

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

CAT WORLDS OF BEIRUT

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Several hundreds of stray cats live in the district of Ras Beirut. These cats are neglected by official institutions or entities like the government, local municipality, or NGOs. Instead, the cats are taken care of through voluntary and dispersed acts of feeding undertaken by a variety of urban residents.

My thesis studies the relationship between the cat-feeder and stray cats in Ras Beirut by drawing on ethnographic data from participant observation and unstructured interviews with several cat-feeders. I accompanied and helped the cat-feeders with their daily feeding activities along their respective routes through the city. Consequently, I became acquainted with a new version of the city of Beirut, one in which humans and animals interact daily.

The cat-feeders engage in daily feeding activities for the cats around their neighborhoods and on their feeding trails. This becomes an intrinsic part of their routine and requires exerted work and determination. As I spent more time with them, I realized that although the cat-feeders care for the cats, this is not always a pleasant or joyful experience. My thesis studies cat-feeding through a framework of “care” that considers the labor involved in entering and sustaining relationships.

Despite the arduous nature of this labor of care, the cat-feeders are persistent and determined to fulfill their daily feeding activities. Where did this sense of responsibility or obligation to the cats come from? The cat-feeders are attentive to their surroundings, and their cat-feeding emerges because of this attentiveness. By studying the way in which the cat-feeders are drawn to the stray cats and how they explain or justify their caring activities, I explore the bonds of obligation and reciprocity with which they are tied to the cats.

Lastly, my thesis examines the manifold ways in which cat-caring and feeding practices interact with space in the city. Cat-feeders are often confronted by other urban residents or landlords about the “smell” or disturbances that their cat-feeding activities pose. I observed how cat-feeders negotiate these conflicts to enable themselves to feed cats through relations of “*akhidh w ‘ata*” or “give-and-take.” This reveals a connection between relationality and the way in which we occupy, use, or share urban space.

The cat-feeders are active participants in the creation of a particular urban fabric. They forge their own paths through the city and build feeding stations and shelters in spaces that are convenient to them. Their propensity to feed cats emerges from their desire and need to care for these nonhuman creatures with whom they share the city. This desire is not an abstract idea or an imagination. The cat-feeders' imaginations become real and concrete in their daily practices of care. Consequently, they participate in the production of an alternative version of the city.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	1
ILLUSTRATIONS	5
INTRODUCTION	6
A. Research questions	7
B. Methodology and data collection	8
C. Outline of the thesis	11
CARING RELATIONSHIPS	14
A. Rituals of care	16
1. Concentrated attentiveness	17
2. Car accidents	20
3. Sickness and dying	22
B. Bodily efforts and attachments	24
C. The pain of caring	25
D. The dangers of attachment	29
E. Conclusion	32
OBLIGATION AND RECIPROCITY	34
A. Being drawn in	35
B. “It just happened”	38
C. Reciprocity	42
1. Hasanāt	43
2. “They are souls like us”	46
3. Companionship	49
D. Conclusion	52
NEIGHBORHOOD NEGOTIATIONS.....	53
A. The traces of cat-feeding.....	55
1. Noura’s feeding spot	56
2. Feeding Nawal’s cats	60
B. Private, public, and shared space	64
C. Give-and-take.....	67
1. The parking lot.....	71
D. Conclusion	74

PLACE-MAKING.....	76
A. Feral encounters and trails	77
B. Neighborhood collaborations.....	83
C. Imagining and making the city.....	88
1. Nawal's street.....	89
2. Creating solutions	92
3. The potentials of abandonment.....	95
D. Conclusion	100
CONCLUSION.....	101
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	105

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure

1. Ghassan's cats at his first feeding station on Sourati Street	18
2. Ghassan and one of his cats, Abu Naddara	28
3. Feeding spot at Ghali Stationary	53
4. The traces of cat-feeding.....	55
5. Noura's feeding spot.....	57
6. Some of Nawal's cats eating from her dry-wet food mixture	61
7. Traces of Nawal's dry-wet food mixture	62
8. More traces of Nawal's dry-wet food mixture.....	62
9. Ghassan's cardboard place-mats.	68
10. Ghassan's cleaning technique.....	69
11. Access to the parking lot.....	70
12. Kittens at Takkoush Flower Shop.....	79
13. Cat food scattered around building in Ayn el Mreisseh.....	80
14. The cat eating from the Picon cheese.....	80
15. Hala's cat houses	87
16. Nawal's street.....	90
17. Nawal's cats eating on a Sunday evening.	90
18. Ghassan's "Cat Hotel."	93
19. Ghassan's "feeding tubes"	94
20. Cat home in Raouche	99
21. Cat home in Makdisi	99
22. Cat home in Ayn el Mreisseh.....	99

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

August 25, 2021. I walk around the city – either to work, or to university, or just for a walk – and I make note of the things I see on my way. Occasionally, I see something new, or maybe it is not new, but I had not noticed it before: some dry cat food strewn on the sidewalk, a small cardboard shelter for cats. You can pass by the same street thousands of times before noticing the small pile of cat food someone has left. I walk past the same spot the next day, or next week, and it is not there anymore. It is a reminder that the city is constantly undergoing change and transformation, and I cannot control it.

As a lifelong resident of Ras Beirut, I had not always paid much attention to the hundreds of stray cats that linger around the city's streets. This began to change during the lockdown of 2020. I would often walk around my neighborhood in Hamra. As I walked around the city, I found that it had irrevocably changed. The streets were empty and silent, and the stray cats were my sole company.

City and human life as I had come to know it had subsided and transformed, so I began to pay more attention to these other creatures with whom I inhabit the city. I observed how territorial the cats are: every day, I would see the same cats in the same spots. I noticed how the city was marked with the food that others left for them. Even as the socio-economic collapse worsened, people persisted in their efforts to feed the cats. I noticed multiple cat homes that were set up around the city and the countless small handfuls of cat food or chicken heads strewn around seemingly random corners. Through my observations, I realized that it was not the municipality or an NGO that was taking care of these cats.

Instead, the cats are taken care of through voluntary and dispersed acts of feeding undertaken by a variety of urban residents.

I was surprised at the determination and dedication some urban inhabitants demonstrated in feeding and caring for the street cats amid such difficult conditions. I was also inspired and moved by these practices of multispecies care. These practices of care seemed to point to cracks in the city's landscape and in its altered and deadened atmosphere. By "crack," I mean gaps or openings in the socio-economic collapse and the structures of power that seem to dominate our lives. These cracks are small spaces of alterity where humans and animals related with and cared for one another, and where the city was used and occupied in different ways. From these cracks, new connections can spring. The "new connections" moved outside of the human modes of relationality or care that previously dominated my world. The world in which I lived was overtaken by collapse and destruction with the pandemic, lockdown, economic crisis, and the August 4 explosion. I found that the cat-feeders' efforts to connect with the cats and make their survival possible may point to an alternative way of living life and occupying space within this overwhelmingly dystopian reality.

A. Research questions

In this thesis, I try to explore care, reciprocity, and obligation in cat-human relationships in Beirut, and the ways in which these multispecies relationships contribute to the making of urban space. Specifically, I explore the following questions: What is it that drives the practice and effort of feeding the cats? What kind of framework do cat-human relationships

in Beirut provide for studying care and relationality? What kind of city are Beirut residents and stray cats producing together; in other words, how is the city of Beirut made and experienced through these relationships?

B. Methodology and data collection

The research for this project took place in the city of Beirut, specifically the neighborhood of Ras Beirut, including Manara, Raouche, Ayn el Mreisseh, Bliss, and Hamra. The area of Ras Beirut that I am examining in this research project is bounded by the sea on the north and west, Ain el Tineh on the south, and Al Sanayeh on the east.

I chose Ras Beirut as the location for this study for three reasons: firstly, because of the difficulties of moving around in current circumstances; secondly, because interactions between stray cats and human residents are a widespread phenomenon in this space specifically; and thirdly, to ensure that the area for the research site would encompass and illustrate a variety of configurations. For example, the site of Ras Beirut was useful in uncovering a variety of cat-caring activities with different cat-feeders establishing feeding trails and/or using cat shelters and feeding stations. Furthermore, I am interested in Ras Beirut as an area that has historically undergone varying levels of economic, political, and environmental transformations and crises, and where the consequences of Lebanon's economic collapse are perhaps even more visible and spectacular than in other parts of the country.

My fieldwork took place from September 2021 to February 2022, during which I engaged in participant-observation and conducted unstructured and informal interviews

with cat-feeders. I met most of my interlocutors gradually through word of mouth. I met Hiba and Maria through a friend of mine who took care of cats inside AUB. Through Hiba and Maria, I was put into contact with Ghassan, Hala, and Nawal, and then I subsequently met several other cat-feeders. Every time I met a new cat-feeder, they would tell me stories of other cat-feeders that they know and would often put me into contact with them. I met both Noura and Mona by chance while walking around Beirut.

This thesis is based on fieldwork that I conducted with around 12 cat-feeders¹:

- Hala. Homemaker in her forties. Feeds cats around Hamra and Koreitem.
- Ghassan. Engineer in his fifties. Feeds cats around Bliss, Sidani, and Jeanne D'arc.
- Maria. 40-year-old music teacher. Feeds cats around Bliss.
- Mona. Manages a store in Ayn el Mreisseh and feeds the cats around her neighborhood and store. Around 60-year-old.
- Rana. English professor in her sixties, who has been feeding cats around Manara and Bliss since she was a young girl.
- Hiba. Graphic designer in her thirties. Feeds cats around Bliss and Ayn el Mreisseh.
- Zeina. Pediatrician in her sixties. Feeds cats around Hamra and Bliss.
- Nawal. Homemaker in her sixties. Feeds cats around Bliss, Hamra, and Jeanne D'arc.
- Marlene. English professor in her sixties. Feeds cats around Manara.

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout the thesis. Many of my interlocutors requested this because of the nature of their feeding activities and the way in which they intervene and intrude on spaces around the city.

- Noura (~60-years-old) and Kamal (20-years-old). Noura works at AUBMC as a custodian. Kamal is a university student. They both feed cats around Hamra and Abd el Aziz.
- Anna. 30-year-old researcher. Fed cats around Abd el Aziz until she recently left Lebanon.

I engaged in participant-observation by accompanying and helping my interlocutors on their feeding routes and other care-taking activities. Most of our interviews took place while I would help with cat-feeding tasks. I never used a tape recorder. Instead, I would use a small notebook to jot down important phrases, sentences, and experiences, and write up the material after every fieldwork encounter. I learned a lot from our random and spontaneous conversations as we walked through the city and fed their cats together. For example, I learned about how they use the space and objects of the city for their cat-feeding practices and heard stories about the neighborhood problems that sometimes arise from cat-feeding. Conversations were mostly conducted in Arabic, or a mix of Arabic and English. I conducted a few more structured interviews with some of my interlocutors in their work offices or in cafes in Beirut. This allowed me to have a more focused conversation with them and learn about the history of their cat-feeding routines and what drew them to the stray cats.

Lastly, I also conducted participant-observation by feeding Anna and Nawal's cats when they traveled. Feeding the cats on my own allowed me to gain a firsthand experience of interacting with stray cats as well as experiencing urban space as a cat-feeder. This

helped me learn about how cat-feeding contributes to urban space and how city residents perceive this practice.

I used photos, videos, and audio recordings during my fieldwork. With these tools, I tried to capture the cats' behaviors and interactions with the cat-feeders, the way in which cat-feeding marked the space of the city, and the spaces and objects that were used during cat-feeding. This also helped me to capture and reflect on the sensory and material dimensions of cat-feeding: such as the sounds the cats made, the traces of cat food on the bodies of the cat-feeders, and how cat-caring practices contributed to transform urban space throughout time.

C. Outline of the thesis

Chapter 1 explores the daily caring activities in which the cat-feeders engage for the cats around their neighborhoods. I study how these caring practices become an intrinsic part of my interlocutors' routine and require effort and determination. As I spent more time with the cat-feeders, I realized that although they care deeply for the cats, this is hardly a pleasant or joyful experience. In this chapter, I look at cat-feeding through a framework of care that considers the difficulties of relationship-making. More specifically, I examine the way in which the cat-feeders dealt with the pain and suffering intrinsic to their caring relationships with the cats. Instead of avoiding or ignoring it, the cat-feeders submit to the prospect of pain and determine to appreciate the present moments they share with the cats. The chapter consequently reflects on what the cat-feeders' ways of dealing with pain and loss in their relations with the cats taught me about how to live with crisis.

Despite the arduous nature of this labor of care, the cat-feeders are persistent and determined to fulfill their daily feeding and caring activities. In Chapter 2 I move to the question: Where does this sense of responsibility or obligation to the cats come from? By studying the way in which the cat-feeders are drawn to the stray cats and how they account for their feeding activities, I explore the bonds of obligation and reciprocity with which they are tied to the cats. While I had initially framed these cat-human relations as “voluntary” or agentive, this chapter challenges this framework of agency by shedding light on how people are drawn into — rather than making a decisive choice to enter — these relations with the cats. Studying how the cat-feeders are drawn to and obligated to the cats reveals that the framework of “agency” is not particularly adequate for giving accounts of multispecies relationality.

Chapters 3 and 4 both examine the manifold ways in which cat-feeders participate in the negotiation and production of urban space. In Chapter 3, I look at the neighborhood conflicts that cat-feeders must negotiate. For example, cat-feeders are often confronted by other urban residents or landlords about the smell or disturbances that their cat-feeding activities create. In this chapter, I observe how cat-feeders negotiate these conflicts so as to be able to feed cats through relations of “*akhidh w ‘ata*” or give-and-take. This reveals a connection between relationality and the making of urban space and the way in which we occupy, use, or share it. In chapter 4, I study how the street cats and cat-feeders actively participate in the creation of a particular urban fabric. The cat-feeders forge their own paths through the city and build feeding stations and shelters in spaces that are convenient to them. Their propensity to feed cats emerges from their desire and need to care for these

nonhuman creatures with whom they share the city. This desire is not an abstract idea or imagination. The cat-feeders' imaginations become real and concrete in their daily practices of care. In a city that is overwhelmingly privatized and securitized, cat-feeders strive to create shared space with and for the stray cats; they create an alternative version of the city.

CHAPTER II

CARING RELATIONSHIPS

October 30, 2021, 9 AM. I am visiting Mona at her store. Mona is a woman in her 60s who manages a store for sewing materials in Ayn el Mreisseh. She feeds the cats around her store and neighborhood daily.

After offering me something to drink, she momentarily steps outside to refill the bowls of cat food set on the sidewalk. As I watch her grumbling about how quickly the cats finish the food, I ask: “Do you ever get tired of doing this? Do you ever want to stop?”

“What do you think?” Mona laughs. “What I feel is even worse than depression... If a cat dies, or goes missing, it takes me five or six months just to accept it, just to forget. On Sundays, I don’t go out to feed them because I am busy cleaning the house. Sunday is my only day-off. And I get into a state of depression. I spend the whole day thinking to myself: did anyone feed them? I get lost in my thoughts. ‘Andi kabit.’”

I ask what that means, “kabit.”

“It means when you cannot be happy. Eh, bi za ‘lu,” she says shortly, before reentering the store.

I began doing fieldwork under the assumption that, in the process of doing research about cat-human relations in Ras Beirut, I would be studying a mode of relationality infused with love, joy, and fulfillment. I assumed that since these cat-human relationships involve animals, then they must offer an experience of relationality that is mutual, joyful, and loving rather than hierarchical and/or painful. This assumption rested on a narrow conception of animals as domesticated pets, functioning only to bolster human happiness or be subject to and return human affection. Studying human relations with stray cats in Beirut vehemently destabilized this conception by revealing that human-animal relationships are often just as – if not more – painful and disturbing as human relationships; and that animals are active participants of these relations.

Since the onset, my study was going to center partly on the practices of care that human feeders deliver to the stray cats. Throughout the course of my fieldwork after I began exploring these practices of care, I realized that I had subscribed to a conception of care as wholly positive. I was not prepared to deal with the darker aspects of care that soon began to emerge through my fieldwork – the aspects of care that lead to what Mona called “*kabit*” or sadness.

In this chapter, I will describe how I came to understand that the practice of caring for the stray cats is intertwined with exhaustion, frustration, and sadness. I will uncover the ways in which caring for the cats is a bodily, affective, and habituated ritual that is done daily. This will reveal that cat-caring involves continuous physical exertions and routine. Cat-feeders, through their daily exertions, made it clear that there are considerable efforts and exertions required by any caring relationship. By observing multispecies relationships, I learned that care is not just something one feels, it is something that one actively does.

Studying the cat-human multispecies relationship in Beirut revealed to me a particularly different way of dealing with the pain or exhaustion that is intrinsic to any form of relatedness. Instead of actively avoiding pain or heartbreak, the cat-feeders embrace and submit to it. In this chapter, I will examine how many cat-feeders described and dealt with the pain and grief that accompanies cat-caring. Additionally, I will reflect on what the cat-feeders’ willful immersion in this painful and disturbing world of cats can teach us.

