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PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTIVES:

in search of a definition for a possible vector of decolonial photography

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ABSTRACT – This paper examines contemporary photo collectives as a new form of professional photojournalism within the network society, comparing examples from Brazil and Spain. It identifies key elements distinguishing modern collectives from past ones and explores their role in fostering a decolonial approach to photography. The study highlights how marginalized cultures reclaim agency and become central to new photographic narratives, offering diverse epistemologies that address 21st-century crises.
Keywords: Photography. Photo collectives. Decoloniality. Epistemological colonialism. Visual narrative.

COLETIVOS FOTOGRÁFICOS: em busca de uma definição para um possível vetor de uma fotografia decolonial

RESUMO – Este artigo examina os coletivos fotográficos contemporâneos como uma nova forma de fotojornalismo profissional na sociedade em rede, comparando exemplos do Brasil e da Espanha. Identifica elementos-chave que distinguem os coletivos contemporâneos dos anteriores e explora seu papel na promoção de uma abordagem decolonial da fotografia. O estudo destaca como culturas marginalizadas recuperam a agência e se tornam centrais em novas narrativas fotográficas, oferecendo epistemologias diversas que abordam crises do século XXI.
Palavras chaves: Fotografia. Coletivos fotográficos. Fotojornalismo. Decolonialidade. Colonialismo epistemológico. Narrativa visual.

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RESUMEN – Este artículo examina los colectivos fotográficos contemporáneos como una nueva forma de fotoperiodismo profesional en la sociedad en red, comparando ejemplos de Brasil y España. Identifica elementos clave que distinguen los colectivos contemporáneos de los anteriores y explora su papel en la promoción de un enfoque decolonial de la fotografía. El estudio destaca cómo las culturas marginadas recuperan la agencia y se convierten en centrales en nuevas narrativas fotográficas, ofreciendo epistemologías diversas que abordan las crisis del siglo XXI.
Palabras clave: Fotografía. Colectivos fotográficos. Fotoperiodismo. Decolonialidad. Colonialismo epistemológico. Narrativa visual.

1 Introduction

In 2018, the Spanish newspaper El País, shortly after establishing itself in Brazil, featured a story about the Brazilian photo collective Farpa, opening with the following statement: "The collectives place themselves in the media game as authors and protagonists of the narrative and have a revolutionary character: they inverted the hierarchical order of being guided by the press. The Farpa Coletivo images in this gallery are the creations of young and promising photographers in Brazilian documentary photography" (Moriyama, 2018).

Revolutionary, inverted hierarchy, protagonist, young, and promising are among crucial terms to understand those that are the core component of this study: contemporary photo collectives. Despite their existence for over two decades, they have received minimal scholarly attention. This oversight has resulted in a significant misunderstanding of their potentially profound impact on revitalizing the struggling professional photojournalistic landscape. Recognizing their value is crucial for ensuring future relevance and equipping the field with the tools needed to overcome contemporary obstacles.

Challenges that, nonetheless, do not diminish the increasing importance of images in our society as, in Fontcuberta's (2019, p. 10) words, "we experience the contemporary world as an overlapping

of simulations", which has photography at its basis. The mismatch between people's trust in images and their growing significance in daily life creates one of the great paradoxes of our time. Therefore, comprehending the inherent nature of images and their creators is a fundamental element of our shared existence.

The crisis of photojournalism must however be understood within the context of the broader crises of the first decades of the second millennium. The climate crisis and its global repercussions, successive financial upheavals, a failed war on terror and its massive ramifications, and the rise of populism represent only a few of the concrete manifestations of what some regard as the breakdown of the Westernizing project initiated with the colonization of the Americas (Castells, 2018; Escobar, 2012; Mignolo, 2017; Zizek, 2012). It's an epistemological upheaval in which the West abandons its long-standing position as the moral and cultural authority it had imposed for centuries. Meanwhile, cultures subordinated during the colonial process, now encompassed within the broad term 'Global South', have begun to establish platforms for political, economic, and social dialogue in parallel contexts. While the Westernizing process disintegrates, concrete alternatives such as BRICS, bilateral and regional agreements, media, and information networks, including news agencies, satellite TV channels, and digital platforms, are all being constructed to provide alternative spaces to Western institutions.

In such a context, where should we look for alternatives? How can we create parallel paths for societies to progress beyond those established by the Westernizing project enacted through the colonial domination of the Americas? Turning to other forms of knowledge and other cultures, accepting their full humanity, and understanding them beyond any superficial categories used in the search for comprehensibility by Westerners, is a first step in that direction. Recognizing non-scientific, non-rational knowledge as, simply put, full-fledged knowledge. Recognizing the producers of this knowledge as individuals capable of managing their lives and realities without the need to follow a predetermined path toward pseudo-development. Not to seek a universal human being with universal rights, but to respect differences and work towards a pluriverse in which difference is celebrated, not feared. A world, as the Zapatista motto remarks, in which many worlds fit.

