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THE DECOLONIAL DEBATE: EXPRESSIONS O DEBATE DECOLONIAL: EXPRESSÕES

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DECOLONIALITY IN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK OF WALTER FIRMO
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Abstract

This text aims to recognize Walter Firmo's photographic production in relation to decolonial thinking, observing signs of a decolonization of the camera, as proposed by Mark Searly. According to the author, decoloniality in photography encompasses values of visibility and public recognition of groups and subjects who, in modern and colonial logic, are treated and represented under signs of violence and dehumanization. Having worked for national and international media outlets, Firmo has made a mark in photojournalism by portraying the pluralism of Brazilian culture and subjects from the black community (anonymous and personalities) in a haughty way. Consecrated in the field of photography portrait, he developed methods of capturing reality that are not limited to recording, but give plasticity and organicity to realities and people that are generally silenced. The intrinsic relationships that are established between the images produced by the photographer and decolonial values are based on the assumptions of decolonial epistemology and in dialog with communication, taken up through bibliographical research, and on the method of equality proposed by Rancière. Distancing itself from stereotyped and crystallized views and values as forms of domination, Firmo's photographic production is decolonial as it values subjects and blackness in processes that reinvent representations.

Keywords: Decoloniality, Photography, Walter Firmo

1 Introduction

In the opening text of the exhibition *Walter Firmo: no verbo do silêncio a síntese do grito*, the curator Sérgio Burgi states that Walter Firmo's photographic work is a "clear awareness of origin - racial, social and cultural (Instituto Moreira Salles, 2022, our translation)". Aspects that appear in the portraits of black men, women, and children that the "poet of the camera" (Machado, 1984, our translation) produced, outside the scope of suffering and subalternization, as in the images selected for this work, in which affirmation and exaltation of blackness are present.

This text proposes a dialogue between Walter Firmo's photographic work and decolonial thinking, in order to recognize decoloniality in the photographer's work. In the wake of decolonial thinking, Sealy (2019) indicates that decoloniality occurs in photography from the intention to decolonize the photographic camera. In other words, when the production seeks to promote values that are detached from stereotypes or move away from crystallized representations of violence or socially established hierarchies.

From this perspective, Walter Firmo's photographs are related to decolonial assumptions and values, paying attention to themes, forms of representation and the production of meaning. Although Walter Firmo's research and photographic gaze have been developed outside decolonial thinking, this approach becomes possible insofar as the photographs highlight the blackness and pluralism of black subjects and their cultural, social, and religious practices. One of the meanings of blackness that seems to emerge from the images is, therefore, the strength of black identity as a response to racism practiced by white men, as Munanga (2012) warns.

Methodologically, this work incorporates the principle of non-hierarchy, which guides the method of equality (Rancière, 2012) and values the researchers' intuition in their ways of choosing and reading the texts put into relation in the writing. Other principles of the method are the horizontality of the connections created between texts and discourses, and emancipation based on the principle of equal knowledge, which makes it possible to relate and promote articulations and approximations in a "free play" of intelligences. This is how the idea that Firmo's productions have decolonial traits is developed in this research, based on creative and intuitive choices, and readings of the material, building a fruitful path for relating the texts and images that embody the writing.

As part of this task, the work is based on bibliographical research that reviews the studies of Mignolo (2014), Quijano (1992) and Costa-Gómez (2014) on decoloniality in the field of social and human sciences. Based on these authors, decolonial

thinking also comprises a movement that posits the need of rethinking practices and discourses around being, knowing, and doing that are characterized as Eurocentric. We also turn to the interface of decoloniality in the field of communication, proposed by Torrico (2016, 2018, 2019), as a movement of epistemological broadening of the field, a way of going beyond the approaches constructed by the Global North¹. From the author's perspective, the notion of alterity is linked to the concept of "alter(n)active" communication (Torrico, 2018) as a way of decolonizing communication practices and processes. In this way, Walter Firmo's photographic practice is "ex-centric" (Torrico, 2019, our translation), because it is unconventional, allowing the denaturalization and reconfiguration of subjects, knowledge, and experiences.

It also highlights the aesthetic and political potential of Walter Firmo's photographic work as a contribution to the affirmation of black identity and culture, a work of resistance and struggle against racism. Wherever it circulates, the photographer's work promotes the pluralism of bodies and discourses of blackness, contemplating the diversity and performativity of groups and subjects (Butler, 2019), constituting and strengthening discourses and political movements that value the visibility of the black population. In Firmo's own words: "The image cannot be neutral. The power of the gaze must influence people because the act of photographing has to be political, and not a mere chance snapshot" (Instituto Moreira Salles, 2022, our translation).