In sum, this chapter will examine practices of care in the context of cat-human relations in Beirut, exploring the questions: what is care? What does caring for the cats entail? What can we learn about care by studying multispecies relationships?

A. Rituals of care

Many cat-feeders spoke to me about the repetitive exertions that are needed to take care of the cats. Hala, a woman in her forties who feeds cats in Hamra and Koreitem, commented on this during one of our conversations:

“I get a lot of satisfaction from feeding my cats. Sometimes I feel exhausted. But I still do it. Because if I don’t, time will pass and then it’s nighttime and then I won’t be able to sleep at night, thinking about all the cats. When you are doing something over and over again like that, you get burnt out.”

Hala’s description of cat-feeding as “doing something over and over again” is significant because it demonstrates how this relationship of care comes to involve everyday repetition or ritual. Bellacasa explains that “caring for something is more binding than just being concerned; it requires active involvement” (14). This resonates with cat-caring as something that requires active involvement or participation – as a daily exertion that is active.

In this section of the chapter, I will present my experience accompanying Ghassan on his feeding route. Ghassan is a man in his fifties who lives in Hamra, works as an engineer, and feeds 50-60 cats daily on a trail starting from Sourati Street and ending at the end of Bliss Street. By drawing on my observations of Ghassan and his cats, I will try to give an account of the various efforts that are involved in caring for the cats. If care is something that one does every day, then what is it that the cat-feeders do?

1. *Concentrated attentiveness*

First, caring about others means practicing sustained and concentrated attentiveness.

While accompanying Ghassan on his feeding route, I observed how he paid precise attention to each cat, making sure that it had food and was eating properly. He named the cats to be able to remember each one of them. Ghassan's concentrated attentiveness influences the way in which he acts and carries himself throughout the feeding process.

October 26, 2021, 7 AM. I am leaning against the wall near Ghassan's first feeding station. I take in the scene around me. The sewage pipes on this street – Sourati Street – have burst and have been leaking since the beginning of summer. The smell is gruesome, and the sight is as well: dark, dirty water all along the street lining the sidewalk.

Three gray cats are moving in and out of the nearby building. Most of the others are seated sedately on various spots around the sidewalk and underneath the parked car. One of the cats has started drinking from the sewage water. The cats are unfazed as people walk past them. They do not move for them, but stay sitting or standing in their place, their gaze steady and unbothered.

At exactly 7:15 AM, Ghassan emerges from the building, holding two large black plastic bags and wearing plastic gloves. He barely looks at me and sets down two large black plastic bags on the ground. As soon as he appears, the cats begin moving towards him. Two cats are curling in between his legs while the others encircle him, all of them meowing loudly. From one of the plastic bags, Ghassan pulls out an already-opened can of cat food with a metal spoon inside of it, as well as several square pieces of cardboard. He begins setting the pieces of cardboard on arbitrary spots on the ground and placing spoonfuls of food on them. He is careful about making sure each cat is eating and that no fight erupts. He uses his foot to direct cats away from other cats' food, shooing them away: "Go, go away, go." When he has placed a serving of cat food in front of each cat, he straightens up and nods and smiles at me.

There are around 15-16 cats at this point. They are different colors and sizes, but Ghassan knows each one personally. He points at different cats as they are eating and tells me a little bit about them. "This one is called Rama," he says, pointing at a ginger cat. "This one is Dark Gray, she is such an intelligent cat. She hasn't been here for four days. Where were

you?” he leans down and scratches the back of her neck. There is one gray and white cat that is not eating from her place-mat of food. “Why aren’t you eating?” he asks her, coaxingly. “I don’t know why she’s not eating,” he says to me quietly, shaking his head. Ghassan goes on to describe the character of the cats, saying that one of them fights with the other cats a lot, that some are more aggressive than others, and so he must feed them first.

When I ask why he names them, he says “Naming them helps to remember them and differentiate. It helps me remember if one of them needs to eat more, or if one of them is sick and needs treatment.”

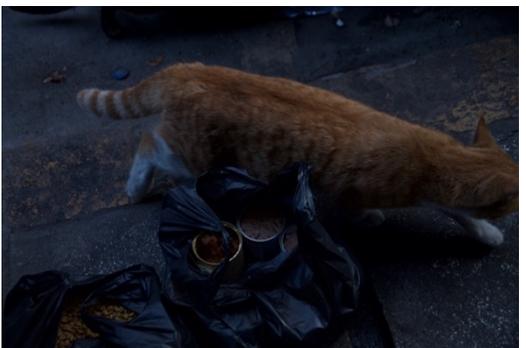
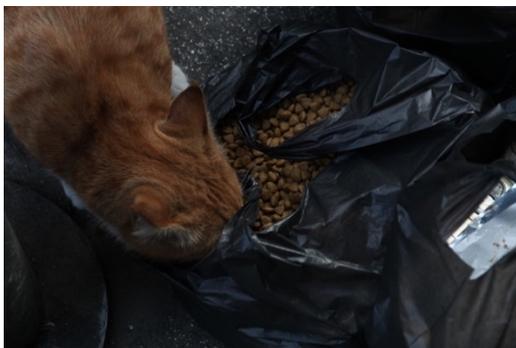


Figure 1. Ghassan's cats at his first feeding station on Sourati Street.

This first encounter with Ghassan and his cats, at the beginning of fieldwork, started to reveal to me the work involved in caring, work that involves a concentrated attentiveness to every cat. I saw how Ghassan was careful to attend to every cat and had specific techniques to feed them. He gets to know their personalities and names each one to remember them and ensure that they are getting proper nourishment every morning. His movements are quick and practiced as he weaves between the cats and delivers food to all of them equally, doing his best to avoid conflicts between them over food. Through this difficult, repetitive, and laborious daily activity, Ghassan enters a caring relationship with the cats.

Between spooning out pieces of cat food and tending to the cats, interrupted by his cajoling of the cats, he points out a cat to me and says that she has had three kittens that he calls the “three rascals:” “Two of them are called Bonnie and Clyde. Once, Clyde vanished for three days. Hala and I found him hiding underneath a security guard container. We spent one hour crawling underneath that box to retrieve him.” I imagined Ghassan and Hala, two fully-grown adults, crawling on their knees underneath that container, where there is not too much space. Ghassan and Hala’s concern for the kitten pushes them to dedicate their time and energy, possibly causing a disruption on the sidewalk, to retrieve the kitten from underneath the container. They give themselves entirely to the cat and to its well-being.

2. *Car accidents*

Ghassan does not just feed the cats, he also protects them from cars and other forms of human city life that create dangers. “When you feed them,” he told me, “They sleep, instead of going around the city looking for food, eating from the garbage, eating from raw chicken with salmonella... so you’re reducing their time on the street. Cats can sleep 16-18 hours per day. So, feeding them keeps them off the street. Otherwise, they would roam around the city all day and most of them would get injured or killed by passing cars.”

While Ghassan is busy setting out the placemats, two cats start growling at each other from underneath a nearby parked car. The growling is loud and threatening. Ghassan stops what he is doing and turns his gaze towards the cats instantly. He tries to distract them with loud utterances: “Hey! Come! Hey!” he yells. They are unmoved, so he rushes in between them, and hops from one foot to another quickly, as if he is doing a little dance. He does this quickly, before I can even register what is going on. This breaks the cats apart – they are distracted and startled, and both run off in opposite directions. Satisfied and relieved, Ghassan walks away nonchalantly. I was watched wondrously this whole exchange. He was totally unembarrassed, even though he had just done that small dance-jig in a public street quite full of pedestrians and students.

The speed and purpose of Ghassan’s actions, which he undertook before I could grasp what was happening, is notable. Without hesitation, Ghassan uses swift and fast bodily movements and sounds to distract the cats, separate them, and feed them, revealing the way in which this response is habituated and unconscious for him. This suggests that caring becomes a labor or work that is habituated and done every day. Ghassan has learned and become accustomed to the behavior of the cats and can tell when a cat-fight is about to erupt. When it does, he is prepared to use his body in ways that are loud and that garner attention to prevent a fight or a car accident from occurring. He practically trained himself

to be synchronously alert to several things at once, tracking the movements of one or more cats while feeding others. This is exemplified by Ghassan's instant recognition of a coming cat-fight and his response. This form of attentiveness stems from a way of being attuned and listening to the cat and itself generates further practices and forms of caretaking.

Bateson's concept of deuterio-learning is helpful for thinking about how the work of care becomes embedded or unconscious, and how the cat-feeder incorporates certain behaviors oriented towards caring for the cats. Bateson defines deuterio-learning as the "acquiring of information about the contingency patterns of the contexts in which proto-learning occurs" (365). He uses the concept to describe the process of "learning to learn", that is, developing "abstract habits of thought" while learning or doing something (173). In other words, people do not only learn responses but during that very process they also gain habits. Bateson remarks that "No organism can afford to be conscious of matters with which it could deal at unconscious levels. This is the economy achieved by habit formation" (143).

Through the framework of deuterio-learning, it becomes easier to understand how Ghassan's practices of caring became habituated bodily ways of being. I observed him, time and time again, quickly jumping up to separate street cats when they simply begin to hiss at one another. At one point, he told me: "When a cat-fight happens, it makes me nervous. So many times, it has happened that the cats get pushed on the street during a fight and killed by a passing car." This quote shows how Ghassan accumulated a breadth of observations and experience that consequently influences the way that he feeds the cats and carries himself around them. He does not only learn about cats' behaviors and habits, but he

also learns how to respond to these cat behaviors like cat-fighting. Through that very process of responding, he gains habits himself. Cat-feeding becomes a habitual practice that is incorporated into his everyday life and routine.

In this way, part of the work of caring includes an ongoing labor of communication with cats, learning about them, and the formation of habits responsive to the cats' lifeworld as a result. This is how caregiving becomes ritualized and partially below the threshold of consciousness. Ghassan's own experience with the adverse effects of cat-fights in the urbanized space of Beirut makes him anxious about cat-fights and leads to his incorporation of bodily habits that are channeled towards preventing such accidents from happening.

3. Sickness and dying

The cat-feeder's role is manifold: besides feeding the cats and protecting them from car accidents, he also medicates and treats them. While accompanying Ghassan on his feeding route, I learned about what he calls "guerilla medicine;" medicine on-the-go, on the streets. This demonstrates another layer of learning that is done because of the caring relations in which Ghassan is involved with the cats. Ghassan works to learn about the cats so that he can care for them in better and more expansive ways.

After he finishes serving all the cats their first helping, Ghassan steps to the side. "Where is that cat, there is a cat I need to give medicine to," he muses to himself, looking around, crouching, and looking underneath the cars. "Ah, there she is!" He unfolds a cardboard he had taken out from one of the black plastic bags. The cardboard was folded, and it had a liquid, gooey substance in it that I assumed was medicine. He takes the spoon he is using to scoop out cat food and puts a portion of the meat on top of the medicine, using the spoon to mix the medicine and the food together. Then he slowly

approaches the sick cat and puts the piece of cardboard in front of her. This doesn't go very smoothly. Other cats begin approaching the food. "No, you go away, go away, you already ate, this is not for you!" Ghassan says roughly. He struggles to get the sick cat to eat the food with the medicine, shooing other cats away, saying the same thing – "go away, move, leave" – and physically blocking them from getting to the food.

When he has finished and the cats are all eating, Ghassan steps back and points to two of them, saying, "these ones, they are dewormed and defleaed." "You took them to the vet?"

He laughs: "No, I did it myself."

I am shocked: "How?!"

He quickly explains the method: "for defleaing, I just put something on their neck, it goes into their blood. For deworming, it's a pill they take. It's a bit troublesome to get them to take it, I put it with their food, but once they do they just defecate out the worms."

"How did you learn how to do this?"

"I spend a lot of time on Google, reading. There is so much information on there. I use off-label medicines for many of them. That means, for example, something like Zitramine, it's medicine for humans but 'off-label' can be used for animals. It's not 'official,' but many studies have shown that it is effective for cats. It's off-label usage of drugs. It's used for respiratory problems. I call this guerilla medicine," he says, winking at me.

When I realized the amount of learning that Ghassan has done on behalf of the cats, I was shocked at first. This learning has transformed into actual actions and concrete practices. Haraway writes about this connection between learning and caring in interspecies contexts: "Caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning" (36). Ghassan's daily entanglement with the lives of the cats necessitated that he learns about them. His practices of care evolved beyond sustaining them with nourishment but involve also maintaining their health and wellbeing in other substantial ways.

B. Bodily efforts and attachments

As I showed in the previous section of the chapter, the cat-feeder involves himself intimately with the lives and habits of the cats to be able to care and feed for them. This intimate involvement entails ongoing and arduous rituals of care that become habituated. My experience accompanying Ghassan on his feeding route also importantly revealed to me that care is physical and bodily: it is something that one does with one's entire body.

Relatedly, Govindrajan, in her study of human-animal encounters in rural India, discusses the way in which the daily "entanglement of lives creates bodies that are open to being affected by one another" (37). This "porosity" allows different beings to come together in intimate relationships. In a similar way, Haraway argues that practices that are "semiotic" or "relational" are also "material" because they are about the physical stuff caught up and shaped in these relations, or what Haraway calls "material-semiotic" knots (15-16). This helps to understand how care is something that is bodily enacted as well as an affective relationship.

When Ghassan crawls on the streets to retrieve the cats from trapped places, interrupts and intervenes in cat-fights on public sidewalks, and medicates and treats the cats, his body is fully and actively involved with the bodies of the cats. His senses become imbricated with those of the cats. The cat-feeder and the cats become attached in particular and enduring ways both bodily and emotionally. Their bodies are open to one another and become affected by each other. Thus, the cat-human relationship is a material-semiotic entanglement whereby objects and bodies are tied up with senses and emotions. The lives of the cat-feeders and those of the cats are intertwined daily because of the routine feeding

and caring activities that the cat-feeders carry out. The cat-feeders become tied and bonded to the cats in habitual and bodily ways as they engage in physical acts to care for the cats.

C. The pain of caring

The practice of cat-caring involves paying attention to others as well as physical and bodily labor, as I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter. This is compounded with varying emotions of anxiety, sorrow, and grief: caring for someone or something inevitably involves not only the fear of dangers they could meet, but the impending anxiety of losing them in the end. As Bellacasa writes, “caring or being cared for is not necessarily rewarding and comforting” (199). Anxiety, sorrow, and grief are “unavoidable effects” of paying serious mental attention to another (Bellacasa, 212). This section of the chapter will explore the intense pain and heartache that accompanies the relation of care between the cat and cat-feeder.

During our conversations, many cat-feeders commented on the emotional difficulty of caring for the cats and dealing with the inevitable reality of loss. Sometimes, this leads to a deterioration in the ability to give care:

October 12, 2021. I am sitting with Rana, an English professor, in her work office. Rana is a woman in her early 60s who has been living in Ras Beirut her entire life and feeding the street cats since she was a girl. Now she does not feed them but pays individuals to carry out feeding activities in different locations in Beirut. They are cat-lovers who cannot afford to buy food themselves to feed and take care of the cats.

“I’ve seen too much sadness,” says Rana, “I can’t feed the cats anymore. I used to feed the cats around my neighborhood, but a few years ago I didn’t want to have emotional ties anymore, it became too much. My friend said that she knows a needy woman who will appreciate being paid to feed the cats. She is a woman who fed the cats at LAU, and they didn’t give her any

money. They pay for the cat food, but she feeds the cats out of the goodness of her heart. I keep looking in on Charlie and others, my favorite cats. But it's too much for me to feed them regularly. I cannot. I cannot see a sick cat, I cannot see a cat that has been brutally treated. When it comes to the street cats, I just want to feel that they are okay."

I was surprised to hear Rana describe this relation as one fraught with grief and sadness, rather than a joyful, loving, or positive addition to her life. In fact, caring for the cats carries with it such intense emotional ties that Rana had to stop – dealing with the cats meant “seeing too much sadness.” Ghassan described the same feeling to me:

“It’s too much to carry emotionally. Because the reality is, you can’t take care of all the cats. You see a group of kittens on the curb, you carry them and put them somewhere else. Then another group, and another. In the end, it’s just not practical anymore. You can’t save them all. Every day I go out and I am worried that I won’t see one of them, that one of them will not come. It’s like your heart has left your body and is spread out on the streets, that’s how it is. That’s why I always tell myself to do the work and not get attached to the results.”

In this quote, Ghassan locates the tense for caring in the present, emphasizing the importance of being in the moment with the cats and the effort of not thinking about the future or about the “result.” Maria, a 40-year-old music teacher, expressed a similar sentiment during one of our conversations:

“I’m tired on one hand from seeing all the sickness and injury. That’s hard. But I also feel like I am getting desensitized... I want to get the sensitizing back without being alienated from the work. This past August it got really hard, I reached a low point. So, recently, I’ve tried not to think too much about the results. I’ve just tried to be in the moment, really appreciating each cat, and not thinking too much about the result or what’s going to happen, because that used to depress me a lot.”

