

Photography as relational placeholding: care, recurrence, and common world

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This paper examines how photography generates shared grounds (common grounds), redefining images as relational placeholders that function as scaffolds for collective meaning-making, solidarity, and ethical engagement. The open call on “placeholders” highlights the tension between the grounded specificity of place and the fungibility of images circulating as substitutable tokens or proxies. This logic risks erasing the nuance and relational ties that give images meaning.

Photography transcends this substitutive logic when embedded in practices of care, ethical attention, and political recurrence, transforming images into relational actors that sustain collective awareness and social responsibility.

Thesis

Photography functions as a relational placeholder that exceeds the fungible logic of the secular substitute (Fontcuberta’s fiction-image) through recurrence (Olufemi) and the ethics of care (Berger), turning images into performative scaffolds for shared meaning and the production of a common world (Garcés, Stengers).

1. Conceptual field: tension between substitute and relationality

Photography is a contested field where competing temporalities, interpretative labor, and political demands converge. This field is defined by the structural function of images as placeholders and the ethical imperative of return.

Joan Fontcuberta (Against Barthes) critically observes the modern, secular role of photography. Photography inherits the role of the “old-guard envoys of death and afterlife,” functioning as a cultural substitute in the absence of metaphysical mediators. Modern photographs manage absence and mortality, often standardizing images into fungible ‘realistic images’ that claim truth. Fontcuberta underscores concerns about images being reduced to interchangeable tokens, while simultaneously noting photography’s potential to evoke imagination and possible worlds (*fiction-images*). This anticipates Olufemi’s idea of recurrence: photography can escape linear, substitutive temporality and open space for relational and ethical engagement.

The structural role of photography is politically significant today. Philosophers such as Marina Garcés and Isabelle Stengers stress that the shared world (common world) is fragile, threatened by crises, mistrust, and fragmentation. The fungible placeholder contributes to this fragility by erasing context and specificity.

2. Ethics of care and holding place (Berger)

John Berger provides the ethical counterpoint. His concept of photography as “holding everything dear” transforms the placeholder into a relational and generative act.

- Careful preservation: The photograph’s political power lies not in its instrumental use but in holding what is threatened with disappearance. It acts as a placeholder by keeping open a temporary space for meaning, solidarity, and unfinished justice.
- Attention and proximity: This “holding” is active, requiring sustained attention rather than passive consumption. It invites viewers into co-responsibility and fosters political proximity.

Berger reframes the photograph from a substitute stabilizing absence (Fontcuberta) into a participant that makes absence thinkable and politically charged. This ethics of attention is central to the subtheme care and calibration.

3. Recurrence as disruption of fungibility and time (Olufemi & common grounds)

Lola Olufemi’s concept of recurrence disrupts the static and fungible logic of the placeholder. Recurrence is the politically and affectively charged return of histories that are never complete.

- Anti-fungibility: Where Fontcuberta describes photographs as substitutable, recurrence activates the unique, affectively charged details — the disorderly lingerings — making each image irreplaceable and relationally singular.
- Anti-linear time: Recurrence destabilizes linear temporality, allowing the past to coexist with the present (*coeval process*). Images become agentic, enabling cross-temporal solidarity. For example, a photograph of Sylvia Erike transforms from an archival proxy into a conduit for ongoing political and affective relations.

Recurrence links Berger’s ethical care to the production of common grounds, emphasizing that images generate shared spaces and social practices, functioning as scaffolds for publics and solidarities. Lina Geoushy’s *Shame Less* exemplifies this practice: her photographs address violence against women in Egypt, rendering these experiences visible while resisting voyeuristic or consumptive viewing. The images hold the women’s experiences in a relational space, demanding ethical attention and fostering collective engagement, transforming photography into a scaffold for political and affective solidarity.

Garcés and Stengers provide a philosophical foundation: recurrence is a practice of the common. *Making sense in common* (Stengers) requires a tentacular apparatus connecting diverse perspectives. Photography becomes a medium for collective sensory and ethical work, contributing to the co-creation of a common world (Garcés).

4. Methodology and contribution

The methodology relies on a triangulated theoretical and interpretative approach:

1. Critical-theoretical analysis: The paper reconstructs Fontcuberta's secular substitute, Berger's ethics of holding, and Olufemi's recurrence, emphasizing points of tension between stabilizing placeholders and insurgent recurrence logic.
2. Visual-cultural interpretation: Using sustained looking and imaginative labor (Olufemi), the analysis examines how images — including Black feminist formations and Geoushy's *Shame Less* — restore agentic potential and disrupt fungibility.
3. Comparative temporal analysis: Photographs are analyzed as dynamic participants in cross-temporal flows.

The primary contribution is the claim that photography's political power lies in the structural tension between placeholder and recurrence. The paper develops an analytical framework for ethical placeholdering, distinguishing when an image functions as a fungible token versus a site of ethical and political relationality.

This paper redefines photography as a medium of relational placeholdering, actively contributing to spaces of care, shared awareness, and political solidarity. The placeholder becomes a temporarily generative scaffold, supporting collective action, imagination, and sustained ethical engagement within the common world.

Keywords: Relational placeholdering, Photography and care, Recurrence and temporality, Common worlds / shared grounds, Fungibility and ethical agency