We drove far out of the limits of the city, past the Jebel Ali port into the stretches of unmarked desert you traverse before reaching the limits of Abu Dhabi. The cemetery was nothing more than a compound of sand with makeshift walls made out of plastic that was already coming apart at several places. I was told that after the plot beside the nearby church had become full, the newer graves were forced to spill over into this more temporary area, clearly indicative not just of the high numbers of migrant deaths in Dubai but also of the lack of infrastructure to deal with such collateral consequences of the city’s growth in migrant numbers.

There were already about six women when we got there. They were all dressed in long skirts and blouses – attire typical of Sri Lankan domestics working in Dubai. A priest, dressed in robes, was also there. The ceremony was quiet and simple. After the priest read a short prayer, everyone joined in for a final Lord’s Prayer. Even Mr Mohammed, a Muslim volunteer, bowed his head in silent respect. Just before the coffin was lowered into the ground, the women who had come to attend their friend’s funeral asked for one last look at the deceased, Edna. The coffin was opened – it was cheaply constructed, made out of thin plywood, completely plain and unadorned. It hadn’t even been painted; the coffin just as unmarked as the body within. Edna’s corpse had been completely swathed in a white cloth so that even her face could not be seen. A tag hung from her wrapped-up body. When Edna’s face was uncovered at the mourners’ request, they immediately whipped out their cameras and began taking photos. What at first seemed like an inappropriate intrusion, I realised later was so that they could send these pictures back to Edna’s family in Sri Lanka, who could neither afford to attend her funeral nor to repatriate her body. A Dubai-based humanitarian organisation had paid for the entire costs of the funeral, and ensured there were friends present to
mourn her. Her body had been lying unclaimed in the mortuary for a
month before the authorities had contacted the humanitarian group for
assistance. Edna’s is one of many such cases. Some bodies of deceased
migrant workers lie in the mortuary for more than a year unclaimed and
unidentified until the police or a charity group arrange for a cremation.
Most come from very poor socio-economic conditions in their home
countries and their families have little means of tracing their whereabouts once they migrate.

Edna Fernando came to Dubai from Sri Lanka to work as a domestic.
Like other FDWs coming from less-developed countries in Asia, she, too,
probably had plans of returning to her home after a period of working
and saving. But like many other low-wage migrants to Dubai, Edna
never managed that return. She fell ill during her course of employment
and died in a hospital in Dubai. Edna’s story reveals the complexities of
analysing migrants’ relationships with the transitory space of the city-
state. Although a temporary labour migrant to the emirate with precar-
ious legal affiliations to the state, Edna’s association with Dubai extended
beyond the city merely as a site for work and capital accumulation. She
had built friendships in Dubai with fellow domestics, formed affiliations
with a local church and in the end, depended on the welfare of a charity
organisation. For the members of the humanitarian organisation who
made the funeral arrangements, themselves migrants, Dubai is a space
in which they have actively invested. In enacting these acts of caring,
they often place themselves in situations in which they risk censure
and deportation. Often extremely inhospitable to migrants, Dubai also
facilitates the formation of significant bonds and social networks. Often
these connections are made between migrants of the same nationality
or religious background. However, as with the humanitarian organisa-
tion’s outreach, they also cross divisions of class and race. This chapter
demonstrates how these social networks thrive within an informal space
in the city, outside state regulations. It goes on to suggest that these
elements of everyday life in Dubai point to possibilities of urban soli-
darity even within a highly rationalised and unequal place.

Urban Informality and “Care” in Dubai

This chapter draws together everyday practices, logics and networks
under the umbrella of urban informality to convey strategies that
migrant communities in Dubai employ to manage their often-marginal-
ised existence within the city-state. Chapters 3 and 5 showed Dubai to
be a highly controlled physical, social and legal environment, especially