RESEÑA

Juanita Solano Roa, *Negative Originals: Race and Early Photography in Colombia*

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Negative Originals: Race and Early Photography in Colombia is a key contribution to Colombian and Latin American history of photography, the social and cultural history of Colombia, and visual culture studies. Through meticulous archival research and theoretically sophisticated analysis, Solano Roa examines the work of two major photographic studios in Medellín, Fotografía Rodríguez and Benjamín de la Calle's studio, to reveal how photography both visualized and contested the racial ideology of the *raza antioqueña* at the turn of the twentieth century. Beyond its rigorous engagement with primary sources, what distinguishes this study is its innovative methodological approach: the author insists that, to fully understand the construction of identity through portrait photography, we must not only examine the positive prints but also the original negatives. Her framing of the negative as material object, conceptual tool, methodological framework, and rhetorical metaphor yields remarkable insights into the construction of hegemonic notions of race in Antioquia, as well as challenges to dominant racial ideology through the depiction of counter-hegemonic subjects such as lower-class, black, and cross-dressed persons.

The book's central argument revolves around the myth of the *raza antioqueña*, a racial discourse that emerged in late nineteenth-century Antioquia claiming that its inhabitants constituted a superior race of Spanish descent, characterized by whiteness, Catholic piety, and industriousness. Solano Roa demonstrates how this ideology had profound social consequences, shaping everything from access to wealth to moral values to conventions of self-representation. Her examination of glass plate negatives from the Biblioteca Pública Piloto de Medellín, which houses one of the most extensive photography archives in Latin America, reveals interventions that are invisible in positive prints: the meticulous retouching of faces to create smoother, whiter complexions; the hand-painting of wedding veils and other markers of social class; the manipulation of backgrounds to underscore aspirations to Western civility. These discoveries transform our understanding of how racial ideologies were literally inscribed onto photographic images, making visible the ingenious technical and rhetorical interventions that the two photographic studios deployed to produce the appearance of an idealized 'white' elite.

While all five chapters are strong, this reader found Chapters One, Three, and Five especially insightful and compelling. The first chapter, "Envisioning a New Race: Photographic Manipulation and the Discourse of la raza antioqueña," articulates one of the book's most significant contributions. Here, Solano Roa provides both historical context for the emergence of the myth of the Antioquian race and detailed analysis of how this discourse materialized in photographic negatives. Her account of the myth's intellectual genealogy is illuminating, tracing how local writers such as Luis Lopez de Mesa, Miguel Jiménez López, and Libardo López reframed international eugenic theories, while carefully noting the idiosyncrasies in the proclamation of Antioquian superiority. The chapter's archival analysis is revealing: examining negatives under raking light, Solano Roa discovered that Fotografía Rodríguez consistently applied graphite retouching to whiten and smooth skin in the positive prints, a manipulation that goes far beyond standard corrections and that suggests an almost obsessive commitment to visualizing racial purity. This contrasts with Benjamín de la Calle's studio practice, which was more restrained, and whose work did not serve the purpose of enforcing racial hierarchies as much as fulfilling aspirational desires, and elevating the social standing of his more diverse clientele. The chapter's treatment of photographs of black Antioquians is especially nuanced, demonstrating how these images resist the myth of Antioquian 'whiteness' not only by depicting black subjects but also by presenting them as persons rather than types or supplementary figures. Through careful consideration of archival material, Solano Roa demonstrates both the crucial role that photography played in the construction of local racial ideology and the complexity of that role, filling a major void in scholarship on Colombian photography.

Following Chapter Two, which delves into the visual construction of Antioquian racial superiority in the Rodriguez brothers' work, the third chapter, "The Negative in Suspense: Deviant Subjects and Bodies in the Work of Benjamín de la Calle," shifts focus to photographs that challenge binary categorizations of gender and sexuality. Here, Solano Roa's analysis of photographs of cross-dressed individuals demonstrates how de la Calle's studio became a space where non-normative identities could

be visualized and, to some extent, validated. The chapter examines gender non-conformity in a society whose dominant ideology enforced rigid Catholic norms. Photographs of cross-dressed individuals, whether in allegorical contexts or as police documentation, reveal the contradictions of de la Calle's practice: while his work often contested elite rhetoric, he also collaborated with disciplinary institutions. Solano Roa refuses to resolve these tensions, instead showing how photography's ambivalences—its capacity to both document and transform, to enforce norms and enable transgression—mirror the ambivalences of the negative itself, simultaneously transparent and opaque, revelatory and latent.

Chapters Four and Five examine subjects that might surprise some readers. The fourth chapter addresses Orientalism in the output of both studios and in turn-of-the-century visual culture in Medellín, both broadening and questioning established definitions of this concept. This focus gives way to Chapter Five, "Negative Spaces: The Backdrops in Benjamín de la Calle's and Fotografía Rodríguez's Photographs." This chapter articulates one of the book's most remarkable contributions by analyzing the painted backdrops that consistently appear in the work of both studios, which are typically dismissed as merely decorative. The author demonstrates that, far from being supplemental, these "negative spaces" actively construct meanings related to class, race, and cultural modernity, and are therefore important aesthetic devices in the construction of the *raza antioqueña* ideology. One particularly insightful passage analyzes Fotografía Rodríguez's shift from figurative to abstract backdrops in the late 1920s—predating abstract painting in Colombia by a decade—showing how geometric art deco patterns did not signal progressive attitudes but represented the paradox of a society that "pursued economic and technological progress but aimed to maintain its conservative social and cultural beliefs," a "traditional modernism" in which modernity appeared as simulacrum.

Negative Originals will be essential reading for multiple audiences. Scholars of Latin American photography will find it indispensable for its focus on understudied practitioners. Historians of Colombia will discover new perspectives on the formation of an influential regional identity. Researchers interested in how race, ethnicity, and gender are mediated through visual technologies will encounter a sophisticated study with broad implications. And theorists of photography will appreciate Solano Roa's sustained meditation on the ontology of the medium—her insistence that the negative, far from being merely preparatory or supplementary, constitutes a crucial site where meanings are produced, contested, and transformed. By refusing to treat photographs as transparent windows and instead examining them as material objects shaped by specific techniques, ideologies, and social aspirations, Solano Roa has written a book that reaches far beyond its immediate subject matter.