PROLOGUE

"ONBOARD THIS AIRCRAFT the following languages are spoken by our crew: Arabic, English, Tagalog, French, Italian, German, Amharic, Hindi, Urdu, Pashtu, Dari, Singalese, Mandarin, and Thai. We hope this will further assist you in having a pleasant flight," said the milky-smooth voice over the loudspeaker. I am a passenger today onboard Emirates Air, which is flying me from London Heathrow to Dubai (or DXB, as the locals refer to it). A Malaysian flight attendant comes to my row and kneels down to hand me and my rowmates a series of menus delineating cuisine from different parts of Asia. I know the flight attendant is Malaysian because her name tag states her country just below her name, Sumitra. She catches me looking and smiles at me shyly.

"She forgot to tell passengers that we also speak Malay onboard," she says, offering us pens for making our food selections on the menu.

The woman to my left tosses the menu into the seat pocket in front of her.

"I'm having the Halal meal, which isn't on here," she announces. She adjusts her head scarf, which seems to be perpetually falling around her shoulders.

I smile and glance at the woman to my right, who has just told me she is traveling to Dubai for the first time. She is from the Philippines and was routed through London for some unexplained reason. The woman is busy with the in-flight entertainment unit that makes flying on Emirates such a treat: over 150 films, and a nice-sized screen makes any long flight more bearable.

"I've been looking forward to this part of the trip," she tells me, referring to the video screen.

"Me too," I confess, smiling.

Instead of focusing on my own in-flight unit, however, I am obsessed with watching my neighbor as she scrolls through the seemingly endless list of blockbusters that I have been (not so secretly) wanting to see. After passing through *He's Just Not that Into You*, *Marley and Me*, and *Revolutionary Road*, she pauses on *Taken* and begins reading the summary. I lean over and say to her, "That film is about the supposed phenomenon of trafficking. It looks terrible, I can't even bear it."

The woman looks at me, puzzled. "Trafficking?" she asks, which catches the attention of my other seatmate who has stopped readjusting her head scarf and is now looking at the two of us. "I don't even know what that means, is it like street traffic?"

The woman on my left rushes to answer. "No, it's like human slavery. It's like when they kidnap women and make them their sex slaves," she says, her accent a mixture of Arabic and British.

"Oh," says the woman to my right, looking a bit embarrassed and concerned at the same time.

"Well, no," I say, "that's just what people *think* trafficking is, but it's more complicated than that." I sit straighter in my seat, aware that my voice has taken on that "I'm a professor" tone that my brother always mocks.

"Yeah, I'll tell you what makes it complicated," says the woman on my left, who later tells me her name is Mona and that she is from Syria but now works as a teacher in Dubai. "All these dumb movies like *Taken*, which I saw, by the way, on my flight over to London, all these dumb movies—at the end the bad guys, the villains, are always the Arabs. The trafficking takes place in Europe or the U.S., but inevitably the Arabs are behind it. What a load of nonsense. It really pisses me off." Mona crosses her arms over her chest and looks away from us.

"Yeah, these movies and all the media representations are really biased," I say, "but they are also problematic because they make it seem like all trafficking is about kidnapping women for sex work." I am ever eager to talk about my research.

"Problematic?" asks the woman to my right; her name, she later tells me, is Lola. "Trafficking? Problematic? I don't think I understand what you are saying. What is trafficking? What are these words?" she asks. Her eyebrows draw together as she squints at the screen playing the preview for *Taken*.

I'm not sure what to tell her; do I begin by saying that there are many contested interpretations of the term *trafficking* within academic and activist circles? That I struggle with the arbitrary labels of *migrant, tourist,* and *trafficked victim* that are infused with moral judgments? As I contemplate what to say next we all sit in silence, Lola's question hanging in the air: What *is* trafficking?

