Transformation and Standstill: Iranian Experiences of Splintering Urbanism in Dubai

By

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Graduate Department of Anthropology
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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on Dubai’s recent urban transformation, and its descent into crisis. Conducted between 2010 and 2012, it examines how the city splintered into a series of upscale “mega-projects” in the periphery known as “New Dubai”, while inner city neighborhoods grew congested with “unskilled” labor and targeted for policing. Through political economic analysis, I argue that New Dubai was not just a geographic category but a techno-political regime working to conflate local real estate with global capital through strategies of flexible sovereignty. Through ethnographic analysis focusing on middle and working class Iranian immigrants I show how immigrants in Dubai variously engaged with or were marginalized by this urban transformation as they inhabited new relations of debt and property in pursuit of “the good life,” or found themselves at risk of eviction, debtor’s jail, and deportation.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation was written alone, but its insights and my access to them are a social endeavour; one that saw me also accumulate debts of gratitude to numerous individuals and institutions.

I especially want to thank my primary supervisor, Joshua Barker. With just the right combination of care and ruthlessness he helped me focus my energies while not allowing me to lose sight of the larger stakes involved in any long-term project in the social sciences or humanities. Andrea Muehlebach and Michael Lambek, members of my dissertation committee, have also been instrumental in my academic upbringing over the years. Among the many lessons I take away from Andrea is that one must actually learn when to stop reading (and as my bibliography suggests, I’m still learning). Among the many lessons I take away from Michael is that one often writes to learn what the research says (and writes more often as a result).

There are other members of the Faculty at the Department of Anthropology (past and present) who participated in this upbringing, and deserve thanks: Naisargi Dave, Gavin Smith, Andrew Gilbert, and Francis Cody. Their enthusiasm for the subject matter was contagious. They gradually weaned me off of my attachment to the sound of my own voice, and instilled in me the humility required for scholarly dialogue. Looking back, I appreciate the patience this must have required and I count myself fortunate that www.ratemygradstudent.com remains an urban legend.

Though these words won’t find her, I want to especially thank Krystyna Sieciechowicz. Her inexhaustible commitment to assisting students piece together a coherent project was singular. Among the lessons I take away from her is: “when you hear the same thing from different people, you’ve found something”. It was a lesson many of her students have since passed on to students of their own.

And then there is my fieldwork in Dubai. It was so dependent on the generosity of others that I’m sure I’ll miss more than a few names here, and not so sure where to even begin. I’ll always be indebted to the families, crews and groups of strangers that shared their villas, apartments, and bedrooms with me. In doing so, they also eventually shared their lives and the struggles required to keep it afloat. Accommodating an inquisitive foreigner, who lacks a job (‘where is he getting his money from?’), lives out of a suitcase (‘isn’t he thirty-something?’), and takes copious
amounts of notes (‘what the hell is so interesting?’) requires a special kind of patience. I hope that the end result—this dissertation—doesn’t cause them regret.

This dissertation was also dependent on the moral support, friendship and intellectual sustenance of several individuals while I was there.

Among them was Noora Lori. Despite the many reasons I gave her to cut me off—such as my habit of forgetting where I parked my car in the worlds largest shopping mall—she persisted in being a friend and fellow researcher. My time in Dubai would not have felt as short as it did without her.

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There were many others. At the risk of seeming ungrateful, I’m going to opt for brevity here. There was Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, Sultan S. Al-Qassemi and Yasser Elsheshtawy. Their words on paper and in person continue to motivate the questions I take up. In Adina Hempl and Yunsun Chung-Shin I found fellow urban enthusiasts. Though we didn’t always agree, they were always willing to share their insights about Dubai. Also generous with their time and insights were Andrea Wright, Sunny Rahbar, Mahmoud Kaabour, Ludmila Yamalova, Tabitha Decker, Amin Moghadam, and SK.
To this list I can add many others. But the realities of living and working in Dubai saw them request that their names not travel with the insights they shared. I especially want to thank all of the young employees of the Dubai government who agreed to speak with me. We shared a sense of urgency about understanding the origins of the crisis that had befallen Dubai, and what the near future held in store.

The collective work informing this dissertation, however, exceeds my fieldwork in Dubai. I owe no small debt of gratitude to the young(ish) generation of academics focused on Dubai and the Persian Gulf who had come before me: Neha Vora, Ahmed Kanna, Andrew Gardner and Michelle Buckley. My scholarship, in the chapters that follow has been heavily informed by theirs. It has also been enabled by their moral support, and tips to overcoming the malaise that dissertation writing can sometimes involve.

I also want to thank the people who were generous enough to read drafts of my chapters. I’m especially indebted to those who travelled just to do so: Elizabeth Povinelli and Henrietta Moore. They came to Toronto to lead my peers and I as part of our annual Master Class, and their feedback was invaluable.

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I hope the pages that follow demonstrate my appreciation of all those who I’ve listed here, and all those who I’ve forgotten.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................................................... iii

Table of Contents .......................................................................................................................................... vi

List of Figures ............................................................................................................................................... x

List of Appendices ...................................................................................................................................... xi

~ Transformation & Standstill ~ ......................................................................................................................... 1

1 Transformation ........................................................................................................................................... 1

2 Standstill ..................................................................................................................................................... 6

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................................................... 13

1 Class and Space ........................................................................................................................................ 13

2 “New Dubai” .............................................................................................................................................. 16

  2.1 Speculation ........................................................................................................................................... 17

  2.2 Urban Splintering .................................................................................................................................. 20

  2.3 Infrastructure and Ethics ......................................................................................................................... 24

    2.3.1 Infrastructure ................................................................................................................................... 25

    2.3.2 Ethics .............................................................................................................................................. 28

3 Studying Migration in the Persian Gulf ....................................................................................................... 31

4 Dubai Through Iranian Experiences ........................................................................................................... 35

  4.1 Why Iranians? ....................................................................................................................................... 35

  4.2 Citing Origins and Crossing Boundaries ............................................................................................... 37

  4.3 A History of Arrivals and Departures .................................................................................................... 40

  4.4 Not an Extension, but a Displacement .................................................................................................... 45

5 Diaspora and its Exceptions ....................................................................................................................... 48

6 An Amplification of History ....................................................................................................................... 51

  6.1 An (Ongoing) History of Transformation ........................................................................................... 51

  6.2 The City as (Financial) Growth Machine ............................................................................................. 54

7 Methodology .............................................................................................................................................. 58

8 Chapters .................................................................................................................................................... 60
~ “Stronghold” ~ .................................................................................................................. 62

CHAPTER 1 Speculative Urbanism & Sovereignty .................................................................. 68
1 An Exhibition ....................................................................................................................... 68
2 An Announcement................................................................................................................ 70
3 The Political Economy of “New Dubai” .......................................................................... 71
   3.1 A Double Movement ..................................................................................................... 74
   3.2 Another Kind of Sacred Figure .................................................................................... 76
4 Sovereign Magic ............................................................................................................... 79
   4.1 Performing a Vision ...................................................................................................... 79
   4.2 What “Mature” Markets Want ..................................................................................... 83
5 Sovereign Liability .......................................................................................................... 87
   5.1 Exceptional Corporations ............................................................................................ 87
   5.2 “Dubai Inc.” ................................................................................................................ 91
6 Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 96

CHAPTER 2 Great Expectations: Properties, Persons and “New Dubai” ............................. 97
7 Why Property? ................................................................................................................... 97
8 Prāperti and its Sīstem ..................................................................................................... 99
9 Relations, Persons, and Things ......................................................................................... 100
10 “The way we used to do it”: Property and Belonging in Ethnocracy ............................ 102
11 The sīstem of New Dubai ............................................................................................... 109
   11.1 Prāperti Talk, and the Practice of Speculation .......................................................... 109
   11.2 The Sheikh in the Sīstem .......................................................................................... 113
12 Expectations of the Spectacular City ............................................................................ 117
13 Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 122

CHAPTER 3 Agent in Default: Radical Risk and Reversal in Dubai .................................. 124
1 Key Figures ....................................................................................................................... 126
2 An Agent Provocateur ..................................................................................................... 129
3 “I didn’t know what to do” ............................................................................................. 132
List of Figures

A luxury car abandoned in “New Dubai” ................................................................. 19

Ad campaign by Staachi & Staachi for the Dubai Metro........................................... 20

‘Before and After’ picture of Dubai........................................................................... 49

UAE Trade with Iran, 2001-2010................................................................................ 55

Iranian Visitors to Dubai............................................................................................ 56

Sheikh Mohammad observing the Burj Khalifa during “Cityscape” 2010................. 80

Working Class Iranians posing with a luxury car in Satwa........................................ 157

Ads from Dubai Municipality’s One Villa, One Family campaign............................... 175

Foreign Residents Applying for Amnesty in the UAE............................................... 224
List of Appendices

Flow Chart of “Dubai Inc.” by Barcklays bank.................................................................272

Flow Chart intended to “demystify Dubai Inc.” by Moody’s........................................273
1 Transformation

Scaling the social hierarchy from one end to the other requires attention to detail. One such detail, as I learned one morning, is the volume setting on your cell phone.

I was due for another bodily transformation. Ethnographic research that cuts across social hierarchy in the city requires donning multiple kinds of “social skin” (Turner 1980). By then the motions were becoming rote: accumulate just the right combination of marks, accessories, and scents; shed any sings of the transformation itself; perform the social skin; when the next scheduled appointment arrives, repeat.

But first I had to wake up. When I eventually did, I immediately reached for my phone to check the time. The interview was in less than an hour. I had missed the alarm. This was a problem. As my interviewee that morning was an executive of a “master-developer”, whom I had been trying to meet with for weeks, rescheduling was not an option. And as the night before was something of an ethnographic breakthrough I had not been in a hurry to conclude it.

I had been visiting a group of Iranian mechanics at their workshop in an inner city neighbourhood. Late into the night, when the workday was done, they invited me to join them for dinner. It was after midnight when we arrived to their apartment, and shortly thereafter when the drinks were poured. I spent the night there. It was a small space, shared by six men ranging in age.

I recall thinking about the bed bugs as I was taking my shoes off. I had already seen traces of them on the bodies of several crewmembers. I had instantly recognized these marks because my own apartment at the time, also shared, had been recently fumigated for bed bugs. But not before all of my roommates and I had been sufficiently gorged. My apartment was a much larger space than the one I was visiting that night. We were nine young white-collar professionals, mostly from Europe and South Asia. The thought of being bit by the little beasts that night did not bother me. The thought that I might once again expose my roommates to this scourge did. Bodily transformation, it turns out, bears risks.
I got out of bed (actually, a foam mattress on the floor) and quickly gathered my things (a cell phone, a knapsack, a pack of cigarettes) and headed for the toilet. I had to wash away the stench of whisky and cigarettes. As I did so, I also scanned my body for any bite marks. Luckily, there were none. I thanked the one crewmember still in the apartment, and apologized for having to leave in a hurry.

I would have driven back to my apartment to take a shower, but it was on the other side of town from my destination. Fortunately, I had everything else I required. By that point in my fieldwork, my car had become a mobile production studio. It carried a spare of everything (undershirts, dress shirts, stationary, water, travel documents, etc.). More importantly, it also carried the suit I had worn yesterday before I visited these working class Iranians. And just as I had changed into my casual wear after parking my car near their workshop (jeans, a T-shirt, and a pair of rubber flip-flops), I was going to change back into my suit (this time using a spare dress shirt, of course).

This practice of changing clothes in or beside my car had become an almost daily ritual. It came about through my daily struggle with punctuality. A consequence of Dubai’s rapid expansion was that social hierarchy was all the more conflated with urban space and distance. Returning to my apartment to ready myself between appointments was simply not practical when I was driving about this sprawling city to meet with various people throughout the day, sometimes during rush hour. Furthermore, as this was the first time that I was driving to this particular office complex, it would have been reckless not to give myself an extra ten minutes to actually find it. This extra ten minutes had also become an institution in my fieldwork. The same rapid expansion that had exasperated socio-spatial distance, in recent years, had produced awe-inspiring views of a superlative cityscape. But as anyone who has tried to actually navigate the road system accompanying this expansion will know, superlatives quickly give way of expletives when signs either do not exist, do not conform to the morphology, or sometimes contradict one another.

My reliance on embodied transformation as an ethnographic method reflects a central concern of this dissertation: the experience of speculative urbanism across social hierarchy, and the way this hierarchy is refracted across space.

The urban transformation that I examine began in the late 1990s. As later chapters will explain, it was around this time that innovations in the administration of urban development, along with the
introduction of new forms of property and credit, led to an historically unprecedented boom in commercial and residential real estate. A series of “mega-projects” were built in quick succession and pushed back Dubai’s periphery along the southern end of its major highway (known as Sheikh Zayed Road). Construction and real estate industries ballooned to 24% of the city’s GDP by 2005, and about US$35 billion worth of projects were under development by the same year (Oxford Business Group 2006: 157). These mega-projects repeatedly featured spectacular architecture and scale. They were soon informally known as “New Dubai”, and often featured in celebratory accounts of Dubai’s ostensible growth into a modern global city. In fact, running in parallel to all of this was official destination marketing campaigns that celebrated conspicuous consumption and the neoliberal ethic of free-market progress. This official concern with urban image eventually coalesced into a government department called “Brand Dubai”. In marked juxtaposition to this constellation of gleaming skyscrapers, large gated communities and the ethos of arrival into modernity that they manifested, was an inner city representing earlier periods of urban development. It hugged either side of what is arguably Dubai’s first mega-project: a Creek that pours into the center of the city from the Persian Gulf. A couple of recent buildings notwithstanding, the inner city is far less architecturally ostentatious and was often overlooked by foreign news media in its recent accounts of Dubai’s progress. It was, however, within the inner city that local news media began to find signs of the city’s so-called “demographic imbalance” and overcrowding. A surge in population had accompanied Dubai’s urban transformation. An annual growth rate of roughly 9% since 2002 (Oxford Business Group 2008: 137) resulted in the doubling of the population to 2 million between 2001 and 2008 (Krane 2009: 119). The shared apartment of my interlocutors that evening—specifically, a space where working class foreign men concentrated—was a staple feature of this local discourse about the perils of a population out of control. This kind of place was not the target of destination marketers representing Dubai as a place of shopping festivals and holidays. Instead, it was the target of municipal inspectors with eviction orders. The city, in other words, was “splintering” (Graham and Marvin 2001).

My study of experiences with Dubai’s speculative urbanism, then, will be primarily framed in terms of the splintering effects of this urbanism.

This splintering was evident in Dubai’s Iranian population as well. The everyday world of my working class Iranian hosts, that evening, was one of small retailers and wholesalers located in
the inner city. Their urban milieu was the hustle and bustle of lower and middle income mixed crowds navigating the heat by day, neon-signs by night, and humidity throughout. The daily transactions that paid their rents and remittances to dependents back in Iran centered around car parts, household merchandise, electronics, and so on. The congregation of bodies inside their fluorescent-lit shops and the patch of sidewalk overlooking their storefronts were often male, engaged in manual labour or haggling over prices, and exhibiting signs of physical stress and little wealth; second-hand smart phones being an exception.

To be sure, none of these sights and spaces was new. The “splintering” effect of urban transformation, however, is not limited to novelty. It is ultimately about prioritizing certain kinds of urban life over others: affording some residents access to the promises of the city, while burdening other residents with the risks and costs accompanying these promises. While the former are invited to inhabit the city as its preferred residents the latter are relegated to being in the way and making due. The middle class Iranian interlocutors who are also the focus of this study are those who pursued this invitation by inhabiting New Dubai, while their working class counterparts are those who watched the skyscrapers in the offing continue to encroach onto their social world.

In fact, it was in late 2008 when a mega-project was announced that marked for redevelopment the area of the city where my hosts that evening worked and lived. It would have replaced those sights and sounds of urban density with wide boulevards featuring high-end condominiums and large storefronts committed to luxury brands.\(^1\) By the time of my arrival in early 2010, many storeowners in the neighbourhood spoke of having received official notices of the impending project. Shortly before my arrival, however, the global financial crisis had occurred, causing the suspension of the project. By the time of my return in 2012, this neighbourhood remained relatively intact. But the adjacent area of villas, called “Satwa” and spanning the distance to Sheikh Zayed Road nearby, was almost entirely demolished.

In the years preceding the crisis, my middle class interlocutors were actively participating in urban transformations on the outskirts of the city. They were consumers of New Dubai. Their

\(^1\) Ironically, this erasure was conceived with a view to ensure “public activation”(interview with MERAAS employee, May 7, 2010).
urban milieu was the relatively self-contained mega-projects that never seemed to be quite finished. The hustle and bustle in this part of the city was rarely due to the close proximity of strangers walking on busy sidewalks. Rather it was the noise of construction crews and their heavy machinery, even during the crisis. These projects were the handiwork of “master developers”: corporations with varying degrees of connection to the Dubai government. It was their initial relief from municipal regulations and ease of access to global capital that resulted in a slew of multi-billion dollar projects: featuring malls, social clubs, and the occasional golf course, marina, or autodrome.

It was navigating this part of the city, between my appointments, that I found especially challenging. Unlike much of the inner city, in New Dubai you either know exactly where you are going or you are gambling. And for most of my fieldwork, I often found myself losing this gamble and arriving late to my appointments. A change of clothes and an extra ten-minutes, then, makes for better odds. These projects had often preceded the public infrastructure that would have linked them to the rest city. Even by 2010, some of them (e.g. “The Jumeirah Lake Towers”) were only linked to the highway through a makeshift network of traffic cones dotting dusty roads. What is more, their connectivity to one another was intentionally limited. Master-developers branded these projects as individual clusters featuring particular lifestyles and aesthetics. An important part of this strategy in place-branding was the promotion of local consumer amenities through limiting access to those available in nearby projects developed by competitors.

When I eventually found my destination that morning, I had no time to spare. I transformed in a hurry, pouring over my notes for the interview as I did so. I walked into the lobby of the master developer’s offices and caught the eye of the receptionist. She received me with a smile. I saw it fade as she took a brief glimpse of my feet. Somehow my dusty, battered, Brazil-coloured, rubber flip-flops had followed me. A US$1000 suit, a double-Windsor knot, a leather-bound binder, and a piece of footwear that had absolutely no right to be a part of this ensemble. She escorted me to my interviewee’s office.

I learned two things that morning. First, marble floors and minimal furniture do nothing to muffle the sound of rubber soles slapping against naked heels. Second, a successful
transformation cannot be rushed. I was careful to get the volume setting on my cell phone right from then on.

2 Standstill

In recent months, global headlines have once again featured much talk and imagery of looming bubbles, debt restructuring, and default. Whether it is scenes of people in Greece standing still in front of ATMs while the “Grexit” was looming, or an order by the Chinese government to stop its affiliated corporations selling shares while the Shanghai Stock Exchange was crashing, we are reminded that over-accumulation tends to conclude by devaluing things and temporarily arresting the circulation of capital.

My fieldwork coincided with such a moment. It was in November 2009, just a few months prior to my arrival, when Dubai’s government made similar global headlines. One of the parastatal corporations that had spearheaded the city’s urban transformation, called Nakheel, was on the verge of defaulting on its substantial debts to foreign creditors. The government made a public statement to this effect, and requested that the company’s creditors accept a temporary “standstill” on the payments they were due (Reuters 2009a). These were instalments on a US$3.5 billion bond that Nakheel had issued in 2006—mostly to US investors—through its government-owned parent conglomerate, Dubai World.

In financial discourse, a “standstill” refers to formal agreements to either suspend the purchase of corporation’s shares (when it is subject to a hostile takeover) or the repayment of its debts (when it is facing bankruptcy). For my purposes in this dissertation, I seize upon this category as a heuristic device. The notion of standstill, I suggest, does well to highlight the various ways in which the aftermath of speculative capitalist accumulation is experienced across relations of power. In this regard, it extends my concern with the experience of speculative urban transformation across social hierarchy by attending to the experience of crisis that follows it.

More specifically, focusing on the discrepancy between the figurative and literal registers of standstill does much to advance this concern with the aftermath of such urban transformation. It alerts us to the inequality of power and structural violence holding this discrepancy intact during episodes of aftermath or economic crises. In this case, the violence extended from the fact that
parastatal actors had the capacity to renegotiate their debt obligations while individual debtors did not. Briefly, while the Dubai government unilaterally invoked a “standstill” to begin restructuring and rescheduling the debt payments of a “government-related” corporation (i.e. Dubai World), heavily indebted foreign residents often resorted to abruptly fleeing Dubai and abandoning their material life to actually standstill. As I explain below, this ability of government-related corporations to renegotiate their debts, along with their over-indebtedness to begin with, hinged on widespread but informal assumptions about their relation to Dubai’s Ruler, and his ostensibly singular power to redeem financial losses. To put it simply, the difference between the figurative standstill of the city-state (evoking the troubles of parastatal corporations) and these literal states of standstill in the city (evoking the troubles of individuals) was sovereignty itself.

The standstill announcement was widely regarded as officially acknowledging Dubai’s implication in the global financial crisis. It was not received well by Nakheel’s creditors and the financial public more generally as it caused panic about financial “contagion” spreading to the Middle East (Robertson and Tomlinson 2009). Ironically, this figurative invocation of a standstill was the cause of much economic fluctuation. International crediting rating agencies spiked the cost of borrowing for the Dubai government, along with that of insuring its debt. It resulted in a local lending freeze. It also precipitated the stunning collapse of Dubai real estate industry. The magnitude of the latter is worth considering. In the month of January 2008, around the peak of the real estate boom, the Dubai Land Department (DLD) recorded 392 sales at a total value of US$ 1.2 billion. During the month of January in 2010, however, sales were down to about 105 (a 73% decline) at a total value of US$ 226 million (an 81% decline) (McGinley 2010a).

The state’s encounter with the economic crisis that followed Dubai’s urban transformation was thus a political crisis as well. The stakes were indeed high for the Dubai government and the larger network of corporations informally known as “Duba Inc”. The latter referred to corporations that were regarded as “government-related” because they were either: managed by sitting public officials, affiliated with conglomerates owned by the Dubai government, or directly owned by the Dubai government. In addition to significant debts that had to be restructured, there was the strategic matter of controlling the precedents that such restructuring would set for future financing. As Brenda Chalfin reminds us, clarifying the presences and absences of the
government in the mix of economic activity is a high-stakes game in relation to global markets (2009: 243).

Much of the controversy that the standstill announcement ignited was therefore about whether and to what extent the debts of so-called Dubai Inc. were indeed “sovereign liabilities” (read Dubai government liabilities). The fact that the Dubai government had called for a standstill at all, rather than immediately assume Nakheel’s debt obligations, was intensely criticized by foreign creditors and financial analysts. Their complaints were based on a widely held, but informal, assumption that prevailed during the boom. Specifically, it was assumed that the financial credibility of “government-related” entities was synonymous with that of the Dubai government. Their debts, it was often claimed, were graced by an “implicit guarantee”. So it was that critics lambasted this move by the Dubai government as an about-face; indeed, the very legitimacy of this expert construct called Dubai Inc. was called into question.

Yet it was an about-face that proved difficult to dismiss. Despite a protracted and contentious process of legal haggling over how much was owed to who and when, Dubai World (Nakheel’s parent company) eventually secured a US$25 billion restructuring scheme with all of its creditors in October of 2010 (Sakoui and Kerr 2010). During the boom the government-related status of Dubai World had lubricated access to loans and investments from international capital markets. Now it lubricated a compromise between the Dubai government and foreign creditors.

Individual encounters with the economic crisis, however, remained economic. Specifically, transmigrants who had taken on significant debt during the boom were especially vulnerable in these circumstances. As non-citizens, they were ineligible for debt relief initiatives by the city or federal government (e.g. Reuters 2012). The stakes were high for them as well, but unlike the state they had little recourse against their creditors. This saw their gradual exodus from Dubai. This exodus, in turn, worked to tie these broader effects of standstill’s figurative invocation with literal states of standstill in the city.
One of these states of standstill was the increasingly common phenomenon of cars abandoned to accumulate dust (Figure #1, below). The abandoned car became an oft-cited image in and of Dubai toward the end of 2009, especially in foreign news coverage about Dubai’s entanglement in the financial crisis. It was a metonym for breakdown and escape.\(^2\)

![Image of abandoned car](Image)

**Figure #1. A luxury car abandoned in “New Dubai.” (Credit: Lis Jakupstovu)**

Sensational claims about thousands of cars being left behind at the airport began to circulate in the media as a sign of individual desperation and widespread economic reversal; of a boom-town gone bust. The abandoned car—synonymous with dust—continued to linger in the public imagination beyond Dubai’s initial descent into crisis. There were occasional reports about the municipal efforts to remove them from the streets. The iconic status of this artefact was even

\(^2\) It is worth noting that this phenomenon of abandoned cars in Dubai coincided with similar states of standstill in other places, and for similar reasons. In early 2009, for example, there were increasingly frequent reports of boats being abandoned and let adrift in the United States; particularly in Florida and South Carolina. Often purchased on the basis of credit prior to the financial crisis that gripped the country (2007-2008), their owners were now unable to either sell them for lack of demand or afford to maintain or moor them (Streitfied 2009). Unlike Dubai, however, the owners of these boats were citizens. They were also living in a jurisdiction with bankruptcy laws. Abandoning possessions they could no longer afford did not involve abandoning the country. As a result, abandoning these possessions involved some degree of care. These owners took the care to modify these boats by erasing any markers that could be used to identify them (e.g. using sandpaper to file down any registry numbers, names, etc.).
exploited in an award-winning ad campaign for the launch of the Dubai Metro (Sambridge 2010) (Figure #2, below).

For the most part, however, the abandoned car was seldom seen in the inner city. This artefact was more native to New Dubai. Its urban environment was often the reserved spaces in underground parking lots, dusty embankments between new condominiums, etc.

In most other cities, it probably would not have survived long enough to become so conspicuous. At some point—perhaps as soon as the dust achieved a critical mass, or the parking tickets started to pile up—such abandoned cars would have been appropriated by others; either as a

![Image](image_url)

Figure #2. Image featured in ad campaign by Saatchi & Saatchi for the Dubai Metro. (Credit: Tara Atkinson)

whole or in piecemeal. But then, this is a city state where about 90% of residents are “guest workers” whose residency is attached to the sponsorship of their employer. One upshot of this is that the risk of criminal prosecution for informally appropriating (i.e. “stealing”) an abandoned Mercedes, for example, is synonymous with the risk of deportation. In short, the owners of these cars may have left, but deterrents to their appropriation by others remained in place.

And when such informal repossession did occur it was sometimes bizarre. Like the unemployed young British resident who was unable to leave Dubai due to a legal entanglement, and began collecting abandoned luxury cars; but doing so “only if they were dusty” (Alamir 2010). Ironically, his legal troubles were also debt-related. He had bounced a cheque. Much to the
public annoyance of Dubai’s police (who preferred to commit their resources to other tasks) this was a criminal offence.

Imminent bankruptcy in a jurisdiction without personal bankruptcy laws bears dire legal implications. This was very likely the same predicament facing those who had abandoned the cars this young British man was fond of collecting. This absence of personal bankruptcy laws, furthermore, coincided with the abundance of credit, and the additional absence of a regulatory framework monitoring its provision. As my middle class interlocutors insisted, banks and financial institutions were aggressively conscripting clients for personal loans, mortgages and credit cards. And nobody cared very much about the actual capacity to service these debts, and there was certainly never talk of “credit ratings”.

The abandoned car, then, was a repository of more than just dust. The stillness implied by its dilapidated surface belied the momentum of money capital during the boom-years. Yet it also belied the continuity of the very financial practices that had spurred this boom. It was in August 2010, for example, when a major Dubai-based bank sold an “asset-backed security” worth a cool US$ 280 million (Wigglesworth 2010) to Japanese investors. It was based on locally issued auto-loans, despite the ongoing rise in the number of abandoned cars (Emirates 24/7 2011).

Like most people in Dubai, I took little notice of abandoned cars. It was by chance that I came to wonder about the larger ensemble of still life that it must have been a part of. The everyday, after all, requires some assembly. And like pieces of a toy model waiting to be snapped out of their plastic frame, one of its parts implies another.

This realization occurred while visiting a friend. He bounced a tennis ball off of a window; actually, a glass sliding door. We were in a communal space shared by several small villas, playing fetch with his dog. He attempted to complicate the ball’s trajectory by bouncing off this balcony door, which belonged to another villa. Sensing my alarm he, he muttered: “don’t worry, they’ve skipped”.

I walked over, and leaned in to take a look. It was all there: a living room, a flat-screen TV, a large couch, a coffee table, an open-concept kitchen in the background, etc. There were even signs of childhood: a colourful toy-car.
I could have been intruding. Someone could have emerged from the corridor to the left at any moment. Perhaps I was staring at an art installation: something understated but with a cliché title like *Life Interrupted*. More importantly, there probably was a scene like this one for every abandoned car out there, like bits of that toy model. And though I could not see it through the tinted glass, here too dust must have been accumulating.

At around the same time that the abandoned car took on its iconic status, the term “skips” also began to circulate in the media. A “skip” was a certain kind of person: someone who had abruptly left the country (“skipped”) due to financial difficulties and the resulting risk of legal entanglement. The “skip” was understood as representing a surge in consumer credit over the course of the boom. Bank managers were already sounding the alarm before the so-called “standstill” announcement. According to one of their estimates in mid-2009, the UAE banking sector was experiencing 1,500-2,500 skips a month (Reuters 2009b).

Just like the abandoned car, I found that knowledge of “skips” was ubiquitous. What was less well known at the time were the measures underway to ensure that debts accumulated here could also travel. Whereas multinational banks had the administrative capacity to track these persons across jurisdictions, local banks started to sell delinquent loans to international collection agencies that would pursue them (Dhal 2014). This was especially worthwhile when skips had left for a jurisdiction that allowed creditors to charge them with the administrative costs of collecting the debt; such as the United Kingdom (McGinley 2010b). Like the abandoned car, the eerie stillness of abandoned residences belied the motions, dealings and speculative pursuits associated with it.

As a category of financial discourse, ‘standstill’ is ultimately about the restructuring of claims and obligations. And insofar as such restructuring occurs during a broader economic crisis it invites consideration of who can attempt it, who cannot, and the stakes involved.

The chapters that follow examine speculative urbanism in Dubai across social hierarchy by telling the story of how the everyday lives of my interlocutors and the spaces they inhabited oscillated between moments of transformation and standstill.
INTRODUCTION

1 Class and Space

This dissertation is an anthropology of speculative urbanism. It relies on the heuristic dichotomy of transformation and standstill to ethnographically examine the political economy of an urban boom turned bust, and the experience of this process across class difference. It will argue that speculative urbanism involved targeting certain kinds of residents for new rights while targeting others for policing, and that this social polarization was spatially mediated.

I understand an ethnography of urban transformation to be about the institutional practices and speculative ways of knowing that work to rapidly create a conspicuous cityscape, while splintering its population socially and spatially in the process. It is about the social experience of such transformation: how some participated in the emergence of this cityscape and its promises, while others either watched it unfold from a distance or were barred from its promises.

I understand an ethnography of standstill to be about the project cancellations, lending freezes, impending litigations (etc.) that follow the tumultuous accumulation of capital through rapid urbanization. It is about those speculative ways of knowing being tested, different kinds of people being ensnared in various ways, and the malaise that comes with not knowing how to respond.

In framing my dissertation in these broad terms, I am ultimately alluding to more than the reconfiguration of a particular urban regime and its instability. I am referring to the violent warp and woof of capitalism more generally. This is the ongoing activity of capital’s valorization and the spectacular things and places it conjures up as it circulates. And it is also the arrest of this momentum when these things and places are radically devalued for growing saturated or disarticulated from the assumptions these values relied upon.

My concern with speculative urbanism, however, looks to ground this general dynamic of capitalist accumulation and crisis in terms of the rapid development of New Dubai. I examine how two categories of urban residents imagined, accessed, and were addressed by a city
emphatically disintegrating into a spectacular periphery that was symbolically central to its
global image—so called “New Dubai”—and an urban center that was symbolically peripheral to
this image.

I take my concern for examining social experiences across spatial boundaries to be synonymous
with my concern about examining speculative urbanism across class difference. The theoretical
foundation of this understanding is a conception of space popularized by Henri Lefebvre (1991).
Space, in his formulation, is at once a material field of action and a mediated basis for action
(190-191). This is a conception of space and social relations that regard them as intrinsic to one
another, rather than ontologically discrete phenomena that dialectically interact. This theoretical
insight underpins Lefebvre’s interest in examining urban life in circumstances of capitalism (e.g.
its ongoing prioritization of exchange value over use value). It also underpins much of my
analysis in the chapters that follow. In addition, my analysis also draws upon the analytic
approach that Lefebvre offers to examine urban life. This is his famous “triad”. Briefly, it looks
to examine the built environment through the intersection of: 1) those expert way of knowing and
institutional arrangements that produce it, 2) its mass mediation, 3) and the mundane ways in
which individuals interact with and imagine it. Thus, for example, the rapid administrative and
material reconfiguration of a city’s built environment may involve a reconfiguration of its polity
and social relations. More to the point, insofar as such urban reconfiguration occurs through and
affects an unequal distribution of opportunities to securely inhabit its spaces, and an unequal
distribution of authority to administer them, it invites us to examine its emergence through
structural relations of exclusion and exploitation; indeed, I understand class to be informed by
some combination of both.

The overarching argument of this dissertation is that the spatial polarization of my interlocutors
was also the polarization of their structural positions as “middle” and “working” class residents
in relation to the emergent political economy of New Dubai. The former were its inhabitants
and active participants in the speculative market of its properties. Now many of them were
struggling, for example, to continue servicing their mortgages. The latter were relegated to the
status of demographic excess, rendering them especially vulnerable to displacement in the wake

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3 I understand “emergent”, here, to mean juridically ambiguous and financially speculative.
of a planned mega project. Now they continued their daily struggle to work and live in Dubai as they had prior to the crisis, while the spectre of a suspended mega-project loomed over them.

My conception of class relies on the recent efforts of Erik Olin Wright (2015: 46-61) to broaden Marxist class analysis beyond its conventional basis in relations of production. According to his formulation, class as a category of analysis is constituted through the intersection between structural relations of exploitation and domination (e.g. the historical restriction of property ownership in the UAE to citizens) with social practices (e.g. the conflation of owning property with belonging). It is through this intersection that I look to examine how actually existing social categories in Dubai (e.g. homeowner, kafil (sponsor), muwatin (citizen), expatriate, illegals, etc.) are produced and sustained through mechanisms of urban expansion and exclusion. More specifically, as Wright takes pains to emphasize, foregrounding class trains our attention on how these mechanisms are mutually constituted (2015: 39). The emergent property regime that offered homeownership to residents of Dubai whose earnings deemed them worthy of mortgage loans was geographically restricted to the region of New Dubai, on the city’s expanding outskirts. It was unavailable in the inner city, where property ownership continued to be restricted to citizens, as it has been historically. An effect of this splintering in rights to property ownership (for reasons I will further explain in chapter two) was a gradual withdrawal of higher income residents seeking home ownership from the inner city. This demographic shift accompanied a moral panic about the growing manifestation of lower income residents in the inner city, and municipal efforts to police them. Thus my designation of my interlocutors as “middle” and “working” class is intended to embed them in an emergent urban regime that afforded the former unprecedented opportunities to reconfigure their lives at the direct expense of the latter who faced heightened scrutiny in the meantime. It is worth noting, then, that I will examine class difference primarily in relation to the institutional arrangements, urban politics, and social practices accompanying the emergence of New Dubai; rather than, for example, the immediate exploitation of working class Iranians by their middle class counterparts. Sidney Plotkin puts it more succinctly when he writes of the tension inherent to capitalist social relations: “the logic is inescapable: expansion is the condition of exclusion just as exclusion is the condition of expansion” (quoted in Hackworth 2007: 68).

In the following sections of this introduction I outline my theoretical approach, the main fields of study that I engage with, the empirical issues that I address, and the historical context in which I
address them. I begin by framing my dissertation as a study of the splintering effects—at once social and spatial—of speculative urbanism. Here I clarify these key terms and explain how my analytic approach to the study of this process relies on recent studies of infrastructure and ethics. I then elaborate the relation of this study to recent scholarship of migration in the Persian Gulf. I follow this by explaining why I have chosen to focus on Iranian experiences in Dubai, and the history of Iranian migration to Dubai. I then provide a brief history of Dubai itself with a view to give context to the more recent period of development that is my focus. This is followed by an explanation of my ethnographic methodology. Finally, I conclude this introduction with a brief outline of the chapters.

2 “New Dubai”

My examination of speculative urbanism in Dubai is focused on the emergence of New Dubai. It further extends into the present, and ethnographically elaborates, recent historical analysis of Dubai’s development and the speculative ethos informing it (Elsheshtawy 2010, Ramos 2012).

As I noted previously, the often-cited but unofficial label of “New Dubai” refers to the constellation of mega-projects that initially developed in Dubai’s periphery. Yet I deploy “New Dubai” as more than a geographic designation. For the purposes of this dissertation, I take it to be a techno-political regime functioning to conflate local real estate with global capital, and amplifying socio-spatial distance between Dubai’s residents as it did so. To put it simply, New Dubai was a speculative urban regime splintering the city. I elaborate each of these terms below.

The often spectacular and rapidly built environment of New Dubai, as a place, emerged in tandem with innovations in urban governance: sovereign functions were sometimes assumed by master-developers acting as quasi-governmental corporations. The origins of New Dubai, then, are also those of that other catchall category, “Dubai Inc.” What is more, accompanying this shift was the introduction of new commodity forms, such as “free hold” property (allowing non-citizens the right to property ownership). Here was a correlation between a new urban form, a new mode of governance, and new commodities. My analysis of “New Dubai”, as an urban regime, revolves around this correlation.
2.1 Speculation

This urban regime was speculative in two respects. First, it was permeated by the assumption that its commodities—whether a pre-built villa, or a bond derived from the mortgage of this villa—were manifestations of the Ruler’s “vision”. This, I will show, was faith in the powers actually existing sovereign to ensure the economic viability of New Dubai. Second, it was permeated by easy access to credit and an organized effort to rely on New Dubai’s built properties (fixed capital) as sources of financial revenue based on such credit (fictitious capital). This, I will also show, was financial strategy that relied on the conflation of private interests and public accountabilities. Here, then, were coordinates of New Dubai’s speculative urbanism: faith and finance.

In the year before the boom in “freehold” real estate—property available for ownership by non-citizens—was approaching its peak, for example, this commodity remained legally undefined and unregulated. Despite this, as I show in chapter one, there was not much hesitation by either individuals or institutions to invest in freehold property or financial commodities related to it. Coinciding with a lack of formalization in law and standardization in valuation metrics, was a widespread celebration of the “vision” of Dubai’s sheikh. That these individuals and institutions attributed monetary and social values to these commodities, I argue, bore testament of how New Dubai relied on a combination of faith and finance. They had faith in an exceptional power undergirding these values and their future durability, and they had access to the financial technologies and easy credit necessary to participate in the market of these values. To be sure, the same has been said about “fiat” money. The legitimacy of this kind of money as a medium of exchange and a store of value is based on a shared recognition of a singular authority moderating its functions (Hart 1986). Yet it has also been noted that in everyday life this insight about the politics of money is often overlooked. Contestations of money’s legitimacy are foreclosed through bureaucracy and practice (De Goede 2005: xvi-xxvii). The emergent commodities of New Dubai did not benefit from this obfuscation of politics through paperwork and convention. For example, the marketability of its properties as long-term financial investments in a place without permanent residency were a recurring point of concern.\(^4\)

\(^4\) This was a recurring theme in my conversations with real estate lawyers, for example.
circumstances, I contend, foreground the work that faith does in speculative urbanization. Here the ability and intention of a sovereign power to maintain the value of speculative commodities and the functioning of these financial circuits was all the more paramount.

I describe this faith as “speculative”—rather than, for example, a case of “shared belief”—in order to stress its emergent, untested, and volatile character. A case in point, as I noted above, was the widely held belief by investors that the development of mega-projects was graced with an “implicit guarantee” that justified the significant capital required for them. Similarly, as I show in chapter two, foreign residents often purchased freehold properties because they assumed that their residency status would eventually be secured on the basis of this ownership. They also assumed, as many of my middle class interlocutors did, that the debt they incurred to obtain newly built real estate, the rising market values of such real estate, and the wealth they accumulated through their sale or use as equity were justified on the basis of their ostensibly greater future value. It was this one aspect of the speculative ethos of New Dubai, I suggest, that sustained the correlation between a new urban form, a new mode of governance, and new commodities.

This speculative ethos was a reflection of the frontier nature of New Dubai itself. It was frontier in two senses: the actual functioning of its political economy, and its situation in a global capitalist system. Regarding the former, the rapid valorization of capital here was prioritized over the legal codification of its commodities and the terms of their exchange. As I explain in chapter one, it was explicitly experimental. In addition to its dearth of regulations, Dubai’s free hold property market expanded well in advance of the actual systems of government bodies to administer it. Nor were master developers providing detailed contracts of sale to consumers of these properties. The historical role of state institutions in facilitating the mobility of capital through the standardization of metrics and commensurability of commodities (e.g. Bauman 1998: 24-54) was initially neglected here. New Dubai was also frontier in that it drew upon significant surpluses and expertise from Europe and the USA (e.g. the bond that Nakheel was faltering on). As I elaborate later in this introduction, it also relied on the technical and aesthetic consultation

5 Interview with RERA official, September 15, 2010; Interview with CEO of a property management company, October 5, 2010.
of, for example, Euro-American planners and architects. Finally, this frontier order of things is emblematic of what Harvey (borrowing from Lefebvre) has described as a “spatial fix” to the over-accumulation of capital (1989a: 33-34). Briefly, this is the notion that as the accumulation of capital begins to outstrip opportunities for its investment in further production, thus threatening to devalue it, it is invested instead into the construction of infrastructure and housing (1989a: 68-82, 86). This is a (temporary) “fix” insofar as it allows capital to continue circulate and valorize itself through the production of space. Harvey claims, for example, that suburbanization in post-WWII USA was a case in point. A key function of this process is also to look for sites of investment and the creation of markets beyond the Western locales in which this surplus of capital accumulated.

To be sure, Harvey’s formulation is based on economic contexts with a history of dependence on factory-based wage labour, which has not been the case in Dubai. There is also much debate among urban scholars as to whether the real estate industry actually functions as an “secondary circuit” of capital into which surpluses from the industrial (i.e the “primary circuit”) can be invested to stave off a crisis, or whether this industry is *sui generis* and functioning according to its own temporality and logic (Aalbers 2008, Christophers 2011, Gotham 2006, Haila 1991).

New Dubai, nevertheless, represented such a spatial fix. And it is on this note that the financial aspect of its speculative urbanism can be more clearly glimpsed. The various administrative and financial innovations that New Dubai relied on, I suggest, were a regionally unprecedented episode of a political economic project that urban scholars have long been examining. This is the increasing conflation of financial and real estate markets (Ball 1994, Coakley 1994, Gotham 1994, Haila 1991).

Ironically, while much popular and academic representations of Dubai’s recent transformation have cast it as an emerging “global city”, this frontier nature of its emergence actually emphasizes the global city status of metropoles such as New York and London according to Sasskia Sassen’s original formulation (1991). Rather than recognition or connectivity, Sassen emphasizes the *uneven relations of power* among cities in the global geography of capitalism. She posits such Euro-American cities as centers of financial command and cultural authority in this regard. This original formulation, in my opinion, is still valid: e.g. Dubai’s latest master plan (2012) was drafted by a Los Angeles-based consultancy (i.e. AECOM), and its recent economic crisis was mediated by sovereign credit rating agencies based in New York (i.e. Standard and Poor).

Harvey, to be fair, was aware of the potential limitations of his spatial fix thesis (1989: 42).
2009, Pugh 1991, Smart and Lee 2003). However divergent these studies may be in their political critique of this process, they share a concern for further emphasizing its under-theorization. Staying with Harvey, for example, we are reminded of the implications of this theoretical neglect in his recent Rebel Cities. Here he stresses that insofar as the urban development remains a “sub-field” of economic analysis—whether liberal or Marxist—we fail to appreciate its centrality to both economic growth and political relations, much less the acceleration of urbanization the world over (2012: 11, 27-29, 35-42). To be sure, this has been Harvey’s clarion call for some time. Now, however, he takes pains to describe the manner in which this process, in the USA, has relied on speculative financial practices. He notes, for example, that the practice of “securitizing” mortgages—that is, bundling them for sale as a single financial commodity generating revenue for the owner (2012: 13, 32-39). The upshot of such practices, he argues, is that financial actors can act on both the supply and demand of property markets. As providers of credit to homebuyers (e.g. through issuing mortgages) they enable the demand for property, and as providers of financial commodities derived from this credit (e.g. securities derived from mortgages) they enable the supply of liquidity.

While I will further elaborate this intersection of faith and finance later in this introduction (and especially in chapters two and three) I now turn to further unpacking my theoretical approach to this end. I begin by outlining the notion of “splintering” as the major socio-spatial effect of speculative urbanism that this dissertation is concerned with. I then turn to recent scholarship in the areas of infrastructure and ethics. My examination of speculative urbanism—the intermingling of faith and finance more specifically—draws heavily from the intersection of recent lessons in these two fields.

### 2.2 Urban Splintering

In their seminal work on contemporary urbanism, Graham and Marvin (2001) focus on innovations in the design and management of infrastructure. Arguing that analyses of urbanism

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8 While cities such as Dubai, Toronto, and Shenzen are emblematic of this process, it is also worth noting that recent enthusiasm about the onset of an “urban age” may be premature. For a trenchant critique of the quantitative fudging involved in the statistical data such claims rely on see Brenner and Schmid (2014).
have not sufficiently considered the significance of infrastructure, they stress that it is not tangential to political norms and social hierarchy. Turning our attention to infrastructure would give insight, for example, into who is counted as the public in the catchall phrase of “public works” (2001: 20). The provision of highways, telephone grids, sewer systems, urban streets (etc.), is not secondary to relations of power in the city, but an important medium through which these relations are constituted and sustained. The authors offer this understanding of infrastructure through a broader argument about the eclipse of a “modernist” paradigm of urban governance by a “neoliberal” one. Briefly, the former relied on a centrally administered and technically standardized network of infrastructure with the aim of integrating urban society through its shared reliance on this network. With the onset of a neoliberalism, however, this ideal of integration has given way to spatial and administrative fragmentation. “Public” infrastructure began to suffer from spending cuts, and augmented by new “private” options that privileged higher income residents capable of affording their premiums. Graham and Marvin refer to this process as “splintering urbanism”. They argue that it insidiously amplifies economic inequality because it relies on the misconception that infrastructural arrangements are simply procedural rather than political. The emergence of New Dubai—as a place and a speculative urban regime—did indeed feature such urban splintering on the basis of affordability. But there was also more to it.

There was distance. It is worth repeating that these places first emerged on the city’s outskirts. Governmental employees explained to me that this was, in part, politically motivated. The properties on sale in these places offered new property rights to foreign residents; such as, initially, 99-year leases. As such they represented a departure from the long-standing norm of limiting foreign residents to the status of short-term tenants, and its connotations of temporary social status. This norm was part of a broader set of policies, as I explain later in this introduction, which maintained a sharp disparity of rights privileging the small population of citizenry against the much larger population of foreign residents. Geographic distance from the city, then, was intended to soften criticism of reducing the political distance between citizens and foreigners.⁹

⁹ Interview with RERA official, October 10, 2010.
There was the scale and content of urban morphology. The inner city featured no sprawling network or high-end gated communities, and New Dubai featured no concentration of densely populated and lower-income apartment buildings. Municipal planning codes and feasibility studies were ignored in order to more freely engage in place-branding; that is, designing a built environment on the basis of an aesthetic theme, and marketing it in accordance with a certain lifestyle.\(^\text{10}\) And brands did abound: “Emirates Living”, “Falconcity of Wonders”, “Jumeirah Islands”, “Arabian Ranches”, etc. Between them also abounded discrepancies in the minutiae of urban design: street curbs, setbacks, street signs, speed bumps, etc.

There was administrative authority. The difference in morphology was in large part due master-developers’ relief from municipal oversight. The spatially hermetic and aesthetically distinct mega-projects that marked New Dubai reflected this relief from regulatory oversight, which was rooted in the quasi-governmental status of these master-developers building them. While “public” spaces, “recreational infrastructure” (e.g. parks), and utility grids were maintained by the municipality in the inner city, master-developers relied on their subsidiaries to maintain those located in their developments.\(^\text{11}\)

And then there was speed. Dubai’s rapid expansion during this period had roughly quadrupled its urban area by 2008 (Krane 2009: 119). This speed of urban expansion was in part due to the exceptional status of master-developers. But it was not limited to the splintering of urban administration. It also represented the fact that this urbanization was speculative in nature insofar as it was financially driven and faith-based. The experience of speculative urbanization shared among my interlocutors also referenced this speed of Dubai of expansion, and often conflated it with the emergence of New Dubai. This sense of speed was often interpreted as a sign of imminent prosperity (especially during the boom) or a hollow promise (especially during the bust). It was also bore social connotations. For one thing it often suggested a sense of growing distance, across social hierarchy and urban space. This was especially the case among my working class Iranian interlocutors who felt that the city was rushing past them, so to speak. For

\(^{10}\) The maintenance of this aesthetic theme is a priority. Emaar’s group of adjacent gated communities known as “Emirates Living”, for example, prohibits homeowners from making external modifications to their residences.

\(^{11}\) The master-developers EMAAR, for example, has developed a subsidiary called EMAAR Community Management.
another, it also amplified the structural transience imposed by immigration laws that withhold permanent residency and citizenship from immigrants in Dubai, and which I elaborate below. Finally, as I explain in chapter two, speed was also a discursive motif in representations of Dubai and the power of its Ruler.

My understanding of urban splintering, then, takes seriously the need to examine its “actually existing” circumstances (Brenner and Theodore 2002). In this regard, while I rely on Graham and Marvin’s (2001) general definition of urban splintering, I also take inspiration from Brenner and Theodore’s call to embed “market-driven sociospatial transformation[s]” in their social contexts and histories (2002: 6). This is all the more important when applying this notion to non-Western contexts. More specifically, in post-colonial urban contexts the socio-economic segregation of urban populations has not precluded their infrastructural integration (Coutard 2008: 1815). Dubai is a case in point. For example, following the discovery of oil in 1966 a second master plan for Dubai was introduced in 1971 that made provisions for “low-income” residents in the city’s periphery (largely of South Asian descent), while white-collar foreigners (largely of European descent) would be settled in the district of Jumeirah (Ramos 2012:84, 88). These populations, however, were both subject to the centralized planning of the Dubai government through the Dubai Municipality. This organization functioned as a key command center instituted in the late 1950s. The paradigm informing this master planning and its management was indeed modernist. Yet its intended outcomes were not to collapse racial differences into a universal polity. It was just this modernist ideal of centralization in planning that did not survive the emergence of New Dubai. The urban splintering that New Dubai wrought, however, did not produce segregation so much as reconfigure it through the introduction of new relations of property.

12 Graham and Marvin’s (2001) analysis coincided with the early days of another trend in urban theory. This was a growing impatience with the Euro-American bent of much urban theory, and a desire to engage with urban centers of the ‘Global South’ without limiting their analysis to the same terms as those of cities in the ‘Global North’ (Robinson 2002, Simone 2001, Mbembe and Nuttall 2004). For an explicit critique of Graham and Marvin’s work on these terms see Coutard (2008), Graham et al. (2013), and Zérah (2008).

13 This is a lesson in (post)colonial urbanization that is neglected in Graham and Marvin’s analysis. Their focus on the urban contexts of Euro-America largely treats segregation as an outcome of neoliberalism and the splintering urbanism it has produced (e.g. 2001: 120).
2.3 Infrastructure and Ethics

I found many of my middle class Iranian interlocutors as curious about their circumstances and Dubai’s future as I was. They shared a sense of bewilderment about the crisis underway, and were unsure about the near future. This bewilderment was not simply a consequence of ambiguity surrounding the depth of the market’s “correction”. The very conception of (New) Dubai as an exceptional place had been radically disrupted. These interlocutors often described Dubai—or more accurately New Dubai—as a prosperous place where a cosmopolitan life could be secured in the midst of a dangerous region. Now, with the twin decline of the city’s financial and real estate markets, it seemed to be Dubai that was dangerous. Termination from employment, or diminished earnings could result in bounced cheques and abandoned cars. The inability to flip that property before its market value dropped below its mortgage could spell financial ruin. Property rights could be retroactively changed to limit damages owed by developers unable to complete a property. And as many of these middle class interlocutors were experiencing financial hardships and facing the prospect of legal entanglements with their creditors, they also struggled with the possibility of their own culpability.

I found my working class Iranians interlocutors also unsure about the near future. And yet, there was no bewilderment about it: no lack of understanding about the dangers that could potentially disrupt this future. These dangers predated the crisis. Customers could turn out to be undercover police officers inquiring about one’s travel documents. Relationships cultivated over time with customers could break down. Work permits could be rejected. These dangers were also a reoccurring theme in late night dinners and sidewalk conversations. The crisis had indeed impacted demand for car modifications and repairs. But it had not impacted their sense of place about Dubai, much less threatened to reverse it. Dubai offered more opportunities to earn a living than their hometowns or neighbouring cities in Iran, they explained. It was not, however, more hospitable for it.

The dangers these two social categories faced implied different urban realities and logics of rule. This is not to deny that their lives crossed paths, or that moral economies often bridged this
Rather, it is to note that their everyday lives were situated on different sides of a splintered city. State actors and popular media addressed them as very different kinds of urban residents. Across this divide, they secured their everyday lives through different circuits of exchange and conceptions of the values circulating in them; a real estate exhibit, for example, is a far cry from the strip of sidewalk overlooking a small auto-shop. Yet I also found that these middle and working class Iranians shared something in common across this divide. They were often preoccupied with similar questions. What justifies traveling here? What kind of life should be lived in Dubai? For whom should this life be lived? What kinds of action and risks does this life require? What kind of future can be expected here? These questions, I soon came to learn, relied heavily on their conceptions of the city itself as a certain kind of place: a place either of opportunities-turned-dangers, or a place of opportunities and dangers. Here was a city undergoing spectacular transformation, aiming for global recognition; now it was in the throes of a major crisis. My interlocutors often linked this turn of events to the nature of Dubai itself. This objectification of the city was never far removed from the reasons they gave for living the kinds of life they did.

It is in order to better understand how my interlocutors conducted themselves in relation to speculative urbanism and its splintering reality—the manner in which they imagined their place in it, gave reason for their actions, expectations, or anger—that I rely on the intersection between infrastructure and ethics. As I explain below, I find recent insights in their respective scholarship to help advance my analysis of unequal experiences with speculative urbanism as it passed from ‘transformation’ to ‘standstill’.

### 2.3.1 Infrastructure

Recent scholarship on infrastructure has repeatedly noted its often extra-pragmatic nature. The design and construction of structures that are intended to facilitate the movement of other things—that is, infra-structures—often exceed technical considerations. They may be informed by political urgency: the prioritization of some social actors over others, or the exhibition of modernity and the ostensibly immanent arrival of the conveniences associated with it (Sneath 2016).