2 Walter Firmo: "A boy, a saci, an enchanter from Irajá"

A Walter Firmo was born in 1937 in Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil's southeast, when the city was still the federal capital, in the northern neighborhood of Irajá. His parents were from Pará (a Brazilian northern state), his mother came from Belém, Pará's capital, was middle-class and from a family of Portuguese origin, while his father was black and a river dweller, from Monte Alegre, in the lower Amazon. At the age of 84, the photographer considers strange to be called sir and refers to himself as "a boy, a saci, an enchanter from Irajá", when interviewed by Lima (2022, our translation). His contact with the world of photography began when he was still a teenager. During this period, Firmo already admired the work of José Medeiros (1921-1990), a photographer for *O Cruzeiro* magazine who, in the 1940s and 1950s, introduced important changes to photojournalism (Lima, 2022). Medeiros was one of the first to record indigenous communities in the Xingu and rituals of African religions such as candomblé in Salvador.

When he started photographing at the age of 15, Firmo received a Rolleiflex camera from his father, who was a marine and traveled a lot, brought from Hamburg, Germany, according to Lima (2022). It did not take long for his productions to become seen in Brazilian newspapers and magazines, earning him recognition and awards. The photojournalist's first stint in the Brazilian press was with the newspaper *Última Hora*, at the age of 18. In the 1960s, Firmo joined the team at *Jornal do Brasil*. At the time, he proposed to the then editor-in-chief of *Jornal do Brasil*, Alberto Dines, a series of photographic reports from the Amazon region with portraits of riverside communities, landscapes and political issues. Producing photos and text, *Cem dias na Amazônia de ninguém* was published in the newspaper. With his work, Firmo won the Esso Journalism Prize in 1964. In the same decade, he also worked for the magazines *Realidade* and *Manchete* and was an international correspondent (Lima, 2022).

Walter Firmo also achieved recognition by portraying black artists such as singers Pixinguinha, Jamelão, Clementina de Jesus. He photographed anonymous black people in everyday situations, celebrations, or representative events. In Firmo's images, black people appear smiling, haughty and in often vibrant colors. The portraits contrast with images produced within Eurocentric culture, in which black people are shown as exotic or inferior subjects (Hall, 2016), including on postcards. Most of the photographs produced by Walter Firmo and articulated in this work were produced with directorial guidelines for the

¹ Studies of decolonial thought indicate that the global North and the global South are concepts that denote an abstract and unequal division, created from the imperial project of colonialism and global capitalism. Their meanings do not, therefore, denote exclusively geographical or territorial meanings, but project antagonistic geopolitical identities, which are neither watertight nor independent, and one can interpenetrate the other and vice versa. According to Ballestrin (2020), the knowledge, values and economic and socio-cultural practices generated by the global North are imposed as valid for all, while groups and movements from the global South, in contrast, represent the construction of a political project that claims different ways of belonging in the international system and society, as well as different epistemologies and practices for a fairer society with more solidarity for all.

composition of scenarios. This intervention made by the photographer, however, does not cancel out the contemplation of the material produced, nor does it interfere with the observation of relations with decolonial thinking.

One of the indications of decolonial values in Firmo's work are the portraits he made of the artist Antônio Bispo do Rosário (Firmo, 2013). The essay, produced for a report in *IstoÉ* magazine, in 1985, was set in the former Juliano Moreira Colony (1926-2022), for people with mental health issues and psychological disorders. Bispo do Rosário was an inmate at the institution and was recognized for his artistic skill with thread and needles for creating embroidery, robes, and tapestry pieces. Firmo was the only press professional to record Bispo do Rosário and his artistic productions in the colony (Figure 1). Through his lenses, the photographer portrayed the artist not as a person in a state of mental or emotional vulnerability, but in a way that exalted the artistic value of Bispo do Rosário's works.



Fig. 1: Antônio Bispo do Rosário. Source: Walter Firmo, 1985. Available at: https://ims.com.br/exposicao/walter-firmo-no-verbo-do-silencio-a-sintese-do-grito_ims-paulista/. Accessed: 15/05/2023.

In addition to the portrayed people, Firmo's photographic production gives visibility to expressions and themes of Brazilian culture, such as festivities, popular and religious actions, and representations, which are generally located on the margins of the predominant motifs in the Brazilian phonographic universe. This translates into ways of representing and photographing that are close to decolonial values, which suggests that, before decoloniality became a topic of research and theoretical

approach in academia, Firmo was already practicing it through his lens and images. Therefore, considering the importance of thinking beyond the expected structures of knowledge and knowledges, it is important to revisit the assumptions and reflections of decolonial thinking regarding the relationship between political and epistemological positions, in order to associate these concepts with Walter Firmo's photographic work.

