

Placeholders there are: the other in the shadow of the bomb

A story in eight movements

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1.

[A]t precisely 9:15 ½ (Tinian time) the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Thus reads the diary of Naval Captain William S. Parsons of the B-29, “Enola Gay”. Nicknamed “Little Boy”, this bomb weighed 9000 pounds and was 120 inches long with a diameter of 28 inches. 43 seconds after the drop it exploded, releasing an estimated 50,000,000°C of heat. 1/10,000 of a second later a fireball formed 180 feet in diameter with an internal temperature of 300,000°C. A shock wave raged through the entire city at 2.8 miles per second. Amplified by heat rays, it had the incendiary and destructive power of 20,000 tons of TNT. Some 20,000,000,000,000 (20 trillion) calories of energy were released. This was August 6, 1945. (Kosakai 1).

The quote above is taken from a book titled *A-Bomb, A City Tells its Story* from 1972 by Yoshiteru Kosakai. The description highlights the first moments of impact of the atomic bomb that was dropped on Japanese soil by the United States on August 6th 1945. The quote sets out to describe the event through the enumeration of quantitative data about the destructive effects of the heat, the shock wave, and the radiation produced by the bomb.

This is one way of constructing a narrative that seems to produce a relationship with those killed there, by the bomb, and may seem to bring forth a way of commemorating those others, people that the reader does not know, people who were, in many instances,

never identified because the incineration by the bomb prevented any identification from taking place. Notwithstanding the importance of a factual narrative of this kind, the analysis that is to follow will propose that this particular kind of framing will not suffice, and does not constitute a proper beginning to productively think about the possibilities of relating to those who died as the result of this attack.

If the enumeration of temperatures, tons, miles, and sizes, has as one of its benefits that it conveys a sense of immensity, it also, paradoxically, and by that same token, transmits a feeling of incalculability. These numbers form an index of suffering that cannot, by looking at the index itself, be measured. They are a part of a matrix that measures something, but the thing that is measured does not seem to close in on the reader simply by the provision of that matrix. In other words: the dimensions of suffering, and the relationship to the other who suffered there, remains incalculable even after the index has been provided.

The analysis that is to follow has as its impossible task to gauge this incalculability. In an attempt to do so, I want to read and analyze an image that was taken of a specific kind of 'shadow' and confront it with the notion of the placeholder, a concept to which I will return momentarily. The occasion for my writing on this image is that I stumbled across it on the Internet some years ago and that I was reminded of it since then whenever the bombing of Hiroshima was brought up. My first encounter with the image occurred in 2015, on the website of *The Sun*, roughly seventy years after the bombing had taken place. It is published as part of an article by Tim Nixon titled *The shadows of Hiroshima: Haunting imprints of people killed by the blast*. I considered this image to be a photograph in which I recognized the shadow of a human figure standing besides a ladder that had somehow been fixated onto the adjacent building through a procedure that remained unclear to me.

It is difficult to trace the status of this particular image, and I am not entirely convinced that this image is truly a picture taken of a shadow in Hiroshima at all, or if, instead, it is one image that has been improperly placed on the website of *The Sun* between images that look similar to it but to which it holds little connection. There are many other such images of which 'the realness' is not in dispute. This, to me, was the most haunting of those shown there. The implications of the uncertainty about its 'realness' contribute to a larger sense of uncertainty that will be the focus of my analysis to come.

What I thought of as the ghost of a person in that image, a placeholder holding the place of a human being who has died there, can still be looked at today at the website of *The Sun*. For the context of this reading it is however more suitable to provide my reader with a placeholder for that image (see “*Placeholder for Image 1*” below), and my reading of it that conveys its allusive qualities.

[PLACEHOLDER]

Placeholder for Image 1: Image of the 'shadow' of a person and a ladder "imprinted" on lighter background. See: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/155844/the-shadows-of-hiroshima-haunting-imprints-of-people-killed-by-the-blast/>

2.