In the age of social media, where "our relations to each other

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are inescapably mediated by images" (Coleman & James, 2021, p. 5), these other forms of knowledge regularly first come to us as images, with photography being a common medium. The Other, frequently, is presented to us through mediated contact, in which their image is often the closest interaction we will have with them. Given the enormous revolution that digitization brings to the world of photojournalism, understanding the alternative methods of photography production in the context of the convergence culture is essential for grasping the opportunities before us. In this environment, photo collectives are on the rise.

But what exactly are contemporary photo collectives, and how could they represent a rupture with established forms of collective organizing in the work of professional photojournalists? Could they indeed represent a vector for decolonial photography, one that pushes non-Western epistemologies? This article is a step towards an answer to those questions. Therefore, departing from the context of a rupture with modernity pushed by technological and sociological developments of the network society, it explores the idea of decolonial photography as a necessary concept if new epistemologies are to be seriously considered in the building of a new world order. This involves an exploration of the historical and contemporary role of photography in shaping narratives about colonial endeavors and their epistemic effects. In short, as Sealy (2019, p. 9) puts it: "What epistemic value has photography brought to our understanding of difference?". Finally, as a result of a comparative study between Brazilian (R.U.A. Fotocoletivo and Farpa) and Spanish (Ollo Photo and Fotomovimiento) photo collectives, this study highlights some of the characteristics that might position them as key players in the rise of decolonial photography.

2 Diversifying narratives: decolonial photography and alternative epistemologies

This essay understands colonialism as a multitude of endeavors aimed at conquering people, lands, possessions, and, especially, their subjectivity. Distinct from other forms of exploitation, it operates on the assumption that the perceived inferiority of the colonized is so ingrained that they are blind to it. Consequently, there is the belief they must be educated by the colonizer on a how-to

journey towards civilization, development, or any contemporary term employed to emphasize the disparity between their epistemologies and those of their violators. It is a system that goes far beyond political-economic domination but constitutes the creation of a system of signs and subjectivities emanating from Europe that classified, described, and conceptualized the rest of the world not as it was, but as the colonizers understood it (Mignolo, 2009, p. 35).

It is a process impacting both the colonized, who rise as modern subjects under the constraints of coloniality, and the colonizer, whose self-perception also emerges and solidifies in its relation to the colonized alterity (Dussel, 1993). From this perspective, colonialism has shaped a "new structure of action and meaning, a new regime of historicity" (Mbembe, 2020, p. 91), forming the bedrock upon which the foundational layers of contemporary societies rest. In selecting Brazil and Spain as the focal points of this study, the research aims to draw on the historical and contemporary connections between these two realities, deeply intertwined by the legacy of colonialism. By examining a former colonizing country (Spain) and a formerly colonized one (Brazil), the research leverages a unique comparative perspective to elucidate the complex and reciprocal influences of colonial processes on both sides of the colonial divide. Spain, as one of the main colonial powers, was instrumental in establishing the structures and ideologies that justified and perpetuated colonial domination. This historical role has left an indelible mark on Spanish identity and continues to influence its cultural, political, and social paradigms. On the other hand, Brazil, as a former colony, embodies the enduring impacts of colonial exploitation and the ongoing struggle against the remnants of coloniality that pervade its societal structures. This historical cord umbilically binds the Iberian Peninsula to Latin America and represents the common barrier that prevents subalternized cultures on both sides from overcoming the colonial matrix of power. This comparative study emphasizes the importance of addressing both colonizer and colonized perspectives to fully grasp the scope and impacts of coloniality (Mignolo, 2011, 2016). This research highlights how photo collectives navigate and resist colonial frameworks, revealing the specificities of each context, shared struggles, and potential pathways toward a decolonial turn.

In the process of shaping identity, visual arts and narratives play a pivotal role. The circulation of images is a key element in which an idealized Self becomes the reference from which all the

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others are to be imagined, to be judged. Changes are firstly an idea, an image, to later become a reality. In a modern world, whose structure was established under the gaze of coloniality and racially hierarchized human relations (Quijano, 2000), photography, invented in the heydays of European colonialism, was quickly applied as a tool of coloniality, wielding the double power of partially unveiling the atrocities of European behavior at the cost of reinforcing stereotypes about the colonized to justify such invasion. The first issue shed light on what Mignolo (2011) termed 'The Darker Side of Western Modernity', exposing the enduring brutalities and discrimination inherent in Eurocentric narratives of progress and development, yet integral to its very existence.