For example, when an entrepreneur operating in one of New Dubai’s Free Trade Zones relies on his personal contact at the Department of Naturalization and Residency Dubai (DNRD) to assist his truck driver with a bureaucratic complication affecting his residency status.
2009). This is indeed the case with a speculative regime of urban development. Insofar as its reigning objective is to facilitate the valorization of capital through real estate, a spectacular aesthetic becomes part of this facilitation. One of the first scholars to study Dubai’s transformation, Yasser Elsheshtawy, highlighted this reliance on the spectacular as a reoccurring “architectural strategy” (2010: 105). As I will argue in chapter one, this strategy both elevated Dubai in global media and complemented the ostensibly exceptional power of the city’s Ruler as a “visionary” defying conventional understandings of both urban development and its manifestations in the Middle East. Furthermore, I will also argue that the speed with which this process unfolds also speaks to its speculative nature. The rapidity of urban development may discount other considerations (e.g. environmental degradation, functionality over time, etc.) in order to amplify this valorization of capital through the built form. My concern with “infrastructure” here revolves around this process, which I have captured under the heading of New Dubai. Three insights from recent studies of infrastructure are worth briefly noting here.

First, any identification of infrastructure is a “categorical” act (Larkin 2013: 330, Coutard 2008: 1817). This is to say that the systems of infrastructure through which physical materials, people, and ideas are channeled do not neatly end in a certain location. Nor are the things that infrastructures enable to circulate or the scale at which they operate self-evident. From the perspective of creating and circulating mortgage securities in New Dubai, for example, it is freehold real estate that is infrastructure. From the perspective of raw sewage, it is sewage treatment plants and trucks that ship it out from Burj Khalifa (the world’s in tallest building, located in New Dubai). Content, extension, and scale are thus to some extent informed by the questions posed. My concern with understanding New Dubai—its political economy and varied experiences with it—will primarily focus on the institutional arrangements of sovereignty and expert knowledge that facilitated its development. In this regard, I take up the public-private institutional assemblage known as “Dubai Inc.” as infrastructure.

15 This question of scale has also been a perennial source of controversy for urban scholars; just where does “the city” begin and end? This was a reoccurring topic of debate, for example, among the first generation of anthropologists who began to concentrate on the study of urban life (e.g. Fox 1977, Gulick 1974, Leeds 1968).
Second, infrastructure can inculcate ways of conduct. Von Schnitzler, for example, has recently demonstrated how the introduction of meters to gauge water consumption caused people to limit their everyday usage in order to save money (2008). Similarly, Caitlin Zaloom has demonstrated that interactions with the technologies and spaces of economic exchange can be informed by competitions for respect and projects of self-making (2004). Technologies of circulation and exchange, then, can also carry normative criteria for evaluation of behavior. Calhoun et al. have recently emphasized this moral dimension of infrastructure in relation to the city (2013). The manner in which inhabitants of cities shape its environment, they argue, often relies on shared conceptions about the current state and potential futures of their urban reality (198-199). I extend this insight by positing speculation as a morally inflected practice of urbanization from below. Specifically, I will examine the shared assumptions and practices according to which my middle class Iranian interlocutors participated with the emergent freehold real estate market as consumers. This practice of speculation relied on mutual understandings about how things worked in Dubai; that is, the connections between the purchase of real estate, the network of institutions involved in its creation, and the “vision” of a sheikh.

Finally, this concern for infrastructure and its relation to conduct also extends to the lives of my working class interlocutors. As I noted above, the splintering effects of speculative urbanism involve exposure to different kinds of dangers, inequalities, and relations of rights vis-à-vis state actors. Here I examine the kinds of infrastructure that these Iranian residents of Dubai relied on to secure their everyday lives as working class residents of the inner city; they were excluded from New Dubai, and increasingly subject to policing. To this end, I draw from recent analyses that examine the interpersonal work required to sustain channels of social and economic exchange (e.g. Elyachar 2005, 2010; Simone 2004). Rather than primarily focus on mapping social networks, this scholarship examines the actual practices, conceptions of obligation, and conventions of reciprocity that sustain the movement of peoples and information.

It is here—the moral dimensions of infrastructure understood broadly as concrete and conceptual media of circulation—where my analysis of infrastructure intersects with recent anthropological
scholarship on “ethics”. A moral charge is required to consummate values through motion, and sustain their circulation: a proclamation by a sovereign, a sense of obligation to provide for one’s dependents from across the sea, etc. This circulation of value, furthermore, is never divorced from the tangible stuff that represents it: the surfaces of a city, a car, or an individual, and their transformations.

2.3.2 Ethics

When the efficacy of infrastructural arrangements breaks down and the objects that rely on them are devalued, it helps to examine the ethical criteria according to which these arrangements were assumed to function and according to which these objects were ‘goods’ (both materially and morally). When the systems and practices of transformation give way to standstill, ‘goods’ become sources of danger; that is, they go ‘bad’. This, after all, is why my middle class interlocutors were at a loss, struggling to make sense of their moral standing as either victims of the unforeseen or harbingers of the inevitable. What is more, an ethnographic research project that examines such a crisis in the context of a splintered city must explore how—indeed if—its dangers manifested themselves across the socio-spatial divide. Here too I found myself preoccupied with understanding the ethical criteria according to which my working class Iranian interlocutors pursued certain ‘goods’, and gave reasons for doing so in Dubai. Here too I often learned of these ‘goods’ through their obstruction and personal struggles to obtain or achieve them.

Broadly speaking, I approach the study of ethics through an “action-centered approach” (Lambek 2010: 16). Such an approach emphasizes the contextual nature of ethics. It examines lived circumstances without foreclosing the possibilities of what counts as ethical in advance by formal criteria; as normative philosophies of ethics often do when they rely on esoteric scenarios to evaluate what ought to be done (Keane 2016: 25). Locating ethics in action represents the

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16 In keeping with recent anthropological debates about ethics and morality, I will be using these terms interchangeably (see Faubion 2011:21, Lambek 2010:8–9).

17 To be sure, the recent “ethical turn” in anthropology that has produced the lessons and conceptual vocabulary that I draw from remains uneven in its theoretical concerns and methodology.
Neo-Aristotelian conception that learning to be moral occurs through conduct, rather than occurring as result of a will or intention always preceding conduct. The question of will, however, remains a point of contention in this literature. Often framed as a question of “freedom”, it strikes at the heart of what an anthropology of ethics should look like. Is examining the *inculcation* of morality over the course of a person’s socialization worth carving out as a subfield in anthropology called “ethics”, or does the Durkheimian tradition of collapsing morality into sociability suffice? If the Durkheimian tradition has stunted our theoretical appreciation of morality (Laidlaw 2002), then how deliberate do our interlocutors’ *cultivation* of morality have to be in order to merit theorization?

These questions inform my decision to focus on certain kinds of conduct and shared knowledge as a matter of ethical analysis. The chapters that follow center upon deliberate projects of self-making and virtue, but do so through the mundane stream of practices that constitute everyday life. They feature working class individuals looking to demonstrate their commitment to their dependents in Iran, and their willingness to endure risk and a life of hardship to this end. This goal and the character required to achieve it are intrinsic to one another; the end is “internal” to its practical means (MacIntyre 2007: 184). But they also feature middle class individuals who participated in the market for properties in New Dubai on the basis of what they took to be implicit promises by the state. Indeed, these properties of brick and mortar were conflated with properties of personhood. Their consumption was thereby wrapped up with some sense of the kind of person one ought to be in Dubai. And when these ‘goods’ went ‘bad’, the (moral) credibility of the kinds of people they were associated with was also jeopardized. My field notes began to swell with retrospection and lament. Reasons were in order. What was once aspiration may have been recklessness, and wealth may have been no more than borrowed money.

In positing these varied experiences across socio-spatial boundaries as “ethics”, I am relying on recent anthropological approaches to the subject and the insights derived from them. I outline these in the remainder of this section.

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18 This notion that being ethical is derived from action (rather than solely the other way around) has been referred to as a “positive” (Colebrook 1998: 41, 43) approach to ethics.
First, my ethnographic data straddle two schools of this action-centered approach to ethics. The first is concerned with the deliberate cultivation of dispositions or behaviors that are imagined to be virtuous. Ethical action, in these analyses, is often located in “complex disciplinary program[s]” (Mahmood 2005: 123) featuring discursive traditions, textual exegesis, and a hierarchy of moral exemplars. Such disciplinary programs, for example, may include religious movements calling for unstinting devotion to God (Hirschkind 2006), or athletic schools that attach the education of character to that of physical strength and dexterity (Flatt 2010). Often drawing from Foucault’s concern with ethics as “reflective self-constitution” (Laidlaw 2014: 104), these studies feature interlocutors committed to becoming morally recognizable subjects through learning and bodily habituation. The second school of thought, often referred to “ordinary ethics” (Lambek 2010, Das 2012), is concerned more with the ethical dimensions of everyday life. For example: the implicit criteria according to which action is evaluated, the conventions that consummate new criteria for such evaluation, the way regard or disregard are demonstrated, the struggle to give reasons for action when circumstances exceed vocabularies, etc. What ties there concerns together is not to much a focus on organized projects of self-making—though these are not precluded—but the notion that ethics is intrinsic to action itself; indeed, to language (Lambek 2010: 49).

As I noted above, my interlocutors were (to varying degrees) involved in projects of self-making. They were trying to become the kinds of people they aspired to be. And so I rely on the oft-repeated insight that endeavors of self-making are often based on the assumption that a correlation exists between a person’s ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ states; that things you do to your body or assemble about you have some bearing on who you are. But these projects were squarely located within the stream of everyday life. I therefore foreground the vagaries and fragility of everyday life that scholars of ordinary ethics often note. Locating self-making in everyday life thus highlights the struggle to secure life itself in the midst of evolving circumstances (Das 2010: 376), and the “sheer burden” of maintaining reciprocal reliances with other people (Al-Mohammad 2010: 434). After all, this is an ethnography of life in a state of crisis. It is in this
sense that I “straddle” these two approaches: the stuff of ethics is more of less organized, and more or less contingent.\textsuperscript{19}

Finally, the personal narratives that I offer in the chapters that follow highlight the experience of struggling with competing obligations and circumstances of uncertainty. On both counts, I draw heavily from Michael Lambek. A reoccurring insight that his theorization of ordinary ethics offers is that incommensurable imperatives and choices are not exceptional to the experience of everyday life. Practical judgment is required, for example, when facing mutually exclusive moral choices (2010: 23). Does one acknowledge the onset of a major crisis in order to begin the work of guarding against its dangers and redeeming one’s loses? Or does one assume that signs of crisis are just an anomaly in an ongoing boom; thereby forestalling the distress of rearranging one’s life or reconsideration of one’s actions and their criteria? A related dilemma is the struggle to make a judgment and give reasons for it in circumstances where criteria for action have met their limits. This may result from facing incommensurable obligations, but it may also result when the shared knowledge about reality is radically contradicted. When shared assumptions or meta-values undergirding a way of life are suddenly realized to be unreliable, the potential fragility of regimes of value is revealed (Lambek 2008: 139). The vertigo, for example, that some of my middle class interlocutors felt was the result of not quite knowing how to exercise judgment within their circumstances. Their lives were not practically arrested—as abandoned cars were—but they were gripped with confusion. Their sense of personhood, insofar as it was dependent on this regime of value, was at a standstill.

3 Studying Migration in the Persian Gulf

In Dubai, like other Arabic societies of the Persian Gulf, permanent residency and naturalization are not available to non-citizens. This is regardless of the duration of their stay. Rather the entry and residency status of foreigners is regulated according to a sponsorship system, known as the \textit{kafala}, that structures their lives in terms of “permanent impermanence” (Ali 2010). According

\textsuperscript{19} For an in-depth and lucid theoretical comparison of these two approaches see Cheryl Mattingly (2012). In taking the approach that I have, I follow Laidlaw’s recent rejection of Mattingly’s call to opt for one instead of the other (2014: 43).
to this system, all foreign residents are administratively registered as economic migrants beholden to the sponsorship of their employer, which is either a citizen or a business. Their residency status is contractually tied to the needs of this employer, and must be renewed every two years. The termination of employment thus often triggers the termination of residency as well.

This sponsorship system, furthermore, is part of a broader ensemble of policies, discourses and social practices that regulate social difference in terms of a highly regimented distinction between citizens and non-citizens. While citizens enjoy state largess in the form of cradle-to-grave social rights, foreign residents are left to manage risk according to their financial capacities in the free market, or the services that their various governments make available to them. The result is an “ethnocratic” (Longva 2005: 118-19) polity wherein citizenship is conflated with ethnicity. The availability of naturalization is highly restricted as it contradicts the illiberal principle that political membership is based on shared descent. The diversity of transnational movements in peoples from across the region that marks everyday life in Dubai is thus formally distinguished from the nation and its ostensible unity.

This ethnocratic regime has historically emerged in tandem in with a steep numerical disparity between the citizenry and migrants. This has been a demographic feature of many Arab societies of the Persian Gulf—especially the UAE—ever since the influx of migrant labour following the discovery of oil in the region (Khalaf 2006: 245, 250). In fact, between 1950 and 2005, the combined population of these countries rose from four to forty million (Kapiszewski 2006). The vast majority of this population surge originates from the Middle East, South and East Asia.

This demographic context, as I further explain in chapter four, has buttressed the political legitimacy of ethnocratic policies such as the sponsorship system, and their differentiation of citizens and non-citizens. These policies are legitimized as a bulwark for the continuation of the nation in the face of a significant and impinging foreign presence.

My efforts to examine experiences with speculative urbanism across social hierarchy extend from a body of research that coalesced in the late 1990s. It is worth briefly elaborating some of the key concerns and conceptual foundations that emerged at this time as they have informed current ethnographic research of migration in the region, and my dissertation. The works of three
authors are especially worth noting for my purposes. In one of the earlier ethnographies of the region, Anh Nga Longva examined social hierarchy in Kuwait by focusing on the everyday regimentation of social relations among citizens and foreign residents (1997). This work dramatically departed from more conventional analyses of migration to the region at the time. These were predominantly concerned with the macro-economic impacts of migration on “sending” and “host” societies (e.g. Gardezi 1991). Instead, Longva drew attention to the shared vernacular and social practices according to which a “politics of exclusion” framed the lives of her interlocutors. Her continued concern with the subject later resulted in a widely cited essay that elaborated the formal characteristics of “ethnocracy” (2005). Roughly coinciding with her ethnography was a seminal essay, by Gwenn Okruhlik, that emphasized the structural impasses in which foreign residents are situated. Focusing on Saudi Arabia, Okruhlik described them as “excluded essentials” for being simultaneously essential to the functioning of the national economy while being categorically excluded from its polity (1999). Finally, Sharon Nagy’s ethnographic research was arguably the first to emphasize how this politics of exclusion, differentiating citizens and migrants, was articulated through the management of urban space. She argued that this politics relied on urban planning techniques intended to segregate citizen households from concentrations of foreigners (1997, 2006). These, then, are the concerns that my ethnographic research is centered on: the politics of exclusion, the contradictory position of foreign residents, and their spatial configuration.

These seminal works have generated two streams of ethnographic research focusing on social hierarchy and migration in the Persian Gulf. The first has been primarily concerned with the experiences of lower income migrants, often from South and East Asia. Two social categories have been a reoccurring focus: men conscripted into around the city (construction, gardening, etc.), and women conscripted into domestic service. Researchers following these interlocutors have examined the structural arrangements that mediate the conscription of their labour, such as the international labour brokerage network linking these “host” and “sending” societies (e.g. Kouaouci 2005, Malecki and Ewers 2007, Mohammed and Sidaway 2012, Gardner 2013). They have also attended to cultural logics and social norms that motivate these lower income migrants as economic emissaries of their families, and their experiences while working in the Persian Gulf (e.g. Osella and Osella 2000, Leonard 2002, Gamburd 2008, Gardner 2010, 2011, 2012). I seize upon two key observations recently foregrounded in these works, especially in regard to my
analysis of working class Iranians. First, though these migrants are economic emissaries of dependents back home they are not simply utility maximizing opportunists (Kamrava and Babar 2012). This is the official view of governments in the region, and is part of the normative ideology that sustains their class position as “essential” to highly uneven relations of exploitation, and “excluded” from any political process that can alter these relations. Second, the cultural expectations that inform their motivations to travel to the Persian Gulf and the social networks that facilitate this travel and the conscription of their labour together link their hometowns and their urban destinations as a “transnational social field” (Glick Schiller 1999, 97). The pursuit of social obligations away from kin and the formal arrangements that enable it, in other words, cut across national borders and sustain travel between them.

More recently, a second stream of research has called for expanding the study of migratory experiences in the Persian Gulf by looking “beyond labour” (Ahmed 2012, Vora and Koch 2015). The criticism, here, is that recent scholarship has too often prioritized working conditions in examining these experiences. Attiya Ahmed has argued that there are consequences to this analytic approach that should give us pause. It often draws our attention, for example, to the circumstances of lower income foreign residents in particular. It also implicitly elides the range of ways in which foreign residents, especially those in less precarious circumstances, have actively participated in these societies and cultivated ties with both citizens and their fellow nationals. In what is arguably the most theoretically ambitious ethnography of the region in recent years, Neha Vora follows this line of analysis. She expands on Okruhlik’s thesis by focusing on the shared imaginings and practices of Dubai’s middle class Indian diaspora (2013). The illiberal logic of ethnocratic policies, Vora argues, has historically existed alongside very liberal policies as well. While the former continues to officially relegate non-citizens to the status of transients, the latter offers opportunities for self-enterprise, flexible accumulation, limited regulations, and limited taxes. Referring to her middle class Indian interlocutors as “impossible citizens” (20-22, 175), she stresses that while this dual regulatory regime has barred them from formal citizenship, it has also allowed them to assume forms of substantive citizenship. The latter category refers to practices and narratives that work to secure everyday membership in this society; even ensuring the continuation of the ethnocratic policies they are subject to. For example, though the small businesses operated by her interlocutors are sponsored by a citizen-partner, it is these middle class Indians who actually manage their daily operations. In doing so
they extend the capillary powers of citizens, for example, by facilitating the conscription of their fellow nationals into Dubai’s labour market.

This dissertation looks to engage with both streams of scholarship in the study of migration the Persian Gulf. My participant observation among working and middle class Iranians residents of Dubai has confirmed many of their keys insights. Even the most short-term and apparently transitory forms of migration to Dubai among my working class interlocutors were shot through with cultural conceptions of honour and obligation. It also relied on social networks spanning the southern and northern shores of the Persian Gulf as a single transnational social field. While my middle class interlocutors were just as relegated from formal citizenship as their working class counterparts, they had been active participants of New Dubai as a neoliberal project realigning legal relations of right between the state and higher-income foreign residents.

Yet the chapters that follow also depart from this body of research insofar they offer a comparative ethnographic analysis of lived experiences across socio-spatial boundaries (but see Gardner 2010). My analysis does not move “beyond” labor so much as its moves in parallel with it as I examine the differences and commonalities between the everyday lives of my working and middle class interlocutors. I contend that such an approach enhances our understanding of migration in the Persian Gulf in several respects. First, it further trains our attention on the ways in which the coincidence of illiberal and liberal logics of membership unevenly distributes rights and risks. Second, it does well to highlight how this unevenness informed different conceptions of the good life and the value that Dubai held as a place worth immigrating to in pursuit of this life. Finally, it offers an especially helpful approach with which to gauge the strength of administrative innovations, working to configure these rights and risks, as they concluded in a major crisis.

4 Dubai Through Iranian Experiences

4.1 Why Iranians?

Iranians are one of the few nationalities that have been intimately involved with the history of urbanization in Dubai. Like immigrants from India and Pakistan, for example, their presence in Dubai is broadly distributed both in terms of social hierarchy and urban locality. These
circumstances are partly due to geographic proximity. Dubai is but an hour’s flight from Tehran, and about twenty minutes from southern port-cities such as Bandar Abbas. This proximity has seen a history of travel from Iran to Dubai. This history, in turn, has resulted in a diverse Iranian society in Dubai today; that is, Iranian residents here are not limited to a particular social or economic demographic of Iranians emigrating from Iran. In this regard, Iranian residents of Dubai provide a convenient set of experiences from which to pursue my overarching objective: ethnographically exploring speculative urbanism across socio-spatial boundaries.

My methodological decision to undertake such research from within the same national category of residents, however, requires further clarification. It is not limited to the fact that Iranians happen to span Dubai’s social hierarchy. My overarching objective could be well served, for example, by contrasting social experiences across hierarchies of race as well. After all, as I note later in this introduction, the history of spatial boundaries in Dubai have been racially informed as it was within the orbit of British empire.

The splintering effects of Dubai’s speculative urbanism may have further exasperated socio-spatial boundaries in the city, but it had not disconnected its population of transnational migrants from either their countries of origin (largely in the Global South) or from other end-points of continued migration (largely in the Global North). The circumstances in which foreign residents encountered the emergence of New Dubai were never removed from their circumstances in circuits of transnational migration. To be more specific: their spatial practices, its relation to their class position, and the extent to which Dubai’s urban transformation had reconfigured them reflected the unequal resources and potential paths of migration that these circuits made available to them. Many of my middle class interlocutors hailed from Iran’s urban centers and aspired to eventually immigrate to Canada or the USA. The pursued the symbols and competencies of what they imagined Western-oriented subjects would pursue (e.g. registering their children in English-language schools). Many of my working class interlocutors, by contrast, hailed from small towns in southern Iran and had travelled to Dubai without their dependents. They relied on social infrastructure that sustained chain migration, and intended to eventually return to these hometowns permanently. Whereas the former represented a centrifugal exit from Iran in search of destinations far afield, the latter represented a centripetal one within Iran’s orbit. While the emergence of New Dubai involved a shifting distribution of rights and risks for foreign residents
in relation to life in this city, these were either: exploited to advance their transnational relations and continued movement, or offset by the resources that these transnational relations offered.

Focusing on foreign residents from the same national category works to foreground this shifting relation of space and class in Dubai with transnational movement. More significantly, for my purposes, insofar as the moral reasons people give to justify travel to Dubai refer to circumstances in the same country, they foreground class inequalities originating beyond Dubai through the priorities that these reasons express. While this dissertation is squarely focused on experiences in Dubai, it nevertheless invites broader considerations of the constitution of class and space across the Persian Gulf and the possibility of multi-cited ethnography (Marcus 1995) to pursue them.

In order to give context to the circumstances in which Dubai’s Iranian population encountered its urban transformation from across the social hierarchy, I now turn to a brief history of Iranian migration to the city.

4.2 Citing Origins and Crossing Boundaries

There is an image of Dubai that began circulating on the Internet in the mid-2000s (Figure #3). It juxtaposes the same stretch of Sheikh Zayed Road across roughly twenty years. It is a powerful testament to the rapid transformation of this city. And much of it, after all, initially occurred along this highway. This image was widely known by the time of my fieldwork. I often relied on this knowledge. One’s relation to Dubai—past travels, a current line of work, a purpose, etc.—inevitably enter the conversation when meeting new people, especially young foreign professionals eager to expand their social network. And I soon developed the habit of referencing this image. I did so because of my personal history with one of the lonely apartment buildings in background. Somewhere on the eleventh floor of that building was one of the first apartments that my family and I resided in after moving to Dubai in 1984. In the ‘before’ picture, this

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20 This is a mid-rise apartment building that is colloquially known as the “Toyota Tower” owing to the large neon Toyota ad above it. It used to overlook an old roundabout called Diwār al-Difa’ (“Defense Roundabout”).
building stands aloof and conspicuous like some kind of urban sphinx: a marker beyond which people and their effects just run out. In the ‘after’ picture, it is gone: not for demolition, but because it has been inundated by the amorphous stream of buildings stretching the city toward the horizon. This little party trick served me well. It identified me as someone with a history here, and offered a segue to discussing my current purpose: studying the transformation that has rendered this old building invisible.

This practice of citing my personal history in the city, however, failed to break the ice when I tried to connect with a group of working class Iranians in the inner city. It was our first encounter. They were loitering on the sidewalk in front of their small store, when I approached them from the crowds walking by and struck up a conversation. Though I did not know it at the time, their social world would emerge as a key focus of my dissertation. But it almost did not, I very nearly alienated them that same night.
“You’re here to study [Iranians], so can you speak our language?” asked one of the crew. The question came in Persian, but the language in question was Achumi. The latter is a Persian dialect that is prevalent in the smaller cities and towns of some southern provinces in Iran. I had only recently learned of this dialect when I arrived for fieldwork a few months earlier.

“Unfortunately not,” I said, “they stopped teaching that at the University of Toronto.” They appreciated this attempt at humour, and explained: “that’s because it’s a dāhāt-i language.”

*Dahat-i* is the adjectival form of “village” (*dāhāt*). In Iranian vernacular it bears connotations of backwardness or a lack of sophistication. Their point was to explain why my preparations for fieldwork had neglected to account for this kind of Iranian resident in Dubai. “You’re in our university now,” smiled one of the crew.

As the conversation continued I noted that I had spent my childhood in Dubai. And of course, for dramatic effect, I cited that image. They were not familiar with it, but the older crewmembers knew of the building I was referring to. One of them immediately remarked: “You’re from here but you’ve never heard of Achumi?! Your building is right there!” Before I could formulate a response, his co-worker grumbled: “So you didn’t used to come around these parts.” Once again, referencing this picture had worked to identify me, but not terms that I preferred. This time, my being in the picture put me outside of the social world I wanted to participate in. The invisibility of that old building in the ‘after’ picture, and my history with it, fails to impress when it becomes apparent that my audience was invisible to me all the while.

It was true: I had not frequented their quarter of the city. Inner city areas featuring a concentration of small retailers and restaurants (e.g.: Al Karama, Murshif Bazaar) were lively and crowded while I was growing up in Dubai. They remain so today. I recall regular family outings to these parts of the city, and always in the evenings. But this changed in the early 1990s. On the one hand, the city’s entertainment industry and tourist infrastructure started to expand. A slew of state-of-the-art shopping malls came in quick succession: Jumeirah Beach Centre, Burjuman, Wafi, City Centre. On the other hand, I had entered high school. The kind of self that I aspired to in those years—as an English-educated middle class teenager practicing American pop culture—was more at home in the glistening spaces of those malls brimming with Western brands, than the congested streets of the inner city brimming with a hodgepodge of household merchandise and lower income bodies.
My history in Dubai, in other words, had been mediated by social boundaries. This encounter was a reminder that everyday life in this *entrepôt* was not just the stuff of cultural bricolage and social mixing. As recent scholarship on the history of urbanization in this city suggests, it was also marked by economic inequality, racial differentiation and their rendition in space. Its most recent transformation, then, continued to offer opportunities from an increasingly diverse population to not only mix, but also evade one another. It also worked to harden these social boundaries as the right of property ownership saw an outmigration from the inner city by middle class residents toward the residential mega-projects in the outer-city where this right could be activated. This further socio-spatial splintering also bore implications for the manner in which my working and middle class interlocutors experienced risk, and ensnarement in states of standstill. Focusing on Iranian residents helps put these structural processes and lived moral struggles into relief.

4.3 A History of Arrivals and Departures

Ever since the late 1800s, there have been episodes of mass migration from the coastal towns and port cities of the northern Persian Gulf to its southern shores. These port cities were already established *entrepôts* and key nodes in Britain’s trade network linking the Indian sub-continent to markets in Europe and North America. Ironically, while my interlocutors sometimes invoked this history to belittle the authenticity of Emirati society, it was precisely efforts by Iranian governments to centralize their control and cultivate national identity that had triggered these emigrations. These movements, furthermore, were often a consequence of soft boundaries solidifying. The communities leaving settlements in Iran behind were not departing for disconnected social worlds, but often joining their extended kin on the other side of this gulf.

The first major episodes of emigration occurred at the turn of the 20th Century as the Iran’s Qajar government began to exert more control over these port cities, in the Persian Gulf, so as to directly manage their income. This eventually led to Sunni Arab residents of the region emigrating for the southern shores of the Persian Gulf in order to evade higher taxes or political persecution.
This political push involved militarily dislodging of the Qawāsim: an Arab tribe that had been ruling in this region since the late 1700s. It was especially their authority over the lucrative port city of Lingeh (a majority Sunni Arab town) that was at issue. This process triggered two mass migrations of Sunni Arab communities in 1887 and 1899 (Abdullah 1978: 230). Another wave of emigration occurred in 1902. The Qajar government imposed a new customs tariff on British trade that year (Heard-Bey 1982: 244). This saw a number of major trading families leave for Dubai, whose ruler at the time waived tariffs to further facilitate this process. A major consequence of this was the economic demise of the Iranian port city of Lingeh (a major trading hub in the region) to the direct benefit of Dubai’s emergence as a regional entrepôt (Al Sayegh 1998: 89).

The next major episode came in the 1930s, when Iran was under the rule of its first Pahlavi monarch, Reza Shah. It was the result of his modernization schemes. On the one hand, his government considerably raised customs duties on food staples that happened to flow through Iran’s southern trade. This was intended to help fund ambitious infrastructure projects—particularly the Trans-Iranian Railway, linking the Persian Gulf with Caspian Sea—while alleviating the need to rely on foreign loans (Abdullah 1978: 247). On the other hand, this project also involved a disciplinary project targeting moral norms and social hierarchies. One manifestation of this was a law was passed in 1936 that banned the practice of veiling in public (Ettehadieh 2004: 96). Officially known as the kashf-e hijab ("the opening of the veil"), it was presented as an attempt to unfetter Iranians from the burden of ostensibly outmoded traditions. It was also intended to diminish the political authority of the ulema (clerical establishment) and the religious imperatives that it relied on. Together, these interventions initiated a period of emigration from towns in southern Iran to what was then called The Trucial Coast (the UAE).

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21 Abdullah records this customs law as going into effect in 1903 (1978: 225).
22 As a result of this customs tariff, for example, the Bombay and Persia Steam Navigation Company bypassed Lingeh for the first time in 1902 and directly shipped cargo to Dubai (Abdullah 1978: 232).
23 Some remarkable reports of resistance come out of these years. In October 1936, for example, a report by the British Political Residency of Bushire (another major Iranian port-city) describes an incident in an island town of Hindurabi. Apparently, when the police tried to enforce this ban, residents charged them, bound them, forcibly confined them along with the Director of Customs, and soon departed for southern coast of the Gulf (Abdullah 1978: 247).
The next period of a major emigration to Dubai came in 1960s and 1970s. This period coincided with the discovery of oil in 1966, the dredging of Dubai’s Creek, and the urban development that Dubai saw during this time. This movement, however, was no longer predominantly Sunni or ethnically Arab in character (Abdullah 1978: 276). Rather, attracted by Dubai’s budding economy and the expansion of petty trades, it was part of the influx of “unskilled” labour that saw the city’s population nearly double from 59,000 to 120,000 between 1968 and 1974 (Heard-Bey 1982: 269). The Iranian interlocutors whom I focus in the latter half of this dissertation often trace their history to this period. They are the operators of small retailers and wholesalers located in the inner city. Theirs is an economy of car parts, domestic merchandise, electronics, and so on. Their urban milieu was the hustle and bustle of mixed crowds navigating the heat by day, neon-signs by night, and humidity throughout. Their working and living spaces feature a concentration of “working class” male bodies, living apart from their families in Iran, and engaged in manual labour.

I was often told of an earlier generation of fathers and uncles, now back in Iran, who had set up shop in Dubai. Legally obliged to have a ‘majority’ business partner of Emirati descent—an ongoing policy—they often sought out Emirati’s of Iranian descent representing earlier periods of migration. This practice continues into the present. The partnerships I examined were often based on shared ancestry in the same town or region in southern Iran. As such, these relations were buttressed by the fact that Achumī (the native dialect of Persian often spoken by these inner city Iranian residents of Dubai) is also widely spoken among Emiratis of Iranian descent.24

By the time my family moved to Dubai in 1984, it was during the last major emigration of Iranians to the UAE in the 20th Century. This came on the heels of the 1978-79 revolution, and the commencement of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980. Unlike much of the Arab world, Dubai remained neutral and emerged as a major economic conduit for the Iranian economy in the 1980s as the latter was subject to US-imposed embargos and sanctions. A re-export market thus developed, allowing Iranian businesses to continue accessing global markets in goods and

24 In fact, it was often claimed to be something of a lingua franca in the Iranian provinces of Hormuzgan and the southern region of Fars.
services despite the imposition of embargos and sanctions by the USA. An early indication of the strategic significance of this economic dependency on Dubai was the formation of the Iranian Business Council (IBC) in 1982. This institution also represents the first endeavor by Dubai’s Iranian residents to establish an organized presence in local civil society.

This period saw Dubai’s Iranian population expand and further diversify in terms of ethnicity and class. Increasingly, there arrived Iranians from throughout Iran. They often possessed more formal education, arrived with their families, pursued work in white-collar professions, and diversified Iran’s economic links to Dubai and the region through re-exports.

Among this weave of immigrants was also the first generation of Iranians that treated Dubai as a jumping-off point toward Euro-American destinations for migration. Thus the end of the war did not see an Iranian exodus back to Iran. Rather, it further embedded these newcomers, living and working in Dubai, as interlocutors for an Iranian economy that began to normalize and expand its presence in global markets. Dubai’s re-export economy, for example, remains a cornerstone of diplomatic relations between Iran and the UAE. It rapidly expanded during the global boom in credit and commodities during the 2000s (Graph #1, above). In fact, according to IMF statistics, it has consistently placed the UAE as the highest-ranking origin of imports into Iran since the late 1990s.

This re-export trade continued to flourish until very recently. In 2010, the US and the UN imposed yet another round of sanctions on Iran. These were decidedly more comprehensive as they involved banning Iran from the international SWIFT network (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication); a first in the history of any sanctions regime. In 2012, the EU also ceased purchasing Iranian oil. This was all part of a broader effort led by the Obama Administration to coordinate and sustain international pressure on Iran. The overriding objective here was to force concessions on its nuclear activities, and render its position weaker in any future negotiations. Dubai’s long-standing role as an economic conduit and relief line for Iran seems to have been severely restrained with this latest push. This is because it coincided with Dubai’s descent into economic crisis, causing it to rely on financial aid from the emirate of Abu Dhabi. It is widely acknowledged that this diminished Dubai’s relative independence in determining its foreign relations, which had seen it maintain close ties with Iran in contrast to Abu Dhabi.

25 IMF, Direction of Trade Statistics.
With the late 1990s the project of New Dubai was beginning in earnest. An early milestone was the launch of the *Dubai Shopping Festival* in the summer of 1996, aimed to attract retail tourism from the region. It was the beginning of Dubai’s status as a recreational destination for Iranian tourists (Figure #4, below). A veritable cottage industry in travel agencies and guided tours began to emerge as large numbers of Iranians arrived seeking high-end consumer brands, performances by Iranian artists often based in Europe or North America, and other forms of leisure that were unavailable in Iran. These audiences, furthermore, are not limited to residents of Dubai, but are known to draw large numbers of fans from Iran as well.

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<th>Figure #4. Iranian Visitors to Dubai²⁷</th>
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²⁷ As these numbers capture arrivals on “visit” visas, they also include Iranians who were traveling to Dubai to work informally. I examine this practice in later chapters.
This city emerged, in other words, as a site of ‘counter-culture’ where opportunities to fashion identities outside the realm of moral possibilities prescribed by the Islamic Republic were abundantly available, especially for middle class youths. By the mid 2000s, then, Dubai had emerged as a key node in transnational circuits of Iranian aesthetics, monies and bodies. Since 2005, for example, Dubai has steadily become a globally recognized hub for Iranian art. Established and upcoming Iranian artists travel to Dubai from Iran and around the world to exhibit their works (Rahbar 2015).  

Not geographically as far afield as Europe or North America, and yet a world apart from Iran, Dubai was at the cross roads of various Iranian social worlds.

### 4.4 Not an Extension, but a Displacement

Iranians in Dubai are not unique for either their socio-spatial differentiation in this city, or for having such a cosmopolitan history of travel to Dubai. Such travels linked the northern and southern shores of the Persian Gulf well before the discovery of oil in the 1960s and the formation of the UAE in 1971. But they also linked this entire region to the Indian Ocean as well (Markovits 1999). Neha Vora, for example, has recently elaborated this heritage of cultural hybridity with respect to Dubai’s Indian population (2013: 52-55). I briefly elaborate her findings here in order to further explain the general circumstances of Iranians in Dubai by contrast.

Vora notes the wide scope of contemporary cultural entanglements between Emirati society and South Asia. These far exceed specific practices that may be regarded as derived from of a history of trade, such as cuisine or dress. She notes the ubiquity of household intimacies and the emotional labour, for example, provided by South Asian nannies and domestic workers that are involved in the social reproduction of Emirati families (2013: 61). These arrangements are  

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28 These works, it is worth noting, are not limited to a niche market. In 2014, for example, the Iranian-Canadian artist Abbas Akhavan was awarded the *Abraaj Group Art Prize* at Art Dubai, the largest art festival focusing on the MESA region.
indeed widespread.\textsuperscript{29} In fact, whether in the home or in labour camps, it is South Asian migrants that conduct the majority of labour-intensive, low-wage work in Dubai.

It is also, however, South Asian migrants that represent the largest segment of Dubai’s population more generally. This explains why Vora’s middle class Indian interlocutors struggle with a moral dilemma. On the one hand, they suffer from the racialization of working class bodies as “Indian”. Co-inhabiting Dubai with this specter of a large population of low-income Indians sees them take pains to differentiate themselves from it (2008: 390-392). On the other hand, they also feel a sense of solidarity and sorrow for their fellow nationals and their meagre lot.

These are not the circumstances Iranians in Dubai find themselves in. Iran is not a migrant ‘sending state’; as, for example, India or the Philippines are. The foreign policy and international relations of the Islamic Republic have not been geared toward facilitating a remittance economy. This is compounded by longstanding political relations between the governments of Iran and those of neighbouring countries in the Persian Gulf. These tensions date back to the Pahlavi era and center around competing claims to sovereignty over territory and local populations.\textsuperscript{30} For example, an enduring source of tension between Iran and the UAE has been the status of three islands in the Persian Gulf that are currently occupied by the former but claimed by the latter. These are some of the main reasons why Iranian nationals are neither a ubiquitous presence in Emiratis households nor in the dormitories of labour camps.

Working class Iranians in Dubai are largely limited to the petty retail or trade economies; either mostly located in the denser quarters of the inner city, or along the Creek featuring smaller wooden dhows carrying merchandise between Iran’s southern ports and Dubai. Cab drivers, nannies, janitors, construction workers, metro station staff, and checkout clerks, for example, are not typically Iranian. This means that middle class or wealthier Iranian residents of Dubai do not


\textsuperscript{30} In fact, the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (1981) was, in part, intended to counter the political ambitions of a newly emerging Islamic Republic.
suffer from the stigma of association with a more widespread but socially devalued Iranian presence.

The difference most significant for my purposes, however, is their sense of place about Dubai in relation to Iran. Iranians in Dubai did not generally imagine their circumstances as “extensions” of Iran, as Vora’s Indian interlocutors, for example, thought of the inner city in relation to India (2013: 32). And they rarely took Iran for granted as a fall-back plan, or casually declared—as Ahmed Kanna’s South Asian interlocutors did—that “we can always go back” (2011:199). Indeed, there was a looming specter informing my interlocutors’ sense of place about Dubai. It was not some larger Iranian presence in the city, or a romantic view of Iran as a “homeland” (as I explain further below). It was Iran itself as an always-present negative mirror image of Dubai. It was imagined as a place without sufficient social freedoms, employment opportunities, links with the world beyond, or simply the security of continuity by which to take everyday life for granted. This notion of Iran as a place in a state of widespread breakdown seemed to cut across class and ethnicity among Iranian residents of Dubai. As one of my interlocutors put it succinctly: “Iran stunts potential (Iran potānsīāl koshe)!” This state of breakdown ostensibly required that Iranian life achieve its potential elsewhere. Indeed, my interlocutors often described Dubai as the manifestation of Iranian potential. The city’s rapid growth and economic success were repeatedly cited as the result of a displaced Iranian modernity. ‘Had the revolution not occurred; the war not occurred; had the government not grown corrupt,’ the thinking went, Dubai would not have so precipitously emerged as a global metropolis because the talents of Iranians along with the natural wealth and history of Iran would not have been throttled.

This pursuit of “potential” elsewhere represents a large part of what this dissertation is about. Between the interlocutors that I have identified as “middle” and “working” class it follows different trajectories of migration, takes up residence in different social settings, assumes different moral categories, seeks to inhabit different kinds of persona, and encounters different kinds of risks along the way.
5 Diaspora and its Exceptions

The immigration policies and history of movement that underpin the general circumstances of Iranian society in Dubai fit awkwardly with the scholarship on Iranian migration. This scholarship continues to focus on Iranian immigrants in Europe, Australia, and especially North America. A geographic bias informs this scholarship, therefore, as it remains largely concerned with the Global North. This geographic bias is worth examining as its bears serious implications on the concerns of this dissertation. If my ethnographic preparations had not anticipated the Achumi language, for example, it may have been due to more than my limited encounters with (working class) Iranians while living in Dubai. It may have also reflected the absence of this language in the literature on Iranian migration insofar as it has neglected Iranian populations within Iran’s orbit. I suggest that the analytic categories this literature has relied on, and the liberal political contexts in which it has been conducted, do not clearly lend themselves to understanding everyday life in circumstances of proximity to Iran and impermanence of residency. Indeed, they risk foreclosing our knowledge of transnational experiences and imaginings in these circumstances.

In a recent review of the burgeoning scholarship on Iranian migration, Karim and Elahi adopt the concept of “diaspora” as especially well suited to understanding the diverse ways in which “Iranians have…reinvented themselves as a distinct national and ethnic group outside of Iran” (2011: 382). They explain its suitability by noting the ongoing incorporation of Iranian émigrés into the societies in which they live, and the recognition of their “ethnic legitimacy” that this process has involved (2011: 386). Indeed, much recent scholarship has examined various ways in which different generations of Iranian émigrés actively participate in the civil societies of these liberal polities as its hyphenated members. Such participation, to list a few examples, includes the public celebration of Iranian cultural heritage (Malek 2011), the cultivation of nostalgia among second-generation youth mobilizing on university campuses (Maghbouleh 2010), the mediation of “home” and dual-nationality through blogging (Alinejad 2011), the production of

31 This bias reflect the emergence of studies of Iranian migration from within the broader study of transnationalism, coalescing in the 1990s, that often eschewed South-South migration.
literary works such as memoirs (Fotouhi 2015, Malek 2006), and the development of cultural organizations relying on policies of multi-culturalism (Malek 2015).

These recent studies and their concern for diasporic practices and identitarian hybridity mark a departure from earlier scholarship on Iranian émigrés and refuges. The latter—largely focused on the USA—was often more concerned with the socio-economic profile, intra-ethnic divisions, and enclave economies of Iranians arriving in 1980s (Ansari 1992, Bozorgmehr and Sabagh 1988, Fathi 1991). Yet the struggle with identity was not absent from these works. In addition to ambivalence about assimilation (Chaichian 1997: 616) and alienation from fellow Iranians (Ansari 1988: 80), we learned of organized efforts to craft an “exilic” identity through cultural production (Naficy 1993). This theme of exile was foregrounded in Hamid Naficy’s groundbreaking analysis of the televisual culture produced by Iranians in Los Angeles. Informing this televisual culture, he explained, was a “considerable tension between the resistive communitas and incorporative structuration” (1993: xvii).

This tension continues to reverberate in the cultural activities of “1.5” and second-generation Iranian émigrés, which the more recent scholarship elaborates. It also points to two socially mediated moral imperatives that underpin the lives of migrants in liberal polities: living as a member of such a polity, while also claiming the heritage of another. However disparate the immigration policies of liberal democracies may be, they do not officially limit formal citizenship to ethnic criteria. Political membership, in other words, is officially disarticulated from ethnicity; allowing for the possibility of naturalization. What is more, to varying degrees, immigrant populations are also afforded the rights and resources required to assemble cultural organizations and ethnic lobbies. It is these official affordances that enable the legitimation of their ethnicity as part of the larger polity. Indeed, whether we read earlier or more recent studies of Iranian migration, we most often find that their Iranian subjects are already naturalized or live as permanent residents of these (liberal) societies. If these Iranian immigrants assemble cultural

32 For a more recent observation of this sentiment see Mobasher 2012.

33 I follow Holston and Appadurai in distinguishing between “formal citizenship” and “substantive citizenship” (1999, 4). Whereas the former refers to official membership in a polity, the later to refers to actual (and often unequal) capacity of citizens to fully participate as such members.

34 For excellent comparative analysis of this capacity between Canada and Sweden see Malek 2015.
associations, orchestrate public festivities, Anglicize their names (Blair 1991), or encourage their children to speak Persian at home, it is because “incorporative structuration” in these societies structures toward permanency. It is the possibility of permanence and the frictions of distance (e.g. the higher cost of travel) that ostensibly qualifies the lives of these Iranian immigrants as “diasporic” and informed by the familiar trope of nostalgia for a distant “homeland.”

Yet what of other destinations in the circuits of Iranian migration? What is the stuff of “diasporic” life—its social practices and moral vocabularies—when impermanence and proximity rather than permanence and distance are the circumstances of reception and the thresholds of settlement? What about modes of transnational mobility that are either unintended, or never lead to the multicultural imperative of “creat[ing] a space of difference” (Ghorashi 2004: 335) as minority-members of a “host” nation?

My field notes do not speak of nostalgic yearnings for Iran. Whether from among working or middle class Iranians, my interlocutors were not in the habit of lamenting their distance from Iran. Nor was there a locally produced “exilic” discourse that cultivated a shared sense of collective identity on the basis of distance and loss. Instead, my interlocutors participated in transnational cultural and economic exchanges connecting wider social networks running through Iran and Dubai.

What my field notes do speak of, however, is a widespread and reoccurring anxiety about the continuity of residency in Dubai. This anxiety was not derived from a feeling of distance. After all, as I previously noted, seasonal travel to Iran was widespread. Nor was it rooted in the politics of heritage and hyphenated identity that the regulated permanence of liberal immigration policies afford. Rather this anxiety was rooted in ethnocratic policies (e.g. the sponsorship system) that formally limit my interlocutors to impermanence in perpetuity. Regardless of their histories in this place, my interlocutors were always cognizant of being in but not of Dubai. I will show that this proximity and structured impermanence was an inextricable part of their shared imaginings about Dubai, and the manner of life that ought to be pursued here and why.
6 An Amplification of History

6.1 An (Ongoing) History of Transformation

Dubai’s recent urban transformation has been widely thought to be part of a broader project of economic diversification, originating in the mid-1990s that aimed to offset the city’s reliance on hydrocarbons by expanding its service sector (Davidson 2008, Herb 2009, Robin 2010). This process has often been considered in terms of a “model” (Davidson 2009, Hvidt 2009), or an assemblage of policies that may be exported regionally as a developmental strategy (Chorin 2010). Some of the key elements of this model include its relative autonomy as part of a national federation of city-states led by separate ruling families, the patrimonial logic informing its political organization, the “patrimonial network” (Davidson 2005: 73) extending into both private enterprise and public administration, a sustained focus on infrastructure development, a flexible labour force policy, etc.

This model, then, paints the picture of a city ostensibly endowed with a strong state that has situated itself as an entrepôt in global circuits of trade and finance. In more mainstream accounts, the success of this model is often glossed with a narrative of rags to riches; a town of no consequence transformed into a cosmopolitan metropolis (see chapter one). What this narrative overlooks for dramatic effect, however, is Dubai’s history as part of the British Empire. By the late 1800s, long before it embarked upon economic “diversification”, it was already a trading hub in the global network of capitalist exchange. In fact, a pearling boom in the early 1900s expanded its population, built environment, and subsidiary economies. It also supplied demand as far away as New York, the largest market for Gulf pearls. This period saw the emergence of wage labour, and rentier arrangements between diving crews and their financiers. As a socially diverse capitalist entrepôt, then, Dubai has some history.

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35 Whereas oil accounted for 24% of Dubai’s GDP in 1993 (Al Abed et al. 2005: 151), this figure had dropped to just over 3% by 2006 (Isthmus 2009: 5). At 170,000 barrels per day in the late 2000s, however, its contribution of about US$6 billion was not unsubstantial either (Chorin 2010: 24).

36 This pearling boom lasted until the early 1930s, when the introduction of Japanese “cultured” pearls and economic crises in Euro-America caused demand to diminish considerably.
The period of time that this dissertation is concerned with, however, occurs about a hundred years after these birth pangs of urbanization and capitalism. It jumps ahead of numerous other episodes of transformation: economic ruin spanning the 1930s and 1940s; the “Reform Movement”, emerging in late 1930s, led by a new generation of local bourgeoisie motivated by Pan-Arabism and modernization; the defeat of this movement and a new political arrangement between monarchical rule and the bourgeoisie that hinged on economic concessions and technocratic modernization, etc.

This history of transformation is also one of urbanization. A few of its milestones are worth noting here as they demonstrate the continuity of a reliance on master planning and a speculative “infrastructural strategy” (Ramos 2012: 92).

Even shortly before the discovery of oil (in 1966) the government of Dubai had commissioned a master plan. Completed in 1960 by British architect John Harris, it focused on the development of what is today the urban core, outlining provisions “in accordance with the requirements of a modern city” (Harris 1965: 1). These included plans for housing, a roads system, a central business district, public spaces, etc. It coincided with the legislation of the 1960 Land Law, which recognized long-time residents as owners of their homes (Ramos 2012: 67). This master plan assumed Dubai’s future growth, and justified some of its proposals with this in mind. But this foresight could not have predicted the discovery of oil a few years later, much less its projected revenues for the government. Thus Harris developed a second master plan. If the first had looked to accommodate future demands on infrastructure due to an “anticipated increase in the population” (Harris 1965: 12), the second was designed to accommodate more supply-side endeavours; that is, projects based on the assumption that demand for them actually exists (Elsheshtawy 2010: 107-11;0 Ramos 2012: 66-75, 86-91). In either scenario, Harris’ master plans were speculative.

This speculative strategy was to produce increasingly ambitious—indeed, “mega”—projects. In his meticulous study of Dubai’s urban development, Stephen Ramos has described this process as an “amplification” of infrastructure projects (2012: 11, 144). Ramos focuses on Dubai’s port infrastructure. He describes the unfolding of this amplification first through the dredging of the

37 I am indebted to Dr. Yasser Elsheshtawy for providing me with a copy of Harris’ first master plan.
city’s creek in the late 1950s (before even the first master plan), then the construction of Port Rashid in the late 1960s (outlined in the second master-plan), and finally the construction of Jebel Ali Port in the 1970s as the world’s largest artificial port. Each of these was a major undertaking, intended to facilitate greater trade by increasing the traffic and scale of commercial ships. The supply-side logic seemed vindicated when Port Rashid was already oversubscribed upon its launch in 1972 (Ramos 2012: 83). It is also worth noting that the year in which Jebel Ali Port was inaugurated, 1979, coincided with Port Rashid’s expansion as the largest port in the Middle East. The government of Dubai was looking to secure its position as a regional—indeed global—entrepôt.

Clearly, then, Dubai has some history as a site of social and spatial transformation. Its historical focus, however, originates in a much more recent intervention by Dubai’s current ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. It was May, 2002, when it was announced that non-citizens could own property in the Emirate of Dubai on a “freehold” basis.38 This represented a major policy shift. Ever since the UAE was established in 1971, the right of property ownership had been limited to citizens. This announcement, however, was not actually decreed into law. There was no legal right of property by non-citizens published in the Official Gazette that year.39 Nevertheless, this announcement set off a period of urbanization that was historically and regionally unprecedented, in both speed and scope. This was informed by the logic of place-branding and the aesthetic differentiation that it requires. So much so that one of the first scholars to examine this period, Yasser Elsheshtawy, coined the notion of “Dubaization” to describe the city’s reliance on spectacular aesthetics as an “architectural strategy” (2010:127-131, 256-262).

The emergence of New Dubai, extended from a break with a significant law and social norm; that is, the exclusion of non-citizens from the right to own property. Yet it also continued Dubai’s history of speculative amplification. Just as Dubai’s first master plan coincided with the introduction of the Land Law in 1960, now too a major strategy of urban development was taking shape and relied on a new set of rights to do so. The right of property ownership, in other

38 At the time, he was the Crown Prince of Dubai. In practical terms, however, he was already regarded as poised to succeed his older brother and ruler.
39 The Official Gazette is a government periodical that lists new legislation; the publication of legislation here usually signals its implementation as well.
words, was bent—or as Ramos might put it, “amplified” in its scope—to include non-citizens. Significantly, however, this right would remain de facto until mid-2006. It was only then that its legal definition and the “designated areas” associated with it were finally defined.\footnote{This came with Law No.\textit{7 of 2006}.} This announcement, then, clearly had the force of law in its effects upon the cityscape and economy. As I explain below, this represents the financial amplification of this particular period of speculative development.

### 6.2 The City as (Financial) Growth Machine

As radical as it was, the emergence of New Dubai thus occurred in an ongoing history of transformation. This new phase of urban transformation has been the subject of much analysis.\footnote{These works have attended to Dubai’s recent urbanism from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Among them are analyses that address histories of urban planning and branding (Elsheshtawy 2010), the effects of ‘demand-oriented’ planning (Bagaeen 2007), the coincidence of this transformation with neoliberal practices of citizenship (Kanna 2011), and the mix of regulatory techniques used to govern the influx of manual labourers required to sustain this rapid urban development (Buckley 2012).} In addition to the history and politics of urban planning (Elsheshtawy 2010, Ramos 2012), there has been ethnographic analysis as well. Especially worth noting for my purposes is that of Ahmed Kanna (2011). Focusing on the boom years, Kanna examines how the spectacular designs of internationally renowned architects, from abroad, worked to erase local politics in the global media coverage that the city garnered for it. The discourse of these architects often took Dubai as an empty canvass, its culture as “traditional”, and the rule of the Sheikh as self-evident (77-104). I look to remedy this by outlining the political economy within which these “starchitects” filled this allegedly blank canvas. I do so by focusing on what I take to be particularly novel about this phase in Dubai’s ongoing history of transformation: the financialization of its urban development. At its core, “financialization” represents a shift toward a mode of accumulation in which the valorization of capital increasingly occurs through financial services, rather than production (Krippner 2011: 28). As I noted above, “Dubai Inc.” may be read as the infrastructural apparatus of this process. While this dimension of New Dubai’s emergence remains under studied, there is a rare exception. Adam Haniah and Michelle Buckley have taken
initiative by arguing that in recent years Dubai’s real estate and financial sectors have been increasingly conflated (2014). My dissertation research confirms this.

Briefly taking stock of this process not only highlights a key shift occurring in Dubai’s political economy in the turn of this century, but also locates this within the broader currents of regulatory experimentation that increasingly made of urban development a financial venture.

It was January of 1997 when a new kind of corporation made its debut in Dubai. This was Emaar, a real estate developer. Part of what set it apart was the sheer scale of its first major development, *Emirates Living*, on the outskirts of the city. This project launched the twin careers of “mega-project” and “master-developer” in local mainstream discourse. Two innovations were closely allied to this strategy of development. The first was the offering of a 99-year lease to non-citizens purchasers; foreshadowing the granting of freehold ownership in 2002. This proved a dud as it failed to generate the demand required for profitability at this scale of construction. The other, arriving in 2000, was a subsidiary of Emaar’s called *Amlak*. This was the UAE’s first mortgage financing company, and it introduced 25-year mortgages primarily servicing Emaar’s customers.