"What would you do if your daughter was taken from you?" booms the deep voice of the preview narrator. "Taken far away, to a place you don't know. Ripped away from you and taken by smugglers?" Images of a young girl and her father (played by Liam Neeson) flash on the screen. The father is chasing her from one country to the next while his daughter's screams echo through his mind. I am disturbed by the strategic sensationalism of this portrayal, in which age, gender, and race are used as devices to gain viewer sympathy in relating to the age of the young woman and her helplessness as she is taken from one place to another by her heavily accented, dark-skinned captors.

Lola looks at me, confused. "I'm someone's daughter. I've been taken away from my parents. I have to go far away to a place called Dubai, a place where they don't know," she tells me. "But I'm an overseas worker. Is that trafficking?"

. . .

This moment has stayed with me, one of several events transpiring in the summer of 2009 that helped shape the contours of my thinking about this book. I continue to brood over Lola's questions as well as Mona's anger about the global portrayal of trafficking. I was incredulous that in this quick, ten-minute conversation the essence of my research had been explored by two total strangers. Mona, the Syrian teacher, had touched on the racism implied in the rhetoric about trafficking (one aspect of my research), while Lola, the Filipina migrant, put her finger on the problematic discourses about the term *trafficking* and the confusion caused by labels such as *trafficked victim* versus *migrant* versus *traveler*. A few weeks later I found myself in a situation where I had to choose a label for myself, when the police were awaiting an answer to their questions of "What are you? Why are you here?" At that crucial moment I was unable to speak, partially out of fear, but mostly because I did not know how to pick a category.

The day had started out on a positive note, mostly because we didn't get lost driving to our first destination. I had set out with my research assistant, Chris, to visit Dubai Humanitarian City (DHC), the part of Dubai that was sectioned off for "humanitarian offices." Dubai, itself one of seven administrative regions,

or emirates, of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), was divided into cities based on industry. We were living in Dubai Media City, which housed the television, radio, and print media staff in the UAE. Just next to us was Dubai Internet City, the area, as the name would suggest, containing the dot-coms. Next to that was Dubai Knowledge City, playing host to most of the schools in the area, and so on and so forth.

We had decided to visit Dubai Humanitarian City in order to get a better idea of the types of outreach the different humanitarian groups were providing in the UAE. One of the chief complaints of the migrant workers we had spoken with up to that point was the lack of formalized social services and support. Later on we would discover the thriving informal civil society efforts that had coalesced around the issue of migration, but at that point we were still trying to locate members of formal civil society. Many people lamented the scarcity of social services and that most of the social support came from ad hoc groups seeking to be formalized. On this note, we felt that a visit to DHC was necessary in order to better understand the workings of the groups there and how potential ties could be built between the formal and informal members of civil society.

When we drove up to DHC we wondered if we were in the wrong place. We had arrived twenty minutes early, having allotted ourselves an extra thirty minutes as we were perpetually getting lost, stuck in traffic, or both. DHC appeared to be comprised of several large, blue warehouses with only a few small office buildings, surrounded by a series of menacing fences topped with barbed wire. Security guards were stationed at each entryway, so we drove up to the first guard we encountered and told him our names. "The person you are meeting with has not yet arrived, so I can't let you in," said the guard apologetically.

We parked on the side of the road, directly under the sun, and waited. Over the guard's shoulder I read the sign "United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees." "Huh. This place is like Fort Knox. What would you do if you really needed help or were a refugee?" I asked Chris.

She nodded, wiping sweat from her brow for the fourth time in four minutes. "Dubai *Humanitarian* City isn't so friendly," she said.

Things started falling into place twenty minutes later when Patricia, the British woman who was the director of the organization we were meeting with, drove up and instructed the guard to allow us permission to enter.

Once inside DHC, I asked Patricia to tell us about the work she does in the UAE.

"Oh, don't you know?" she trilled in her high-pitched voice. "None of the organizations here actually does work in the UAE," she said matter-of-factly.

