



WAITING

A PROJECT IN CONVERSATION

Edited by
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[transcript] Culture & Theory

Ecologies of Waiting: Stories of a Vacant Land

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Lurking sleepiness

The observer is awake. Insomnia makes him *wait* a long time for the first signs of sleepiness. A constant waiting for something unexpected. An anxiety about missing or having missed the first moment of that unexpected event that could finally spark the first line of the story: the story of the vacant land. A siren is heard from afar. Besides the occasional roar of a car passing down the street on the left side of the block, the night is relatively silent. The struggle is between keeping the windows open and suffering a blocked nose due to the pollution hanging over the city or keeping them closed and tossing about on the sofa. The struggle soon resolves in keeping the windows open; the city air rushes in, bringing the hissing sound of night and the aura of unseen crimes. Even in the dark, the vacant land opposite is clearly visible from the top floor flat, where the observer is leaning against the window's handrail and is imagining the ongoing stories behind the weakly lit windows of the buildings opposite; the stories that are lurking behind the semi-closed shades and strengthened by the dim figures passing by the gaps. He moves his eyes from east to west, randomly pausing on the lower and upper windows of the residential buildings lining the edge of the opposite block. After his voyage amongst the imagined lives of others

behind the lit and unlit windows, he lowers his gaze to the vacant land lying in between two five-storey buildings: a university building on the left and a residential building on the right. The vacant land is separated from the yard belonging to his building by a white stone wall. It then stretches up to a brick wall with a dark red rusty door on its left corner that opens on to the land on the next street. A single short tree stands off the centre of the land towards the south; the rest seems empty.

The observer doesn't know how long the vacant land has been vacant, although he remembers the land from his childhood, when it was one of three empty plots in a row opposite their balcony; the other two now have buildings on them. He also remembers when the vacant land was the escape route for the burglar, who, one spring night, escaped from the yard and disappeared into the darkness. Other than those rare occasions, the land has been there without that much to say. The observer though hears the murmuring voice of the land telling its stories through gestures only readable to a real observer with acute attention and keen eyes: the single tree, the irregularly grown grasses, the overturned bucket, the tiny little chicken coops here and there, sacks of some sort of soft material, empty aluminium cans of cooking oil with the image of a swan encircled in a blue background, piles of chopped vegetables and watermelon rinds, the occasional stealthy visits by a man, and the earth itself holding all these together: an archive of stories of a vacant land.

Thinking of the earth takes the observer back to the old days, when the land was not a rectangular piece of land but continuous terrain expanding over a village called Mobarak Abad located beyond the gates of old Tehran; the name refers to what the village was famous for: green, flourishing, fertile lands. The observer imagines the fig and pomegranate trees spreading their branches under the sunshine, sparrows flying on the breeze over the cultivated fields and lush gardens. He imagines farmers leaving the fields at sunset with sun-tanned faces and deep lines around their eyes, chickens here and there scratching the dirt tracks, pecking invisible morsels, the scent of freshly baked bread drifting on the air. He hears the sound of streams originating

from the subterranean well that runs through the roots of the fig trees, pomegranate trees and fields of vegetables and legumes that turn the village into scenic greenery. The image belongs to the 19th century, during which this scenic greenery and the charming weather of the village, with its 258 inhabitants,¹ turned it into a destination for Naser al-Din Shah, one of the Kings of the Qajar dynasty, and his allies; a favourite verdurous place for royal banquets. The observer imagines the cool summer breeze blowing over the huge moustache of Naser-al-Din Shah as he observes the village from the windows of his coach, proud of *owning* a country.

The King's excursion

On the 3rd of October 1892, a sunny autumn day, the observer pauses on a ladder by a fig tree, turns his head to the sound of galloping horses pulling a blue coach with golden ornaments along the dirt track passing by the fields; a crowd of villagers are cheering for the King while disappearing in the cloud of dust behind the coach and its army of escorting horses.² The observer spots the King's huge moustache behind his dusty coach windows and realises it is another of Naser al-Din Shah's excursions to Mobarak Abad. That day, the King has been invited to the village by Mirza Abdullah Khan Yooshi, whose two sisters will become his wives. The observer, standing on the ladder, thinks about the banquet prepared for the King and wonders how many of his garden's figs were used in the recipes. He drops a ripe fig on the ground and says in despair: one for the land.