The production of space and the financial means for its consumption: this model stood in sharp contrast with the prevailing rentier arrangement according to which family-based conglomerates acted as intermediaries between local markets and foreign manufacturers (Hanieh 2011: 75). 42 The political legitimacy of monarchical rule was secured by conflating patrimonial privileges with economic enterprise. The majority of Dubai’s bourgeoisie have relied on this policy of requiring foreign corporations to exclusively import their commodities through an Emirati business partner.

42 As Hanieh notes, this strategy has been common to Arab societies of the Persian Gulf. In the case of Dubai more specifically, this arrangement can be traced to the emergence of a progressive political movement in late 1930s. This was the so-called Reform Movement. It emerged during a period of economic turmoil from among the ranks of local bourgeoisie, and attempted to reconfigure monarchical norms toward more deliberative and technocratic rule. And though it was defeated, one of its lasting effects was the strategy that I describe here (i.e. linking the legitimacy of monarchical rule with economic concessions to the bourgeoisie). For historical analysis, see Al Sayegh (1998) and Heard-Bey (1982).
This shift toward the liquid—that is, credit-driven and speculative—urbanism of New Dubai continued to heavily rely upon this normative patrimonial logic. The heads of master-developers were often concurrently heading public institutions, and well positioned within the political network centering on the sheikh.\(^{43}\) This straddling of ‘public’ and ‘private’ roles was not new. What was new about Emaar was the economic experimentation it represented: a new relation of property and the emergent market derived from it, a real estate mega-project on the urban periphery, and new forms of finance.

It caught on. Soon, in 2003, banks entered the fray by also offering mortgages. That same year saw Nakheel emerge, another master-developer. In 2004 it launched its own subsidiary mortgage financier called *Tamweel*.\(^{44}\) With the boost of “freehold” ownership, the effects of this experiment on Dubai’s real estate market and cityscape were marked. The value of property transactions in 2002 increased by 80% from 2001 (Amlak 2004: 3), and the value of Amlak’s loans more than quadrupled between 2002 and 2003 (Boleat 2004: 15).

Yet all of this also amounted to more than simply an urban development scheme.\(^{45}\) It is worth situating this transformation within a global shift toward finance-led strategies of accumulation and their entanglement with the exchange of property. The global financial crisis has been linked to neoliberal experiments with housing finance undertaken in the US beginning in the 1980s (Gotham 2006, Aalbers 2009, Sassen 2009).\(^{46}\) Key to this process is the “securitization” of mortgages. This refers to the practice of bundling mortgage loans into a single financial product (a “security”) to be sold to third parties. It has been a major source of financial profit—and

\(^{43}\) Emaar itself is a case in point. Its founding CEO (Mohammed Ali Alabbar) was concurrently acting as the head of a major public institution, the *Department of Economic Development*, which he also founded a few years earlier.

\(^{44}\) This was Nakheel, the developer that would go onto build the famous mega-project extending into the sea and shaped like a pal tree (called “The Palm”).

\(^{45}\) As I explain in the chapter one, it involved an unprecedented reconfiguration of state through strategies of “graduated sovereignty” (Ong 2006: 78).

\(^{46}\) These were part of the more general ascendance of financial industries in many industrialized economies during the 1980s. This structural turn toward the proliferation of financial services has been explained as occurring due to a systemic crisis of surplus absorption owing to conditions of “monopoly capitalism” that ultimately blunt the effects of competition (Paul and Sweezy 1966, Sweezy 1994, Foster 2007, Lapavitsas 2014).
driven the expansion of financial markets—as it allowed banks and lending institutions to remove sold mortgages from their balance sheets, thus freeing up their capital to register yet more mortgages.\footnote{This explains the momentum that eventually rendered “sub-prime” borrowers attractive. The shift to an ‘issue-and-sell’ model from and ‘issue-and-hold’ one meant that lenders were less exposed to the immediate risk of borrowers defaulting as these mortgages would be passed on.} It also worked to increasingly disarticulate property markets from local economies by further integrating them with larger financial markets (Hackworth 2007: 30).

It was just this strategy that Amlak and Tamweel were pursuing. In 2007 Tamweel, for example, issued its first mortgage-backed security in the amount of US$ 210 million (Shuaa Capital 2007: 15). But the first such financial product had come a couple of years earlier. It was in 2005 that the first mortgage-backed security originating from the UAE—worth US$ 350 million, and sold mostly to European and US investors—was issued by a recently established corporation in Dubai specifically committed to securitization. This was the 	extit{Emirates National Securitization Corporation} (ENSeC). The event was hailed by the UAE’s Minister of Finance, Dr. Mohammed Al Kharbash, as “an enormous step forward for Dubai” in its efforts “to integrate with the global economy” (Lloyd-Jones 2005). Al Kharbash also happened to be the Chairman of 	extit{Dubai Islamic Bank}, and this bank happened to have facilitated the funds initially required by the master-developer to build the properties whose mortgages ENSeC had just securitized. This was the kind of concurrent positioning between governmental and corporate entities that was common among high-ranking members that epitomizes what Davidson calls the “patrimonial network”. And as I show in chapter one, it was a reoccurring theme in expert financial discourse and it’s concern with something called “Dubai Inc.”.

The urban transformation that the Dubai model represented, then, may have continued the precedent of master-planned development in this city. From a political economic perspective, however, it did so toward very different ends. The production of space here was ultimately a vehicle for capturing household surpluses and repurposing them as the basis of financial products sold in international capital markets. The economic underpinnings of this model—emanating from experiments in Wall Street—were thus geared toward “the creation of liquidity out of spatial fixity” (Gotham 2009: 358).
In this regard, there was nothing exceptional about this superlative city.

7 Methodology

This dissertation is based on ethnographic research conducted in the summer of 2008, the entirety of 2010, and the summer of 2012. My interactions with Iranian residents of Dubai were primarily based on participant-observation and informal interviews. This was not evenly the case between my middle and working class interlocutors. The very circumstances that this dissertation aims to examine saw me conduct participant-observation more easily among the latter category. This was primarily because working class Iranians with whom I engaged were severely limited in their movements around the city. Their days were largely spent between their shops and their apartments, usually in same building. Once I had been received as an acquaintance—and eventually a friend in some cases—spending extend periods of time with the men and youth working and residing in these spaces was not impractical. This was not always the case with the middle class Iranians as they necessarily more mobile, were not concentrated in particular quarter of the city, nor so exposed to the general public. What is more, these interlocutors were often residing in Dubai as families. Gaining access to their residences was a more formal affair involving the etiquettes of hosting and being a good guest; even simply taking up their time often meant competing with kids requiring to be picked up from school, and other family commitments.

In many ways, access to my working class interlocutors relied on the same structures of violence that rendered them a “street-corner society” (Whyte 2012) while my frustrations in maintaining a sustained presence among my middle class interlocutors were the result of the same privileges that inhabiting New Dubai entailed. As a result, and as will become evident in the chapters that follow, my ethnographic data on Iranians residents inhabiting New Dubai relies more heavily on informal interviews.48

Much of my time in Dubai was also dedicated to examining the political economy of its recent transformation. And on this note, like all major sociological research projects in these ethnocratic

48 I have also opted to use pseudonyms for all interlocutors.
societies of the Persian Gulf, this one also has its share of caveats. First, as my arrival in January of 2010 coincided with the brunt of the crisis, I initially found it quite difficult to engage with the various professionals involved in the administration of New Dubai or in the city’s emergent market in “freehold” property. These primarily included, government officials and employees, employees of developers, lawyers, financial analysts, and real estate agents. The sustained thrashing that Dubai’s image was receiving in global media, the lack of democratic protocols surrounding the disclosure of information, and the uncertainty about the extent and duration of this crisis, all resulted in a widespread hesitation on the part of such professionals to humour the probing curiosity of a foreign researcher interested in examining how this crisis had come about. Securing a Visiting Scholar position at the Dubai School of Government in the July of 2010 proved instrumental here. Equipped with formal requests (signed by the Dean) I was able to access various governmental bodies. The institutional email sufficed for the others. Nevertheless, owing to the political sensitivity of my inquiries, virtually all of these interviewees requested anonymity.49 Second, governmental institutions are not accountable to electoral politics but are ultimately headed by leading members of a “patrimonial” network concluding in the royal authority of Dubai’s ruler. This had a bearing on the logic by which they made demographic data public. Certain categories of data—particularly statistics on the national population, and the national breakdown of foreign residents—were guarded for being deemed politically sensitive. Though I was able to successfully tackle this hurdle to some extent (see chapter four especially), I remained unable to obtain official demographic data on Dubai’s Iranian population. Third, as a large part of this dissertation focused on a section of this city’s population that is regularly targeted for policing—e.g.: eviction campaigns (see chapter four) and dragnets seeking to arrest undocumented workers (see chapter six)—I have therefore chosen to omit any additional information (e.g. name of stores, streets, etc.) that may be used to incriminate these interlocutors. Their policing also prevented me from employing more quantitative techniques (e.g. random surveys) to obtain general statistics on shared practices such as informal travel or remittances.

49 As the AAA Style Guide does not address citation of anonymous interviews, I have relied on its source: the Chicago Manual of Style (see 16th Edition, section 14.220).
8 Chapters

My first chapter examines the structural experiments and ideological conceptions underpinning the emergence of New Dubai and its “market” in so-called “freehold” property. I attend to the administrative techniques of sovereignty, and faith-based expert knowledge about the sheikh. Specifically, I argue that the emergence of New Dubai involved a double movement of sovereign power: the simultaneous distribution of sovereign functions among so-called “Government-Related Entities,” and the concentration of sovereignty in the figure of the sheikh as an ostensible guarantor (Muehlebach 2012) and meta-value (Lambek 2008) facilitating a speculation in this property market.

In chapter two, I take up this emergent market and its urban world from the perspective of middle class Iranians engaging with it. I do so by relying on two shared categories of practice: prāperti (freehold property) and sīstem (the order and logic of its market). I begin by briefly examining how they imagined prāperti as representing a departure from the inequalities between citizens and immigrants embedded in the regime of ownership preceding it. I follow this by examining the kinds of ethical work that prāperti and its sīstem did for these interlocutors (Humphrey and Verdery 2004), and also the kinds of work that this sīstem required of them. This chapter begins to elaborate my running concern with totalizing conceptions of place, actions taken in relation to them, and their reasons.

Chapters three and four rely on the analytic device of the “key figure” (Barker and Lindquist 2009). This approach focuses on a social type featuring prominently in public discourse and invoked to certain ends. Examining social types gives insight into the social, economic, or political processes in the midst of which they emerge. In chapter three I take up the “real estate agent”. This character came in for sharp criticism during the crisis as an agent provocateur: having “damaged the market” by propelling speculation and misreading the “true valuation” of properties. In chapter four I take up the “bachelor”. This character was foregrounded as Dubai’s boom saw its population surge. Editorial pages and policy reports swelled with concerns about “demographic imbalance” between citizens and expatriates. This social type stood for an especially dangerous (Douglas 2006) implication of this imbalance: the concentration of “unattached”, working class, male foreigners living in proximity to Emirati families.
But the “key figure” approach also aims to complicate this reified character by ethnographically elaborating it, and examining the actual experiences and moral imaginaries of those living it. And so, in each of these two chapters, I focus on the manner in which these types were inhabited by my interlocutors. Here I explore the divergence between their objectification and the kinds of people they actually aspired and struggled to be in relation to Dubai.

In chapter five, I return to the relationship between places, actions and their reasons, but from the perspective of a working class youth and his fellow crewmembers living in the inner city, and away from New Dubai. I elaborate the shared moral geography and lived spaces giving force to the circuit of mobile masculinity in which they were participating, and how their search for respect drew from certain conceptions about life in Iran and in Dubai. No talk of ārāstī, a future of self-correction, or overzealous creditors here. Rather it was a shared concern with nāmardi: the injustice borne of indifference, giving moral substance to the experience of marginalization.

Finally, in chapter six, I further elaborate the everyday lives of these working class Iranians as a moral project of self-making. There was an arrival to Dubai for the pursuit of certain moral ends, and possibly a return as a certain kind of person for having met these ends. I examine the ethics of successfully becoming a khaleej-boro: the dangers and hardships that required endurance, the virtues imagined as “internal” (MacIntyre 2007) to them. My analysis between chapters five and six thus fluctuates between implicit knowledge, explicit criteria, and the competency cultivated between them. I especially focus on these dangers and hardships in order to examine the forms that breakdown takes here, and how they may be ethically productive.

Taken together, then, these chapters chart a course to examine splintering urbanism that is more focused on rapid and speculative development than a particular infrastructural technology, grounded in an ethnographic analysis of its experience across social hierarchies, and concerned with the ethical content of these divergent experiences and they varied conceptions of the city these were informed by.
“...After all, they really were building them! I mean it was unprecedented. They said they would build something and in a few years later you’d see them finish it,” said Nima. It was late in the evening, and we were discussing Dubai’s boom years. I was visiting him and his wife, Mana. It was September of 2012.

I met Nima through a mutual friend of ours, Hamid. He introduced us in the summer of 2008, when I was in Dubai for preliminary fieldwork.

Nima was new to Dubai back then. He had traveled here in search of work, and was relying on the assistance of friends and acquaintances to that end. When we met it was at his place of business, an accounting firm catering mostly to Iranian trading companies. He had started this business several years ago with a couple of friends and fellow Iranians, including Hamid. He was married, had two young children, and living in villa in a gated community in New Dubai.

Not long afterwards, I was invited to a small get-together at his villa. Nima seemed enthusiastic about introducing me to his friends. My research was a subject of curiosity.

“Why don’t you come by the office first, and we’ll go together?” he suggested. And so we did. Along the way, our conversation inevitably turned to my research and the urban transformation that I had missed for having left for Canada (I had not been back since). Along the way, Nima would occasionally point to a particular structure or development as an indication of how radically the city has changed. Most of our conversation, however, centered upon life in Canada. He was curious to learn how my parents in particular had fared there. As I was explaining their inability to secure the same or even similar fields of works for lack of so-called ‘Canadian experience’, he suddenly interrupted me. “Look at that!”, grinning as he pointed to the onboard navigation system. “This (place) has developed so fast that there’s no map for it yet.” The blue arrow representing the car was now moving along a blanket grey background. It did so for several minutes until we arrived at his villa.
Later that afternoon, when their guests had left, I had an opportunity to further discuss life in Dubai with Nima and Mana. I had initially asked them how often they traveled to Iran as Mana and the children had just recently returned from a visiting family in Tehran.

**Mana:** A few times a year. It’s important, you know, for their children to see their families as they grow up.

**Behzad:** Yes, Nima mentioned this on the way here.

**Nima:** It’s important. Dubai is close to Iran so it’s easier. The problem with Canada is that this becomes difficult. You yourself haven’t been back much since you left, right?

**Behzad:** True.

**Mana:** When was the last time you were there?

**Behzad:** Iran, or here.

**Mana:** Iran.

**Behzad:** 2004.

**Nima:** See!

Our conversation now turned to life in Canada, and the prospect of immigrating there.

**Nima:** “I’ve thought about it. But I’d rather not be so far from Iran. This place is also close to Iran culturally. So this is also something. I don’t want my children to leave home too soon because of the possibilities that (Canadian) society makes available to them (*amkānātī ke barāyeshoon ejād mikone*). I sometimes picture us sitting at home alone when we’re sixty, in that cold. I mean I’m 40 years old (already)!”

**Mana:** “And you know, we’re used to how things work here. Learning another language all over again, and trying to find work is more difficult when you’re older.”

I confirmed their concerns by explaining the difficulties my parents had endured as they tried to integrate into Canadian society: my father’s bout with depression for suddenly finding himself delivering pizza’s and still barely able to financially support his family, my mother’s struggle to professionally reinvent herself—from marketing specialist to early childhood educator—as she worked retail by day and took classes at a college by night, all in the hopes of gaining secure employment. It was while explaining this that Mana interjected with what she thought to be an important distinction.
Mana: But you know, at least there you are get residency. They eventually give you a passport. Here you’re constantly ‘in the air’ (*ru havā hasti*: this is a figure of speech suggesting a feeling of uncertainty about one’s circumstances).

Nima: Yeah, you stay here your whole life but they never accept you (*injā kol-e omret mimuni ama hich vaght ghабoоlet nādaān*). They’re not as liberal as more developed societies like Canada. Here we have to renew our visas every three years here.

Behzad: (interrupting him) But they do renew it, right.

Nima: Well yes, they usually do but it’s not certain that they will. And one grows bothered by this (*azīatesh mishe ādām*).

Mana: That’s how it is here.

Nima: Someone once told me — that year when I had first arrived here — that Dubai is like a company. You work, get paid and leave.

At this point in the conversation, I asked them if this is why they’re considering migrating to Canada, to which Nima replied: “No, we’re not considering it anymore. We’re staying here...this place is now our *pāigāh*.”

*pāigāh*, in this iteration, translates to “base” or “foothold”. I recall immediately taking note of this notion; “key word” I scribbled next to it in my filed notes. This was not so much because it contradicted earlier mention of feeling unmoored (as though precariously hovering in the air) or conceiving of life in this city as a job placement in a company (connoting the impartiality of professionalism, and the inevitability of exit). These insights would come much later and from afar, when I set about analyzing my field notes in Toronto. But just then, at that moment, I could not help but notice that describing Dubai in this way was foreign to me. And as our conversations continued, I occasionally wondered whether I had ever heard my parents refer to Dubai as a *pāigāh*. And yet it immediately made sense to me. To the extent that I too was situated within this social imaginary I shared its *moral geography*, and regarded their presence in Dubai primarily in relation to Iran. This shared moral geography generally understood Iran as unsafe. As both my middle and working class interlocutors will elaborate in various ways throughout the coming chapters, it was thought to be a place in turmoil: where ordinary life was subject to state violence, injustice and the lack of regard for others. The notion that Iranian life would seek out a foothold outside of Iran was readily intelligible to me.
At this point, I invited Nima and Mana to elaborate on this sense of having a pāigah. They explained that the possibilities (emkānāt) and social freedoms (āzādi-e ejtemā-i) available to them here were far more than what they could hope for in Iran.

**Mana**: Our children are being educated in English...and they can use it here. They’ll have more possibilities.

**Nima**: And I don’t have to worry about them being harassed just because...a little hair is sticking out of their headscarves.

**Mana**: Exactly, nobody gives you grief here (kasi bāt kāri nadāreh injā). In Iran you always have to be on your guard (hamishe bāyad ādam havāsesh bāshe)...They imprisoned neighbor last year. He had gone into the streets to protest and they got him. He was in jail for 2 days, this old man! He said they didn’t bother him, but he said could hear the screams of younger inmates. He was so affected by this, he still doesn’t want to talk about it.

**Nima**: ...And people over there want to come here. When we go to Iran people ask us ‘What’s happening in Dubai?’ They see what they’re building here, and they want to bring their money here.

**Behzad**: Yes, I hear that Iranians are very active in the real estate market especially.

I had earlier explained the focus of my research to be Dubai’s urban transformation, and the manner in which Iranians were experiencing it. Nima and Mana were kind enough to humour my curiosity as our conversation shifted to this end.

**Nima**: Well of course. They bring their money here (pulashun-o miāran injā). Loans in Tehran have high interests, (but) here you can come and easily buy a new property (used the original English term). They see that this place is growing.

** Mana**: We were going to buy an apartment to sell it.

**Nima**: “Yeah. We have a villa now in the Arabian Ranches. It’s close to where Hamid lives. We got it “off-plan”, and we’re going to sell it soon. You should talk to Hamid too. He’s been very involved in the property market.

These were key insights into the social imaginary of the middle class Iranians that would hear repeated over the course of my fieldwork: a sense of Dubai as a counter-place and pāigah in relation to Iran, a desire to benefit from an unprecedented economic boom that was underway there, and the potential for migration to yet other “more developed” (usually in the Global North) destinations. This sense of Dubai as a pāigah (foothold) never seemed to detract from the ease and eagerness with which these middle class Iranians cited the speed of Dubai’s urban transformation. Whatever else it may have been that pāigah offered relief from, the tumult of
material change in ones environment was not it. In fact, and especially prior to the brunt of the crisis, the speed of urban change was sometimes referenced as a sign of potānsīal (potential) manifesting for being unencumbered by oppression. There was safety—if not prosperity—in transformation.

Several years later, late in 2012, when Nima felt the need to stress the actual scale and speed with which new projects were transforming Dubai, it was for other reasons. It was because this conception of Dubai as pāigāh was no longer something they took for granted. He was adamant in stressing that the events which had transpired since I last visited his family were simply beyond anyone’s capacity to foresee. The overarching event, of course, was the rapid economic collapse that this city began to experience in late 2008 as it too was implicated in the global financial crisis. The scale and speed of its urban growth during the boom was outmatched only by that of its economic collapse; officially acknowledged to be underway with a public announcement for a “standstill” in the loan repayments of a “master-developer” whose projects epitomized those building frenzy of those years.

The everyday lives of much of Dubai’s middle class residents who were either inhabiting New Dubai or participating in its economy of “freehold” real estate would be heavily impacted by this economic sea change. This crisis remained in place during my follow-up fieldwork in the closing months of 2012, albeit diminished in its severity.

This much could not be said for Nima and his family. The volume of sales generated by Nima’s business, and his income along with them, had significantly diminished. So too had the general availability of credit. This precipitated a rapid decline in demand for the property in the Arabian Ranches that they were renovating for resale. Thus its exchange value continued to diminish, and with it their margin of profit. But the interest rate on the loan that he had taken out to finance this venture prior to the financial crisis had not diminished. They would thus soon find themselves in possession of negative equity (an asset that is worth less than the amount owing on the loan used to obtain it), and increasingly less capable of continuing to finance it. About a year into the crisis, they decided to sell their villa to offset their debts. That evening, when I was visiting them again, their residence was not a villa but a small two-bedroom apartment. They were renting it.

Nima looked exhausted that evening. Perhaps it was a hard day. Or perhaps it was the past three years that had settled on his face. These were hard years. They involved a progressively uphill
struggle to hold on to this ‘foothold’. It was not at all clear that they actually could. At one point in the evening they noted fellow Iranians who had seen their livelihoods erode and eventually leave Dubai for Iran, Turkey or Georgia. It was then, in a moment of candor, that Mana turned to her husband to ask: “what do you think?” I initially failed to appreciate the gravity of the question. But then, several seconds later, Nima replied “I don’t know; (pausing again) I’m fed-up (man khaste shodam digeh).”

Some weeks later, I tried to arrange a final get-together with them before I returned to Toronto. When my call went unanswered, I took Hamid’s advice and did not pursue it. “It’s not a good time now”, he said. He was right. I would later learn that Nima was defaulting on his loan for the property in the Arabian Ranches. Perhaps he was prioritizing his rent in order to ensure that his post-dated cheques wouldn’t bounce. A bounced cheque, after all, was technically a crime in Dubai. And if your creditor should file a formal complaint, it will be the police you’ll have to answer to. In a market lacking a credit bureau and populated mostly by transmigrants, the longstanding assumption has been that the “disincentive” for default must be more severe.50

In any case, the police seem to have been informed. Some time following that evening, Nima and Mana were temporarily detained at the airport as they were attempting another routine travel to Iran. As far as I am aware, this was to visit family. As far as the state was concerned, they represented a potential “skip”: the technical term in financial discourse for abandoning Dubai without notice owing to impending bankruptcy and the inevitability of debtor’s jail that follows.

For the time being, they were bound to their pāigāh.

50 Interview with employee of credit consultancy, September 14, 2010.
1 An Exhibition

“Where you are going sir?!” He was wearing a grey suit, standing a few meters away with his arm stretched out, a walkie-talkie in his hand, and he was addressing me, loudly. None of this ever made it to my field notes. I did not care for it. But I remember it well enough. It was a little dramatic, and plenty bizarre. The conviction in his voice was reason enough to pause, so I did. “I’m going home,” I said, pointing to the building-sized aluminum bulge not far behind him. It was a Dubai Metro station. There were other people as well, scattered about and walking in the same direction. Yet I was the one hailed. It was late in the afternoon, this was a business district, and that is where people head to this time of day: the Metro station. And so would I when I had spent the day at my office in the Dubai School of Government. And until this point it had been just another day. I distinctly recall thinking ‘what is this guy doing?!’ I was not impressed.

But I should have paid more attention. If I had not been focusing on the sandwich I was trying to unwrap, I would have noticed the red carpet; that I was walking on it; and that I was spoiling its reverence with a few bits of fallen topping. He was not much impressed either. And neither were his colleagues, who had paused their conversation and were now looking at me as though I was about to cause them paperwork. I put my head down, took a detour, and kept walking.

It was October of 2010. The “Cityscape” exhibition had started, and would continue for the rest of the week. This is Dubai’s major real estate show, held annually ever since the freehold market began in 2002. I had already conducted a quick scan of the exhibition earlier that day, looking for industry representatives to interview over the course of the week. Here is where mega-projects are often premiered, and where master-developers carve out little fiefdoms on the exhibition floor. The red carpet clearly signalled the immanent arrival of a royal personality.

It was sometime the next day, at the DSG, during my morning ritual of making tea and skimming the stack of newspapers on the kitchenette, when I came across the kind of scene that yesterday’s
skirmish was about: the sheikh, the prince, their arms both crossed, observing a model of a mega-project, a coterie of executives and government personnel (Figure #5).

Among the imagery that circulated about New Dubai—and still does—this image was something of an “inaugural scene” (Mattingly 2012: 1): a scene associated with a particular set of social relations and their moral personae. The “workshop”, for example, with its rigors of apprenticeship and the virtues internal to them. Or a Kafkaesque “trial” with its bureaucratic hollowing of social relations. Or, in this case, the exhibition with its models of a future city available for sale now. And like the other scenes, this one too had its typical characters; some of which will be elaborated in the chapters to follow. Among these characters, however, there is one in particular that this chapter revolves around; someone not typical, but exceptional. This is the actually existing sovereign. And much like the earlier world fairs that Timothy Mitchell has described, here too the royal personage was incorporated into the exhibition (1991: 4); only this time, wittingly and without protest. He was not an accessory to simulations of a static Orient, but to futuristic architecture that was unabashedly declaring the eclipse of the European capitals once hosting those world fairs.
2 An Announcement

The “standstill announcement” that I described earlier was a far less auspicious event. No pageantry or theatre this time: just a publically televised explanation by government officials that a major, government-owned, conglomerate was unable to meet scheduled payments to its mostly foreign creditors. This conglomerate was Dubai World, and the problem largely stemmed from one of its subsidiaries. This subsidiary was Nakheel: one of Dubai’s three “master-developers” and the one responsible for The Palm, perhaps the most iconic of Dubai’s superlative mega-projects.

The controversy that ensued was less about the actual US$3.5 billion bond owed by Nakheel, than it was about the wider implications surrounding the nature of this debt. The reoccurring concern in editorial pages, market reports, and eventually, many of my interviews, was whether it was “sovereign debt” on account of Nakheel’s “government-related” status. Opacity about the relations of ownership between so-called “Dubai Inc.” entities, and this revelation about one as significant as Nakheel left many wondering about the financial health of other such entities. As I noted above, the announcement sent ripples across global financial publics. After all, these were still early days in the unfolding of the global financial crisis.\(^{51}\) While Dubai’s freehold property market had already been in decline, this announcement confirmed that it was early days in Dubai as well; that an entity as lucrative as a master-developer was not immune to financial default; and that this market had not yet “bottomed-out”.\(^{52}\)

Most importantly, however, this announcement brought to the fore what had been an ambiguous relationship between Dubai’s government and the so-called “Government Related Entities”—

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\(^{51}\) I follow Sassen in using “global financial crisis” as a shorthand for the combination of the sub-prime mortgage crisis that erupted in the United States in August of 2007, and the credit-default swap crisis that erupted in international financial markets in August of 2008 as a consequence (Sassen 2009: 420).

\(^{52}\) This panic was somewhat misplaced. Nakheel’s woes were already well known. In fact, it was about a year prior to this standstill announcement, in December 2008 that it cut 500 employees, about 15% of its workforce at that time (Noueihed 2008). In July of 2009, it shed another 400 (Futurebrand 2010:39).
such as Dubai World, and Nakheel—that were spearheading its urban transformation. As soon as the standstill was announced, Dubai’s government offered clarification by dismissing any implicit expectations about its liability. As the Director of Dubai's Department of Finance put it: “Creditors need to take part of the responsibility for their decision to lend to the companies. They think Dubai World is part of the Government, which is not true” (Robertson and Tomlinson 2009).

This disavowal of Dubai World’s debt was not the response that international creditors were expecting. There followed a torrent of articles in foreign news media that expressed alarm and repeatedly noted the entanglement between the city’s government and these GREs. Part of this alarm stemmed from the fact that a substantial portion of the accumulated debts of GREs were owed to foreign banks: about 44% by one estimate (Morgan Stanley 2009: 4–5). But it also stemmed from the celebratory discourse in preceding years about the sheikh’s “visionary” leadership and his unofficial assurances that the city’s government would “guarantee investments” made in this emerging market (Raveendran 2003). And yet, this alarm seemed entirely at odds with the contractual terms of the bond that had triggered the “standstill”. It explicitly defined Nakheel as a private entity incorporated in a “free zone”, and emphasized: “investors should note, however, that the government of Dubai does not guarantee any indebtedness or any other liability of Dubai World” (Nakheel 2006: 8, 35).

3 The Political Economy of “New Dubai”

My concern in this chapter is the social production of this emergent “market”; that is, the political economy of New Dubai, understood both as a place and a speculative regime of accumulation. While Dubai has been the focus of much analysis in recent years, the political economy of its urban transformation still remains largely neglected. This is remarkable given the regularity with which this city is invoked in analysis of other places and their transformations (Abaza 2011, de Boeck 2011, Goldman 2011, Harris 2013). It is perhaps this lack of a grounded

53 The term “Government Related Entity” was one of the names commonly used for the emergent corporate entities who were implicated with Dubai’s government in their ownership structure and executive management.
analysis of this political economy that continues to give license to superficial characterizations of this city as underpinned by “the apotheosis of the neo-liberal values of contemporary capitalism” (Davis 2006: 60-61).54 Rather than reproduce such hyperbole and risk giving credence to the ample Schadenfreude in foreign news media about Dubai, I look to contribute to the few ethnographically informed analyses of the political economy of Dubai’s emergent urbanism (Hanich and Buckley 2014, Kanna 2011).

In doing so, I follow Donald Nonini in his call to examine the situated specificities of apparently “neoliberal” configurations. His point is to highlight the tensions and contradictions informing such configurations as they interact with local cultural logics and political ideologies (2008); lest we reduce this category to a catchall. Indeed, as I will show, the formation of New Dubai relied on a convenient contradiction. Whereas the rapid emergence of its freehold property market and its integration with international capital markets were underpinned by strategies of what Aihwa Ong calls “graduated sovereignty” (Ong 2006: 77-79) to relieve the accumulation of capital from regulatory scrutiny (in keeping with neoliberal ideology), this process also benefited from widespread belief that this market was subject to the ultimate authority of an actually existing sovereign capable of overriding contractual formalities in order to recoup investments (not in keeping with neoliberal ideology). In a sense, the sovereign/guarantor was the ultimate “security”

In making this observation I draw from Nonini and Ong in other ways as well. The central argument of this chapter is that Dubai’s recent transformation-cum-standstill involved a double movement in the workings of sovereign power. To be more specific, the emergent urban regime of New Dubai relied upon a “recombinant” arrangement of sovereign power whereby it was at once concentrated and distributed (Nonini 2008: 155-158). This is also how Nonini describes the practical coincidence of recent market liberalization in China with longstanding political norms of Maoist governance, the cultural logic of guanxi, or moral the economy of gifts and personal connections. The upshot of this recombinant regime is that, as he puts it, an “ambiguity” or “a blurring of the distinction between what is state and public, and what is market and private”

54 See also Davis 2013.
(2008: 156, 161). The double movement that I describe functioned according to just such an ambiguity.

Yet whereas Nonini is primarily focused on demonstrating the situated character of “neoliberal” arrangements, part of what motivates this chapter is the workings of speculative urbanism. It is on this note that I further rely on a recent intervention by Ong (2011). She addresses the proliferation of spectacular urban projects in East Asia and suggests—much like Elsheshtawy (2010)—that they represent a deliberate strategy to capture global surpluses. More specifically, she examines reliance of this strategy on technologies of graduated sovereignty; that is, on rule by exception. Urban spaces are thus variegated and subject to zoning codes flexible enough to displace people on the scale necessary for such projects (2011: 206). She calls this strategy “hyperbuilding”, and explains that it is partly “performative”: that is, by undertaking spectacular projects of urban development states invite foreign investors to anticipate continued growth and the state’s own commitment to accommodating this growth while aspiring to global recognition for doing so (2011: 207-209). I seize on this observation because it elaborates urban transformation in terms of the intersection between speculation, sovereignty, and the spectacular. And such was the case in the emergence of New Dubai. The double movement in sovereign power that I describe can be considered as facilitating the coincidence of financial speculation and the spectacular urbanism.

In what follows, I outline the analytic framework by means of which I examine this concurrent concentration and distribution of sovereign power underpinning New Dubai. Once the contents of this dynamic are broadly explained, I then examine this dynamic more specifically in relation to the anthropology of sovereignty. In doing so I hope to theoretically buttress this analytic frame. The rest of the chapter focuses on examining the institutional practices and ways of knowing that underpinned both parts of this contradictory double movement of sovereign power.

55 My understanding of “spectacular” is primarily scalar not aesthetic. Nevertheless, I recognize that this distinction is not mutually exclusive as one ultimately informs the other.
3.1 A Double Movement

Between the exhibition and the standstill announcement there is an inconsistency, one that much expert financial knowledge would try to reconcile. On the one hand, there is a king endowed with “the aura of sovereign ultimacy” (Chalfin 2010: 43), his annual arrival to an exhibition of his city’s transformation, and his gaze upon the various mega-projects this involved. On the other hand, there is a for-profit corporation potentially facing bankruptcy, its implications for a government featuring a sovereign figure, and its abandonment.

The inconsistency is one of defining the presences and absences of corporate and government actors; more simply, the difficulty involved in situating things in their proper domains when boundaries are blurred. This was the blurring of “public” administration and “private” enterprise. As I noted in the introduction, Dubai’s rapid urbanization was set off by a sovereign decree extending the right of ownership to non-citizens in 2002. But it proceeded in a regulatory dearth. The ‘decree’ was not immediately codified, and the very legality of “freehold” remained unfulfilled until mid-2006.\(^\text{56}\) In fact, a public body charged with regulating “the market” in freehold property was only launched in 2007, approaching the height of the boom. And the master-developers expanding the city with “mega-projects” did not have much credit history, as they were only a few years old. Yet none of this was a major deterrent to international investors. In 2004, for example, Nakheel received a syndicated loan from HSBC, Citigroup and Standard Chartered in the amount of US$350 million (Reevendran 2004). And, in 2006, it was able to sell the massive bond in question.

What conception of this emergent market had made this possible? How, exactly, were government decision-making and the pursuit of profit understood to be conflated? And just where did this royal figure stand in relation to the public and private domains: was he within, between, or above them? Was his royal arrival to Cityscape a performance of his reign, or his rule?

These questions strike at heart of the institutional practices and expert discourse that produced the emergent “market” of freehold real estate in Dubai. They point to the dynamic I noted above:

\(^{56}\) This came with Law No. 7 of 2006 (Government of Dubai 2006).
a ‘free’ market subject to the exceptional powers of ‘supreme’ authority. While this may seem a contradiction, it is in fact a complementary arrangement. It is an arrangement that enables speculative excess with sovereign exemption; amplifying private gain through public guarantee. Underpinning this arrangement, or the blurring private actors in a ‘free’ market with the supreme figure of the public realm was the concurrent distribution and concentration of sovereign power.

This double movement represents what Michelle Buckley has recently referred to as “autocratic neoliberalism” when examining the regulation of labour in Dubai (2012: 2): a combination of undemocratic rule informed by patrimonial logic, and laissez-faire policies designed to further integrate national economies with global circuits of capital. And it was this ethos of autocratic neoliberalism that was often objectified by expert market analysis as “Dubai Inc.”. Examining this double movement throws up the “politics of regulation” (Gotham 2009: 357) that were involved in positing Dubai Inc. an ostensibly rational domain of exchange warranting major investment despite its regulatory dearth.

My analysis of how this market was constituted along the continuum of concentration and distribution of sovereign power is divided into two parts: sovereign ‘magic’ and ‘liability’.

By ‘sovereign magic’, I mean to elaborate the celebratory discourse and performance of the sheikh as a “visionary” leader, and the work that they did in sanctioning the speculative growth of this market. New Dubai, so it was thought, was spectacular because of this supreme vision, and ostensibly worth investing in because a supreme authority of state backed this vision. Speculation, in other words, extended to the figure of the sheikh, and was often justified as resulting from a lack of market “maturity”. In employing the notion of magic, I thus mean to stress the poetics of speculation. Recent scholarship in the sociology of finance notes that the functioning of monetary instruments and the mediation of value in financial exchange do not proceed from a socially detached calculus of intrinsic risks and rewards. Rather, as Maierke de Geode puts it, they rely on shared “faith” in “strong nodal points of (discursive) authority supporting and maintaining that faith” (2005: xxiii).

By ‘sovereign liability’, I mean the practices of master-developers as exceptional entities ostensibly realizing this vision. In addition to interviews with government employees and various experts to elaborate these practices, I also rely on the discourse about “Dubai Inc.” to examine how this patchwork of institutions was imagined in relation to royal authority and the blurring
between the “private” and “public.” For my purposes in this chapter, much of the expert
discourse I cite was published during the onset of crisis. I suggest that it was precisely during just
such a moment—when past assumptions required justifying—that the tension between
neoliberalism’s demand that markets should be free from government interference, and its
equally strong preference for a supreme power as an ultimate fail-safe when these markets
standstill, is laid bare.

I now turn to explain the theoretical understanding of sovereign power as rule-by-exception that I
rely on. I do so in order to preface how such an understanding can be deployed to examine the
concentration of rule-by-exception in the performative magic of a king, while it is
simultaneously distributed in a network of institutions animated by this royal authority.

3.2 Another Kind of Sacred Figure

Anthropology’s analysis of “sovereignty” has seen it elaborated across a wide variety of scales
and contexts in recent years. A quick survey locates it at the level of international customs
organizations (Chalfin 2006, 2010), within exceptional areas of the national territory as a result
of “zoning technologies” (Ong 2006), at “street level” (Humphrey 2004: 423), and at the level of
the body through “self-care” (Ecks 2004). It has been liable to privatization and outsourcing in
neoliberal contexts (Hansen 2006, Burr 2005), and fragmentation in contexts where a unitary
state does not possess a monopoly of violence (Sieder 2011).

My concern with the “distribution” of sovereign power pertains to the institutional practices by
which sovereign functions are articulated. Here I rely on works that examine the rescaling of
state power. Specifically, the administrative experimentation this involves, and its
representations to those who would encounter it (Ong 2000, 2006, 2011; Ferguson and Gupta
2002; Chalfin 2006, 2010; Randeria 2007). In sum: how states practice sovereign power, and
how they perform it.

But as I have tried to unpack this double movement I have also met with certain limitations. The
exhibition of sovereign power in the figure of a king who can initiate a new market by decree—
one largely functioning on the force of law at that—sits awkwardly with efforts to theorize the
state in terms that exceed its conventional understandings as a discrete actor or “political
singularity” (Ong 2006: 99). On the other hand, efforts to distil sovereign power as something ultimately “grounded in violence” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 297) hardly lend themselves to understanding the performative demonstration of kingship and its significance in sanctioning a market. I have found it useful, therefore, to complement these Agamben-inspired treatments of sovereignty by drawing from an older anthropological chestnut: sacred kingship.

As with Agamben’s formulation, a key concern in the anthropology of kingship is the issue of separation: just how does a person inhabit an institution imagined to be impersonal and timeless (Feeley-Harnik 1985: 278-280)? Also as with Agamben, the notion that sovereign power is exceptional for straddling the social order—operating within it, but also capable of framing it from without by actions that exceed norms—is a reoccurring theme (Richards 1968: 27; Quigley 2005: 4-5).  

However, the anthropology of kingship takes a very different view of the objectification of this power in a sacred subject, and the relation of this subject to the social order. This difference is key to my analysis. The “relation of exception” (1998: 18) in Agamben’s framework posits a figure on the margins of society where they risk an unceremonial death. “Homer sacer” is an outcast in whom biological life and political life are indistinct: a subject, in other words, whose relation of separation from the polity is abandonment. It is on the basis this relation, Agamben argues, that the polity is delimited in the first place. The “sacred” nature of this figure is not indicative of a king walking a red carpet at an exhibition. This king stands at the center of the social order, and is ceremoniously charged as a figure of ultimate moral if not political authority over his society. In this case, his society stands before him in miniature. In the simplest of terms, bare life is sacred for being related to no one, the king is sacred for being related to everyone (Evans-Prichard 1948: 413-414).

So just what was the nature of political authority on exhibit at Cityscape? What exactly was the stuff of sacred kingship here? A common theme in contexts where kings inhabit the singular position I have described—being situated in and yet transcending the social order—is their imagined function as a hinge between incommensurable domains, ostensibly guaranteeing their

57 This is particularly evident in the “stranger-king” vein of analysis (see de Huesch 2005 and Sahlins 1981, 2008).
equilibrium; for example, between the natural world and the world of human affairs (de Huesch 1997, Sahlins 1981). “Dubai Inc.” encapsulates just such a proposition. It is derived, after all, from the conflation of institutional domains conventionally understood as juxtaposed: government and entrepreneurship, public and private, security and speculation. The expert financial discourse I will examine underscores these conventions by positing the sheikh as an exceptional authority at once flowing through this institutional network, and yet standing outside of it and thereby capable of fixing it or bestowing equilibrium to it. Here is a sacred actor for bearing this singular relation to “the market”. This is not a relation of abandonment. It is one of guarantee: a guarantee of the commensuration of its historically unprecedented commodities as the meta-value on the basis of which they could be exchanged, and a guarantee of resolution in the event of a breakdown of this exchange. 58

What is sacred about this royal figure, then, is ultimately his imagined status as the personification of exceptional power; a singularity whose actions may exceed legal and economic conventions. This is not an analytic metaphor mined from the anthropological quarry of “little communities” (Redfield 1955). The moral authority of the state also lends itself to sacralisation when it is condescend into its ultimate actors. Insofar as it is involved in the management of social life while ostensibly transcending the sphere of such life, it posits itself as a singular actor with magical abilities (Coronil 1997, Ferguson and Gupta 2002, Graeber 2011, Muehlebach 2012). The magic, in this case, was not so much about “pulling social reality…out of a hat”, as Coronil puts it (1997: 2). It was about pulling speculation out of the shadow of gambling: allowing the exchange of New Dubai’s emergent commodities to proceed on the basis of a magical guarantee. Sacred kingship, then, was part of the “politics of regulation” (Gotham 2009: 357) that sanction certain conceptions of the market, and the relations of right they are based on.

In her recent ethnography of the neoliberal regimentation of welfare services in Northern Italy, for example, Andrea Muehlebach elaborates just such a project. She explains how this current neoliberal order breaks with “a history of state sacralization” (2012: 60). This sacralization of the state had seen the traditionally Catholic virtue of caring for others at once condensed into an

58 Drawing from a wide range of ethnographic analysis of tribal societies Luc de Heusch has argued that this dual aspect of king’s sacred status is mutually reinforcing (1997, 2005).
imperative of state, while elevating the state itself as the caring subject par excellence for standing in relation to society as whole. Its moral authority was allied to its allegedly transcendent status as the “ultimate guarantor and mediator of the common good”\(^{59}\); in this case, through the provision of welfare (2012: 87).

With “Dubai Inc.”, however, sacralization and neoliberal administrative strategies coincided in the figure of the sheikh whose aura was at once distributed in its institutional network, and yet also removed enough that it was thought to be capable of intervening without recourse to contractual formalities. It is this dynamic of guaranteeing commensuration and correction—corresponding with the distribution and concentration of sovereignty—that the remainder of this chapter is concerned.

\section{Sovereign Magic}

\subsection{Performing a Vision}

Since the introduction of freehold in 2002, there has been no shortage of media commentary about the spectacular nature of Dubai’s urban transformation. Here, I seize on two oft-repeated and mutually informing tropes—usually appearing in the same accounts—that explicitly relate this transformation with the figure of the sheikh. They were common to characterizations of Dubai both during the boom and the crisis.

First, there was the narrative about Dubai’s magical entrance onto the world stage. This was the oft-cited story about Dubai’s immediate transformation into a global city from circumstances that could not possibly have anticipated it; in fact, from “a sleepy fishing village” (e.g.: O’Donnell 2008, Farrelly 2009, AP 2010, Arnold 2010, Pamuk 2011, Kerr 2012, Al Qassemi 2013). A litany of titles have been offered to capture this magical entrance and the rapidity of its logic-defying transformation: “Mushroom City” (Nicolson 2006), “Sudden City” (Molavi 2007), “Bingo-Urbanism” (Jensen 2007), “Off-the-Shelf City” (Jenkins 2009), “Five-Minute City” (Farrelly 2009), “City from Zero” (Basar 2011). This notion of exceptional speed has also been

\footnote{\textit{Italics added.}}
emphasized in recent scholarship. It has been highlighted as representing a particular form of urbanism: “instant cities” (Bagaeen 2007). Mike Davis has even suggested that Dubai has bypassed entire stages in historical development. Rather than experiencing the “arduous intermediate stages” of a historical process, he writes, it has superficially imitated the trappings of such development for having “telescoped” its way into a highly distilled form of neoliberalism (2006: 53-54). All of this, then, tells the story of an entrance without an arrival.

What these accounts share in common is a normative understanding of urbanization. It is one that understands the city as something organically accumulated over time: bearing the trappings of historical epochs as they sedimented in its built environment. A new and superlative cityscape may overshadow, depreciate, gentrify or destroy this environment. But it is eerie that it should occur without it, and that it in doing so it has transformed nothing but nature itself: a city “built on sand” (Jenkins 2009) as it were. The desert in such a reading, after all, is removed from history insofar as it does not register its passage. And here was Dubai: entering the stage of modernity without historically arriving. Here, in other words, was a magical entrance. This narrative, however, only echoes the effects of splintering urbanism. It was not history that was bypassed, as Davis argues. Rather, it was the technique of spatially bypassing areas of existing urban density in order to develop master-planned projects for residents capable of affording their premiums.

Often featuring alongside this trope as the driving force bridging a sleepy village with a glittering metropolis was the “vision” of Dubai’s sheikh. It was ubiquitous in both local and foreign news media, whether their portrayals of Dubai were kind or unkind (e.g.: Nicolson 2006, Dore 2007, Hammond 2009, The Economist 2009, Arnold and Arnold 2013). It was also a key category in the official lexicon of Dubai’s government, and the sheikh’s own. An early iteration, for example, was his speech to the World Economic Forum in 2004. Speaking of “my father’s vision” (Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al Maktoum, 1912–1900) he referred to his “foresight and courage” for having ordered the construction of the Jebel Ali Port in the mid-1970s; the largest port in the world. The sheikh insisted that “if the project had been suggested to consultants or subjected to an economic feasibility study, it would never have been implemented”, ostensibly

60 Michelle Buckley provides a trenchant critique of Davis on this note (2012:5-6).
because Dubai was not a global entrepôt at the time. Such is the force of vision. And this vision he did inherit, as he went on to elaborate “my vision”, emphasizing the construction of projects at “exceptional speed” to be a key part of it (Sheikh Mohammad 2004).

Here, then, was a radical break in urban morphology but a continuity in visionary leadership. A city lacking the sedimentation of urban history, but endowed with royal rulers spearheading their society toward modernization, and even anticipating future trends and embarking upon projects to accommodate them.

These tropes theatrically converge in the scene I described above. The miniature renditions of superlative projects on display were understood to be claiming an arrival without precedent, a transformation. And though it was a transformation available to be viewed by all, it was ostensibly anticipated only by the vision of the sheikh.

Yet the sheikh too was on display. As a highly orchestrated performance, it worked to bring this transformation and this royal figure into formal relation with one another. This was sovereignty in the sense of sacred authority that I described above: at once inside and outside of the polity, or “the market”. On the one hand, the sheikh is demonstrating that this authority and “vision” extend to the various quasi-governmental corporations whose pavilions he visits, such as Nakheel. These corporations, it is worth recalling, are concurrently headed by government officials and confidants of the sheikh. This is that “patrimonial network” to which I earlier referred (Davidson 2005: 73). As the terminus of sovereign power, then, he is also the source of its distribution. He stands as the implicit force behind the actions of these actors, and therefore within their sphere of action. On the other hand, he also seems to stands a part from this network of actors. Paradoxically, this is also conveyed through the same act of visiting these pavilions; there is a productive slippage here. In ceremoniously taking stock of these pavilions the Sheikh also stands apart from them. It is by inhabiting this Archimedean point, available only to him, that he performatively posits himself as a concentrated or singular source of sovereign power. As Mitchell put, when describing the epistemology of colonial rule in 19th Century Egypt: “without a separation of the self from a picture...it becomes impossible to grasp ‘the whole’” (1991: 22). In this context of sacred kingship, the scale of social reality represented in those miniature mega-projects was transposed on a larger-than-life figure; a supreme personification of state ostensibly.
above the sphere of law and bureaucracy. It is from this vantage that he can be deferred to should things break down.

This performance of sacred kingship indexed the speculative nature of New Dubai’s urban regime. It was largely unregulated; a fact that was widely known. The valorization of capital through the production of space did not proceed on the basis of bureaucratically defined standards of evaluating the categories and market price of freehold properties. In these circumstances, the very category of “freehold” property and the domain of its transactions as a “market” were unclear. The christening of miniature models by the Sheikh functioned to alleviate these circumstances. Again, this speaks to the fact that the speculative nature of New Dubai was not limited to profiteering on the basis of risky short-term transactions, as the notion of “speculation” is popularly understood. Rather it was because the very sphere of these transactions—the commensurability of their fungible objects and the durability of their value—was speculative.

And it was just this politics that saw the sheikh invoked as a universal value anchoring an emergent market and making it amenable to investment. In fact, this extoling of his vision was sometimes explicitly associated with the lack of quantitative data about this market. As one CEO put it to his audience during the 2005 Cityscape exhibition: “If [Dubai] had relied on data then it would have not taken the risks,” but instead found itself “bogged down in statistics”. The success of this city, he suggests, was due to “vision-led development”. The analysis quoting him argues that this mode of development “is ultimately dependent on the ruler compensating for less-than-ideal information on the investment climate” (Oxford Business Group 2006: 156).61

This conspicuous sovereign presence at an exhibition in the figure of a sheikh (attesting the continuity of a vision for growth) and the presumed recourse to his remedial powers together thus underpinned this widely held belief that Dubai’s freehold real estate market was guaranteed to function in a particular way, even if unofficially.

61 Notice the correspondence here with the sheikh’s reference to this father’s exceptional foresight for having dismissed conventional expertise when commissioning the Jebel Ali Port in the mid-1970s.
This was the assumption that expert financial discourse about Dubai Inc. doubled-down on when the crisis occurred, especially following the standstill announcement. Before I examine that discourse and the manner in which it conflated this market with the political peculiarities of this place, I first briefly examine the nature and extent of this regulatory dearth. The urgency about this discourse in pursuit of sovereign liability in a moment of crisis, was a variation on this theme of a sovereign vision. The fetish of sovereign power informing both was underpinned by concerns about the problems that rendered Dubai’s freehold property market less than “mature.”

4.2 What “Mature” Markets Want

“Behzad?” She was smiling, donning a black abaya, and sitting at her desk. She gestured to the entrance of the corridor leading out of the room, inviting me to walk through. This was a small waiting area somewhere in the Real Estate and Regulatory Authority (RERA). She was my interviewee’s assistant. Despite the frequency of my visits I always found its offices difficult to navigate; narrow corridors, blocks of offices buffered by separate waiting areas, cubicles in rooms one had to pass through to access the elevator, etc. The official I had been waiting to meet was a senior manager, and another of Dubai’s “flexible citizens”, as Kanna has described them (2011): that is, foreign educated, proficient in English, and a technocrat committed to Dubai’s modernization.

We discussed RERA’s regulatory strides since the onset of the crisis. His chief concern was the valuation of properties, and his department’s struggle to standardize it. “It still happens a lot, people can’t get their properties valuated because they don’t have title deeds...we can’t help you because your property doesn’t exist in our system,” he quipped. It was in order to help alleviate this issue that RERA had recently embarked on an automated registration system. And all of this paled in comparison to what he emphasized was one of the single most important shortcomings of the property market during the boom: the lack of a centralized control in valuations. In this he was adamant:

“The market had no transparency because there were no basic standards, there were different companies doing things [in] their own way...so if you wanted to know the real value of a property you couldn’t access the information you need.
There was conflict of interest...some developers—I won’t say which ones—had their own companies doing valuations for their own properties...[Real estate] brokers were also a major problem. They were valuating properties themselves...And, you know, they made money based on these prices they gave.

The market was not mature...property was treated like a stock; like it was liquid. People were making valuations based on future values! That is why our laws have been playing catch-up!”

He went on to show me the solution he had drafted: the *Emirates Book of Valuations Standards*. It featured a litany of definitions and categories. Its “most important part”, he said, was the section on determining the “market value” of properties. This would ostensibly ensure that market actors would act with definitions they all shared: a hallmark of “mature” markets. It would also ensure that values reflect the present state of the market, not its future.

Concerns about the valuations of properties were not uncommon. Market analysis, for example, had noted the numerous valuations methodologies that were concurrently in play (e.g.: Asteco 2009: 3). The effect of this was to render pricing, market projections, and the determination of mortgage rates problematic for being derived from multiple, incommensurate metrics of valuation. This issue was also linked a host of others that constituted the regulatory dearth of the market during the boom.

There was the inconsistent issuance of title deeds, for example. My interviews of real estate lawyers overwhelmingly indicate that title deeds were generally not issued during the boom. In fact, it was only following the establishment of RERA (in 2007) when developers were required to register their freehold projects with the government at all. 

On the one hand, this meant that the exchange of freehold properties was often accompanied with little paperwork. In fact, for years the only document exchanged were “Sales and Purchase Agreements”. These were often just a few pages long and merely listed the terms of payment,

62 Interview with RERA official, October 10, 2010.
63 These were Law No (8) of 2007 and Law No (13) of 2008. The latter law in particular pertained to the registration of so-called “off-plan” (freehold) properties: that is, properties that are brought to market prior to construction. It was precisely this kind of property that was changing hands, or “flipped” in industry vernacular.
without featuring the cadastral information that could be used to determine so-called “market value” in any universal way.