The black and white image shows the wall of a wooden structure. A house, I suppose, or a shack. On that wall I see the imprint of a ladder and the figure of a person that seems to hold that ladder, perhaps preparing to climb it or perhaps ready to take that ladder away from the structure. It is as if I am looking at the shadow of a person and at the shadow of a ladder, though the original figures casting those shadows are absent. Bracketing the possibility that the *The Sun* simply misplaced this image, for the moment, what I do know is that the image is one of dark stains imprinted on a lighter background and that this is a quality it shares with other images taken of ‘shadows’ in Hiroshima. The notion of the

“imprint” was a suggestion by professor Ewa Domanska who, in an email, wrote the word “imprint” in quotation marks and urged me to look at the work of Akira Mizuta Lippit (Domanska, 2017:personal correspondence). Lippit explains the following about images that are similar in appearance to the one in this analysis in his 2005 book *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)*:

Seared organic and nonorganic matter left dark stains, opaque artifacts of once vital bodies, on the pavements and other surfaces of this grotesque theater. The "shadows," as they were called, are actually photograms, images formed by the direct exposure of objects on photographic surfaces. Photographic sculptures. True photographs, more photographic than photographic images (94).

What I had been looking at, following Lippit, was a photogram of particles of the body of a human being imprinted or photogrammed into a background when that body was incinerated by the atomic bomb. I had initially understood these ‘shadows’ as the result of bodies blocking the thermal radiation coming at the surroundings and bleaching those surroundings, thus leaving an unbleached ‘shadow’ behind the contours of the body. It was my understanding that these are, in a way, true ‘shadows’, not of light but of thermal radiation. This would explain both the way in which these ‘shadows’ were produced and how they remained there permanently without the bodies and objects that had originally cast them. According to Lippit, what we see in photograms like these is not the blockage of light but the residue of a living being that was once there and is now turned into a dark mark as the result of incineration; organic matter, biological traces of a body. The body turned into the necessary material for representation through a mode of photography that needs no camera in order to produce its imagery; an instance of re-presentation of the human body that effaces the original in its process of creating and preserving an image. The photogram in the photograph, a placeholder for a body. The author producing this placeholder is not the person taking the picture, but those responsible for the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima; at once killing and preserving the body of the other.

3.

More notable than the suggestion that this photogram consists of organic material, is the uncertainty that comes along with this kind of image production. This placeholder, this photogram, operates as an invitation to go beyond the content of what can be seen there, and to suspend the questions of 'reality' and 'materiality' that haunt the image. Its uncertainties are a provocation to pay attention to the imaginary quality of what is depicted there. The uncertainty about the framing and 'realness' of the image as well as the uncertainty about what matters in this image, about what the material of this image is, about how this image comes to materialize, how it comes to matter, is productive to an understanding of what it means to deal with otherness – and how to grieve its loss. This analysis, then, may be considered an exercise in dealing with the uncertainties of loss, or, again, the presentation of an uncertain reading.

The image is interesting to me, not because it coincides with the body of that other, much less because it is evidence of it, or proof of its existence, but because it functions as a trace, a ghost that has the capability to take the place of that other in our imagination. Judith Butler's understanding of materialization of the human body – more specifically of "sex" – in *Bodies that Matter, On the discursive limits of "sex"* from 1993, suggests that it not only matters if something is material, but how it has come to materialize, and how that materialization is judged and reinforced after that first iteration. In other words, materiality operates not in opposition to cultural or social delineations of a body but as a discursive foundation for them which only becomes meaningful when viewed through the lens of those latter structures. It follows that this discursive grounding effects the ways in which certain bodies come to matter more or less. And if that grounding is, for our purposes, tainted from the start with a sense of uncertainty, it is to this uncertainty that this analysis wishes to draw attention.