Four years later, on the 31st of April 1896, when the observer hears of the King being assassinated, he is again up on the ladder, checking the fig trees. While he remembers the fig that he dropped four years ago

¹ Hossein Karimian, *Qasran* (Tehran: Anjoman-e-Asar-e-Melli, 1977), 533.

² Mohsen Moetamedi, *Joghrafiay e Tarikhi e Tehran* (Tehran: Nashr-e-Daneshgahi, 2002), 393.

from top of the ladder and how it became part of the soil, part of the roots, part of the trees, he thinks of the King's moustache: "if he doesn't survive the bullet, his decomposing body soon becomes part of the soil, part of the trees, part of the land," and whispers: "one for the land."

The day after, on the first of May a child is running on along the dirt tracks of the village of Mobarak Abad, shouting: "THE KING IS DEAD...", cackling chickens running away. The observer is washing his hands in the narrow stream running past the garden of fig trees and choked by the dust raised by the child running, who by now is being followed by around ten more kids, leisurely announcing the death of the King. The observer coughs and thinks of Naser al-Din Shah's moustache once more and wonders what it is in the chemical structure of the hair that doesn't become part of the earth even after years of decomposition. Forty days later, when the figs are ripe, the observer hears of the coronation of the new King, Mozaffar al-Din Shah, the 43-year-old prince.

After that event, the village and its lands changed hands several times. Despite his father, the new king never came to the village, but the ownership of the village was handed over to his Prime Minister, Abdol Majid Mirza Eyn-ed-Dowleh, who built himself a mansion and a garden there. In 1911, when the village gradually lost its prosperity and scenic greenery, men of wealth and power stopped visiting the village and instead it gradually became part of urban and real estate development. Ten years later, when Reza Heravi purchased the land from Eyn-ed-Dowleh and developed cultural and educational infrastructures, the area thrived once more.³ But the force of urbanisation along with political shifts of power, revolutions and so on, created new urban characters as land speculators, whose numbers increased with the ticking of time. These new urban characters amputated the farmlands from the rest of the terrain. Farmlands became fragmented rec-

³ Soudabeh Ranjbar, "Heravi: Khatereh Mandegar e Mobarak Abad," in *Hamshahri Online*, 2018, accessed October 20, 2019, <http://newspaper.hamshahrionline.ir/id/10600>

tangular pieces of land waiting to become buildings. Others remained empty as a source of progressive accumulated wealth created by the increasing housing problems for unprivileged urban dwellers and rural immigrants to the big cities.

Mr. Mayor and amputated terrain

The vacant land, amputated from the rest of its body by a history of ownership, occupation, land reform and urbanisation, is among more and more rarely found vacant plots in the densely constructed city of Tehran. These vacant plots left in between high-rises and carelessly built buildings, preserved from inept developers, have become the plots of formal and informal urban acts in a state of waiting. Many of these lands have remained vacant for years, some owned by those who fled the country in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution. In the power vacuum following the revolution and the absence of owners, some were taken over by squatters, and later on by the Mostazafan Foundation of the Islamic Revolution with the intention of expropriation under the name of handing them over to the public poor.

Mr. Mayor has followed many of these lands since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The observer has seen Mr. Mayor twice, from his top floor flat's window wandering around the opposite vacant land. Mr. Mayor, though, has never become a mayor, but has been waiting to become one. While waiting for the right moment to step in and put himself up for mayoral election, he works as a janitor of a residential building, writing and working hard on his *theories* of urban vacant lands. When the revolution happened, and one of its slogans was to give power to the poor, he was excited by the very thought of the possibility of becoming a mayor. But those in positions of decision-making asked him to wait a bit longer for things to be stabilised, so that the enemies of the Revolution couldn't destroy what had been achieved. He waited, and while waiting read many books, talked to many people, visited many

vacant lands, hopped on many busses, waited under many bridges, watched many movies, imagined himself in many cities: London with red busses, Paris with street cafés, Delhi with many motorcycles, Venice with many boats.

He reviewed Urban Wasteland Ownership Abolition Law and took notes in his series of black notebooks about the two terms in Iranian Islamic land law appointed to vacant urban land: *mavat* and *bayer*. *Mavat* is "land that is undeveloped and that has no prior record of development" and *bayer* is "land that previously had been developed but that had fallen into disuse."⁴ He knew that this classification created different ownership status under the law over time. For example, the 1979 Urban Wasteland Ownership Abolition Law, that was approved six months after the revolution, brought some tension to the private ownership of urban wastelands.⁵ According to this law, based on the detailed city plan, the government had to tell the private owners of the vacant lands to initiate the development in a given time frame. If the owners did not show up, the government would take hold of the land. This created some complicated situations as many of the private owners had fled the country and couldn't return for political reasons. As a result, solicitors and lawyers became busier than ever, running up and down the courts, making international calls discussing deeds with their clients. Mr. Mayor has observed these scenes as well.