However, grounded in centuries of misrepresentation, the introduction of photography into visual arts solidified the notion of natives as "a lower human form, out of harmony with European capitalist ideals, or poised on the edge of humanity" (Sealy, 2019, p. 42). Indeed, from archival images to anthropological photography, the presence of non-white bodies is often in places of pain and suffering, rarely in contexts that fully represent their subjectivity (Campt, 2017). Not a refugee, a victim of any kind of atrocity, but simply a human being presented with all the learnings that they could bring. The Other, in this context, often becomes the recipient of assistance rather than a source of knowledge, thus solidifying a hierarchy whose roots can be traced back to the birth of the modern concept of race in colonial America (Quijano, 2000). A tradition that reinforces the colonial matrix of power and shifts the focus to the outcomes rather than the historical roots of any given situation. These images encourage viewers to consider them in isolation, rather than as part of the broader context of exploitation and epistemic violence. Thus, rather than contributing to the much-needed decolonial turn, photography can inadvertently obscure Western atrocities and perpetuate the dominant narrative of modernity.

This narrative often portrays Western powers as defenders of universal values against cultures tied to traditional beliefs. As discussed below, contemporary collectives are beginning to challenge this position by reclaiming narratives, amplifying marginalized voices, and advocating for more inclusive representations in visual media.

In conclusion, decolonial photography aims to portray historically marginalized subjects as complete individuals,

transcending racist and simplistic categorizations that have long dominated discussions of decolonization and global development. It involves reconstruction work, representing marginalized subjects in their full humanity through photos of everyday life. This process challenges what Azoulay (2008) terms 'photography imperial rights' and works to deconstruct stereotypes historically perpetuated by photography and visual narratives in the context of colonialism. It involves reinterpreting past photographs and their role in shaping perceptions of alterity and looks forward to sowing the seeds for a renewed understanding of our relationship with the 'different'. "The goal is not to treat differences as alien but to integrate the 'different' into the realm of the collective 'Us' rather than distancing it as 'Them'" (Sealy, 2019, p. 201).

3 Photographic collectives as vectors: key characteristics

What defines contemporary photo collectives? How do they differ from past collective experiences in photography? Identifying their unique characteristics is crucial to understanding their potential departure from photography's historical entanglements with coloniality in professional photojournalism. While this article focuses on Spain and Brazil, similar groups are emerging globally, highlighting the phenomenon's worldwide significance. In essence, photo collectives are groups of photographers who unite using digital tools to bolster their work financially, organizationally, and ideologically. This particular method of organizing professional photojournalism production is uniquely enabled by the mechanisms and dynamics inherent in the network society. The earliest instances of these groups emerged around the turn of the millennium, as photographers sought strategies to confront the challenges posed by convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) and the digitalization of traditional journalistic practices.

Contemporary photo collectives constitute a novel and underexplored phenomenon, thus an examination of the terminology employed is needed, particularly the nuanced interpretations of 'contemporary' and 'collective', as underscored by Queiroga (2011). Regarding the term 'collective', Queiroga (p. 248) observes that it "allows confusion with other collective ways of making photography. Wouldn't photography agencies also be collectives?" What about

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photo clubs? These are two well-established collective photography practices that, however, differ significantly from what this research denotes as 'contemporary photo collectives'. This issue is explored further in subsequent sections, with the discussion centering on the ubiquitous influence of digitalization, which serves not only as a tool but also as an ontological framework shaping the identity and operations of these groups.

Moreover, the term 'contemporary' could also present some problems as "etymologically speaking, contemporary means that it is in a common time or epoch with something else. That is, everything is contemporary to something else" (p. 248). Despite these ambiguities, the research opts to adopt the term 'contemporary photo collective' supported by its frequent use in photographic practice, as highlighted by Queiroga (2011, p. 249), but also because the term 'contemporary' also signifies a deliberate stance – an "attempt to place oneself more consciously and critically in relation to one's environment" (Entler, 2009, p. 1). This perspective resonates strongly with collectives that, as outlined below, strive to disrupt conventional approaches to creating, producing, and disseminating photography. This approach signifies a maturity and a move away from "addressing historical critiques that questioned its [photography] artistic legitimacy" (p. 2) and push for critical and politically engaged photography.

In the realm of contemporary collectives, Brazil and Spain also present a unique case. Since the early days of Internet 2.0, both Brazilians and Spaniards have opted to organize their work collectively to address the challenges introduced by convergence culture to traditional photojournalistic practices. Events that historically attempted to unite the Euro-American scenario, such as the extinct Laberinto de Miradas (Carreras, 2009) or the still active E.CO: Encuentro de colectivos iberoamericanos y europeos (Carreras, 2011), bear witness to the massive presence of collectives in both countries since the early 2000s. For instance, Laberinto de Miradas has extended its reach across 18 countries with an exhibition showcasing the work of 83 photographers, both individuals and collectives.

Among the 17 collectives featured, Brazil (including Cia da Foto, Garapa, and Observatório de Favelas) and Spain (represented by NoPhoto, Blank Paper, and Pandora) had the highest representation, highlighting the significance of this phenomenon

in both countries from its inception. In fact, this is the primary factor motivating comparisons between Brazil and Spain instead of Portugal, which would be more historically coherent. In Brazil, the rise of these collectives challenges the dominant mass media model, which often features distant photographs devoid of local context. Similarly, in Spain, collectives predominantly originate and thrive in historically marginalized regions like Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia. This highlights how marginalization in Europe's birthplace of coloniality has suppressed non-dominant perspectives, prompting a reevaluation of Europe that includes its marginalized cultures.