Maria is aware of the prospect of becoming desensitized but decides to continue engaging with the cats. She does this by “being in the moment” and refusing to think about the results

or the future. Maria's comment on desensitization was interesting to me, because living in Beirut in general requires a level of desensitization or of forcing oneself to become accustomed to the suffering and violence with which one is constantly surrounded. Maria's response to this reality is not to ignore or normalize it, but to engage with it. When we had this conversation, I was alerted to the way in which responses to pain or crises are temporal; they revolve around ways of dealing with or conceiving time. For example, amid the crisis and collapse in Beirut, I quite often find myself looking back on better times or anxiously worrying about the future. Maria's response, however, is anchored in the present. Both she and Ghassan respond by focusing on the present and what immediately surrounds them. They do not move past or forget the pain that accompanies living in this city but pay attention to it. When confronted with the realities of suffering and death, sometimes being present is all one can do. Immersing oneself in the present requires a specific kind of attention *and* inattention practiced daily by the cat-feeders.

What the cat-feeders are seeing and dealing with every day is an added layer of pain and violence that seems invisible to other inhabitants of the city. This is made even harder to handle with the heightening levels of deterioration in the city at large: the cat-feeders do not just expose themselves to animal suffering and pain, they are also in pain themselves as inhabitants of a collapsing city. The cat-feeders deliberately expose themselves to the disturbing or violent experiences that accompany cat-feeding while knowing that it is threatening. The cat-feeders put the cats first: their obligation and will to care for the cats overpowers the threat of pain or loss. They are afraid of this threat, but they do not let the fear stop them or avert their eyes, instead they persist with their care-giving practices.

The cat-feeders taught me how to exercise attentiveness in the most engaging and intensive way possible, but they also showed me that doing this work of paying attention necessarily involves exposing oneself to a great amounts of pain and violence. Paying attention to the world means attending to all its parts, including the ugly and painful parts. My experiences with the cat-feeders allowed me to discover an alternative way of dealing with the pain and grief that accompanies life in Beirut. Instead of ignoring or struggling against it, they taught me how to submit to the reality of pain. In our conversations, they register a certain resignation or surrender: they know that they are “fighting a losing battle,” as Ghassan once put it. Pain, loss, and death are unavoidable realities. The cat-feeders do not react to or resist these realities, they submit to them. By submitting to the threatening reality of pain and loss, they willingly allow themselves to be stopped by the hungry, injured, or sick cats that come into their way. From their willingness to be stopped, they forge caring responses to their fellow nonhuman inhabitants of the city.



Figure 2. Ghassan and one of his cats, Abu Naddara.

D. The dangers of attachment

Many cat-feeders try to respond to this dilemma of being enmeshed in caring yet painful relations with a discipline of non-attachment. When I spoke to several of the cat-feeders, I observed the way in which many of them spoke of the dangers of attachment to the cats.

For example, during one of our conversations, Ghassan spoke of his determination not to get attached:

“It’s not always nice feeding the cats. You see terrible things. Sometimes it’s ugly. That’s why you can’t get attached. You know, some people who feed the cats get scared about letting them go on the street. They take them into their homes, that’s how scared they get. But I tell them, if a car hits the cat – that’s life.”

When he said this, I was intrigued, especially since I had seen Ghassan put careful effort into attending to and naming each cat on his feeding route. I mentioned this to him, saying that it seems he does get attached – he has named so many of them. He said, “That’s true, I do, but I have to work to mitigate it.” In this way, Ghassan shows how the work of mitigating or moderating the attachment or affinity he feels for the cats is a significant part of the caring relationship.

Kamal, a 20-year-old university student who helps his mother feed cats in Hamra, also brought up his fear of attachment to the cats. I found that he “mitigates” this attachment to the cats by totally refraining from naming the cats that he feeds, unlike Ghassan. He said: “Naming the cats is a big thing to do. Naming something is big. You get attached faster if you name them. I am scared of getting too attached.”

Ghassan and Kamal both depict attachment as something to fear, though they have different strategies for dealing with it. Caring attachment is presented not as something appealing or desirable, but as something dangerous to be avoided at all costs. Their quotes point to the desire to retreat that is always present in relationships of care or love where the possibilities of pain, loss, or death are imminent.

During one of my visits to Mona's store, she also said something striking to me that pointed to the fear of attachment that accompanies these cat-human relations.

October 30, 2021. I am sitting with Mona in her store. The conversation lags, and Mona looks outside the glass door, towards the street, her gaze searching. "There's a cat I haven't seen in two weeks ... I'm worried about her."

She turns to me and says: "You know, if a cat wants to die it doesn't do it in front of the human so that the human does not mourn her... So maybe that's why some of them disappear sometimes, because they go to die alone. The cat goes alone to die. Most of the cats will get hit by cars. You'll see. That's what happens to most of them."

I am gathering my things and heading out the door.

"Come by anytime..." she says affectionately, then in a more serious tone she warned me: "You have a weak heart, you need to be careful with the cats."

After this visit, I would often think of Mona's words – her admonition – and wonder where they came from. What was it that made her think that I had a weak heart?

My first interactions with Mona revolved around a sick cat, who we cooperated to try to feed and care for together. For weeks, I would pass by her store and help her in feeding this sick, skinny ginger cat that lingered around her street. Every time I passed by, she would be happily surprised: "I have no one else I can talk to about the cats," she told me. Throughout the rest of my relationship with her, she would talk to me about the cats she has lost that she struggles to forget, and the cats that she is anxiously struggling to save.

She would tell me about the various secretive ways in which she tries to sustain her cats: by taking the sick ones to the small upstairs attic in her store and feeding them there, making sure that the owner of the store, who hates cats, does not find out. More than that, we also talked about the struggle we both experience of wanting to stay and live in Beirut under the current conditions and trying to battle the constant seemingly common-sensical urge to leave. Maybe she saw that she and I had something in common, like a tendency for anxiety or attachment, which pushed her to tell me to “be careful.” She was giving me a brief and genuine warning not to immerse myself too deeply into the world of cats which she cannot escape. The fact that Mona felt the need to make a personal warning to me illustrated the intensity and pain intrinsic to the relationship of attachment she has with the cats.

As already established, an enormous part of caring for cats is dealing with issues of death and mortality. The cat-feeder’s work is ultimately geared towards ensuring that the cats survive. What they see every day is a lot of pain and death that seems invisible to the other inhabitants of the city, their neighbors. They live a life of messiness and discomfort. But they still find it in themselves to manage the disturbances, frustrations, and ruination that accompany what they do, which is intensified by the general degradation of the city.

Entering the world of cats makes me see the world in its messiness and indecipherability. It reveals to me the inevitable intertwinement of love and pain, of care and neglect, of companionship and loss. The accounts of those cat-feeders uncover the hard work required to sustain and negotiate any relationship. Through their concentrated attentiveness towards their surroundings, they show that there is no escaping this world of

relationship or others – no matter how painful. Being attentive entails understanding that we share the world with beings who are radically different from us.

E. Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored care in the relationships between the stray cats and their feeders in Beirut. Examining these relationships requires a conceptualization of care that moves beyond its positive aspects to think seriously about the difficulties and irritations that accompany relations of care.

In their daily exertions and feeding routes, cat-feeders show that care is something that is done repeatedly – it is a concrete act or practice that welds material objects and practices with semiotic affects. The cat-feeders care for the cats by doing much more than feeding them: they go through a profound learning process, they practice a concentrated attentiveness, they medicate or treat them, and they protect them from bodily harm or injury. The cat-feeders are enmeshed in bodily relations and attachments with the cats. Care is not just something that they feel towards the cats; rather it is something that is enacted in bodily and physical ways through the cat-feeders' repeated acts of feeding, medicating, and protecting the cats.

This relation of care essentially revolves around sustaining the survival of the cats and thus carries with it an intense fear of loss or death. These fears and realities of violence or death are in fact intrinsic to the caring and intimate relationship between the cats and the cat-feeders. The cat-feeders, through their practiced attentiveness, present a will to anchor themselves to the present that allows them to connect with their cats in the present moment.

Their form of relatedness is attentive or sensitive to the dark or difficult realities of care, i.e., the threats of pain or loss – while also submitting to these realities. This is an alternative to the previous conceptualization of relatedness to which I had subscribed that turned away from the difficulties that accompany caring for others and that presented care as a wholly positive or self-satisfying experience. The cat-feeders present to me a way of dealing with violence or destruction that is predicated on being in the present moment or looking around at what is available to us, rather than looking forward to the fictional better future that awaits us.

CHAPTER III

OBLIGATION AND RECIPROCITY

September 22, 2021. I am sitting with Hiba in her office at noon, during her lunch break. Hiba is a graphic designer in her thirties who takes care of cats in her spare time. She sits across from me on a small table next to a window in the room, and the sun shines on my back as we talk. After a little bit of small talk, I ask her: “Why do you feed the cats?”

She says: “Seeing the cats suffer makes me depressed. I prefer to do something and get exhausted rather than get depressed if they’re dying. I think the same applies to the other cat-feeders. Maybe it’s their calling. I feel that it’s a curse to do this work, because it’s tiring but you cannot help doing it. People act like I love it and it’s my hobby. I tell them no, I don’t have a ‘thing’ for cats and no, it’s not my hobby – I have to.”

In September 2021, I had indeed assumed that those who fed or cared for the cats do so because they love it or at the very least “have a thing” for cats, as Hiba puts it.

Accompanying the cat-feeders on their long and difficult feeding routes deepened this illusion. I thought I was observing a relationship where one participant in the relationship (the human) gives more than the other participant (the cat). The cat-feeders give a lot of their time, money, and effort for the cats without, on the face of it, getting anything concrete or obvious in return – they are not paid for their work, for instance. Why do they do it, if not because they want or choose to?

Hiba’s answer ruptured my illusion of cat-feeding as a pastime that the cat-feeders actively choose. On that day, she intriguingly referred to cat-feeding as a “calling,” framing it as something that she was called or compelled or called to do rather than something she had purposefully chosen for herself. Other cat-feeders similarly articulated the origin of their ties to the cats. Many of them recounted to me an encounter with one cat with whom

they had a connection, which then made them pay attention to the street cats and led to them taking up cat-feeding. Others described the sense of responsibility they feel towards the cats as something that is unexplainable or inherent to who they are. This chapter will explore how these two accounts point to the way in which people *find themselves* entangled in relationships rather than actively seeking them out. I will answer the questions: How does a person become a cat-feeder? What draws the cat-feeders to this mode of multispecies care-giving or relationality?

In addition, I will look in this chapter at the way in which cat-feeders account for these relationships and what cat-feeders get from these relationships. Many cat-feeders justify their connection to the cats through the framework of *ḥasanāt*, an Arabic term that translates to “credit for good deeds.” Cat-feeders elaborate other explanations for their practices, such as the feelings of companionship and comfort that the cats relay to them. I will uncover what reasons underlie the cat-feeders’ practices of care they carry out towards the cats. By studying the connection between the street cats and their feeders, I will discuss how these relationships come into being and what maintains or sustains them.

A. Being drawn in

When I asked my interlocutors about how they began feeding the cats, several of them responded by telling me a story of a single cat that they had encountered that captured their attention and with whom they built a relationship. Following this individual experience, they began attending to other stray cats in their neighborhoods. In this section

of the chapter, I will answer the question: How are the cat-feeder and the stray cats drawn into a relationship with one another?

October 7, 2021, 11 AM. I am meeting with Ghassan for the first time. We meet at a cafe on Bliss Street and sit facing one another. I tell him about my project and how I came to do my thesis about stray cats, after living in Beirut my whole life without really caring for them. He listens to me as he rolls a cigarette. He is wearing sunglasses, a beige and baggy shirt, and square glasses. His hair is graying.

When I am done telling Ghassan about my project, he tells me:

“For me, I was a little bit like you. I’ve lived in Ras Beirut my entire life, but I never really cared for or noticed the cats. I live in an apartment building on Souraty, on the top floor, so I often go out to the roof and the terrace. My neighbor has a cat who would always go to the roof and hang around me. This began eight years ago. At one point, the cat tried to step into my living room, and she hesitated, giving me a look, and trying to see if I would stop her. After a while, I noticed that she was getting much thinner, so I went to a vet to ask why. He tells me it is because she is ‘in heat’, and hormones make her eat less. The vet told me she should be spayed. When I brought this up to the neighbor, he was dismissive, he said he will give her some kind of injection. I found out that this is very bad because it messes up with the hormones of the animal. So, I lied to my neighbor. I said that my friend is a vet, and I can get the operation for free – but I paid for it secretly. Ever since then the cat spends more and more time with me on the roof. I do nothing to attract her, nothing to stop her from doing anything – the neighbor sometimes comes up to take her back down, but she always comes back up.”

“What’s her name?” I ask.

“Cat. I just started calling her Cat because I didn’t know what the neighbor called her, and it just stuck. Anyway, this is what drove me to pay attention to the cats on the street. One incident like that can unlock your awareness and you start paying attention to different things around you. Then when the lockdown began,” he continued, “I started thinking: who will feed the cats? They are so used to the university students who would leave remains for them to eat – now who will feed them? And it was on that day, March 2, 2020, the first day of the lockdown, that I decided I will go down to feed them. And I have been doing it every single day since that day, for almost two years. I haven’t missed a single day.”

I was intrigued by the investment that Ghassan put towards this cat – lying to his neighbor, paying for a surgery, learning about cat biology. In his story, he described how he found himself in the way of the neighbor’s cat, and no matter how many times the neighbor came up to collect the cat and bring it downstairs, it continued making its way back up to the roof, to Ghassan. There was no active decision that he took to enter into a relationship with the cat: it just happened. Ghassan entered the relationship gradually without being fully in control over it. He was pushed by desires and a sense of care towards Cat, and then the rest of the street cats, of which he was not fully conscious until Cat herself revealed it to him.

For Maria the process as she tells it was somewhat the same: it began with one cat who drew her in, attached itself to her, so that she couldn’t live her life separate from the life of that individual cat. Then she developed what Ghassan would call an “awareness” stemming from the attachment to that cat, which led to her cat-feeding. Maria told me:

“I always saw sick or hungry cats around. I wondered about them, but I didn’t really do anything. It started with a cat named Fisky. I named her that. There was something about her demeanor and character that I liked. I just felt a connection for her, she drew me in. But one day I saw that she had a bump, so I took her to the vet. I hate that vet. He said it was a tumor and that there was nothing that could be done, just feed her well. So, I made it my mission: my responsibility everyday was to feed this cat. Eventually the tumor got so big, it became like a huge lump on her back, and the fur wouldn’t cover it. I was really upset over that cat.”

Maria’s usage of the phrase “she drew me in” is significant. She did not elaborate further about why she felt a connection towards this one cat. Her story, like Ghassan’s, showcases the way in which relationality often takes forms that we do not control. Maria did not explain the thought process that accompanied her actions of taking the sick cat to the vet or

feeding it through its sickness. The way she described it is as if it was a call and response. The cat's sickness called to her, and she responded immediately by "making it her mission" to care for the cat.

Ghassan and Maria's stories made me think about how a relationship or encounter with another being can change a person. Ghassan speaks about how the bond with Cat "unlocked" his awareness. He presented this moment of being drawn to Cat as the event that preceded his decision to feed the stray cats, which ultimately transformed him and his life. Govindrajan writes in a similar vein about how entering a relationship "undoes and redoes you (...) encounters with certain creatures can destabilize conceptions of the world and offer new possibilities of world-making" (110). This is what happened with Ghassan, Maria, and the other cat-feeders I spoke to who recounted similar stories of one cat drawing them in. Maria had lived in Beirut for years and seen hungry and sick cats all the time, but she only began to attend and care for the stray cats after her encounter with Fisky. The singular encounter between a cat and a person changes a person; they notice and see the world in a different way. This draws them into relationships with other stray cats, and they become cat-feeders as a result.

B. "It just happened"

While several of my interlocutors, like Ghassan and Maria, were able to describe the process through which they began caring for the street cats, many others had trouble explaining the reason behind their practices of cat-feeding. This difficulty emerged in many

of my conversations with other cat-feeders, who would describe cat-feeding as something that they cannot explain, or simply as a part of their being.

For example, when I asked Mona why she feeds the cats, she replied shortly: “I don’t know what the reason is. I don’t know why I’m like this. I am an old woman, and this has happened to me, this attachment.” Mona’s statement according to which the relationship or “attachment” between her and the street cats had “happened” to her conveys how she became entangled in this connection or attachment with the cats without choosing to be. She encountered the call of another which she then became bound to through her forms of response or attentiveness, but her responses, similarly to Maria’s and Ghassan’s, were not active, deliberate, or conscious decisions or choices. The relationship just “happened to her.” This quote revealed to me that relinquishing control, letting one’s guard down, and being open are often necessary for entering into relationships with others.

Many other cat-feeders communicate this same lack of control of which Mona speaks. More than that, they explain their relationship to the cats as being a part of who they are, a distinct part of their being. Hala said, “It’s just in me;” Rana said, “This is how I’m made. People are made differently.” Nawal, a 60-year-old homemaker and cat-feeder, exclaimed to me: “God sent me for the cats. What am I supposed to do? It’s not in my hands.”

I was struck by the phrasing that so many of the cat-feeders used. Why do they speak in a mode of being compelled? Why is it so hard for them to explain how they came to be in this relationship?

