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"Some kind of family": *Hijra* between people and places

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Abstract

This article follows one woman's serial migration to, away from, and back to Dubai in order to consider the intersections of migration, subjectivity, and piety. It analyzes how Hanna's migratory journey, or *hijra*, relates to her desire to become pious and reveals how people in her life shape the trajectories of both her faith and her movement. Engaging scholarship on migration and ethical subjectivity, it traces how Hanna's mobility runs parallel to her attempt to surround herself by those who make her piety possible. Whether it is the relationship with her parents and siblings in Birmingham, or the community of "sisters in Islam" she establishes in Dubai, Hanna is moved both by aspirations of piety and by the people who support (or inhibit) her efforts, highlighting the social nature of the geographic places she moves through and inhabits. Recognizing the ability of others to help or hinder her spiritual goals, Hanna actively seeks to settle amongst those who motivate and empower her to become the ideal Muslim she desires to be. Seen in this way, Hanna's experience allows us to shift from a notion of subjectivity premised upon individualized acts of self-cultivation like prayer, fasting, or veiling to an appreciation of the intersubjective role of others in the development of the self. Combining this intersubjective lens with an alternative account of mobility, I argue for understanding Hanna's *self-positioning* as an act that is not only geographic, but (inter)subjective, with the trajectory of her piety discernible both geographically and socially.

Keywords Migration · Sisterhood · Dubai · Subjectivity · Piety · Neoliberalism

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When I ring the doorbell of her apartment, it has been seven months since Hanna and I have met.[1] The door swings open and behind it is her same beaming smile. We dive into conversation as she invites me in, telling me we can sit anywhere as the apartment is empty. Usually bustling with five other tenants, each renting a room and sharing the large kitchen and bathroom, the flat emptied out when the landlord declared that the property had been sold— Hanna would be the last one to leave. She was struggling to find an affordable place, she told me, because she would only be in Dubai for another two weeks. It was too long to pay for a hotel, and too short to warrant subletting an apartment for the month. When I inquire where she intends to go next, I already know the answer: "Back home to England… I just have to sell my car and ship my things," she tells me confidently. It feels like *déjà vu*.

The first time Hanna was tying up loose ends in Dubai with the intention of returning permanently to England was when we met in August 2016. Born to Pakistani parents in Birmingham, Hanna had come to Dubai in 2008 as a teacher. Recently divorced, and desiring a new start elsewhere, she completed two-year contracts in different British schools across the city until, in June 2016, she decided she had had enough. In her early 40s, Hanna was worn out by the pace of life in Dubai and felt compelled to return home to provide her aging parents care and company. She was spending the rest of her summer in Dubai selling her car, shipping her belongings, and devoting time to what she called her "personal projects" of self-development. Now unemployed, Hanna could better address the needs of her "mind, body, and soul." We met in the context of this endeavor, crossing paths at an Islamic center which Hanna had begun frequenting in order to amass as much Arabic, Quran, and religious knowledge as possible before her departure. Before she knew it, this center felt more like home to Hanna than anywhere else, and the women she met there had become her sisters. Hanna had unexpectedly found herself part of "some kind of family," she told me.

And so, Hanna never left Dubai. At least, not permanently. As I conducted fieldwork in Dubai over the next three years, I witnessed her move between the UK and UAE no less than a dozen times. Every time, she left Dubai with the goal of finally looking after her elderly parents fulltime. Every time, she returned to Dubai with the declared intention of only staying a short while, attending classes at the Islamic center and spending time with her sisters while endeavoring to sell her car and ship her belongings. In a perpetual state of arrival and departure, Hanna was seemingly always on the phone with travel agents helping her book or change flights, potential landlords offering short-term leases, and strangers responding to her online car sale advertisements. These phone calls often punctuated our time together, and every time I heard her booking yet another one-way ticket back to the UK, or agreeing to stay in a Dubai apartment only available for a few weeks, I would think to myself: here we go again…

[1] All names used in this article are pseudonyms. This article utilizes data collected from eighteen months of fieldwork and interviews conducted in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, between 2016 and 2019. I carried out semi-structured life history interviews with 100 non-Emirati middle-class migrant Muslim women of varying ethnonational backgrounds between 19 and 59 years of age, most in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. With approximately half the women interviewed, I conducted more extensive ethnographic research, which involved spending time with women in their everyday settings by sharing tea in their homes, dining out together, meeting with their friends in parks or at the beach, and attending Islamic classes and self-development lectures together.

In this article, I argue that charting out Hanna's migratory trajectory provides more than an erratic map of indecision. Moving past an initial skepticism, I consider what we might learn about the intersections of migration, subjectivity, and piety by taking seriously the deliberate and intentional, if multiple, migrations of Hanna. As we spent more time together, I observed how Hanna's constant movement mirrored her active attempt to locate herself among people she found conducive to her piety. In what follows, I analyze how Hanna's migratory journey, or *hijra*, between places signifies her pious pursuits and reveals the role of others in her life in shaping both trajectories and endeavors.[2] Engaging scholarship on both migration and ethical subjectivity, I understand Hanna's migration to be guided by pious practice that is inherently social in nature. I trace how her mobility runs parallel to her attempt to surround herself by those who make her piety possible.