Chris and I weren't sure we were hearing correctly. Patricia read the confused looks on our faces and added, "No, no, we are all just logistics hubs here. None of the social service–type work is done here."

"Logistics hub?" I asked.

"Yes, meaning that we only have offices here so that we can buy supplies like blankets and water and trucks and that sort of thing. None of us do actual NGO work in-country." Hence the warehouses. Suddenly it all made sense. We *were* in the wrong place, we decided, gathering up our things. After talking with Patricia a bit more and meeting other folks in DHC who were all busy buying and selling various goods, we thanked her and decided to make our way back home.

Murphy's Law of Dubai, at least for us, was that if we got lost on the way to our destination, getting back would be simple. If, however, we managed to find our destination easily, that meant trouble on the way home, which was our case that day.

The roads of Dubai are like a tangled mess of spaghetti. Highways and streets, all spiraling around one another with no signage, combine with the constant presence of construction to render maps and other navigational tools useless. The congested traffic as well as the speed of passing vehicles can strike fear into the heart of even the most skilled driver. Add to this the fact that the population of Dubai is made up of over seventy nationalities, seventy different driving styles and rules that make predicting a driver's next move impossible. Needless to say, driving in Dubai is frustrating at best and nerve wracking and frightening at worst.

On our way back from DHC we veered off the main highway that we had become accustomed to, Sheikh Zayed Road, named for the visionary "father" of Dubai whose smiling face gazes down on the passing cars. The family resemblance is remarkable between the now deceased Sheikh Zayed and his son, Sheikh Mohammed, often referred to as Sheikh Mo by residents of Dubai. On this particular afternoon we decided to try our luck at navigating the back roads, as neither of us was interested in sitting in traffic in the high-noon sun.

"OK, I think I know how to get home, you'll just have to drive through one of those big scary roundabouts," cautions Chris. She is referring to the large, four-lane circles that render traffic lights useless and that for the unaccustomed driver can be as scary as walking a tightrope over a deep canyon.

I take a deep breath and merge into the roundabout, choosing to stay in the outer lane, the slow lane, because to me it feels safer. "Phew, this isn't that bad," I say to Chris as I merge into the oncoming traffic.

I should not have spoken so soon. After getting halfway around the circle our little Toyota starts to shake violently, the right side of it crumpling like paper as a large pickup truck merges into us. I am trembling, but decide to pull off the roundabout for fear of getting hit by other cars whose drivers have not so much as slowed down upon seeing our accident: mistake number one. I later learned that in Dubai one must never move the car from the site of an accident (though like other rules, one never finds this out until it's too late). As was explained to me condescendingly at the police station a few hours later, one must wait at the scene until the police arrive, regardless of whether this action might result in even more accidents.

As I pulled off the road and into a parking lot, the driver of the offending vehicle that had merged into my little egg-shaped Toyota Yaris, followed me and quickly got out of his car. "I'm so, so sorry Madam," said the driver. "I didn't see you, I'm sorry."

"I understand, it's no problem, but you'll have to pay to get my car fixed," I replied, still shaking from the accident. Just then a red Mercedes Benz drove up and a man in a police uniform got out of the car. "Where did he come from?" asked Chris as I shrugged in confusion.

The driver who had hit me ran up to the police officer and began speaking in rapid Arabic that we couldn't follow. The policeman and driver kept looking at us as they spoke. After about three minutes, the policeman walked up to me, hands on his hips.

"Yes, I knew it, it was your fault, that accident," he told me.

"My fault?!" I said in disbelief. "But you just apologized to me, you acknowledged it was your fault," I said to the driver. He was silent.

"What are you anyway, what are you doing here? That's a rental car, right?" asked the policeman.

I just looked at him, dumbfounded. I was still trying to process the chain of events, let alone his difficult questions about who and what I was, when he decided to haul Chris and me off to the police station.