On the other hand, this also meant that there was no universal registry. Master-developers had their own registries and were not eager to share them with governmental bodies, such as the municipality. This, I was often reminded, did nothing to help render the market “transparent” as it made it all the more challenging to collect universal data.\textsuperscript{64} As a manager from one of these master-developers explained, it was not unusual for them to delay or withhold the cadastral data of entire mega-projects. This meant that the legal claim of individual owners of the plots contained therein did not exceed their arrangement with the corporation; that is, their ownership was not formally recognized by the government as their unit were not officially registered. As he put it:

...so people didn’t technically own their properties...I mean, it was like buying a share in Emaar [for example] because you didn’t have your own claim to the property.\textsuperscript{65}

What I kept hearing, then, was that there is an ideal correspondence between these two kinds of numbers: spatial coordinates and monetary value. The market actors I engaged with—government employees, real estate lawyers, real estate brokers, etc.—shared in this belief that this correspondence represents an achievable equilibrium. It was a range that was presumably clear in a “mature market”, yet remained elusive in Dubai.

There was also another set of numbers that were absent, and also often the subject of my discussions with industry professionals. It was the financial kind. Much in the same manner that there lacked a central registry of ownership and a standardized method of valuation, Dubai’s retail banking industry did not rely on a central financial registry detailing the financial assets, liabilities and payment behaviours of customers. This was because there was no credit bureau in the UAE. Here was a market where financial credit was easily available but where credit scoring

\textsuperscript{64} It was just these issues of property valuation and registration that a major feasibility study of securitization in the UAE highlighted (DIFC 2010: 15).

\textsuperscript{65} Interview with manager of master-developer, October 10, 2010.
did not exist. In fact, personal bankruptcy was criminal and bounced cheques cause for arrest should a complaint be filed.

What this meant was that financial institutions had very limited knowledge of an individual’s overall financial status, or so-called “credit worthiness”. Nima’s ability to obtain significant loans relative to his personal income was because he was engaging multiple banks in a market where their customer information was not shared. The only significant financial information that a loan application usually required was a salary certificate and a three-month banking statement. As such, there were virtually no institutional mechanisms affording the retail banking industry “predictive power” in their mediation of individual credit.

Lacking clear property rights and sufficient calculating tools there was not much of an “organized market” here (Callon 1998: 22). Yet none of this was cause for enough concern to limit the flow of capital into this market. During its heyday, this market expanded so rapidly that property prices increased by about 80% from 2007 to 2008 (Morgan Stanley, cited in McGinley 2011).

Enabling this, I suggest, was that the disparate parts constituting “the market” here were brought into a relation of exchange—that is, made commensurate—by an imagined meta-value (Lambek 2008: 144). The ingredients of a “mature” market were missing. But in their stead was an exceptional figure, walking a red carpet, who possessed not just with a vision but the ostensible capacity to exercise the kind of power that would override the need for bureaucratic process and financial statistics. And it was on this power that certain moving parts were folded into a universe of exchange (a market). Parts such as: a relation of property called “freehold” that remained legally obscure for years, title deeds with limited technical information, multiple valuation standards, multiple private registries of properties, multiple financial profiles of

66 The conventional financial metric of “debt burden ratio”—i.e. the amount of debt payments an individual is obliged to make relative to the income they earn in a given period of time—was therefore very difficult to ascertain.

67 Ironically, this sometimes meant that an applicant’s chances for approval by one bank were actually better where they were defaulting on their loans from another because these monthly loan payments would not appear in their statements.

68 Interview with employee of credit consultancy, September 14, 2010.
customers, newly-minted master-developers with limited credit histories, massive bonds leveraged against these juridically ambiguous properties, massive syndicated loans from foreign banks, mega-projects in miniature, advertisements for “property visas”, a place in the line-up at a property launch, etc. And looking on, from above, a sacred figure; a guarantor in whose vision and ability to rule by decree was placed much faith.

5 Sovereign Liability

5.1 Exceptional Corporations

Employees in governmental institutions, like the RERA manager above, had no shortage of opinions to offer me about master-developers. They were usually less than flattering. They repeatedly took pains to emphasize that if they had been able to wield more control over master-developers the severity of the crisis would have been considerably diminished. Referring to Nakheel, for example, a RERA manager summed up the sentiment: “they are not really part of us...the government”, and that it was “acting like its own municipality”. There was a general sense of frustration with the exceptional status of these organizations.

Here I elaborate some of the administrative strategies articulating the “graduated sovereignty” (Ong 2006: 78) that these master-developers represented. Charged with realizing the “exceptional speed” that was part of the sheikh’s “vision”, they engaged in institutional practices that were exceptional to national regulations, and also enjoyed considerable relief from official governmental oversight.

These practices and this relief, it is worth noting, were often extra-legal as their urban entrepreneurialism preceded the legal establishment of actual zones of exception. Indeed, if these Emirati technocrats felt the need to disavow master-developers from Dubai’s government it was precisely because this urban entrepreneurialism hinged on the entanglement of “public” and “private” institutional functions. These corporations, after all, were headed by local elites concurrently serving in governmental positions. This enabled the speculative nature of Dubai’s

69 Interview with RERA official, September 15, 2010.
urbanism in these years, and its heightened exposure to the financial crisis. So what were some of these strategies of graduated sovereignty?

What had initially attracted investors from abroad and long-time foreign residents such as Nima and Mana to this emergent property market was the linking of freehold real estate to residency visas. The real estate advertisements referring to such residency visas that Nima mentioned were not entirely misleading. Residency visas were indeed issued with the sale of properties early on during the boom.70 And several employees of master-developers explained that it was intended to attract buyers wealthy enough to purchase these freehold properties in full.71

Many of my middle class Iranian interlocutors—regardless of whether they had actually obtained such a visa or not—initially understood it as a mechanism offsetting the structural insecurity of life in a context where permanent residency was unavailable. I was repeatedly reminded that “in those days” visas were no small part of the draw. Property ownership, then, was device for social permanence.72

Yet it was just this correlation between permanence and property ownership that remained vague. On what legal grounds were these visas anchored? Despite early assurances by Emaar’s management, for example, that three year visas would be granted with freehold purchases, this practice eventually turned out to have been unregulated (Jose 2002, WAM 2002). These visas were based on the direct sponsorship of the master-developers whose real estate was being purchased.73 As a high-ranking member of RERA explained: “the property visas were sponsored by these master-developers, so it was like you were an employee. This was a problem. What if you wanted to sell it or challenge their fees? Then they will cancel your visa”.74 That master-developers were acting as sponsors in these visa arrangements remained a consistent theme

70 Interview with RERA official, September 15, 2010.
71 Interview with employee of master-developer, June 29, 2010; Interview with manager of master-developer October 10, 2010.
72 It is important to note that this was not always simply transactional (a property for a visa). For many, it was also informed by the social value associated with ownership of property.
73 Interview with RERA official, September 15, 2010.
74 Interview with RERA official, October 21, 2010.
among my interviewees. What varied were the explanations I received regarding the terms of this sponsorship. The government employees with whom I spoke on the topic, suggested that the purchasers would be defined as employees of these master-developers. Yet an employee of the *Dubai Economic Department* insisted that these visas were sometimes registered as corporate subsidiaries of master-developers.\(^{75}\) The owners, in effect, were technically subcontractors.

My efforts to corroborate the exact nature of these sponsorship scenarios with the *Department of Naturalization and Residency of Dubai* (DNRD) were unsuccessful. Despite my association with the Dubai School of Government at the time—Dubai post-“standstill”—the matter proved too politically contentious. The practice was widespread enough to warrant a clarification and public rebuke by its Director General, who insisted: “nothing's changed when it comes to residence permits,” and that “real state companies who have promised permanent residence...[were] not allowed to make such promises” (Hilotin 2006). Significantly, this came immediately after the introduction of legislation defining freehold in mid-2006. Until that time, master-developers had been continuing this practice, albeit to a lesser extent. So-called “property visas” would remain a controversial subject until the onset of the crisis, when there was a renewed effort—spurred on by the same discourse about helping the market “mature”—to officially reintroduce them in order to boost “investor confidence”.

This practice of providing residency visas for purchasers of freehold property was indicative of the elevated status of master-developers in relation of the Dubai’s government. Headed by elites members of a neo-patrimonial network who were concurrently leading governmental agencies, they were spearheading the sheikh’s “vision” of Dubai and were thus imagined as corporate extensions of the sovereign’s authority. The “exceptional speed” included in this vision was based, in part, on their ability to consistently outmanoeuvre regulatory oversight by governmental institutions whose functions pertained to urban planning and real estate.\(^{76}\) The municipality was often frustrated in its initial efforts at enforcing city-wide planning standards

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\(^{75}\) Interview with DED employee, May 12, 2010.

\(^{76}\) Another part to this exceptional speed was the labour regime that saw hundreds of thousands of (mostly) South Asian men conscripted into construction through sub-contractors. Their wages were competitive with their home societies—featuring weaker currencies and lower costs of living—and they were legally barred from collective bargaining. On the neoliberal regulation of labour in Dubai, see Michelle Buckley 2012.
such as the design of street curbs, much less coordination mega Projects between competing master-developers.\textsuperscript{77} So effective was this condition that by 2007 a municipal planner remarked: “We were often learning about major developments from the newspapers!”\textsuperscript{78} Similarly, the Dubai Land Department lacked both the legal and administrative capacity for oversight until the launch of RERA in 2007. The sales, registration, and fees pertaining to the freehold real estate market, as I explained above, was largely limited to the in-house administration and policies of these master-developers. All this amounted to the ability of master-developers to design, market, build, and launch projects in quick succession.\textsuperscript{79}

This \textit{de facto} sovereignty of such corporations was not limited to frustrating the regulatory oversight of long-standing governmental bodies. It was also apparent in the newly minted institution called \textit{The Executive Council} (TEC). Launched in 2003, it was touted as the institutional command-and-control center in terms that smacked of business management as it looked to coordinate the functions of governmental agencies (Gulf News 2003).\textsuperscript{80} The Council itself was a group of about twenty high-ranking government officials representing various public agencies.

\textsuperscript{77} Emaar’s \textit{Emirates Living}, a series of gated communities, was its first mega-project and saw it lock horns with the municipality at the outset. One point of contention was the streetscape. Its roads feature \textit{rolling} street curbs. These are a far cry from the municipality standard of \textit{raised} curbs. According to a project manager involved, this was a small but early demonstration of the ability of master-developers to override local regulations (Interview with project manager, June 12, 2010).

\textsuperscript{78} Interview with Adina Hempl, N.d. 2010.

\textsuperscript{79} A project manager from one master-developer summed it up nicely: “Building major projects needs several stamps of approval. There are N.O.C.’s (No Objection Certificates) required...for example, from DEWA (Dubai Electricity and Water Company), the RTA (Roads and Transportation Authority), and Civil Defense. Then your urban designs need approval to be put on the GIS (Geographic Information System)...[which] involve ‘affection plans’ to be submitted to the DM (Dubai Municipality). This can take a year...but one day we just started building it. I mean this was a huge competitive advantage (Interviewed with project manager, June 17, 2010)!”

\textsuperscript{80} TEC originated from what was initially known as The Executive Office. This was set-up just a few years prior, and was essentially the personal office of Sheikh Mohammad who was the Crown Prince of Dubai at that time.
But when it came to the coordination of Dubai’s urbanization and TEC’s initiative to establish an “Urban Planning Authority”, the limits to such an endeavor became apparent. TEC employees insisted that the effort was sabotaged. Some of the Council’s members were also executives of master-planners. “They were opposed to us”, said a TEC manager, “we were the technical people trying to...tell them that their activities must be coordinated”. But master-developers were reticent to provide basic planning documentation. From their perspective these were proprietary. Sharing them in a governmental scheme involving their competitors was to risk jeopardizing any competitive advantage. “They kept insisting that the boom meant this kind of coordination wasn’t really necessary”, explained another employee.

In the remaining section of this chapter, I attend to the discourse about “Dubai Inc.” The distribution of sovereignty that I have here described is scrutinized by an expert discourse that glosses it with a conception of political culture prevailing in Arab societies of the Persian Gulf. Here, the locus of this graduated sovereignty in the figure of the sheikh is foregrounded; not for the sake of celebration, but the tracking of liability. And in so doing, the reconciliation of the contradiction between free market logic and authoritarianism is elaborated.

5.2 “Dubai Inc.”

With the onset of the economic crisis came much talk of “Dubai Inc.” It is worth examining this discourse as it explicitly problematizes the double movement that Dubai’s emergent property market featured: the graduated distribution of sovereignty in the form of an institutional network (Ong 2006: 77-79), and its imagined concentration in the form of a royal figure possessed with exceptional power exceeding this network. This discourse addressed not just the causes of the

81 Such a body “was necessary”, explained a TEC manager, “because the city was really a series of separate projects, we wanted it to be one project....but there was no authority to approve of their master plans other than the approval of the Sheikh. So they went to him” (Interview with TEC manager, September 16, 2010).
82 Interview with TEC manager, September 13, 2010.
83 Interview with TEC employee, August 12, 2010.
crisis, but repeatedly offered explanations about how it was likely to be corrected. In these prescriptions, the tension inherent to this double movement is put into relief.

The overriding concern—especially in light of the “standstill” announcement—was the clarification of “Dubai Inc.’s debts” (e.g.: Reed 2009, Nagraj 2010). The fanfare about a “visionary” sovereign had given way to calls for disentangling corporate enterprises from centers of public decision-making. News coverage often noted the “blurred lines between the public and private sectors” (Kerr 2010a), bemoaned the lack of “transparency” (e.g.: Casey 2009, Cruise 2009, Carney 2009, Keehner and Saitto 2009, Kerr 2010b), or called for financially disciplining “Dubai's government-backed champions” (The Economist 2009a) like Nakheel. Expert market analysis also hit the same notes. It too was concerned with identifying the location of sovereign debts. As one report put it: “the sum of the parts of Dubai Inc. is relevant from the point of assessing the sovereign’s contingent liability” (Commerzbank 2010: 2). Not sovereign magic, but sovereign liability. It also repeatedly emphasized the conflation of government and corporate enterprise: “in most countries there are identifiable delineations between the public and private sectors...[here] the fact that the Ruler and his closest relatives form the core of the government make it difficult to draw such distinctions” (Moody’s Investor Services 2008b).  

Yet whereas the alarm and explanations that filled editorial pages usually focused on this conflation of private and public domains and called for their disentanglement, expert analysis went further in its explanations and advice. In doing so, it articulated the contradictions of autocratic neoliberalism.

One the hand, this expert market analysis attempted to give the graduated sovereignty underpinning Dubai Inc. some bureaucratic coherency. This network of GREs was thus rigorously interrogated in order to delineate the institutional pathways that decision-making followed. This was rendered all the more urgent in a moment of crisis; indeed, Dubai Inc. required “demystifying” (Moody’s 2008a). To this end, it was variously posited as “a web” of corporate enterprises that were either “public or affiliated with the public sector” (Commerzbank AG 2010: 2), a “government-controlled system” (Moody’s Investor Services 2008b: 1), a collection of “quasi-sovereign companies” (CITI 2008: 5), or a constellation of corporations

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84 Italics added.
acting as “the Dubai Rulers’ instruments” for economic growth (Isthmus 2009: 6). On the one hand, decision-making cascaded vertically from the ownership of the sheikh or the government of Dubai, to conglomerate entities like Dubai World, to their subsidiaries like Nakheel. On the other, it also flowed horizontally as it featured the widespread practice of concurrent executive appointments both between these corporate entities, and between them and governmental bodies.  

References to Dubai Inc. thus sought to objectify Dubai’s emergent political economy as an intelligible site of economic transactions and debts. Here was a network of entrepreneurial corporations that were not “bogged down” by either feasibility studies or much regulatory oversight. But despite the elaborate flowcharts that this endeavour produced (Appendix 1) the lack of those “identifiable delineations” remained a major hurdle. And in a moment of crisis, this fantasy risked turning into a nightmare lest the financial debts that this network had relied on could be offset somehow. For foreign creditors, for example, this required displacing these debts from the private domain of their accumulation to the public domain of their (preferred) settlement. The blurring of boundaries was also problematic in this regard. It is not just that explicitly sovereign-backed debts were difficult to locate, it was also that such blurring rendered such a clear displacement more difficult.

It was just on this note that the figure of the sheikh loomed larger than life, and outside of this institutional muddling. This expert discourse took pains to elaborate the likelihood and capacity of the sheikh—as a classical figure of sovereignty disposed with “supreme legitimate authority” (Philpott 1995: 357)—to intervene with the intention of offsetting contractual caveats (where they existed) that may have seen the investors incur loses, and the more general blurring that rendered governmental interventions redundant as the government was itself implicated in these debts. Succinctly clarifying the aura of the sheikh’s capacity to resolve breakdown was an article that is worth quoting at length:

85 Those who inhabited these commanding-heights of Dubai Inc., as I noted previously, were leading members of Dubai’s neo-patrimonial network who represented the administrative experimentation involved in this historical project of economic diversification through urbanization (Hanieh and Buckley 2014).
The blurry lines between Dubai World, the corporate entity, and Dubai, the sovereign state, only make the restructuring process more unpredictable than that of a typical private company...“This may just come down to one sheikh calling another,” says a senior adviser, who's currently working with Dubai World.

...most figured the emirate, or its neighbour Abu Dhabi, would bail out the businesses if they ran into financial trouble. The belief was so strong that both lenders and Dubai World executives referred to the "sovereign halo" around the enterprise. “Lenders weren't looking too hard into what entity was actually backing the debt...There was an implicit sovereign guarantee, which the government didn't discourage.” (Keehner and Saitto 2009)86

Such was the imagined force of the sovereign’s decision. It could cut through explicitly stated contractual convention. It could correct the financial shortfall of the entire city-state with no more than a phone call.

Expert market analysis shared this understanding of how things (ultimately) worked here, and applied it to their credit ratings of these GREs and the risk analysis they offered. It was also purportedly on the basis of these assumptions that foreign investors had engaged Dubai Inc. One way it did so was by clarifying the “support assumptions” informing this understanding (JP Morgan 2009: 6; Moody’s Investor Services 2008a: 7, 26; 2009: 3). These assumptions often bore sociological content. In these analyses, Dubai was characterized as indicative of Arab societies of Persian Gulf. These featured “paternalistic governments...with a tendency to intervene in the private sector” given the concurrent executive roles of local elites across private and public bodies. They have “a need to maintain investor confidence in order to sustain future financing sources” (Moody’s Investor Services 2010: 2). And this has resulted in “a long history of bank support at the federal level” (Commerzbank 2010: 4).

My interlocutors confirmed that these assumptions about patrimonialism and the possibility of royal interventions were indeed widespread. In fact, they sometimes related these understandings, about the order of things in Dubai, to the prevalence of “relationship banking”. This was allegedly the basis on which these GREs received the substantial loans that they did from multinational financial institutions. Relationship lending is a technique of lending that relies

86 Italics added.
on the presumption of an ongoing relationship between the lending institution and its customers. As one analyst explained:

Lenders assumed that [the government of Dubai] wouldn’t risk jeopardizing their relationships with them later. This is common. They just didn’t take [the caveat] seriously.

He was referring to the caveat in the bond issued by Nakheel that had resulted in the “standstill” (noted above). This overlooking of an explicitly stated stipulation in a contract, for an implicit guarantee based on the need to maintain “investor confidence” thus took for granted the potential for autocratic decision-making in Dubai.

It was this assumption and the relationship lending that it supported, then, that expert analysis of Dubai Inc. explained to have justified speculative investments in the past. The category of “Dubai Inc.” was an infrastructural device that aided this speculative endeavour by capturing the double movement I have been describing. It referred to the emergence of a network of corporations spearheading urban entrepreneurialism. These were the agents of graduated sovereignty doing the work of market-making. But Dubai Inc. also referred to the magical force flowing through this “web” or “system”. It was a force that radiated from an autocratic center. It was the more classic conception of an actually existing sovereign; a personification of exceptional power in whom lending relationships were imagined to ultimately condense.

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87 “Relationship lending” refers to a mode of lending where decisions are based on “customer-specific information” that is accumulated over the course of ongoing business between the financial institution and the individual customer (Boot 2000: 10). This profiling of customers is proprietary (Berger and Udell 2002: 37). In this regard, it is often contrasted with “transaction-based lending” which is based on standardized or “arms-length” methods like credit-scoring. As these are administered by credit bureaus, the customer profiles they produce are universally available. Both techniques are theoretically intended to mitigate the possibility of over-lending.

88 Interview with financial consultant, September 17, 2012.
6 Conclusion

I have examined the emergence of New Dubai through the social production of the emergent market in freehold property that underpinned it. To this end, I have unpacked the double movement of sovereignty that articulated the institutional workings of this market and the assumptions about its possibilities (magic) and its limits (liabilities). A productive tension, then, existed between the instrumental and ideological functioning of sovereign power (Chalfin 2010: 45) as it was concurrently concentrated into a royal personification of state disposed with exceptional vision and authority, while also distributed into an institutional network of exceptional corporations. This reliance on an actually existing sovereign anchoring a patrimonial order of things and the administrative strategies of graduated sovereignty of the corporations inhabiting this order, I suggest, was a demonstration of the autocratic neoliberalism described, in various ways, by Buckley, Nonini and Ong.

And between this objectification of sovereign power through fetish (a sheikh touring an exhibition) and its institutional elaboration through bureaucracy we can glimpse the literal and figurative registers of a financially–fuelled process of urban transformation.

It was within this double movement and the speculative nature of the market it produced that my middle class Iranian interlocutors, such as Nima and Mana, realized the lives that they did and experience them eventually erode. Specifically, it furnished them with the new commodities and forms of credit that situated them as new kind of person in Dubai: property-owning non-citizens. With the boom, they experienced the potential lifestyle that was available to this person. With the crisis, they experienced the potential radical risk that was inherent to the untested commodities and forms of credit that this lifestyle offered. It is to these experiences that I turn in chapters two and three.
CHAPTER 2
Great Expectations:
Properties, Persons and “New Dubai”

7 Why Property?

When “freehold” real estate was introduced in May of 2002, it was celebrated as a vehicle for economic growth, and a sign of Dubai’s modernization more generally. There was hardly any indication that freehold was something of an open question just a few months prior. As late as August of 2001, for example, the Head of Dubai’s Land Department was insisting that such a thing was not actually forthcoming (Menon 2001). It seemed that the 99-year leasehold option—introduced in 2001—was going to remain as the only mode of property ownership for non-citizens, despite its lackluster sales. Enter the sovereign, and his decree; or so it was presented in news media.

In the midst of these promising proclamations, however, questions remained. In late 2003, a string of editorials by one of the leading Emirati protagonists of New Dubai—in fact, the legal architect of Dubai’s financial free zones—elaborated the legal and financial implications of this latest technology of financialization (Al Mulla 2003a, 2003b 2003c). Calling it “an interesting departure” from “the long established...form of ownership” in the UAE (Al Mulla 2003a), he outlined in detail the legal foundations of ownership by non-citizens that freehold introduced. Its legality, as I explained previously, would remain ambiguous and open to speculation until mid-2006, well into the real estate boom that it generated. These expert elaborations, then, were aiming to overcome the “unprecedented legal challenges” posed by this new kind of property and its increasingly expanding market (Al Mulla 2003b). In more cynical terms, they sought to reduce juridical ambiguity so as to boost economic speculation.

I refer to these early interventions not only because they anticipated the legal and financial experimentation that was underway, but because they represented the emergence of “property” as an increasingly ubiquitous topic in public discourse. These editorials did not appear in a specialty publication, though several such publications were about to appear. They were part of a growing genre in Dubai during those years: ‘talk of property’. This was a constant stream of articles and
commentary in the media—especially English-language newspapers and magazines—elaborating the actions, aspirations, persons, risks, opportunities, and urban forms associated with “property”. There were commentaries on the lifestyles it offered, the world of things commensurate with them, and the know-how required to manage them. There were tips on how to decorate them, how to negotiate terms of sale, how to find the right mortgage for the right one, and how to treat property as a financial asset that would continue to give. There were celebratory profiles of the high-flying entrepreneurs behind “master-developers” and how their projects articulated the Sheikh’s vision for the future of Dubai. There were commentaries on the particular needs of owner-occupiers—down to the spaces preferred by teenagers—and how developers should accommodate them in their designs. With the onset of the crisis and bursting of the freehold real estate bubble, there was a sustained focus on market indicators to determine when it would “hit bottom”, and when it could recover. There was also an incessant concern with the regulations required to help the market “mature”, and the balance of rights between developers, the city, and purchasers (e.g.: terms of cancellation, claims to common property in master planned developments, visas attached to ownership, bankruptcy law etc.). All the while, “property” was often synonymous with freehold residential property, and the mega-projects of New Dubai.

This talk of property—even during the crisis—complimented the “urbanist” discourse (Kanna 2011: 80-85) also emerging in those years that celebrated Dubai as an apolitical canvas for so-called “starchitects” to build a modern metropolis. A “visionary” sovereign peering over his model city, charismatic entrepreneurs, and the “master-developers” they led were but some of the more noteworthy raft of characters also featured in this discourse: “investors”, “speculators”, “owners”, “fly-by-night developers”, “unscrupulous real estate agents”, “property managers”, “Owners Associations”, “end-users”, “tenants”, “greedy landlords” etc. Some of these were formal categories, and others were not. But their urgency extended from the unprecedented speed and scope of new morphological facts inundating the city’s surface. Together these characters

89 My framing of this discourse as “talk of property” borrows from Teresa Caldeira’s notion of “talk of crime” (2000: 19-20). I share her concern for examining how official discourse was articulated in everyday conversations, and the manner in which these banal and reoccurring exchanges of an idea work to reinforce its reality.
indexed the universe of interests and practices animating an emergent property regime that these facts at once derived from and buttressed.

All the while, this thing called “property” remained the conceptual nub in this vocabulary of urban transformation. It was also conflated with “New Dubai”. It was thus clearly an organizing concept in the mass mediation of this transformation, and loaded with connotations of progress, consumer citizenship, and urban entrepreneurialism.

8 Prāperti and its Sīstem

The English term “property”, I soon came to learn, also often featured in the shared vernacular of my middle class Iranian interlocutors; who were, as I noted previously, largely either inhabiting New Dubai or working in the market of its key commodity, freehold real estate. In fact, prāperti (property) was deployed in everyday Persian conversations and used interchangeably with the Persian equivalent of melk. These terms bore local connotations and indexed the world of urban transformation that concerns this dissertation. Here too prāperti was conflated with New Dubai. There was no prāperti—either juridically or materially—in the city center. Nor was there prāperti prior to sovereign intervention in 2002.

What is more, property ownership and booming real estate markets were available in Iran as well. And yet here they were: living in or working on New Dubai (e.g. real estate brokers). I thus rely on the transliterated category of prāperti (property) to highlight its status as a shared category of practice.

Along with this category there often came another: sīstem (system). This was one of the first categories that I noticed to be virtually universal in such conversations. It quickly began reappearing in my field notes as a ubiquitous catch-all phrase in the stories my interlocutors told: sometimes about the way things used to be prior to prāperti and the urbanity associated with it, but usually about their engagements with this urbanity and its regime of prāperti. It is this latter usage that concerns me here as it distilled the domain of prāperti: the reasons, actions, and expectations coinciding with New Dubai. There was a way of doings things here. There were certain kinds of practices associated with prāperti: the ceremonial pomp and circumstance with which mega-projects would be launched, standing in line for hours to be the first to purchase
their units, the speculating of these units in the secondary market, the pursuit of another mortgage from another bank to do so, investing from abroad as a safe haven for one’s savings, and so on. The conceptual glue or shared knowledge stringing all of these phenomena together was a certain sense about this place—*their* place, New Dubai—as having been animated with the audacity required to manifest spatial superlatives extending into the sea and the sky; a place where the kinds of practices and expectations that such audacity called for were possible.

This chapter centers on these notions: *prāperti* and its *sīstem*. I examine the kinds of work that *prāperti* and its *sīstem* did for these middle class Iranians. By this I mean the significance of these categories in shaping their shared sense of place about Dubai, the reasons they gave to explain why it transformed in the manner that it did, but also the reasons they gave for participating in this process. And by the same token, I will also elaborate the kinds of work that this emergent regime of *prāperti* (this *sīstem*) required of them. Here, I will be examining the *kinds of persons* that this regime could potentially make of them in relation to New Dubai.

In what follows, I first elaborate the theoretical framework I rely on. This will involve a brief foray into the anthropology of property. I then focus on the logic of property ownership and its associated hierarchy of personhood that preceded the abrupt introduction of freehold property. Next, I begin to unpack my interlocutors’ shared knowledge about the *sīstem* informing Dubai’s transformation, and their engagement with it. Here I examine a combination of activities and presumptions that constituted this *sīstem*: their own talk of property, the practice of speculation it often featured; their knowledge of a sovereign at once looming over and permeating Dubai’s urban transformation; and the expectations they shared about this transformation. It is in elaborating these expectations that the emergent personhood this property regime called forth will be distilled.

### 9 Relations, Persons, and Things

My reliance on this two-fold focus, on the kinds of work and persons associated with a certain understanding of property, derives from a theoretical engagement with the anthropology of “property” itself.
Property and its relationship with personhood is an old chestnut for anthropologists. But then, the figure of Robinson Crusoe and the classical liberal understandings about human nature that he distils has an even older pedigree. Anthropological studies of property—its cultural and legal conceptions, for example—have often sought to counter this liberal understanding and its basis in “possessive individualism” as C.B. Macpherson puts it (2010; e.g. Goody 1962). Instead, anthropology has understood property as a relation between persons with respect to things (Hirsch 2010: 348).

With the proliferation of new commodity forms (e.g. genetic patents and cultural heritage) and the technologies for their exchange that have proliferated in recent years (e.g. online Peer-to-Peer networks), the anthropology of property has revisited this triad in order to explore how each of its constituents have been problematized as these novel commodity forms chafe against cultural logics, juridical categories and market forces (Hann 1998, Humphrey and Verdery 2004, Benda-Beckmann et al. 2009).

A particularly helpful tack of analysis in this scholarship addresses the “kinds of work” that a property concept or practice of property does in its social setting (Humphrey and Verdery 2004: 5). The mediation of claims upon the objects of property, after all, works to identify claimants as particular kinds of morally recognizable or rights-bearing persons in relation to them, and thus each other (Strathern 1996: 30, Verdery 1995: 127). The socialization of things as property is thus reflected in the objectification of social relations. The work that property does, then, is to create certain kinds of persons. Differentiating the mediation of social relations through things in terms of ‘the work’ it does foregrounds the often-tenuous nature of a property’s intended effects, the terms of its exchange, or the places it was presumably a part of. There is a possibility such work may fail.

In more theoretical terms, then, this chapter takes its cue from these recent explorations of property’s mutations; that is, mutations in the mediation of social relations through emergent regimes of property. Yet it is the mutation of landed property that concerns me. In the recent literature it is sometimes referred to as “‘real’ property”. The apostrophes are intended to suggest that our theoretical understanding of property looks beyond claims to discrete parcels of space, which is often the case in vernacular references to “property”. They draw our attention to the multiple (and multiplying) forms of. However, these apostrophes take on further significance in a
critical study of speculative urbanism. They invite us to reconsider the assumption that proprietary claims to space are necessarily more discrete or less fictional than, for example, proprietary claims to "culture". Recall that this was a context wherein 'real' property was juridically ambiguous, and spatial metrics of its monetary valuation lacked coherency. It is worth asking then: what happens when 'real' property is the subject of speculation? And what kinds of speculation did New Dubai involve? These questions are inextricably linked to the kind of person that I will argue participation in New Dubai required.

But to appreciate the new, and the possibilities it threw up, it is necessary to understand the old.

10 “The way we used to do it”: Property and Belonging in Ethnocracy

I cited the correct villa number to the security personnel at the gates. I drove through. Winding suburban roads flanked by palm trees. I arrived. A Beige stucco finish. Large windows. Branches thick with purple bougainvillea flowers hanging over short walls. A deep blue BMW parked by the curb, near the entrance, glistening in the afternoon sunlight. A long garden hose strewn about in the driveway. A light stream of water following the zigzag contours of the interlock sidewalk. The sound of a broom scratching against a hard surface from behind the wall. The humidity.

This was the villa that I arrived at one afternoon to meet an Iranian couple that Mani had recently put me in touch with. I had let him know of my desire to engage with long-time Iranian residents of Dubai. Sohrab and Shabnam fit the description.

This couple used to be Mani’s landlords a few years ago. He was renting a small one-bedroom apartment from them. It was located in another nearby master-planned development called The Greens: a series of mid-rise apartment towers advertised (at the time of this writing) as a “residential community of the professionals” (Emaar.com).

90 For a good critique of this assumption about private Demian 2004: 64)
“You’ll learn a lot from these types”, Mani explained. He knew that a major focus of my research pertained to Dubai’s (freehold) property market. Referring to this couple in particular, he said: “they were pretty active in those real estate games (uses the English term)” (tu un bāzi-hā-ye rīyel-esteyt kheli faʿāl budan). As it turned out, he was right.

When I began to elaborate the nature of my research to Sohrab and Shabnam, they took immediate interest and seemed genuinely eager to share their thoughts and experiences. Most of these thoughts and experiences, however, turned out to be those of Shabnam’s as Sohrab repeatedly broke away from the conversation to answer an incessant stream of incoming calls on his cell phone. There seemed to have been some kind of incident at the worksite; he managed a small construction company. While Sohrab was shouting directions in Urdu in the other room, Shabnam and I began to discuss Dubai’s recent growth. At some point in the conversation, she said something that piqued my interest: “We’re not very common anymore (mā-hā digeh kam shodīm)”. She was clearly generalizing, but it was not clear to me who the subject of this generalization was. I asked: “Do you mean Iranians?”

Shabnam: No (says with a smile). I mean Dubai has changed a lot since we came. The way we used to do it, before freehold (uses English term) started, was different. I’m not sure exactly how freehold works...anybody can just walk into a sales center, write a cheque, they give you a prāperti (property), and you walk out. We used to buy land (zamin) or a villa, and then develop it. We developed the property and either sold it or rented it.”

Behzad: (interrupting her) “Before freehold? But at that time...

Shabnam: (interrupting me) “Our friend Mr. Abdullah—you can ask Mani to introduce you, he knows him—he’s local (uses English term). He used to help us. The place we had in Mirdif is one of these.⁹¹

Behzad: How did he help you?

Shabnam: We’ve known him for a long time. He used to be Sohrab’s sponsor (uses English term)...his father is also a good man, I designed his home. He was one of our first customers. He’s also helped us a lot. In those days, only locals had the right to buy property (faqat lokāl-hā haq-e kharīd melk-o dāshtan). We would pay him [the cost of the property] and he would register it under his name...we never had any

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⁹¹ Mirdif is an upscale suburb of Dubai. It is located on the eastern side of the Creek, and is not popularly associated with the urbanism New Dubai. It has been a major destination in the outward movement of Emirati families from neighbourhoods in the city.
problems. We were always a little nervous. One time, Sohrab accompanied him [Mr. Abdullah?] to the Land Department. They made him sign something saying he had no interest in the property at all. What we were doing was illegal...but we had known him since first coming here in [the late 1980s].

**Behzad:** “What did you do with the place in Mirdif?

**Shabnam:** We sold it a few years ago.

**Behzad:** Did you also *develop* (I use the English term) it?

**Shabnam:** Yes, we were renting it. But when the prices went up, we decided to sell it.

**Behzad:** Did Mr. Abdullah get a share of the sale? I imagine you needed his help again, with signing and...

**Shabnam:** (momentarily breaking from the conversation to tell Sohrab that she thought the gardener’s work was done) Well yes. He was always very courteous with us, he never...[illegible]. We paid his share...he was helping us. But these days, people don’t do this as much (*in ruz-hā mardom kamtar az īn kār-hā mikonan*). Now you only do this when you’re interested in places like *Jumeriah* and *Mirdif* (districts outside the legally “designated areas” where freehold was available). When freehold (uses English term) came we just bought the places ourselves, everyone did. It was much easier.

**Behzad:** Can I ask why you bought property (*melk*)?

**Shabnam:** “Why not?! A person lives here for so many years [so] eventually they get fed-up of paying rent. That money we used to pay to our landlord is now paying for this place: a house that we own...and back then they were giving visas as well.”

**Behzad:** Did you get a visa?

**Shabnam:** No, we didn’t need it. We already had residency. But it was important for many.

About then, Sohrab joined us again. I complimented them on their garden. They were flattered, and began to describe some of their own modifications to their property. In a few moments, we were all standing in the backyard and admiring the colourful patterns of “tumble-dry” marble tiles they had installed on the ground. “If you find us on Google Earth, you can see it...all the garden needs now is more flowers”, said Sohrab.

92 Shabnam provided a specific year, but I have chosen to generalize the period so as to protect their identities.
By the time we returned inside, the conversation had turned to the real estate boom, again. Having heard of their ventures in these “games”, as Mani put it, I had inquired about their thoughts on it all. As I usually did, I asked what started the boom. Sohrab immediately noted the offering of residency visas. “A lot of people came from Iran just to invest in properties and return,” he said. They also cited Dubai’s exceptional status in the region. This was a much-rehearsed point in my conversations with virtually all of my middle class interlocutors (Iranian or otherwise). Once again, I was told of the “social freedoms” and “security” available here. “If the things go awry in their society, they pick up and can come here,” said Shabnam.

They eventually went on to give a sense of the frenzy about it all. Shabnam asked me if I’ve visited the Emaar Business Park. “It’s beside The Greens,” she said, “you should go there. People were lining up when a new project was announced. They would send their drivers and servants to reserve a spot...people were even selling their spots!” She explained that they had invested in almost a dozen or so properties, usually “off-plan”, and either rented them or redeveloped and put up for sale. I noted the regulatory dearth at the time, and asked if she ever thought that this was a problem. “In those days that was the sīstem here (sīstem-e īnjah hamūn bud); people did not really care because they were making money.” Sohrab’s cell phone eventually rang again, but not before he had a chance to vent a little: “I don’t even know what ‘freehold’ means”, he said. He explained it was clear that the authorities were serious about it; that it was not some kind of hoax. He claimed that the scale and quality of projects undertaken confirmed this. He also suggested that speculation was deliberately encouraged, noting that penalties for breaking a mortgage were very low and often actually factored into the cost of transactions. This was something that I had heard time and again from real estate agents. Shabnam also referred to the incessant marketing of loans and mortgages during the boom: “I don’t know where they would get our numbers, but even banks that I don’t have accounts with would regularly call to let me know that I can get loans from them.”

Their point in all of this was to emphasize that their Dubai, New Dubai, was animated by an ethos of growth and prosperity, and that there was a certain way about things prior to the crisis, a way of getting things done; a sīstem.

Before I explore this sīstem, it is worth first exploring the practice of property that Shabnam explains to have been eclipsed with the introduction of freehold: the arrangement of proxy
ownership through a citizen friend. This practice underscored the social logic according to which a normative hierarchy of belonging was mediated. It trains attention on the spatial practices articulating this hierarchy. Briefly taking stock of this hierarchy and its spatialization, I suggest, also gives insight into the departure represented by the regime of freehold property.

As I noted at the outset of this chapter, insofar as property relations involve a shared understanding about what kinds of things are available for various claims to be made upon them, they necessarily involve a (moral) hierarchy of persons. An important part of the ‘work’ that property has historically done in Dubai is the conflation of this hierarchy of persons in relation to rights of ownership and dispensation of space (owner/landlord, renter), with a hierarchy of persons in relation to the national polity (citizen/non-citizen, lokāl / expat). The practice of proxy ownership—“the way we used to do it” as Shabnam explains—was occurring prior to the sovereign intervention that extended the right of property ownership to non-citizens. That is, prior to prāperti. Until then, this right was the exclusive domain of the citizenry and ownership of property was generally imagined to be synonymous with being of the national polity, while renting was synonymous with merely being in it.

This conflation of a hierarchy of spatial claims (and its attendant categories of persons) with a hierarchy of belonging is hardly unique to the Gulf. Be it longstanding narratives of the ‘American Dream’ or more recent neoliberal housing policies in the UK, home ownership has often been posited in distinctly moral terms by conflating it with self-reliance, upward mobility and civic membership (Jefferson 2013: 97-99, Vale 2007, Flint 2003). Conversely, the practice of rent has been represented as a sign of transitional social status. The renter has been imagined to be less invested in their social milieu and more disposed toward mobility (Perin 1977: 54-55).  

In these formally liberal contexts, however, this conflation does not necessarily extend to distinctions of national belonging. After all, in these contexts national origin and race have been decoupled from official citizenship. This is emphatically not the case in the UAE where social

93 The scholarship on homeownership is replete with analysis of this morally charged distinction between homeownership and renting, along with the discourses and regulatory regimes that it underpins it. For further the analysis of the UK, for example, see Gurney 1999 and Smith 2008.
regulation continues to follow an explicitly ethnocratic logic. Elaborating on the policies and cultural logics according to which social difference is mediated in Arab societies of the Persian Gulf, Paul Dresch notes that the granting of land to citizens and their exclusive right of ownership have complemented the sponsorship system (kafala) by further privileging citizens (2006: 202). As he puts it, “ideas of physical space, of dependence, and morality intersect” here such that distinctions between the members of the nation and a much larger presence of foreigners also occupying it were mediated through relations of rent (2006: 210).

In an ethnocratic setting where ownership of property was historically restricted to a small population of citizens, the mediation of social hierarchy and belonging was thus especially refracted through relations of rent. There is a normative “logic of rent” permeating these Gulf societies according to which the practice of conscripting tenants distinguishes the citizen-landlord as a member of the national community for arbitrating the presence of outsiders. Assuming the person of landlord, then, is one of the structurally supported practices by means of which citizenship in the Gulf often functions as “a position of authority and command over” non-citizens (Gardner 2010: 80). Dresch notes, for example: “as a rule...citizens do not rent from citizens” (2006: 210). The extent to which it this practice of rent prevails in Emirati society in Dubai is also revealing. In a survey conducted by the Dubai municipality in 1998, about 41% of the incomes of Emirati households in Dubai were derived from rent and other property-based transactions (Dubai Statistics Center N.d.: 286).94

I suggest that Shabnam and Sohrab’s pursuit of proxy ownership for the purpose of generating rental income should not be viewed in terms of economic motivations alone. Rather it highlights the force with which this hierarchy of property relations was conflated with one of belonging, and their desire to augment their social status within this hierarchy. This may seem counterintuitive. Such an arrangement, after all, represents a clear breach of the legal conventions intended to render citizens “privileged landowners” (Dresch 2006: 202). As such it

94 Dresch cites the same survey, but mistakes this particular statistic as 48% (2006: 209), which is actually the figure representing the percentage of annual income derived from salaries and compensation. My interviews with employees in Dubai’s Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA) are worth noting. When asked to comment on how widespread this practice was, they explained it to be a major source of revenue for citizens. One of my interviewees even suggested that more than 70% of Emirati households engage in the practice (Interview with RERA official, October 21, 2010).
is a transgression: officials at the Land Department even called in Sohrab to obtain an official statement declaring his lack of interest in the property. But such an arrangement does not contradict the cultural logic according to which relations of property are conflated with a hierarchy of belonging. Rather, it suggests that this conflation was a norm. Residents of long-standing in this society were well acquainted with this norm. I contend that it is precisely when non-citizens, legally limited to tenancy, informally ascend this hierarchy of belonging to inhabit the persona of landlord that its cultural significance is confirmed. Their efforts, then, were an example of “the changing work that people want property to do for them with respect to other people” (Rose 2004: 275). By attending to the practical task of dispensing these properties as tenements for other foreigners, they were very much partaking of this culturally mediated moral authority over them. As the logic of belonging in property relations—i.e. the hierarchy of spatial claims—is agonistic here, the ‘work’ of this arrangement was to transpose their structurally mandated transience onto the person of their tenant.

To be sure, I cannot say that I encountered many such arrangements during my fieldwork. In fact, I only confirmed five. It is revealing, nevertheless, that in every instance my interlocutors cited the intimacy of their relationship with their citizen friend, who was usually their sponsor as well. As another interlocutor who was also engaged in this practice of proxy ownership stressed to me: “it’s out of trust that we did this” (az ru e’temad in kar ro kardim). This was his answer to my inquiry about the legality of the practice and the risk of complications arising with RERA. Taking on the practical work of being a landlord and benefiting from rental revenues, while skirting the law, was thus understood to hinge on the strength of personal relations. Such clientelist mediation of property, then, followed the logic of the gift: at once a confirmation of intimacy and an assertion of distinction (citizen giver / non-citizen recipient), and an opportunity for further distinction still (non-citizen giver / non-citizen recipient). As Melissa Demian so succinctly puts it: “property connects, then, even as it divides” (2004: 62).

The introduction of freehold property ownership for non-citizens, however, brought with it a spectacular urbanity in which their status—as middle class foreigners capable of affording this emergent property—was no longer subject to the immediate mediation of citizens. It was an

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95 Italics added.
urbanity they imagined to be informed by a certain order of things, and allowing for certain expectations about its future. I now examine the imagining of this new sīstem.

11 The sīstem of New Dubai

11.1 Prāperti Talk, and the Practice of Speculation

Some weeks later, I met with Sohrab again. I had sensed his enthusiasm about my inquiries, and hoped that he felt rather embarrassed for not sufficiently attending to me, as his guest, the last time we met. My hopes proved right.

It was early in the evening, and he was accompanied by a friend, Saeed. We were sitting in a patio somewhere in The Walk, colloquially referred to as JBR (Jumeirah Beach Residence). This was a newly developed strip of restaurants, coffee shops and retail stores close to the shore and buttressed by a string of tall, beige, residential condominiums. Near the beach, and featuring a wide boulevard with the occasional spatter of cobblestones, it was a regular draw for tourists and middle class residents.

I once again inquired about why the crisis had occurred, and taken the proportions that it had. Once again, our conversation turned to the heyday of the boom, but also to the nature of Dubai and Emirati society more generally.

Saeed: This place wasn’t ready for all of this. It didn’t have the laws and experience to make sure that this [crisis] wouldn’t befall it. Don’t just look at these buildings (gesturing to our surrounding with a nod of his head). This place is still a Third World Country. Its culture is still traditional...their children are walking around with BlackBerry’s, but when you visit their homes you’ll see how little their culture has changed...They understand business, they’re people of business (tājer-an). They created a safe place to invest money, a pāigāh (base). They asked: ‘what do people in the region lack?’ So they said: ‘come here, bring your money, and we’ll give you residency (uses English term).’ The people in this region have no confidence in their societies (ādam-ā-ye īn mantageh be mamlekat-ā-shun e temād nadāran). And that’s why people came here: because they assumed that their earnings would be safe. There were a lot of opportunities (emkānāt). It was also easy to profit...Iranians were very active here. It was not a joke. It was Iranian money that made this place. Some
guy in Iran would pour money into a prāpertī (property) here, or in Ajman\textsuperscript{96}, so that he can tell his family ‘I also have a place in Dubai’.”

**Sohrab:** People would even come for property tours (aslan mardom brāye tur prāpertī mūmānād). The guy wouldn’t care about the details [of the property]. He just came to invest in something off-plan (uses English term). And there was so much scamming (va yek kolā bardārī-hai bud), among Iranians especially! There were agencies in Iran that misrepresented the visas. They said it was permanent residency (eghāmat-e dā’em). Ask Mani. So many came here thinking that you can just buy [permanent] residency this way. They were even advertising this way on Iranian satellite TV.\textsuperscript{97}

Iranians have indeed been among the most active nationalities in Dubai’s nascent freehold real estate market. This was the stuff of common knowledge by the time of my arrival, and had even garnered its fair share of attention in the usually exaggerated portrayals of this market. By one account Iranians represented 10-30\% of purchases in new developments by 2005 (Fattah 2005), while another estimated that they represented 400,000 purchases (Mahoney 2008).\textsuperscript{98} Official figures of Iranian activity during the boom have been harder to obtain, but my interviews with professionals in the real estate and finance industries confirm a notable Iranian contribution to this market. A financial consultant working at Amlak—a major corporate financier of freehold mortgages—claimed that Iranians represented about 30\% of this company’s mortgage sales.\textsuperscript{99} More recent data confirms the continuity of this trend even during the downturn, and the boom that is currently underway. Iranians were officially ranked fourth in terms of the total value of property transactions in 2009 which was the annus horribilis of Dubai’s freehold real estate market (Reidin 2010, cited in Futurebrand 2010), and also ranked fourth in 2012 when this market was undergoing a rapid expansion, again.

\textsuperscript{96} Ajman is another Emirate of the UAE. It is located to the north of Dubai.

\textsuperscript{97} In the universe of Iranian media, the majority of channels only available via satellite receivers are foreign based and often air diaspora-generated content unavailable within Iran for running counter to state-prescribed moral codes. Despite their illegal status and repeated campaigns to round-up satellite receivers, many of these channels command substantial viewership. In fact, the term “satellite” (māvāreh) in everyday language in a euphemism for ‘foreign TV’ (Persian or otherwise).

\textsuperscript{98} This figure of 400,000 is especially vague as it was also often cited in popular estimations of the Iranian population in Dubai as a whole.

\textsuperscript{99} In fact, so significant was this demand that she was soon responsible for receiving only Iranian customers (Interview with AMLAK employee, April 10, 2010).
As was common during conversations about Dubai’s transformation, it inevitably turned to the practices in the real estate industry that were widely regarded as indicative of the boom. And as was equally common, the frenzied scenes and transactions of property speculation were highlighted. Like so many of my other interlocutors, Saeed and Sohrab were also acutely aware that the very circumstances which had quickly fostered such intensity in Dubai’s burgeoning freehold real estate market—the governmental desire to see people invest their money here, the dearth of laws, the easy availability of credit, and “opportunities” for investment—also fostered the serious risk of being cheated. Deploiring the prevalence of chicanery during the boom was an oft-cited feature in talk of prāperti. As Saeed explained:

Yeah, it was a wolves’-sīstem (sīstem-e gorgī bud). As I said, there was no control balance because it happened so fast. In those days, no one asked you who you were, or where your money came from…very often people just wanted to sell [the property]…they lined up to buy in order to quickly sell again.

Such complaints were borne of having participated in this sīstem. Saeed and Sohrab had each speculated in the freehold real estate market. Saeed had once bought such property—also standing in line on the day of its launch—in order to resell it on the secondary real estate market. He made a substantial profit. Sohrab, on the other hand, had done so repeatedly and had even sometimes renovated these properties in order to enhance to their resale value. And it was a personal episode of such speculation that he volunteered which I found especially compelling in demonstrating the intensity and temporality of such speculation:

(Speaking with a smile) “Once when I was selling a property, I entered the room and saw that there were two other buyers waiting”. (They were waiting to buy his property, in turn, from the buyer he had arrived to meet) “For a moment I thought ‘well why shouldn’t I just sell it to the last guy!’…The same document (probably referring to a properties SPA or Sales and Purchase Agreement) was exchanged several times in the same sitting.
This scene succinctly captures not only the general expectation that these properties-as-assets would accrue in value in a relatively short period of time, but the actual creation of this anticipated value in the present.\textsuperscript{100} Here was the christening of speculative capital.

The short-term temporality of such speculation was a function of the financial means with which such speculation was practiced.\textsuperscript{101} It was usually through easily available technologies of credit (mortgages, personal loans and sometimes even credit cards) that an initial down payment—often 5%-10% of the total property value—was deposited to secure the SPA (Sales and Purchase Agreement). Coupled with a (productive) absence of administrative technologies designed to penalize short-term reselling, this allowed buyers to sell such properties before their next instalments to developers were due. If my interlocutors were so adamant that, as one real estate agent put it, “everybody began dabbling in the market”, it was because this practice of property did not require that purchasers have the actual financial capacity to afford the total value of their purchases. Rather, when these rights to freehold properties were flipped, profits were realized on their down payments alone.\textsuperscript{102}

The subject of speculation, then, was a constant in recollections of the boom. Mani’s experience, for example, of having stood in line in the early hours of the morning to buy and then sell the rights to “off-plan” property was by no means exceptional. It was a scene that most of my interlocutors were aware of, one of many such scenes that exemplified the state of speculation prevailing during the boom. Talk of speculation was thus a recurring narrative genre according to which my interlocutors made sense of this \textit{sīstem}. Of course, knowledge of rampant speculation was hardly news. My point here is that this knowledge of rampant speculative activity and its mode of practice informed a broader understanding or shared knowledge about what was afoot in Dubai in those years. Talk of speculation was always wrapped up with allusions or explicit references to yet other aspects of this \textit{sīstem} that I will elaborate in the sections that follow.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{100} Among the thirty or so real estate agents whom I interviewed, and the roughly dozen individuals who had engaged in such speculation, not a single one had done so with the intention to retain these properties for an extended period of time.
\textsuperscript{101} Such speculation was especially focused on so-called “off-plan” properties, or properties that were available for purchase prior to their construction.
\textsuperscript{102} For example, if this was 5% of the original value of the property, then raising the total resale value by the same amount would realize a profit of 100%.
was always accompanied by reasons; reasons, for example, about the motivation for investing in property (e.g. a safe haven for one’s savings) and the peculiarities about this place that enabled it (e.g. a dearth of regulations). I suggest that it was these mutually implicating reasons that constituted this sīstem as a larger configuration of shared knowledge about the urban transformation that they had experienced and participated in.

It is with the aim of further examining this sīstem that I now focus on my interlocutors’ knowledge of an exceptional power operating in it. I contend that this shared sense of place about Dubai—its transformation, and the nature of this new kind of property it threw up—were informed by their knowledge of an actually existing sovereign somehow animating this process and rendering New Dubai a deliberate project. Drawing from another conversation later in the year between Sohrab and me, I examine this shared knowledge of the sovereign, and the logic of mediation that he represented.

11.2 The Sheikh in the Sīstem

It was at the end of the day and we were sitting in his back yard. Sohrab wanted to know of my progress. No sooner had we sat down than he half-jokingly asked, with a smile: “what do you do exactly?” I tried my best at answering him seriously, but the smile never left his face; leaving me to wonder why for the remainder of the evening.

In bringing him up to speed with some of my findings, I began by noting how so many of my interlocutors had experienced a change in their fortunes. The struggle to stay afloat was the common theme, I explained. Sohrab was hardly surprised. “Well of course”, he said. He then began to explain some of his own struggles. What most vexed him, were recent regulations introduced since the collapse. I could hear the emotion in his voice.

Sohrab: Last year they passed a law that said that if I default (uses English term) then the developer (uses English term) can retain all of my down payment. But in my contract (uses English term) it had said that if this happened I would lose only 15% of it. So imagine that! So what’s the point of a contract? This hurt a lot of people. So you see, the law is like this here: it’s like a suit, you can tailor it to fit your needs...That’s what happens when a place suddenly grows. Our society (i.e. Iran) with all of its history it still looks this. They (a vague reference to Emiratis) thought that they didn’t need this history (înhā jekr kardan ke ehtīyājī nadāshtan be īn

113
tārīkh)...Sure, we made a lot of money in a short period of time. After all, there were a lot of opportunities (belakhareh emkānāt kheyālī zīyād bud). But we also lost a lot of money. Our gains were kāzeb (false)...a lot of people became farārī for this reason.” (farārī is Persian for “runaway”. It was used as the Persian colloquial equivalent to the official category of “skips” in reference to the same phenomenon: the undeclared departure of foreign residents facing bankruptcy and its criminal consequences).

Behzad: I’m sorry, I didn’t understand. They became farārī because their gains were kāzeb?