The history of collectives in Brazil has been discussed in other contexts (Paim, 2012; Queiroga, 2015), whereas, in Spain, there is very little literature on the subject; the history of collectives in the country has been addressed by Cajueiro (2024), the doctoral thesis that forms the basis of this article. What they have in common is that they emerge from a sense of indignation. In the Brazilian context, for instance, the year 2013 and the widespread protests that ignited the country between June and July saw the emergence of numerous collectives such as R.U.A., CHOC, and Mamana. These groups of independent photographers intersected on the streets of Brazil and decided to form collectives to produce politically motivated photography during a period of social upheaval, actively engaging in the country's political landscape.

A significant driving force behind this movement was the desire for greater control over how their images were disseminated and the narratives they sought to convey. Tércio Teixeira, from R.U.A. Coletivo, reflects, "We decided to do it our way, telling our stories and delving deeper into the subject, you know? That was basically it – we were tired of agencies that exploit photographers" (personal communication, November 10, 2022). The Brazilian collectives that emerged in 2013 represent a second wave following pioneering groups from the early 2000s like Rolê and Garapa. These early collectives arose from deep dissatisfaction with conditions in large agencies and have been extensively studied by Eduardo Queiroga (2012, 2015) and José Alfonso Silva Junior (2011).

In Spain, the situation was notably different. While collectives like Ruido Foto, Calle 35, and No Photo began emerging in the early 2000s, the social upheaval from 2008 to 2011 did not spur as many new collectives as in Brazil. According to Professor

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Carles Costa (personal communication, November 10, 2022), Spain saw the rise of individual photographers gaining prominence in contemporary Spanish photography. This generation, known as the "fright generation" or the Arab Spring generation, including figures like Santi Palacios, Ana Suriñach, Bernat Armangué, and Samuel Aranda, began publishing extensively around 2010-2012 and primarily distribute their work through international agencies (personal communication, November 9, 2022). Unlike Brazil, where collectives gained traction in the early 2010s, Spain's focus remains on international agencies, with some photographers like Suriñach establishing their own agencies. Looking ahead, it could be cautiously asserted that the years following the covid-19 pandemic mark a new era for Spanish photo collectives, exemplified by emerging groups such as Sonda International, Oak Photo, and Ollo Photo.

4 Methodology

This paper, based on doctoral research, aims to develop a comprehensive model for defining photo collectives. The findings derive from detailed and publicly accessible interviews and questionnaires (Cajueiro, 2024). Grounded in a constructivist approach, the research employs a case-driven strategy with a specific sample to facilitate in-depth analysis. This methodological framework aims to extract principles that transcend specific cases and offer nuanced insights into this phenomenon (della Porta, 2008). The methodology employs qualitative and quantitative techniques to study the organizational aspects of four collectives from a larger pool of 51 (34 Brazilian and 17 Spanish). The initial selection involved questionnaires and bibliographic research. Data collection included questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to explore the organizational dynamics of the chosen collectives.

The questionnaires were distributed online to all individual members of the sample (10 Brazilians and 14 Spaniards) to profile photographers socioeconomically and examine collective work processes using structured thematic questions. This approach aimed to underscore critical aspects of intra-group interactions. To provide a deeper contextual understanding, the research conducted both individual and group interviews with collective members. These

interviews contextualize questionnaire results within broader social dynamics, guided by insights from Leech (2002) on interviewer preparation and the exploratory nature of semi-structured interviews (p. 655). Despite concerns raised by Soler (2011, p. 215) regarding online qualitative techniques, this research leverages the digital nature of photo collectives, conducting interviews and questionnaires online to accommodate the geographic dispersion and cyberspace-centric nature of these groups. This approach is crucial for understanding how these collectives operate within their digital environment. With this consideration, we now proceed to define contemporary collectives.

The questionnaires and interviews aimed not to analyze narratives produced by collectives, but to establish the identities of new photographic subjects. This profiling allows future research to focus on narrative analysis. Without understanding the identities and perspectives of producers, discussing narratives would undermine scholarly inquiry into their cultural and artistic contributions. With this in mind, let's explore what distinguishes contemporary collectives from past experiences.