Complicating popular politico-economic narratives, Hanna's movement is reducible neither to economic factors which push her out of the UK and into the UAE, nor an oppressive Islamophobic environment in Europe she seeks to escape. While her mobility is certainly shaped by economic circumstances, Hanna continuously finds ways to persist, even if precariously, in places and among people who enable her self-cultivation, and away from those who obstruct it. Whether it is the relationship with her parents and siblings in Birmingham, or the community of "sisters in Islam" she establishes in Dubai, Hanna is moved by aspirations of piety and the people who support her efforts, highlighting the social nature of the geographic places she moves through and inhabits. Recognizing the ability of others to help or hinder her spiritual goals, Hanna actively seeks to settle amongst those who motivate and empower her to become the ideal Muslim she aspires to be. Seen in this way, Hanna's experience allows us to shift from a notion of subjectivity premised upon individualized acts of self-cultivation like prayer, fasting, or veiling to an appreciation of the intersubjective role of others in the development of the self. Combining this intersubjective lens with an alternative account of mobility, I argue for understanding Hanna's *self-positioning* as an act that is not only geographic, but (inter)subjective, with the trajectory of her piety discernible both geographically and socially.

Hijra as migration between self and other

As the editors of this Special Issue duly note, *hijra* is an Arabic term used to denote 'movement' or 'migration.' While the term is used by Arabic speakers to describe all varieties of migratory processes, it carries particular resonance in relation to Islamically inspired journeys, evoking imaginaries of the prophet Muhammad's quintessential *hijra* from Mecca to Medina. Central to this conceptualization is a narrative of religious oppression that compels Muslims to migrate from locales which prevent the unfettered practice of their faith. Importantly, in the Islamic tradition, piety is not bound territorially, but understood as flourishing amidst social relations which make it possible.

[2] Though some women who relocated to Dubai from Europe described their move to me as a *hijra*, Hanna did not ascribe this Islamic idiom to her journey in our conversations. Despite this, I consider her movement a *hijra* because I understand the term broadly, referring to any motion in the direction of piety, regardless of whether the persons moving consciously foreground the religious objectives or consequences of their migration. As Hanna's example demonstrates, these rationales may emerge after the fact.

Thus, the impetus to undertake *hijra* by leaving one place for another reflects the desire to abandon a spiritually toxic society in favor of a community more conducive to the development of one's piety and moral character. Thinking beyond a migration driven by political and economic push or pull factors, what follows considers how Hanna's movement maps onto a "transnational social field" (Lubbers, Verdery, and Molina 2020) where space and movement are understood socially, rather than geographically, highlighting how social networks (rather than nation-states) drive migration.[3] To this end, this article examines the affective, intersubjective relations guiding migration as characterized by the Islamic notion of *hijra*. On the one hand, this conceptualization of *hijra* complicates the secular analytics of understanding migration as driven by this-worldly material needs. On the other hand, it challenges *hijra* imaginaries premised upon binaries between nation-states, where Muslims are either oppressed or given free rein, to include an appreciation for how the social relations animating any milieu might induce a religiously inspired departure or arrival.

Accounts of migration premised upon economic and/or political motivations also privilege understandings of agency resonant with Western (neo)liberal accounts of subjecthood. In such narratives, agents are autonomous, reflexive, and calculating individuals who identify and pursue the course of action rationally expected to procure them the greatest benefit. Scholarship on ethical subjectivity and personhood has since complicated such conceptualizations of agency, however, most notably and relevantly in works by anthropologists Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006). Mahmood and Hirschkind highlight how pious Egyptian Muslims seeking moral refinement operate with understandings of freedom, agency, and ethics which diverge from those of their liberal Western counterparts. Following Mahmood, numerous works have examined how Muslim women cultivate their selves through various forms of pious practice (Deeb 2006; Fadil 2011; Fernando 2014). While Mahmood and others have acknowledged that Muslim women often understand their individual self-cultivation as a personal project directed towards a collective end— the constitution of a more just and Islamic society achieved through public practices like *da'wa*— scholarship has focused primarily on the individualized practices and consequences of this self-cultivation, rather than its social valences.[4]

In over-emphasizing the active, intentional self-fashioning of Muslim subjects, the other forces at work on an individual are backgrounded (Mittermaier 2012; Rytter 2016), including the role of others in constituting the self. As a corrective, recent scholarship has posited the notion of "intersubjectivity" as an organizing framework which highlights how subjectivity is constituted through social relations (Duranti 2010; Jackson 1998; Pels 2014, 201; Jouili 2015). Calling into question the self-contained, agentive individual and his or her bounded subjectivity, scholars have suggested the use of concepts like dividuality (Strathern 1988),

[3] Moreover, as Cati Coe (2016) illustrates in her study of female Ghanaian migrants, mobility is driven as much by social and spatial considerations as temporal ones. As women migrate from rural to urban areas (or transnationally), they work to synchronize the timings of their movement with care-giving responsibilities to their parents and children back home. This "entrainment" Coe describes, a temporal coordination of care and life-courses, becomes more challenging in transnational contexts, as Hanna's example indicates.

[4] Two notable exceptions are Paul Anderson (2011) and Vanessa Vroon-Najem (2014).

fractality (Wagner 1991), and relational agency (Burkitt 2018) (see also Bialecki and Daswani 2015) to indicate the collective efforts involved in the constitution of a single self. I move the inquiry into Muslim women and subjectivity in that direction, considering the centrality of others to an individual's self-development and transformation by reflecting on the inherently relational nature of pious pursuits. The outcomes of such collective endeavors towards faith, I suggest, exceed (neo)liberal accounts of the individual, ethics, and migration and allow us to reconceptualize each categorization, respectively.