Sohrab: Look, people didn’t expect these things to happen. Even if they thought that this growth would eventually subside, nobody thought this place would suddenly crash this way (kasī fekr nemī-kard ke īnjā yehowī intorī suqut bokone). And at the end of the day this place isn’t Canada (īnjā belakhareh kānāda nist ke!). Over there, it doesn’t matter whether you’re rich or an immigrant: the law is the same for all of you. But here if you’re in debt, and someone complains [against you], and you don’t have vāseteh then you’re stuck (gīroftadī).

I pressed him on this point. The notion of vāseteh was already something I had been paying more attention to in my research. A Persian word of Arabic origin, it was a commonly used category of practice among Iranians in Dubai and meant ‘middle-man’ or ‘mediator’. In its colloquial usage it was often a euphemism for simply having connections. In this respect it was synonymous with the original Arabic term of wāsta. This is a ubiquitous category in Arab societies of the Persian Gulf. It is generally understood as the social relations by means of which one’s interests are advanced or secured.103

Sohrab explained its value in terms of ordinary life: its uncertainties and the occasional fixes they required (applications for a job or entry into a school, traffic fines, terms of sale etc.). I raised the citizen-friend through which he’d been able to informally rent out properties as an example. “Yeah, exactly!” he blurted out. Without any coaxing on my part, this line of inquiry soon launched into a more focused discussion of the sīstem, with Sohrab identifying vāseteh as a key ingredient. It was during this discussion that he stressed Dubai’s growth to have occurred in the extraordinary manner that it had because the sheikh ultimately wanted it to be so.

103 Gardner has recently noted that while it is “a versatile notion with no immediate parallel in English”, it does coincide with the Bourdieusian notion of social capital (2010: 154). To have vāseteh, after all, involves the activation of favors with a third party relation toward some end or another.
It’s like this here: there is a ruler, and eventually all of this is connected to this person (ینیح الممتد: یه هکم دار، یا همچنین بارمیارد به این ادام). This building, this truck (starts pointing to our surroundings)...they’re all owned by one person in some way...The culture here is sheikh-i (kingly).

This notion that the order of things in Dubai inevitably hinged on the figure of the sheikh was something that I repeatedly encountered throughout my fieldwork. Sohrab’s description distilled this imagined power of the sovereign and its linkage, however indirectly, to such mundane objects as “this truck”. I cannot say that my interlocutors shared a coherent understanding about the political functions of this actually existing sovereign or the practical limitations of his power. Highly visible though this dramatis persona of state was, his power was not transparent.

Nevertheless, as surely as the scene of this sheikh peering over replicas of mega-projects was by then a paradigmatic image of Dubai’s transformation, so too did virtually all of my interlocutors attribute to him an exceptional capacity for rendering these replicas into reality. Indeed, there is something to be said about the fact that this figure was referenced that evening in the course of talking about vāseteh. There was a correlation between these notions; a rhyme in their meanings such that one was the ultimate incarnation of the other.

I contend that this logic of mediation and the knowledge of governmental decision-making as culminating in the figure of a sovereign informed my interlocutors’ expectations of this sistem. More specifically, it informed their understanding of New Dubai itself as representing a deliberate project wherein the right of property ownership had been extended to them as non-citizens. The introduction of this right (in 2002) by way of direct decree on the part of Dubai’s sovereign was common knowledge. It was regularly cited in interviews especially. The properties of New Dubai and their right to inhabit or participate in their exchange as owners or investors with a claim to ownership, thus originated in this figure and his intentions. In this respect, there is something of a continuity between the practice of proxy ownership and this new freehold property regime worth exploring.

Such an observation may seem odd, at least according to recent scholarship in financially-driven urbanization. The informal dispensation of property for rent by means of an individual citizen-proxy, is hardly comparable with the sheer volume of transactions and capital circulating in an emergent market where freehold properties comprised multi-billion dollar “mega-projects” and were legitimately available for direct purchase. Indeed, the sistem that these middle class Iranians
took pains to describe—and often took for granted as existing within New Dubai—was marked by transactions in scale and intensity that far outstripped the property regime preceding it. Whereas Shabnam’s description of proxy ownership recalled the inter-personal intimacy of a non-citizen couple with a citizen-friend—i.e. the activation of vāseteh—the mode of property transactions described to me that evening at JBR spoke to the emergence of structural “disintermediation” (Hackworth 2007: 30). The incessant telemarketing of mortgage loans which Shabnam noted to have occurred during the boom, and Saeed’s observation that back then “no one asked you who you were, or where your money came from” both speak to the lack of administrative mediation of individual financial circumstances and one’s capacity to take on debt.

And yet, in each of these property regimes trust or faith in another actor seems to have been key. As I noted previously, freehold properties were also technically informal until mid-2006 when they were finally given legal definition. Until then, they were subject to legal ambiguity. Strictly speaking, then, there were actually no freehold property owners until June of 2006! This too was public knowledge. Shabnam’s quip about being unsure as to “what freehold is” was not unusual. Many of my interlocutors—be they real estate brokers, speculators or owner-occupiers—expressed a similar uncertainty about the legality of their claim of ownership, especially as ownership had been unequivocally disassociated from residency some years ago. This uncertainty, however, was clearly not debilitating. In much the same way that institutional investors and experts relied on faith in the sovereign’s exceptional powers when trying to understand Dubai’s emergent property market, the knowledge about Dubai that these middle class Iranian interlocutors shared was also faith-based (de Goede 2005: xxvi, 150-1; Miyazaki 2007: 405).

\[104\] I noted in the introduction, this refers to the conflation of local real estate and global capital markets such that mortgage lending is conducted with a view to repackage its anticipated revenues as the basis of yet new financial products, and to sell these to internationally (Aalbers 2009: 285, Gotham 2009: 360).

\[105\] The onset of the crisis saw repeated calls from the business community to revisit this issue and officially attach residency rights to property ownership. In 2010 this was finally introduced. However, the eligibility criteria were so restrictive that they limited such residency to the wealthiest segments of the real estate market.
Though the sovereign decree was not immediately codified into law, it did nevertheless carry the force of law (Agamben 2005: 38). Such property was presumed to be animated by the authority and intentions of its *sheikh-i* (kingly) progenitor; it bore his illocutionary imprint so to speak. These middle class Iranians, then, acknowledged the juridical indeterminacy of freehold property but participated in its emergent market with the knowledge that it represented a legitimate right nevertheless. It is in this sense that the “trust” to which Sohrab referred when explaining their arrangement with Mr. Abdullah (their Emirati friend) resonated here as well. Simply put, this thing called “freehold” was presumed be a reliable right of ownership despite, for example, not immediately possessing title deeds to this effect.

The notion of an actually existing sovereign, then, did certain kinds of work. It rendered Dubai’s recent transformation a singular project: a deliberate endeavour to create a certain kind of place. A visible master-planner, rather than an invisible hand, conferred a coherency about urban transformation despite the bombastic architecture, disruptive construction, property market frenzy, etc. This figure of exceptional authority grounded New Dubai’s *sīstem*, so to speak. He also conferred legitimacy in the face of legal ambiguity: directly sanctioning the extension of property ownership to non-citizens. Here was a project, then, available for them to claim a stake in and expect things from.

I now further examine the contents of these expectations. This will involve further elaborating the sense of place about New Dubai shared by these middle class Iranians (even into the crisis). More specifically, I outline how this place-making project was understood to be oriented towards a certain future where these expectations would be confirmed, how these expectations about such a future were synonymous with a certain kind of person, and how both the future of this project and the persons attached to it were implicated by the emergent category of freehold property.

### 12 Expectations of the Spectacular City

Unpacking the contents of these expectations about New Dubai requires a closer examination of the topography of this place; that is, its edifice and the things it was imagined to be claiming. Middle class Iranian residents of New Dubai often described its built environment as a sign of it being “a modern place”—this despite their casual belittling of Emirati culture—and that this
modernity was imagined to represent a displaced Iranian modernity. New Dubai, in other words, was the kind of place—a modern place—that Iran would have been had its progress not been interrupted (Sarmadi 2013).

But, as my conversations with Sohrab and Saeed attest, they were also ambivalent about it. After all, it was 2010. And like most residents of Dubai, they had serious doubts about its economy and especially its real estate market for having witnessed it gradually unravel over the previous year. While Saeed cautioned me not to be deceived by Dubai’s built environment for it was “still a Third World country” despite it, Sohrab claimed that Dubai’s sudden growth actually lacked historical basis. This was an oft-repeated theme in my conversations with most Iranians in Dubai that year (and something that I will return to in a later chapter). The notion of kāzeb, meaning false or illusory, was something I regularly encountered in their descriptions of Dubai’s predicament at that time.

Scepticism about the viability of continued life in Dubai was nothing unusual. I had encountered it during my preliminary fieldwork, just prior to the collapse, in the summer of 2008. I can also vividly recall the complaints of my parents and other family members during weekly get-togethers when I was a teenager in Dubai in late 1990s. My field notes and recollections include anxieties about visa renewals, retirement, employment contracts, the litany of everyday governmental fees, and so on. Such scepticism, however, did not foreclose expectations of this place to function as a site of progress and prosperity, offering “opportunities” and “freedoms” unavailable in Iran. Nor did those concerns about the dangers of rapid development that I recorded in 2008. But with the onset of this crisis, a particular understanding of Dubai itself was problematized.

Such doubts as expressed by Saeed and Sohrab, and the repeated recourse to this notion of its urban edifice as somehow misrepresenting its social or economic reality, are insightful. They speak of the expectations associated with this edifice. Though dashed at the time, these expectations were shared by so many of these middle class Iranians as they engaged New Dubai by either participating in the speculative economy for its freehold properties, or as owner-
occupiers of these properties. These expectations, I contend, necessarily elucidate the manner of person implicated by this emergent category of property that I’m looking to examine. To have engaged with New Dubai on the basis of faith in an official urban project to construct a place of prosperity where, for example, displaced Iranian modernity could accrue, was to be oriented toward the future itself in speculative terms. In this sense, these middle class interlocutors were *speculating persons* in relation to the spectacular city that seemed poised to continue expanding its horizons. If I seize on this notion that New Dubai’s urban edifice could not be trusted—that it did not mean what it used to say—it is because I want to emphasize that this speculative subject was necessarily tied to knowledge of this edifice, and that spectacular architecture or “hyperbuilding” was very much a mode of address inviting these middle class Iranians to engage with New Dubai as such a person. ‘Expect a certain kind of future’, it said. One that was set apart from that available in either Iran, or even the city-centre; an unprecedented future for a place apart.

Speculating on this future, then, involved a particular way of being in the city. This was reducible to the conventional Debordian understanding of spectacle as a form of mediation that works to alienate or disorient individuals from understanding their actual relations to people and things. The trope of bewilderment neither coincides with explicit acknowledgements of trusting a magical state, nor references to actually existing mega-projects as reason enough to continue trusting. When elaborating her notion of “hyperbuilding”, Ong explains that it is intended to encourage an “anticipatory logic” whereby these cities are legitimized as sites of ongoing accumulation. Spectacular urbanism, as she puts it, aims to “leverage city futures” (2011: 207). That is, it aims to produce *a certain kind of place* in anticipation of *a certain kind of future*.

And indeed, my ethnographic data from before the crisis and the lament about the crisis that I encountered during my main fieldwork suggest that such expectations were widely shared among these middle class Iranians. The emergent category of freehold property was a repository for these expectations insofar as it was synonymous with the spectacular edifice of New Dubai.

To begin with, the practice of speculation clearly relied upon this anticipatory logic. Anticipation, after all, is immanent to the act of investing monies in a property commodity with

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106 As I noted in the introduction, I am not pursuing this line of analysis in strictly epochal terms.
the intention of later exchanging it for a profit. The practice of speculating in freehold property as a fungible unit of this spectacular urbanism was always informed by expectations about the future of New Dubai as continuing to be a safe haven or site of continued growth and accumulation. And insofar as speculation was imagined by my interlocutors to have been a key feature of the boom as a particular epoch—reflected in talk of speculation—it was conflated with the place-making project of New Dubai itself. Put simply, a place deliberately pursuing rapid and spectacular transformation was itself imagined to be a speculative endeavour. That this project engendered rampant property speculation and was itself a speculative enterprise was especially clear in my interlocutors’ repeated references to the flurry of real estate ads in Persian-language satellite channels. I suggest that this attested to the conflation of spectacle and speculation in their sense of place about New Dubai. As my conversations with Saeed and Sohrab suggest, these middle class Iranians were acutely aware that the spectacular nature of this new urban form was being marketed to draw yet other Iranians outside of Dubai to eventually invest in its freehold properties or move here. Their understanding about the significance of the spectacular aesthetic that freehold properties often assumed, was thus not some affective experience of bewilderment upon encountering them but the reflexive knowledge that these properties were in demand by indefinite others elsewhere. This demand, more specifically, was thought to hinge on the expectation of indefinitely lasting security and/or opportunities for accumulating wealth. Oft-cited examples about other Iranians buying freehold property without even inspecting them, for example, were intended to underscore the force with which prāpeti (property) was pursued. A force imagined as all the more impressive by virtue of its indefinite reach outside of Dubai.

In this sense, their knowledge of a larger Iranian public poised to pursue a future in Dubai—a future either for their monies, themselves, or their families—neatly coincided with the official narrative about Dubai that I noted previously. Namely, the oft-repeated mantra that its transformation was not undertaken with regard for present demographics or demand, but the presumptuous notion of “build it and they will come”; in effect, deferring the use-value of this urban form toward an anticipated future.

Then there was the expectation that wealth in Dubai was thought to be secure, and its conflation with freehold property ownership. Saeed’s observation about people in the region not trusting their societies and seeking a pāīgāh (base) for their savings and wealth was universally cited. This notion of pāīgāh necessarily implied an expectation of continued stability; complementing
the expectation of ongoing opportunities for further accumulation of wealth insofar as these are cumulative. After all, the equally oft-repeated complaint about the lack of long-term residency and anxiety about renewing residency visas every few years was informed by the expectation that there is a stable future to be had here. However, for those middle class residents who pursued freehold property ownership—such as Shabnam and Sohrab—the anticipatory logic of pāīgāh was not limited to expectations of continued stability. It is worth recalling that many of them did so prior to the legal formalization of these properties. In doing so, they were expecting that this extra-legality would eventually be resolved in their favour as their claim to this novel category of property was presumed to be in alignment with the interests of the sovereign. Their consumption of these properties, then, anticipated that their claims would be legally secured. The future was anticipated as a “horizon of successful self-correction” (Povinelli 2001: 328). This is to say that the legitimacy of their claims to property, a metonym of belonging to Dubai, would be clarified and secured.\textsuperscript{107} In a sense, then, the future was imagined as a site where speculation would give way to surety.

The notion of ‘speculating persons’ is thus applicable to both those middle class Iranians who engaged in the practice of flipping freehold property and those who purchased them as owner-occupiers (as I outlined above, Iranians were very active in this market).\textsuperscript{108} The categories of prāperti (as a commodity in demand) and pāīgāh (as a haven away from Iran) were both informed with anticipatory logic, and indexed shared expectations about an imminent future. They both assumed, in other words, a particular relation to New Dubai: one oriented toward a future where freehold property would continue to accrue value, household wealth would remain intact, and the right to property ownership would be secured.

Relations of property in this freehold regime, then, were not necessarily valorized in terms of the normative hierarchy of belonging that I described earlier when examining the practice of proxy-

\textsuperscript{107} Povinelli elaborates this notion with respect to liberalism. She suggests that liberal ideology is buttressed by an epistemic orientation toward the future as a site of redemption: wherein present-day injustices inflicted upon certain members of the liberal polity will be acknowledged and reversed. I suggest, however, that this notion can also do work in illiberal contexts where sovereign power is distilled in a sovereign figure, and where this authority is imagined to be pastoral in nature.

\textsuperscript{108} Statistics relating to “flipping” real estate in Dubai in those years is not available.
ownership. This new property form did not coincide with citizenship. The distribution of claims constituting it did not function as another mechanism for demarcating the national body in distinction to foreigners. And the middle class Iranians with whom I engaged did not generally imagine ownership in New Dubai as a claim to securing their presence in relation to Emirati society. But it did not foreclose more conventional imaginings of social status in relation to ownership either, especially insofar as freehold ownership coincided with economic class. My interlocutors—especially those of long standing in Dubai—did regard those residents of the city living in the urban core and continuing to rent as a more transient population than those who could afford ownership. Different frames of reference for relating to freehold property and its ownership thus existed simultaneously.

But they were not quite complementary either. The spectacular urbanism of New Dubai aspired to an unprecedented urban life, not a continuity of long-standing social relations. These middle class Iranians imagined themselves as inhabiting or engaging with a deliberate project oriented toward a kind of future of continued prosperity and security. And in anticipating this future and its promises, they belonged not so much to a place they imagined was contiguous with the Emirati nation, but to a place in the process of becoming. Their relation to this place was not that of a tenant or a landlord, but a person speculating on its future; in effect, living “a life in future tense” (Schielke 2012).

13 Conclusion

A sense of place about New Dubai: an ethos of unbridled growth, implicitly guaranteed by a transcendent but engaged figure of a sheikh, and the speculation that it invited. A certain kind of person: engaged in speculating in the fungible units of New Dubai, and on their viability as vehicles of security and future prosperity despite their juridical indeterminacy. Insofar as personhood is always pursued in places, this distinction about ‘sense of place’ and ‘kind of person’ is really just analytic artifice; a heuristic pause in an otherwise dialectical process.

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109 Indeed, as I elaborate in the following chapter, it was precisely because freehold property relieved non-citizens from the direct mediation of citizens that it was subject to controversy.
Another such pause, in the service of explanation, has been the epochal narrative that I have relied on. In this I’ve followed my interlocutors. There was a way of doing things prior to prāperti, the sīstem that was then ushered in, and its breakdown. But it is important to note that their explanations about the present and their recollections about the boom preceding it were already informed by one another by the time of these conversations (2010). Reasons given about how and why New Dubai emerged, in other words, also gestured toward those of its interruption and reversal. As Vivian Solana would put it, their explanations of recent history were “always within the reach of the priorities of the present” (2015).

This entanglement of recent history and the present is borne out in the category of sīstem itself. On the one hand, it worked to elucidate the mechanics of the boom and the expectations it was thought to sanction; giving credence to their repeated appeals that one could not have known any better but to “trust” that things were indeed working. On the other hand, discussions of sīstem aimed to explain why things broke down, and often with an almost self-explanatory air. And yet, my interlocutors’ shock about the onset of the crisis and its severity was not diminished for it.

The shock of crisis was transposed onto this category itself. It was the domain of prāperti—the sīstem—that sputtered out of control succumbing to its own contradictions. It was the surfaces of this city that proved deceptive. This notion worked to diminish individual culpability as it implied that speculating persons could not have foreseen the crisis. And here they still were: persons still speculating. Now, however, they were not speculating on the promises of a city in the midst of a spectacular transformation, but on the near future and whether they would survive the crisis that this transformation had concluded in.
My interlocutors had no misgivings about explaining the contents of the better life they used to associate with Dubai, and in some respects still did. Economic opportunities (emkānāt), social freedoms (āzādī-hā-ye ejtema’ī), the security of one’s wealth and savings (aminyat), and the possibility to pursue even more attractive destinations for migration in the ‘West’ (we moved to Canada). Once we had developed a rapport, I also found them eager to share their predicaments (as, for example, Sohrab did). But the extent of these predicaments—the degree to which their material circumstances had actually deteriorated, or the severity of the uncertainties they faced—was not immediately forthcoming. In fact, it was mostly toward the end of my fieldwork that I came learn of the various details which had been politely excluded from our conversations. Things like being on the verge of debtor’s jail, marital strains owing to disagreements over financial decisions, living in a luxurious villa before their small apartment, or being notified you could not leave the country due to your debts.

The encounter that this chapter centers around represents an exception in this regard. It involved someone I had just met sharing with me the kind of intimate uncertainties and personal struggles that had taken me many months to learn about from others. I was unprepared.

It began with the chill of air-conditioning when I walked in. A glass container filled with marbles on top of a glass coffee table. Sunlight off of glossy magazine covers. Stacks of files and envelopes on bookshelves. White ceramic tile flooring. A couple of real estate agents sitting behind their computers, their desks just a couple of meters apart. A small space.110

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110 In Dubai, the terms “broker” and “agent” are both commonly used in relation to the persons mediating real estate transactions. This is not the case in other jurisdictions where these categories represent different legal capacities in relation to this process. For my purposes here, I use “real estate agent”.

124
It was early in the morning, and I had arrived to interview one of these agents. This was Aidin, another middle class Iranian resident of Dubai. He was in his early forties, and had moved here in the mid-2000s along with his wife and their two children.

I almost missed the meeting. I was still depleted from the night before. I had spent most of the evening conducting another visa-run at the UAE-Oman border. It was a monthly endeavour. This particular run had been especially draining. I was told that things tend to slow down at the end of the day as less staff is on hand to process comings and goings. But I was not told that my car would breakdown that night. By the time I arrived back in Dubai it was almost three in the morning.

Thankfully, this office was not far from The Lakes, the gated community in New Dubai where I was staying at the time. Close to the Mall of the Emirates, it was located in a cluster of newly built medium-rise apartment buildings and hotels. These structures were wedged between the formidable Sheikh Zayed highway on the one side—brimming with traffic as usual in the mornings—and large expanses of dusty plots on the other that eventually met stretches of newly built villas. I had recently come to appreciate the variety of shops, restaurants and offices populating this area. Dropping off dry-cleaning, grabbing something to eat, and meeting an interviewee all while my car remained parked in the same spot was something I usually associated with the inner city, not New Dubai.

Aidin wasted no time pouring me some tea. As I seated myself on the chair in front of his desk, I noticed that his co-worker was also Iranian. She was busy talking on the phone. I began by describing my misadventure the night before in attempt to break the ice. He was not interested. Aidin was curious to know whether my family and I were contented with our lives in Canada. He singled out his young son as his main concern, and that he thought his future would be bleak in

Aidin: “So your passport is not Iranian.”

Behzad: “No, it’s Canadian.”

Aidin: “How long have you been in Canada?”

Behzad: “It was in ’97 that my family left here and headed there. So we were not here when these changes began to occur.”

Aidin was curious to know whether my family and I were contented with our lives in Canada. He
Iran. Once again, I was told about the uncertainties of life in Iran: the everyday risk of entanglement with moral police, the unemployment, etc.

He explained that he was the operator of a small clothing store in one of Tehran’s malls. It was in its more affluent shahrak-e gharb district. He said he could not foresee any real advancement in his prospects, and when the boom was underway in Dubai he convinced his wife to migrate.

This was a familiar story. Life in Iran was insecure, incapable of accommodating aspirations, or altogether unbearable. This was also the story of my family’s arrival to Dubai. My parents were about the same age as I was when conducting this interview. It was the war with Iraq. But the reasons for arrival that my field notes feature don’t include the world-ending violence of war. Instead, they often speak of the pursuit of a better life.

The reasons for considering departure, however, do. It was not invading armies, mass casualties, food shortages or rolling black outs. Yet it was a widespread sense that a way of life was radically jeopardized, perhaps ended altogether. It was also a growing realization that the ‘goods’ associated with prāperti had gone ‘bad’; that promises had reversed into dangers.

This chapter aims to elaborate the experience of this breakdown. It is for this reason that it features Aidin. Our encounter may have been exceptional, but his reasons for migrating to Dubai during the boom, and his reasons for frustration, anxiety and shame during the crisis, were not. In fact, in many ways, they were typical.

1 Key Figures

In elaborating Aidin’s experience of breakdown, I posit him as a “key figure” (Barker and Lindquist 2009) in relation to the regime of freehold property that I’ve been examining in the dissertation thus far. This unregulated and credit-fueled regime of property is thus the background in relation to this figure: it had attracted Aidin, had seen him employed in the

111 There was the Green Movement a few months prior to my return for fieldwork. But this was not something that saw the steady swelling of Iranians in Dubai.
property market, and was now in a state of breakdown. A real estate agent against the background of a speculative property regime.

The key figure serves as a metonymic device for understanding the societal context in which they are rendered. This approach takes as its point of departure the *production* of a particular “social type”, or character, which is often invoked in public discourse and features prominently in the shared imagination of a society. Social types animate the institutional arrangements and social logics that might frame, for example, regimes of citizenship, migration, and urbanization. Their mass mediation as specific “kinds of people” (Hacking 1986: 226) is often intended to anchor and legitimate the normative social hierarchy that these regimes construct and uphold. Yet their publicity may also signal moments of transformation. Examining the production of a social type, then, is to examine both its discursive content and the emergent social, economic or political processes that see it invoked as a specific character in a certain place at a certain time. The key figure, however, is not limited to this objectified character. Rather, it seeks to complicate such types and their reductive effects by also taking stock of the lived experiences and social identities of individuals relegated to them, or typecast so to speak, along with their possible struggles with them. The key figure is thus neither synonymous with the type nor the individual. Rather, it straddles the production of the former and its inhabitation by the latter. This is the heuristic value of the key figure: it provides an understanding of general processes while also allowing for a proliferation of particularities that would subvert easy generalizations (Barker et al 2013: 2).

Aidin represented just such a social type: the real estate agent. This, after all, was one of the reasons why I was witting in his office that morning. I wanted to learn about the boom years: the practices and vocabularies that constituted the frenzied market in freehold real estate. In keeping with my original research plans, I sought out certain categories of market actors. I had mixed success. I occasionally ran into major real estate speculators in social events. They were fond of recalling the entire floors and buildings they bought to flip immediately thereafter. They were less fond of replying to my emails and risking inquiries about where the capital required for these activities came from. I tracked the names of real estate lawyers and market analysts from their appearances on air or in the columns of magazines. They were happy to share their opinions to

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112 The study of social types and typification represents an enduring field of study, and may be traced to such classical sociology as Simmel’s treatment of “the stranger” (1971: 143–213).
the public, but individual meetings required the right credentials. This would eventually come with my stint as a visiting scholar at the Dubai School of Government (DSG). I found governmental regulators through personal networking and the public relations office of the DSG. The only requirement here was formal letters of request, signed by the Dean. Then there were the managers of master-developers. In 2010, they were something of an endangered species: either their ranks had been gutted—as with Nakheel—or they were weary of interviews.

What I have just listed here is a set of social types associated with Dubai’s urban transformation. With the exception of the speculator, at various points they all had a recognizable voice in public discourse: that is, a know-how and institutional perspective in relation to what I previously described as ‘property talk’. Some were known to have been spearheading New Dubai (opening their fists to the cameras to depict the expansion of the city’s shoreline in the shape in a palm), others had seen their fortunes and airtime rise with the onset of the crisis and the disputes that accompanied it (giving advice on how to deal with developers that refused to return down-payments on stalled projects), and yet others represented governmental efforts to catch up with the market (proclaiming the time of “transparency” to have arrived).

And then there was the real estate agent. No institutional emails or letters required. Just a personal reference, and a request for anonymity. Not surprisingly, real estate agents came to represent a major source knowledge in my fieldwork. And what better kind of agent for my research than an Iranian?

In what follows, I briefly address the production of the real estate agent as a readily recognizable social type. With the onset of the crisis, this type came in for sustained criticism as a character representing the excesses and greed of the boom years. As such, the agent represented a force out of balance; something that required governmental intervention in order bring “transparency” and “professionalism” to the market. I then return to our meeting that morning in order to complicate this mass mediated characterization. Here I elaborate on the actual person of Aidin: his lived experience of this crisis and the manner it had radically threatened this personhood with disintegration. In this, I suggest, Aidin was also typical.
2 An Agent Provocateur

I understand the production of social types to be a manifold process involving some combination of official policies, public discourse, and social logics. The production of the real estate agent, in this regard, has already been sketched out to a large extent in previous chapters. The unregulated, credit driven and sovereign backed political economy of Dubai’s emergent freehold property market was part and parcel of this production. This social type, in other words, did not precede New Dubai’s fungible spaces, the ease of their exchange, and the anticipatory logic informing it. Rather, this actor represented a moment in their co-constitution and exchange. And it was due to this position—as an agent involved in the commensuration of things—that real estate agents were repeatedly the subject of editorial pages, advice columns and official proclamations. In what follows, I further elaborate their production by examining this discourse and the policy interventions targeting them.

The beginning of my fieldwork coincided with increasing talk about real estate agents in news media. In January of 2010, RERA announced plans to formally recognize the title “real estate agent” as “a separate professional category” (Nohra 2010). This was intended to reconcile the actual practice of this profession with one’s official residency status. It was widespread knowledge that the boom had seen a rush to this profession by all manner of immigrants who had been working in other fields until then. This was largely a consequence of the fact neither commission rates nor the exchange of “off-plan” properties in the secondary market were regulated. Without minimum holding periods or a universal listing database, a real estate brokerage could facilitate the repeated flipping of a unit between several buyers and sellers in short order. What is more, it was common for agents to charge a commission from both parties. Not only did the ranks of such agencies swell, but individuals could also conduct this work on a part-time or freelance basis.

This push to formally register real estate agents was represented as part of a larger “campaign” intended to “outlaw rogue practitioners” (Sambridge 2010) and “maverick freelancers” (Nohra 2010). And this (very) free market did indeed make for creative entrepreneurialism. Among the more dramatic testaments of this in my field notes was a young Iranian-Canadian woman who had been working during the height of the boom. She did so while only holding a visit visa. Conducting routine visa-runs between the UAE and Oman—much as I was doing—she preferred
not to register as an employee of her brokerage. This way, as she explained, “I wouldn’t have to declare my income to them”. She was referring to the Canada Revenue Agency.

That this market actor was coming in for scrutiny was hardly unprecedented. In fact, even prior to the height of the boom or the establishment of RERA there was the occasional news report about their greed and fraudulent practices (Al Jandaly and Hilotin 2003, Chand 2004). These accounts about “dodgy agents” (Baldwin 2008) would continue to reappear in the years that followed, and make for editorial fodder well into it crisis and the recovery (Bohyrul 2009, 2011).

Nor was it the first time that real estate agents were being targeted with regulations. There was a steady, if protracted, series of interventions beginning in May of 2006 when the Dubai Land Department issued a by-law requiring the registration of all brokerages and their agents. Following this, there came: the refusal to officially recognize property transactions involving unlicensed agents in 2007 (Sharma 2007); the imposition of mandatory real estate examinations in 2008 (Arabian Business 2008); and the introduction of a four-tiered, colour-coded “classification system” of agents in 2009, limiting certain kinds of agents to the sale of certain kinds of properties according to their training (Billing 2009).

But in the period following Dubai World’s infamous “standstill” announcement and the deluge of critical coverage of Dubai in foreign news media and market analyses it prompted, there was a heightened need to demonstrate a serious concern for “transparency”. It was an issue that also featured prominently in the IMF’s Article IV Consultation (2009: 5, 6, 16-19), which was widely regarded as the most authoritative appraisal of Dubai’s circumstances at the time. One oft-repeated marker of such transparency—especially in property talk—was the “professionalism” of real estate agents. RERA’s discourse stressed this as one of the reforms required for restoring confidence in the market (2010a: 8, 2010b: 8). The contents of professionalism remained vague beyond formal accreditation. What was clearer, however, was that it was some combination of their sheer inexperience and pursuit of greater commissions in an under-regulated market was

113 For examples of market analyses on this note, see Isthmus 2009: 18, 27; Jones Lang LaSalle 2010: 11, SHUAA Capital 2010: 20, 36. This emphasis on transparency was repeatedly justified on the basis of enhancing “investor confidence”.

114 For examples of market analysis on this note, see EFG Hermes (2008: 1–2) and Jones Lang Lasalle (2009: 7).
alleged to have led real estate agents to hurt the market. A common allegation to this effect, for example, was that they manipulated buyers and sellers into accepting flawed valuations (Nohra 2010).

It was just this notion that I also heard in my conversations with RERA management. The real estate agent was not the most prominent social type in their explanations of the “lack of market knowledge”, as one of them put it, which prevailed during the boom. The agent of real estate that was most singled out for criticism here was usually the master-developer. But their references to real estate agents did work to underscore that point that market transactions were often decoupled from some putatively rational basis; that these agents were “only wanting to make more money quickly” without regard for the adverse effects of their behaviour on the functioning of the market.116

Some time has passed since then. As I write this, however, Dubai’s real estate market is once again booming.117 As before, there is talk of bubbles and the need for regulatory oversight, with even the IMF urging caution (Arnold 2013). And once again the character of the real estate agent is being invoked as a problematic force upon the market requiring control.118 What this latest uptick of concern about this social type puts into relief, also again, is the distinction between “professionals” and “opportunists” (Alwadiya 2014, see also Sophia 2013 and Nagraj 2014). It’s a distinction that seems to hinge on a formality. Whereas professionals abide by the laws of the market that are officially prescribed, opportunists abide by the laws of the market that are not. But it is in this formal difference that there lies an important tension. This is the tension inherent

115 Interview with RERA official, October 21, 2010.
116 Interview with RERA official, October 10, 2010.
117 A glance at year-on-year comparisons is telling. Whereas the value of real estate transactions had plummeted by 65% between 2009 and 2010 (Arabian Business 2010), they had increased by 53% from between 2012 and 2013 (Dokoupil 2014).
118 RERA’s CEO, for example, has suggested recently that there is once again a glut of real estate agents in the market. The quoted figure of 5,021 agents operating in 2014 is hardly as exorbitant as the estimated 10,000 to 12,000 operating during the boom years, but apparently it’s still “too many” (Nagraj 2014). In an effort to suppress this number, RERA has thus adjusted another: moving to raise the passing score of mandatory accreditation exams from 75% to 85%.
to the notion of an ‘effectively regulated free market’. It is a tension borne in the need to prevent a chaotic market while somehow also ensuring the ebb and flow of supply and demand.

I suggest that this tension was transposed onto this social type, the real estate agent. It was a tension that, as I have briefly outlined here, was exacerbated during this moment of transformation when the possibility of a “market correction” invited regulatory interventions to correct market practices. Invocations of this social type thus deflect critical attention from the structural instabilities of an economy of freehold property based on the easy availability of credit, or its potential for speculation. Rather, it foregrounds an agent provocateur: someone abusing the market and the trust of those who participate in it in order encourage irrational behaviour and unsustainable outcomes. The prospect of disciplining this agent reinforces the prospect of an effectively regulated free market is implied, denying the inherent tendency of capitalist markets to experience periodic crises.

In what follows I elaborate the crisis from the perspective of Aidin. In doing so I aim to complicate this social type by elaborating the precariousness of Aidin’s circumstances, the reasons he gave for his expectations about this market in property, and the moral dilemma he found himself in when these expectations were dashed. In demonstrating him to be an agent in default, rather than an agent provocateur, I posit him as a key figure of the crisis.

3 “I didn’t know what to do”

Aidin: I didn’t intend to get into this work when I came here. I know people who are in the export business with Iran. I had been traveling to Dubai for a long time—about ten years—for business. So I thought that I would keep doing this. I had a lot of contact(s) (uses English term). But this real estate (uses English term) market was so lively. It was easy work too; there was a lot of demand in those years. Of course, it’s apparent now that a lot of this was kāzeb (‘false’ or ‘fictitious’). But a lot of people were buying and Iranians were very active. Most of my clients were Iranians. So I fell into this work (pas ofiādam tu in kār).

Behzad: Why was this? Why were so many people buying properties?

Aidin: Nobody knew where the money was coming from. And the government of Iran was also very active here in this market. Dowlati-hā (government types) brought a lot of their money here…and that’s why this place developed so fast. They didn’t
want *regulation* (uses English word; *regulaşin nemikhāstan*). When I started I did not spend a lot of time in the office. I was usually meeting clients. It was busy.

**Behzad**: I’ve heard a lot of wealthy Iranians used to buy entire floors. Was this common?

**Aidin**: Well yes. But it was not just Iranians doing this. Everyone with money was doing this. This was the *sīstem* here: people were just buying to sell... Look, people trusted them. Where else in the world does a city get built so quickly? They said they would build something, and then they built it. And the market was responsive (*hāzār javāb midād*). So why not? Our problem wasn’t unusual (*moshgel-e mā ajib nabud*). A lot of people went bankrupt. Some fled, but we stayed (*kheili-ha farār kardan, amā mā mundim*).

*(Aidin ended his explanation here and seemed to be anticipating my next question.)*

I remember shifting in my seat when he mentioned this “problem”. I had not been told anything about Aidin experiencing financial distress beyond what was to be generally expected during this economic crisis, much less bankruptcy. Was the “we” to whom he was referring the business, Iranians in general, people buying properties, himself? There was plenty of room for slippage here. The English plural pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ are the same in Persian: *mā*. What is more, in colloquial Persian it is common to use this plural pronoun as a rhetorical way of referring to oneself.

Whatever fatigue I felt must have left me as I began to craft the next question in my head. This was delicate business. His co-worker was sitting next to us, and it was not clear to me whether I was being invited to inquire about his personal circumstances, whether he was intimate enough with his co-worker to have shared any personal misfortune with her, or whether he was simply making a general statement about people in the real estate market. Directly addressing the issue would have risked causing embarrassment. On the other hand, if I was being invited to address this “problem” then deflecting it would have surely been construed as inconsiderate, or simply inept at reading social queues. Unsure about how to proceed, I found myself blurting out:

**Behzad**: So you suffered losses too?

**Aidin**: Well you see…everybody did. A lot of people had bought a lot of *prāperti* (property) but weren’t able to sell it because nobody wanted to buy it at those prices [anymore]. People went out of work (*kāreshun ru az dast dādan*; the term *kār* in this context could refer to either ‘job’ or ‘business’) or couldn’t pay their debts.
Aidin and I continued to discuss the regulatory dearth of the real estate market and the extraordinary nature of Dubai’s growth in particular. Sometime into the conversation his colleague stood up and started to gather some of the files on her desk. She turned to us, wished me luck on my project and left in a hurry. A few minutes later, while still discussing Dubai’s rapid growth and relating it to an absence of governmental control, Aidin noted the criminality of financial default in Dubai. He stressed the issue with some urgency: “…Where?! You tell me! Where else in the world do they jail a person because of default-kardin (defaulting) on a credit card?!” Aidin was borrowing the English term “default”, and attaching to it the Persian suffix kardin, which, in this case, was the functional equivalent of “-ing”. He explained this to be one of the most significant drawbacks to life in the UAE. I could sense the frustration building in his voice. As he continued, he revisited the “problem” he had mentioned earlier. He said that he and his wife had accumulated significant credit card debt, and described the extraordinary uncertainty and pressure he felt when Dubai’s economy began to turn:

The banks began to harass us as soon as we missed a payment. They kept calling us. They threatened to file a complaint with the police because we were failing to make our payments. I was still paying them to the extent that I could. But they threatened to complain because one of my cheques did not go through… and [because] I wasn’t able to make monthly installments. If they did this…I would have been jailed! We had to start pawning our jewellery, even some of our furniture. I was not selling anything. The market was asleep (bāzār khabideh bud). We even borrowed money from our family and friends in Iran. And this money only covered the interest.

2009 was a very hard year. I used to go to the beach, park the car, and start crying (says very somberly). I didn’t know what to do. I constantly felt like this. I still owe those people who helped us...With their help things eventually got better.

Aidin had struggled to make sufficient sales that year in order to continue paying off his debts. It was in early 2010, just a few months before our meeting, that one such transaction was lucrative enough to significantly alleviate his financial burden. This and the financial aid from friends and family in Iran saw him significantly reduce the principle on his credit card debt. He was fortunate to have been renting during the boom years. The addition of a defaulting mortgage would have likely proven too large a financial burden to overcome, even with the aid of his kin and social network. This meant that they were able to move out of their accommodations in New Dubai as rents began to soar during the peak of years of 2007 and 2008. And this is just what they did:
relocating to a smaller apartment in the neighboring city of Sharjah (to the north of Dubai along the UAE’s coast) in search of cheaper accommodations.

But business remained scarce. His cell phone did not ring during the two hours that we spent together in his office. I had interviewed enough real estate agents by then to have gained an appreciation for the frenzied pace of their work prior to the financial crisis. When I realized just how much time had elapsed (we had planned to meet for an hour) I excused myself and promised to follow-up our conversation in the coming week. This was a mistake. I never saw Aidin again. When I called him next week, he did not seem very interested in meeting again. “I’ll let you know when I have time”, he said. He never called.

As I noted already, I was not expecting an intimate encounter. The details of Aidin’s predicament, the toll it took on him, and the fact that I never heard from him again stayed with me. How much could he have been in debt? How long did he wait until he reached out to his friends and family in Iran? Did he feel that he overexposed himself in our conversation? Was this why he chose not to meet me again? Or did I offend him for taking the initiative to conclude our meeting when he had been so forthcoming?

I eventually came to find that many of these middle class Iranian interlocutors—especially those who had engaged with Dubai’s emergent freehold real estate market—were experiencing unexpected financial hardship. The personal distress that accompanied it, however, was less often immediately available to me. Aidin’s “problem” may have been shared in relation to this so-called sīstem, but the act of sharing it usually omitted details of personal anguish and family crisis. For all of the lament that I repeatedly heard in my participant-observation and interviews about the regulatory inadequacies or widespread speculating and chicanery during the boom, my interlocutors nevertheless regarded their entanglements with this crisis in very personal terms. Normative Iranian conceptions of honour and respect, after all, do not favour divulging emotional distress and familial tensions to strangers. And uninitiated I remained for most of these interlocutors; developing an intimate rapport with only a few individuals beyond my own family.

In hindsight, then, these criteria were reversed in my meeting with Aidin: I was offered knowledge that I had not properly earned, perhaps rendering my departure insensitive. But while Aidin’s narrative of personal breakdown may have exceeded normative moral conventions and my own better judgment, it did not exceed the general experience of crisis that these interlocutors
had been describing to me. Again, he was typical. Specifically, this was a sense about life in Dubai as increasingly liable to reversal. It is this sense of breakdown-as-reversal that concerns me in what remains of this chapter. Individuals (in)vested in New Dubai were more or less burdened by debt, more or less obliged to and by family, more or less emotionally distraught etc. Aidin’s predicament distills the peculiar character of reversal that my interlocutors were coming to grips with. First, however, it is worth examining this risk of financial default that he was facing, and its production.

4 Where difālt-kardan comes from

It is important to understand that Aidin’s financial hardships were indicative of the consequences of a credit-driven boom. As Dubai’s economic diversification strategy gained further momentum in the early 2000s—especially in the real estate, tourism, and retail industries—and its population of foreign residents further expanded in the process, its financial institutions began to focus on expanding their retail portfolios. Extending credit cards, personal loans and mortgages to a growing population of expatriates were now regarded as promising ways to generate revenue streams beyond their long-standing financing of quasi-governmental corporations. The economic experimentation in Dubai implicated the national economy as well (Aidin, for example, lived in Sharjah). By the time this boom was peaking, other Emirates were also fast following the “Dubai Model,” as it was increasingly called. In fact, so rapidly did these services expand that consumer loans in the UAE roughly doubled between 2004 and 2008 (Gulf News 2009). The issuance of credit cards was a key facet of this financialization of the economy: increasing from 62 cards to 199 for every 100 adults between 2003 and 2008 (Hancock 2010). In fact, according to one estimate, by 2007 the UAE’s credit card market was expanding at a rate of 25% a year (MEED 2007).

This was the financial landscape into which Aidin and his family entered: a largely unregulated market in consumer credit, with few limitations on extending this credit, and lax underwriting
criteria. This was one manner in which “economic diversification” manifested itself in everyday life. As Shabnam did, my interlocutors often described the aggressive telemarketing of financial products during those years. Receiving calls informing them of being preapproved for credit cards or personal loans was ordinary; and not only from the institutions they already had accounts with. With the onset of the financial crisis and the resulting “freeze” on credit, this aggressive drive to further register foreign residents into the financial market turned into an equally aggressive drive to recover lost revenues from them. Aidin’s financial distress was likely compounded, therefore, by the trend of raising interest rates on credit cards in attempt to recover losses on other lending services (Hancock 2010).

In fact, a survey conducted in 2010 by a national newspaper examined 170 cards offered by 40 banks and found the average annual interest rate to be almost 34%, among the highest in the world (Reagan 2010). Regulations designed to constrain lending practices and the terms of repayment would not arrive until May of 2011. Until then, Aidin had to live with the prospect of incarceration for bouncing a cheque.

5 Radical Risk and Reversal

This crisis, as evidenced in the lives of such middle class Iranians as Aidin and Nima, was often experienced as a significant reorientation of everyday life. It is not so much that downsizing one’s home, being harassed by creditors, threatened with incarceration, or prevented from traveling back to Iran were absent or inconceivable during the boom. Rather, it was their sense

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119 The only regulation limiting consumer lending, according to a Fitch analyst, was a maximum limit of AED 250,000 (US$ 68,000) on a single loan. Limits in maturation and refinancing were apparently absent (Martin 2007). In fact, it was only in May of 2011 that the UAE Central Bank introduced a raft of new regulations designed to this end: including caps on loans and their monthly repayments in relation to personal income (Rodgers 2011).

120 It was common practice to subcontract client services such as registration. These subcontractors accumulated the contact information of clients as they moved from servicing one bank to another, thereby increasing the pool of potential customers for their next client (Interview with manager of credit consultancy, September 14, 2010).

121 As the head of retail banking at one major bank put it: “Interest rates have increased on credit cards as banks look to preserve profit margins because delinquencies have increased across the board on other retail products...So there have been attempts to re-price retail credit generally, not just on credit cards" (Hancock 2010).
that the circumstances of everyday life more generally were shifting; that something in order of a societal-wide breakdown was underway. An anticipated future of indefinite prosperity born during the boom, was suddenly receding and leaving in its wake a litany of what Saegert et al. (2009) refer to as “radical risk”. In their examination of how homeownership in Britain has been reconfigured into a project of asset-based welfare, they emphasize the qualifier “radical” in terms of “the layering of multiple risks on households” resulting from a withdrawal of social welfare (2009: 307). I too rely on this notion of radical risk as a multiplicity of dangers. But I lay the stress on reversal rather than withdrawal. These dangers were not the result of policy shifts over a protracted period of time. They emerged from within this life, and in short order, as the very practices and arrangements that were once imagined as producing security and prosperity were now incommensurable with them. The very sources of value identified with the sistem—like prāperti and the credit required to purchase or speculate in it—were mutating into an ensemble of potentially intense dangers.

All of this amounted to a particular experience of breakdown: this was reversal. It was not just a general sense this life was more precarious as a result of the crisis. It was also a growing realization that in many ways this place had shifted on its axis: rendering what were once the emkānāt (opportunities) thought to inhere to Dubai, into liabilities instead. This place was thus now beginning to open onto an altogether different future: not of one of continued prosperity, or a “horizon of successful self-correction” (Povinelli 2001: 328) eventually securing their property rights, but a devaluation of wealth and possible ensnarement. Put simply: ‘goods’ were turning into ‘bads’.

Aidin was giving voice to a general frustration that I regularly encountered: that the very rudiments of the life that New Dubai had made available were now functioning to opposite effect. Whereas credit cards used to secure the trappings of a cosmopolitan lifestyle, they now may have led to arrest. Whereas transactions in real estate used to be a particularly lucrative source of profit, they were now especially suppressed. Whereas claims to ownership were once conflated with social anchorage or participation in a deliberate project of urban transformation sanctioned by the sovereign’s authority, they were now increasingly conflated with the unrelenting claims of creditors. Whereas routine travel to Iran was taken for granted, it was now liable to have been obstructed for being associated with outstanding debt and possibly concluding in a holding cell (as Nima and his wife learnt). And finally, whereas middle class
Iranians used to occasionally assist family in Iran with remittances or investments in a family business, money was now flowing in the reverse direction to simply stave off financial ruin in Dubai. These reversals, of course, did not always coincide in everyday life. My interlocutors did not experience all of them in tandem. But there was a palpably shared sense that nature of the game had shifted. There was widespread knowledge about the variety of ways in which the kind of life constructed during that period could now conclude in financial ruin and entanglements with the law. Those whom Sohrab described as farār-i—people whose losses were so dire that they felt ensnarement was immanent and decided to pre-emptively leave Dubai permanently—were, in effect, also social type; one indexing the force of radical risk. Similarly, Sohrab’s disappointment with the regulatory innovation that retroactively redefined the terms of contract between freehold purchasers and developers was another example of encountering radical risk; in this case, a strategy of “accumulation by dispossession” on the part of the Dubai government to protect master-developers from further losses (Harvey 2003).

Staying with Aidin, I want to further elaborate two of the reversals noted above: his requesting financial assistance from friends and family in Iran, and his insistence that informing real estate market’s boom was a certain “trust” in the sīstem. I do so in order to further examine the distinctly moral implications of radical risk, while complicating the notion of an immoral agent provocateur.

5.1 More Debts

Venturing out of Iran for the sake of a better future is hard to reconcile with focusing one’s energies on avoiding arrest for personal bankruptcy. Clearly, it overwhelmed him. The moral implications of this manner of reversal are especially personal. Aidin could insist that his problem was not exceptional; that the magnitude of this crisis was societal-wide. Its intensity, however, was not felt any less for it. It may have exceeded his particular experiences, but he was so personally implicated in it that he regularly retreated into solitude to cry.

Yet there was also a distinction here. He regarded the debts that were owed to his institutional creditors to be punitively exaggerated and unfair. This was not just about the harassment he felt they had subjected him to. It represented something of a breach of trust insofar as there was
nothing remarkable about incurring significant debt. “This was the sīstem here”, as he put it, and as the “prāpertī” market it was booming there was presumably nothing remarkable about accumulating a lot of earnings in commission. Aidin regarded those debts that he incurred from his family in Iran as very differently however. This was debt of another kind. It was morally charged. As a gift, it assumed an obligation to recognize the generosity of these relations in heeding his request for financial assistance, an obligation that would be fulfilled upon the return of this money. The exchange of money here thus at once confirmed the veracity of these social relationships and tested them. Perhaps it was also this widening scope of his financial debts to include monies laden with moral obligation—in effect, swelling his debts both in number and in kind—that regularly took him to the beach in 2009.

And it was not just the obligation to return. The very act of requesting financial assistance while residing in Dubai must have been especially humiliating. Here, after all, was a place generally imagined to have been synonymous with economic opportunity. This notion about Dubai was part of the same imagined geography that rendered Iran to be a place of hardship or insecurity; the kind of knowledge about Iran that he cited for me at the outset of our meeting. According to this imagined geography, his friends and kin in Iran were already disadvantaged by virtue of remaining in Iran. Like most middle class Iranians who had moved to Dubai in search of a life they thought to be unavailable in Iran, Aidin no doubt gave reasons for his departure by rehearsing this imagined geography. More to the point, the same friends and family with whom his relationships were sufficiently strong to warrant requests for financial aid were also probably those for whom he had elaborated these reasons. Inviting them to help him and his wife overcome their financial difficulties thus represented a radically different portrayal of current life in Dubai as it was beset by crisis. Indeed, this was the crux of his personal struggle with life in a state of breakdown-cum-reversal. The very opportunities for financial credit and windfall gains in a speculative real estate market that once seemed to confirm expectations about Dubai as a place more attractive than Iran, were not only reversed into personal bankruptcy and potential incarceration but required financial assistance from a place left behind where life was presumed to be already precarious. Lest this life in Dubai continue to further deteriorate into arrest, or
possibly prevent Aidin and his family from exiting Dubai (as it did Nima, his wife and their children).122

5.2 Less Faith

In the previous chapter, I cited the warnings I heard about New Dubai’s being untrustworthy; its edifice being deceptive. I did so in order to unpack the promise it was implied to have once (literally) exhibited. Aidin’s comments amplify the faith-based ethics of participating in the legally ambiguous and financially driven real estate market. “People trusted them… They said they would build something, and then they built it,” he insisted. In this he was virtually paraphrasing the appeal that I would later hear from Nima: “they really were building them!” These statements invoke the surface of the city and the hyperbuilding it displayed as having been widely understood to be an accurate representation of ‘real’ value and prosperity.

But they also foreground a “them” and “they.” I seize on this, here, in order to emphasize that my middle class interlocutors who had participated in Dubai’s emergent freehold property market were often quick to attribute blame for its collapse. Their narratives and explanations were often bereft of apolitical or economistic explanations that posited this collapse as a “correction”. Rather, our conversations often saw them stressing that a mishandling had occurred, and that their trust in the capacity of Dubai’s government or corporate administrators to foresee New Dubai’s economic unraveling, much less mitigate its impact. And many of them certainly never expected that the Dubai government would have reformulated real estate regulations in order to displace financial risk from the developers on them. They were generally disillusioned, then, with any figure of authority in relation to the city’s economy and the real estate market in particular, and the future of Dubai more generally. Indeed, an important part of what this crisis

122 From the perspective of the state, after all, Aidin also represented a risk of capital flight for fitting the profile of a so-called “skip”. As I explained in the prologue before the introduction, this is a heavily indebted expatriate, lacking the income and wealth required to redress this debt, facing the prospect of jail for defaulting on this debt, and thus possibly looking to simply abandon this life instead.
entailed was the unavailability of any authority to rely upon that would elucidate its depth and duration.

This is not to suggest that conventional understandings of business cycles were absent. But if they often described the economic value associated with this urban transformation as revealed to have been *kāzeb* or “false”, it is because they were acknowledging that they had engaged with it based on some degree of trust; that they had trusted in the merit of investing in a rapidly transforming city throwing up superlative structures. Put another way, they were acknowledging that doing so involved the act of speculating that such trust or faith in abilities of these administrators would be rewarded. These middle class Iranian interlocutors were thus reproducing the same (speculative) logic that expert financial discourse relied upon to cast this untested real estate market as worthy of credit (i.e. trust).

In highlighting this sense of trust about the things that the surfaces of New Dubai ostensibly promised, and the reversal of such promise as radical risks, a very different narrative emerges than the breakdown of the market at the hands of reckless real estate agents. This was a domain of economic transactions unmediated by speculative expectations. Whether it was a royal performance at a real estate exhibition or the surfaces of the city itself, the value of investing in New Dubai was understood through its representations. And these representations relayed the value of such investments by relying on the faith of my interlocutors that they were doing so truthfully.

In this regard, it was not Aidin as a mischievous social type who broke the market by acting counter to its normative workings and assumptions about “freehold” as a right and as a commodity (i.e. *prāperti*). It was a credit-fuelled market—driven both by *loanable capital* and *faith* in the viability of New Dubai as a domain of investment— that broke his moral person, as the ‘speculating person’ that I described in the previous chapter, when it collapsed.

### 6 Conclusion

Aidin’s predicament distils the potential intensity of radical risks facing those who had engaged with “New Dubai” in the broader sense of an emergent political economy and urbanity rather than just a place. It is also in a broader sense that I suggest Aidin’s predicament represents a case
of life at a standstill. As I explained in the introduction, I am not positing this notion literally, but as a heuristic device to highlight the structure of feeling involved in period of widespread economic crisis and radical risk. The experience of a sudden shortfall of income, being harassed by creditors, the downward social mobility involved in cutting expenses and changing residences, the recourse to family and friends in a place that was left behind in pursuit of the good life, etc.: these are all transitions, involving a struggle to cope with new circumstances and their dangers. But insofar as they are born from the arrest of financial capital and are experienced as a series of ad hoc and unscripted reactions to the crisis this arrest involves, they may be understood as representing life in a state of standstill.