3 Decoloniality: ideas and visions

The need of decolonizing and rethinking the processes and ways of producing scientific knowledge, popular knowledge, and identities began with the recognition, by groups of men and women, that the canonized practices for developing decolonial values did not consider the plurality of experiences outside the scope of Eurocentric culture. Thus, the group called Modernity/Coloniality (M/C), formed primarily by intellectuals from Latin America, designed the *decolonial turn* movement. According to Ballestrin (2013), the group's proposal is to reshape knowledge by bringing to light characters and events that have been silenced as a result of the deliberate erasure of power.

According to Mignolo (2014), Modernity brought with itself signs of violence by establishing which discourses and knowledge would be silenced or accepted in the public space. For the author, in addition to rethinking history and the processes of knowledge construction by science, decolonial thinking is based on the political recognition of subjects and groups that have been silenced. Mignolo (2014) also considers that the colonization of knowledge and subjects is inseparable from Modernity, as this period of humanity supported the distinction between groups and consolidated the knowledge produced by the white, Eurocentric, and bourgeois bias as the standard parameter for explaining the historical, social, and cultural dynamics of the world. In the same vein, Quijano (1992) develops the proposal to decolonize knowledge and political practices, questioning Eurocentric references as a universal measure. He also bets on the idea that decolonizing knowledge goes beyond not reproducing Eurocentric thinking and requires detaching oneself from these values in such a way that there can be room for the promotion of freedom and recognition. Decoloniality is thus seen as a manifestation of power, knowledge, and political action (Quijano, 1992).

According to Costa-Gómez (2014), Modernity was a path to violence because it disregarded actions and thoughts that were alien to the prevailing norm. For the author, *doxa*, that is, opinions, could be discarded if they were detached from the modern moral order. Thus, the author criticized the modern position that postulates previously produced knowledge as *punto cero* (zero point). Costa-Gómez (2014, p. 93, our translation) explains that this position refers to the "epistemic dimension of colonialism, which should not be understood as a simple ideological or 'superstructural' extension of it, as Marxism wanted, but as an element belonging to its 'infrastructure', as something constitutive"². The author questions the Eurocentric positioning and points to the importance of thoughts and reflections from other matrices as ways of structuring knowledge, since the culture of Latin American, Asian, and African countries remained on the margins of visibility and appreciation.

The movement to rethink epistemological practices and the processes of constructing history and meanings has advanced in the humanities and social sciences, without losing sight of the intention that studies should "They maintain the singularity of places, people, languages, subjectivities, emotions and decolonial horizons of life"³ (Mignolo, 2014, p. 15, our translation). The feminist studies, for example, have considered the reality of black and peripheral women from the point of view of intersectionality by bringing in other intersections that make up their existence (Lugones, 2010), which are not limited to analyzing only gender issues, but also seek to observe power relations, social class, and ethnicity. In this way, decolonial feminism opened doors by giving visibility to women who had been forgotten by the reflections of white American and European women.

² From the original in Spanish: "[...] dimensión epistémica del colonialismo, lo cual no debe entenderse como una simple prolongación ideológica o 'superestructural' del mismo, como quiso el marxismo, sino como un elemento perteneciente a su 'infraestructura', como algo constitutivo.[...]"

³ From the original in Spanish: "[...] mantienen la singularidad de los lugares, las personas, las lenguas, las subjetividades, las emociones y los horizontes descoloniales de vida [...]"

Decoloniality is thought of beyond the field of social sciences and humanities, such as studies that target the way we deal with natural resources and environmental issues. In this sense, Ferdinand (2022) discusses the need of rethinking water use and land occupation beyond conventional practices. For the author, current methods of housing and land use ratify colonial legacies of land ownership. Thus, practices that exploit nature for usufruct are maintained and promote alterity i.e., the death of alterity as a sense of coexistence and sociability.

In a more intimate dialog with the discussions proposed in this work, decoloniality is part of the theoretical framework of communication studies and photography, which are useful for bringing decolonial thinking closer to Walter Firmo's photographic productions. The movement to think of the field of communication as an area of decolonial knowledge was one of Torrico's positions (2016, 2018, 2019). In addition to thinking about communication theories beyond the thoughts built up by the countries of the Global North, the author proposes reflecting on communication processes as a movement to broaden the field's epistemological territory. For Torrico (2016, p. 24, our translation), communication must promote "a non-Eurocentric reinterpretation of world history and promote the dismantling of the mechanisms of compulsive Westernization to which this world was subjected after the integration of America into planetary geography⁴".