When we got there things went from bad to worse. For starters, it seemed that everyone in the police station was male; their eyes continuously followed us because we weren't dressed in an *abaya* like the local women. My dark hair, dark skin, and the religious symbol of Allah that I wore around my neck

caused further confusion. Where was I from? What was I doing here? If I was Muslim, why wasn't I covered? If I was a tourist, what was I doing driving a car? Needless to say we were stared at the entire time we were there.

"I feel like I could vomit," Chris said, cradling her head in her hands. "I almost wish they had a separate office for women."

I nodded, fighting back tears. We were both afraid, not because we had done anything wrong, but because the police station was a frightening place. We kept getting shuffled from one room to another by angry policemen, and no one explained to us why we were there, how long we would be staying, or what we needed to do to get out. I clutched my cell phone tightly in my hand in case I would need to call one of my lawyer friends in town whose numbers I had programmed into my phone the moment I arrived.

I couldn't believe how uncomfortable and downright terrified I felt. I suddenly realized that if I—a woman with a relatively strong sense of self who speaks English, Farsi, and some Arabic—was feeling so vulnerable in the police station, how much more frightening it would be for a migrant worker who had run away from his or her employer, didn't speak the language, and was uncomfortable around law enforcement in general. What would it be like for a woman who had been randomly picked up off the streets by a policeman who assumed she was a sex worker or "trafficked victim"? How would a man who had abandoned his job after months of working without pay be treated when the policemen realized he had outstayed his visa? How would anyone without a strong understanding of the complicated laws in the UAE stand up to the type of policemen who were now staring suspiciously at us?

After an hour or so of being yelled at by different officers for repeatedly sitting in the wrong area (we never did find the appropriate place for women to wait), I suddenly remembered that one of the Iranian sex workers I had become friends with had joked that she was grateful that many of the policemen in Dubai spoke Persian.

I looked around the room and decided to take my chances with the angry-looking officer sitting a few feet away from us. "Excuse me sir, could you please tell me why I am here?" I managed to squeak this out in Persian, biting my lower lip so that he would not see the trembling.

"Oh, you are Iranian," responded the officer in accented Persian.

I wasn't sure, but it seemed like I could detect a note of relief in his voice at finally having figured out at least part of "my story," the answer to the lingering question, "What are you?" I nodded, hesitantly.

"You're here on vacation then, and that's your friend?" He asked me, as if explaining it to himself and his colleagues.

I nodded again, wringing my hands, hoping he wouldn't start speaking to Chris in Persian. Luckily, she had wandered away at that exact moment, so for now we were safe. "When can I leave? Why am I being held here?" I asked the officer, in the most polite tone I could muster.

"Calm down, calm down, there's no problem," he said, laughing for the first time that afternoon.

"Well, I didn't do anything wrong and I'd like to leave," I said.

His laugh quickly faded and he became serious. "I'd watch that tone," he said. "You are in police headquarters. You have obviously done something wrong, so you're going to have to sit here and wait your turn. Someone will come and decide your punishment soon enough." The color drained from my face and I returned to my seat.

When Chris came back from her wandering, her previous look of fear had been replaced by anger. "What's wrong?" I asked her.

"The two cops over there have spotted your wedding ring," said Chris, motioning with her head to the other side of the room where we had been sitting earlier.

"So?" I said. I tried to avoid eye contact with the officers who were, in fact, staring at my left hand.

"So they are sitting there making snide remarks about why your husband would have let you drive, let alone let you leave the country without him," she responded, trying to contain her anger.

I stood up, outraged. Who did they think they were? I was a staunch defender of the people of the UAE, insisting that the UAE is different from Iran, that it isn't a place where human rights are violated, that the citizens care about their international reputation, that the country had gotten a bad rap for being a trafficking hotbed despite circumstances having been created by the intervention of the West. All of that rational thinking went out the window as I began marching over to the other side of the room, ready to unload my frustrations on the snickering policemen in the corner.