5 The lack of a single, unifying, model

First and foremost, there isn't a single model or practice that defines what we refer to as a photo collective today. These are heterogeneous groups with distinct characteristics reflecting their origins and cultural backgrounds. Certainly, within a decolonial perspective, the absence of a universal, homogenizing model that overlooks local values, visions, and needs stands out as a notable strength of contemporary collectives, as it opens spaces for cultural particularities to be expressed in their organizations and publications. Through a decolonial lens, the ambition is not to adhere to a single, overarching standard but rather to embrace a pluriverse of possibilities, each reflecting its own unique reality. Simultaneously, the absence of a singular model brings about certain risks, especially regarding the potential ephemerality of such groups. The challenges of establishing a stable presence in the field of photojournalism continue to pose a significant obstacle to the sustainability of contemporary photo collectives, as many of them have relatively short lifespans,

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often lasting only a couple of years. Still, there are instances of collectives like Spain's Ruido Foto and Brazil's R.U.A. Fotocoletivo that have marked their 20th and 10th anniversaries, respectively. By delineating a comprehensive set of characteristics, this study seeks to work towards a definition that is sufficiently expansive to encompass collectives with varying attributes while also being restrictive enough to ensure they all retain a foundational set of attitudes and practices, justifying their categorization under a unified model.Bottom of Form

6 Living online, gathering strength on the streets

Living predominantly online but gathering strength through physical interactions, contemporary collectives leverage the opportunities and tools provided by the digital environment. Despite differing goals and political positions, they universally explore collaborative creation as a key aspect of their endeavors (Entler, 2011). This collaboration, facilitated by real-time communication and shared group management, fosters a horizontally organized space where individual subjectivities are subsumed under a collective identity (Saffron, 2013). The ability for instant interaction distinguishes collective actions in the digital age, transforming political and sociological discussions about photography beyond mere technical or aesthetic considerations. While technology plays a facilitating role, contemporary collectives are distinguished by their adeptness at utilizing new technologies to circulate ideas (Entler, 2011) and by being formed on the cultural ethos of digitality.

Despite their significance, virtual interactions alone are insufficient for solidifying group cohesion. This cohesion is reinforced through non-digital engagements, including face-to-face meetings, informal gatherings, and organizational activities. While digital tools are vital, the most meaningful bonding and crucial decision-making occur through physical interactions, thereby transforming the collective into a tangible entity. A point in line with scholars such as Levy (1999) and Castells (2015) that had been arguing for some years that we should not consider the digital and physical worlds as two separate entities but rather a single space in which subjects create their hybrid existence. This perspective emphasizes that digitality is understood not only as the employment of specific

technologies but rather as an embodiment of a distinct culture – the culture of autonomy, which is "the fundamental cultural matrix of contemporary societies" (Castells, 2015, p. 258). This involves multimodal networking that integrates both the pre-existing social networks of individual photographers and those developed throughout the collective's evolution.

7 Binding factor: the territory

Two binding factors that unite the various photographers within contemporary photo collectives emerge: geographical unity and ideological alignment. In sharing a geographical space and possessing a common cultural background, photographers from specific regions unite to tell stories from and about their own territories, emphasizing the issues they deem crucial. For instance, Spain's Ollo Photo, which concentrates on the Galician territory, or Brazil's Mídia Indígena, an indigenous collective, serve as notable examples among many that represent this trend where local individuals document their own regions. Indeed, the focus on local stories that aim at a global audience is a reflection of the belief that local issues can always be useful to other cultures.

Agostiño Iglesias, from Ollo Photo, in his interview for the research, states that he "believes that what happens here can always be extrapolated to other spaces, other realities. The small, the local, is also the big, the global. Sometimes I think that to tell the story of Galicia is to tell the story of the whole world" (personal communication, February 20, 2023). A local perspective embedded with global significance.

A global perspective is expressed through their ability to publish photos in international publications rather than just regional newspapers. In interviews, photographers emphasize that using digital technologies to reach a global audience is a key element of contemporary collectives. The longstanding collaboration of The Guardian newspaper with the photographer from Manaus, Christian Braga, a member of Farpa, and Francisco Proner's collaboration with the French VU Agency, also from Farpa, are clear examples of local photographers reaching a global audience through partnerships with established communication channels.

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By producing a type of local photography but targeting a global audience, many collectives are completely overturning the logic that has dominated the photojournalism market over the last decades and positioning themselves in different spaces from traditional agencies. In agencies, it was the norm that a small group of photographers, mostly white Western men, acted as the conduit for worldwide events, whereas the goal of collectives is for local people to tell their own stories. This shift places the local perspective at the center of the debate, allowing locals to go beyond the superficial needs of the market, transcending the increasingly shorter news cycles, and avoiding the gaze of exoticism. Understanding the complex layers that constitute any image and the various frequencies they convey (Campt, 2017), the importance of local photographers documenting local realities becomes a revolutionary experience. These photographers resist being dictated by mainstream media, capturing cultures they deeply understand, and rejecting historically created stereotypes of non-hegemonic experiences. In doing so, they create photographs that encompass different notions of time, space, and consequently, subjectivities. Ollo Photo, founded and composed exclusively of Galicians, serves as an excellent example of a collective whose work effectively brings to the forefront issues from Galicia marginalized by mainstream media, offering perspectives only possible to those deeply rooted in the region. Notably, it addresses the disappearance of artisanal crafts unable to withstand the pressures of global capitalism, as seen in the report "O capitalismo Salvaxe" by Agostiño Iglesias, and delves into the motivations and impacts of the massive migration of young Galicians to more urbanized regions of Spain.