When the cat-feeders readily admit that they do not know why they are like this or why they have entered this relationship with the street cats, they point to the way in which relationship-making is quite often indeliberate, as this chapter has revealed. These quotes illustrate the lack of certainty and conscious decision-making or knowledge that accompanies relationship-making.

Bateson's writing about the concept of the analog can also be useful towards understanding the predicament of my interlocutors who found so much trouble in explaining their relations with the cats. Bateson distinguishes between analog and digital communication, writing that analog is mainly used for animal or nonverbal communication whereas digital is used in human verbal communication. Analogic communication includes "kinesic and paralinguistic forms of body language, gesture, and tonality, as well as the interpretation of action sequences" (Guddemi, 51). Further, Bateson likens the analog to the Freudian concept of "primary process." Primary process governs the operations of the unconscious; it is opposed to secondary process which Bateson states is the "medium of expression of the thoughts of consciousness – especially verbalized thoughts" (Guddemi, 48). Bateson writes that primary process is characterized as "lacking negatives, lacking tense, lacking in any identification of linguistic mood (i.e., no identification of indicative, subjunctive, optative, etc.) and metaphoric" (139). He says the same thing about analogic communication: "There is no tense, no simple negative, no modal maker" (140).

Bateson's work helps to understand why so many of my interlocutors struggled to express why or how they found themselves in these relationships. The cats and the human feeders interact with each other non-verbally, through the usage of senses – through smells,

sounds, and textures – and through bodily gestures. They do not speak with each other using verbal language, rather they concoct another language with one another that is non-verbal and come to understand one another in this way. As such, the bonds that tie the cat and the cat-feeder are mostly unconscious, nonverbal, and habitual. How a person responds to a hungry cat that they see walking along a sidewalk becomes so habitual or unconscious that it is understood as inherent to the person’s make-up: “It’s just in me,” as Hala says.

The fact that these cat-human ties are mainly unconscious and nonverbal renders them difficult to break down or communicate in words. The usage of words would be inadequate or insufficient to explain the relationship which is largely unconscious and that does not rely on verbal language. The struggle that my interlocutors faced in explaining the way in which their relationship with the cats came into being reveals the difficulty in expressing consciously, purposefully, and verbally something that is fundamentally nonverbal, unconscious, and indeliberate or unplanned. This reveals the near-impossibility of rendering or describing relationships of obligation and attraction in words – especially when those relationships revolve around nonverbal and nonhuman forms of communication. At least, rendering in the words of human language the logic of relations unfolding in another code presents, as Bateson puts it, “a formidable problem of translation.”

On a personal level, it was difficult for me to comprehend my interlocutors’ inability to explain their cat-feeding. My research project initially stemmed from my desire to explore the ways in which people and animals are agentive in their attempts to shape the space of the city to fit their needs and wants. However, hearing my interlocutors describe

the way in which they were drawn in by the cats without making an active choice made me realize that what they are speaking to is a particular *lack* of agency. These human-nonhuman relations are not actively initiated or sought out by either participant; rather they “just happen.” In their own words, the cat-feeders do not describe themselves as having decisive control over the relationship or its onset – they did not choose this relationship or pathway. Nor do they even choose the terms of their involvement. The work that these cat-feeders do is not work they do only out of love or passion or joy, but out of a certain sense of obligation. Cat-feeding is a compounding layer to the troubles and crises of the city by exposing the cat-feeder to struggle, exhaustion, and suffering. In this way, I realized that the concept of “agency,” so central to the anthropological tradition in recent decades, is partially unhelpful or inadequate when it comes to giving accounts of certain kinds of multispecies relationality.

C. Reciprocity

As this chapter has established, humans often become cat-feeders after being drawn to the stray cats through chance encounters or entanglements over which they have little control and which they do not fully understand or are able to put into the words of human language. The cat-feeder finds herself in a relationship without making an active decision but rather by virtue of being hooked by an encounter with a cat. In the chapter, I have tried to answer the question of how a person becomes a cat-feeder. But once they are a cat-feeder, what commits them to the practice of feeding the stray cats around their

neighborhoods? What is it that maintains their cat-feeding day by day? How do they explain their practice of cat-feeding?

The more cat-feeders I met and accompanied along their long and tedious feeding routes throughout my fieldwork, the more I wanted to understand what, if anything, they were getting from this arduous task. The cat-feeders give a lot of themselves to and expend much of their time, energy, and money for the cats. In this section of the chapter, I will explore how my interlocutors attribute value to their practices of cat-feeding and what they get from the practice of cat-feeding.

1. Hasanāt

As I began to explore cat-human relations in Beirut more, I was surprised to learn that religious faith occupied a great level of importance in these relationships. This was not something I was expecting or prepared to find while exploring cat-human relations in Ras Beirut. I was more prepared to hear about the ways in which the stray cats brought comfort and companionship to the lives of their feeders. Instead, I found that many of my interlocutors explained the value of cat-feeding through the framework of *ḥasanāt*, a concept originating in the Islamic tradition. My interlocutors also told me about Prophet Muhammad's fondness for cats, which is conveyed in the hadith: "Affection for cats is part of faith" ("*ḥub al- hira min al- 'ymān*") (Maqasid al-Hasanah, al-Sakhawi).

Hasanāt emerged as a particularly important concept that people invoked while speaking to me about stray cats. *Hasanāt*, in Arabic, translates to "good deeds" or "the good actions which will be placed, symbolically, upon the 'scales' to determine salvation at the

Day of Judgment” (Glasse, 165). By drawing on my field-notes from my first encounter with Mona, I will present the concept of *ḥasanāt* and how it emerges as an ecological and reciprocal framework through which to understand cat-feeding.

October 20, 2021. It is a calm afternoon, and I am on a walk down Ayn el Mreisseh. The sky is blue, and the city is quiet. I notice a ginger-white cat creeping along the sidewalk in Ayn el Mreisseh. The cat has a big head and large eyes, or maybe it seems that way because his body is shrunken, skinny, and boney. His fur is streaked with gray dirt. He moves slowly, looks up at me, and meows croakily. I pause and stare at him. I look around the sidewalk and notice two containers of dry cat food and one makeshift bowl of water, made from a cut-out bottom of a 1L plastic water bottle. A black and white cat, healthy-looking, is sipping from the water bowl.

A woman in her mid-50s is lingering outside a storefront. She approaches me timidly, points to the white cat, and says, “Isn’t it awful? He is sick, and I can’t help him. He won’t eat anything. He only eats wet food.”

I pull out a can of wet cat food I am carrying in my bag. “I have this, will he eat it?”

“Yes, this is better, it’s soft! But why do you have it?”

“I feed cats sometimes,” I say. I tell her that I am a masters student doing my research on cat-human relationships in Beirut.

“Bya ‘mlo ḥasanāt,” she says knowingly. “God will bless you if you feed the cats – if you do it from your heart. You will see.” She moves closer to me; her blue eyes widen. In a lower voice she confides:

“Before the explosion I was standing near the front of the store, leaning against the glass door at the entrance. Suddenly, I heard a meowing from across the street. I went to look, and there was a small kitten there. I rushed quickly into the store to get her food. I keep a can of wet cat food in my drawer for emergencies. As I am leaning down to feed her, I hear the explosion. It was the loudest sound I had ever heard. I turned around and the whole store was destroyed, the door was gone, the glass was everywhere like knives... And I never saw that kitten again. Can you believe it?” She pauses and looks me straight in the eye. I shake my head slowly.

“If I hadn’t heard the kitten,” she continues, “if I hadn’t gone to feed her, something serious could have happened to me. God saved me. I was standing right next to the glass door, leaning against it. I would have died.” She dabs the corner of her eyes with Kleenex.

With an abrupt change in tone, she says, “You should come here at 9 AM to see how they follow me to the store every morning, when I feed them. Pass by!”

I agree to pass by, and we warmly say our goodbyes.

I left this encounter shaken by the story Mona related to me about her experience of August 4. In many ways, her story was like many other stories that I had heard about August 4 – a near-death experience, saved by what can only be explained as sheer luck or coincidence. Almost everyone I know who was in Beirut during the explosion would have almost died if just one thing had gone differently. But Mona’s story stuck out to me. By sharing this story, Mona presents an explanation of the way in which, through unpredictable pathways, feeding the cats is a reciprocal action which benefits the cat-feeder as much as it benefits the cat. *Hasanāt* on this account operates according to a logic whereby good deeds will bring rewards or blessings into one’s life. When Mona responded to the kitten that meows from across the street by offering her food, she distanced herself from the glass door that later shattered everywhere “like knives.”

A week later when I went back to Mona’s store to visit, I asked her to explain the concept of *ḥasanāt* more to me. Mona answered:

“It means that the person who feeds them is kind and will be blessed. There is a saying in Islam that goes: God sent the cat so you can feed her, and it will bring blessings to you. If you are feeding or caring for cats, that makes up for the bad things that you do. So, if you do something bad, it won’t be counted because you are taking care of the cats. There is a saying that goes, “A small deed pays a lot.””

In this quote, Mona describes an ecological and reciprocal circulation of blessings that takes place not between two human individuals but between the human, the non-human, and God.

The relation of reciprocity does not connect Mona and the cat only but Mona and God, it transmits blessings to Mona: the person who feeds the cats will be forgiven for their sins and will be blessed by God. Mona presents herself not as an isolated individual but as a person who operates in a system whereby her actions have consequences such that there is a feedback effect to her actions towards the cat that in turn should motivate people like her or me to take good care of street cats. Although she does it alone, she explains her cat-feeding through a framework of ecological connectivity. Her practice of feeding or caring for cats is linked to larger entities and has larger effects.

Hasanāt, in this respect, speaks to a form of ecological awareness because it presents an analysis or an understanding of the ways in which living organisms are related and connected to one another. This phrase points to the reality that the world is shared between humans and nonhumans. By invoking the concept of *ḥasanāt*, my interlocutors showcase that the practice of cat-feeding stems from channeling attention and awareness towards the many ways in which the worlds and lives of humans and nonhumans intersect and merge, even in the urbanized space of Beirut. *Hasanāt* entails understanding how to deal with this reality of sharing the world, and how to live one's life in mutual reciprocity with the nonhumans with whom we share the earth.

2. *"They are souls like us"*

My interlocutors discussed and put forward the concept of *ḥasanāt* to explain their actions of caring for the cats frequently throughout my experience doing fieldwork. They explained their cat-feeding practices and entanglements with the cats using other similar

phrases centered around their religious faith. Several times during my own cat-feeding or when I accompanied the cat-feeders, we received comments from passers-by that illustrated a particular understanding of cat-human relations revolving around a religious, spiritual, reciprocal basis. Many of these comments alluded to the souls that all living beings, including animals and plants, have. The fact that the cats have souls is presented as incentive or imperative for humans to enter into mutual relations with them. Not only that, but there were constant allusions to life after death. The cats having souls means that they have contact or relation with God. In this way, the comments also allude to *ḥasanāt* by stating that feeding the cats will bring a reward from God.

November 13, 2021. Nawal has traveled for a week, and so I am feeding her cats along her feeding route as a favor to her.

Nawal's feeding route includes various spots across alleyways and side-streets between Jeanne D'arc and Bliss Street. There are many small shops there. Men drag plastic chairs onto the sidewalk, drink coffee, and talk to one another. There is a laundry shop, mechanic, hairdresser, and a vegetable seller. On the other side of the street, there is a bakery called "Al Hamra Snack." A bicycle is stationed in front of it for the delivery boy. There is always at least one person standing in front of the bakery, making an order. I can always hear kids yelling and playing. The people on this street all seem to know each other, they call out to each other from the doors of their stores and laugh loudly. Laundry hangs from the balconies.

It is 5 PM and I am doing the afternoon feeding along this trail. A man is standing outside a nearby store, watching the street before him and leaning against the doorway.

"Do you feed the cats?" he asks me.

"Only sometimes."

"I feed them too."

"Where?"

"All across this street. I raised this one," he says, pointing to a black and white cat sitting on the corner. "I've been here for 30 years."

Then he begins talking a lot:

"Feeding cats is doing God's work. God is merciful to you when you do these things. Especially in this situation that we are in, these circumstances."

Everyone is hungry. Everyone needs help. It's good that you're feeding the cats because it shows you're a good person, you're helping the animals, it's the same as helping the homeless and refugees, it's the same as growing plants. This is a soul. They are all souls like us. This will reward you in heaven. You will have a reward from God."

This encounter dovetails with Mona's story. In it like in Mona's account, feeding the cats delivers blessings and it is thus rewarding not in a concrete or monetary sense but in an invisible, spiritual sense. Although the word *ḥasanāt* is not uttered, the framework is the same: the man states that the cat will bring blessings – that there will be a reward from God for this practice.

Several other passers-by often repeated similar words or ideas to me while I was feeding the cats: "this is a soul" and "you will have a reward from God." For example, once while accompanying Ghassan on his feeding route, a man carrying a small paper cup of coffee approached us. "God bless you," he said, clutching his heart. Ghassan smiled at him. The man said: "God bless you. These creatures, no one sees them except for God. They get hit by cars, they get sick... they die... they are souls!" Ghassan thanked him and told him that what he was saying was exactly right. They exchanged a few words, and the man said again, "God bring you goodness... Lucky you, that you do this," before walking onward.

One of the most frequent issues that came up for me while I was doing fieldwork was the fairness or legitimacy of feeding (or studying) stray cats when there are people that are starving. When I brought this issue up to Ghassan shortly after the man who fervently blessed us walked away, he nodded and said: "That's why I always say, it's not either [humans] / or [animals.] It's "and."” Importantly, these experiences and exchanges offered me a way of recognizing and relating to the cats not just as animals or other creatures, but

as “souls like us.” The comments present an understanding of the world that does not register differences based on categories of human and nonhuman or animal but establishes sameness or empathy on the basis of spirituality or having a soul. What matters is not whether a being is human or non-human, but that they have a soul and that they are living beings. The cat-feeders relate to these living beings in a mutual way, in that they see them as their autonomous counterparts with whom they share the earth. What draws the cat-feeders to this mode of relationality with the cats, to the practices of cat-feeding that they undertake, is a way of living one’s life with consideration towards all living beings, which will yield blessings and rewards. In this way, the framework of *ḥasanāt* allows for an understanding of how cat-human relations stem from a form of ecological awareness whereby one opens oneself to the world and all its living beings in its entirety.

These quotes demonstrate that cat-feeding is a spiritual, reciprocal, and ecological circulation within the human and non-human world. The quotes illustrate in concrete practice the idea or premise that there are consequences to the practices of care that the cat-feeders are carrying out. “*Hasanāt*,” “reward from God,” and “this is a soul” are all phrases that provide an understanding of reciprocal action that involves the entirety of one’s living and ecological surroundings.

3. *Companionship*

Besides *ḥasanāt*, there was another way in which the cat-feeders explained what they get from the cats that they feed. The relations with the street cats give something back to the cat-feeders, though it may not be exactly concrete, obvious, or monetary. The cats

bring companionship and comfort to their lives. This final section of the chapter will look at the way in which relationships – even with those beings that are non-human – provide people with care and enable them to get by.

February 10, 2022, 11 AM. I am sitting with Zeina in her office at AUBMC, which is where she works as a pediatrician. Zeina is a woman in her mid-60s, who has been feeding the cats across the street from her building in Hamra for the past several years.

When I ask her why she feeds the cats, she nods before saying emphatically: “People laugh at us, they say, “in this situation, you’re really gonna feed the cats?” I say, no, this is life! When I see a cat that is hurt, it hurts me. I have to do something to help. And cats, they appreciate the food you leave for them. They really give you unconditional love.”

After a short pause, Zeina continues: “For me, it’s a struggle to wake up every morning. It’s a struggle to wake up and get out of bed. The cats are the reason why I wake up. I feel good afterwards. When you see them satisfied and eating, it’s uplifting. It helps me get over the sad feelings I wake up with. And all the other cat-feeders you talked to; it probably also helps them get over something emotional that they are going through.”

When Zeina said that the cats help her wake up every morning, I was instantly reminded of something that Hiba said at the beginning of my fieldwork, in September 2021. She recounted the same difficulty in waking up and facing the day, saying:

“In the morning, I don’t want to get up. Then there is this voice in my head, get up get up get up, because I need to take care of the cats. I give them medicine, feed them. They make me feel better. I think I am less depressed than many other people who are here, because of the cats. I don’t go to therapy. But I think they are maybe a bit like therapy – they help me.”

Both Zeina and Hiba speak around the socioeconomic crisis and the deteriorating living situation in Beirut in their interjections. Zeina calls it “the situation” or *al-waḍi*‘ referring to the disdain that people harbor towards her actions of feeding stray cats in the middle of an economic collapse. Hiba says, “I am less depressed than many other people

who are here,” implying that “being here” must entail a certain level of depression, sadness, or despair. Although people may look down on the practice of feeding cats in the middle of an economic crisis, both Hiba and Zeina explain that feeding the cats is how they get by in these conditions; in fact, it seems to be the only thing that keeps them together. When the hardest possible thing to do is to get up in the morning – which is a predicament to which many people living in Lebanon can relate – the cats are the ones who help move them out of bed and into the world over and over again.