Torrico thus discusses the need to recognize the particularities of each region and suggests moving away from the Western colonizing idea of communication, understood not as an action aimed at control, discipline or financial ends. According to the author, communication theories and processes have become established in academia and the social environment as actions aimed at instrumentalization or mechanical uses. In addition to being movements that distinguish and usurp the condition of subjects and groups, according to Torrico (2016), these proposals do not elaborate notions of alterity.

When thinking about the field of communication, alterity is a concept present in the intention to decolonize it. To explain the movement of communication based on this concept, Torrico reconfigures language and creates the idea of alter(n)ative. The proposal distances itself from the conventional understanding of alternative communication as a mode of production that offers a counterpoint to the discourses and practices of the mainstream press because there is a communicational deficit as points of view (Grinsberg, 1987). Torrico's idea is communication allied to otherness in such a way that the realities of the groups involved are taken into account as a movement to change the status quo. Thus, Torrico presents the meaning of the expression *alter(n)ative*: "1. [...] the right of an epistemological-theoretical Otherness (Alternative); 2. [...] highlights the local-native and historicized nature of that *Otherness* (Alter/native); 3. And [...] involves the proposal to alter the status quo (Alter/ativa)"⁵ (Torrico, pp. 79-80, our translation, *emphasis added*).

By contemplating the otherness of Latin American realities and neglected peoples and subjects, Torrico explains that communication fosters pluralism. In other words, it does not develop a reluctance for uniform discourses, but rather a diversity of discourses, of experiences. Torrico's considerations are conducive to understanding and recognizing Walter Firmo's photographs when, as a black man, he strives to portray black men and women with traits of haughtiness and vivacity outside the representations of subalternity and desubjectivation.

Another point to highlight in the decolonial communication conceived by Torrico (2019), which also supports the recognition of Firmo's photographs as decolonial, is the notion of "ex-centric". In addition to alluding to what is odd and unconventional, this other neologism also proposes to conceive of communication outside the center in the possibility of denaturalizing and reconfiguring the field of communication in Latin America. By bringing in black people (anonymous or recognized in their field), Firmo operates off the axis by not portraying the black population through the lens of suffering or poverty, composing scenes and representations that escape these frameworks.

⁴ From the original in Spanish: "[...] una reinterpretación no eurocéntrica de la historia del mundo e impulsar el desmontaje de los mecanismos de la occidentalización compulsiva a los que este mundo fue sometido tras la integración de América a la geografía planetaria[...]" (Torrico, 2016, p. 24)

⁵ From the original in Spanish: "[...] alter(n)ativa": "1. [...] el derecho de una Otredad epistemológico-teórica (Alternativa); 2. [...] remarca la índole local-nativa e historizada de esa Otredad (Alter/native); 3. Y [...] comporta la propuesta de alteración del statu quo (Alter/ativa) [...]" (Torrico, 2016, pp.79-80, *emphasis added*)

In photographic productions, decoloniality is present, according to Sealy (2019), from the intention of offering plural meanings to the blackness portrayed. According to the author, in the early years of the advent of photography, still in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the black community was portrayed as exotic by European standards or in extreme conditions of vulnerability and slavery due to imperialism. Black men and women did not go beyond the margins of representation as wild and uncivilized beings, destined for extermination or as targets of violence by the colonizers. Samples of this occurred, for example, in the colonization of the Congo by Belgium which, under the command of King Leopold II, between 1885 and 1924, led to the death of at least 10 million natives (Sealy, 2019).

According to Munanga (2012), it is based on the common history that links all those who are characterized as black by the white western gaze that blackness and/or black identity can be defined. The author explains that blackness depends on a diversity of factors involving religion (of African origin or not), social structures, feelings of belonging to a community and of historical continuity, experiences with the diaspora and racism, forms of language or communication, among other elements and contexts lived and experienced by black people. In this way, it's not just about skin color. These groups have in common that they have been "victims of the worst attempts at dehumanization and that their cultures have not only been the object of systematic policies of destruction, but, more than that, that the existence of these cultures has simply been denied" (Munanga, 2012).

In the face of racism, which inferiorizes and denies the humanity of the black population, blackness emerges as a permanent call for historical awareness, as a political position of affirmation and positive reconstruction of black identity (Munanga, 2012). This occurs with the revaluation and acceptance of the African heritage in the construction of solidarity between the victims and in the fight against the devaluation of black people. In this way, it is possible to relate the approach to Walter Firmo's visual lyricism in relation to blackness, in the images that portray black men and women with an artistic eye, in an engaging, illuminated, majestic way, in a dreamlike atmosphere. They are images that break with the frontier of prejudice that inferiorizes the black and peripheral population.