Embracing local subjectivity signifies a profound shift towards decolonial photography, challenging ideas that perpetuate existing power relations where information about marginalized groups was mediated by the socially powerful. This approach acknowledges that knowledge is geographically situated and genuinely considers space, avoiding the postmodern 'non-space' (Dussel, 1977). By photographing the cultures they are embedded in, photographers naturally move beyond documenting victimization and deprivation to visualizing the intricate social relationships and networks that underpin communities in resistance and protest. This shift represents the most revolutionary aspect of contemporary

collectives in narrative terms, as it inevitably broadens perspectives. It generates information that expands existing realities, producing images liberated from the imperial constraints discussed by Azoulay (2008) that have historically limited the scope of photography. Consequently, these images enrich perspectives by adding depth and nuance to events already in the public eye and, in many cases, spotlight stories that traditional gatekeepers might otherwise marginalize or silence.

8 Binding factor: the values and causes

In the digital era, geographical cohesion by itself cannot be the sole binding factor. Contemporary social movements – including photo collectives – are characterized by strong mobility and internationalization of causes, leading to the formation of groups that transcend national borders (Castells, 2015). Thus, members of contemporary photo collectives strive to unite despite not sharing a specific geographical territory. In interviews conducted for the research, photographers indicate that they join collectives precisely to gain greater control over the narrative created with their photos and the platforms where their work will be published. This movement aligns with the network society, which appears to transcend the artificial limitations imposed by traditional notions of nationalism and belonging. For instance, Farpa includes photographers from various Brazilian cities united by their focus on human rights, while the Spanish collective Sonda International comprises photographers from across Spain addressing the impacts of climate change.

The importance of online tools is evident as they eliminate the need for physical proximity, enabling ideologically united photographer groups on a global scale. The digital realm represents a new space where photographers, despite geographic distance, stay connected and share a common digital territory. This space is already being shaped by coloniality and the imposition of knowledge as the one to be followed (Stingl, 2015). In a predominantly male market, feminist collectives play a crucial role in discussing masculinity and integrating female perspectives. Similarly, in predominantly white contexts, collectives of the African diaspora or indigenous descent introduce diverse worldviews to the digital

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sphere. Collaborative efforts amplify the photographers' collective impact, making them more influential agents of change compared to individual photographers.

Expanding perspectives on the world is potentially the core contribution contemporary collectives can make to the idea of decolonial photography. They overcome the tendency of photographers to gravitate towards places where media attention is concentrated, driven by capitalist news-making logic, often to cultures unfamiliar to them. Once on the ground to cover any given event, photojournalists stay only as long as the news cycle dictates, then move on as attention shifts to something else. In doing so, photojournalism – even indirectly and unintentionally – perpetuates symbolic violence by treating people and their stories as news products rather than subjects.

Complex issues are portrayed as fragments of realities, decontextualized, and, thus, easily subjected to political manipulations. In interviews, a need emerged for time, for long-term projects driven by the understanding that impactful projects, which mature and have a lasting presence in society, require time. Projects such as "Gaviões" by Farpa's Tuane Fernandes, or "Gente sin casas, casas sin gente" by Ruido Photo's Bruna Casas, discuss matters considered significant for society, often focusing on subjects that evolve slowly and demand thorough documentation. This is not to undermine the significance of the daily press, which primarily focuses on breaking news, but to highlight this distinctive characteristic of collectives.

9 Fighting for a cause: non-objective photography and political journalism

In common, regardless of the binding factor, collectives advocate for causes and completely transcend the idea of objective photography. Quite the opposite, by understanding that each photograph carries within itself countless layers of meaning, members of collectives not only choose topics that resonate with their political ideals but also cite this as a primary reason for joining the collective in the first place. Indeed, in interviews for this research, the majority of photographers in both Spain and Brazil stated feeling comfortable expressing their political stances within their collectives, highlighting their potentially liberating nature

compared to traditional media outlets and leaving space open for decolonial photography.

Fotomovimiento, a Catalan collective based in Barcelona, serves as a prominent example of activist photography. The group explicitly positions itself as an activist collective of photographers that employs images to report and denounce social issues they deem relevant. In their own words, they create images "which bear witness to and disseminate social reality, with special emphasis on the most disadvantaged social sectors and communities"[1].

The political stance of photo collectives signifies a significant shift in the media landscape. Historically, the media has strived for an illusion of objectivity, despite being decidedly aligned with a specific cosmovision. As Olu Oguibe (2002, p. 256) points out, "The camera was a decidedly ideologically positioned tool on the side of the incursion of the colonized", serving as the primary means to create a visual narrative about colonized lands. This tool allowed colonial powers to bring images back to Europe that were crucial in shaping stereotypes and the popular imagination about both colonial subjects and endeavors. These images were central in propagating the idea of the civilizing mission of the colonizers, despite the brutalities carried out in the colonies. Understanding news photography as a commodity that produces a performative model for citizenship, contemporary collectives embrace subjectivity as a way to propose new possible imaginaries beyond those that historically dominated news photography.