An ethnography of Dubai is particularly well-suited to this endeavor, insofar as the UAE's simultaneously secular, (neo)liberal, and Islamic governance makes it difficult to map onto easy categorizations of *dar al-Islam/dar al-kufr* or West/non-West.[5] While it ostensibly draws on the Quran and Islamic principles in its constitution and legal system, the UAE also wields secular power when it governs religion in the public sphere and its subjects' private lives (Agrama 2012). At the same time, the UAE's state leaders and institutions utilize techniques of neoliberal governmentality (Harvey 2005; Ong 1999) to propagate discourses of self-development and success (Rose 1990). This rhetoric extols individual risk and responsibility (Rudnyckyj 2010) and is intended to offset any discontent arising from migrants (over 80% of the UAE's population) maintaining an economically and legally precarious life in a state which provides no welfare services to its expendable foreign labor population.

This precarity is further produced through the UAE's reliance upon the *kafala* (sponsorship) system (Ahmad 2017; Jamal 2015). Utilized as a means of managing and disciplining its population, *kafala* is built upon the dependency and transience of migrant labor, whereby local sponsors are made responsible for providing their employees with accommodation and health insurance. While these benefits and the tax-free salaries they accompany are often successful in drawing global talent to Dubai, they also embroil employees in perilous relationships with their sponsors. In this arrangement, one's work contract, residence visa, housing lease, and health insurance can all be legally terminated with only a 30-day notice from one's employer. This constant threat of displacement colors the lives and subjectivities of the masses of migrants who find their way to Dubai, to labor, service, and invest in the city's many industries. A growing body of scholarship exploring Persian Gulf migrations has considered the everyday experiences of non-citizens in the Gulf by exploring questions of citizenship, ethnonational identity, and transience (Vora 2013; Hanieh 2011; Kanna 2011; Ahmad 2017). Building upon these works, I shift the focus to modes of belonging which exceed ethnicity and national citizenship— such as belonging to a family, a sisterhood, and a religious tradition— and consider how these social relations might define one's migratory trajectory. Hanna's *hijra* to and from Dubai provides us one such account.

[5] Traditional theological works referenced take for granted the distinction between *dar al-Islam* (space of Islam) and *dar al-kufr* (space of unbelief) (Abou El Fadl 1994; Masud 1990), a categorization which is often reproduced in scholarship on *hijra*. Such divisions have since been critiqued and complicated by European Muslims (Ramadan 2013).

"Leaving the door open": Dubai as a place to leave, and return

What Hanna sought from Dubai when she first arrived in 2008 is different from what kept her coming back in later years. Although the idea of living in a Muslim-majority country appealed to her—as did the prevalence of *halal* food— Hanna did not initially envision her move to the UAE as a *hijra*; only later would Hanna's relocation be motivated by spiritual pursuits. In the beginning, she cited the country's ideal location for travel, its cleanliness and modern aesthetic, along with its use of English as a spoken and business language as reasons which first motivated her migration. The city's safety was also important, especially for a single woman; Hanna felt secure from both sexual harassment, violent crime, and even petty theft in the closely surveilled state. Even matters as simple as warm weather and abundant sunshine made life in the UAE more appealing than in the UK, she told me often. Combined, these features made Dubai a prime location for a single, British woman of Muslim and South Asian heritage to earn a good living for some indefinite amount of time.

For Hanna, this time added up to eight years. During this period, she taught on the weekdays and socialized with her colleagues on the weekends. While this arrangement initially worked fine for Hanna, over time, she became disillusioned with what she described as Dubai's unprofessional and unethical work environment. To do well here, she told me, was to ingratiate yourself with your superiors, heeding their every word, regardless of how unprincipled or harmful their directives might be to colleagues, students, or yourself. "Doing the right thing" meant nothing in this corporate world and would even be perceived as a shortcoming if it challenged the system or its hierarchy of authority. As someone who detested such pandering, Hanna faced constant conflict at work. I inquired whether her distress was magnified by a heavy workload, and Hanna responded, "I wasn't working more hours here. I worked more in England, but here the burden is heavier because everything depends on this job. In England, if you lose your job, you just find another one— here, if you lose your job, you lose your accommodation, your visa, your medical insurance. To me, that is such an emotional burden."

It was only upon quitting her job that Hanna's experience of Dubai shifted significantly. Taking advantage of a friend's empty apartment, she spent the summer in the city doing things she was too busy for when she worked fulltime. Her main priority was gaining more Islamic knowledge, something she had not received growing up in the UK and expected to find little of when she returned. Devoting time to herself and what she termed her "spiritual journey," come August, Hanna no longer wanted to leave. She was doing yoga, going to religious classes, and spending time with new friends she made at the Islamic center. Hanna intended to live like this for two months, until her savings ran out and her friend reclaimed the apartment, and then go home to Birmingham for good.

Shortly before her expected departure, however, a new opportunity arose; an acquaintance offered to pay Hanna to tutor her children part-time. Hanna embraced the offer, figuring she could always use a little extra spending money. Word spread about her skill with schoolchildren, and her prospects snowballed from there. Hanna picked up more tutoring jobs, warranting her remaining in Dubai until Christmas, when most students traveled abroad with their families, giving her a chance to amass even

more Islamic knowledge. She too went back to Birmingham for the winter break, only to return to Dubai in January, tutoring and tending to her own religious edification until the school year concluded in June.