Luckily, Chris caught me before I made it very far, spun me around, and took me back to my seat. "It's not worth it," she said quietly, forcing me to sit back down. But the officers across the room had seen the anger in my face, and they all left their desks only to return ten minutes later with the officer who had brought us down to the police station in the first place, sandwich

in hand. "Great, that's why we've been stuck here this long, because our cop wanted to go grab lunch?" remarked Chris. The officer motioned us toward his desk, tucking the remnants of his sandwich into a drawer.

"You have violated several rules, and you will have to pay," began the officer. Chris put her hand on my lap to calm me down. I sat silently, staring at the officer, waiting for him to continue. "First of all, you shouldn't move your car when you get into an accident, you are supposed to wait there until the police arrive," he said.

"But, that would have caused more accidents, that would have been unsafe!" I protested, trying to control my voice, which was rising notably.

"You were wrong. And you were driving recklessly, that's what caused that accident, so you will have to pay," he finished. He took out a piece of paper and scribbled a series of numbers onto it. I could only presume he was totaling up my fine.

"That's just not fair," I muttered, under my breath, shaking my head. "Can we go now?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Give me your passport first, we are going to keep it for a few days."

Give over my passport? Not a chance in hell, I thought. I had no desire to end up like so many others, stranded without my most valuable possession.

"I don't have it," I stated truthfully, which seemed to anger him.

"Why not?" he asked, making an effort to keep his voice low.

"Because I was always taught to keep it locked in my hotel when I travel," I said quickly, deciding right then and there that I was going to play the innocent tourist.

"Well then give me your driver's license, I'm keeping it for a while," he said. He reached across the table and took my license (which he had previously used to write my ticket) out of my hands.

"California, huh?" he laughed. "What are you doing here anyway?" he asked. "Two young girls, tourists I gather. But two girls alone. Driving. A rental car. On that side of town? You are lucky that you are only getting a fine," he said. He pocketed my license and retreated from the office.

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Experiences such as these are reflective of my own schizophrenia when thinking about the UAE. At times I am sympathetic toward its citizens, the Emiratis, and frustrated by the anti-Islam and anti-Arab sentiments implied in some

media depictions, as well as by reports and policies that paint nationals of the Gulf countries as noncompliant in addressing a trafficking "problem" that has its roots in the aftereffects of rapid globalization. At other moments I would become angered by small details such as the fact that Dubai Humanitarian City was merely a "logistics hub," or that a car accident would immediately be the fault of the person with less agency vis-à-vis the police, or that the police could arbitrarily decide punishment for an uncommitted crime based on their assumption of the answer to the ever lingering question, "What are you?" Throughout my time in the UAE, I struggled with that problematic question, which seems to create so much anxiety in a country where most of the population is from somewhere else (over 80 percent according to the UAE embassy). I could never place myself in a single category, a struggle shared by many migrants I encountered. Their experiences and stories rarely fit neatly into the categories constructed in policies and media depictions of trafficking and migration. The arbitrariness of labels such as *migrant, tourist*, and *trafficked victim* within the global rhetoric and policies on trafficking and migration continue to bother me, as does the inability of the international community to recognize how policies about trafficking are biased by race, class, and gender.

Many aspects of my research continue to unsettle me. How to write about trafficking and migration without reproducing the same caricatures of which I am critical? How to talk about sex work in a way that does not glamorize or victimize the experience and those in the industry? How to avoid the "politics of pity" or "politics of risk" portrayals when it comes to trafficking?[1] How to talk about conditions of migration when each migrant story is so unique, and when these very differences offer the most interesting and important gaps in our understanding of forced labor and migration.

Throughout this book I have tried to let my interviewees narrate their own stories while I provide the framework for a critical analysis of the issues. Any shortcomings in their stories are attributable to my inadequate translations and representations of their narratives. I continue to brood over their words and the global caricatures, stereotypes, and oversimplified sketches of trafficking, and I ask for readers' forgiveness when I find myself stuck in the "gridlock" of my subject.