The uplifting feeling that Zeina gets when she sees her cats eating was repeated by several other cat-feeders. Rana said:

“Remember, during the lockdown when we weren’t going outside that frequently? And when you went outside it would be so lonely and deserted that you wouldn’t want to be here. No kind of life. But you know, the cats never forget you. There’s a black cat, she must be three or four years old – she lives around the end of Bliss Street, near Faysal Snack. She did not forget me at all. I would come out occasionally, and she would still follow me, she remembered me although I did not have food.”

In this quote, Rana points to a feeling of comfort that she gets from the cats. Loneliness and isolation heighten during times of crisis and through the pandemic. The cats provide her with companionship as they follow her around a city that has been irrevocably transformed by the economic situation, lockdown, and explosion. The cats relay to her a feeling of joy and comfort, soothing the feelings of abandonment or loneliness that would otherwise arise.

As their relationship develops, the feeders and the cats become entangled in multiple ways, and they live their lives – the good and the bad – through these entanglements. The cat-feeders do not miss a single day of feeding and they meet their cats every day, twice a day. Being entangled with the cats in this way means sharing with them

one's everyday life, troubles, and joys. The relationships between the cats and their feeders help people to get by through the intense and arduous struggle that has come to define daily life in Beirut.

D. Conclusion

In this chapter, I looked at the way in which the relationship between the cat-feeder and the street cats is formed. During my encounters with the cat-feeders, I observed their difficulty in describing how or why they began cat-feeding. Their responses to my question of why they began to feed cats uncovered the way in which these multispecies relationships do not emerge as an outcome of active choices. Rather, the cats and cat-feeders are drawn to each other and find themselves entangled in relationships with one another. The way in which the cat-feeders account for or explain their relationships to the cats illustrates a particular form of multispecies reciprocity that underlies these relationships and entanglements. During my encounters with the cat-feeders, I found that they referred several times to concepts like “*ḥasanāt*” and “reward from God.” These concepts point to a religious-based ecological awareness and understanding of reciprocity whereby one's enactment of good deeds or *ḥasanāt* towards other living beings will lead to rewards from God. Further, cat-feeders often commented on the comfort or companionship that they felt from the street cats, which made it easier for them to deal with the difficulties of everyday life.

CHAPTER IV

NEIGHBORHOOD NEGOTIATIONS

October 26, 2021. I am accompanying Ghassan on his feeding route for the first time. One of the feeding stations is down Jeanne D'arc street, in front of Ghali Stationary.

"This is a risky spot," Ghassan tells me in a low voice. We are on the corner, sitting (almost hiding) behind a parked motorcycle. "There are many checks and balances I have to keep here."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"If it was up to them," he gestures to the nearby apartment building, "they would just throw out all the cats here. But they know I would create a huge problem."

"Have you done that before?"

"Many times. Yeah, it's all about give-and-take. You have to leverage your personality to be able to feed the cats, or there will be problems."



Figure 3. Ghassan keeps – or hides – a small bowl of cat food in the corner of the space in front of Ghali Stationary, behind air-conditioning vents.

In this chapter, I will look at the negotiations that take place between cat-feeders and their surrounding neighborhood inhabitants because of cat-feeding practices. Cat-feeders often find themselves imbricated in conflicts with urban residents and neighbors over their cat-feeding practices. I will try to understand what is at stake in these disputes to uncover the way in which cat-feeding practices disturb the written and unwritten rules that govern life in the city.

Much of the work of the cat-feeders involves breaking various social rules or conventions that designate certain practices as acceptable and others as unacceptable. The conflicts in which cat-feeders often found themselves indicated that their practices of feeding cats transgressed on particular norms that some urban residents upheld. Neighborhood disputes often centered on the cleanliness or the smell of the cats and revolve around an imagination of, or desire for, a clean, civilized, and orderly city – i.e., one in which animals are either fully domesticated or absent.

Further, cat-feeding also involves breaking more concrete or tangible rules or boundaries: those dividing public and private space. Cat-feeders challenge so-called privatized spaces in the city by insisting on following the cats and feeding them in the spaces where they reside. In this way, looking at the city from the lens of cat-feeding allows us to conceptualize private space not as a taken-for-granted category but one that is contested daily in the practices of urban inhabitants. Cat-feeding practices problematize the boundaries between public and private space in the city, striving to produce instead shared space.

To resolve or preemptively prevent these conflicts, cat-feeders negotiate with the members of their neighborhood. Studying these negotiations entails conceptualizing urban neighborhoods through the framework of “give-and-take” or *'akhidh w 'aṭa*. I will explore the way in which reciprocity or *'akhidh w 'aṭa* is a social unit that allows the city and its neighborhoods to move or function smoothly.

In sum, this chapter will answer the questions: How does cat-feeding disrupt or disturb the written and unwritten rules that govern the usage and experience of urban space?

What kind of conflicts arise as a result, and how are these conflicts resolved or circumvented?

A. The traces of cat-feeding

From the very onset of my fieldwork, I was interested in how cat-feeding practices create traces and markings on the public streets and spaces of the city. The cat-feeders leave behind a variety of objects in their efforts to feed the cats: they place cat shelters in random spots, bowls of water in street corners, and handfuls of cat food everywhere. The traces are not just physical but also sensory. For example, the cat food leaves behind a distinct odor and sometimes garners flies and insects.

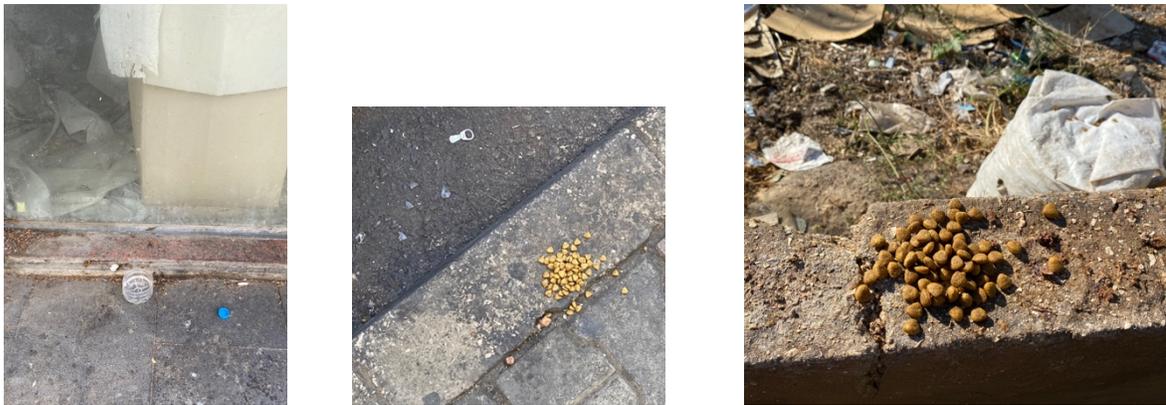


Figure 4. The traces of cat-feeding.

In this section of the chapter, I will explore how these traces of cat-human encounters, to the eyes of urban residents, are garbage or litter rather than food and nourishment. The traces of cat-human encounters disturb the habitus of the ordinary urban resident (like me) who is trained to see such objects as litter. I will present my observations

of Noura's feeding practices, which involve a hefty amount of cleaning, to explore how cat-feeding breaks particular conceptions or fantasies of modern and civilized urban life.

Further, by drawing on my own experience feeding Nawal's cats, I will explore my own uneasy disposition towards cat-feeding practices and the traces they leave in the city and how this stems from that same fantasy.

In sum, this section of the chapter will ask: How do cat-feeding practices mark the space of the city? What kind of conflicts emerge from these cat-human traces and markings? How do cat-feeders negotiate these conflicts to make their cat-feeding possible?

1. Noura's feeding spot

September 2, 2021. I am leaving my house for a bike ride at approximately 7 PM. On the short street perpendicular to mine, there used to be a series of restaurants, all of which have now closed. The space in front of one of the closed restaurants is now occupied by two cats that I had seen loitering around every time I walked down that street. Earlier that day I noticed that the cats had given birth to kittens, approximately three each. One set of kittens was noticeably larger and older than the other set. They were playing with one another inside the cardboard boxes left on the floor in front of the restaurant.

As I begin my walk down that street, I am immediately accosted by the smell: strong and putrid. Garbage is strewn across the floor. Flies hover around the corner where the cardboard boxes are. I notice a boy, around 9-10 years old, sitting on the ledge and watching them. He smiles at me. He has two cans of cat food, one of them is open, its contents spread on the ground, the other is still closed beside him. "A man saw me playing with the kittens and gave me money to buy cat food from the supermarket," he tells me. He introduces himself as Reda and tells me how much he loves playing with the cats.

After a few minutes, a woman appears, loaded with bags and wearing a mask. The woman enters the space, complaining loudly about how the cats here are neglected, "Nobody cares, not the government nor the people." She busies herself with setting down her many bags and refilling the bowls of cat

food as Reda and I watch. People walk by; some of them pause to watch the kittens, others just glance toward us. She smiles towards all of them and nods, saying, “Ahla w sahla” – as if it is her home to which she is welcoming them. A man passes by and stops. He asks the woman: “Do you feed them alone?”

“I do. I come to feed the cats every day and only my son helps me, no one else. You should see the price of cat food in the supermarket, too. It’s unbelievable.”

The man asks if he can have her number, and name, offering to help her with donations of cat food. She introduces herself as “Noura” to the man and gives him her phone number, thanking him profusely.

After this interaction, Noura calls her son Kamal on her mobile, asking him to bring down from their apartment a pitcher of water and a mop. Noura then turns to me and explains: “If I don’t clean the space, the people living in the buildings and the landlady on this street complain of the smell of the cats and threaten to kick the cats out. Us poor people, we struggle a lot. The people lean out of their balconies and yell at me to stop feeding the cats.”

A few minutes later, Kamal arrives, holding a small bucket of water and a mop. He introduces himself to me energetically, and helps his mother clear out dead leaves and waste from the space. Reda and I also help collect the waste to throw in a nearby garbage can. When the space is clear, Noura empties the bucket of water on the floor and begins mopping the floor clean.



Figure 5. Noura's feeding spot

Why does Noura mop the floor of the restaurant? While I was watching her, I was taken aback by this effortful act which she did in full force in broad daylight and in a public

space where she was under the gaze of the general population. By cleaning the space in a very visible fashion, Noura attempts to make herself, her actions, and her cats invisible.

The stray cats destabilize a carefully constructed border or divide between nature and culture, as they are neither domesticated nor wild. This divide assigns or categorizes certain spaces, things, or beings as belonging to separate and opposite categories. The stray cats, however, do not strictly belong to either nature *or* culture, but occupy an in-between position as “feral” or “stray.” They live in company with humans in the city and intervene in city life in many ways, specifically through their smells and noises. The cat-feeders further these impositions by amplifying the traces of the cats (who, after all, are careful to hide their own traces as much as they can) upon the space of the city. Noura’s practice of caring for her cats delineates the nonhuman or stray cats as intrinsic to the city and destabilizes the established nature and culture binary.

The concept of “ruderal” is useful, here, to analyze how the stray cats and their feeders move beyond assigned places or categories. Bettina Stoetzer uses the concept of the “ruderal” to explore how communities emerge spontaneously in disturbed environments usually considered hostile to life (297). Stoetzer studies how human-plant relations in Berlin are shaped by systems of control and yet also create openings for new forms of cohabitation. To elaborate, humans and nonhumans amid “projects of domestication” and under the threat of institutional power do not stick to their “assigned places” (310). Rather, they bring into being spaces of hospitality and new forms of cohabitation for those human and nonhuman beings that “do not belong” (Stoetzer, 312).

Noura, in her insistence to use the conveniently empty space in front of the restaurant as a feeding site, refuses to stick to her “assigned place,” as do the stray cats that she feeds. In doing so, she directs attention to a way of being in the city that intimately involves the nonhuman. She produces a space of hospitality and a new form of cohabitation with the stray cats of the city. Noura creates these small spaces of hospitality in a city which is undergoing various levels of destruction and collapse. Importantly, Beirut is facing a drastically different set of struggles and system of control than Stoetzer’s Berlin. The economic and political collapse has altered the city in countless ways, breaking the fantasy behind the famous tagline “the Paris of the Middle East.” The societal and economic deterioration which had always been relegated to the background or periphery of the city has moved to the forefront, diminishing the imagination of Beirut as a vibrant and modern city. This is evident in the opening lines of my vignette: almost all the restaurants on this street in Hamra, which used to be one of the main hubs of nightlife, have closed.

In this context, Noura’s mopping of the space takes on greater importance and urgency. Here, cleanliness is about more than just whether the space is clean. It is about the removal of smells or textures that don’t fit into the imaginary of a modern or civilized city. This imagination is fading away or harder to maintain in many respects because of the political and economic breakdown the country is facing. Cleaning the space thus revolves around ensuring that cat-feeding does not further contribute to the decay of the city which is already taking place.

By explaining to me the importance of keeping the place clean for the sake of the landlady and the rest of the residents, Noura links cleanliness with the absence of animals –

in this case, stray cats – from the space of the city. The smell that the neighbors and landlord complain about is linked to a certain vision or imaginary of the city and of civilized life that Noura and her cats disrupt by introducing an amalgamation of smells and misshapen objects on the city's streets. When Noura mops away the leaves and miscellaneous garbage that covers the space in front of the closed down restaurant, she is amending the space to make it look a certain way – proper, empty, unsullied – that will placate neighborhood residents and landlords.

2. Feeding Nawal's cats

Meeting Noura and learning about her practices of cleaning allowed me to observe how cat-feeding disturbs a particular set of norms to which some urban residents subscribe. These sets of norms revolve around a fantasy of a modern and civilized city and involves clear boundaries that separate unambiguously the human from the nonhuman. My encounter with Noura allowed me to observe these tendencies from a distance. However, I was surprised to find them within myself when I began feeding stray cats as a favor to another cat-feeder, Nawal.

Walking with Nawal through her feeding route, I watched her scoop out spoonfuls of cat food and drop them on the sidewalk as she moved along the city. She dropped the spoonfuls of cat food any time she saw a cat: in the middle of sidewalks, in front of stores, on the street. Then she walked along her way, sometimes not even turning back to see if the cat had eaten the food.

Nawal uses a mixture of cat food to feed her cats: five cups of dry food and two cups of wet food. She does this to save money, as the dry food is less expensive than the wet food. The dry food fills the cats up, and the smell of the wet food, the meat, entices them. The resulting mixture is reddish brown in color, slimy and gooey in texture, and the smell is pungent. Left on the street in mounds, it browns and starts to resemble dirt, dark brown spots on the city's floors.



Figure 6. Some of Nawal's cats eating from her dry-wet food mixture.

When I began feeding Nawal's cats on my own, I emulated her feeding tactics, dropping spoonfuls of food whenever I would see one of her cats, even on the middle of the sidewalk. The next day, I would walk down her route and notice these dried up brown mounds that are left on the ground, always, where I left them. The color turned darker brown. I felt guilty and embarrassed when I see these leftovers, the shame of "littering," leaving my own remains around the city.



Figure 7. To the left is one of Nawal's cats eating from a freshly mixed serving of dry-wet food I gave her. To the right is traces from cat food I had left the day before, which had browned and dried up.



Figure 8. Another example of what Nawal's mixture of cat food looks like the next day.

One incident with Ghassan furthered my feelings of embarrassment or wrongdoing:

November 11, 2021. I am walking along and feeding Nawal's cats. I take a turn from Jeanne d'Arc onto Sidani Street when I hear someone calling my name: I turn around, and it is Ghassan. "You're feeding the cats too, now?" He asks, half-confusedly, half-excitedly. He is also doing his afternoon cat-

feeding. I explain to him that I am just tending to Nawal's cats while she is gone. He tells me he'll walk down the street with me. When we stop at one of the feeding stations, in front of an empty dekeneh, Ghassan squints at something on the ground and then look up at me: "is this from you?" He asks, pointing down to a lump of dried cat food underneath him. I am embarrassed to say yes. He picks it up with his gloved hands and takes it to a nearby garbage bin.

I was unsure of where my feelings of embarrassment and shame originated. From the beginning, I had determined to approach my study of cat-feeding practices with openness and appreciation for this mode of care-giving. So why was it that I mainly felt unease and embarrassment when I was the one carrying out these practices of care?