Sealy (2019) also dialogues with Michel Foucault's (2021) idea about the power of biopower to condition the meanings of black peoples and subjects by limiting the processes of representation in photography, as well as being movements of violence against the black body, which is forcibly given over to control and discipline. However, the photographs of communities and peoples subjugated by the lenses of colonizers, to a large extent, were symptoms of the tricks of the technologies of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2018), as forms of governance that foster death, which occurs both through disregard and the intention to annihilate the other.

According to Sealy (2019), the decolonization of the camera and, consequently, of photography, corresponds to a move away from the ways of portraying and framing promoted by the colonizing gaze. There is a move away from signs and elements linked to violence or desubjectivization to develop empowerment and freedom in photography. The author's understanding strengthens the presence of decoloniality in Firmo's productions because they separate black subjects from elements that suggest the usurpation of their human condition in movements of violence.

4 Decoloniality in Walter Firmo's photographs

Bringing Walter Firmo's photographic productions closer to decolonial concepts offers insights that broaden the sense of representation of subjects and groups that have been marginalized and stigmatized as a matter of power. In this way, it is possible to consider photographs as representations of subjects and places that orbit outside the crystallized order. By featuring black and brown Brazilian artists in his portraits, in a mode of exaltation, Firmo highlights the country's culture and moves away from forms of representation that associate the black population with a condition of subalternity or suffering. In his photographs, men and women from the black community are presented with dignity, in images that distance themselves from those that show hypersexualized black bodies or those in conditions of vulnerability that could serve to form stereotypes or spectacularization. The photographer's work suggests a detachment from Western currents of communication, bringing to light references that enhance the panorama of Latin American artistic production based on his own experiences and lives.

By adopting these photographic methods, Firmo has made portraits of people and situations offering meanings that are outside predictability, thus dialoguing with Torrico's (2019) concept of "ex-centric". The author understands ex-centric as a way of creating theoretical subversions in the field of communication as a way to think of new paths of knowledge outside the conventionally idealized center as a power structure. Torrico's understanding adheres to Firmo's productions in view of the bonds of alterity built in the photographs. This characteristic adheres to communication as a "constructive process of the human and the social, [which] preexists the means that transmit or amplify it and supposes the construction of a com-knowledge (a 'knowledge with the other') in a reciprocal relationship of a dialogical and convivial nature" (Torrico, 2019, p. 101, our translation).

The dialogue between decolonial perspectives and Walter Firmo's photographs can be seen in Fernandes' (2003) reflections on the work of Firmo and other photographers, such as Maureen Bisilliat and Luis Humberto. In the work of these photographers, between 1970 and 1980, it is possible to recognize the intention to portray the pluralism of identities of the Brazilian population, "from the different popular representations, using photography as independent information" (Fernandes, 2003, p. 21, our translation). By using warm colors and portraying black people beyond the signs of suffering and subalternity (Figures 2 and 3), Firmo's photographs translate decolonial values, "whether through the vibrant strength of the colors or the unquestionable dignity of the human being revealed there by the photographer's gaze" (Coelho, 2012, p. 115, our translation).