After freelancing as a tutor for her first full academic year, Hanna decided she would draw the line there, and resettle in Birmingham permanently. Persistent money troubles, coupled with the impracticality of staying in Dubai without a residence visa, had slowly eaten away at Hanna's resolve to stay.[6] Moreover, frequent visits to the UK to see her family had made Hanna feel she was needed back home. Classes at the Islamic center Hanna frequented often reminded listeners that exercising *sabar* (patience) while caring for one's elderly relatives was an Islamic obligation (Qureshi 2013), and Hanna could not ignore that tending to her parents was a virtuous act just as (if not more) important to her spiritual development as gaining Islamic knowledge was. When Hanna ultimately left Dubai, however, she kept several ends untied; her car remained unsold, and her belongings were still scattered between a storage locker and her friends' apartments. This necessitated a return in September, a cost which Hanna hoped to subsidize by tutoring as she closed the Dubai chapter of her life once and for all. And yet, returning to the city reminded Hanna of all the spiritual benefit it had to offer, and she promptly found herself contemplating sticking around just a little bit longer…

What was initially envisioned as a short-term means of earning a small side income had developed into Hanna's primary profession and *modus vivendi*. When Hanna would return to Dubai again and again in the months and years following, it was always under the guise of selling her car and shipping her belongings back home. The accomplishment of these tasks, however, was perpetually deferred. At the same time, Hanna would never announce to her tutoring clients her intention of returning to the UK permanently. Avoiding cutting ties with her regulars, Hanna maintained her ability to find paid jobs whenever she returned to Dubai. This (un)conscious habit of always—but not quite fully—leaving would become Hanna's characteristic mode of mobility, a strategic move she describes as "leaving the door open." Aspiring to go back home to the UK, Hanna nonetheless ensures she keeps intact a thread connecting her to Dubai, which she can follow back when in need, not materially, but spiritually.

Hanna often found, however, that the spiritual and material components to her wellbeing clashed. The exhausting, time-consuming, and stressful financial balancing act she managed—making enough money tutoring to survive in Dubai without a regular paycheck—sometimes prevented her from fulfilling the very objective she sought to accomplish by being there, namely, seeking Islamic knowledge and nurturing a budding piety. At one point, Hanna attempted to gain some financial stability by taking up a part-time position as a substitute teacher, only later realizing it would prevent her from attending Arabic and Islamic classes she had registered for. When she found she was neglecting the very reason she sought to stay in Dubai, Hanna told her employer she would only work during times that did not conflict with her Islamic learning. It meant a less reliable income, but Hanna was confident that Allah would recognize and reward her prioritizing faith over finances. Hanna's intentional decision to continue living so precariously baffles those around her. She recounts to me that friends constantly offer the obvious as a solution to her persistent stress: just get a job.

[6] Hanna was working illegally, like many in Dubai do, on a tourist visa which necessitated a "visa run" to the Omani border every 30 days.

Hanna responds to this well-intentioned advice by shrugging her shoulders and stating disinterestedly that money is no longer her focus, and that fulltime work will distract her from the primary reason she remains in Dubai: her spiritual wellbeing.

Al-Noor and the nourishment of the soul

To Hanna, remaining in Dubai is critical for her spiritual wellbeing, something she became more dedicated to after quitting her fulltime job in 2016. No longer constantly stressed by workplace politics, nor surrounded by "toxic" colleagues, and with a more flexible work schedule, Hanna experienced Dubai in a new way, among new people. Her endeavor to develop herself as a Muslim inspired her to begin frequenting Al-Noor, an all-female Islamic center in Dubai which caters primarily to middle-class expatriate Muslim women.[7] Since her discovery of this center and integration into its social network, her experience of life in Dubai had been radically transformed. Hanna's subsequent desire to stay in Dubai reflected her yearning to stay involved in the classes and community Al-Noor offered, a place which quickly worked its way into her life, sense of self, and relationships.

At least twice a week, Hanna visited the center that had become a central site for my fieldwork. Located in a lavish villa in an affluent neighborhood populated by Emiratis and well-off expats, Al-Noor is an Islamic center which, as its website notes, works to provide "mothers, daughters, and sisters… nourishment for the soul." This sustenance comes in the form of free-of-charge classes offered five days a week and broadcast on a sleek online learning platform.[8] Sister Budoor, the Emirati woman who founded and heads Al-Noor, teaches all classes in English and Arabic, lecturing on themes like the 99 names of Allah, the meanings of Quranic verses, and the life stories of the Prophet Muhammad, his wives, and his companions. Al-Noor also offers classes in other languages, where women—usually dedicated students who take Budoor's English classes—mediate general Islamic knowledge to those in their language cohort. The current language offerings—French, Pashto, Persian, Russian, Sinhalese, Tagalog, Turkish, and Urdu—reflect the center's ethnic diversity and cosmopolitan outlook.