As a lifelong resident of Ras Beirut, I had never paid much attention to the stray cats that roam around the city. I grew up hearing from my parents and other adults in my social world that the cats were dirty and repulsive. Most of the comments that I heard people make about the cats also revolved around their uncleanliness, and the impositions and disturbances they made to the city life. Therefore, it was not very surprising for me to hear Noura's stories about the urban residents who complained about her cat-feeding. But my experience feeding Nawal's cats revealed to me that I had internalized this outlook towards the cats that saw them not as fellow inhabitants of the city but as unclean and occupying pests. Within this outlook, placing offerings of cat food on the public streets where the cats live meant polluting the city's streets – a decidedly uncivilized practice.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus is useful for analyzing my experience of feeding Nawal's cats. By habitus, Bourdieu meant conduct that is "regulated and regular" without the existence of a matter of obedience or an explicit rule. In other words, habitus tends to

guarantee the “correctness” of practices and their constancy over time more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms (Bourdieu, 54). In short, “habitus” are socialized norms and tendencies that guide behavior and thinking. Feeding the stray cats entails deviating from these constructed and internalized cultural rules or norms that are a part of my own habitus, which usually involves an attitude of ambivalence or ignorance towards the street cats. This habitus also involves the idea that littering is bad, that leaving traces on the public streets of the city is uncivilized and improper. This is what led to my own feelings of embarrassment and shame as I walked through the city and dropped spoonfuls of cat food behind me, in the middle of sidewalks.

Interestingly, Bourdieu writes about how the consequence of deviating from the habitus relative to this or that field is being “negatively sanctioned” (55-6). Indeed, cat-feeders must pay a high social cost for their cat-feeding practices. This is evident in Noura’s comment to me about how urban residents yell at her from windows. The cat-feeders must engage in actual physical labor, like cleaning the spaces in which they feed, to appease or pacify the urban residents who are enraged or contemptuous towards the cat-feeders’ deviation from particular social rules.

B. Private, public, and shared space

As this chapter has established, cat-feeders interfere with a particular set of norms or tendencies that define urban life. By setting up cat shelters and putting out food and water for the cats, the cat-feeders introduce a variety of smells, textures, and physical traces that disrupt an urban habitus that sees such practices as a threat to modern city life. Cat-feeders

also disturb other sorts of urban rules and boundaries, such as those that designate space as either public or private. When I accompanied the cat-feeders, I observed how they use parking lots and spaces in front of buildings or restaurants to set up their cat-feeding stations. The cat-feeders disregard the rules that designate such spaces as private or forbidden to them and in the process create their own shared space with the cats. This section of the chapter will explore how cat-feeding allows us to move beyond the binary of private and controlled space *or* public and accessible space.

October 17, 2021. It is 7 PM and I am accompanying my friend Anna to feed a family of cats that resides in front of her apartment building near Abd el Aziz.

While Anna is emptying her bag of cat food onto a small container set up on the street corner, a woman approaches us. In the darkness I do not recognize her, but as she comes closer, I realize it is Noura: her black hair is tied in a tight ponytail and she is wearing large circular glasses.

“I also feed the cats here!” she says, coming to greet me. I introduce Anna to her, and they begin sharing cat-feeding tactics.

Noura informs us that there is a “wealthy doctor” who lives on this street, in an apartment building with a garden.

“Yes, I know him,” says Anna, “That man is mean. He once began yelling at me when he saw me feeding the kittens here.”

Noura nods along fervently and tells us indignantly: “They don’t like the cats here. I even tried cleaning his garden for him, but he still didn’t let me. One of my favorite cats had given birth there, I just wanted to feed her. Even around his building, they told me I’m not allowed to feed there. I told them: you don’t own the sidewalk; it doesn’t belong to you! This woman came out of the building, she started complaining to me about how the fleas came on her. I told her, I have nothing to do with the fleas, and anyways the cats may have fleas, but they kill cockroaches and mice. I didn’t bring the cat here, I told them, she came into the garden and gave birth here. I’m just feeding her.”

This story points to a certain negotiation between landowners or residents and cat-feeders that continuously takes place surrounding the boundaries of private space. The

residents and landowners constantly try to push these boundaries or borders outward, claiming the entire sidewalk or space surrounding their building as theirs and forbidden to the cat-feeders – informally policing access to such spaces. Noura disputes this claim and reminds them that this space “does not belong” to them. Privately-owned space becomes fallible through these continuous bargains; and the opposition between private and public space is contested rather than accepted as a simple given. Cat-feeding in Beirut operates on the very thin line between public and private space. Individuals who feed the cats constantly attempt to cross this line or render it thinner and invisible. Hala summed this up by saying:

“I don’t ask permission from anyone anymore. If there’s a cat trapped inside a fenced area, I don’t ask permission from anyone, I don’t care, I just go in, climb over the fence, and get the cat. Who cares about the police? There is an abandoned place at Madame Curie Street, in Koreitem, and sometimes cats get dumped there or stuck there. I just go in and get them.”

Hala’s words show how cat-feeding necessarily involves disobeying particular social rules or laws. Feeding the stray cats in the city necessarily entails occupying spaces that are private or off-limits. In their efforts to deliver care for the stray cats, Hala and Noura must circumvent or transgress the many obstacles that are in their way.

The practices of care that Noura and other cat-feeders carry out are essentially about the kind of city that they want. This is a city that is not divorced from or separate from its non-human inhabitants but one that notices and engages with them. By carrying out their practices of care in the space of the city and entering and using private property, the cat-feeders are claiming and asserting their power to shape the processes through which the city

is made. In doing so, they fundamentally challenge power relations and designations of private and public space that produce what we understand as urban space. In Noura's efforts to deliver sustenance and care to the stray cats, she brokers deals with the residents or landlords who come in her way through the exchange of services. This allows us to conceptualize space through the daily practices of urban inhabitants. Cat-feeding, as a daily practice, alters the urban fabric and the way in which space is used in the city.

Noura is not silenced by the scolding or complaints of other urban dwellers but answers back. In her answers, she reveals a perception or recognition of the cat as an autonomous being outside of the control of human beings: "she came into the garden and gave birth here." Through this statement, she reminds the residents that it was the choice of the cat to come into the garden. She reminds them that they do not reside alone but share the city with the animals who have a mind and a will of their own; and that making homes is not limited to humans. When she utters this phrase as a retort to those who are trying to police or restrict her access to space, she is speaking to an imagination of the city that does not rest on binaries of public and private space which she, and even before her the cats, continuously contests through their daily practices. Instead, her imagination is of a shared space.

C. Give-and-take

This chapter has described the many kinds of conflicts that cat-feeders run into. As a result of their cat-feeding practices which disturb hegemonic norms of city life, the cat-feeders find themselves at odds with other urban residents. The cat-feeders maintain these

practices against constant hostility. However, the cat-feeders are also adept at preventing or negotiating these neighborhood conflicts. This section of the chapter will explore how Ghassan told and showed me he attempts to negotiate these conflicts to be able to secure access to feeding spaces.

October 26, 2021. This is the first time that I have joined Ghassan on his feeding route. I am fascinated as I watch the techniques through which he feeds the cats.

Ghassan uses pieces of cardboard and plastic as placemats for the cats, and when they are done eating, he says: "It's time for clean-up." He removes all the cardboard pieces from the ground and puts them back in one of the black plastic bags. He pinches up the remaining cat food with his fingers, makes it into a firm mound, and puts it in front of a different cat, back in a can, or he throws it away. He says,

"I try to clean up as much as possible to avoid conflict with neighbors or passers-by. The most important part is the clean-up because it puts you at odds with the neighborhood. That's why I'm invisible as much as possible. It's all about akhidh w 'ata... balancing the negotiation out with the rest of the neighborhood is very important."

The clean-up takes no time at all because Ghassan is so quick and seemingly well-practiced. All done, he picks up the three plastic bags from the ground, and we move on to the next "station," as Ghassan calls them.



Figure 9. Ghassan's cardboard place-mats.



Figure 10. Ghassan's cleaning technique: When Ghassan runs out of place-mats, he puts the food on the floor. But he makes sure to clean up after himself using the soles of his rubber boots to rub the traces away or picking up the meat with his gloved hands to serve to other cats.

Ghassan walks along his feeding route: with an air of familiarity and joviality, he greets other passers-by, storekeepers, security guards, waste-pickers, and construction workers that he sees daily. At one point, Ghassan stops to talk to a construction worker who had just gotten out of a car.

“Shu, you’re not done yet?” He asks him. The man shakes his head sleepily, his eyes half-closed, and explains what they still have to do.

“Ya ‘tykun al- ‘āfya,” Ghassan says, patting him on the back. As he walks on the dirty floor with waste strewn everywhere, cats follow him, trailing behind his feet. They curl from around garbage bins and walk beside him. There are also cats that were stationed a bit further up the street, as if they were waiting. They are meowing loudly, insistently.

“Ya ‘tyk al- ‘āfya ya m ‘alim,” a man calls to Ghassan as he is passing by, “The whole family is here.” He is an old man with white hair and beard. They speak for a bit, then the man bids Ghassan goodbye and walks away.

“See, I won’t put food on the ledge here,” Ghassan says, pointing to the small white wall near the building that is under construction beside us, “Because they just painted it.” I look at it. Aside from a few smudges, it does look like it was freshly painted in white, but I had not noticed that until Ghassan pointed it out.

The last station is at a parking lot at the intersection of Jeanne d’Arc and Makhoul streets. I ask how come he’s allowed to feed here.

“The parking lot guys are cool. We have an agreement.”

“What’s the agreement?”

He says: “Here, only,” gesturing his arms around the small corner of the parking lot, lined with trees that create shadows. I understood that he meant that he can only feed cats in this small space, the corner.



Figure 11. The parking lot workers gave Ghassan access to this corner of the parking lot to feed the cats.

This scene is significant because it showcases how the reciprocal work of *akhidh w'ata*, as Ghassan calls it, is necessary for caring for and feeding the stray cats. Ghassan frequently uses words like “give-and-take,” “checks and balances,” or “agreement” to express how he can use the space of the city to feed the cats only under conditions of negotiation with the members of his community. Ghassan makes a point to speak to all the members of the neighborhood. They know him, and he knows them, and this is what enables him to feed the cats.

These scenes exhibit how a particular space is formed through these voluntary agreements that people enter with each other. These voluntary and brokered agreements then secure Ghassan’s access to spaces where he feeds the cats. Ghassan does not force the cat food or the cats on anyone. Rather, he enters relationships with residents and negotiates or agrees with them over the conditions of feeding the cats. A network of relationships is formed that changes the way in which space is occupied or used in the city. The ordinary users of the space of the city, like Ghassan, work outside the boundaries and discipline

imposed by the state and other institutions. Instead, Ghassan bases his relationships on reciprocity and negotiation to make the spaces of the city accessible to him and his cats.

In this way, the relationship between cat and cat-feeder or the work of cat-caring is also essentially a relationship and an ongoing communication within the neighborhood. Ghassan demonstrates a constant awareness of his surroundings – both human and non-human. By paying particular attention to the smells and traces of the cat food and how others might perceive or interact with them, he is communicating in a way to avoid conflict with his neighbors. This relationship with the city space and its residents involves a particular reciprocity. It is not just that Ghassan makes concessions to satisfy the urban residents: they also must make concessions or compromise because if they don't, as Ghassan himself says, he “would create a huge problem.”

1. The parking lot

To further illustrate how Ghassan initiates and enters give-and-take agreements with members of his neighborhood to facilitate access to otherwise restricted feeding spaces, I will draw on my experiences accompanying him to one specific feeding station. This feeding station is in a parking lot on Jeanne d'Arc Street, that was used both by Nawal and Ghassan. However, while this space was accessible to Ghassan, Nawal was sometimes forbidden from feeding there and had to feed her cats on the periphery of the parking lot. At one point, Nawal and I arrived at the parking lot to find that one of the water bowls was missing. Nawal proceeded to yell insults at the workers at the parking lot. Later, when I

accompanied Ghassan on his feeding route, I was surprised to see that he used the space of the parking lot freely:

November 18, 2021. I am feeding cats with Ghassan, and he shocks me by striding confidently directly inside the parking lot to feed the cats. I rush up beside him. “You feed inside here?” I ask in wonderment. Ghassan has already placed the plastic bags down and begun setting out the place-mats in disparate spots for the cats that have begun to gather. “Yes,” Ghassan says. “How come?” “Badik tākhdi w ta ‘ty ma ‘un. You need to give-and-take with them. You need to talk to them – it’s all about checks and balances. I talk to them, bseyeron, I’m nice to them, and so they’re nice to me and let me feed here.” We are right in front of the small white “sitting room” of the parking lot. There are two cats gazing out at us from underneath the room-container. Ghassan places two pieces of aluminum in front of them with cat food. The guys are sitting on plastic chairs in the middle of the lot, no one tries to stop Ghassan.

“When they have a problem they call me, like if they need to fix something, or they have a personal problem, or a problem with a cat. And I help them. This is what you have to do when you’re in a neighborhood and you’re doing this. You have to give and take. I’d rather not do it, but I need to,” he tells me. “If you don’t do it, if you don’t give and take, it creates problems for you. I had to build a relationship with them, and that was very important so that I would be able to feed the cats.”

My exchange with Ghassan in this scene revealed to me that the practice of feeding cats is largely a practice of communication with large segments of the urban community. Building relationships with one’s neighbors is a substantial part of cat-feeding. Ghassan approaches the workers at the parking lot with mutuality and understanding. In his words, he builds and creates relations with the people that surround him, he comes to know them. His usage of the words “build” and “create” speaks to the way in which relationality is in fact a kind of work or labor. There are real consequences to refusing to enter these relationships. It creates problems and obstacles towards the work of “collaborative

survival,” to borrow a term from Tsing, in which Ghassan is trying to engage with the cats (3).

The work of creating or building these relationships can be analyzed through Mauss’ concept of reciprocity or “the gift,” or as Ghassan puts it, *’akhidh w ’aṭa*. Ghassan gives himself to the parking lot owners, he establishes friendly and warm relations with them, he displays an interest in their lives, engages in small talk with them, and helps them if they are facing a problem. His actions are “self-interested” in that they are geared towards ensuring that he has feeding space to do what he desires, but also have a “concern for others” in that he exhibits interest and involves himself in the lives of the workers (Mauss, 167). In return, the workers welcome him into their space, they give him the liberty to occupy and use the space of the parking lot. Through this exchange, Ghassan and the workers are bonded or bound by a relation of obligation, they establish a “communion” and partnership that is “relatively indissoluble” (Ibid, 108). They are obligated to one another through this “constant give-and-take” that Ghassan has initiated (Ibid, 112). Solidarity, or a communal and shared usage of space, is achieved through these bonds and exchange practices. Ghassan’s “give-and-take” displays how social life is precariously held by voluntary, mutual agreements based on “obligation and liberty mixed together” (Ibid, 124).

The story of the parking lot offers a striking example of the different ways in which cat-feeders approach their cat-feeding and the neighborhood, and how this can lead to a variety of outcomes. This story demonstrates how reciprocity builds relationship(s) which then build a community or a neighborhood. Ghassan and Nawal’s different experiences of

the same parking lot reveals how relationality creates worlds and impacts the way in which we occupy, use, experience, or share space.

D. Conclusion

In this chapter, I looked at the negotiations that take place over space in the city because of cat-feeding practices. Cat-feeders transgress the unwritten, social conventions that delineate which practices are and are not acceptable, as well as the boundaries controlling private and public space in the city. The cats and cat-feeders disrupt these rules or conventions and, in the process, create an alternative city or space that does not rest on the binaries of public and private space and that embraces the otherness of nonhuman species. Through the cat-feeders' insistence on using the spaces that are convenient for them and their cats, they play a role in shaping and changing the meaning of urban space.

The cat-feeders' insistence on feeding the cats leads to conflicts and disagreements with other urban residents and landowners. The cat-feeders' practices put them at odds with their neighbors and other powerful neighborhood actors. They maintain their feeding practices against constant hostility and engage in negotiations and exchanges to be able to feed the cats. They attempt to resolve these conflicts or circumvent the obstacles that are put in their way through processes of *'akhidh w 'ata* or give-and-take.

Studying these conflicts and disputes over urban space entails conceptualizing the city through the framework of reciprocity and relationality: how people make their relationships influences the way in which the city is made. In sum, cat-feeding allows us to study the link between sociality or relationality and the construction of urban space.

Examining the city through the lens of cat-feeding allows us to think about how the city is produced through the daily practices of its residents and inhabitants.

CHAPTER V

PLACE-MAKING

September 22, 2021. The first time I met her, Hiba told me of all the cat-feeders she knows around Ras Beirut: “There’s Ghassan who feeds around Hamra... Reem, she has a house that she doesn’t live in, and she puts street cats there.... Vera and Marlene, they feed in Koreitem. And there is a taxi driver, he feeds cats in Ayn el Mreisseh, all along the streets. There’s a woman called Rana, she has a piece of land in Ayn el Mreisseh where she keeps stray cats and dogs and feeds them,” Hiba perks up, excited to tell me this, and then sighs: “There are so many hidden beautiful spots in the city that people don’t see or know about. I met Rana because I talked to her one day, because I talk to anyone that I see who’s feeding cats. Rana told me to go with her, she wanted to show me something, so I followed her... While I was walking with her, I was like, what am I doing, am I crazy? What if she ends up killing me? But then she showed me the farm. Rana feeds cats from Ayn el Mreisseh all the way to the end of Hamra. There’s a person for each neighborhood.”

Early in my fieldwork, Hiba explained to me how cat-feeders organize the space of the city into places through their feeding practices. As I accompanied the cat-feeders through their various routes along the city, I found that studying cat-feeding in Beirut requires conceptualizing how urban inhabitants change, alter, and structure urban space. In this chapter, I will study how cat-feeders imagine, make, and structure the space of the city through their cat-caring practices.