Later, when the end of the war between Iran and Iraq in 1988 brought relative stability, some of the owners with legal deeds could claim their land back. Mr. Mayor has seen many children of the owners visiting the land. For example, he remembers one who travelled from England and was unhappy with the florist who had occupied their land, built a water well in the middle of it and had turned the land into a garden. Mr. Mayor also saw two siblings who travelled from San

4 A.-Ch Kiss and Johan G. Lammers, *Hague Yearbook of International Law*: Vol. 10: 199, (Leiden: Brill., 1997), 212.

5 Mohammad Mehdi Azizi, "Evaluation of Urban Land Supply Policy in Iran." in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 22/1 (2002): 96.

Diego and were happy that the brick wall enclosing their land was still there, almost untouched. While Mr. Mayor was watching the siblings from across the street, the observer saw him from the window of his top floor flat for the first time.

Mr. Mayor and his theory of subtle occupation

Many solicitors and their clients won their cases in court and could reclaim their pieces of land. But many of those lands remained undeveloped, fenced off and marked "No Entry. This Is a Private Property." Mr. Mayor, though, has developed his own theory about these lands and suggests they produce their own ecologies over years of waiting. Mr. Mayor thinks of the stories accumulated in these lands, in the earth and in the remaining infrastructures during the period of waiting. He thinks of these lands as silent archives; having waited long under rain, thick snow, decomposing leaves, urinating passers-by, the excrement of crows and cats, dead mosquitos, flies and bees, and perhaps a hair from the moustache of Naser al-Din Shah. All buried, layers on layers, years after years waiting for their stories to be told. Such plots are no longer urban surfaces to be occupied but are *thickened* through years of *waiting* while hosting events and stories. He believes telling these stories can gather together all living and non-living human and non-human characters that once inhabited these vacant lands and can enrich the earth.

Mr. Mayor thinks these stories should be actively continued. To speculate over how these stories can be continued he has written pages and pages on his theory of *subtle occupation* i.e. *growing an urban ecology in suspended ownership*. Contrary to overt occupation that changes the existing relations of the plot and exposes the act of occupation, subtle occupation, he argues, can happen through minimum intervention in the site that renders the ongoing act of occupation invisible. In other words, the land seems empty, while activities go on covertly without the owner noticing, and importantly, without any violation of the

initial ownership. Mr. Mayor not only writes these theories, but also conducts experiments. And this morning he is proudly thinking of his own experiment in subtle occupation, an aviculture in nearby vacant land that has lasted for years without being stopped by the state or the owners, the two siblings from San Diego. He looks out at the pink dawn and thinks that his night shift will be over soon and he can drop by *his* land before city life starts, to feed his chickens and take care of the subtle infrastructures he has set up on the site.