While important to reach those not as fluent in English or Arabic, these language classes merely complement Al-Noor's main attraction, which is Sister Budoor's charismatic presence and presentation. Arriving at the center in a black *abaya* and veil which reveals only her eyes, Budoor removes her cloak to show a bright smile which never leaves her heavily made-up face. She is always well-dressed, paying close attention to her jewelry and hair, and encouraging women in the room to do the same. A specially designed powder room at Al-Noor supplies hairbrushes, hair straighteners, perfumes, lotions, and makeup that women use and share—because, after all, "God is beautiful, and he loves beauty," something Budoor reminds her students of often.[9]

Al-Noor offers other enticements; a free on-site daycare allows mothers to attend classes and socialize while their toddlers receive their own religious instruction and playtime. Wholesome, home-cooked meals (also free) are served throughout the day—

[7] I use a pseudonym for the center to preserve the anonymity of those who frequent it.
[8] As of June 2018, there have been changes to Al-Noor's organizational structure, and classes are no longer entirely free of charge; this section describes Al-Noor before June 2018, with the impacts of its recent transformations discussed in the postscript.
[9] She is citing a popular hadith.

dishes like pasta, salad, rice and chicken supply the main course, alongside fruit and baked goods for dessert, and a constant supply of coffee, tea, and juice. There is even a Baskin Robbins ice cream stall operated by a female employee coming in twice a week to dole out complimentary ice cream to women and girls of all ages.

Women who frequent Al-Noor tell me they have never experienced any place like it, often describing their first visit to the center with a sense of nostalgic awe. Al-Noor is certainly a far cry from some Islamic centers in the Western contexts these women are familiar with, where women's sections of mosques or Islamic institutions are sometimes allocated smaller shares of already meagre community resources, and where unpleasant ethnic and religious struggles over authority often shape mosque politics (Khan 2012; Grewal 2014). Being part of an ethnically dominated (Pakistani, Somali, or Lebanese) Muslim community in a small mosque tucked away inside a warehouse or garage and being part of a cosmopolitan, educated, upper middle-class Muslim community at the lush Al-Noor undoubtedly inspired two very different imaginaries of the *ummah* and reasons for belonging.

While perhaps unique in its opulence and feminine aesthetic, like all Islamic centers in the UAE, Al-Noor is governed by Dubai's Islamic Affairs & Charitable Activities department, meaning all teachers, lecture content, and institutional activity are subject to ministry review and approval. Though they did not operate under formal government recognition until June 2018 (a new development which significantly altered how the center operates, discussed in greater detail in the postscript), as an Islamic center in a closely controlled state, the center's self-governance ensured its teachings always remained within the boundaries of what was politically permissible, which meant advocating an apolitical, quietist, neoliberal Islam. Budoor's classes describe the theological underpinnings of individual responsibility (Watt 1948; De Cillis 2014) and advocate a religiously inspired responsiveness to life's trials and uncertainties, where spiritual endurance is deemed critical to the cultivation of the self (Pandolfo 2007; Mahmood 2005). Al-Noor focuses on the practical application of Islamic values like patience, gratitude, contentment, and charity in one's daily life, and the centrality of a personal relationship with God (comparable to that Tanya Luhrmann (2012) describes among American evangelical Christians). In so doing, it provides women with the discursive frameworks necessary to making sense of and living in a precarious context where individuals like Hanna are forced to rely almost exclusively upon themselves, at least economically.

Even as Al-Noor teaches the importance of individual responsibility and fortitude, however, in practice, its vibrant social environment makes it an incubator for bonds of friendship that quickly extend beyond the class setting. These relationships are guided by an Islamic ethics of "sisterhood for the sake of Allah," a term frequently cited by women at Al-Noor to describe relationships founded upon a common devotion to God.[10] The primary

[10] To do something "for the sake of Allah" means to do it with full sincerity, desiring nothing but God's pleasure in the act. The term is used in numerous Quranic verses, such as "Say, 'My prayers and sacrifice, my life and death, are all for God, Lord of all the Worlds" (6:162). Trans. Muhammad Abdel-Haleem. Hadiths mention specifically the great rewards inherent in loving another person for the sake of Allah, as opposed to any worldly benefit. In one popular hadith, Muhammad says: "Allah has servants who are neither Prophets nor martyrs and who the Prophets and martyrs are pleased to see what they have, due to their place of nearness to Allah." The companions asked: "O Messenger of Allah! Who are they? What are their actions so that we may love them?' He said: *They are people who love one another for Allah's sake, without having family connections among themselves or money that they give to each other*."

purpose of sisterhood for the sake of Allah is the attainment of God's pleasure through individual and collective spiritual development. A mode of sociality which emerges around the Islamic tradition of commanding good and forbidding evil (*al-amr bil ma'ruf w al-nahi 'an al-munkar*), friendship for the sake of Allah entails regularly offering and receiving the moral advice (*nasiha*) necessary to uplifting oneself and one's community morally and spiritually (Asad 2015). In this kind of sisterhood, one reminds her friend when the time for prayer has come, privately and kindly advises those committing sins, and refrains from gossiping, backbiting, and rivalry. Women at Al-Noor actualize the *social* aspect to self-development discussed in scholarship exploring Islamic modes of cultivating the self (Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005). This is done through "an orientation of mutual care of the self, based on the principle of friendship," and within a tradition that encourages "a desire for being transformed through friendship, through belonging to others who belong to you, as they themselves are also changed by that mutuality" (Asad 2015, 212–13). It is precisely this transformative mutuality of being and belonging that women like Hanna find at Al-Noor, and in Dubai generally, and that which keeps them constantly coming back for more.