What is produced in this 'portrait' as it is presented by *The Sun*, is not just a copy that can be seen next to or instead of an original, but a placeholder that operates as a stand-in for a body that has been murdered. In Jacques Lacan's essay *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience* from 1949, the mirror image produces a moment of recognition, but that recognition is botched from the beginning because the image is precisely never situated at the body of the subject to be

recognized in it. Image and body are never at the same place at the same moment, representation necessarily implies distance, a placeholder implies absence. Analogously, though the image that I am looking at may be the residue of a body that was once there, it is precisely due to that body's current absence, and the uncertainty that surrounds its materiality that it becomes interesting to call the figure in this image a placeholder. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, 1997, Judith Butler writes:

[T]he subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation. [...] The subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency. (10–11).

If the placeholder in my image operates as the representation of a body, it represents, at the same time the absence of that body. It is the representation of an individual who has been murdered – a subject who is no longer there but persists in attaining a minimal residue of individuality as long as this placeholder lives on. And if this placeholder does live on, it does so without presenting any 'proof' or 'evidence' of the material conditions of that individual. And even if this image is not in any way tampered with; if this is a 'real' photograph taken of a photogram in Lippit's sense, we are still dealing with a moment of re-presentation. Nothing original here, not-yet and not in the future either.

4.

Re-presentation in the form of at least triple mediation: first an image of a silhouette of body with a ladder produced through incineration and imprinted on a wooden structure, second a photograph taken of that wooden structure, and third the digital rendition of that photograph on the website of *The Sun* seen on my computer screen displaying data in the form of light. Triple mediation that, because of its layers and allusions, its uncertainties and deferrals, at first seems to increase the distance to the body of the other who died at the time of writing precisely 74 years, 5 months, 25 days, 15 hours, 1 minute and 57 seconds

ago. This writing itself only comes to add one more layer of mediation, a fourth re-mediation that nonetheless aims to bring the other closer, to invite that other to come visit, to interrupt this discourse and to confront it with its difference from my attempts to capture it. A difference of which a measure will surely be impossible, not impossible but as Søren Kierkegaard would say, in *Fear and Trembling* from 1843, incommensurable to the division between what is possible and impossible. Not (in)calculable, but rather entirely beyond what can be considered (in)calculable.

The image presents a placeholder for a body that was once there, and perhaps still is, imprinted onto a lighter background. A placeholder that holds a place, already from the beginning displaced. Away from the site where that body used to exist and imprinted at the moment that that body ceased to be a living body. A placeholder which exists as the trace of a person's death, which opens up a place for remembering an individual who would have otherwise remained difficult if not impossible to grieve. And if Butler's suggestion that some bodies may become ungrievable is pertinent to this image as well, the uncertainties surrounding it open up a site where that ungrievability is played out, made visible. A place where this impossibility is made explicit, and where the incalculable suffering referred to above nevertheless becomes thinkable. I wonder if it is possible to prepare a moment of contact between the image and the concept of the placeholder through this uncertain reading which itself holds the place for the image once more?

5.

To say that there is an uncertainty in the encounter with the other in the image, and that the encounter that is staged here is impossible to measure, is not the same as saying that no encounter whatsoever takes place. To acknowledge that we are dealing with a placeholder is to refute the romanticism of loss: it is to pay attention to what has been deemed un-grievable and to undo that 'un-' by being open to the shape this placeholder has acquired. No non-encounter, then, but an encounter with the traces of an other who is no longer there. An encounter with a trace that has acquired a specific shape, or with what Jacques Derrida has referred to as a cinder, a cinder in the form of a human being.

Derrida's analysis of the sentence "il y a là cendre", meaning something like "cinders there are" in his essay *Cinders* from 1987, forms the heart of this work (21). Derrida writes, with himself figuring in the third person, as if to hold his own place away from himself, becoming a placeholder for his own voice:

[B]ut that is just what he calls the trace, this effacement. I have the impression now that the best paradigm for the trace, for him, is not, as some have believed, and he as well, perhaps, the trail of the hunt, the fraying, the furrow in the sand, the wake in the sea, the love of the step for its imprint, but the cinder (what remains without remaining from the holocaust, from the all-burning, from the incineration the incense). (43).