The fox

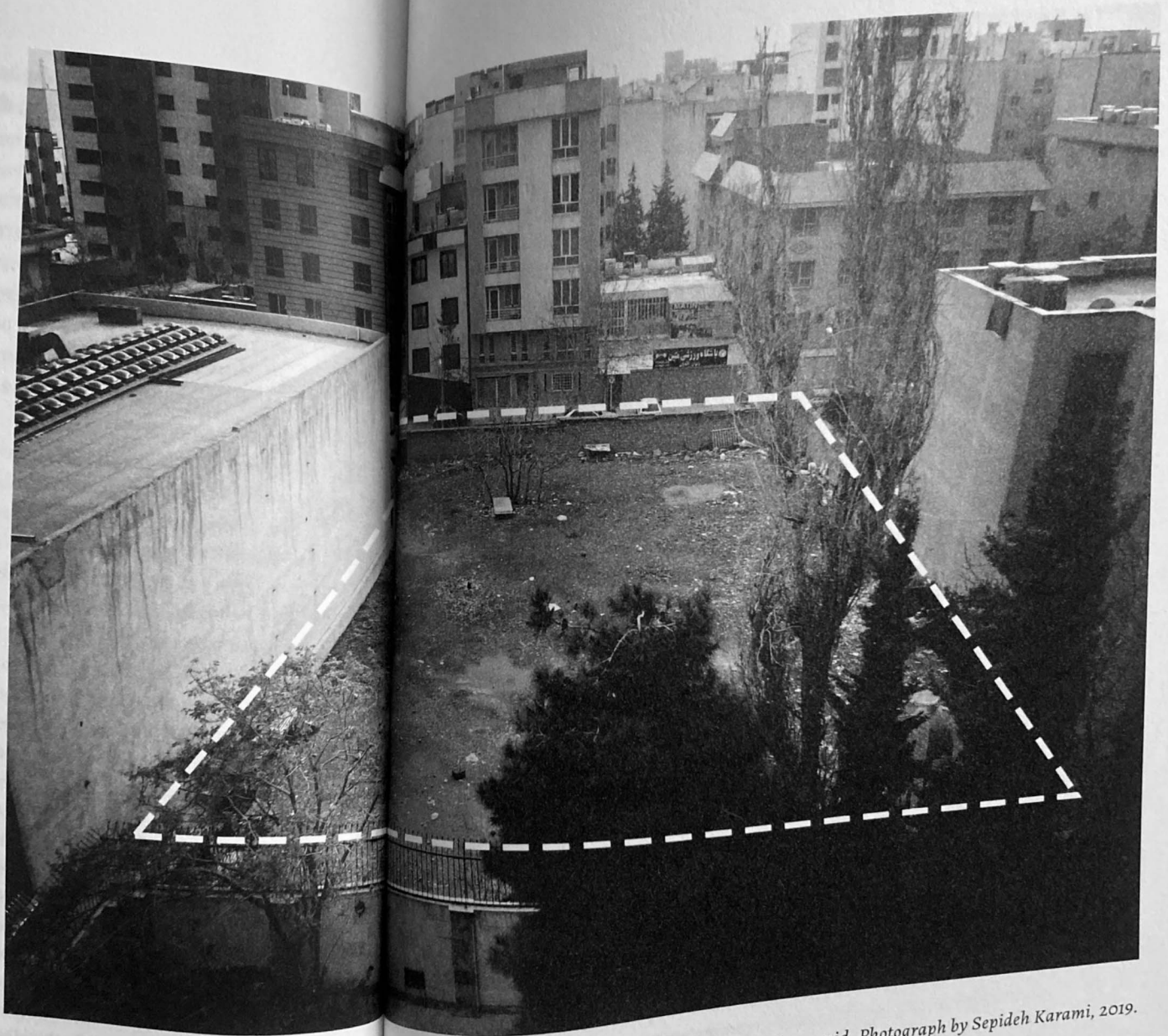
Foxes know how to approach human habitats at night, intrude through small holes and gaps to find food and vanish before being caught. It's why they have survived in Tehran without often being observed. Like many other nights, while the observer is looking out of the window, foxes are possibly doing their mischief somewhere in the city. The observer, though, is not thinking about foxes but about how out-of-control urbanisation has taken over fields and rural areas. And it is just when he is thinking about the escalating value of land coupled with a sense of nostalgia for farmland in the historical images of this area of Tehran, he becomes distracted by a furry thing moving in the vacant land. At second glance, he spots a fox. The fox is friskily taking the chickens by their necks out of their coops and leaving them in the middle of the plot. Now the night is ornamented by the chickens' cackles. The observer waits for the fox to be done with his wild adventure. When he thinks the fox is done, he hisses very slowly, but the fox spots him behind the window on the top floor. The fox hesitates for two seconds and then runs away from the hole beside the metal door. The plot resembles a massacre against the newly born dawn.

An hour later, when the observer can hardly keep his eyes open, finally what he has been waiting for happens. Mr. Mayor descends the small steps that he has made himself by the metal door. He steps on the ground and freezes in shock: his chickens, here and there, dead

or semi-alive; blood splashed on the ground. Only three of them, still alive, walking around, scratching the earth, pecking at food, and the observer writes:

A crow on the slim branches of the long tree in the neighbouring land, weighs itself against the pink-greyish sky. Up and down in a leisurely manner, it dives down to where the three chickens have gathered, reaches the land, picks something up quickly, flies back up to the sky, and perches on the edge of the next building. Up there, the crow flips its wings in a display of victory and clicks its beak to re-taste the food. Mr. Mayor doesn't move, and the crow's caw pierces the early morning sky.

Thanks to Babak Karami for thinking with me while I was writing the stories of the vacant land.



An empty plot in the Tehran grid. Photograph by Sepideh Karami, 2019.