Aidin’s case highlights the indeterminacy that I earlier related to the notion of standstill. Part of his struggle involved understanding the gravity of his circumstances and whether or not the market in real estate would recover in time to salvage the kind of life he was pursuing. He was unsure about just what to do.

This sense of indeterminacy was widespread among these middle class interlocutors. ‘Goods’ were clearly going ‘bad’, but how to cope with this process remained unclear. After all, this crisis was not experienced as the ushering in of another property regime or alternative urbanity. Unlike the reconfiguring of property relations that the emergent ‘freehold’ property regime (or sīstem) ushered in—which I have categorized as indicative of “transformation” rather than “standstill”—this scenario did not present itself clearly or offer a defined set techniques and categories in any way that these interlocutors would sum up as a system. Once government policies were introduced to address this turn of events, they were piecemeal and sometimes revised upon their reception. There was no official re-imagining of Dubai’s urban image. And the celebratory representations of Dubai in Iranian media did not assume another orientation or offer different services so much as they simply petered out.

Middle class Iranians such as Aidin shared a sense of angst about not knowing when the crisis would relent. Indeed, this was part of the ‘crisis’ itself.
In recent years, a corridor of skyscrapers has flanked Dubai’s old district of Satwa. This is an area largely composed of residential villas, and it was being demolished in anticipation of a US$92 billion mega-project: the Jumeirah Garden City. Running just above this district is a busy throughway called Al-Satwa Road. And running along either side of this street was a long corridor of small retailers and cheap restaurants that continued to attract large crowds despite the nearby demolition of old villas. Together they offered an eclectic mix of goods and services: lingerie, videogames, roast chicken, car-parts, etc. The latter was largely represented by Iranians as they operated most of the auto-shops here. To themselves and their Iranian customers, these were known either as pancharch-i (an auto-shop offering mechanical services and repairs) or taz’ināt-i (an auto-shop specializing in the customization of car interiors and bodies). This was one of those parts of Dubai that I had seldom visited as a mobile teenager, not even for the videogames.

It was also here that I first came to engage with the interlocutors which the following chapters are focused on. This was by way of a plastic chair located in front of an auto-shop. Al-Satwa Road features broad sidewalks onto which the contents of these shops often spilled over. Sometimes, these contents were men sitting on white plastic chairs. But sometimes—like following the noon call to prayer (the azan) that accompanies a sweltering sun, and initiates the daily break that sees many of these crewmembers return to their nearby apartments for lunch and a nap—these seats were empty.

This was the price of admission to this social world: assuming a chair, and waiting to be addressed. It was a departure from the routines that had seen me engage with the social world of middle class residents in New Dubai. These latter were often a more formal affair: email requests, telephone introductions, greetings in social events, buzzer codes, parking passes, concierge personal, security guards at the entry gates, and waiting rooms outside of offices. Now I was seated in the midst of crowds passing by.

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123 This was the last of Dubai’s “mega-projects” announced before the onset of its real estate downturn in late 2008.
These chairs on the sidewalk, then, were a bridge of sorts. Something standing between the movement of strangers passing by, and the beginning of a more intimate interaction when one of these passersby directed a question to the person sitting still, or took leave of the crowd by taking a seat. They facilitated the process of becoming a customer or visiting these crews as a friend. As one of the masters put it to me once: “we put these chairs out for our customers…so they don’t get bored.” He was implying that they often facilitated conversations. Their utility was not limited to simply countering boredom, then, but enabling social relations.

More specifically, they facilitated ethnic solidarities across differences in class and citizenship. Many of their business partners, repeat customers-cum-friends, and acquaintances who would occasionally visit them were Emiratis of Iranian descent hailing from southern Iran whose families had often immigrated to Dubai—or so I was told—prior to nationalization in 1971. It was thus common to find them speaking to these Iranians in Achumi.

It took some time, however, before I came to learn that the relations these chairs helped cultivate could often prove just as flimsy. And as I elaborate in chapter five, this was an ongoing and shared point of concern among these men: that the individuals with whom they’ve cultivated relations over time may eventually disregard them or refuse to reciprocate something. In much the same way that Julia Elyachar explains “the market” of small workshops in Cairo to rely on networks of social relations extending from the master’s person and reputation, here too the cultivation of such relations was key to their market (2005: 120-124, 149-152). And as I elaborate in chapter four, this market relied on morally charged networks of chain migration between hometowns in Iran and Dubai. I borrow from Elyachar on this note as well by highlighting the infrastructural functioning of this transnational circuit by analyzing it in terms of “communicative channels” and what she calls the “phatic labour” sustaining them: that is, the mundane and ongoing communication sustaining relations between people that is implicitly understood to bear potential for creating economic value (2010: 453-455).

These chairs, then, were the little infrastructure required to translate publicity into intimacy—even if only of the instrumental kind—between crewmembers and their market. And yet they did not merit much investment. They were often wobbly and non-descript, usually just a single-mold piece of plastic. This was because they were likely to be stolen or break in the midst of heavy tools and energetic bodies. And like their exposure to this wear-and-tear, they also highlight the
exposed nature of the lives of these working class Iranians men, and the necessity of this exposure in sustaining their livelihoods.

Figure #7. A couple of Iranian mechanics posing with a luxury car in front of their store in Satwa. They had decorated it with the national colors ahead of National Day celebrations.

This exposure, as I demonstrate in the following chapters, did not lend itself to feelings of participating in Dubai’s urban transformation. The speed of urban change was hardly conflated with security, and certainly not so much that a notion like pāigāh (foothold) could serve as a key term in the shared vernacular of these men and youth. They may have been exposed to the hustle and bustle of bodies in the city, but they were removed from its transformation. And yet these Iranians often helped assemble, equip, and embellish this speed. Their customers sometimes featured those who could afford luxury cars (Figure #7). And weather or not these vehicles were sports cars along the lines of R8s, M5s or GTRs, they were all symbolic of the speed of Dubai’s transformation, and the faith-based logic that underpinned the emergence of New Dubai. They were also presumably dependent on the kinds of infrastructure that was not intended for them; be
it the privately maintained patchwork of roads in large gated communities, or the institutional network of Dubai Inc. These men and youth could not directly participate in speculative economy of New Dubai that many of the drivers of these cars probably did. But they attended to them as its material manifestations; recall, once again, bits of a toy model sitting in their frame. And while some of these cars may have eventually assumed a state of standstill with the onset of Dubai financial crisis, they represented a transformation of the city in relation to which these residents of Satwa were felt their everyday lives to be standing still. To be more specific, theirs was a state of structural standstill: at once exploited and excluded.

The dust that had gathered on a lot of the paperwork in Aidin’s office clued me into the lack of business he was experiencing, as a struggling real estate agent, when I caught up with him. But the fact that these papers had gathered into those piles or shelves to begin with also suggested that business was brisk at some point. Where as he had once actively participated the speculative practices propelling New Dubai—working at the very juncture of faith and finance—the crisis saw him target for exclusion from a future where such speculation would allegedly be “corrected.” These working class residents of Dubai, however, had been targeted even during the boom. And there was never much dust amidst the flow of bodies and car parts, not even during the crisis.

In this way, then, this social world was a stark departure from the infrastructural morass that buffered so many of my middle class interlocutors from the inner-city crowds in which these men were always situated. A mangle of highways, interchanges, limited points of access between projects, manned gates, etc. And as the following chapters elaborate, the exposure to the crowds and the inner city that sitting on the sidewalk involves also brought with it some of the vulnerabilities that such exposure involves.
1 Talib and the Burj

Talib was a recent addition to one of the crews in an auto-shop on the strip. He still required some practice rolling tires to his co-workers while avoiding passers-by. We quickly grew acquainted. Upon learning that I was studying Dubai’s urban development, he regularly began to volunteer his insights about how the city had, in his words, “exploded” and was “unlike anything in Iran”.

Talib was twenty-seven, and like all the younger crewmembers his movements in the city were dependent upon the permission of his arbāb (store manager). He had never ventured into this urban “explosion” and the polished luxuries it offered. One evening, Talib decided to risk the ire of his arbāb and deftly enlisted my support to that end. As was typical, a new customer interrupted our street-side conversation. The cry of “hamshahrī” (countryman) turned our attention to a young Iranian man pulling up to the shop with an expensive looking Audi. The car was to remain with the crew for a few days in order to be reupholstered. Taking advantage of the absence of his arbāb, Talib was quick to invite me for a ride around the block. Soon we were overtaking most of the traffic and I got the feeling that he was driving with purpose. “Do you think they’ll let me in if we drive to the Burj?” he asked eagerly, as he put down the windows and turned up the music. He was referring to the Burj Khalifa: currently the world’s tallest building and the keystone of superlative structures Dubai has recently come to be known for. He suggested that my English “with an American accent”, as he described it, would likely placate security if they should approach us. Despite my informing him that the building was not open yet, we were soon parked in front of it.

\[124\] These parking spaces, it is worth noting, are vertically aligned with the curb such that the drivers of cars pulling in would be facing the crew and often gestured for their services even before turning off their engines.
It was late in the evening. The street was dimly lit from the glow of nearby construction sites. The white noise of the crowds on the other side of the Burj—where an esplanade joins it to the world’s largest shopping complex, Dubai Mall—seemed to render our surroundings all the more desolate. A few minutes of silence passed between us; Talib stood there with his head leaned back, while I devised an explanation for our prolonged absence. Content with my story, I began to list a few factoids about the building when he interrupted me: “I think we should head back”, he said, with a blank expression.

I’m not sure what took Talib to the Burj that evening, much less his thoughts when he encountered it. Perhaps it was a fascination with the spectacle of it all, or maybe he was hoping to momentarily inhabit the world of those who will eventually be residing in the project looming over Satwa. What was unmistakable was his waning enthusiasm about Dubai’s urbanism in our conversations thereafter. The Burj was always visible from the patch of Satwa Road that Talib occupied; yet he never referred to it again. And there it remains; part of an encroaching background.

2 Key Figures and Slippery Categories

This chapter also relies on the analytic device of the key figure. In this case, it takes up Talib’s presence in Dubai as such, and in relation to this emergent background of urban transformation.

Talib inhabits just such a type in Dubai. This is the so-called “bachelor”, or the allegedly “single” lower-income labour migrant conscripted for menial work, focused on remitting earnings to family abroad, and living together. While Dubai was recently garnering international attention for its superlative urbanism, this type of urban inhabitant was increasingly the subject of local news media. Public scrutiny saw “bachelors” inextricably associated with “overcrowding” during this time, and corresponded with repeated assertions of “demographic imbalance” (khalal sukkānī) owing to a surge in Dubai’s population. My aim here is to critically unpack this association by elaborating on the “bachelor” as a key figure. I do so while aware that Talib’s experience of being a “bachelor” hardly exhausts the variety of ways in which working class transmigrants of different nationalities, particularly South Asian men, are also relegated to this type and experience it. My intention, then, is not to provide a definitive account of
“bachelors” per se in the Gulf by merely framing a discrete set of socio-economic indicators attributable to them. Rather, it is category-making as a form of Othering that I seek to address. To this end, I first examine the intersection of discourses, institutional arrangements and social practices working to produce it as a social type; one disposed to “overcrowding”. This includes the discourse of “demographic imbalance” and its differentiated geography in Dubai’s emergent urban regime, practices of what I will call custodian citizenship that enable so-called “bachelor accommodations”, and finally, the municipality’s policing of “bachelors” and its attendant discourse of “overcrowding”. I then elaborate the cultural imaginary of the young Iranian inhabiting this social type.

The “bachelor”, I contend, is no more an objective analytic category capable of being easily extrapolated from its discursive milieu, than notions of “demographic imbalance” or “overcrowding” are disinterested references to merely numeric realities. Rather, as a mass-mediated social type, it is an essentialized category that represents an assortment of meanings and presumptions rendering it “matter out of place”, with implications for the nation. As Mary Douglas describes it, in its most distilled form, “matter out of place” pertains to people or things contravening the normative moral order undergirding a social hierarchy (Douglas 2006: 44–50). I deploy this notion with particular attention to its spatial connotations. The moral risk that this social type poses is not hybridity or the blurring of social identities; this type is not ambiguous vis-à-vis the national body. As I will show, it is the alleged overabundance of “bachelors” amidst Emirati households that contravenes the moral order of an ethnocratic social hierarchy by collapsing (but not dissolving) the distance between the citizenry and masses of working class transmigrants. The concrete proximity between these populations has caused the latter to be figuratively and literally rendered out of place within the city.

Public representations of the “bachelor”, then, are part of the “structural violence” according to which class hierarchy is refracted into a normative hierarchy of belonging (Gardner 2010: 1-7). Working class transmigrants in the inner city are reduced to an overabundant presence synonymous with “bachelor accommodations”. It is by way of these representations that the lower rungs of this class hierarchy are associated with the specter of “demographic imbalance”, and the threat of “overcrowding” is ideologically valorized and animated in urban space as a certain segment of al-wāfidīn (the immigrants) is marked as disorderly and therefore particularly threatening to al-muwāṭinīn (the citizenry).
The “bachelor” and his living arrangements have already been noted, to varying degrees, in scholarship focusing on the Gulf (see especially Khalaf 2006, Nagy 2006, Ali 2010, Elsheshtawy 2010, Haines 2011, Gardner 2011, Ahmed 2012, Mohammad and Sidaway 2012). Attiya Ahmed has even noted him to be an “almost archetypical figures” in this scholarship, and who is often attached to what she views to be an overreliance on the trope of labour (2012: 40). Indeed, this category has often been addressed as a product of the kafala system of sponsorship and the labouring arrangements that it enables. Ahmed convincingly argues that this trope has tended to elide practices that may inform other ways in which non-citizens imagine their presence and engage with the social milieu of these Gulf societies. While I agree, it seems to me that there remains plenty to learn about and through the “bachelor”.

Ahmed’s critique is not limited to analyses explicitly referring to what she calls “bachelor workers”, but those generally concerned with the circumstances of lower-income transmigrant men (2012). She thus implicitly cites them as both an analytic category prevalent in contemporary analyses and a locally situated “category of practice” (Brubaker 2004: 31-33). This slippage is worth further considering as it speaks to a potentially wider tendency in the scholarship on the Gulf, whereby analytic categories are not sufficiently distinguished from the categories of practice that are employed in everyday articulations of Othering. Though recent analysis continues to address the politics and processes of social differentiation in these societies, categories such as “worker”, “labourer”, and even “expatriate” have often been used interchangeably (for example Okruhlik 1999, Khalaf and Alkobaisi 1999, Leonard 1999, Louër 2008, Ali 2010, Gardner 2011). It becomes unclear, therefore, if these categories are also synonymous in the social contexts under study. My ethnographic research in Dubai suggests that they are not. Rather, they index particular sets of social attributes working to differentiate non-citizens along axes of class, gender and nationality. These differences interpolate members of these categories according to a normative hierarchy of belonging by accruing to them varying degrees of transience and/or social privilege. The social type of the “bachelor”, for example, represents one of the more socio-economically precarious segments of what Dresch refers to as “foreign matter”
His coinage is intended to capture the force with which structural arrangements and everyday practices in Arab societies of the Gulf differentiate a putative national body from foreigners. Here, I suggest that cultural anxiety with an imagined overabundance of foreign matter has increasingly coalesced around this category owing to its alleged misplacement within the city.

Where such categories are conflated, however, it impedes our ability to critically examine how they constitute what Bristol-Rhys has recently referred to as a “lexicon” of social differentiation (Bristol-Rhys 2010: 25-26). Her analysis illuminates how certain kinds of employment (e.g. construction, taxi driving, domestic work) and spatial practices (e.g. the policing of malls for groups of lower-income migrant men) work to distinguish “workers” and “labourers” in Abu Dhabi, and the U.A.E more generally (Bristol-Rhys 2010: 25). Similarly, Vora has noted that in the shared imaginary of middle class Indians in Dubai, the term “foreigner” is often reserved for “white” professionals (Vora 2008: 386). During my fieldwork, I hardly encountered the phrase “expatriate worker” (c.f. Longva 1999: 20-21, Leonard 1999: 221) and certainly never “expatriate bachelor” (c.f. Gardner 2011: 20). The category “expat”, in Dubai, is generally understood to mean middle class non-citizens.126

It is in an effort to situate the “bachelor” within this lexicon of difference, that I examine this category as a key figure. I contend that its ideological import as a foil to normative conceptions of moral order may be more fully appreciated by unpacking the “catch-all-phrase” that it has been described to be (Haines 2011: 180). In what follows, I examine how the moral threat arising from demographic imbalance is identified with a particular segment of society through this social type, transposed onto their bodily abjection, mapped out in the city, and made available for control through the threat of removal.

125 It should be noted that Dresch does not actually define this notion. Rather, he deploys it as an umbrella concept capturing various discourses and everyday practices that work to socially differentiate citizens and non-citizens in Gulf societies according to an ethnocratic logic. 126 This class position usually affords these income-earners the ability to sponsor their families, and even seems to be socially valorized according to the presence of family.
3 The Politics and Geography of “Demographic Imbalance”

“It’s bad, it’s really bad”. Talib was recalling his frustrated attempts at securing a job in his hometown, in the South of Iran’s Fars province, so as to contribute to his family’s needs. Lament over Iran’s economic circumstances is frequent among these men. Immediately after completing high school, Talib had begun working in a small grocery operated by an uncle. It was not an experience he recalled fondly: “my pay was no good, and I wished to continue my education instead...even if it didn’t result in a proper job, which it doesn’t for many”. A few years later he learned of the substantial remittances that his two cousins were sending from Dubai. He contacted them and they told him Dubai was booming with work opportunities offering better pay. With their assistance, he applied for a work visa and made the journey. It was 2005.

The city was indeed growing. In the year of Talib’s arrival, Dubai’s GDP outstripped its 2010 target set in an economic plan introduced just five years earlier in 2000 (MEED 2007: 1-2). At US$38.18 billion, it represented an annual real GDP growth rate of 13% since 2000 (Oxford Business Group 2007: 8, 30). As I noted in the introduction, the real estate and construction industries were rapidly expanding. Meanwhile, 6.1 million tourists had visited the city by year’s end (Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing 2009: 2). As I noted previously, this boom that had attracted Talib was based on an economic strategy of diversification intended to offset the reliance of this city-state on the petroleum economy.

Equally significant for my analysis here, these years also saw the population surge. Dubai’s annual growth rate of roughly 9% since 2002 (Oxford Business Group 2008: 137) resulted in the doubling of the population from 2001–2008 to 2 million (Krane 2009: 119). At present, citizens in the UAE are estimated to account for only about 11% of the population (National Bureau of Statistics 2011: 10)\(^{127}\) The newcomers driving these numbers were largely those attending to the manual labour of a building boom, or servicing the concomitant expansion of the retail and hospitality industry. According to official figures, including the Ministry of Economy’s last national census in 2005, about 476,000 construction workers, and 140,119 service/retail workers were recorded

\(^{127}\) Statistics indicating the numerical disparity between citizens and non-citizens are notoriously sparse as this information is deemed to be politically sensitive.
from a total employed population of 982,296 (MEED 2007: 21, UAE Ministry of Economy 2005 Census: Table 5). Talib was among the latter category.

To be sure, the specter of a foreign majority or “demographic imbalance” is not new in public mediations of national identity in the UAE.\textsuperscript{128} A significant numerical disparity between citizens and non-citizens has long been a feature of Arab societies of the Gulf ever since the influx of migrant labour following the discovery of oil (Khalaf 2006: 245, 250). These years of population growth, however, saw official discourse and media coverage turn increasingly alarmist. High-ranking national and urban officials, along with academics, began representing the numerical disparity between citizens and non-citizens as a dilemma requiring expert “diagnosis” and policy “solutions” (Alittihiad 2007).\textsuperscript{129} Some, such as the Minister of Labour and Foreign Affairs, suggested the nation was at risk of dissolution teetering on the verge of “demographic collapse” (Khaleej Times 2005a, 2005b). Sensational though it may be, my research suggests that the minister’s anxiety was indeed widely shared among government employees. But it coincided with another—sometimes explicitly reformist—position: the coordinates of Emirati national identity and the UAE’s reception regime require rethinking. The well-known Emirati academic, Abdullah Abdulkhaleq, for example, described the challenge as already “lost” and argued in favour of accommodating foreigners as more permanent members of society (Abudllah 2007). Both prior to and following the onset of the crisis, there have been calls “to take this debate forward” (Gulf News 2008) by overcoming inclinations toward chauvinistic isolationism, and even extending citizenship to “expatriates” (Al Qassemi 2013). What runs throughout these various interventions—be they in English or Arabic newspapers (c.f. Albayan 2006, 2007, Al Khaleej 2011)—is the emphasis upon “imbalance” in pathological terms. The notion that an existential reckoning looms in the offing for the Emirati nation, and requires resolution, remains intact. What this discourse highlights, then, is the ethnocratic logic of a “cultural zero-sum game” (Longva 1997: 7) whereby the more foreign matter accumulates the more the nation is at risk of cultural dissolution. An attempt to address these anxieties came with the massive ‘National Identity

\textsuperscript{128} It was already an occasional subject of concern in Arabic news media even before the real estate boom and population surge (c.f. Albayan 2000).

\textsuperscript{129} As Dresch notes, claims of “demographic imbalance” have always cast it as temporary and subject to eventual correction (2006: 201).
Conference’ in 2008, and the declaration by Sheikh Khalifa of Abu Dhabi that the same year was officially “UAE national identity year”.

My conversations with employees of the Dubai government, however, suggest that the specter of “demographic imbalance” was not based on a homogenous view of foreigners. They often distinguished the city’s population of lower-income transmigrants as a particular type of non-citizen: short-term economic emissaries of dependents in their home countries. The menial categories of work they occupied were assumed to render them an especially flexible labour force for the “transitional phase” of Dubai’s growth. “In a few years many [projects] will be finished, and many of them, they will leave”, I was told by a municipal employee in June of 2008, just prior to the onset of the city’s real estate collapse.  

Yet while these city employees were describing lower-income transmigrants as a temporary imbalance of foreigners, the city limits were rapidly expanding with yet other foreigners as residents of New Dubai. Appeals for demographic solutions, however, have refrained from targeting these foreigners as they represent the novel category of “freehold investors”. Capable of affording to reside in New Dubai, this category of non-citizen is inextricably associated with Dubai’s new urbanity and the opportunities for cosmopolitanism it offers.

Standing on the other side of the Burj, these were not opportunities available to Talib. The “architectural strategy” of the superlative on show in ‘New Dubai’ was not for him to revel in (Elsheshtawy 2010: 105). Nevertheless, the municipal emphasis on policing him and the “overcrowding” he stands for coincided with the emergence of this architectural strategy and together they reflected a new (political) regimentation of urban space. Specifically, the superlative urbanism of New Dubai that initially took shape in the urban periphery occurred in spite of the municipality, as so-called “master-developers” (e.g. EMAAR and Nakheel) consistently ignored its zoning and planning codes. The municipality’s interventions targeting “bachelors” in the urban core, therefore, must be understood in the context of this emergent urban politics.

130 Interview with Dubai Municipality employee, July 16, 2008.
As I demonstrated in chapter one, these master-developers were not removed from Dubai’s state apparatus. Officially referred to as “Government Related Entities” (GRE’s), they were led by high-ranking members of the city’s “neo-patrimonial network” who often concurrently participated in such governmental bodies as The Executive Council (Davidson 2005: 73). Tasked with realizing the Sheikh’s “vision” of a modern metropolis, they were at the forefront of the urban entrepreneurialism that saw massive development projects designed, marketed and sold in quick succession. The neoliberal logic of relieving capital from oversight that underpinned this entrepreneurialism, initially rendered them exceptional institutions beyond the reach of the municipality to easily regulate.

In a conversation about those years with a municipal employee at 2012 Cityscape event in Dubai, for example. I was told: “It was not planned properly…their managers were very bad. The new master plan will not be like that, it will fix it.” I note this encounter because the sentiment that the development of New Dubai was riddled with mismanagement was something that I encountered repeatedly in my interviews with governmental employees. Until the real estate collapse, these longstanding governmental bodies had seen their political standing in this city-state wane in the face of institutional innovations such as The Executive Council. These innovations saw the municipality, a long-standing command and control center in Dubai’s state apparatus, decidedly outflanked.

I contend that it was partly because the Dubai municipality was unable to exert itself upon master-developers and the graduated sovereignty they enjoyed, that it instead focused more vigorously on the inner city by campaigning against the problem of “overcrowding”. The politics at play here were not just the stuff of private conversation. Municipal officials, at times, even publicly distinguished their jurisdiction from the freehold projects of master-developers, stressing that older “residential areas” were at risk (Khan 2008). To the best of my knowledge, this demarcation was de facto. These “residential areas” were usually neighbourhoods composed of older villas that had, until recently, been inhabited mostly by Emiratis. The municipal policing of these spaces were thus an exercise in what Kanna has called the “politics of protection”, whereby the political legitimacy of the state is imagined in terms of shielding the citizenry from

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131 He was referring to Dubai’s latest master plan being showcased by the municipality at the event.
the alleged dangers of “demographic imbalance” (2011: 55-61). Yet there was also more to this: at a time when new configurations of urban management had seen master-developers generate a superlative urbanism, the municipality’s reiteration of cultural anxiety with foreign matter can be construed as an attempt to recoup some of its relevance in the political apparatus of this city-state. Though its authority over urban planning in what was emerging as “New Dubai” was eclipsed, it could look to reassert its authority to regulate concentrations of non-citizens in the urban core. More specifically, it was the proximity of “bachelors” to the national body that required a regime of removal to disentangle them (Peutz 2006). By publically positioning itself at the forefront of ‘correcting’ urban demographics, it was not only acknowledging the cultural anxiety that was increasingly the subject of public discourse but—in effect—claiming to stand in as a bulwark for the Emirati nation by undertaking such removal. In this respect it occupied a political position that master-developers could not insofar as they represented the very ethos of transformation.

Before I turn to this regime of removal, however, it is necessary to explain the social practices enabling so-called “bachelor accommodations” and the “overcrowding” attributed to them.

4 Rent and Custodian Citizenship

As in other Arab societies of the Gulf, the differentiation between citizens and non-citizens in the UAE is largely produced through a dual regime of risk management. Whereas the former enjoy a broad ensemble of cradle-to-grave social rights, the latter are generally left to mitigate risk in the free market according to their employment contracts. The kafala is arguably the keystone upholding this differentiation, and also informs the arrangement of “bachelor accommodations” in which Talib resided. As I explained in the introduction, this institution regulates the entry and residency status of migrants through the contractual needs of their employer (either a citizen or corporate entity) who is at once their sponsor as well. Where foreign labour is required by small retailers, arrangements are usually made by managers (Talib’s arbāb) who often recruit fellow nationals. Yet even here the kafil plays a mediatory role as such businesses legally require an Emirati majority-partner for operating within the city (rather than within Free Trade Zones). Where these inner city retailers hire expatriates, their places of residence also tend to be arranged
and are either in the same building as their shop or one nearby. Hence, the grouping together of such staff in single accommodations often reflects their sponsorship by a single kafil.

Property, as I elaborated in chapter two, has been a key category through which formally prescribed differences between citizens and non-citizens are socially articulated. In addition to being legally limited to the former until recently, the granting of land (minḥa) has been tied to such milestones as marriage. Similarly, citizens in lower income brackets have been allowed to apply for low-interest government loans to buy or develop properties.\(^{132}\) So whereas foreigners were limited to the option of rent, citizens were well positioned to conscript tenants. The practice of renting to non-citizens has thus complemented the institution of kafala as a vehicle for citizens to offset risk by extracting revenue from foreigners. Emiratis who, upon moving out, rent their inner city villas to large numbers of working class transmigrants extend the conscription of flexible labour.\(^{133}\)

Sometimes rental arrangements can occur even while an Emirati family still resides in the property. One of my interlocutors, Khalid, was a thirty six year old Emirati of Iranian descent who had modified his family’s villa — located in Al-Bada’a, just north of Satwa — to feature a separate entrance to what was originally a storage area.

A smooth, flat, non-descript wooden door painted in white. Into a small washroom. White linoleum floor tiles on their way to yellow. White ceramic tiles on the wall repelling florescent lighting. A green ceramic sink on top of a white ceramic stand. A small gas stove on top of a small cupboard overlooking the sink. Another wooden door. Into a small bedroom. Two triple-decker bunk beds of the kind usually seen in Dubai: tubular aluminum frames painted in black. Five dishevelled beds: thin foam mattresses, crumpled blankets, suitcases, and a man sleeping.

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\(^{132}\) In late 2006, for example, the Dubai based Mohammad Bin Rashid Housing Establishment was set up with the goal of providing 10,000 villas for citizens, and AED12 billion of funding to this end. This policy has facilitated the gradual movement of many Emiratis away from the inner city in terms that invite comparisons with the phenomenon of ‘white flight’. See, Davis (1990; reprinted 2006).

\(^{133}\) Where they do not also sponsor these tenants, they provide these spaces to small businesses employing such labour, or individuals delegated the responsibility to seek out their own accommodations.
“Who lives here?” I asked. “They’re four Bangladeshis and a Pakistani. They’re my gardeners; the Pakistani is a taxi driver”. I was puzzled. “You have a garden?” I asked. I had not seen one while in his villa. “No!” He laughed. “They work for me, they go to other people’s houses”.

Khālid was looking to fill the other spot. He had added the second bunk bed earlier that year because rents were steadily climbing in his neighbourhood; it was July 2008 and Dubai was still booming. He explained he had wanted to take advantage of the rental market even sooner, but that he had refrained from doing so owing to his wife’s objections. “She doesn’t like this…she says three is enough,” he said.

I consider Khālid’s opportunistic rent seeking as an exercise in agentive citizenship working to reproduce a normative hierarchy of belonging. I take citizenship, here, to be a moving configuration of formally prescribed rights, informal social practices and cultural logics working to differentiate people according to such a hierarchy. In framing citizenship this way I reiterate recent scholarship on the Gulf highlighting the active participation of citizens in national discourses and state projects (Kruse 2008, Gardner 2010, Kanna 2011, Vora 2013). These accounts look to complicate the simplistic rendering of citizenship often found in formulations of rentier-state theory. This school of socio-political analysis has tended to dominate scholarship about the Persian Gulf ever since it was originally formulated by the Iranian economic, Hossein Mahdavy (1970). It has suggested that citizens are politically pacified owing to a lack of political rights, and economic largesse at the hands a rentier state (Beblawi 1987, Davidson 2005). In effect, then, citizenship is here is reduced to a technology of coercion based upon the labour-averse principle of homo-economics; a social type in its own right, and one that still informs expert knowledge of these Persian Gulf societies (Kamrava and Babar 2012: 3-7).

The more encompassing tripartite understanding of citizenship that I am proposing here is intended to avoid this economistic reading. As a sponsor-cum-landlord, I suggest, Khālid represents a capillary extension of state power working to actively manage socio-economic relations. This capacity results from activating the bundle of social and economic rights that formally render him a national subject endowed with the capacity to conscript foreign labour, own property in the (inner) city, and conscript this labour as tenants. This mobilization of foreign employees-cum-tenants and the informal modification of his villa to house them, valorize his social identity as someone belonging to this nation by way of being an intermediary to other
nationals. As Dresch points out, Emiratis prefer not to rent from other Emiratis; for this would be to forfeit the position of the citizen custodian for that of the foreigner client instead (2006: 210).

The contractual nature of sponsorship extends beyond the formalities of employment insofar as it also connotes a moral contract. As Gardner puts it, there is “slippage” between the kafala as “legal arrangement” and a “cultural practice” (2010: 58). This slippage, to be more specific, occurs between the double senses in which the kafil is presumed to act as caretaker.

One the one hand, he is responsible towards his foreign employee. In addition to appropriately managing their pay and work conditions, this also extends to their living accommodations where these employees are also conscripted as tenants, as in Khălid’s case. As I show in the following section, the discourse of “bachelor accommodations” also identified these tenants as being at risk and thus ostensibly requiring policing for their own sake as well those of their neighbors.

On the other hand, as a capillary of state, Khălid is also positioned on frontlines of the nation’s engagement with foreign matter. In this regard, the kafil is presumed to be the first to mitigate the risk of moral hazards associated with al-wāfidīn by cancelling the visas of the offending individual he sponsors. He is imagined as someone who is entrusted with defending normative conceptions of moral order. Staying with Khălid, I contend that his wife’s concern about the number of his employees-cum-tenants was informed by this moral imperative: that judgment is required to balance the desire for extracting rent with the duty to secure the national body against an excess of foreign matter and the risk of moral pollution that such excess exacerbates.

This morally inflected logic of sponsorship, and the combination of roles by means of which Khălid mediates the presence of these men as foreigners — sponsor, employer, landlord and moral police — may be described as custodian citizenship. The motif of custodianship is intended to emphasize not only the active pursuit of clientelist arrangements—involving prescribed rights, informal practices and, yes, economic interests—but also the widespread cultural logic of social mediation shared among Gulf societies and its moral underpinnings. This logic should be familiar by now. Indeed, it was precisely this notion of custodianship that informed the two paradigms of property I elaborated in the previous chapter and my middle class interlocutors’ engagement with them. Namely, proxy ownership prior to pre-freehold, and the sense of New Dubai as a grand project overseen by a sovereign inviting non-citizens to (literally) own a piece of it.
It is the performance of custodian citizenship, here, that has enabled the proliferation of “bachelor accommodations”. However, while this configuration of citizenship sheds light on alignments between nationalist discourses, the reception regime and social practices, it is also clearly laden with tension. Khālid’s performance of custodian citizenship extended state processes and dignified him as a national subject endowed with moral authority. Yet it also allegedly exposes the nation to the risks associated with “overcrowding”. An underlying tension thus emerges between the kafil as an economic agent implicated in state processes and as a moral custodian defending the social fabric of his society. These are incommensurable kinds of persons, and Khālid was acting was both. The increasing numbers of “bachelors” inhabiting formerly Emirati residences represent the pursuit of greater rental income as enabled by the kafala. However, they also represent a presumed moral hazard to the Emiratis still living in these neighbourhoods by situating them in greater proximity to concentrations of the more transient segments of foreign matter. It is this impasse that renders these “bachelors” ‘out of place’ within the city. Their “overcrowding” in what have been traditionally Emirati neighbourhoods dramatically collapses the socio-spatial distance between the citizenry and more transient segments of foreign matter, the maintenance of which underpins the moral order of “ethnocracy” (Longva 2005). It is in this impasse that “bachelors” risk ensnarement as state interventions aim to keep this socio-spatial distance intact by regulating landlord-tenant arrangements.

5 “Houses and villas are for families only”

A few weeks prior to leaving Dubai, I let Talib know that I planned to return later in the year. “I hope I’ll still be here when you do”, he said. Upon inquiring what he meant, he explained that if Satwa should eventually be redeveloped he would once again have to find a new employer and place of residence. “[The crew] are good guys and I don’t want to start from the beginning again…it wasn’t easy finding this place!”

His concerns were well founded as he had already been displaced once before in Dubai. Upon first arriving in the city in 2005 he had secured work in an Iranian-operated grocery in Deira with the help of his cousins. His first residence was a two-bedroom apartment that he shared with some fifteen men. This space was subletted to his former arbāb (the manager of the grocery) by another Iranian migrant who previously resided there with his family. After a year he was
abruptly forced to move. The landlord informed his tenants one morning that the real estate company managing the building had given him notice to reduce their numbers to just five. “We only had a week to find another place…that’s how I came [to Satwa]”, he recalled.

The pressure placed on his landlord was very likely part of a much publicized “eviction drive” targeting “bachelors” by the municipality in 2007, which came on the heels of the population surge (Sengupta 2007). In the few years preceding this drive, media coverage had increasingly noted cases of “overcrowding” in villas in the inner city (Mirza 2004). By early 2006, in keeping with the de facto separation of territorial authority noted above, the municipality declared it was in the process of inspecting “residential areas” in the urban core to identify such villas (Ahmed 2006). These villas were being interchangeably referred to as “shared villas” or “bachelor accommodations” and were located in what used to be traditionally Emirati neighbourhoods, and usually still housing some Emirati families (Shalini 2005, Ahmed 2004). While such classifications remained vague in this discourse of “overcrowding”, what was expressly clear was that the quintessential inhabitant responsible for overcrowding was the “bachelor”. By February, municipal inspectors had already identified 835 villas housing an estimated 15,000–20,000 lower-income man (Ahmed 2006). By July of 2007, approximately a year-and-a-half later, the tally of these villas had reached 1,800 (Glass 2007). These efforts were complimented by detailed coverage in newspapers, with journalists accompanying inspectors to inner city districts that had previously been mostly inhabited by citizens. The usual list included older districts such as Jaffilia, Rashidiya, Abu Hail and Satwa featuring a concentration of villas. One such exercise targeted a villa in Satwa not far from Talib’s building, describing it to be dark and crammed with the belongings of no less than eighty South Asian men (Khan 2009). Imagery of “horrible living conditions” was intended to give credence to the official rationale that these accommodations were unfit for their own inhabitants. They were depicted as increasing the potential for disease due to lack of hygiene, a fire hazard to their surroundings, and ultimately a risk to their neighbourhoods.

These interventions continued before culminating in the municipality’s “One Villa, One Family” campaign in April 2008. Posters began appearing in parts of the city rampant with “shared accommodations” showcasing idealized family members extolling the virtues of safety, healthy living, and privacy (Figure #8). The urgency of this campaign was attributed to the need to disentangling “bachelors” from families — the villa being as an ostensibly familial space — far
more so than limiting multiple families in sharing a villa. It took specific aim at “partitioned villas” or “illegal subdivisions” where landlords maximized the rental space of their villas by installing plywood to create additional rooms, each with their share of bunk-beds. Some 41,000 units have been inspected since the beginning of the campaign, with a total of 474 instances of “bachelors living in residential areas” recorded in 2010 (WAM 2010, Ahmed 2011).

It was a revelation, therefore, when the municipality conceded in February of 2009 that there was actually no law preventing “bachelors” from residing in “residential areas” or villas. While inspectors had been steadfast in their insistence that “houses and villas are restricted to families only” (Khan and Nilufar 2007), the rhetoric shifted to stressing the association between “bachelors” and crime; despite claims by the Criminal Investigation Department to the contrary (Ahmed 2011).

These media representations and municipal interventions inscribed the very condition of “overcrowding” onto this mass-mediated persona. Through this social type, the presence of economically underprivileged or working class transmigrants in the urban core, from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, is acknowledged only insofar as it requires correction. Whether they seek out shared accommodations on their own volition or are allocated to them by their kafil, their bachelorization reduces them to spaces unfit for habitation and the propensity for crime. They are at once vulnerable and threatening: on the one hand, they are represented as so docile and hapless as to require formal intervention in order to mitigate the risks their own living conditions expose them to; on the other, they are also deemed to be actively eroding the sanctity

\[^{134}\text{If landlords failed inspections, they were given notice to evict their tenants.}\]
Figure #8. Ads from Dubai Municipality’s One Villa, One Family campaign.
of families, thereby requiring the protection of the latter. In either scenario, the “bachelor” emerges as a polluting presence — physically and morally — for being misplaced in the city.

In this respect, the hundreds of thousands of construction workers, popularly referred to as “labourers”, that are housed in labour camps in Dubai’s outer districts such as Al-Quz, Jebel Ali and Al-Muhaisanah do not disrupt this moral order. Insofar as these places they are segregated from families, the foreign men that are gathered in them do not immediately threaten the sanctity of “residential areas” (read ‘Emirati neighbourhoods’) (Dubai Statistics Center 2007). This is not to suggest that this much larger presence of foreigners is absent in the anxiety over “demographic imbalance”. It is only to emphasize that the identification of “overcrowding”, the social type explicitly associated with it (“bachelors”) and the strategies of correction they are subjected to (i.e. eviction) reflect and reinforce a differentiated moral geography rather than a discrete numerical reality. It is a moral geography, to be more specific, in that it is based upon the premise that certain kinds of people naturally coincide with certain kinds of places, and that when this order is disrupted wrongs will accumulate. The “bachelor”, then, is essentially linked to a kind of place that represents such a disruption: inner city accommodations where foreign matter is in overabundance rather than in camps in the urban periphery. The social transience of this social type is thus amplified. In addition to already being a foreigner supposedly unattached in any meaningful way to Dubai and focused upon his dependents elsewhere, he is represented as a misplaced urban inhabitant that will eventually either return home or afford to live alone when the rental market corrects itself.

This moral geography is also highly gendered. The Dubai municipality actually defines “bachelors” as any “single” man or woman (Glass 2007). Yet, remarkably, media representations of “bachelor accommodations” are almost entirely bereft of scenes depicting the huddled bodies of women. Nor has the discourse of “overcrowding” focused on immoral behaviours specifically pertaining to women. This is not because women are absent from shared accommodations or somehow not at risk of eviction. The district adjacent to Satwa called Al-Bada’a, for example, features a significant population of working class Filipino men and women often residing in the same villa. It too has been subjected to inspections and evictions. This elision of women living in

135 Bristol-Rhys has noted this distinction with regard to Abu Dhabi as well (2012).
such accommodations in the inner city produces a substantive conflation between
“overcrowding” and spaces exclusively inhabited by men. “Overcrowding” is thus represented as
a largely male misplacement and overabundance of foreign matter. Indeed, as I noted in the
introduction, this moral panic surrounding “demographic imbalance” continues to coincide with
occasional coverage of another demographic problem: “gender imbalance”. Although not nearly
as widely addressed as the question of Emirati population and identity, it is nevertheless worth
noting. While not as prescriptive as commentary on bachelor accommodations, the overriding of
this imbalance is repeatedly identified as an abundance of foreign men (Hilotin 2008, Thomas

The qualifier “single” thus bears particular significance on precisely this note: a mass of
unattached men is supposedly incommensurate with the institution of family. As John Borneman,
for example, notes with regard to the large numbers of men seeking asylum in the US during the
1980 Cuban boatlift, this incommensurability was politically charged as the categories of
‘family’ and ‘nation’ were conflated in the discursive apparatus of the receiving regime, and
posited in contrast to ‘single’ and ‘foreign’ in reference to these men (Borneman 2004). Given
the focus on inner city neighbourhoods still inhabited by Emiratis, “family” here connotes
families of citizens. A not so subtle conflation, then, was occurring between the family and
nation. The overabundant misplacement “bachelors” was thus an intrusion upon both. Yet its
urgency was not limited to the numbers of foreigners, but to its moral substance and potency as
the intrusion of single men.

Nevertheless, it must also be noted that “bachelors” (as men) hardly have a monopoly over moral
pollution in public discourse. Foreign woman employed in the domestic sphere as servants are
also regularly identified as morally dubious. This intimacy with the Emirati family has rendered
them prone to accusations of adultery, impudence and emotional manipulation in news media.
The mass of “bachelors” (often represented as men) in proximity to Emirati households, and the
individual domestic servant (often represented as a woman) within them thus complement one
another as sources of risk between and against which this national household is situated and
discursively rendered.
6  Friction and Irony

6.1  The Social Infrastructure of Travel

While Talib inhabited the social type of the “bachelor”, he did not do so in an explicitly reflexive fashion. He was not an active member of the reading publics (either English or Arabic) who could afford the time, access and language proficiency necessary to regularly receive the discourse of “overcrowding”. Reading newspapers was not routine practice among his crew during their twelve to fifteen-hour work days, or the few hours late at night when they retired to their apartment to engage in communal eating and drinking. Talib’s limited uptake of this discourse was common, I believe, to working class transmigrants in Dubai. This is not to say that he or his crew was unaware of such categories and their evaluative content. While they did not receive this public discourse they did receive ‘the public’ everyday on the sidewalks and in their shops. In the banality of these exchanges — in the content and tone of bargaining, hailing, anecdotes, introductions, personal narratives, passing comments etc. — their social status as foreigners, working menial jobs, and living apart from their families informed their interpolation as transient and socio-economically underprivileged. Thus while the term “bachelor” was not an oft-cited topic of deliberation among them, they were well aware of their situation in the normative hierarchy of belonging that the discourse about this type reproduced.

It was perhaps this knowledge of his transience, his dispensability to the vision of Dubai steadily encroaching upon his neighbourhood, which informed Talib’s silence that evening in front of the Burj, and his call for a quick return. His journey to the Burj, nevertheless, suggests a struggle with this status. In covertly exiting Satwa to confront Dubai’s most celebrated symbol of modernity, he was challenging his exclusion from a vision of its future by momentarily attempting to inhabit it.

This exclusion, however, was predicated upon his incorporation into Dubai’s economic boom as part of the influx of “unskilled” labour essential to realizing this vision; the pliable stuff of urban transformation. This structural contradiction and that between the practice of custodian citizenship and official efforts to police “bachelors” are indicative of what Anna Tsing describes as “friction”, or “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of [global] interconnection” (Tsing 2005: 4). Here I further elaborate the socio-cultural substance of this friction and the irony it involves by elaborating the personhood Talib was pursuing while
inhabiting this social type. First, I further examine Talib’s travel to Dubai in terms of the “social infrastructure” that had facilitated it. This, I suggest, also informs their concentration within the city; but for very different reasons than the official discourse I describe above. Second, I also begin to examine how these interlocutors imagined their life in Dubai, and some of their own categories of practice in this regard. This will involve analysis of the “ethical criteria” (Lambek 2010: 42-50) according to which this life was conceived as a moral project, the conduct appropriate to successfully practice it, and the ends to which it aspired.136

To begin with, if Mahdī had arranged apartment accommodations for his crew it was not just to avoid the economic losses he would incur should they be evicted from a villa. There was more at stake here. The recruitment of working class Iranians in Dubai’s inner city retailers is generally not arranged by intermediary agencies. Unlike their South Asian and Filipino neighbours residing in villas who—as my research suggests—were largely recruited through such agencies in their countries of origin on behalf of corporations or citizen-sponsors, Talib and his crewmembers were recruited through Mahdī’s interpersonal network between Dubai and his small hometown in southern Iran. They were not conscripted into the “transnational labour brokerage system” (Gardner 2013: 42) that is responsible for organizing the recruitment of most of the Gulf’s working class population from abroad, and mostly from South and East Asia. Rather, the transnational arrangements by means of which Talib arrived here were a more informal and interpersonal affair. This is also why they physically consolidated these Iranian men and youth in certain places (i.e. a small retailer run by a fellow Achumi master) and not others (e.g. a labour camp managed by a subcontractor to a master-developer).

It was chain-migration, and relied on channels of communication linking the crews of these inner city auto-shops to their various hometowns in southern Iran, and the shared knowledge about Dubai that was relayed through them. These were sustained through the kind of “phatic labour” (Elyachar 2010: 453) that I described earlier. This was the kind of work sustaining these transnational communicative channels. And given the intrinsically interpersonal nature of “phatic labour”, then, it is not surprising that Mahdī’s crew largely composed of people from his hometown, his extended family, or the relations of his friends and fellow Iranian businessmen in

136 I elaborate the notion of “ethical criteria” and its relevance to the everyday lives of these interlocutors in the following chapter.
Satwa and Dubai more generally. In this regard these transnational channels of communication were infrastructural in their functioning: they facilitated the movements of people (labour) and things (money).

Yet, unlike concrete urban infrastructure and the bureaucratic infrastructure of recruitment agencies, the functioning of this social infrastructure was morally charged. It was underpinned by reciprocity, filiation, and a shared conception of moral goods and the kinds of men who facilitate and pursue them. More specifically, the strength of these channels of chain migration was synonymous with the reputation and moral standing of the men arranging them. This latter point is worth elaborating.

The moral standing of the master in this transnational social network extended, in part, from the welfare of his crew. The event of an eviction would have potentially diminished this standing and maybe even jettison him from this network for unduly exposing his crew to legal sanction. Mitigating such exposure is a shared concern in such networks largely owing to the widespread practice of informal work. Younger crewmembers, especially, were often recruited for short-term work in Dubai through “visit visas”, rather than the more bureaucratically cumbersome and costly “work permit” that is accompanied by a “residence visa”, and which requires a formal sponsor (see chapter six). As a corollary, crewmembers were also obliged to conduct themselves not only with a view to prove their worth as employees to their arbâb, but also to the individual(s) who facilitated their recruitment; lest the latter’s concern for Mahdî, or the value of their judgment come under question. Any behaviour on their part, then, that would heighten this risk was equally unacceptable.

6.2 “They’ll say he’s become his own man”

Yet the moral criteria according to which this circuit of migration is practiced exceeded the implicit stuff of transnational labour arrangements. For these interlocutors, shared expectations about how various actors within this transnational circuit ought to conduct themselves were informed by a broader moral project that these arrangements are imagined to be a part of. Traveling to Dubai in search of work was indeed such a project: it was a striving toward ends ensuing from a sense of how one ought to live with and for others to whom they are obliged. The
kind of moral project that I am describing here, more specifically, was a temporally delimited affair: a striving occurring and conceived of as *a part* of one’s life. Put simply, there was an arrival to Dubai, there was a life lived there, and there was a return as a potentially different kind of person for having lived this life. It was a self-making project unfolding from and focused towards one’s familial obligations.

In this regard, my findings depart from recent scholarship that tends to stress the economic motivations informing the intentions of lower income migrants to the Persian Gulf (Nagy 2006: 123, Gardner 2010: 74, 77).  

In the cultural imaginary of the small towns from which these Iranians hail—largely in the southern Iranian province of Hormuzgan and the southern region of Fars—journeying to Gulf cities is generally conceived as a distinctly manly undertaking, while women are presumed to remain bound to their homes/hometowns in Iran. It is associated with the pursuit of respectable masculinity. It was toward this end that Talib was striving. In doing so, he was necessarily assuming the status of a *khalij-boro*; literally, “Gulf-goer”. In the lexicon of difference practiced by such working class Iranians, the *khalij-boro* is a social type that they identify with and regard as representative of their segment of Iranians living in Arab cities of the Gulf: namely, tradesmen and small retailers generally operating in the inner city, and hailing from southern Iran. Yet the *khalij-boro* also represents something more, especially for younger crewmembers: it was a mode of life contingent upon travel, the endurance of hardship, perseverance, and the material support of dependents left behind. It was also a distinctly gendered self-making project, whereby a potential masculinity is gradually cultivated at a distance from filial relations, albeit with the aim of attending to these relations.

A couple of the conversations I first had with some of these crews are worth briefly considering. They were late into the night, during the communal dinner following the end of the work day.

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137 To be sure, older scholarship on migration to the Persian Gulf also took this economistic calculus for granted. Yet they did so within an analytic paradigm that also took for granted the nation-state and so-called “push” and “pull” factors that are more oriented toward policy formulation (for example: Rashid 1989, Nambiar 1995). If I note this tendency in recent scholarship, however, it is because these works do not take the nation-state for granted and because my work extends from and speaks to this particular generation of research. See Kamrava and Babar (2012) for a further critique of methodological nationalism informing older studies of migration in the Gulf.
These occasions had initially been an awkward affair when I was still getting to know these men and youth. Abiding by their conventions of hosting, they took care not to speak too frankly or to take my presence for granted by failing to continue offering me food and drink. But it was also during these initial engagements that much about our differences was explicitly discussed.

There was hardly any furniture. It was worn, dimly lit, and smelled of cigarettes. It was late, past midnight. As always, we were gathered around the sofreh (the “spread” of food) on the floor, and began to drink before dinner was served. It was after dinner, much joking, and even a little bit of poetry from the master, Reza, that most of the crew began settling into their thin foam mattresses. But this was the first time they were hosting an Iranian-Canadian, which was reason enough for some, including Reza, to stay up and further get better acquainted. The poem he had sung had painted a stark and unwelcoming picture of Dubai, and I was impatient to learn more: just what was the attraction, then, if this place was so off-putting? Reza did not mince words:

Reza: Our customers have more money here. So earning money here is easier.

Another Crewmember: There are a lot of ‘lord[s]’ here (using the English word; injā lord ziāde). So they spend more money, and they don’t haggle as much. In Iran if people see some of these prices, they’ll laugh at you. But here people pay it.

Reza: Even when they haggle you, they still pay more than over there.

Behzad: (later on in the conversation) “Is it necessary to travel to the Gulf?

Reza: What do you mean?

Behzad: If a man doesn’t go to the Gulf to work, is this frowned upon?

Reza: No. Many go to other places, like Shiraz. It’s common.

Behzad: So it’s not expected to travel to the Gulf.

Reza: Many come here, but others make money elsewhere.

Behzad: What if they don’t go anywhere?

Reza: That’s not good. I mean, if they don’t have [adequate] income (darāmad) there...then those who stay, we say that he doesn’t have honour (migim yāroo gheirat nadāreh); that they’re not willing to endure hardship (nemikhān sakhtī bekeshan).
Many of these categories—especially “honour” (gheirat)—would go on to fill the pages of my field notes in the coming months. I would learn more about the moral geography that informed the journeys of crews such as this, the ends they were pursuing while here in Dubai, and kinds of people they imagined themselves being (or becoming) for doing so. The other vignette I offer here was one such learning experience.

It was around midnight and we were all gathered around the sofreh on the floor, again, as we began to eat from a large round aluminum salver. This time, I was visiting Talib’s crew. One of the crew inquired whether one is expected to support one’s parents in Canada. I do not recall my response—never having bothered to record it in my field notes—but I do recall that it elicited a shared effort on the part of my hosts to explain the significance of doing so for them. It began with a reaction from Mahdi, the master:

Mahdi: You know, for us it’s important. Every so often, I send my father money. He’s very old. It always delights him, and he prays for me.

Behzad: How so?

Mahdi: We say that the prayer of a parent is more valuable; it has more meaning. A friend’s blessing is also good, but we say it’s “from the tongue”...a parent’s blessing is from the heart.

Behzad: How often do you send money?

Mahdi: It varies. Some guys send most of their pay...others not. But you can’t send nothing, even if your family doesn’t need such money. It’s offensive.

Talib: [Interjecting, but taking care not to interrupt Mahdi] It’s also important to save your money. When I return, I won’t need my father’s sufrih138 anymore. I mean...they’ll say “he’s become his own man” (mīgan “mard-i khudish shud”).

Mahdi: Right. This is also common. Some of the guys save up to start their own businesses...[or] to build a house.

Here were some of the coordinates of this moral project: monetary remittances, a parent’s blessings, personal savings, a father’s sufrih, and independence from it. In my conversations with these crews in Satwa, it was particularly clear that possessing a home, even if only purchasing it, was inextricably attached to respectable masculinity. The heightened significance of home

138 Sufrih refers to the spread upon which meals are set.
ownership was informed by what it presumably facilitated: a family of one’s own. Associated with marriage, it was at once something of a moral capstone for many of the younger crewmembers in the narrative arch of life as a khalīj-boro—whether or not they continued working in the Gulf—and the material foundations for more graduated forms of self-making projects: namely, becoming the head of a family.

Friction, then, bears irony. The combination of circumstances lived as a khalīj-boro and the ends to which this mode of life was ostensibly committed rendered Talib a morally recognizable subject. Life away from one’s family, journeying to a foreign country, manual labour, and the homo-social setting of a small apartment with other men were not incidental to the cultivation of a potential masculinity. These are some of what were expected to be endured. They comprised part of the criteria by which everyday life was organized, lived, and charged with a moral teleology. The criteria, that is, of becoming one’s “own man”. Yet, as I have demonstrated, it was precisely some of these very circumstances in which he lived that were discursively seized upon in Talib’s typification as a “bachelor”. His moral project as a khalīj-boro originated in his commitment to his father’s household, and matured toward establishing his own; it’s imagined point of departure and terminus was family. Yet the configuration of structural processes, social practices and discourses that received Talib rendered him into another kind of morally recognizable subject: one allegedly inimical to the very institution of family, and requiring policing.