Spiritual kinship in neoliberal times

Importantly, this Islamic sociality of care found at Al-Noor both complements and challenges Dubai's neoliberal orientation. On the one hand, Al-Noor's students are taught that the trials and tribulations of modern life—losing one's job, having trouble with one's landlord, or struggling to finance emergency health expenditures—are individualized tests from God which one must endure with fortitude. This enshrines a quietism which rationalizes state policies that renounce any responsibility for the maintenance of non-citizen residents. On the other hand, Al-Noor fosters a network of "people as infrastructure" (Simone 2004; Elyachar 2010), where women find themselves with a place to stay when behind on rent, emotional support in times of grief, and companions with whom one can unwind on the weekend. More than a network of migrants (Xiang and Lindquist 2014), the "spiritual infrastructure" that friendship and sisterhood for the sake of Allah offers dramatically reconfigures an otherwise lonely, taxing day-to-day existence in Dubai into a communal project of (self)-development.

While the techniques of the self (Foucault 1988) central to this endeavor are often drawn from neoliberal discourses of self-help and development (Rudnyckyj 2010; Rimke 2000), the outcomes of this sociality of care exceed neoliberal calculations. The relations cultivated between sisters at Al-Noor are unique insofar as women seek rewards and recognition for their good deeds not from those for whom they care, but from God. As in other practices of Islamic charity (Mittermaier 2019), God mediates the exchange of care between women in need at Al-Noor, where care for the self invites an altruistic care for the other—a critical element for survival in the precarious setting of Dubai.

Hanna is acutely aware of the role sisterhood plays in the Al-Noor experience. After telling me her own reasons for coming to Dubai— the *halal* food, nearby travel opportunities, cleanliness, safety, and weather— she tells me that other women might initially also come for these perks, but end up staying just so they can remain a part of Al-Noor. Like her, many even remain in Dubai without employment, "buying" visas

and figuring out ways to make ends meet just to attend classes.[11] Hanna underscores repeatedly that Al-Noor is about much more than gaining Islamic knowledge. She describes to me an incident where once, upon returning to Dubai, she was unexpectedly without a place to stay. Hanna sent a message to a friend from Al-Noor asking if she knew of any rooms for rent. This friend circulated Hanna's request on a WhatsApp group composed of Al-Noor sisters. Irina, a Ukrainian convert, responded saying she could take Hanna into her studio apartment for free. Years later, Hanna is still incredulous at Irina's generosity, remarking that not only did she barely know Irina then, but that Irina herself was out of work at the time. "Some friends you're close to because you spend time with them, others you have an instant connection with even if haven't had much time together, and I can't say I have either of those with Irina," she admitted. Hanna had repeatedly asked Irina to accept some form of payment in return for her kindness, but Irina had refused, stating that she was doing it *li wajh Allah,* or, for the sake of God (literally, the face of God), and sought rewards only from him.

In this mode of friendship, one woman welcomes another into her modest home, seeking no payment, even in a moment of financial struggle. She does this for a friend not because of a closeness produced through similar hobbies, backgrounds, or personalities, nor months or years in one another's company. Rather, Irina's closeness to sisters in Islam like Hanna is borne from their shared closeness to Allah, a common beloved. This closeness exceeds that of a mundane friendship, and resonates more with the intimacies of kinship. "The women at Al-Noor have created some kind of family," Hanna tells me, a family whose contours are determined not by blood relations, but *divine* relations. Relationships built around God inspire not only greater care than other friendships do, Hanna remarks, but different *modes* of care; "even if it's just praying for a person— that's care isn't it? It doesn't have to be visible in a physical way, it can be just an intention." Immaterial modes of care are especially important during hard times, which women at Al-Noor face often. "Many of these girls don't have jobs, everyone is in a difficult situation, no one has it easy," Hanna explains, "And yet, people do things for others in their own way— there's *something* about that group."

Hanna contrasts this "something" with the "fakeness" of most other people she has met in Dubai. As an (on and off) resident of Dubai for the past twelve years, Hanna has had to adapt to the perpetual arrival and departure of colleagues and friends, and the impact this transience has on the kinds of relationships possible between people in the city. This impermanence, I heard from her and others, got in the way of migrants making and committing to relationships that went deeper than a surface level. A friendship is difficult to develop in a setting where people do not remain long enough (or anticipate remaining long enough) to invest their time, energy, and trust in others. Bonds are also hard to cultivate and maintain in a place where an incredibly precarious work-visa nexus encourages a cutthroat attitude that precludes collaboration and care (even in settings beyond the office), and instead promotes a Machiavellian realpolitik of survival. Over time, these factors made Hanna realize that her expectations for a friendship built upon mutual dependability, support, and care were unrealistic in Dubai.

[11] What Hanna terms "buying a visa" refers to a common practice undertaken by those wishing to remain in the country without holding a formal job. It usually entails undertaking an agreement with someone who legally runs a company in the UAE (often in one of its free zones) who "sells" them a work visa for a lump sum of money on the premise that they are employees of that company, after which individuals are free to live in the UAE off their own sources of income (whether coming from within the UAE or outside it).

Worn out after several years in such an environment, Hanna, an otherwise sociable person, gradually withdrew inwards, finding she could not focus on herself when being constantly social and meeting new people. When I inquire whether she could not do both—work on herself and be social—she responds that it is at Al-Noor where she found the opportunity to do precisely that. At Al-Noor, "people's intentions are good; we're all there for the right reasons. Even though we're not perfect, we're all striving to better ourselves in character. Even if you have ego, arrogance, bitchiness, if you're on that path [of Islam], it will eventually reduce, and hopefully go away." In the context of Al-Noor's sisterhood, then, life in Dubai became bearable to Hanna once again.