The cat-feeders forge their own paths and maps through the city, along with the stray cats who are active participants in the designation of places like feeding stations in the city. Through these practices and inventive interactions with the space and materials of the city, a network is formed organically with the neighborhood. Cat-feeders do not do their work alone but come to rely on members of their neighborhood and on each other to

facilitate their work. This emerges from their walks along their feeding routes and their mutual and communal usage of space.

With the absence of an institutionalized or organized entity that manages the care for cats, the cat-feeders come up with solutions and channels by themselves. They innovate ways in which to facilitate their caring and feeding practices. In doing so, they transform the space of the city around them. Objects or spaces that are abandoned or that are seen as waste and garbage are employed and mobilized so that they become useful or sites of possibility. The cat-feeders' propensity to feed cats emerges from their desire and need to care for these nonhuman creatures with whom they share the city. This desire is not an abstract idea or an imagination. I will explore how the cat-feeders' imaginations become real and concrete in their daily practices of care and they create an alternative version of the city.

In sum, this chapter will answer the questions: How does the practice of cat-feeding make or produce urban space? What sort of relationship to space does the practice of cat-feeding engender? How does cat-feeding create or participate in the creation of a particular urban fabric?

A. Feral encounters and trails

Walking around or visiting spots in Beirut often entails finding oneself in unplanned interactions with stray cats. These are interactions that one cannot control; to which one can only respond. Engaging with the cats requires becoming comfortable with this lack of control, these "unpredictable encounters that transform us" (Tsing, 20). These interactions

transform or affect the individual who must deal with the stray cat blocking his way on the sidewalk or hopping onto his lap in the outer restaurant seating area. But they also transform the space of the city as the stray cats delineate spaces as their own. The cats make their homes and reside in spots in the city. Human residents then meet the cats in these spots to feed and care for them. This section of the chapter will explore how the stray cats and the cat-feeders choose and create feeding stations and trails in the city together.

I spent a lot of time walking around the city. During these walks, I gradually noticed objects like cut-out bottoms of plastic water bottles and small mounds of brown cereal-like substances located in arbitrary spots and specific streets. Over time, I realized that these were nourishment left by human residents for the stray cats living in the city's streets. Once I began paying attention to these traces of cat-human engagements, I began to see them everywhere – on almost every street corner and sidewalk. Now, when I see a new water bowl on a street corner, or notice one that I had not seen before, I am accosted by the thought: “there must be cats here.”

Like most other urban inhabitants, I had previously ignored these cat-human traces. Though I had not realized it at the time, my mode of attention was selective and limited, focusing only on my human counterparts. Being attentive to the traces of cat-human engagements meant entering the world of stray cats in Beirut and learning about what happens in this world. The following are some examples of my own experiences with unplanned encounters with stray cats in the city:

September 17, 2021. A mother cat takes residence in the storage room of the flower-seller, Takkoush, on my street. She stays there until she gives birth,

and then tends to her kittens inside the small space. I happen to be passing by the store one morning during my walk to class. I pause to take a picture of the little kittens climbing on the pots of plants for sale, wrestling with one another. The flower seller invites me inside. He lets me pour into a bowl some cat food that he is rationing to make the expensive bag last as long as possible.



Figure 12. Kittens at Takkoush Flower Shop.



October 17, 2021. I am on a walk with my friend, down to the Corniche. It starts raining lightly, and we pause underneath a leafy tree facing a residential building in Ayn el Mreisseh. It is quiet and conversation is sparse. I look around myself and notice a plastic container of water set near the doors of the building, and a handful of cat food strewn nearby. There are two cats loitering around the space: a black and white one, and a calico. As I am staring at them, an elderly man walks by, he approaches me, “What are you doing?” He asks. I tell him I am looking at the cats. He seems excited: “My daughter feeds them every day. You should come at 4 PM, that’s when she comes here to feed them. There will be many more cats than this. They all crowd around her. It’s amazing,” he says, and there is awe in his voice.



Figure 13. Cat food scattered around this residential building in Ayn el Mreisseh.

November 11, 2021. I am walking back home from class. It has been a long and draining day. In front of me walks a middle-aged woman with curly hair. A sickly, skinny looking street cat is walking – crawling – along the sidewalk. The woman stops, quickly reaches into her bag, and pulls out a piece of Picon cheese, a processed cheese brand, still in its wrapper. She unwraps it, stares carefully at the cat, approaches it slowly, and drops the cheese next to it, then pulls back. She sees me watching her and tells me she always keeps Picon in her bag for the cats. “People say the cats don’t like it, but they do. And it’s cheaper than regular cat food. My brother does this all the time. They eat it because of how hungry they are.”



Figure 14. The cat eating from the Picon cheese the woman had thrown onto the sidewalk.

What do such ordinary scenes reveal about the interaction between stray cats and urban space? We hardly pay attention to the ways in which these nonhuman creatures occupy and use space. But once I began to channel my attention to the ways in which cat and human lives intersect in Beirut, I found myself drawn to situations, people, and cats through no doing of my own. Spontaneous encounters take place with strangers, people who live in my neighborhood but with whom I had no prior contact. I found myself entering a world and encountering cat-feeders without trying. As a result, I started to understand how the stray cats are active participants in the usage and production of urban space.

In these scenes, the stray cats occupy and use the space of the city actively and autonomously. The flower-seller at Takkoush does not invite them in or make the decision to put them inside his storage room to keep them safe from the outdoors. Instead, the mother cat chooses this spot to give birth. The flower-seller did not initiate or control this interaction but chooses to respond to the cats by giving them food and water. The same is reflected in the next exchange with the man whose daughter meets the cats every day to feed them. As he tells me, “She comes here to feed them:” she meets them in the spot where they live. And lastly, the woman’s walk along the sidewalk is interrupted by the cat crawling along. She does not initiate the interaction: she simply responds to the cat who is walking along the streets of the city that it inhabits. Through these random encounters that I had while walking, I learnt about my neighborhood and city, I learnt about the stray cats and the people that fed them. I watched the people of my neighborhood take care of the street cats around them in different ways because of unplanned encounters with the cats.

When I talked to the cat-feeders, I found out that all of them also walked frequently around the city. Their cat-feeding emerges concurrently to this practice of walking. To elaborate, when I asked the cat-feeders how they decided to use a particular feeding spot, they described themselves as “just walking,” noticing a spot where there are cats, and putting food there. Over time, this spot becomes a feeding site.

For example, Ghassan explained his feeding route to me when we first met:

“It was random. I walked around the city from my house, and I chose the sites as I walked along. And the stops would increase with time, because I would get to know the cats more, and figure out where they stayed. Or I would find a few cats staying around one spot, so I would decide to feed there. First, I start on Sourati Street, underneath my building... near a place called “DRM,” it used to be a dance place... you wouldn’t have heard of it, it closed a long time ago. Then I feed on Jeanne d’Arc, across the street... in the Makhoul alleyway, on Bliss Street near the security guards.”

This quote from Ghassan is significant because he makes it clear that the basis of establishing a feeding route is finding out where the cats reside or stay. From this, I learned that it is not (only) the cat-feeder who chooses a spot for the feeding station. Rather, the stray cats choose and reside in specific spots, where cat-feeders find and feed them. The stray cats territorialize the city in their own way and their human feeders respond to that by meeting them in these spots to feed and care for them. The stray cats and feeders together establish and transform a space into a feeding station or cat home. In this way, the stray cats turn out to be active participants in the creation of a particular urban fabric as mediators for the human feeders’ relationship to space.

The feeding route is thus a form of place-making that arises from walking. It represents a particular orientation to space and a way of positioning oneself in space and in

the city that ends up structuring urban space by creating a route through the city and following it. In their techniques of naming places and constructing or demarcating the boundaries of their feeding trails and stations, the stray cats and cat-feeders produce their own places in the city.

B. Neighborhood collaborations

After describing the way in which cats and the cat-feeders forge their own feeding stations and trails through the city, I will now turn to examining the networks of collaboration that are formed because of these cat-human trails. As the cat-feeders make their way through the city on their feeding routes, they encounter and interact with the members of their neighborhoods. Patterns of unintentional coordination consequently develop whereby people come to rely on one another and collaborate with each other to care for the cats. Human-animal interactions produce a neighborhood or a certain kind of urban sociality because they create bonds between humans themselves. The single human-animal bond between the feeder and her cats extends outside of itself and creates and shapes other relations and other worlds. This reveals the way in which relationships move and branch out of themselves. The entanglements of humans and cats in the city make lifeways by binding people to one another in bonds of obligation and knowing; these bonds create a neighborhood and a particular feel or atmosphere to the space.

When I accompanied the cat-feeders on their feeding routes, I noticed how much they rely on members of the neighborhood to be able to take care of their cats. The activities of cat-feeding engender a certain familiarity and collaboration within and with the

neighborhood. This first became apparent to me when I accompanied Nawal on her feeding route for a week:

Every morning, Nawal stopped at a hairdresser salon on Mansour Jurdak Street to refill her bottle of water that she uses to replenish the water bowls for the cats. The first time I accompanied her, Nawal introduced me to the ladies at the salon as her “helpers.”

“We all help Nawal!” one of the women said to me. Nawal said that this woman helps her feed cats in this area and on Jabre Dumit street. After she conversed with the women at the shop for a little bit, we left the hairdresser, forgetting to refill the water bottle. Another woman, who works at a nearby store, offered to do it for us. She ran down the street and handed the bottle back to us a couple of minutes later, full.

Another morning, Nawal and I needed to refill the water bottle, so we went into the beauty salon.

Nawal asked: “Can we fill the water bottle?”

“We don’t have a single drop of water,” replied the woman.

“Oh no, you’re kidding,” said Nawal. The woman suggested another store where we could fill the water bottle, then smiled at me as we were leaving. Ahead, there was a laundry and dry-cleaning shop, which we entered. It was very small, and there were clothes hanging from the walls. Nawal asked if we could refill the water bottle, and the man sitting behind a desk looked at us and said, “Akid you can, you can fill two water bottles kamen!” He took the bottle and filled it from tap water in a small room in the back.

This experience revealed to me how neighborhood collaborations allow Nawal to go about her life feeding the stray cats. This ongoing exchange of favors or help between Nawal and the neighborhood storekeepers is something that takes place over time, as she makes her stops at her feeding stations. It then becomes a part of Nawal’s routine and habit to stop at the hairdresser every day and refill her 1L bottle of water. Through her cat-feeding, she created a particular acquaintance or orientation to the city whereby she knows its residents and they know her.

I observed a similar sort of neighborhood familiarity when I accompanied Ghassan on his feeding route. I found out that every morning, Ghassan stops at a small store that is on his feeding route to have a cup of coffee, a cigarette, and “take a break,” as he put it:

October 26, 2021. We are at Ghassan’s second-to-last feeding station: a spot near Bubbles Market, on Bliss Street. When we get there, a member of the staff is standing outside. He makes eye contact with Ghassan. “You’ll have a cup of coffee,” he says, half-sternly, half-smiling. He asks me, more timidly, if I want coffee. I politely refuse. The worker has curly black hair and doesn’t look over 25 years old.

Ghassan pulls out a cigarette and lights it while drinking Nescafe, telling me: “This is where I take a break.” He and the worker begin talking about emigration. I ask, “Who’s emigrating?” Ghassan points to the man and says, “Austria.” He tells the guy, “It will take a while to get used to. You just have to hold it out for one year. You’ll say to yourself, what the hell am I doing here? And then after that, you’ll be like, wow, life is so much better here!”

As I listened in on their conversation, I thought about the care that is implicit in their small interactions. The man insisted on giving Ghassan a cup of coffee. He asserted that Ghassan would have a cup of coffee, rather than inviting him to have one. Ghassan reciprocated by giving him advice about emigration. This small scene illustrates how Ghassan’s practice of feeding cats creates a relationship with the neighborhood and its residents. It is part of his feeding route and daily routine to stop here; it has become customary for him to drink coffee and smoke a cigarette with the staff in between his last two feeding stations. The relationships Ghassan has with the neighborhood support and enable him to feed the cats. These relationships themselves come out of his cat-caring practices and the route and feeding stations that he has forged through the city.

Ghassan and Nawal interact with the members of their neighborhood in small and specific ways, relying on them and exchanging favors with them as they walk through their feeding routes. But when I met Hala, she shared a story with me that unveiled another deeper layer of this neighborhood collaboration.

November 11, 2021. I am standing with Hala in front of her first feeding station, after she has fed all the cats. This feeding station is in front of an abandoned and closed restaurant, Bagatelle. Hala tells me the story of how the space became her feeding site:

“When the restaurant closed, the empty space was useful for setting up the cat homes and a feeding station. But soon after I put the homes there, the owner of the restaurant started creating problems. So, then the natoors on this street, they fought for me,” Hala relates to me, smiling.

I am intrigued and ask her for more information. She says, “The natoors made a problem with the landlord... Because at one point, in the winter, he sent this private garbage company to remove everything. I had six houses for the cats, I put them up especially for winter because it was cold. Then one of the natoors, Mohammad... he paid the landlord off,” she says the last part in a part-whisper. “They love cats, three of the natoors on this street. One of them gave me a hard time, but eventually he came around.”

“I used to put these cat homes over there,” she says, pointing to a spot right next to the building entrance across the street. “But when the restaurant closed, the natoors told me to move here. Because it was raining, and they would see me feeding the cats under the rain, and they wanted to help me. So, we moved them here. Sometimes they take over the clean-up, sometimes I do. They help me.”



Figure 15. Hala's cat houses, feeding station, and storage of water in front of the closed and abandoned restaurant.

Hala's story shows how fragments of the neighborhood community mobilize towards resolving a particular instance of conflict with the landowner of the empty space. Hala's relationships with her surroundings meant that when the landowner threatened to "evict" the cats, she and the natoors advocated for the cats and for their ability to use the space. In other words, her relationships forged a network or community that impacted the employment or structuring of space. Collaborations between neighborhood residents produce a neighborhood solidarity which enables the care for cats.

The conflict taking place here between Hala, the natoors, and the restaurant owner is also about who counts as an inhabitant of the neighborhood space. Hala and the natoors, by insisting in various ways to continue caring for the cats in this area, present the stray cats as

legitimate inhabitants and residents of the building and neighborhood. The restaurant owner, although he is the only one out of all the characters in this story who does not live in this neighborhood, still takes it as natural that he has a claim on controlling this space. On the other hand, the natoors represent a particular disenfranchised section of society who are often looked at as temporary or peripheral urban residents. Yet the natoors also present themselves as inhabitants of the neighborhood by contesting the restaurant-owner's power and claim over this space which he is not using. Hala and the natoors, through their coordinated efforts, succeed in granting themselves access to this privatized space.

In sum, feeding the cats is not an individual endeavor but one that necessarily relies on communal bonds that are formed voluntarily. The storeowners, shopkeepers, and natoors are not necessarily required to help or support Nawal, Hala, or Ghassan, but they do it anyway. This illustrates a form of sociality that is based on familiarity and trust whereby people do favors for and exchange services with each other. This is no small thing, especially in this time of all-around scarcity. The scarcity is evident here – sometimes there is no water to share at Nawal's hairdresser salon. The collaborations that cat-feeders enter with the members of their neighborhoods illustrate how the everyday practices of urban dwellers determine and produce places and spaces.

C. Imagining and making the city

Cat-feeders do not just interact with the members of their neighborhoods. They also interact with and shape the space of the city by structuring it in particular ways to suit their cat-caring needs. Beirut is a city that is inhospitable to most of its human inhabitants, let

alone those that are nonhuman – and even more so in the past three years with the onset of the socio-economic collapse. To care for the nonhuman residents of the city necessitates a work of the imagination that envisions and creates an alternative version of the city that can sustain its human and nonhuman populations.

Thus, this section of the chapter will explore the various ways in which cat-feeders come up with solutions or channels through which they can care for the stray cats. I will ask the question: How are cat-human relations of care possible in a city that is marked by levels of destruction and decay?

1. Nawal's street

When I visited one of Nawal's feeding stations in Manara, I noticed how she ordered and structured the space in relation to her needs and the needs of the cats. By doing this, Nawal makes her imagination a reality. She creates and produces a particular sort of urban space that fulfills the needs of the stray cats and the humans that feed them.

November 7, 2021. I am at Nawal's feeding station near Reynolds Building, where she has been feeding cats for 30 years. She continues to do this currently although she is not paid for her work and has had conflicts with the AUB administration for years over their treatment of the cats.

Nawal is getting out of her car. I gingerly open my car door; I am uncomfortable because the second we pulled up on this street, ten or more cats began advancing upon the car, meowing repeatedly and loudly. They are so close that I feel as though they might jump into the car.

By the time I get myself out of the car, Nawal is already holding a Ziploc bag with her cat food concoction in it and talking to the cats – "yalla wait a bit." I ask if I can help with anything. She hands me a plastic bag with dry cat food in it and a Sohat water bottle full of water and asks if I can refill the water bowls: "there are bowls lined up all along the road."