7 Conclusion

Talib’s arrival to Dubai coincided with an emergent urbanism. As ‘New Dubai’ rose in the urban periphery, its morphology and the lifestyles associated with it were celebrated as symbolically central to the city. Meanwhile, legions of working class foreigners continued concentrating in the urban core but were symbolically consigned as marginal.

My analysis has been intended as an instance of exploring this urbanism through the production of a social type, and some of the cultural imaginary of those who would be subject to it. The configuration of structural processes, social practices and discourses implicated in this production are moving, inflected with local politics, and experienced differently as Dubai’s
reception regime differentiates between nationalities, their labour arrangements, and modes of residency. I suggest, therefore, that while our analytical lens would benefit from panning away from this “archetypical figure” to capture the diversity of other migrant experiences, further insights remain to be had by also further focusing upon it; specifically, its social production. Indeed, every facet of the configuration that I have presented here itself bears further study in relation to the production of this type.

This is also necessary if we take seriously the invitation to examine local lexicons of social difference. Ironically, Ahmed’s observations about “bachelor workers”, for example, tend to elide the local circumstances of their identification as such. “As the term ‘bachelor worker’ implies”, she writes, “these men live without their families…outside of household contexts” (Ahmed 2012: 37). Yet while “bachelors” are without their immediate families they are clearly not entirely “outside of household contexts”. As I have explained, it was precisely the widespread proximity of working class transmigrants to Emirati households that resulted in their objectification as “bachelors”; a category reducing them to a concentrated mass of unattached foreign bodies.

Approaching the “bachelor” as a key figure, then, requires that we take stock of the circumstances in which such categories assume widespread intelligibility. Yet it also requires that we keep within view what such intelligibility omits or simplifies by virtue of being widespread. It is the scrutiny of their typicality itself, in other words, which it calls for. As a key figure, the “bachelor” is linked to lived experiences — among men and women of various nationalities—that a single ethnographic engagement cannot hope to exhaust. In my analysis, this key figure precariously stands at the intersection where the ethnocratic project of buffering the nation (as “family”) from an overabundance of underprivileged “single” foreigners, meets with a culturally mediated self-making project of respectable masculinity among my Iranian interlocutors.

I suggest that the key figures approach promises to bear fruit in the analysis of Gulf societies, where the tension between flexible accumulation and fortification of the nation is animated through a proliferation of social types and the bundles of meanings they carry. “Labourers”, “khādim-at al-manzil” (domestic servant), “Jumeriah Janes”, and “khudmūnī” (a colloquial expression for Emiratis of Iranian origin) are yet others social types in Dubai indexing particular
anxieties, identity politics and modes of residence. Each promises to offer a window into the historical configurations enabling their emergence, and the multiplicity of lived experiences their typicality renders out of focus.

In the chapter that follow, I further elaborate the shared moral imaginary according to which these working class Iranians understood their presence in Dubai, the social practices commensurate with the ends they thought to be pursuing, the politics that saw them interpolated as a particular kind of urban resident, and some of the moral struggles involved in sustaining this project of life as a khalij-boro.
CHAPTER 5
From Decay to Denial:
A Geography of Moral Breakdown

1 Moving Parts

It was usually later in the afternoon when I arrived at Satwa to visit the various Iranian auto-
shops located there. My mornings were for men and women in suits, offices, or gated
communities. Or perhaps their afternoons and evenings were not for me. In any case, I only ever
spent the mornings in Satwa when I had stayed there the night before, in the “bachelor
accommodations” of my interlocutors. This was usually once every other week. As for the early
afternoons, well, it was not very conducive to fieldwork. Satwa was located in the inner city, and
like most of Dubai’s older markets located there, the rhythm of work and street life slowed down
considerably during mid-day. This followed the first afternoon call to prayer, usually sometime
just past noon. I did not much care for it because it meant that I had to seek shelter in some
nearby restaurant. It was the combination of heat and humidity, and all the more so in the
summer. This was the time of day that required roving ethnographers to take stock of their
mornings, and collect themselves for whatever followed next. It was also around this time that
many of the crew, especially the elders, retired to their apartments for either lunch or an
afternoon nap. Very few of them actually prayed.

Between the time of their return to the shops and the uptick of the crowds in the early evening,
there would be a little gap: a window to hang out and talk before they’d be immersed in their
work again. It took some trial-and-error before I learned to time my visits just right to fall into
this little gap. Among my earlier field notes there are a set of numbers that I kept revising to this
end. “3-4” (scratched out), “4-5”.

Whenever I arrived, I’d find most of the crew either already seated on the white plastic chairs
arranged on the sidewalk near their store entrances, or beginning to trickle back. There was just
enough time to discuss a few random topics or exchange a few anecdotes over tea and cigarettes,
lots of cigarettes. The cooking back in their hometowns, the dating scene in Toronto, American
imperialism, those tourists speaking some weird European language. There was never a shortage
of material. At some point I began to notice that the younger men would never quite commit to these conversations: their bodies always slightly turned away, on the lookout, ready to receive the next honk, high-beam, or a passer-by-cum-customer. And when the customers arrived, it was usually the younger men who first broke away from the conversation.

Soon, most of them would be attending to one car or another. Hunched over the hood, tinkering with the radio settings, revving the engine, scraping windows clean of old tinting-paper with little razors, applying a new sheet, flattening out the air pockets, and so on. Sitting on the sidewalk, it could feel like a blur. Glossy colours, mechanical shrills, metallic shimmers, fenders-grills, front-lights, body parts jutting out of car parts.

These auto-shops relied on the public parking spaces immediately in front of their stretch of sidewalk for their unofficial space of work. These would usually be just a couple of spots per shop. Passing by, you’d see a couple of cars with (Iranian) men frantically buzzing around them, then a long stretch of cars in neglect as they awaited their owners, and another couple of cars with more (Iranian) men doing the same. When things got really crowded these spots would be reserved. Nothing fancy, just a large heavy-duty jack sitting in the middle of an empty parking spot acting like a beacon for some drivers and a warning to others.

There must have been some kind of public announcement or understanding about this practice because I never once saw a driver challenge them for these spots. This despite a constant shortage of parking in the area during the middle of the evening. Some police, however, had clearly not got the message. A few honks as they slowly drove by, a sharp glance at the jack, then one at a crewmember, and suddenly the ‘public’ parking spot was public again. I say ‘some’ police because others just drove by. In fact, on a couple of occasions even a greeting or two were exchanged instead. “Those ones, they’re good to us because they’re khod-e-mooni”, I was later told by a crewmember.

As a result of this arrangement, the quicker each car could be attended to, the quicker these limited spaces would open up, and the more cars these shops could receive. This explains the frenzy of bodies surrounding each car, especially as the late afternoon turned into evening and traffic picked up.
I’d try not to look too out of place while just sitting there. No one other than a crewmember on a quick cigarette break would take notice of me. But one evening a customer asked me a question about upholstery. I pointed her in the right direction. And then, flush with pride for knowing the right answer, it suddenly occurred to me: ‘Wait, what the fuck?! Why didn’t this happen sooner? I’ve been sitting on this damn chair for two months now?!’ I stopped wearing my sunglasses on my head after that.

As these nights wore on I’d observe crewmembers in the incessant stream of ordinary acts that constituted their work: the rush of technical exertions and the bodily movements they involved (most honed to the point of automation, others still uncertain); the manner of engagement with customers of different sorts, each other, and their masters; the relaying of information or queries between auto-shops along the street; the momentary rest before the next car.

There was also another set of numbers in my field notes; also from when I was first getting to know these interlocutors in Satwa. These numbers represented the winding down of the workday: always late into the evening. By then the hustle and bustle had long subsided. There was often a playful sense of relief sometimes coupled with more serious talk about goings-on that day as these men started to break from work and settle once again into their plastic chairs on the sidewalk, or air-conditioned shops. First, the more senior members would break away from work. They’d be followed by the rest of the crew when the necessary tools and equipment had been put away in their proper place for the following day. “10-12”, (scratched out) “11-12”.

It was when I first lingered around until then that one of the masters, Sallāh, invited me to join them for dinner. Not wanting to impose, I respectfully declined. The next time that I stayed until closing there was more insistence behind the invitation. This time I decided to join them, not wanting to wear out my welcome. If I was still plotting numbers by then, they might’ve read “11-2” (scratched out), “12-1”.

That night, when the aluminum shutters finally rolled down, we headed into a short alleyway near the shop. We turned into another one. Now we were on the other side of the apartment buildings lining the main street (Satwa Road) onto which all the shops in the area opened. The urban landscape from here on was flat: mostly old villas interrupted by narrow residential roads. There was also the occasional empty patch of dirt with iron rods poking out of bits of cement: remnants of villas that had gotten up and left. The contrast with the other side of the building was
dramatic. Even with most of the shops closed and their signs turned off, the main street was still lit like a movie set thanks to the abundance of street lights. It was their yellow incandescent glow that lit our way through these alleyways.

A couple of pitch-black flights of stairs (there was no elevator). A door opening into a pitch-black apartment. A flick of the switch.

Sallāh looks at me as he steps on the heel of one of his shoes to take it off: “Do you like chicken? One of the guys has gone to get chicken (then the other heel). He’ll be here soon. Want to wash your hands?”

Buying dinner, as I came to learn, was an exception to their regular routine. It was for a night on the weekend, or when hosting an inquisitive Iranian-Canadian who keeps showing up. This was usually a younger crewmember who would retire from the shop ahead to the rest to begin preparing dinner at the apartment. Once again, it was nothing fancy; just some canned beans mixed with sliced hotdogs in a red sauce; lots of bread.

The crew and I gathered around on the floor of one of the rooms. The whole place was carpeted. I took my place. Cigarettes again. Only, this time, “Do you drink mashrub (Persian for ‘alcoholic drink’)”, asked Sallāh, smiling while brandishing a bottle of Johnny Walker, Black Label. I hate Scotch. I especially hate good Scotch. It’s usually offered with an expectation of eliciting comments (is this one ‘earthy’ or ‘smokey’? I never know). I gave out a shaky “of course”. Thankfully, no Scotch-talk followed.

It was while repeatedly participating in this nightly affair that I began to grow well acquainted with these crews. Here was an occasion to converse more directly: free from the regular interruptions of customers, the aloof disposition required while on duty, the concentration their tasks demanded, the sheer exhaustion. As my conversation in the previous chapter with Talib and his master suggests, here reasons could be given and implicit criteria made explicit. In doing so, reasons could also be challenged or reconsidered. More detailed advice could be offered with the intention of aiding fellow crewmembers—especially the younger recruits—in their efforts to meet the ongoing demands of everyday work and the know-how and practical judgment it required. The subject matter bore varying degrees of urgency and often arose in the flow of conversation: swinging from the quality of bargains struck with customers that day, encounters
with strangers passers-by, an ongoing legal predicament distressing one of the crew, the state of another’s health, the state of sales more generally, and so on.

My presence was also a part of all of this. These dinners were initially a more subdued and formal affair when I was still getting to know them. Abiding by the Iranian logic of hosting, these men took care not to speak too frankly or to take my presence for granted by failing to continue offering me food, drink, and cigarettes. Who was at risk of arrest for violating their visa, who was suffering from melancholy: these were not appropriate topics in the company of this Iranian guest visiting from Canada. But it was already by the third invitation that these were a much more boisterousness affair featuring no shortage of venting, joking, drinking and storytelling. In time, I’d come to learn that singing was also occasionally part of this mix.

2 Places, Actions, and their Reasons

In the previous chapter, I examined the ensemble of state practices—the reception regime, and municipal policing of working class migrants—public discourse, and local cultural logics that structured the social circumstances of these crews. I showed how all of this rendered them an especially transient segment of Dubai’s non-citizen population, and situated within a normative moral geography that was further politicized in those years. I argued that the objectification of “bachelors” as a misplaced social type was a constitutive part of this moral geography and their class position.

The urgency of the moral panic about their misplacement and the proliferation of shared accommodations in the inner city that it addressed are another vantage point into Dubai’s urban transformation. It was the same political economy of speculative urbanism, after all, that simultaneously sold the city through the eyes of a figure exceptional for ostensibly being related to everybody (the sheikh), while trying to shield it from a figure exceptional for ostensibly being related to nobody (the bachelor). However, by referring to the politics between master developers and the municipality I also further stressed the disorganized nature of this political economy, despite its autocratic foundation.

Finally, in taking up the “bachelor” as a key figure, I also shed some light on the shared imaginings of these working class Iranians about their presence in Dubai, and its moral charge.
In this chapter, I extend this analysis by examining their moral geography and its relation to their understandings of self-fashioning in Dubai. I do so, furthermore, with a view to compare the contents and vocabulary of this shared moral geography with that of my middle class interlocutors.

Between these visits to their places of work and residence, I grew to understand how these working class Iranian men and youth conceived of their presence in Dubai. As I mentioned before, life here was understood as a deliberate undertaking toward becoming a certain kind of person: the *khalij-boro* (Gulf-goer). While I would only gradually learn of the nature of this person—his motivations, the risks that concerned him, his presumed capacity to endure, the virtue this implies, and so on—I was almost immediately introduced to their shared sense of place about Dubai; that is, understandings of the nature of this place. As a place of undertaking, it was thought to offer opportunities that warranted a removal of oneself from the small towns in southern Iran. But it was also often discussed as a place of hardship and danger: somewhere that does not lend itself to the endurance of social bonds, somewhere that required one to always be on guard lest one is taken advantage of by people who do not mean what they say. Moreover, the fickle nature of social bonds in Dubai was never removed from conversations about the remarkable *speed* with which it had recently transformed. The frenzy of cars and bodies around them seemed to punctuate the point: things were hard to hold steady here.

The feeling that social relations were fleeting and at risk of being unreciprocated was often captured with the category of “nā-mardi”. Depending on the context, this notion could refer to “dishonour”, “unfairness” or “injustice” in standard Persian. Their oft-repeated invocations of this notion, however, bore other connotations. As I will show, it was posited as a catchall phrase in relation to Dubai as a place pervaded by injustices owing to the denial or disavowal of social ties; ties that should otherwise bind.\(^\text{139}\) I suggest, however, that this insecurity about the

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\(^{139}\) At its most literal, *nā-mardi* translates to “un”(*nā*)-“manly”(*mardi*). As this reference to being ‘unfair’ or ‘dishonourable’ is couched in terms of the negation of manliness, it may be viewed as indicative of the patriarchy underpinning normative gender realtions in Iranian society more generally. I initially highlighted this gendered connotation. I suggested that it clearly did the work of buttressing expectations of respectable masculinity among these men and youth. This did not stand up to scrutiny. Upon reconsideration, my ethnographic data does not suggest that any such work is “clearly” what its invocations did. Rather, my data suggests that *nā-mardi* as “unfairness” was imagined to be systemic, and
endurance of their social ties and its expression nā-mardi can also be read as a meta-commentary on the rapidity of speculative urbanism from the perspective of those whom it relegates to structural standstill (simultaneously exploited and excluded). Nā-mardi, in this case, was thus an immanently spatial category.

All of this, furthermore, was almost always elaborated in relation to Iran in some way or another. Explanations or even passing references to the kind of place that Dubai was—its offerings and demands—accompanied invocations of the state of life in Iran. This usually involved explanations of why life there was increasingly untenable, thereby justifying recourse to “this side of the khaleej (Gulf)”. This sense of place about Iran was also accompanied by an oft-cited category of practice: fesād, meaning “corruption”.

Here was a moral geography: a shared knowledge about Dubai and Iran as discrete and morally charged places requiring travel between them, and certain kinds of conduct while doing so. Places, actions, and their reasons.

In the following chapter, I focus more specifically on some of the imagined contents and actions comprising the “moral project” of being a khaliţ-boro: that is, its lexicon of social difference, and shared expectations about the kinds of work, struggle, and responsibilities to others that life in Dubai as such a person ostensibly involves. But before I do, it is worth first situating these interlocutors in terms of their own understandings of this place. Why they travel here at all? What is one to expect while here? And how does all of this lend itself to certain kinds of conduct? This moral project, after all, was as much a story about becoming through movement and situation as it was about committing to a being certain kind of person through the cultivation of a particular disposition, or fulfillment of familial obligations. It was, to be more specific, as much a story about a mode of migration and the experience of a certain place as it was about being a certain kind of moral subject.

that invocations were intended to stress this sense of its being widespread rather than its negation of manliness.
I examine their imaginings of Dubai and Iran as societal totalities; that is, as reified and extensive domains featuring certain characteristics (Anderson 2006). Whereas the former was conveyed as a site of rapid transformations, the other was conveyed as a site of stagnation. Yet both were imagined in terms of breakdown, even before the crisis. Unlike their middle class counterparts, there was no sense of respite in the speed of Dubai’s transformation; it may have resulted in more customers, but these working class residents of Dubai could only service the cars that moved through its new spaces rather than move through it themselves. Here I draw on conversations that framed them as places where society was plagued by either breakdown-as-decay (fesād) or breakdown-as-denial (nā-mardi).

In addition, I examine some of the things done and said in confines of their apartments at the end of the workday. In the intimacy of these homo-social scenes, further substance was given to the distinction between everyday life in Dubai versus that of their hometowns in Iran. Here was a place of inversion: where the work of being men demanded actions unacceptable back home. Crucially, here was also a place of standstill in relation to the speed and hustle of their workday on the streets and sidewalks.

This chapter, then, continues my interest in examining the intersection of class and space. Here, however, my theoretical lens takes on a more ethical hue. Having focused on the infrastructural processes that situated these working class Iranians in an shared space in an inner-city neighbourhood, I now examine the shared criteria according to one’s conduct in this city away from home—indeed, the city itself—was subject to evaluation.

My theoretical starting point, to this end, is the assumption that knowledge of ‘the how’ involved in moral becoming is always more or less entangled with knowledge of ‘the where’. In making this point, I want to avoid a clear distinction between phenomenological and social constructionist conceptions of space (e.g. Creswell 2004). Though analytically convenient, this dichotomy departs from the Lefebvrian understanding of “space” as always already informed by both, however contextually. In taking up ‘the where’, so to speak, I am looking to examine

140 I’m equally eager, therefore, to avoid the oft-repeated distinctions between ‘space’ as a pre-social and abstract medium into which some kind of social experience is then cast, and ‘place’ as space transformed in this process (e.g. Taylor 1999, Gieryn 2000).
how knowledge of different places—be they “imagined communities” (Anderson 2006) or the kitchen—and certain kinds of actions inform one another.

To this end I draw from Doreen Massey, writing in the early days of the so-called ‘spatial turn’. Weary of essentialist conceptions of place that necessarily posit it as socially contained—wherefrom global flows are either resisted or inevitably triumphant—she emphasizes contemporary material and symbolic linkages between places as productive of identitarian distinctions in relation to place (1994). ^141 The moral geography that I have outlined here, after all, is conceived in terms of transnational migration. It is with this understanding of place that I elaborate the significance of Iran, Dubai, and their apartments.

But this early warning about too eagerly assuming the disarticulation of place remains perched in structural analysis. It’s in order to understand the ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ associated with these places, how they inform what is socially at stake in successfully navigating this geography, and the kinds of conduct such navigation involves, that I also turn to Michael Lambek’s recent contribution to the so-called “ethical turn” in anthropology. Specifically, I rely on his understanding of meaningful action as always informed “ethical criteria” (2010), and read him literally when he suggests that “ethics is intrinsic because there are always criteria already in place” (2010: 43, emphasis added).

To briefly elaborate, Lambek notes that such criteria is dialectically posited through the combination of the actions arising in the stream of everyday practices, and the explicit performances ushering-in particular states or the terms according to which such actions are evaluated against (ostensibly) shared expectations. ^142 Instead of emphasizing them as discrete and necessarily exclusive kinds of action, however, he insists that practice and performance mutually implicate one another in ordinary life: “criteria for practical judgment are established and acknowledged in performatve acts” (2010: 39), while “practical judgment generates new performances...relatively formal acts and utterances that recalibrate the criteria and shift the

^141 Massey was also keenly aware of the unequal relations of power that saw various social actors experience these linkages differently. Invoking the notion of “power-geometry” in the context of globalizing processes, she stressed that “the point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and does not..it is also about power in relation to the flows and movement” (1993: 61).

^142 ‘Dialectical’ here does not conclude in resolution through ‘negation’.
ethical content” (2010: 56). In addressing the moral geography of these interlocutors I look to shed light on the ethical criteria that framed its places in their relation to certain kinds of action: understandings about Iran that clarified why the need to travel elsewhere, about Dubai that clarified why life required vigilance and insulation, but also allowed for certain things away from home.

3 About Iran

3.1 “This is Our Society Today!”

Sitting on a plastic chair. Florescent lights hanging above my head. Cigarette butts strewn about on the grey interlock. A row of sprayers along the glass vitrine of the store: round, colourful, large handles, filled with adhesive liquid. Ornamental stickers of various logos and slogans cluttering this vitrine. Colourful printouts of car parts on the open door, jutting out onto the street, acting like a makeshift tableau. Not much foot traffic. It was late.

Mahdi, a master, pulled up another chair and joined me; groaning a sigh as he did. The rest of his crew continued to loiter about and chitchat, it was not time to close up yet. He was curious to know how I was sustaining myself in Dubai. I suppose I had hung about during the day enough times to justify such a question. (‘Just what does this guy do all day?!’ I sometimes imagined they asked themselves). I explained that I was living off of a combination of my own savings and university funding. This quickly developed into a conversation about the prospect for earning “good income” (darāmad-e khub) in Canada. I never knew just how to answer such questions about economic life in Canada. Like Scotch-talk, it always seemed to imply a particular glossary: in this case, “bazar khābideh” (a slow market), “bikārī” (unemployment), “kārgari” or “kārmandī” (menial work or a desk job), etc. But no sooner was the question posed, than I found Mahdi presuming that it was a relatively easy affair. I recall explaining that it was not so; that Canada was not necessarily an easy place to earn a living. I came to stress this point throughout my fieldwork because many of my interlocutors—whether in Satwa or gated communities—seemed to have a picture of life in ‘the West’ as more secure. And this often times involved expectations about living comfortably. I never lived in this Canada, and I always took it upon myself to dispel this notion of dar kānādā… (“in Canada...”) when it came up.
I found Mahdi and some of the crew, having gravitated in our direction since my little rant began, were staring at me with a look of confusion. Or was it amusement? And then Mahdi set me straight:

Yes but it’s much harder here, especially for Iranians!” (and here came the rest of the crew). They’re really bad with us here...and even in Iran. You know...in Iran now, you can’t find work—even if you’re educated. You look for work and when you eventually do find something, and you pursue it, you see that they give it to some kid whose father had connections (pārti). He’ll have neither the knowledge (savād) nor the willingness to take the work seriously.

The situation (sharāyet) we face in Iran today...is a ridiculous (khiti) situation! I mean nothing is as it should be. No one is accountable for anything, and this is why I say that you can’t rely on things. You know my nephew? He’s (university) educated. He studied chemical engineering. But he wasn’t able to find any work for a long time; for over a year! Some other family and I had pitched in to help him afford his expenses while he studied in Shiraz. He eventually couldn’t [find work]. He was so upset. He got depressed. He came here and worked in Satwa for a while...so a chemical engineer became a pancharchī! This is our society today!

...in Iran, you can’t get your work to move along without deceit (tu Irān bedune durugh kāret rā nemiofteh)...Without lying you can’t eat bread! But people are now used to this (because) when they see that their government is stealing from them, eating their money (puleshān rā mikhore) and the corruption (fesād), they feel they have no choice but to eat other people’s money so that they can have their ‘money for the night’s bread’ (pul-e nun-e shabeshun). Truth-telling (rāst gui) in Iran is of no use now. If you stand up to government lies you’ll lose (mībāzi).

I never stopped being critical about life dar kānādā while in Dubai. But when I look back now, this exchange figures as a lesson: there is an art to lament. An art that manifests itself not just through anger and the quivering notes it sputters out, but depleted bodies and their calluses. An art requiring not just certain claims but the bodily surfaces associated with them. And a young man who can leave his family behind for a year only to collect notes he cannot spend does not make for a very convincing artist in this genre.

So here we were. And over there was Iran: a lack of work opportunities, a lack of accountability, a lack of regard for expertise and education, a widespread reliance on nepotism instead, a resulting state of societal desperation, and its translation into a widespread reliance on deceit. These were the stuff that often featured in the lamentation about life in Iran. At times they were
attributed to a disregard for due process by the government. This was a failure to govern well. At other times, as in this case, they were attributed to a deliberate abuse of power with the intention to secure government interests at the expense of ordinary people, like the theft of people’s money. This was conspiracy.

These, then, are the stuff of fesād (corruption). Here forcefully performed not just for the outsider careless enough to lament life in Canada, but the young crewmembers looking on.

The specificity of this stuff, however, was not clearly ranked or formally ordered according to their significance. The categories and goings-on featuring in lament about life in Iran were not mechanically rehearsed. Nor were they exhausted in Mahdi’s monologue above. State violence, the threat of war, the cynical exploitation of religion, Iran’s loss of standing vis-à-vis the world and especially its Arab neighbours, and the neglect of its ancient heritage are just some of the ways in which it was registered. None of these issues, however, was ever prioritized as the root cause of fesād. And if I’ve been stringing them together in litanies, it’s for the sake of explanatory convenience. The whoop and wharf of this little genre—what was foregrounded and what was not—accommodated concerns usually arising out of impromptu conversations with customers and visitors. It did not always involve a huddle or the authority of a master.

And yet, while root causes were absent, my field notes indicate a general theme. It was a theme personified in Mahdi’s nephew, the chemical engineer turned pancharchi. The episode I cite above would prove the first of several instances in which his story would come up. I never had a chance to actually speak to this individual, despite expressing my desire to do so. In any case, he figured as emblematic of something very wrong in Iran: a general disconnect between striving and accomplishment, between the aspiration and effort required to earn a presumably well-paying (if not secure) career, and the actual facts of life that all of this is likely to conclude in. It is in this impasse that dishonesty among ordinary people was thought to be called for, and said to thrive.

Mahdi’s nephew, however, was not the typical young crewmember hailing from a small town in southern Iran. Many never pursued a post-secondary education. In fact, most traveled to the Gulf immediately following high school. But the value of this individual’s story was the moral purchase it gave to the pursuit of life as a khalij-boro. It was his exceptionalism, in other words, that was invoked to confirm the larger reasons behind a trend that brought Iranian men to Dubai:
societal-wide moral breakdown, as confirmed in this instance by a lack of correspondence between aspirational effort and its material outcomes. A lack of correspondence or disconnect, in other words, that cast doubt on the faith in Iranian society that undertaking the time-consuming pursuit of higher education implied. ‘Look!, look at what it amounted to!’ This was the general sentiment and it worked to justify one mode of self-making (travel to the Gulf) rather than another (post-secondary education).

But why moral breakdon as decay?

This sense of place about Iran was very much informed by a sense of history as well; more specifically, a sense of regression. The widespread nature of feṣād was complimented by the oft-repeated but vaguely defined notion of “in the past” or ghablan. This notion not only distilled the force of feṣād as a breakdown of moral order in Iran, but also the difference about this kind of moral breakdown and that which they thought to prevail in Dubai. This moral geography, after all, relied on certain distinctions between these places. I now turn to another conversation I had with members of a neighbouring crew nearby, in order to elaborate this sense of decay about moral breakdown in Iran.

3.2 “Ghablan”

It was late in the afternoon. Arriving at the shop I was visiting that day, I found a couple of the crew loitering about on the sidewalk. I began to pull up a chair—well, a crooked stool really—when they insisted we take a seat inside. “As you sure?” I asked. “Yeah, it’s not busy”, one of them sighed with a smile. I had timed the gap just right.

An assertive stare. A perpetual scowl that never quite materialized. An athletic figure despite the cigarette just as perpetually fixed to his right hand. This was Māni. He was in his late twenties and had been with the crew for about six years. He was something of an exception, as he had not travelled back to Iran during this time to visit his family.

The fellow searching for Māni’s lighter (having put a cigarette in my hand already) was Sāmān. Some years younger than Māni, he was already due to be married in a few months. Back in his
hometown, work was already underway on a new house for him and wife-to-be. This represented a pooling of family resources, as his own remittances had not yet time to sufficiently accumulate.

It had been a couple of weeks since I visited them last. I was soon informed of plans to diversify the store.

Sāmān: “We’ll be turning the back of the store into a mobāl-i (cellphone store), so all that stuff will go (pointing to the industrial sewing machine and rolls of car upholstery stacked near the back-wall). And we’ll be putting up a new poster as well (now pointing toward the store vitrine). We’ll be changing it all.”

Behzad: “Even the Faravahar?!143

Sāmān: “Well yeah, it’s too big, and the vitrine will be cluttered.”

Māni: “Remember when I explained what it said to you last year? (Smiling, as he pointed to the three Persian captions displayed just underneath the symbol)”

Behzad: “Yeah, (smiling back) I remember. (Looking up to read the inscription) ‘Speak well’ (goftā r nik), ‘Think well’ (andishe nik), ‘Do well’ (kardār nik). Right?”

Māni: “Yes (laughing as he pats my leg), well done (damet garm)!”

Sāmān: Did you know that our hometown goes back to that time (barmigardeh be an zamān)? There’s a little tower on top of a hill nearby where fire-worshipers (ātash-parastha) used to congregate.”

Māni: “No, they weren’t fire-worshipers. They had a prophet, Zoroaster was a prophet...and he had sacred teachings (stretching out his arm in the direction of the captions).”

143 The Faravahar is a Zorastrian symbol. Once utilized by the former Pahlavi regime for the nationalist purpose of underscoring continuity with ancient Persia, it is also deployed in contemporary Iranian popular culture as a celebration of this ancient past. Depending on the circumstances, its usage can thus connote a rejection of official state iconography that is often deliberately shorn of references to Iran’s ancient pre-Islamic history. Its usage in performances of identity politics in contexts of migration has been noted to bear the same value: a mark of distinction against the official Islamic discourse of the current Iranian government (see for example Malek 2011).

But here in Dubai, this symbol bore other uses as well. Much like the jack in the parking spot, it was a beacon to Iranians customers. Owing to religious identity politics in this context, such a public display could not have been Shi’ite symbolism (e.g. odes to saints in calligraphy). These were, however, to be seen inside shops. Nevertheless, its connotations as a celebration of ancient Iranians hitsory were not absent here. After all, Iran’s national flag could have sufficed.
Sāmān: “Right, (looking to me once again), and they were also very advanced. Did you know they had sewers back then? Cities had sewers! They were very advanced (extending the word “very”).

Māni: “That’s true. They were also very wise (bāshu ’ur).”

Behzad: “How so?”

Māni: Have you ever been to Persepolis (takht-e jamshid)? Have you seen anyone on horseback on those engravings there? There aren’t any, right? You know why? Because everyone had to be on equal terms; in the past (ghablan) everyone was equal. That is why...This was Cyrus’ philosophy (tafakor). That’s why his cylinder is at the UN.”

Quarrying the mines of Iranian history, especially its ancient past, for marks of glory is a ubiquitous practice among Iranians throughout the diaspora more generally. But here—among groups of Iranian men sharing a local neighbourhood in Dubai, implicated in the same transnational network of chain migration, and routinely engaged in lament about life in Iran—there is significance of a certain kind. It puts into relief the general object of this lament as being life in Iran today.

The shared conception of the contemporary against which ghablan was often invoked was never clearly defined. This was the rhetorical value of this category: its elasticity. Its invocations could accommodate ancient Iran, the modernization of Abadan in the 1900s, the period of Phalavi rule just prior to the Islamic revolution, or the skill of national soccer team that defeated the USA at the 1998 World Cup.

Yet recourse to ghablan was not altogether ad hoc either. It generally referenced a way of life or societal condition preceding the Islamic revolution. Over the course of my time with these men, the fault-line distinguishing the Iran of “now” (alān) or “today” (emruz) and the Iran of ghablan emerged as Iran’s departure from what was ostensibly its ordained history. Their historical imagination loosely posited the revolution as a fulcrum between a preceding state of affairs that was suffused with moral certainty, or at least closer to such certainty, and an unnatural present where decline, uncertainty and deception pervade.

This was not for love of Pahlavi. But it did signal a shared sense that the state of fesād gripping contemporary Iran was suppressing a civilizational propensity that would otherwise manifest itself were it not for the ineptitude or machinations of the political establishment today. In this regard, fesād takes on added connotations. It is not simply a matter of bureaucratic corruption,
but the corruption of this natural Iranian propensity toward civilizational glory and pre-eminence. Hence digression and decay, rather than regression or relapse.

This sense of civilizational glory residing in the past but now residing *in potentia*, lends further depth to the sense of endemic disconnect between honest action and its outcomes. It firmly locates the problem as a national one; both in scale and essence. Here is a nation (*melat*) and culture (*farhang*) that was once at the forefront of yet other nations and cultures, brimming with ingenuity and steeped in accomplishment. Such pre-eminence was thought to have been in accord with the true sense of Iranian character or faculty as a national collective. It was immanent to Iran. Part of the distance between this past and Iran’s present was imagined to manifest itself in the decay of exactly this pre-eminence.

Clearly, these men imagined Iran to be in the throes of moral breakdown. The government’s alleged disregard for its people was thought to correspond with nothing short of a societal-wide disregard for others among ordinary people. As a certain kind of place, then, Iran was conceived of in explicitly global terms. It was articulated according to the objectifying logic that posits the nation as a singular totality that has persisted through linear time. It was precisely this nationalist logic that informed their lament and—more to the point—suffused the substance of this lament with moral meaning and urgency. Iran was a natural place experiencing an unnatural condition: a natural community without mutual camaraderie, a nation historically ordained for great things but mired in *fesād*, engravings of tribute bearers on a pilgrimage toward the center of ancient Iran while Iranian men travel away from modern Iran in search of better work. This was the essence of moral breakdown in these accounts. Here decay (as disconnect and regression) set honest men into motion across the *khaleej*.

Juxtaposing this lament about Iranian (as a place of decayed grandeur) against lament about Dubai (as a place of where stability is denied) serves to underscore the marginalized position of these interlocutors in Dubai’s social hierarchy. More significantly for my purposes here, it also serves to situate this class position and the moral geography informing it in the flurry of speculative urban transformation.
4 About Dubai

As I noted earlier, these interlocutors shared an ongoing concern about the strength of the social relations they cultivated with the people briefly pausing from the flow of the crowds to assume a seat in their midst. It was around the same time that I became aware of this anxiety, when I also came to learn that this concern about the denial of personal relations was conflated with a concern about the nature of Dubai itself as a place not conducive to social fidelity: either due to transience in the broader sense of things just drifting away or failing to return, or the refusal to recognize commonality on grounds of Iranian descent. I rely on a couple of vignettes to briefly elaborate these concerns so as to elucidate the sense of place about Dubai shared by these working class Iranians in Satwa, and contrast it that of Iran I explain above.

4.1 National Day

Sallāh was a thirty-something year old with an unstinting sense of humour, and a well-respected master known for his understanding of the trade and his care for younger crewmembers. He had been working in Dubai ever since the mid-1990’s, and continued to support his immediate and (to a lesser extent) extended family in Iran with the income he earned here. His uncle was already established in Dubai—having operated a small retail operation since the early 1980s—and had facilitated a partnership between Sallāh and another Iranian retail operator in the area. We grew well acquainted, and he looked forward to my visits.

It was the evening before “National Day.” This is the anniversary of the U.A.E.’s unification and formal independence from British tutlege in 1971. Its celebration is widely practiced by Emirati residents of Dubai. It inundates roads with banners and flags—red, white, black, green—and the airwaves with commemorations to “visionary” forefathers. If you’re the right kind of small retailer, it can be big business. And a taz’inat-i (an auto-shop specializing in car accessories and furnishings) is just the right kind of retailer. This is because a common form of celebration, especially among male Emirati youths, is the ostentatious decoration of their cars with all sorts of national symbolism. The surfaces of these cars are converted into canvases for performing the nation.
A group of young Emirati men had descended onto Sallāh’s auto-shop. They seemed to be in a hurry and looking to buy a variety of decorative ornaments: flags, large stickers displaying national colours or royal figures, temporary paints, glitter etc. “They have it. Come here”, insisted one of them into his cell phone. With meticulous precision and over the course of an hour, three young crewmembers virtually covered two cars with a variety of such ornaments as their young customers directed them on what to place where.

Sallāh and I looked on from inside the store. One of these customers entered the store again to point out a small sticker of the number “39” featuring the U.A.E.’s national colours. He asked if there was one large enough to cover the hood of the car. The U.A.E. was turning thirty-nine that year. Shortly after the transaction concluded and the young man had exited the store once again, Sallāh turned to me and asked:

Sallāh: “What do you think? (smiling) It’s interesting, no?” (nodding toward the car being decorated outside).

Behzad: “Yeah, I don’t remember these things...I didn’t have many Emirati friends...I think it’s new.” (Sallāh was aware that I had grown up in Dubai).

Sallāh: “It’s relatively recent. The country is relatively recent!” (coughing up a chuckle. I returned the gesture with might’ve been an unsure smile. He puts his cup of tea down on the table). You see this? (now pointing to the sticker of “39” that his young customer had initially referred to) My father’s wedding suit that’s still in his closet is older than thirty-nine years. None of this (raising his arm and pointing to the skyscrapers lining Sheikh Zayed Road in the background) was here ten years ago. Even Satwa (pausing to take another drag from his cigarette) wasn’t like this forty years ago. It wasn’t paved like this, it was all desert (biābun bud].”

We remained in the store for the better part of the afternoon that day. This conversation continued over the course of several interruptions by customers and his young crew. It was about an hour or so later that Sallāh said something especially germane to my analysis here. “This place has no originals (in jāh asli nadāreh]”, he said, “everyone here has come from somewhere else.” This was not the first time that I had heard this notion. It was widely shared not only among these Iranian interlocutors, but and their middle class counterparts too; indeed, it was something of cliché more generally.

When I first encountered it among these interlocutors, a few months prior to this conversation, I took it to be yet another expression of their nationalist sentiments. And it is. Insofar as this notion denies Dubai the possibility of being a site of historical attachment and lacking people who can
claim to have originated here, it complements the imagery of a desolate landscape that he offered earlier that afternoon. After all, these totalizing representations of Dubai lent themselves to drawing contrasts with yet other places. Namely, with Iran, which was repeatedly posited as a place with a people rooted in it. Iran was a putatively “genuine collective”—ordained by the winds of history—while Dubai was posited as a euphemism for Emirati society and described in terms that suggested it was a “false collective” instead; that is, a historical anomaly held together by coincidence, opportunism and coercion (Brown 2003: 91). On the one hand, a hometown with a nearby hilltop featuring an ancient site of religious congregation. And on the other, a highway nearby Satwa featuring recently built skyscrapers inhabited by people from elsewhere.

But why moral breakdown as denial?

By the time of this conversation with Sallāh, I was already beginning to understand that the moral implications of this notion exceed nationalist sentiments. The notion that this place lacks primordial authenticity and historical depth was bound up with an uneasiness regarding life’s “permanent impermanence” (Ali 2010:3, 162) here. It is not that these working class Iranians sought to permanently reside here. Regardless of whether an apprentice wished to eventually set up shop in Dubai rather than in Iran, or how often a crewmember activated the transnational circuit linking these shops to their hometowns, these interlocutors never considered Dubai as a desirable place to live permanently. The khalīj-boro’s mission, after all, concluded in his hometown. Yet it was also clear to me that a sense about the impermanence of things here was eating away at them.

Much of this anxiety, I believe, had to with the transience of social relations in Dubai. What of the fidelity of social ties cultivated in a place of constant impermanence? Nā-mardi was most often invoked with regard to this concern; that is, the kinds actions that cast such fidelity with others into doubt. It was the refusal of others to carry on caring about their relations or affiliations with these men that represented an ongoing concern. These were relations with people outside of their immediate network of khalīj-boro Iranians. Wrongdoings or trust betrayed from within this network was within their means to redress: accusations traveling and compelling a response, a refusal of future dealings, etc. But what of a long-time customer turned friend who—for whatever reason—chose not to reciprocate or recognize when called upon? What if their vests became less frequent, and eventually stopped? What if they sided with the other party
in a dispute? What of someone, even if not a relation, who was perceived to share in their history but who insists on denying it? These were various forms of nā-mardi as dishonour or denial of reciprocity, and they had various implications. What would happen to their ‘market’ in such cases? What would be the implications on the value of this history, and them as the kinds of people who continue to rely on it?

It is this sense of nā-mardi that I foreground here, and elaborate below. It was a reoccurring theme, despite the fact that I never actually witnessed such a betrayal of trust. And, in keeping with my overall focus in this chapter, it was virtually always conflated with “this place” or “here” (in jā); that is, Dubai as place of transience where a lack of history informs the fickle nature of present-day social relations. Yet, I suggest that this anxiety also exceeded the precariousness of permanent impermanence that has been repeatedly linked to an ethnocratic immigration regime in scholarship focusing on migration in the Persian Gulf. This lament, among these working class residents of the (inner) city, about Dubai’s social infidelity and lack of history must be understood within the context of urban splintering. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, these Iranians were targets for policing as they were objectified as a source of moral pollution in the city. Moral breakdown as denial, captured under the heading of nā-mardi, then, was also a commentary on this process and its amplification of their status as a transient and morally inferior. The moral deliberations of the men was, in other words, informed as much by these circumstances as they were about any normative notion of respectable masculinity per se.

4.2 “He didn’t even look at me!”

There was shared sense among these working class Iranians that their social ties in Dubai were just as sturdy as those plastic chairs, on the sidewalks, through which they cultivated them. But there is need for clarification here. The withering of these relationships did not always result from an individual’s disregard for the friendship or rapport they shared with these men. Life in Dubai, after all, was based on short-term residency visas. This is a universally recognized concern among foreign residents, and is often the source of much anxiety. Succumbing to this facet of Dubai’s propensity to strain social relations was cause for lament about this place itself rather than the moral failures of someone they knew.
Yet, and here is the point, even where it was an individual’s disregard for these men that strained their social relations, it was still attributed to the nature of life in this place. A certain kind of (immoral) conduct, in other words, was conflated with Dubai as a whole, thus informing the broader moral geography they imagined themselves to be moving about in.

I was visiting Sallāh’s auto-shop again. And again I found him sitting outside. This time, sitting next to him was a smile I knew from my first interaction with any crew in Satwa. “Where’ve you been?!” This was Youssef. He was around the same age as Sallāh, but lacked the recoiled energy that Sallāh seemed to always carry about him. He commanded respect among the crew, being a senior member of the crew. No small amount of this respect, I think, was due to his reputation for having little patience with customers bargaining in bad faith.

Accompanying them was an older gentleman wearing a kandorā (the national Emirati attire for men). They were speaking in Achumi and seemed to be friends. Shortly after he left, I asked about him.

**Behzad:** “Who was that? Was he Achumi?”

**Sallāh:** “Yeah. They’re all Achumi (says smiling). But this fellow has become a citizen (muwātin shodeh). His family came here from Bandar Lengeh” (a small but historically significant port city in the South of Iran).

**Youssef:** “This society is basically from Iran. Where would they be without Iran?”

**Behzad:** “How do you know him?”

**Youssef:** “He used to live near here. He’s related to the kafil of one of the guys” (referring to another Iranian master down the street, to which the conversation now turned).

**Sallāh:** “Yeah that kafil works at the Department of Residency. He also visits us sometimes.”

**Youssef:** “He has a very high title too. He comes around and hangs out sometimes, like you. He’s Achumi too. (Pausing) I mean he talks Achumi to us. I once had some business at that place (the Dept. of Residency). So I went there. I see him there. I say ‘Hello Mr. [so-and-so]!’ I say this in Achumi. He didn’t even look at me! (Now raising his voice and speaking in an increasingly agitated tone.) Can you believe that?! Anyway...so a few weeks

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144 The kandorā consists of single-piece robe extending over the entire body and usually ending just above or on the ankles. The former look is usually a marker of religious conservatism. While it is a historically enduring form of dress, it has been conflated with national identity only more recently.
later he visited us again. He said to me: ‘why did you greet me in Achumi that day?’ He was angry with me. Seriously!

Sallāh: “Yeah, these kinds of nā-mardi happen a lot here (in jā).” (A look of exhaustion hanging over his face.)

Perhaps noticing that this little narrative had piqued my interest, Sallāh volunteered a similar experience later that same evening.

Sallāh: “...I was at one of their offices once (a governmental office) and I see that the person I am talking to is khod-e-mooni (that is, an Achumi). His family name was on his badge, and [on] it was written ‘Lengeh.’ I talk to him in Achumi, but he replies in Arabic. Well, I continue to speak in Achumi. He started to get frustrated. I told him, ‘why do you deny your background? I can see it on your name tag!’” (pausing for dramatic effect).

Youssef: “What happened?” (on cue, the smile slowly creeping on his face).

Sallāh: (On the brink of laughter and trying to contain himself) “He told me to go to the back of the line” (we burst out laughing).

It is not a coincidence that both of these anecdotes refer to Emiratis of Iranian descent. It was in relations or encounters with these counterparts—who could often also trace their history to southern Iran, and were often also versed in Achumi—that expectations of social fidelity were especially strong. By the same token, the disregard for this presumedly natural camaraderie that was believed to especially underscore the (unnatural) nature of this place as lending itself to nā-mardi, and giving cause for anxiety about their ability to secure their relations with others.

Sallāh’s little narrative may seem to be no more than an attempt to lighten the mood. As I already mentioned he was known for his sense of humour. But it was not. It may also seem that his brush up with a stranger in a government office hardly speaks to the logic of the gift implicitly informing relations with a repeat customer-cum-friend and the injury resulting from its denial.

But it does. In a society where social hierarchies are ethnocratically administered, ethnic affiliation is all the more likely to function as the moral grounds upon which to either receive or refuse the claims of others. Whether by way of friend or stranger, the refusal to acknowledge an identitarian affiliation based on a history outside of the UAE devalues the social ties that would transcend the distinction of citizenship. This bears unsettling implications for these men. The general state of transience about life in Dubai, as I explained in the previous chapter, was not evenly experienced. For a group of working class non-citizens engaged in menial work—a group of “bachelors”—recourse to ethnic affiliation was an important means with which to cultivate and secure relations with others, especially Emiratis of Iranian descent. Both Youssef’s and
Sallāh’s narratives elucidate this aspect of their sense of place about Dubai: it is a place where the value of Iranian origin as a basis for ethical demands is diminished and unreliable.

Thus, while a general state of transience about life in Dubai was imagined as inimical to social solidarity more generally, and lamented in terms of the kind of place that this is—a place of nāmardi—this insecurity about the fickleness of social relationships was often lamented with regard to their dealings with khod-e-mooni Emiratis. In this moral geography, the decay of Iran and the false collectivity of Dubai compound one another in the refusal to acknowledge or lack of care about these men on the part those would ‘ought’ to be khod-e-mooni. This is where Youssef’s anger for being ignored by a khod-e-mooni whom he regularly received as a guest on the sidewalks of Satwa Road stemmed from. He really didn’t expect to suffer the indignity of having his greeting rebuffed.

But then, perhaps he should’ve known better. These are very different places. The kinds of persons they make possible rely on incommensurable conceptions of moral value. The friendly visitor to auto-shop in Satwa who activated a shared historical association with Iran by speaking in Achumi, is not a high-ranking official doing the work of an ethnocratic regime in a government office.

Like a lot of governmental spaces receiving large numbers of people in order to administer some bureaucratic process or another, the Department of Residency and Naturalization is heavily laden with symbolism representing the nation and royal heritage. This symbolism usually extends to the bodies of administrative staff as well: through dress codes that either require the donning of ‘traditional’ dress (the kandorā for men and abayā for women) or uniforms with a clearly military aesthetic. In these spaces, markers of ethnic affiliation that identify one as originating from elsewhere are generally regarded as a source of social liability. These are, in others words, a clear habitus that conflates ethnicity, national belonging, and professional worth. If the work of practical judgment is called upon when we encounter exclusive regimes of value and their competing demands (Lambek 2008: 143), it stands to reason that someone who had been living and working in Dubai for as many years as Youssef has should have known that some judgment

145 The sensitivity surrounding origins, furthermore, is all the more pronounced with regard to Iranian ancestry given the long-standing political tensions with Iran.
was required here. What a *khod-e-mooni* greeting asks for, an officiate of ethnocracy cannot give without declaring themself a *khod-mooni* (a local pejorative designation for ‘Emiratis of Iranian descent that is derived from the original Persian).

Clearly, different things are also happening in these accounts. Whereas Youssef contravened normative habitus either out of carelessness or naiveté, Sallāh was feigning naiveté in order to make a point. In refusing to engage his Emirati counterpart in Arabic he was goading him to acknowledge his (presumed) Iranian ancestry, thereby revealing his ‘true’ identity as an Iranian and thus a khod-e-mooni. The refusal of acknowledgement, on the part of his Emirati counterpart, did not violate *implicit* expectations on account of friendship, but the *explicit* challenge to recognize an allegedly primordial affiliation instead. What is more, this refusal of acknowledgement was mutual. Sallāh, after all, refused to acknowledge the authenticity of his counterpart’s Emirati identity by continuing to engage him in Achumi. In so doing, he seemed to have been performing—indeed testing—the notion that nobody is ‘originally’ from around here.

But what I’m taking pains to highlight here is that together they speak to a shared anxiety about the *same* thing. These accounts of encounters with the same kinds of persons (Emiratis of Iranian descent) in the same kind of space (government offices) highlights a shared anxiety that the goods they cultivate with others in Dubai will eventually go bad; that the fidelity of social ties cultivated with a customer, for example, or the capacity to cultivate any at all, remain uncertain. This uncertainty, furthermore, was conflated with the nature of this place and the force with which it was thought to unsettle things, and dilute claims to affiliations that could cut through the divide between citizens and non-citizens. Here causes things to fall apart. As Sallāh once put it, “nā-mardi is in the very soil of this place” (*in jā, khākesh khāk-e nā-mardi-e*).

### 5 Upstairs

Taleb was an exception. Most of his crewmembers expressed little interest in travelling about Dubai to explore its superlative cityscape. This expression was a matter of performance as well. An early tip-off came when Sāmān had asked me whether I could identify a group of blonde tourists strolling by, constantly stopping to take pictures of the merchandise these shops occasionally threw up on the sidewalk. “Scandinavian” was the best I could do. This was the
beginning of a conversation about Dubai as a place of “gardesh”. In standard Persian, this term could either refer to the physical movement of an object, or to the taking of “trip” or “excursion”. It’s this latter connotation that saw it frequently used here to refer to tourists (gardesh-i) or the act of leisurely travel (gardesh raftan). “...you know, we’re not here for gardesh raftan. (mā vāse-ye gardesh raftan nai-madim in jā) I don’t even care about this place (raising his hand and gesturing to the line of skyscrapers on the horizon, pulsating with the blues and whites of aircraft-warning lights in the night). I haven’t even seen Dubai”, he took pains to explain.

This was something that many of these interlocutors shared: a lack of travel about Dubai. It was especially true of younger crewmembers. It didn’t mean that gardesh was entirely absent here. There were occasions when some of the crew would take a day off to go to the beach nearby. There were those annual occasions such as Nowruz (the Iranian New Year) when whole crews might take the afternoon off to visit a park (e.g. Jumeriah Beach Park). But these occasions were generally far and few between, and varied with the enthusiasm or economic circumstances of the master.

Instead, the replenishment of nerves, muscles, and the social bonds between them was most often limited to their quarters, upstairs. And so came the invitations, when the end of the workday found me still sitting on a plastic chair: “Will you come upstairs?”

Through the back alley, and up those stairs.

There was initially very little magic about the flick of the light switch. There was not much for the eye to behold when their apartments were lit. They were all barren. A small TV, on top of a small wooden dresser that stood more like a testament to survival than decor. Florescent bulbs hanging exposed from the ceiling. A stack of polyester blankets, their colours fading, piled in a corner. A couple of bunk beds in one of the rooms. A small kitchen, with just enough room to manoeuvre. A handful of plates and cups sitting next to a small sink. A large tank of gas also exposed, and standing its ground. Nothing hanging on the walls except a some clothes from a hook. No clutter.

Barren. But not empty. In fact, quite full. Full of the stuff that respectable men, and youth aspiring to be respectable men, do and endure away from home: like drink Scotch, and be the drink of bed bugs.
Here was another part of their moral geography. Not shared imaginings about total places, but a place totally inhabited; not interactions with strangers and customers conceived in terms that referred to a more general societal conditions on either side of the Gulf (nā-mardi or fesād), but the intimacy of an enclosed homo-social space among the fellow khalīj-boro of a working unit (its young, its seniors, and its master).

This is not to emphasize disconnect. As Massey would have it, it’s to highlight the meaningful differences between various places imagined in relation to each other (1993, 1994). The things said and done in these small apartments were informed by, and explicitly about, those occurrences on the sidewalks, the kind of places Iran, Dubai and their hometowns were imagined to be, and so on.

So what about these “things said and done” here? And what is their relation to the work of being men? There was the “mashrub” (alcoholic drink). Consuming alcohol in Dubai is usually simply a matter of waking into a hotel, or an affiliated venue nearby. These are what the Dubai Code of Conduct—invoking the same logic with which freehold property was eventually defined—deems to be “designated areas” (DCC: 8). But the booze flows well beyond the Code. Unless they’re card-carrying-high-net-worth Christians, most foreign residents of Dubai get their drinks from a hole in the wall on the outskirts of the city. For residents of Satwa, this black market was available on site. A constant fixture of the nightly “sofreh” (Persian for the spread of food around which to gather), and represented by the usual brands of vodka, Scotch, and whisky.

But no beer. And this was my segue. “It’s not strong enough...instead you just get full”, insisted one of the crew. I did not require much convincing, it’s a universal refrain. Once again, they inquired about Canada. It was while I was explaining that it’s pretty casually consumed, that Sāmān chimed in: “It’s not like that for us.” He was referring to his hometown and Achumi society in Iran more generally. “If people think that you drink, they’ll say ‘this home has been got by corruption’ (īn khāne-ro fesād gerefteh). They’ll say it should be avoided. It’s like opium for you city-folk (shahri-ā). For us opium is not really very important. But alcohol is serious.” As city-folk, I confirmed that I’d never done opium. We laughed. And never one to miss an opportunity for comedy, Sāmān raised his glass of Johnny Walkers, “Cheers!” (salāmati). More laughter.
This huddling, around the sofreh, late at night, in intimate quarters, made certain things possible. A practice that no self-respecting man possessed with gheirat (“honour”, elaborated further in the next chapter) would presumably commit back in his hometown—that is, not publically anyway—was an occasion for camaraderie and the affirmation of social ties. It was a clearly a gendered camaraderie as well: absent their families, in here Achumi-Iranian men and their masters celebrated a taboo from elsewhere. Away from life in their hometowns, then, sharing in routine drinking was a performance of living in a state of removal from kin, and their moral expectations. Some drank more than others, but no one abstained.