The cinder, the trace: a word used to refer to what remains from that founding moment of language, that moment where language is not-yet, that is nonetheless implied in language and leaves its trace there, all the while remaining beyond language itself. The trace, the cinder: a figure that at once preserves and effaces, it preserves the moment outside of language by referring to it, but at the moment of linguistic reference, language founders and the trace effaces its referent because it is referring from within language. Our encounter with the placeholder expands on Derrida's concept of the cinder by suggesting that this shapeless and ungrievable trace has acquired recognizable contours – the form of a human being, the shape of a ladder – thus rendering the shapeless cinder grievable once more.

The ladder in the image, the moment of holding that ladder, is a point of entrance into the image. It shows a fixed moment in which movement is nonetheless implied. It shows a trace of movement, a cinder of incineration. It confronts the viewer, in an almost accusatory way, with the trace of the other, the body of a person that is no longer within reach, and that may, properly speaking, never have been in reach. It demands that we acknowledge how this person was doing something there, holding something in place, some structure, a ladder, something to walk on, something to leave a trace on and something on which one traces one's steps.

Which is not to say that the image is no longer tainted with uncertainty. One cannot be sure, for example, if the figure is holding this ladder in place or rather taking it away. Upon second glance, I am no longer sure, even, if this figure is touching the ladder at all or merely standing besides it, functioning as a framework through which the ladder can be understood and through which the ladder makes this figure understandable. This second option would imply a different kind of support, the support of a symbolical system in which the body of the figure and the figure of the ladder rely on each other and provide a frame of reference for one another.

This frame of reference itself remains unstable throughout, it does not produce meaning in any clear-cut way. It is, unlike incineration, not a moment of pure origin or destruction but rather a trace of such burning, a cinder that has acquired a shape, a shape that remains there, away from what I am able to see or define in certain and measurable terms.

6.

Derrida writes:

Cinders there are, the phrase thus says what it does, what it is. It immediately incinerates itself, in front of your eyes: an impossible mission (but I do not like this verb, "to incinerate"; I find in it no affinity with the vulnerable tenderness, with the patience of a cinder. The verb is active, acute, incisive). (35).

Again, a problem of certainty. The incisiveness of incineration haunts the image that we see. It works-on in a mediated form, a form that is no longer properly incisive but rather reiterative, performative perhaps; no longer irruptive. But what does this performative produce? What does one allow this incineration to generate, so much later, so far away from the body of the other that refuses to arrive here but remains there, away from me, outside of reach? Perhaps one needs to produce a place in order to encounter this other,

this other that will not arrive, a place that will allow her to come, on her own terms, without our intervention. To speak of a placeholder is to invent what is always already there, and to suffer the demand that it makes on us.

In a 2011 collection of poems titled *O Bon* the American-Japanese poet Brandon Shimoda writes:

IRRADIANT

In one week from now

you will be seen anew

though the light will catch

you incorrectly

(55).

The light of which Shimoda speaks opens up a space, a space in which one can be caught, a space that holds captive. Perhaps it is this space that the image shows us, perhaps it is the space of reiteration and repetition that is opened up from the moment of incineration onward, which produces the possibility of this writing, the possibility of this search for the other that has died, the other that was rendered ungrievable and must be allowed to become grievable once more. The other is unreachable precisely because she is caught in this space from which no escape is possible, in the image that I see on my computer screen.

Who is the figure in this image? Who is that body that is no longer there but preserved, effaced and caught away at the same instance? This is the figure of the placeholder, a figure that holds a place away from a place, a place that is not the place of the other but in the place of the other. Derrida writes:

Pure is the word. It calls for fire. Cinders there are, this is what takes place in letting a place occur, so that it will be understood: Nothing will have taken place but the place. Cinders there are: Place there is (*il y a lieu*). (37).

If he is right, and *il y a lieu*, I would like to add, that this *lieu*, this place that is there, needs to be held, is in need of some kind of support, a reminder that it exists. This support must preserve the place that is there, even if that place itself will remain out of reach. This support is what I would like to call the placeholder or in English military jargon that draws on the French rendition of the word placeholder a lieutenant. Derrida may affirm that “Nothing will have taken place but the place” but I would like to respond that if a place is there, it will have been held, always already, by the body of a placeholder; any place that is there needs support, any territory its lieutenant. In other words, if “Nothing will have taken place but the place.”, my response would be, *placeholders there are*.