10 Collective subjectivity: the rising of a new photographic self

Collective subjectivity is a crucial element that contemporary collectives bring to photojournalism, distinguishing them from individually focused agencies. The discussion on subjectivity in photography oscillates between viewing it as purely objective versus recognizing the photographer's inherent subjectivity. Collectives contribute to this discourse by advocating for collective authorship, where all contributors to an image are considered authors, not just the ones pressing the shutter button. Therefore, authorship is often attributed to the group, involving photographers, fixers, subjects, and others involved in its creation, and not to a single individual.

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The fact that photography emerged alongside modernity, coinciding with the rise of big cities, the Enlightenment, and, particularly relevant to our argument, the standardization of procedures and ideas, is fundamental for understanding the weight of objectivity in photography's early days and its subsequent developments. What Rouillé (2009, p. 39) refers to as 'document-photography' encapsulates the debate in the early decades of photography, where it was viewed merely as a tool – an industrial revolution invention capable of mass-producing images. It was a mechanical process where the photographer functioned as the operator of equipment that reflected reality. This marks the advent of the technical image (Flusser, 2006), generated by apparatuses derived from scientific principles. Consequently, these images occupied a distinct space from earlier visual representations, reinforcing the myth of scientific objectivity that traditionally influenced photographic narratives. The photographer was often perceived as a passive recorder of scenes, with more emphasis placed on equipment than on human aspects such as techniques and cultural background.

Over the decades, however, there has been a shift towards acknowledging the photographer's role in the photographic process. What Kobrè (2011, p. 437) termed 'Image expression', or the celebration "of form, the affirmation of the photographer's individuality, and dialogism with the subjects", encapsulates the main features of this new understanding of photography. Robert Frank's seminal work 'The Americans' from 1958 is widely regarded as the epitome of this reorientation, as it emphasized the "sovereignty of the 'I-photographer'... placing the image squarely within the exclusive domain of subjectivity, inspiration, and soul" (Kobré, 2011, p. 171).

From being an objective recorder of the world to offering a passionate view of it, the 21st century has introduced a new challenge with the digitalization of photography. Digital photography is unequivocally grounded in its historical context, inherently reflecting the core issues, concerns, and challenges of its time. Unlike analog photography, which captures light on photographic film, digital photography employs a binary sensor to capture raw data about light, subsequently converting it into images. This seemingly straightforward shift has profound ontological implications for photography; digital technology dematerializes the medium, transforming it into raw information

– "content without matter" (Fontcuberta, 2003, p. 8). The allure and impact of digital photography are now influenced by factors beyond the frame, particularly during the post-photographic phase of editing, where data is transformed into an image. In this sense, digital photography reintroduces a heightened level of subjectivity akin to other visual narratives like painting and writing. The expanded potential for image manipulation also poses challenges to the concept of visual truth itself.

Digital photography thus sets itself apart ontologically from analog photography in terms of subjectivity, becoming the arena where photo collectives are situated. With its capacity for extensive image manipulation and departure from referentiality, photography is losing the support of its empirical roots and its credibility begins to depend on the trust that photographers gain (Fontcuberta, 2019). This underscores the central role of photo collectives, where young photographers unite to strengthen ties and bolster their work collectively. These groups emerge as a cohesive entity whose solidarity legitimizes social practices that might otherwise face individual challenges. Such collectives foster a strong culture of critical engagement among members, where "individualities are diluted in the construction of a collective identity, independent of the work being signed as a reference to a specific photographer" (Queiroga, 2015, p. 138).

11 A new kind of horizontal collectivity: not the traditional agencies

One consequence of the dissatisfaction and indignation driving the formation of collectives is their rejection of traditional leadership structures and delegation of decision-making authority to representatives. Instead, the managerial process is inherently collective, with most decisions made in assemblies where all members express their opinions, and decisions are reached through persuasion rather than hierarchy. Horizontally organized, cooperation is fundamental to contemporary collectives beyond decision-making, serving as a means to support fellow photographers during moments of struggle or insecurity. This emphasis on horizontality distinguishes collectives and underscores their commitment to collaborative, egalitarian practices.

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Collectives are distinctly different from agencies, which historically dominated professional photographic practice throughout the 20th century. While agencies like Magnum, Getty, and the Associated Press operate with rigid and vertical structures, collectives often form in response to dissatisfaction with such organizational models. Although some collectives may adopt operational approaches similar to major agencies in the future, their foundational principles set them apart. Examples like NOOR in the Netherlands and Farpa Coletivo in Brazil illustrate this potential evolution. Previous research has compared photo collectives and agencies, highlighting disparities in professional photojournalism consolidation (dos Santos, 2020; Persichetti, 2016; Queiroga, 2012). This study focuses on a key difference: the verticality of agencies versus the horizontality of collectives and its impact on photographers' creative processes.