While this collective act represented one kind of ethical possibility opened up by life in a state of removal, there was a less celebratory kind as well. Cleaning and cooking. It was while singing the praises of food back home, as he set the sofreh, that I once asked Māni whether they ever cook those savory dishes. He explained that they lacked the time. “So I’ll have to visit you in your [home town],” I said, half-jokingly.

Giving up a loud chuckle he looked at me and replied, “You’re welcome, but over there I won’t be the one cooking for you” (laughter in the background).

“Why not?”

“Well, because when a woman is around, a man needn’t cook anymore”, the look on his face suggested I should’ve known better than to ask.

With the exception of the master, these men generally took turns cooking in the evening. And cleaning was something that would occasionally see a crewmember delegated a particular area like the washroom or kitchen. These activates were also outside of the purview of gheirat while back home. But there was no pleasure about transgressing this taboo; at least, none that was confided in this anthropologist. Not much complaining either, but certainly no air of festivity; just the drudgery of things that require doing to secure everyday life.

Engaging in this activity, then, was a testament to enduring hardships. More specifically, it was exactly the inversion of the gendered division of labour to which Attiya Ahmed refers (see previous chapter) when noting that “bachelors” in Gulf cities “live without their families...outside of household contexts” (2012: 37). Whereas I critiqued this notion earlier as not sufficiently informed by the discursive context constituting “bachelors” as a social type, I
confirm her meaning here. Doing domestic work was very much perceived as such an inversion, regardless of whether or not it may have been enjoyable.\footnote{If important to note this is inversion was understood and practiced as a part of a shared moral project that was more or less represented on either side of the khaleej. As I previously explained, these men and youth did not arrive into these workshops entirely haphazardly. As I explained in the previous chapter, unlike most of Dubai’s male working class population that is bureaucratically conscripted into mass-mediated labour arrangements such as labour camps, these interlocutors were channeled into spaces of fellow-Achumi Iranians. Inversions in the former, may be less indicative of the stuff of “communitas” (Turner 2011: 95-131) held together by the moral authority of a master, than they are the result of neglect and dehumanization: like sleeping in piles bodies and next to overflowing seweage.}

It was while singing the praises of food back home, as he set the sofreh, that I once asked Māni whether they ever cook those savory dishes. He explained that they lacked the time. “So I’ll have to visit you in [home town],” I said, half-jokingly. Giving up a loud chuckle he looked at me and replied, “You’re welcome, but over there I won’t be the one cooking for you...When a woman is around, a man needn’t cook anymore”.

Paradoxically, then, it’s exactly in a place where actions and their natural persons do not coincide—cooking and men, for example—that respectable masculinity has an opportunity to be demonstrated and cultivated: drinking mashrub in the company of fellow khalīj-boro away from kin and their women, and doing the work of these women. In this apartment, one’s actions were directed toward becoming a particular kind of moral subject by transgressing the very order of morality that underpinned the ‘goods’ rendering this subject worth pursuing.

This is not to suggest that the actions required of respectable men are necessarily a matter of transgression or inversion. Neither of these pertains to perhaps the most important testament to gheirat, remittances. If I’ve foregrounded these actions, it’s been to highlight the force with which ethically meaningful action coincides with a sense of place, or social locatedness.
6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the kinds of places these working class Iranian men and youth believe to be moving away from, into, and gathering within. And, if I have been successful to this end, it has necessarily elaborated on the kinds of people that places make possible, if not simply known.

I’ve relied on the simple but important lesson that places are imagined in relation to yet others, especially in contexts of transnational migration. This has been a running theme in the dissertation, and literature on transnational migration more generally. Here, however, I’ve extended this lesson to argue that knowledge of places are conflated with knowledge of the social realities presumably inhering to them, actually prevailing therein, the actions this impasse requires, and the kinds of people that such actions make.

An ancient nation naturally disposed toward greatness (“Iran”), currently overcome by a general state of corruption (fesād), and throwing up men willing to journey elsewhere to secure what is unavailable here (a khaliţ-boro in pursuit of remittances).

A recently emerged city/nation naturally disposed toward opportunism and transience (“Dubai”), actually enabling these to such an extent that reciprocity in social relations can’t be taken for granted (nā-mardi), and resulting in Emiratis of Iranian descent who refuse acknowledgement when it’s not opportune for them (a khod-e-mooni who values citizenship over friendship and history).

Taken together, I regard these things as amounting to a moral geography. I’ve offered a combination of shared practices—gruelling work, drinking mashrub, cleaning, cooking—and mundane performances—lament about Iran for me to understand and others to hear—that together posit a shared knowledge about a constellation of actually existing “fields of action” understood according to varying scales of distanciation. “Iran” and “Dubai” as extensive isomorphic totalities known in terms of strangers occupying empty time, often the stuff of propositional knowledge. The small bedroom in a small apartment, or the sidewalk in front of the shop, known in terms of embodied practices alongside fellow Iranian-Achumi journeymen under the tutelage of a master. These fields, furthermore, are only knowable to the extent that they are endowed with a basis for certain kinds of action but not others: possibilities and their limits. My reliance on the ethical criteria of place has been key to this end of my analysis.
CHAPTER 6
A Life Endured: An Ethics of Honour in Dubai

Honourable men endure. They may complain and lament, but they carry on. They do so because they are committed to others; to the needs and wellbeing of their families. This requires a wherewithal of character: the courage to face uncertainties, and the perseverance to bear hardship and indignity. This was the stuff of gheirat, or “honour.” And as I explain above, it was imagined that societal-wide moral breakdown in Iran and Dubai require such character. These circumstances saw honest men seeking better livelihoods alienated from Iran’s border (a place succumbed to corruption), and saw these same men alienated from Emirati society for lack of regard (a place where social infidelity inheres). There was virtue in honour. And as Reza explained, honour involved sakhtī keshīdan, or “endurance.” This much was common sense among the working class Iranian operators of the auto-shops in Satwa.

But what of the actual experiences that ‘honour-as-enduring’ could involve? How did this common sense about honour manifest itself in everyday life, what were its limits, and what kinds of Others did it preclude? I began to steer in this direction when I examined the significance of engaging in domestic work while living in a homo-social setting. This chapter continues this course of analysis by elaborating some of the lived contents of ‘carrying on’ in the face of risks and hardships.

What I present here, then, is an ethics of honour. Previous chapters focusing on the lived circumstances of my working class interlocutors were in various ways already elaborating such an ethics by explaining how travel to the Gulf was conceived as a moral project. But whereas I have previously examined the objectification of these men and youth as a certain social type marked for removal, their sense of journeying to Dubai as a moral project in pursuit filial obligations, and the moral geography informing this journey and its aims, here I focus on the category of honour as a virtue. In doing I hope show some of the moral imaginary I that have been elaborating in action as these interlocutors encounter the vagaries of everyday life and strive to do the work associated with this virtue. Such an “action-centered” approach to ethics
(Lambek 2010: 16) does well to highlight the contingencies in which becoming and breakdown were experienced, the struggle to reconcile the incommensurable possibilities these contingencies pose, and the frustrations that can be heard as a result. Previous chapters have been outlining a teleology and the organization of a ‘project’ under the auspices of a master. This chapter offers further thick description to this project in order to throw up the struggle simply involved in enduring some of the possibilities (e.g. the risk of arrest) and inevitabilities (e.g. the look of sunburn) that it involved. The notion of gheirat (honour) informed both.

To this end, I also aim to examine how such uncertainties and hardships articulated a certain relation to the city. How were they sometimes derived from the circumstances of a city transforming? On this note, I extend my analysis of moral pollution the removal of working class bodies. Yet whereas in my examination of “bachelors” the threat of removal remained largely couched in statistics, here I examine its experience and the struggle to deal with its consequences. I also aim to elaborate how this virtue of honour-as-enduring was imagined in relation to other kinds of Iranians inhabiting this city and calling on these crews. How did these crews objectify them in the stream of everyday encounters and in doing so render their ethical criteria of honour a little more explicit? In attending to these questions I elaborate some of the practices, moral predicaments and embodied experiences of this virtue of honour-as-enduring that informed this life located in the city-center but on the margins of New Dubai.

1 The Ziarat-ỉ: Enduring the Possible

1.1 “they’re rounding up!”

I never witnessed the policing of bachelor accommodations. My knowledge of the scenes it involved—municipal inspectors and police officers taking stock—are based on the accounts of these interlocutors, the South Asian men residing in shared villas on the other side of Satwa Road, and news coverage. But I did witness another form of policing, one that also targeted inner city working class bodies for removal.

The drama did not begin with a knock on the door or public employees arriving in uniforms. It was a young face, rushing out from the crowd of passers-by on the sidewalk. Eyebrows raised,
beads of sweat, and a stern voice: “I tried calling (pausing to catch his breath) they’re rounding up (dāran mīāran)!” It was early in the evening. Some of the crew and I were hanging out in front of their auto-shop, chatting over tea and cigarettes. But with this warning, the scene suddenly changed. The hurried appearance the young man’s face was enough. Even before he caught his breath the crew had immediately turned to Amir, one of the elder crewmembers. Suddenly his plastic chair was empty. He was half-running into the dimly light alley nearby. He was gone.

Meanwhile, that young face was also gone, and the rest of the chairs were also emptied as everyone was suddenly attending to some minor task or the other. All the chairs but one, which Reza, the master, was carrying into the shop. With a nod of his head, he suggested that I follow. I felt like I should. The air was thick with anticipation; not the good kind. They may have been scraping off window tint, or fidgeting with the car radio, but for a moment everyone was scanning the crowd, and barely speaking. Who were “they”? What powers did they possess to so quickly splinter us? And why Amir?

“What’s happening (chī shodeh)?” I found myself whispering. While sipping his tea and fixing his gaze on the store window, he replied: “Amir is not supposed to be working here.” Sensing this only to be confusing me further, he elaborated: “They shouldn’t see that he’s working here. He was arrested a few months ago by undercover police...he was ziārat-i...You can’t work when you’re visiting,” he said.

In standard Persian, the term ziārat means “pilgrimage.” In standard Arabic it may be deployed as the noun form of “visit” or in attributive-nouns such as “visit-visa” (t’shira-ziāra). It is this latter bureaucratic category—the official title of short-term visas granted, for example, to tourists—that these men index when they qualify it with the attributive suffix “i.” As a category of practice, however, it does more than identify a particular kind of khalij-boro according to their mode of arrival. Rather, the ziārat-i is a social type gathering onto itself shared knowledge about travel to the Gulf as a moral project, and the virtue of honour-as-endurance that it required.

I didn’t see Amir again that evening. But when I returned a few days later, things were further clarified. I found him busy at work. He was glad to see me. Having attended to his customer, he pulled up a chair and inquired where I had been. “I hope you didn’t leave on my account,” he said. “Of course not...I had too see some family,” I replied, in the hope of deflecting any
impression of discomfort for having witnessed his undignified departure. He seemed to appreciate the gesture, and continued to explain:

They got me a while ago. The guy parked his car and asked for service. When I went to talk to him he suddenly showed me that he was actually police! He wanted to see my passport...and when he found out that I didn’t have a [working] visa, he arrested me.

“So what happened?” I asked. “Not much,” he replied, “I was in jail for a few nights, but I still refused to admit that I was here (Dubai) to work...I told them I had come here to see some friends and I was just helping the guys because I was staying with them. So they took my passport and gave me court date.” He stopped short here. Another customer required service.

Amir was in his late thirties and had been working and living in Satwa for a several months by then. Like his fellow crewmembers, he had a history of travelling and working in Dubai over the years. And like them he too was away from his wife and children in Iran. Unlike them, however, he was residing alone, in an apartment a few floors above that which his crewmembers shared. He invited me over for dinner sometimes. Roasted chicken from a nearby rotisserie, a modest ration of vodka, and playing cards would preoccupy us until well past midnight.

On the first of such evenings—prior to learning about his legal predicament—I asked him why he was lodging alone. I knew if was not for lack of space; there was a half-empty bunk bed in his crewmembers’ apartment. “I prefer it this way, living on my own,” he replied, “...the guys can be dirty sometimes, and here I have the whole room to myself.” I was unconvinced. But I decided not to press the issue. By then the vodka was taking effect and I was not confident in my ability to register ‘good reason.’ But it didn’t seem to be about hygiene alone, if at all. The other room was full of car tires. It was not air-conditioned; creating a stench of ‘new car smell’ that was—at least for the anthropologist—a little overbearing.

But an industrial odor was the least of his problems. In the few days following that eventful evening, I learnt that he had been appointed a court date to settle the matter. It was scheduled for several months after his arrest, but by now only a few weeks remained. He was determined to continue insisting that he was not working for a wage. “They can’t prove it,” he insisted. In the days approaching this court date, my ethnographic energies were focused elsewhere in the city. I made sure to call him and wish him well.
I returned to Satwa a few days after this court date. Again, it was early in the evening. Amir was already depleted. He sat with a somber expression for most of that night. He clearly had the group’s sympathies. But the usual teasing that went on between them did not extend to him. This was new. It was not a good sign.

Things had not gone as he hoped. The judge had offered him the opportunity to confess his real purpose in Dubai at the time of his arrest; that he was in fact working for a wage unofficially. When he reiterated his story, he was given yet another court date. It was to be four months later.

It was later that same week when Amir had a few visitors from another Iranian operated auto-shop down the strip. He invited me to join them. Once more the combination of roasted chicken, vodka and playing cards saw us through late into the evening. I could not help but feel that the objective was to help ease Amir’s mind. His legal entanglement was not discussed; I certainly was not going to initiate it. Instead these men reminisced about their youthful mischief in years past, and embarrassing episodes at work. Among these narratives was one that was especially fitting in light of his predicament. It was also one that I would hear again throughout the year. This time it was friend Ali. “This Amir agha¹⁴⁷ you see here,” he began, looking around for a lighter as he did so:

...one day (back in Iran) he borrowed my motorbike and began following this group of Qatari’s. They had come to Iran for hunting quail. They used to do a lot of that. This agha followed them into the country...he was gone all day...and made them miserable! Anyway, every time those poor guys settled down to begin hunting, this guy began honking and throttling his bikes! (we all erupt with laughter) Finally, one of these Qatari guys (pausing to draw breath) approached him and pleaded that he leave them alone. Then this guy (looking over to Amir)...told him ‘Over here, I’m muwātin (“citizen” in Arabic) and I’ll do whatever I want!

When the evening drew to a close, I settled into the empty bedroom I was to share with Ali. As we were unfolding the extra sheets, he inquired about my reasons for being there – both in Dubai, and Satwa in particular. I began to reproduce my standard account of being a student

¹⁴⁷ “Agha” is a Persian wording meaning “mister.” It is also used to mean “sir,” denoting esteem or status. Often times, as is the case in this episode, it is satirically employed in everyday exchanges to emphasize a person’s behaviour as anything but distinguished or respectable.
researching the city’s growth and the history of Iranians residing in it, when he interrupted me: “Just don’t get too comfortable. A shitty place; just leaving a man stuck like this!”

Those four months took their toll on Amir. He increasingly lapsed into melancholy. He had not planned on being apart from his family for so long and clearly missed them. His presence at the shop became more sporadic. By then, the crew was teasing him simply to take his mind off his legal limbo. He was even considering smuggling himself out of the country at one point, but decided against it in the hope of being able to return for work in the future.

Despite his exhaustion with the whole affair, he remained adamant about not confessing the truth to the court: “so long as my story doesn’t change, they can’t prove anything.”

It was during our last diner together—though we didn’t know it at the time—that he told me he was not sure what kind of ruling to expect, or whether to expect one at all. Once again his appointed court date approached, and I wished him well.

A few days following this court date I reconvened with his crew at Satwa. I had arrived late in the evening and I assumed Amir had probably retired for the day. He was not loitering in front of the shop with the rest of the guys. It was only as the men were closing up shop a few hours later that I learned he was in prison and awaiting deportation. I was helping move the tires on display back into the shop from the sidewalk, when one of the crew invited me to dinner upstairs. I mentioned that I was planning on visiting Amir. He had not returned my calls. Reza was restacking the tires in the shop, and without pausing noted: “He confessed. He’s in jail. They’ll be deporting him soon.” I accepted the dinner invitation.

That evening, I expressed my surprise that Amir had done an about-face. The crew knew us to have grown close in previous months, but had refrained from elaborating. Finally, some days later, when dinner had concluded and the younger crewmembers had retired to their beds and the routine round of alcohol was presided over by the older crewmembers, Reza elaborated:

He’s in ou’jil now. He caused a scene too. They wanted him to shave his head but he refused and started pushing them away, so I think they’ll be holding him longer.”
Sensing my confusion Reza clarified things: “[smiling] That’s what we call it. It’s from your English; it’s really ‘out-jail’...did I say it right?...that’s where they put you when you’re being expelled.” Apparently Amir had called Reza from jail to inform him of the ruling, and requested he relay this to his family in Iran. “So this means he can’t come to Dubai anymore, right?” I asked. “Not unless he does it illegally by boat,” replied another of the crew. “I don’t think he’ll want to anymore,” said Reza, pouring another glass of Scotch.

2 Another Regime Of Removal

This was an encounter with a deportation regime. Like the policing of “bachelors” described earlier, this policing of working class migrants was informed by the politics of defending the integrity of the nation. Once again their ‘excess’ was represented as a source of moral pollution as the informal presence of foreigners was linked to, for example, “scores of criminals and beggars” (Salama 2008). And like the policing of bachelors, the urgency of removing this excess foreign matter—variously labeled as “illegals”, “visa overstayers”, and “infiltrators”—was informed by the population surge of recent years. Unlike that regime of removal, however, the end-goal of state intervention here was not the relocation or redistribution of this foreign matter within the city, but its expulsion from the nation altogether.

The social type that the state saw Amir to be was wedged between a system of sponsorship regulating the labour of foreigners (the *kafala*), municipal codes regulating their place of residence, and the social logic of custodianship. Rather, Amir represented a type of foreigner that was derived from the more immediate contradictions of the kafala itself as a regime for receiving migrants and conscripting their labour. These contradictions are manifold. Here, however, I elaborate on the particular combination that rendered Amir predicament.

The administrative costs and process required to legally conscript non-citizens has not been economically feasible for small trades dependent on short-term seasonal demand. The costs that the employer must bear amount to hundreds of dollars: obtaining an entry visa, obtaining a work permit, converting the entry visa into a residence visa on the basis of employment (lasting two years), paying for the employee’s medical screening, covering the cost of their flights, or paying a hefty fee to a recruiting agency to facilitate all this.
What is more, the kafala works to inhibit the possibility of unemployment or even part-time work. On the one hand, termination of employment triggers a formal countdown toward the termination of one’s residency visa. There is no pool of unemployed foreigners immediately available for exploitation. On the other hand, the “freedom” of the wage labourer to seek employment (Marx 1990: 391, 415, 520) is largely constituted abroad insofar as the formal boundaries of this labour market are conflated with those of the nation-state. To be more specific, changing jobs required an official release from the current employer, and—with the exception of certain white-collar professions—a mandatory waiting period of six months requiring the employee to leave the country in the meantime.

This structural contradiction between the formal configuration of labour laws under the kafala, and the practicalities of immediately exploiting menial labour has resulted in reoccurring accumulations of working class foreigners residing in the UAE informally, be they employed or not. One strategy the state has relied on to address this is periodic amnesties. Running for several months at a time, they have seen significant numbers of largely South and East Asian men and women coming forward to their embassies in order to either receive “out-passes” or reconcile their visas with their current employment (i.e.: to “legalize” their status). The magnitude of these numbers (Figure #9) attest to the widespread reliance on informal labour here. They also suggest that the real value of this strategy seems to be the continuation of kafala as a socio-economic order by defusing this contradiction through removal en masse, not adjusting its underlying circumstances.

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^148 With the exception of figures for 2007, the UAE Ministry of Labor has not released official reports documenting amnesty results. These numbers are based on official statements given to the media. See Jandaly (2012) for 1996 and 2003 figures, Ministry of Labor (2007) for 2007, and Ahmad (2013) for 2012.
The other state strategy has been the dragnet, especially following amnesties. With the same fanfare accompanying the problem of “bachelors” and “shared accommodations,” news coverage regularly reported official campaigns targeting “illegals” in surprise inspections of workplaces, border crossings, and even bus stations (Hassan 2009). Amir was ensnared in one such surprise inspection. On one hand, his arrest was indicative of how this regime of removal localized the danger of moral pollution by conflating it with the category of low-income foreigners more generally. On the other hand, for his fellow crewmembers, it was indicative of the omnipresent danger of the state. Indeed, his identification as a ziārat-i was itself informed by this ever-present threat of removal, and the “enforced orientation to the present” that accompanies it (De Genova 2002: 427). It is to this orientation and its ethical connotations that I now turn.

3 Another Portrait of Life at a Standstill

The ziārat-i was most often associated with younger recruits. New to this circuit of migration, they either seek employment for just a few months, or the opportunity to demonstrate their worth as a worker who would merit the costs of formal employment. Men with years of work experience in the network of petty trades and retail in Dubai were better situated to secure a residency visa by relying on the relationships that they have accumulated. This social type, therefore, seemed to be wrapped up with the bundle of characteristics associated with young recruits; such as recently having graduated from or discontinued school, requiring training in the work at hand, being unable to speak Arabic and Urdu, being unaccustomed to engaging in routine drinking, living in a homo-social space, or being removed from family for an extended period of time.

In this regard Amir as was something of an exception. For reasons I never understood, he did not pursue the status of a master. Despite having been formally employed in Dubai previously, and possessing the know-how that far exceed the status of a novice, he still relied on seasonal employment.

Yet his circumstances and his struggle to bear them did coincide with shared knowledge about the ziārat-i as representing an especially vulnerable kind of khalij-boro. While all of these men are ultimately “guest workers” according to the kafala, the ziārat-i is all the more vulnerable to
arrest and removal for working outside the prescribed rights of a visit-visa. This vulnerability was socially mediated in everyday interactions with customers and the crowds passing by. Amir was limited in his range of activities. Driving long distances to pick up supplies, intervening in a crewmember’s dispute with a customer or participating in the occasional prank on a passer-by, are among those activities understood to be beyond their capacity as they invite the possibility of interacting with law enforcement. Like most khalīj-boro, he endured life away from his family. And like most ziārat-i, he not only endured the sakhtī keshīdan involved in manual labour and long hours, but the risk of legal ensnarement. In these things honour was called for and tested.

So too was there honour in limiting the consequences of ensnarement once it occurred. On the one hand, Amir wanted to leave open the possibility of returning to Dubai for future work. To this end, he tried to avoid a guilty verdict by denying that his reason for traveling to Dubai was for the purpose of work. Such an outcome would have ensured his deportation and a permanent ban from re-entering the country. It would deprive him from a significant source of future revenue and remittances, thereby diminishing his capacity to effectively care for his dependents.

On the other hand, his denial was also directed towards a more immediate obligation: care for his master. A confession would not have boded well for his master. He may have faced a significant penalty for knowingly hired someone without abiding by the formal channels. As I explained previously, this circuit of travel, life, and work that informs the sense of place about Dubai that these Iranians share is morally charged. It is often organized according to networks of extended kin and relies on a mutual sense of obligation between crews with each other and their masters. This was the logic that saw masters try and avoid, as far as they possibly could, exposing their crews to the risk of eviction. And it was this same logic that saw Amir try and shield his master from legal scrutiny. His living alone may be better understood in this light. A follow-up inspection that may have found him residing in an apartment occupied by employees would have done little to either bolster his case, or limit the implication of this master.

All of this could be regarded as ethically “positive” (Colebrook 1998: 41, 43). Here were a set of practices and a way of conducting oneself in ad hoc circumstances that rendered a particular kind of moral persona (the ziārat-i). But the trope of self-making does not suffice here. Amir was increasingly in despair; increasingly succumbing to the looming verdict that was repeatedly delayed; the nights alone; the state of constant anxiety about another encounter with the
authorities while working; the unexpected time away from his family; the little indignities of fleeing a scene or tolerating a rude customer. Here was a clear demonstration of honour-as-endurance, but it seemed to be doing little for Amir. The more of himself he committed to observing his moral obligations to others by the less of him there seemed to remain for working regular hours, hosting a dinner, or teasing his fellow crewmembers.

I suggest that these circumstances are better understood it terms of standstill rather than self-making. In this case: the state of being suspended between incommensurable obligations while waiting for a legal outcome that seemed to be indefinitely delayed. What is more, here too standstill smacked of the tragic. Much like Aidin, the middle class real estate agent facing bankruptcy, Mohsen’s journey to Dubai had resulted in the reverse of what he was pursuing. He arrived as a ziārat-i ready to endure risk for others, but found himself to have inadvertently become a source of risk for others.

As such, his predicament exceeds a neat analytic distinction between ‘freedom’ or ‘unfreedom’; ‘thinking’ or ‘unthinking’; or agency and structure. Here, instead, was an individual pursuing a moral project in the midst of contingent circumstances who found himself facing incommensurable possibilities. He could confess to working informally in order to sooner reunite his family with their father and husband, but consequently relinquish future work in Dubai and the income it generated for his family’s well being. He could deny having been working informally in order to test the possibility of returning to Dubai for shielding his master and (hopefully) being acquitted, but consequently stay separated from his family indefinitely while living with the constant fear of being rearrested. What Amir had to rely on was practical judgment (Lambek 2001, 2008), not unmitigated choice, or the formal prescriptions of an organized discipline, or the unity of a social tradition. Such practical judgment ultimately only aimed to realize one possibility over another as he encountered them; it aimed to realize a potential future from actual circumstances of the present (Das 2012: 134).

The gravity of his melancholy, I suggest, was in part due to being unsure in the outcomes of his judgment between possibilities that were morally incommensurable. What he ‘ought’ to do here was not based on a clear prioritization of one moral principal over another; which ever course of action he chose to endure, he ought to have endured the other (MacIntyre 2007: 224).
Ultimately, then, this state of standstill puts into relief what I earlier described a state of structural standstill. Mohsen was unsure how to judge between his incommensurable obligations, and he was unsure about when and how his legal limbo would conclude. The only thing he was sure of, it seemed, was the significance of this conclusion upon his ability to continue attending to his filial obligation by practicing the life of a khalij-boro. The anticipation of this looming, unclear, and hugely important outcome is what I understand to be angst. It was inextricably “urban” in so far as his predicament was imagined as reflecting Dubai itself as a domain of nāmardi, and born of Mohsen’s exposure to the city as the stream of strangers of passing him by on the sidewalk.

Eventually, his predicament concluded in the worst combination of these outcomes. He remained apart from his family for a significant period of time, but was also indicted and therefore banned from returning to Dubai.

4 Surfaces of Honour: Enduring the Inevitable

So far in this chapter, I have elaborated the moral imaginary of these men in relation to Dubai and each other through the virtue of honour-as-enduring, and its lived experience by a certain kind of khalij-boro, the ziārat-i. In what follows I examine how this virtue was more immediately embodied; that is, experienced as a material manifestation of conducting the kind of work that requires endurance and indicates honour. Doing so also offers an occasion to examine how these crewmembers imagined themselves in relation to other Iranians. I begin with two short vignettes. They occurred months apart. And yet they are suggestive of each other: pointing to shared understandings about the correlation between bodily surfaces and personhood.

4.1 “who is this khoshtip?”

I rarely took pictures of these crews while they were busy with work. When I did it seemed that I was a distraction. The evening before I returned to Toronto, however, was an exception. It seemed that the news of my departure had spread. When I arrived I was immediately greeted with questions about when I would be returning. Taking advantage of the lull in customers, some
of the younger crewmembers began to pose for a picture (my camera was hanging about my shoulder). They were soon in formation the way soccer teams are when their pictures are taken just before the match starts. A few pictures had passed when Saman arrived from one of the auto-shops down the street. Looking to borrow some piece of equipment or another, he realized what was going on and burst into a light sprint toward the nearby public water-cooler. Running his hands through water and then through his hair, he finally emerged with a faux-hawk and a not so subtle smirk. Saman was one of the older crewmembers and was not known for fussing about his hair, much less wearing a hairstyle as ostentatious as a faux-hawk. There were laughs, and I was soon taking pictures of him and some of the others crewmembers inside the auto-shop. As I did so, another crewmember walked in. Glancing over at Saman as he went about his business, he smiled and said: “who is this khoshtip?” [good-looking guy]. More laughs.

I appreciated Saman’s sense of humour; we all did. Yet its ethnographic implications were not immediately apparent to me. It was several months later, during another humid and uneventful night that an encounter with Iranian customers alerted me to the social distinctions that his faux-hawk was playing upon. It is to this encounter that I now turn.

4.2 “Behzad is not a sousoul!”

A long ponytail. Short hair styled to stand upright and on a slight angle; lots of mousse. The coordination of colours between shoes, t-shirts, and belts. Fitted dark-denim jeans; one was a Diesel. A pair of Puma’s, no scuffs. Two pairs of biceps that only dumbbells and protein supplements can shape. Eyebrows without a hair out of place. And of all of this stepping out from either side of a BMW.

These were two young Iranian men pulling up to the curb in front of a taz’inati auto-shop. One of them hailed the crew in Persian with “hi friends” (salam dustān). They wanted their car windows tinted. As a couple of the crew immediately set about attending to this, the rest engaged them in small talk. One of the crew asked what part of Iran they were from (bache-ha-ye kojāīn?), to which they replied: “Tehran.” These young men hung out with us for about half an hour, sharing laughs and exchanging the occasional cigarette. It was during the course of these conversations
that I began to appreciate the stark contrast between these two types of young Iranians, mingling on the street.

When they left, however, I noticed a couple of the crew commenting (in Achumi) about their hairstyles and laughing. When I asked what they were laughing about, they replied with a question. “Do guys sport ponytails in Canada as well?” one of them asked half-jokingly. I explained that it was pretty common. “These [guys] from Tehran are very fond of them” [in bachahā-ye tehran kheili ahle šān hastan], said Saeed, one of the younger crewmembers. Then Tāleb put me on the spot. “Do you like [them]?” he asked. His expanding smile suggested that there was a right answer and wrong answer. “Not really,” I said, hoping not to diminish the respect I had earned by then. Perhaps sensing a diplomatic response, they burst out laughing. Tāleb rose his hand high gesturing that I should receive it with an extended palm. I did. Slapping my hand he said: “Agha Behzad is not a sousoul!”

The term sousoul was not something I encountered often during my conversations with these men and youth. In fact, it occurs only twice in the entirety of my field notes. Despite its lack of frequency, I suggest that it nevertheless merits examination because it is suggestive of the social difference that Saman’s attempt at humour momentarily embodied, and the kinds of personhood and moral character that these interlocutors associate with this difference.

Sousoul is roughly the Persian equivalent of ‘sissy.’ In Persian vernacular it is generally used to describe men or boys who avoid physically strenuous activities, may be timid, or are focused on their appearances. These are feminine characteristics according to normative conceptions of gender in Iranian society. More recently, it has also been deployed as an informal category in urban youth culture (Khosravi 2008, Khiabani 2009). Here it refers to young men who preoccupy themselves with their looks. More specifically, it is most often associated with an aesthetic of tightly fitted clothing, brand names and ostentatious hairstyles. As an informal category its invocations and their evaluation of character can vary. It can be deployed to insult by suggesting a lack of masculinity on the part of those who practice this aesthetic, in official discourse it identifies such youth as Western dupes and vessels of cultural invasion (tahājome farhangi), and sometimes even deployed tongue-in-cheek by these very youth in reference to themselves.

Clearly, then, the sousoul is a social type. Saman’s impromptu fauxhawk was a parody not only referencing shared knowledge about the fact that some individuals practice such bodily
aesthetics, but positing them as certain types of people in distinction to him and his fellow crewmembers. Specifically, his faux-hawk was a parody of Iranian youth who focus on fashion trends. In more academic terms, it was a parody of a consumerist middle class habitus concerned with the observation of one’s stylistic competence by audiences of strangers in public settings. What Saman and his fellow crewmembers find to be ridiculous, on the part of these *tehran-i* youth, is what they take to be an exaggerated concern for and casual display of bodily forms presumably intended to capture such attention. Manipulating one’s hair in *this* fashion was regarded as an exercise in unabashed pomposity or vanity for deliberately seeking such attention.

This invocation of the *sousoul*, as a recognizable social type, was performed by way of momentarily assuming a typical piece of his bodily form. This is worth emphasizing. The object of parody, here, was something contrary to tacit norms of bodily comportment shared by these working class Iranians. As a result, the bodily form sanctioned as more appropriate is necessarily rendered explicit by contrast; by its conspicuous inversion. After all, the effect this parody relied not so much on the faux-hawk itself, but the fact it substituted the usual form of Saman’s hair.

The sculpting of a slick fauxhawk from a scruffy looking head of greasy hair, thus neatly demonstrates the deployment of bodily forms to evoke different kinds of morally recognizable subjects. The clarification of embodied ethical criteria that is achieved in the process highlights the significance of the superficial; namely, as something legible from which the nature or identity of a person may be inferred. As Webb Keane recently notes, insofar as we are unable to account for the minutia of possible reasons informing the behaviour of others, we “find [ourselves] responding to the surface of things” (Keane 2010: 68) as we try and render our social worlds comprehensible and coherent. Everyday practices of “typification”, then, proceed from surfaces; in this case, bodily exteriors. My own reliance on bodily transformation while navigating social boundaries in the city was a case in point.

### 4.3 Exteriors and Interiors

Here I seize on this notion of surfaces, and their ethical connotations. I do so as I believe that bodily exteriority or surface is a significant register of moral character or interiority for these
interlocutors, and because the manner and intent with which this surface is manipulated bears implications for the virtuous content and development of such character.

During my time with these crews, I started to realize that they rarely invested in new clothing. The limited wardrobe they possessed usually looked worn-out as they were washed once a week, and were worn for long stretches at a time while they engaged in manual labour. Nor were they usually ironed, as these crews either did not invest in irons or simply did not use them often. Their wrists, fingers and necks were usually absent of accessories that their middle class Iranian customers sported: watches, wristbands, rings, and necklaces. They did not attend to washing away the dirt or grease that accumulated on their hands and feet (slippers were common) regardless of the water-coolers nearby or a lull in customers. Though they would inevitably be drenched in sweat for attending to cars in the open, I never detected a change in t-shirts or quick showers; despite the fact their apartments were just a few flights of stairs away in the same buildings as their shops (these buildings in Satwa have no elevators), and the fact they would routinely return to them for washroom breaks.

Physical discomfort and the signs of toil that accrued on the body were sometimes a subject of deliberation as well. It was not uncommon among these crews to lament the effects that working in Dubai’s environment had on their bodies. As a younger crewmember put it to me once, “when the summer comes, our skins turn colour. We burn [out] here!” One of the earliest occasions in which the subject was raised is perhaps also the most instructive. It was during my second or third visit to one of the crews, that I was asked how old I was. “Thirty”, I replied. I distinctly recall at least two of the four or five crewmembers that were engaging me in conversation, express their surprise. It was Mahdi—one of the senior crewmembers with whom I would eventually grow well acquainted—who put it into words: “Good on you [damet garm], you’ve kept well! (khub mundi).” It was in response to this, my being older than they expected, that the conversation briefly turned to how physically exacting it is to work out under the sun all day, and how doing so leaves its mark upon the body. I replied that it if I did not look my age it was perhaps the result of having either sat in a classroom or an office for most of my life. It was about then that Mahdi said: “...as we would say, people like you have long nails [mā migim ādam-a-i mesle shomā, nākhun-a shun bolandeh]”. The others began to smile, as did I, sensing the humour in this to be at my expense. Mahdi did not have to elaborate, and I did not feel the need to ask that he do so. The difference between my clean hands and the combination of dirt
and grease that had blackened theirs and accumulated under their nails was already obvious. Long nails, then, were literally a result of not doing such manual work and figuratively a sign of not being the type of person who does it.

The theme of changing colours also emerged once again in a separate conversation with Mani. He had just walked back into the shop and was looking for his pack of cigarettes when he abruptly sat down and took a deep breath. I inquired if he was all right. The following is a part of the conversation that followed.

**Mani:** “There was a time (pausing to adjust his chair, and then collapsing on it) when I was an athlete. I used to wrestle. I didn’t look like this before [mā ghāblan in shekli nabudim]” (he begins to look for his cigarettes)

**Behzad:** “Look like what?”

**Mani:** (Says with a smile) “Don’t be polite [ta’rof nakon]. I mean that I was fit...but ever since I started smoking I got messed up [o’zām kharāb shod]...and this heat screws you up too [pedaret rā dar miāreh]. You see this shirt [pulling at his black T-shirt]? It’s grey, but it looks black because it’s soaking wet with sweat [khīs-e araghe]. It’s like this all day!”

**Behzad:** “Well just change it then.”

**Mani:** “What’s the use? It doesn’t take more than half-an-hour before it’s soaked again. How many T-shirts do [you think] I have?!"

Mani went on to explain that the heat had caused him to loose his musculature; that it had “melted” away (āb shod). I asked him why he does not sign up in a nearby gym (he had previously mentioned there to be one). He explained that he had been considering it, but that routine exercise would be difficult to maintain in addition to the already physically strenuous nature of his work. Clearly, then, being a khalīj-boro in Dubai was understood to alter one’s body; to leave its marks.

Much of this did not initially have any analytic significance for me beyond a material description of what such manual labour involved. After all, most of what I have just outlined bears functional reasons: wearing rings and watches while servicing automobiles is inconvenient if not dangerous, and any grease or sweat that is washed away will inevitably accumulate again over the course of the working day. Yet the brief ethnographic vignettes that I began this section with the conversation above suggest that there is something more to these bodily practices and
corresponding surfaces than merely their practicality or inevitability. They bear moral significance, and imply the logic and workings of honour-as-enduring. There is a continuum between these states of exteriority and interiority (Flatt 2010, Mahmood 2005); that is, between the surface of the body and one’s character as a man.

It is on this note that the relation between honour (gheirat) and enduring hardship (sakhti keshidan) comes into focus again. When elaborating the risks of legal entanglement, I explained the work of gheirat in terms of the capacity to bear with and manage vulnerability and isolation. It was this capacity of the ziārat-i that I suggested captured this relation between honour and enduring. Here, however, I am concerned with the work of honour-as-enduring with respect to physical hardship.

To begin with, there is more than a little resemblance between the austerity of their appearance while at work and that of the interiors of their apartments. Their bodies and their living arrangements, after all, were both informed by the centripetal moral logic that regard life in Dubai as ultimately focused on attending to life in Iran. Investing in new furniture or new clothes to sport while in Dubai for the sake of novelty of fashion—whether at work or not—would be to miscalculate the trajectory of their obligations. In light of their moral geography, this much should be clear.

What remains less examined is the nature of the moral continuum according to which the kinds of surfaces described above were socially registered as either worthy of respect or ridicule; that is, either elicited honour, or the lack thereof. This requires more than simply noting that the superficial and the substantive are imagined to mutually inform one another. It requires an examination of how these surfaces materialize. This requires considering the ethical criteria according to which this continuum links certain kinds of surfaces to certain kinds of personhood. I suggest that the bodily surfaces these men and youth more or less shared were imagined to connote honour through their gradual transformation. Diminished muscle-mass, skin turning colour, looking aged, ‘worn down’ nails: these are some of superficial effects of routinely conducting the manual labour of attending to vehicles for extended periods throughout the day. These bodily surfaces bore testament to the willingness to bear the exertions and hardships involved in routine manual labour. The underlying criteria for confirming and cultivating honour here was the exposure of one’s body to discomfort while toiling rather than immediate
embellishment. Exposure, more specifically, not just to Dubai’s natural environment but to the material environment of car tires, engine oil, tint glue, and so on. These bodily surfaces are thus better described as having gradually accruing certain characteristics while gradually diminishing in others. This is not a case of self-fashioning specifically targeting the body with the intention to manipulate according to a preconceived aesthetic. Instead, Mani’s bodily surface is as derivative as it is deliberate. His body bears the signs of exposures and exertions primarily directed towards other ends: tinting car windows, reupholstering their interiors, installing designer rims, replacing their batteries etc., and all the while doing so in the open.

It is in this regard that Saman’s parody of those who would sport a faux-hawk clarifies the ethical criteria informing this continuum between bodily surface and moral being. As this type of person, the sousoul was imagined to directly manipulate the surface of his body as a matter of identity. It was this, the immediate focus on the body with the intention of fashioning it according to an aesthetic, and not merely stylistic content of that aesthetic, which distinguished this social type from those whose bodies bore marks rather than brands. This is not to suggest that the bodies of these men and youth do not also achieve an aesthetic as they register these marks, or that honour-as-enduring is somehow legible without it. It is merely to emphasize that the virtue of honour associated with these rugged bodily surfaces was thought to be “internal” to the practice of manual labouring in difficult conditions. To distil my point: the sousoul was imagined to manipulate to his own bodily surface, while that of Mani’s, for example, was imagined to be manipulated by his circumstances. This distinction lies at the very heart of how these men and youth conceive the correlation between the body and moral character. The embodiment of gheirat as sakhti keshidan—that is, honour-as-enduring—was thus not so much an expression of a particular configuration of pliable adornments (Puma shoes and Diesel jeans) or practices specifically undertaken to shape the body in a certain way (weight lifting), as it was expressive of Dubai and how the kind of life to be had here inevitably bears upon the body.

Yet none of this precluded complaining. Mani’s exposure to manual labour in an auto-shop in Dubai may have graced him with the bodily surface becoming of gheirat in a shared moral imaginary. But it also involved the breakdown of one that was also proud of. He was longer athletic and had taken up smoking. Lamenting this did not expose him to criticism or rebuke. One was not less of a man for acknowledging discomfort or its effects. Indeed it was common to complain. The heat, the empty water cooler, the bits of broken glass on the sidewalk, the sharp
metal corner on that chair; these were some of the stuff to warrant complaining. And they all bore implications on the body in just the manner that would eventually accrue signs of hardship. I make no claim about a specific ethical function of this practice. It only works to underscore that demonstrating honour here was not highly orchestrated, but occurred in the stream of practice and the minutiae of bumps, burses and burns that one’s body gradually accumulated along the way. As such, it was prone to antipathy and frustration.

5 Conclusion

This has been a story in the ethics of honour. Honour underpins the very notion that journeying to Dubai aims to meet moral obligations and cultivate the kind of person that can live well with and for others. In this sense it is a central virtue involving a constellation of practices and categories. In this chapter, however, I have relied on the analytic device of honour-as-enduring in order to focus on how this virtue is achieved in ways that necessarily draw upon the contents of my interlocutors’ shared moral imaginary but also test its limits and highlight lived struggles simply to participate in this journey. This limit saw them encounter a national regime of removal. This struggle saw them faced with incommensurable obligations when ensnared by this regime. This limit saw them encounter other kinds of Iranians whom they understand to represent another position of class and another way of being a man incommensurable with their conception of honour. This struggle saw them endure the physical breakdown of their bodies, as they inhabited the skin of a khaliţ-boro.
CONCLUSION

1 Supe\textipa{r}lative Urbanism Followed Me Home

It was early in 2011 when my main fieldwork concluded. And as I began writing this dissertation I could not help but notice a certain irony: I had travelled to Dubai to study the dynamics of speculative urbanism, but I had returned to find some of those same dynamics gradually transforming Toronto. Now, in 2016, I find myself advising friends to delay taking out mortgages; “you’ll be caught with negative equity”, I tell them. To demonstrate my knowledge of real estate, financial bubbles, and bankruptcy, I refer to my time in Dubai. The things I learned while in Dubai recently have been the basis of my predictions about Toronto’s immanent future: a crisis borne of cheap credit and overvalued real estate. As I continued my research, however, I noticed the stark difference between this practice and the scholarship on so-called “ordinary cities” that I was studying at the time. At the heart of this literature is a call to avoid conflating Western urban precedents with urban theory more generally. The present and future of cities in the Global South, the argument goes, must also be grounds for theory itself rather than opportunities to apply or augment traditions of urban theory derived from Paris or New York, for example (e.g. Robinson 2002, 2006). But critiques of “metrocentricity” (Bunnell and Maritangi 2010)—that is, urban theory’s paradigmatic reliance on Western metropoles—lose their punch when you develop a habit of invoking Dubai’s recent past to explain Toronto’s near future. It is perhaps fitting, then, to conclude this dissertation about Dubai’s recent urban transformation and standstill by pointing to yet other scenes in which the dynamics of superlative urbanism are unfolding.

2 Soft Landings or Standstills?

During the year of my return, in 2011, there was much talk in local news media about Toronto’s burgeoning real estate market. The pace of construction and ongoing rise in prices had analysts trying to assess the sources of demand and their sustainability. The numbers were impressive. A condominium boom had put Toronto ahead of all North American cities in the number of high-
rises under construction, with one-hundred and thirty two; Mexico City ranked a distant second with eighty-eight (City of Toronto 2011: 14). Investors represented a considerable driver of this demand in condos as 24% of all units that year were rented (Alexander 2012).

These numbers, however, soon began to elicit warnings far and wide about an impending “correction”, and whether this would come in form of a “soft landing” or “crash”. A national boom in real estate had emerged as a reoccurring and hot-button topic of local and national news media. Among those urging restraint were the Bank of Canada (Ladurantaye 2011), and eventually even the IMF (Huffington Post Canada 2014).

The federal government had repeatedly introduced and revised regulations specifically intended to temper this market. Most significantly, perhaps, in early 2013 the Department of Finance capped the volume of mortgages that the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC)—a so-called “Crown corporation”—could insure to CAN$600 billion (Perkins 2012). This was intended to immediately affect Canada’s property market by discouraging lenders from indefinitely issuing mortgages; once this limit had been reached the government would no longer insure these mortgages. These regulatory innovations were coming on the heels of innovations in lending that were intended to spur Canada’s property market, and financial contracts with it. Chief among these was the unprecedented forty-year mortgage that was introduced in 2006 and briefly insured by the CMHC following the passing of new legislation allowing it do so. What is more, during the global financial crisis, this same federal government helped ensure the continued circulation of credit and demand for mortgages by introducing a program to assist the

149 This remained high at 23% in 2012 (CMHC: 1-3). It is also worth noting that the median price of a detached house, meanwhile, increased by 7.5% year-on-year: from CAN$455,000 in January 2011 to CAN$489,350 in January 2012 (TREB 2011, 2012).
150 One consultancy even suggested that such a correction would be so dramatic as to see house prices fall by 25% (CBC 2011a).
151 Also in early 2011, for example, Canada’s late Finance Minister announced limiting amortization periods to thirty from thirty-five years, reducing the limit that people could borrow against their home equity from 90% to 85%, and scrapping government insurance on so-called HELOCs or home equity lines of credit (CBC 2011b). See also the 2013 issue of CMHC’s annual Canadian Housing Observer (sections 3-10).
CMHC to buy up to CAN$125 billion worth of mortgage-backed securities from Canadian financial institutions (CMHC 2014).  

So what to make of all of this? That I returned from a city still in the grips of a widespread crisis, largely born of unprecedented innovations in property and finance, only to find another in the midst of a boom born of similar circumstances is worth considering.

First, it suggests that the increasing entanglement of real estate and finance is not limited to emergent circumstances featuring a dearth of regulations, as was the case in Dubai. Indeed, the Canadian real estate market is highly regulated. This suggests that if processes of accumulation are increasingly based on financial services mediated through the production of space, then they also involve a reconfiguration of state practices. This process is not limited to innovations from private corporations, but the entrepreneurial mingling of ostensibly public actors and private interests (Harvey 1989b). This amounts to more than neoliberal “roll-back” (where public funding is diminished and regulations are loosened) proceeded with “roll-out” (where new funding schemes and regulations work to increasingly privatize gains while socializing costs) (Peck and Tickell 2002). Such a dynamic still relies on a conventional distinction between the state (read “public”) and the economy (read “private”). Rather, the dynamic at work in Dubai and more recently in Toronto involves the increasing conflation of these domains of expert practice – whether in the form of a “Crown corporation” backing private transitions, or a “master-developer” managed by public authorities.

Second, it also highlights the globally varied forms of splintering urbanism. As recent studies continue to point out, the configurations of discourse and policy by which cities are divided into zones of premium services or those of neglect are not universal (Coutard 2008, Graham et al. 2013, Zérah 2008). They are not necessarily the result of a modernist ideal of urban integration cultivated in a liberal context, which is then eclipsed by a move to unbundle services and privatize once public goods. Neither Western metropoles nor too general a notion of “neoliberalism” should make for universal claims about the logic underlying contemporary urban

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152 This was the Insured Mortgage Purchase Program, and it ran between 2009-2010.
153 As Harvey reminds us, “[it is] important to specify who is being entrepreneurial and about what” (1989: 6).
transformation. The hyperbuilding of Beijing (Ong 2011), the spectral urbanism of Kinshasa (de Boeck 2011) or the emergence of New Dubai rely on logics of rule, norms of political membership, and articles of faith that diverge from those informing the property boom in Toronto. It therefore bears repeating that we must exorcise the ghost of Western pasts from urban theory in order to understand these cities and their contemporary circumstances.

In the case of Dubai, I have tried to demonstrate the structural dynamics of speculative urbanism in a context featuring “autocratic neoliberalism” (Buckley 2012). The emergence of mega-projects in quick succession along Dubai’s periphery involved a double movement of sovereign power: it was simultaneously concentrated in the figure of a sheikh, and distributed in a burgeoning network of government-related corporations. Both the sheikh and these institutional entities represented rule by exception. The figure of the Sheikh reconciled the contradiction inherent to the notion of a “government backed”-“free market” by performing the role of power’s ultimate locus. He was thus a meta-value capable of bringing things into commensuration with one another in a “market”, and capable of repairing this market by intruding when it breaks down. It is in this sense of occupying a position within and without this emergent market that I posited him as a sacred figure. Master-developers employed a strategy of graduated sovereignty to develop an urbanism markedly removed from Dubai’s city-center. In this, however, their capacity to short-circuit official protocols or manipulate conventionally sovereign functions (e.g.: granting visas) ultimately relied on widespread knowledge of them as executing the sheikh’s “vision”, and being concurrently managed by high-ranking public officials. It was this knowledge that legitimized them vis-à-vis foreign investors despite the absence of regulations and the harmonization of transactions. Informing either side of this double movement, then, was the combination of instrumental and ideological workings of sovereign power (Chalfin 2010: 45).

Whether speculative urbanism in circumstances of liberal democracy or autocratic neoliberalism is more disposed toward concluding in a “soft landing” or a “standstill” remains to be seen.
3 Lived Experiences

My concern in this dissertation, however, has extended to lived experiences of the splintering effects of speculative urbanism. Relying on ethnographic fieldwork, I was primarily concerned with the lived experiences, shared imaginings and social stakes it involved for middle and working class Iranian residents of this city. By these I mean an embedded social analysis that investigates urban experiences across economic inequality. Such an analysis, as I explained in the introduction, considers the criteria for inclusion and exclusion that urban spaces imply; indeed, that all spaces imply insofar as they are socially produced. Both my middle and working class interlocutors conceived of Dubai transformation in totalizing terms; specifically, sīstem, or a place of nā-mardi.

These were totalizing conceptions of the city were moral geographies as they were shot through with criteria for action and living well. This was partly because Dubai was a destination and thus required reasons to travel to, settle in, or eventually depart for yet other destinations farther afield. An important insight developed by ethnographically crossing the social divide was that both my middle and working class interlocutors imagined their presence in Dubai to be a result of widespread breakdown in Iran. Iran was imagined as a place where the pursuit of the good life or, even more simply, security was jeopardized.

Yet it was not just the logics of migration that inflected these imagined geographies with moral content. Among my middle class interlocutors it was also informed by a sense that the city had been subject to a deliberate project of transformation, and that the spectacular morphology it rendered did not coincide with their expectations but had given way to life in a state of standstill. The anticipation of a future of continued prosperity and the resolution of ambiguities surrounding their status as property owning “guest workers” was often times replaced by the angst of not knowing what to anticipate.

The speculative orientation with which these interlocutors engaged New Dubai—as both a market and a kind of place disposed toward a prosperous future—may be understood as an ethical state: it was informed by understandings about why it was worth investing household savings into vaguely defined properties in the urban periphery (why not continue to rent in the inner city?), and criteria with which to evaluate whether one is competent in practicing this orientation (when does borrowing become overleveraging? How long should you wait during the
crisis before you cut your losses and sell that villa below what you paid for it?). But, as Aidin’s case makes clear, ethics here was not limited to shared knowledge or implicit criteria. With the onset of a crisis and the reversals it triggered, questions of responsibility took on urgency. These middle class Iranians not only gave reasons for why they participated in New Dubai; they also explained why doing so was sensible or why their current predicaments were difficult to foresee. Recourse to the workings of ārām and shared readings of New Dubai’s spectacular surfaces, then, were never just matter-of-fact explanations. They articulated a struggle to reconcile what felt like collective betrayal with personal culpability.

Betrayal was also a matter of shared concern in the inner city neighborhood of Satwa. My working class interlocutors were alert to the possibility that the social relations they cultivated may prove unreliable when called upon. They imagined this risk as inherent to the kind of place that Dubai was. This anxiety about their vulnerability to betrayal through the neglect of social obligations was not incidental to their structural circumstances and encounter with Dubai’s splintering. It bore testament to their reliance on “people as infrastructure” (Simone 2004) in order to sustain a transnational circuit of travel and work between Dubai and their hometowns in southern Iran. Unlike their middle class counterparts, they were not implicated in the institutional network of Dubai Inc. nor exposed to the juridical ambiguities of its commodities or retroactive regulations designed to transfer financial losses onto homebuyers. Their socio-economic marginalization exposed them to the possibility of neglect from their Emirati relations, and the possibility of being targeted by state authorities. This marginalization, as I have demonstrated, was informed by a geographically differentiated moral panic about “foreign matter” (Dresch 2006). This moral panic, furthermore, also saw them exposed to various regimes of removal targeting concentrations of lower-income male bodies in the inner city.

Yet whereas Iranians invested in New Dubai experienced betrayal as a sudden and radical disruption of their circumstances and sense of place about Dubai, these Iranians in Satwa did not. As I explained, it was par for the course. The risk of betrayal and legal ensnarement were part of what tested ārām (honor) through travel, and required enduring. They were not immersed in a transforming urban scene. There was no shock about a “stronghold” (pāigāh) turning out to be false (kāzeb). Such was the difference between the moral geographies informing the kinds of life pursued in the gated communities of New Dubai versus those on the busy sidewalks of Satwa.
As Mohsen’s case makes clear, however, there was angst in Satwa as well. The actual experience of ensnarement did not seem any less severe for having deliberately risked it. Much like Aidin, Mohsen was caught between incommensurable obligations, was not sure how to respond, and did not know what how his predicament would conclude. His life, in other words, was also in state of standstill.

Perhaps this is the final irony: despite the very different worlds they inhabited in Dubai and the very different ways in which they were interpolated as certain kinds of foreign resident by the state, the personal narratives of both Mohsen and Aidin began with a departure from Iran as a place in a state of breakdown, in pursuit of becoming certain kinds of people, only to conclude in breakdown in Dubai.
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Figure 6. Flow Chart of Dubai Inc. displayed in a report by Barclays bank (2009: 10)

Source: Comment on Dubai Inc’s Barclays Capital_appendix 1

ApPENDIX 1: WHO’S WHO IN DUBAI INC?
Figure #6. Flow Chart intended to "demystify Dubai Inc." in a report by Moody’s credit rating agency (2008: 19).