7.

If this image is a place in place of the place that was there when a person was still alive and holding a ladder, it seems to me that this place is in no way fictional. Unlike Lacan's mirror-image – a necessary imaginary double in a larger development – this imaginary place functions as the extension of the place where this photograph was taken, somewhere in Hiroshima, a place that is no longer there. No longer there, at least, in the way that it used to be there. This image opens up a place that is added onto the place which now no longer exists. It is, in a way, a redefinition of that place that is for us, now, out of reach. A redefinition that came about through incineration, but as soon as

incineration became photography, it lost its incisive moment. It became performative, repetitive, reiterative.

The place in the image is a territory in this particular sense as well. It is a territory that threatens to expand beyond its borders, transgressing them and in so doing widening them but also redefining what was already inside. If transgression is the moment at which a border to the other is crossed, and effaced, and renewed away from itself through deferral at the same time, as Michel Foucault seems to argue in his 1963 essay *A Preface to Transgression*, it is this crossing that is at stake in the image. Such a crossing cannot be undone. One cannot trace the original limits of a place backwards because the transgression itself has effaced any history that would be retrievable. The figure to which this placeholder refers will always be further away, but the placeholder itself will never be at home either. The lieutenant is never at her post but always before the existence of a post. Never where we try to find her but always one mediation beyond that place, always one step further down that ladder to which it lends support in this image. She is the one who occupies the ladder without ever being on the ladder, she is the support for that ladder that never comes to an end, a ladder that instead becomes blurry at the foot – I urge my reader to look at the image at this juncture – and on which one hopes to trace her steps, always one step further down.

8.

If this lieutenant, this placeholder, not only stands for a body that was there, but signifies, at the same time, and despite itself, the end of a war, we seem to be approaching a victory that is at once a loss. The lieutenant is always in retreat, the war is almost over. We are witnessing the end of the Second World War with the retreat of a placeholder that will never have held its place always holding its place at the same time, away from itself. Perhaps any attempt to come closer to the other must imply an openness to what some may consider the enemy. An openness to what I have called the lieutenant, or the placeholder, who will not arrive but should nonetheless be invited. Perhaps one could, in a new way, in a different way, open up a place for the lieutenant to come and visit, without trying to incinerate, but by letting the placeholder cross a limit on its own. If we want the

placeholder to arrive back at where it came from, if we want to encounter the other for which it holds a place, we need to prepare for her coming, we need to prepare a new place, and a new one, and a new one. Derrida writes:

It is obviously a figure, although no face lets itself be seen. The name "cinder" figures, and because there is no cinder here, not here (nothing to touch, no color, no body, only words), but above all because these words, which through the name are supposed to name not the word but the thing, they are what names one thing in the place of another, metonymy when the cinder is separated, one thing while figuring another from which nothing figurable remains. (71).

Derrida says "words", I read the word placeholder. This writing has attempted to name. It has tried to give to a 'shadow' that was never a shadow the name of the placeholder, and with that name the function of a lieutenant. It has tried to refer to the 'thing' that sustains the image and our encounter with the other through this image. That 'thing', that figure, which remains internal to the image and sustains it nonetheless. But without a shadow of a doubt my writing has only managed to name "one thing in place of the other" (71). It has made the image and the figure in that image "figure" for another figure "from which nothing figurable remains".

It turns out, in the end, that not the image itself, and perhaps not even the photogram in the image, is properly suited to hold the place of the person that I imagine to see there. Instead, this writing and the attempt to put the photogram into contact with the notion of the placeholder invents that placeholder for the first time. This writing not only sees a placeholder elsewhere, but proposes that concept as a tool for looking otherwise. Not for truth, proof, or numerical evidence, but in search for what can no longer be found. That kind of attentiveness, not to the uncounted, but to incalculability itself, operates as a first step in making the ungrievable grievable. It makes that which does not count matter.

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