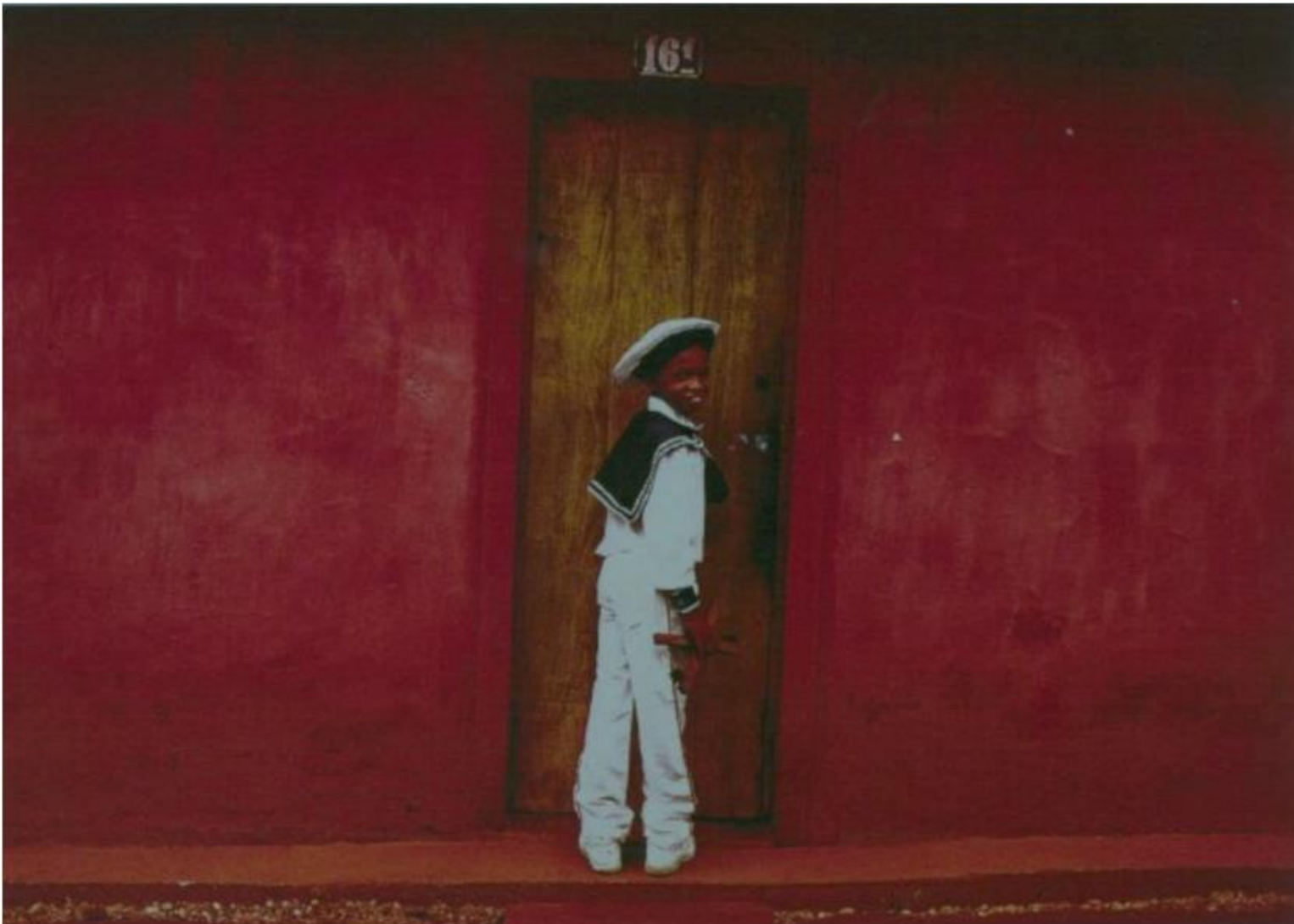


Fig. 2: Untitled. Source: Walter Firmo, 1994, 1992. Available at: Fernandes (2003).



Fig. 3: Carnival in Rio. Source: Walter Firmo, 1972. Available at: <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/donas-de-si/> Accessed on: 10/05/2023.

In the photographs he produced at the time, Firmo sought, according to Fernandes (2003, p. 156, our translation), "to build an atmosphere involving the participation of black people in the daily life of the country, giving them citizenship, intense affection, timeless luminescence and the feeling of a national hero". In this way, for the author, Firmo manages to celebrate life and build memory. From this perspective, it can be said that Firmo's image compositions create bridges with Torrico's (2019) decolonial proposals, constituting ways of reinventing representations and

(...) deconstructing the logic of the oppressive mechanism and its theoretical justification, using a historical and epistemological positioning whose core is subalternity. Subalternity defines the general condition of forced submission (political, economic, cultural, gender, age, "race", education, etc.) suffered by a human group and therefore implies a specific location, at the base of the social structure, from which a cognitive and mobilizing point of view is formed that is inevitably critical and oriented towards liberation (Torrice, 2019, p. 100, our translation).

Although the photographer presents people who may experience subalternity and vulnerability in everyday life, the images do not approach these references and combine perspectives that confront the discourses and practices of crystallized power regarding black groups and subjects. According to Torrice, subalternity cannot be understood as the stigma of suffering and anguish, but as the power to create knowledge and promote visibility and public recognition. The images sought and produced by Firmo also come close to Sealy's decoloniality as an intention that proposes representations that go beyond meanings that refer to violence and are associated with stereotypes or establish relationships between the dominated and the dominant.

As a means to encourage the decolonization of photography, Searly (2019) suggests not allowing references and signs constructed as movements to colonize bodies, knowledge and subjectivities, signaling a path that is detached from normative and hegemonic values present in media representations. The author points out that, in the early years of photography, the use of the camera was recurrent to portray subjects, peoples and communities as exotic and savage. The movement to decolonize photography starts, according to Searly (2019), from the need to reconfigure the processes of representation of the black community, dissociating it from violence and desubjectification, through humanized signs and far from exploitative or exotic values. Therefore, according to the author, decolonizing the camera means working to promote black culture to destabilize the condition, reception and process of creating the other as exotic.

Decoloniality in Firmo's work also appears in the portraits of subjects and groups outside the frames of places established according to the order of hegemonic power, as Torrice (2018) points out. In this sense, the work of Moraes (2023) is pertinent, highlighting Walter Firmo's proposal not as a way of denying the violence and desubjectification to which black people have been subjected throughout Brazilian history, but as a way of showing that these people have a life beyond this.