Contemporary collectives typically integrate professionals from various disciplines besides the photographer and recognize the importance of each area in the creative process. They embrace "the possibility of incorporating other specialties, where each specific function plays a crucial role in shaping the final photographic work. This not only acknowledges the need for diverse expertise, unlike in agencies but also integrates these specialties as creative forces" (Queiroga, 2012, p. 139). These may include designers, editors, fixers, producers, and others – roles also present in photographic agencies but often excluded from the creative process. "The common practice is for them to be part of a mechanism driven by the photographer-author... and not [to] actively contribute to the creation of the work" (Queiroga, 2015, p. 140).

Agencies tend to isolate photographers from commercial and bureaucratic processes, placing them in a distinct bubble. In contrast, collectives operate with a logic of collective intelligence, involving these professionals in discussions and agenda formulation. This rhizomatic, non-linear logic represents a significant divergence from traditional agencies, fostering alternative modes of thinking through the interaction of these diverse roles. Collectives embody the rhizomatic logic akin to what agencies represent in the arborescent model.

12 Conclusion

Contemporary photo collectives are groups of professional photographers leveraging digital tools and ontology to produce politically motivated work, challenging traditional practices of photographic collectivization. They emerge from a desire for autonomy and seek to amplify marginalized perspectives while redefining cultural and artistic contributions in their respective contexts. When considering collectives as spaces for the circulation and production of photography alongside photo agencies, several significant tensions arise. Collectives often seek autonomy and control over visual narratives, contrasting with the hierarchical structure and commercial interests of established agencies.

While traditional agencies have a solid reputation for credibility and legitimacy in photojournalism, collectives may struggle to achieve similar recognition. Additionally, collectives prioritize diversity of voices and underrepresented perspectives, which can contrast with the narrative uniformity often associated with agencies. Economic sustainability is also crucial, as collectives typically operate with limited resources and face challenges in securing stable funding. Lastly, differing ethical approaches to the use of images, particularly in sensitive or conflict contexts, raise questions about responsibility and social impact. These tensions not only illustrate the complexities of today's photojournalism landscape but also underscore the dynamic and challenging role of collectives in reshaping visual journalistic practice, leaving doors open for future research to draw lessons from these tensions.

In discussing such profound changes, it's easy to fall into the trap of excessive optimism that partly plagued the first generation of scholars studying the social and cultural impacts of the internet. The allure of photography liberated from the constraints of coloniality and able to actively participate in constructing new imaginaries can be both charming and deceptive. The challenges stemming from social movements in the network society are immense and not inherently liberating – fake news, image manipulations, and social bubbles are just a few obstacles significantly affecting the development of photojournalistic practices in the digital age.

Nevertheless, the emergence of contemporary photo collectives may represent one of the most significant steps in the reinvention of photojournalistic practices over recent decades.

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Intrinsically linked to the social and technological dynamics of the network society, their core characteristics can offer substantial theoretical and practical contributions to journalism studies. Their impact is already evident in various aspects: from opting not to join traditional agencies to focusing on local cultures, a new generation of photographers is being nurtured in an environment vastly different from that of their predecessors. It's natural to envision that this different environment will generate a distinct set of demands. However, the lack of academic interest in this phenomenon remains a barrier to its full development. Indeed, both collectives and theoretical debates lose valuable information and richness when a phenomenon lasting over 20 years, encompassing some of the most prominent figures in photography, is simply ignored. Challenges persist, as the volatility of these groups often demonstrates, yet in a period of structural societal changes, our attention should be squarely focused on these new, previously unseen structures, as innovation often emerges from such spaces.

Focusing on collectives also prompts a discussion on the concept of decolonial photography and the production of narratives (imagery or text) emerging from established centers of knowledge production. In this regard, an open question for future investigation is the extent to which this new photojournalistic subject can genuinely contribute to the decolonial turn. Can it serve as a vehicle for narratives and epistemologies that transcend modernity and offer alternatives to the models needed for the network society? Or are we simply integrating subalternated voices into an already rigid system without fundamentally reforming the guiding structures of our society?

If we aspire to a future that embraces a rich pluriverse for everyone, it's crucial to critically reassess the assumptions that perpetuate subjugation forged during imperial times. It necessitates rethinking the relationships between "indigenous peoples and colonizers and, more broadly, between the West and the rest of the world" (Mbembe, 2020, p. 116), which continue to influence international relations pragmatically and symbolically. The forthcoming democracy – an inclusive democracy – will emerge from a serious commitment to dismantling imperial knowledge. This task "must go hand in hand with a critique of all forms of universalism that, hostile to difference and the figure of the Other, attribute to the West a monopoly on truth, civilization, and humanity" (p. 117). Therefore,

discussions of decolonial narratives help us grasp how contemporary technologies and social dynamics can contribute to constructing this new democracy. At its core, the focus on photojournalism is a quest for this democracy, which will emerge through overcoming hostility towards the Other and valuing their narratives.

NOTES

1. https://fotomovimiento.org/equipo/

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