"Home is a hellhole": Choosing between spiritual wellbeing and family

Even with Al-Noor and her sisters in Islam, however, Hanna can never remain in Dubai for long— the need to care for her parents always guiltily pulls her back home. Her back and forth remains so frequent and unchanging that, after the first few times, I know the drill. I will meet Hanna for coffee, and she will be frazzled, in-between apartments, tutoring around the city for another week or two or three before she flies back to the UK. She will be unsure if she is returning at all, let alone when, but will anxiously mention her car, her storage locker, her things… She will fly out of Dubai, and a week or two into her time in England, I will receive an excited text message declaring that she has booked a flight back to Dubai and can't wait to see me soon. Repeat.

The last time I meet Hanna, however, I note a slight shift in her demeanor and outlook. It is February 2019, and we are sitting in yet another one of her transient rooms in a Jumeirah Beach Residence apartment. From her window on the 21st floor, sand and sea stretch out before the distinctive Dubai skyline. The room does not feel temporary; her shelves are lined with books and personal mementos, several lit candles give the walls a soft glow, and clothing has already filled not only the closet, but two corners of the room as well. I contrast this with my own room in Dubai, which is quite bare—after all, I am only in town for a few months of follow up fieldwork. Hanna laughs: "That's longer than I'll be here… I'm moving out at the end of the month!" Tongue-in-cheek, I ask, "Heading home for good this time?" Sitting on her bed, she and I reflect upon what it is that makes it impossible for her to stay put, be it here or in the UK. Hanna responds by pondering over the reasons she is in Dubai; "I can't say solely for the sake of Allah, but for the sake of mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing, and for the purpose of learning for Allah's sake." I push her, asking how being in Dubai can give her emotional wellbeing when the financial precarity causes her such enormous stress? Her response surprises me: "Because being back home with my family is even worse."

Hanna proceeds to tell me that, the last time she was home, life there was not as she expected it to be. Things had never been great; like many first-generation immigrants, Hanna's parents struggled to raise their children in a foreign land, and the moral and financial challenges they faced in the process left long-lasting scars on all members of the family. Her mother and father were long divorced and not on the best of terms, and her siblings were too preoccupied with their own lives to dedicate much time or care to either parent. To top it off, her mother was becoming increasingly unwell, both physically and mentally, and conflict had arisen between her family members on how to best address her needs. Whenever she went home for a visit, Hanna returned

to her old room in her father's home, and always found herself involuntarily caught up in unending family drama. "When I went back to England in December, it was a hellhole…" Hanna declares, "It was so awful that, when I landed in Dubai's airport in January, I didn't even have enough money to pay for milk… But I remember thinking to myself that this hellhole in Dubai, and not having any money, not even money to buy milk, is better than that hellhole in England with my family."

I ask if her leaving was just about escaping her family, or if there were other reasons pushing her out of the UK. She responds enthusiastically, telling me how, during this last visit, she had gotten involved with a local mosque which offered free talks and workshops, and had an active and welcoming sister's community that reminded her of Al-Noor. She had also met people through taking a first aid course, cycling classes, and Zumba lessons. For the first time in a long time, Hanna felt settled enough in Birmingham to truly consider staying. Ultimately, however, the very reason that drew her home was the one that sent her fleeing it— her family. Hanna struggles to reconcile the ethics and intentions underlying her return to Dubai, asking herself aloud "is your intention for Allah or to escape your family?" acknowledging the Islamic importance of possessing a sound intention for any action she undertakes. In response to her moral dilemma, Hanna reasons that "if I'm crazy, then I can't be a good Muslim. And that's how I've had to understand it."

So, while Hanna is not driven by other—material—reasons that draw people to Dubai, she still struggles to locate herself between two places and communities which fundamentally impact her piety and sense of self. She sums up for me her rationale for being in Dubai: "Getting away from the craziness back home, and not going crazy myself. I didn't realize that would be my priority, but it is." The second appealing factor is gaining spiritual knowledge, which she is most able to embrace alongside the support of her sisters at Al-Noor. Thus, not only is Hanna's move instigated by the pull of an Islamic sisterhood based in Dubai, therefore, but it simultaneously stems from an attempt to break out of a family environment she identifies as toxic to her piety. Her *hijra* thus reflects a choice to live in community premised upon a spiritual kinship which bolsters her religious endeavors, rather than a blood kinship which hinders her quest for faithfulness.

Conclusion: Piety between people and places

Hanna's example showcases how the attempt to cultivate a pious self can govern one's migratory trajectory. It also highlights how piety, and the mobility it inspires, are inherently social, with both aspirations driven by the desire to become part of (or escape) a community. Hanna's *hijra* is not driven by political nor economic concerns, but affective and relational ones, and not always in a predictable direction— she does not desire to return "home" to her parents and siblings, but to establish a new spiritual abode and family elsewhere. Bound by more than blood, Hanna's Al-Noor family shares a common practice of mutual care of the self, mediated by a shared understanding of and obedience to God. Hanna's *hijra* to Dubai is thus a quest to immerse herself in Al-Noor, a place grounded within a mode of sociability which provides her spiritual succor and sustenance. A simultaneously singular and social pursuit, Hanna's active attempt to emplace herself more piously in the world takes place at the individual level

at the same time that it unfolds as a relational process. Her becoming the Muslim she aspires to be is not a simple matter of praying or fasting more, but is dependent on the creation and maintenance of social relations that allow her faith to flourish. Hanna's piety is not exclusively her own doing, in this narration, but the combined product of her social relations, geographic placement, and internal struggles, all of which she has some control over, but never entirely.