Instead of replicating these situations of suffering in photographs, however, [Firmo] uses them to represent, in another way, the bodies that suffer the most, capturing them in moments of enjoyment, joy or even calm and rest. These are images in which there are almost always signs of invention and the strength of emotional bonds. Images that subvert what is known and suggest other possibilities for living arrangements in the country, in which there is no longer an almost direct association between dark skin and the pain felt (Moraes, 2003, pp. 302-303, our translation).

The subversion of the order of meaning that stigmatizes black bodies can be seen, according to Moraes (2023), in the photograph entitled *Carnaval no Trem* (Figure 4). Dating from 1985, this image shows women in costume in the foreground of a train carriage in the capital of Rio de Janeiro. Highlighting the voluminous costumes and bright make-up, Firmo re-reads the everyday use of urban public transport that makes journeys to take people to work or other appointments in order to portray women in a moment of magic and relaxation.



Fig. 4: Carnival on the train. Source: Walter Firmo, 1985. Available at: https://ims.com.br/exposicao/walter-firmo-no-verbo-do-silencio-a-sintese-do-grito_ims-paulista/. Accessed: 10/04/2023.

In the same place where, for the rest of the year, many other women (or these women themselves) make the journey to work and back home in a routine without surprises or contentment, the photographer catches a scene that signals a change of mood (...) and triggers new associations between these people and their lives. At that moment, carnival - an event that disrupts the common order - takes place on the train (...) (Moraes, 2003, p. 303, our translation).

The representation of young or adult black women does not present a dialogue with the hypersexualization or fetishization of their bodies, expedients used in photographs of these people at the dawn of photography, as mentioned by Hall (2016). By photographing black women and showing them away from this stigmatization, Firmo performs a movement of alter(n)activity, as proposed by Torrico (2018). This way of portraying presents itself as a path to alterity and the promotion of the constructive and humanized character that the author calls *outridade* and revolts against fetishized or stigmatized discourses. According to Torrico (2018), this movement develops communication proposals using contours that consider the history and aspects of the lives and experiences of the subjects involved.

In addition to Brazilian blackness, Firmo also portrayed black people from other countries, including Cape Verde (Figure 5).