A man approaches. He has a graying beard and seems a bit timid but also excited to tell us: “I already filled the ones on top.” Nawal nods at him and tells me, “Just the ones on the bottom of the street then.”

I look at the street ahead of me. There are two narrow sidewalks outlining the street, adjacent to the Reynolds building and to the AUB Resident Gate. Along the sidewalks are plastic bowls for water, placed regularly about 1-2 meters away from one another. The plastic bowls are all the same material, made from the bottoms of 1L Sohat water bottles. On the right side of the road, near Reynolds Building, there are big gallons full of water. Nawal tells me she keeps them there for storage just in case she does not have enough water with her. She instructs me to place big handfuls of dry food near each water bowl along the street: “Make the dry food into a firm pile, around 1 meter apart from each other, along the street.”



Figure 16. An example of how Nawal structures the street with handfuls of cat food, water bowls, and gallons of water.



Figure 17. Nawal's cats eating on a Sunday evening.

During this visit to Nawal’s feeding station, I noticed how Nawal had structured this street. She placed the water bowls in specific spots around the periphery of the sidewalks, with

water storage placed next to them. She explained carefully to me how and where to place the dry food. From this, I gathered that the way I interact with the place matters. She harbored a particular orientation toward the space and has constructed the feeding site in the way that is most adequate and convenient for her. She has transformed this space into a feeding site or a cat home; it becomes her space. By structuring urban space or a street the cat-feeders are practically reconfiguring this space as their own. They produce an orientation towards the city in organizing it and in relating to it in their own way: by creating a feeding route within the city, picking various spots as their feeding stations, and so on and so forth. They create a new version or map of the city.

Members of the neighborhood then begin to associate this space as with its cat feeding routine. They notice the way in which Nawal has structured the space and interact with it accordingly. This is evident in the man's arbitrary contribution and interaction with the space: he takes it upon himself to fill up the water bowls. This also reveals the way in which the presence of the stray cats allows for a certain kind of familiarity, a neighborhood familiarity that can be felt and discerned whereby the sole basis for the interaction between neighbors or urban residents is the presence of the cats. The stray cats contribute to the formation of a particular atmosphere or urban and neighborhood familiarity.

This neighborhood familiarity revealed itself during the interactions I would have with random city residents, when they would mention to me in passing that "There is a woman who comes here, to this particular spot, and feeds the cats every day," or, "There is a space down the road, across from the sea, where people feed cats. Every day at 4 PM, the cats arrive at this spot as a crowd, and wait to be fed," or, "There are so many cats here,

because a man throws chicken heads for them from the roof of the neighboring building every night.”

In this way, the city and its space become marked by the cross-species entanglements between stray cats and their human feeders. This demonstrates how such animal-human practices of care produce place in the city: by structuring the space in a particular way, leaving traces and structures for feeding in particular places, the place becomes marked as a cat-feeding site to other urban inhabitants. In this way, cat-feeders participate in the production of urban space.

2. Creating solutions

Other than structuring the space of the city in particular ways, cat-feeders also go through considerable efforts to build tools that expedite or enhance the process of cat-caring. Ghassan, for example, had already built a small cat shelter, or what he calls “the cat hotel,” in a small alleyway in Makhoul Street. “I built this so that the kittens could have somewhere warm to stay during the cold months,” he said.



Figure 18. Ghassan's "Cat Hotel."

After accompanying Ghassan on his feeding route several times, he told me how he was becoming exhausted from cat-feeding in the city which is “falling apart,” in his words. “I won’t stop feeding them – I can’t,” Ghassan said. “But I’m working on a project with Hala to build and install tubes for cat food and water around Hamra.” He described his vision: the feeding tubes would open from the top, and the cat-feeders would be able to pour dry food into the feeding tube, filling it up. This would make it easier to feed the cats by allowing the feeders to stop by the stations less often, as the tube could be filled up and would only need to be replenished once every few days. Ghassan told me about this project in mid-November. By February, I began noticing these feeding tubes placed in one or two locations around Ras Beirut.



Figure 19. Ghassan's "feeding tubes"

By thinking about and creating tools to care for the cats and placing them in the public spaces of the city, Ghassan is claiming what Lefebvre calls “the right to the city.” The right to the city is “the right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart’s desire” (Harvey, 1). Lefebvre elaborates that the right to the city involves a work of the imagination and of creativity. As Harvey writes, the right to the city is the right to participate and appropriate moments and places; it is the question of what kind of city we want to live in. This question cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be, what kind of daily life we desire and what kind of social relations we seek (Ibid). By innovating and building these tools, the cat-feeders are producing a city that resembles them, their needs and wants. These new structures and tools that cat-feeders place in the city shape the way in which they use and experience urban space and how they interact with or forge relations with other city inhabitants.

In this way, cat-feeding allows us to observe how individuals and communities come up with their own solutions or ways to counter the problems or restrictions they are

facing. Instead of waiting for an outside intervention, the cat-feeders do it themselves. They brainstorm and come up with ideas and then proceed to put them into place – they exert themselves and their creations on urban space by producing a different version of it that involves their own wants and needs, and those of the cats. To understand the city through the lens that practices of cat-feeding offer us is to examine the ways in which imaginative practices and spontaneous actions are linked to everyday encounters in the city.

3. The potentials of abandonment

As I argued in this section of the chapter, the activities of the cat-feeders and the relationships between cats and cat-feeders transform the space of the city and actively change it. The cat-feeders' inclination to care for the street cats who dwell around their neighborhoods depends on their ability to design often-improvised alternatives. These alternatives also include using and appropriating spaces of the city that are empty, abandoned, or restricted.

I had already observed how cat-feeders establish feeding stations in front of spaces that have been shut down, like restaurants or stores. But through my conversations with them, I began to learn about another additional layer of cat-feeding which entails encroaching on and making use of abandoned buildings and wastelands to be able to feed and care for the cats.

*October 26, 2021. I am feeding cats with Ghassan. I point to one of the many cats that have approached the feeding station on which we have stopped. The cat has clean light gray fur and beautiful green eyes. I tell him: "What a pretty cat."
"She has the sweetest character. She is a mother, she has kittens."*

“Where are they?” I ask, always excited at the prospect of kittens. He tells me, “We took them away.” We have this conversation through many pauses, as he leans down to break a possible conflict over food between two cats or adds more cat food on various cardboard placemats. The cats are friendly and pass by my legs.

“Who? Who took them away?” I ask.

“The kittens were inside my building. One day I was having a coffee with Maria, and the natoon called me randomly, he told him that he was going to remove the kittens. I asked why, but he didn’t answer... So, we took them to this abandoned building, Maria and I. We know that it’s abandoned. We broke in together and put them there.”

I am thoroughly intrigued and impressed, but Ghassan did not make much of the story.

Later that day, Ghassan points at one of the cats that are eating and says: “This one, he had Parvo.” When he sees the confused look on my face, he explains, with widened eyes: “It’s a very strong virus, it kills. So, we took him to that abandoned building I told you about, and we gave him an IV.”

In this exchange, Ghassan revealed a distinct and hidden layer of his cat-feeding practices which was not immediately obvious to me. I observed at length how cat-feeders occupy spaces like empty lots, storefronts, and more, but Ghassan’s story showed me that there were other, murkier, and less visible places in the city that cat-feeders used. This became more apparent to me during a conversation with Marlene, an English professor who has been feeding stray cats for over thirty years. Marlene also spoke of abandoned spaces and their usefulness:

“I used to feed the cats inside an abandoned parking lot with my friend near Manara. We used to go inside to feed there. They eventually closed it so that we wouldn’t feed anymore there. But I dug a small hole, so the cats come out from inside it and I feed them right outside of the parking lot.”

What these stories from Ghassan and Marlene reveal is an aspect of secrecy and stealth that accompanies cat-feeding, which I had not expected to find. Until this moment,

most of the practices in which I had seen the cat-feeders engage were very pointedly public. But Marlene and Ghassan, by telling me these small stories, explain how an essential part of cat-feeding is finding and using spaces that are abandoned yet supposedly out of reach. Part of the creativity inherent to cat-feeding that I try to make visible in this chapter thus appear to be finding ways to make such restricted spaces accessible to the cat-feeder and her cats. To do what they do, they must find and use these hidden places, but keep them secret.

More than that, Ghassan and Marlene's stories demonstrates a particular resourcefulness that accompanies cat-feeding. As I walk along the streets with the cat-feeders, the city transforms before my eyes. The abandoned wasteland or parking lot becomes a hosting ground for cats and other living creatures. The terrace of a closed-down restaurant transforms into a site for cat homes and feeding stations, with makeshift homes made from cardboard boxes and rags and water bowls made of cut-out water bottles. Objects that we throw away – like old sofas, desk chairs, car tires – and garbage – like pieces of styrofoam, cardboard, fabric – are reassembled to create shelter for the cats that roam our streets. They are set up in the middle of sidewalks, on a space on the side of the road. Spaces and objects that are on the margin, such as waste and wastelands, are transformed from sites of deprivation to sites of possibility.

This certainly resonates with Stoetzer's concept of the "ruderal," or "communities that emerge spontaneously in disturbed environments" (298). Stoetzer defines "ruderal worlds" or "ruderal ecologies" as "communities that emerge spontaneously in disturbed environments that are considered to be hostile to life" (297). Stoetzer argues that the notion

of the ruderal allows for analysis to go beyond the forms of destruction that are constitutive of the production of space in the city, and to locate the analysis in the desire to forge new connections between human and non-human worlds. Importantly, Stoetzer notes that in thinking with the notion of the “ruderal”, “the goal is to ask how people, plants, animals, and their environments connect and get entangled in different modes of destruction—and how they traverse them” (Stoetzer, 300). The ruderal analytic is useful to think about how the relation between the stray cat and human feeders in Ras Beirut gives rise to new ways of being and existing in the world; new ways of seeing space and using objects. The cat-feeders make homes and organize forms of nourishment for the street cats from the ruins or waste of the city. These practices are essentially ways of being alive that exceed the ruination, destruction, or boundaries of the city.

What marginal spaces like abandoned parking lots and buildings, empty storefronts, closed shops and restaurants, and junk or garbage have in common is that they appear useless to the momentary glance of passers-by. But for the cat-feeders, these are spaces or objects of imagination and possibility. Abandonment, rather than connoting desertion, desolation, and waste, now becomes full of potentiality and possibility. Forms of life are retrieved from a place of deadened scarcity, and creativity emerges from what seems to us as a “dead end.” People make use of what is available to them to create a shared and cooperative life with the stray cats.



Figure 20. Cat home in Raouche: A cat home set up on a street near Raouche. Pictures taken a year apart (May 2021 -- February 2022). Materials used included cardboard boxes and rags, then expanded to include old sofa cushions, Styrofoam, old suitcases, car tires, and more.



Figure 21. Cat home in Makdisi: A cat home set up by a pub-owner near Makdisi Street. Made from cardboard boxes and old rags/pillows.



Figure 22. Cat home in Ayn el Mreisseh: A small cat home and feeding station set up by the fishermen in the port of Ayn el Mreisseh.

D. Conclusion

In this chapter, I looked at the connection between cat-feeding and place-making, and how practices of cat-feeding involve imagining and making the city in new and alternative ways. The cat-feeders forge pathways and routes through the city to set up their feeding stations, producing their own map or relation to urban space in the process. From practices of cat-feeding, an urban fabric or sociality of collaboration and familiarity arises. The cat-feeders rely on their neighbors to facilitate their cat-feeding through a relation of neighborliness. An organic network is formed between the cat-feeders which further facilitates their organization and belonging to different spaces in the city. Lastly, the cat-feeders imagine and strategize solutions to the various drawbacks that they face, structuring their feeding sites and designing tools and objects to place in these sites that meet their needs. In the end, cat-feeding emerges as a form of place-making which transforms and alters spaces in the city through the daily practices of the cat-feeders.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In 2020, I walked around a city that gradually entered worsening degrees of crisis and destruction and was intrigued by the cat-human encounters that marked the space of the city. Though the world in which they lived was collapsing, residents of Ras Beirut continued to feed and care for the stray cats daily – perhaps even more so than before. In this thesis, I attempted to answer the questions that arose when I initially began observing these practices, by drawing on ethnographic fieldwork: Why do people feed the cats, what ties them to these nonhuman creatures? What kind of relationship do the cat-feeders have to the stray cats? How do these relationships make, alter, or structure urban space in Ras Beirut?

In Chapter 1, I looked at the caring relationships between the cat-feeders and the stray cats. By accompanying my interlocutors on their feeding routes, I observed how the cat-human relationship hinges on repetitive and difficult rituals of care. It requires that cat-feeders expose themselves to pain and suffering, as they frequently lose their street cats to sickness or death. Cat-feeders persist in their practices of care regardless of the pain. By submitting to and engaging with pain rather than avoiding or ignoring it, the cat-feeders create and sustain caring relationships with the cats. In chapter 2, I argue that the cat-feeders do not actively choose or decide to be in these relationships. Rather, they are drawn to the cats through chance encounters. Gradually, they become tied to the cats in bonds of obligation and reciprocity. Lastly, in chapters 3 and 4, I discussed the connection between

cat-feeding practices and urban space. The cat-feeders' ability to feed the street cats who dwell around their neighborhoods depends on their inclination to engage in interactions and negotiations with members of their neighborhood and improvise solutions to the various obstacles they are face. Through this work of negotiation and imagination, the cats and their cat-feeders participate in the production of urban space.

Amid the multiple crises facing the country, studying cat-human relations might seem irrelevant to the political and economic problems at the root of these crises and/or detached from the struggles of the population. But exploring how cat-feeders transform the hostile and inhospitable environment of Beirut into a place that can nourish, sustain, and care for the cats opened new ways for me to think about how to deal with systemic collapse. Imaginative work is intrinsic to the struggle of feeding and caring for cats in a city that is hostile to its human population and arguably even more so to those that are nonhuman. The cat-feeders are creating their own alternative world to counter or replace the one that has been built for and imposed on them: they are building a city for cats in the cracks of the city. I was inspired to reflect on several questions, such as: How can we forge new responses and different relationships with all those who inhabit this country with us? What does it take to build a new world, now that our old one is collapsing? How can we create new realities to replace or confront the reality that is imposed on us? In a time of diminished political imagination and numbed political life, the cat-feeders help me imagine different ways of living with and through crisis. This has helped me think towards what Ghassan Hage calls an "alter-politics," or a politics that grows not from opposition to our

current systems but from attention to another way of being. For the cat-feeders, this “other way of being” involves other living beings.

Growing up, I have often denigrated Beirut as a space filled only with concrete and lacking “nature.” Through my fieldwork, I discovered that in fact some urban residents experience Beirut through human-animal or nature-culture entanglements. As I tried to demonstrate in the thesis, the cats of Beirut are often ignored by or invisible to most urban inhabitants. People who are drawn to the cats and who become “cat-feeders” are thus also experiencing a new or different layer of the city. Similarly, while doing fieldwork, I was becoming acquainted with a different version of the city than the one to which I had become accustomed: a city where humans and animals make lives together in intimate and enduring ways. This “cat city” is one in which the borders of private or public property are not simply imposed but also contested. Cats and their feeders engage in a form of place-making together, breaking the written and unwritten rules or norms of the city. Beirut, an urbanized, privatized, securitized city now faced with economic and political collapse, is also a space where humans and animals interact daily, at times circumventing the difficulties or divisions of the city. This provokes questions like: What kind of city is Beirut and who decides what kind of city it is? What sorts of understanding or knowledge could we gain about the city by looking at it through the lens of other multispecies relationships (like pigeon-fancying or fishing for example)?

On a personal level, meeting the cat-feeders and entering the world of cats in Beirut has been a profoundly life-altering learning experience for me in countless ways that are beyond description. The cat-feeders taught me how to be attentive to what surrounds me,

directing me towards a way of being that is predicated on curiosity rather than rigidity. By practicing the attentiveness of the cat-feeders, the city in many of its different elements becomes visible to me, and I am drawn to places and people that I had not previously noticed. Doing research about the cats and entering their world meant becoming entangled with and getting to know my neighborhood and its human and nonhuman inhabitants. This helps me find life in a city that mostly seems and feels deadened and unbearable.

More importantly, I learned a lot about relationship-making and care from spending time with the cat-feeders. I always had trouble accepting the fact that human relationships are not always or necessarily smooth and joyful, but can also yield pain, irritation, and exhaustion. I consequently found it hard to create and sustain social relationships. I have often turned away from the difficulties, misunderstandings, and the possibility of loss that accompany all relationships, decrying these facets of relationship-making as wholly unnatural and undesirable. I learned from the cat-feeders to try to accept these facets as an inevitable part of sharing a life with others. In this way I think that I learned to be more open and receptive to the potentiality of relationships or friendships, despite the “dangers of attachment” that may arise.

In sum, entering the multispecies world in Beirut has helped me move out of the established modes of knowledge and relatedness that had dominated my scholarly and personal world to contemplate instead other forms of being and relationships with “other” nonhuman beings. In the middle of a socio-economic collapse, this has led me to reflect on what alternative responses to destruction and decay may look like.

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