In this way, Hanna's example of "migration as *hijra*" complicates both economic narratives of migration and theories of subjectivity centered solely around individualized pious practice, insofar as trajectories of piety and migration both emerge as products of "relational agency" (Burkitt 2018). While recent scholarship on Islam and ethical subjectivity has problematized elements of a liberal conceptualization of agency, to a large extent, individualistic accounts of agency have remained normative. This perhaps hearkens back to the liberal equation of agency with subjectivity, whereby foregrounding the cultivation of the pious self has entailed focusing on the individualized acts of the subjects being studied. However, foregrounding the social aspect to pious self-cultivation, as I have done in this article, can allow instead for an appreciation of the relational agency that undergirds individual *and* collective acts, and thus, personal and public flourishing. Accordingly, it also permits us to further consider the inherent intersubjectivity of a community; insofar as agency is relational, then so too must subjectivity be a product—or even, a *process*— of interaction. Subjectivity is always intersubjectivity then, and thus the cultivation of the self inevitably takes place within a larger project of the cultivation of the community (however that community is delimited and defined).

Thus, while particular in its on ways, Hanna's example of how the intersubjectivity of pious pursuits drives migration was a common theme among my interlocutors. Many of the unmarried women I met in Dubai shared Hanna's sense of struggle and self-appraisal that came with living one's life between competing people and places. They valued the sisters in Islam they had found in Dubai, and appreciated the Islamic knowledge they could access while living there, not to mention the ease with which they could practice their faith. At the same time, women could not entirely ignore the Islamically mandated obligation to care for one's aging parents, particularly if they were the only caregivers available. While not all had complicated relationships with their families like Hanna did, many were also concerned that their piety would languish when removed from the safe haven of sisterhood they had cultivated in Dubai. This worry was magnified among converts or women whose families were not practicing Muslims, who balked at the challenge of living in close proximity with family members who did not share their Islamic values or commitments. The ethical dilemma engendered by these competing communities and places was rationalized in different ways; for some, the correct action was to return home to care for one's parents. For others, like Hanna, the importance of buttressing one's piety through knowledge and good companions was justified as the greater good (MacIntyre 1981). Often, there was a pragmatic element guiding this ethical reasoning— one woman I met, Aynura, spent a year in Dubai trying to find a job, using up all her savings to remain in the country as long as possible. Once her money ran out, and still without a job, she decided she could best serve God by returning to provide her mother, an aging widow, companionship and care.

It is important to conclude by noting that understanding Aynura's decision to leave Dubai, and Hanna's incessant back and forth, as produced through social relations is not to discount the characteristic significance of the places they migrate from and to. Indeed,

insofar as places govern sociality differently, they set different limits and produce unique possibilities for certain relationalities to thrive in one setting vis-à-vis another. Changes in a place's characteristics thus induce shifts in the communities which comprise them, potentially stimulating new trajectories of migration to and from them in turn.

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When I returned to Dubai in January 2019, I found that Al-Noor had been formally incorporated as an Islamic institution under the purview of Dubai's Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department. This change in status was accompanied by a restructuring and rebranding process that entailed an increase in the center's surveillance and security measures, the charging of an annual student registration fee, and the standardization of previously unregimented class lectures. Most significantly, a new rule decreed that women could only enter the center for the duration of their scheduled class, not a minute before nor a minute after. No longer did women hurry to the center straight after work seeking reprieve in the center's garden among carefully cultivated flowers and sprawling green vines, or in its "café," which boasted floral wallpaper and the day's delicious meals generously laid out and constantly replenished. In the past, it was between sips of tea and mouthfuls of samosa, quinoa salad, or honey cake that women discussed their workdays, their family lives, and their weekend plans. It was during this time that friendships were cultivated, moral and practical advice shared, and the insights of yesterday's lectures discussed and debated. This was the place where sisterhood came to be; seemingly, it no longer was. When I arrived early to class in January, I was asked kindly but firmly by a staff member guarding the front entrance to remain seated outside until my class was set to begin. I obliged, sitting in solitude until other women started slowly trickling in minutes before class was due to start, exchanging *salaams* in hushed tones so as not to disturb the ongoing lecture inside. In the span of a few short months, the sociality possible at Al-Noor had changed radically.

While Hanna still attends Al-Noor as often as she can, it is undeniable that its transformation makes it a very different place from the one that consistently drew her and her sisters back to Dubai. It is too early to make any definitive claims about the effects these recent measures have had on Al-Noor and the community it serves, but they will inevitably shape the relationships and pieties produced among the women who frequent it. They will also influence these women's decisions to migrate to Dubai, or to leave it. Without a space to engage other sisters on a deeper, affective level, women might find that they can access the same knowledge in another city, attending Islamic classes at one's local mosque, or even tuning into Al-Noor's live online webcast. If the potential for a pious sociality has diminished in a place, and the same information can be accessed elsewhere in the world, there might remain no compelling reason to remain in Dubai. If *hijra*, as a mode of mobility, entails settling in a place and among people where one can better oneself as a Muslim, and those places and people are no longer to be found, it might mean that the time has come to move on—to the next place, to other people.

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