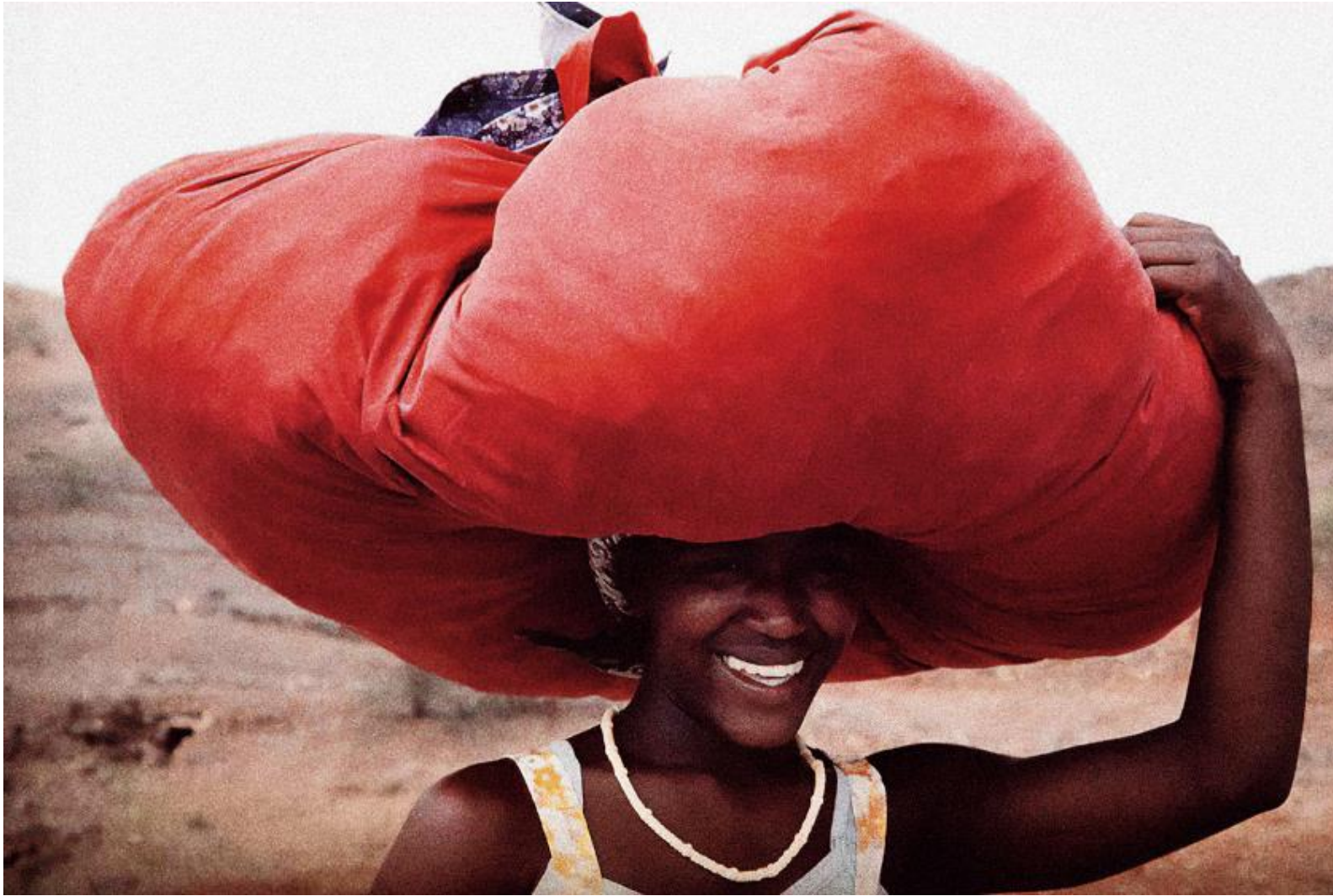


Fig. 5: Untitled. Source: Walter Firmo, 2004. Available at: <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/donas-de-si/>. Accessed on: 10/05/2023.

Firmo did not limit himself to photographing anonymous people, but brought black personalities of national recognition in the arts to his lens, maintaining the visual grammar of portraying them in expressions of joy and contemplation. By refusing to fetishize, Firmo's photographs portray blackness with pride as a form of public recognition and by praising black artists from Brazilian culture, such as Pixinguinha (Figure 6) and Clementina de Jesus (Figure 7), among others. By portraying prominent black figures in the Brazilian art scene, Firmo elaborates on the pluralism of blackness not only in Brazil, but also abroad, as Lima (2022) points out. In this way, the photographer's work can be understood as an action of insurgency, recognizing that black people are worthy of public recognition, as well as projecting blackness beyond the stigmatized elements of desubjectivation.



Fig. 6: Pixinguinha. Source: Walter Firmo, 1967. Available at: <https://www.uol.com.br/ecoa/reportagens-especiais/walter-firmo>. Accessed: 15/05/2023



Fig. 7: Clementina de Jesus. Source: Walter Firmo, 1977. Available at: https://ims.com.br/exposicao/walter-firmo-no-verbo-do-silencio-a-sintese-do-grito_ims-paulista/. Accessed: 15/05/2023.

Exercising the alter(n)activity movement, Firmo became aware of his blackness when he was a correspondent for *Manchete* magazine in New York (Firmo & Gomes, 2022). As soon as he arrived in the United States, according to Lima (2022), he was discriminated against for being black by the reporter who accompanied him on his coverage. This had repercussions on his productions. On his return to Brazil, Firmo began to experience photography politically and developed his visual lyricism

in relation to blackness, as Firmo himself says in a statement to the Vale Maranhão Cultural Center (2022). In this way, he always had blackness involved in his lenses in such a way that it wasn't under-represented.

5 Final considerations

Thinking about the bridge between decolonial studies and Walter Firmo's photographs offers other insights into the debate on visibility, public recognition and alterity in communication processes. By bringing black people together without the constraints of suffering and under-representation, Firmo exercises alterity, a concept that is part of decoloniality, and also proposes new forms of representation that are detached from the values commonly disseminated in the production of photographic images about the black community. Whether undertaken in the artistic field or in photojournalism, decoloniality is a way of photographing that reconfigures the processes of production and representation of groups and subjects, giving them visibility and public and political recognition.

Firmo's photographic insurgency is not just an act of rebellion, but a movement that challenges new proposals and also slips through the power structures that limit the production of meanings and modes of representation. To a large extent, the decoloniality of Walter Firmo's photographs also becomes insurgent by not following paths that stigmatize black groups and subjects, usually associated with vulnerability, in photographic production.

The images produced by Firmo signal decolonial perspectives on communication, both because they are alter(n)ative and are produced from the reality experienced by the groups and their peers, and because of their intention to develop the alterity, vitality and loftiness of the subjects portrayed. In addition, they orbit outside the predictable axis of representation, constituting themselves as "ex-centric" by investigating and bringing to light everyday people and actions. In this way, Firmo's photographs reflect the pluralism of Brazilian representations, identities and references, without the need to standardize or distance themselves from the particularities of each group.

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