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# “Daguerreotypes in the South at New York Prices:” A Paper Archaeology of John Armstrong Bennet

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A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing.  
But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in  
metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.

- Karl Marx, *Capital*

## INTRODUCTION

Today, the daguerreotype portrait appears as a curiosity hidden between archives and collections, despite having been one of the major inventions and most ecstatic commodities of the nineteenth century. Daguerreotypes were the first photographic technology to circulate globally already in the first years after its invention. They were officially presented in Paris in 1839 by Louis Daguerre, an artist and entrepreneur, who had perfected a method for capturing and fixing a photographic image onto a metallic plate, thus yielding a unique copy such as the one below (Fig. 1) (Daguerre 1). In the two decades between 1839 and 1859, also known as the Daguerrean era and on which this research is focused, the ontology of daguerreotypes shifted in discrete but significant ways, before paper photography was fully developed and spread as an industry in the late 1850s. The study of these shifts is especially relevant with regards to the Latin American context where the discursive spaces occupied through this new mode of representation have been overlooked, often taken at face-value as part of a would-be continuous and stable global language.

While national histories of photography have long stated the early presence of daguerreotypes in the region, more focused research evidenced the diversity of approaches and appropriations of the medium upon arriving to the American continent.<sup>1</sup> This diversity, I argue, can be explored further through the singular practices of early practitioners such as John Armstrong Bennet.<sup>2</sup> Although credited as being a pioneer in studio photography, Bennet is also an elusive character who looms alternately large and small in apparently disconnected national histories of photography and scattered archival sources.<sup>3</sup> A review of Bennet’s journeys and of the circulation of his daguerreotype portraits allows us to bring into focus the emergence of other geographies of the photograph in the hemisphere.



Figure 1. John Armstrong Bennet. Daguerreotype portrait of anonymous sitter. PM000183. 1848-1850 © Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.

Bennet’s broad practice offers a continental vision of the early years of photography before multiple reproduction became possible, supplementing genealogical national histories and encyclopaedic surveys.<sup>4</sup> The task, however, of articulating this vision through the biographical form is challenged by the material conditions of daguerreotypes and of archival sources from this period. Despite being printed on metal and often kept in cases, these image-objects are especially fragile and difficult to classify and preserve. If they have survived, they are kept out of sight, in between collections and archives often having lost their singular stories. The study of daguerreotypes must often be supported by archival sources such as advertisements, printed articles, and other marginalia. As François Brunet noted in his study on the promiscuous relations between photography and literature, the early years of photography are framed by its written condition: “permeated by discourse and writing; ‘it happened by way of telling, rather than showing’” (Brunet 14). The global expansion and development of photography was indeed chronicled by the press and through personal correspondence, leaving behind a significant number of dispersed documents. Many of these sources have been gathered by previous generations of photohistorians to sketch the early years of the medium, setting the ground for the discipline through national histories of photography as a form of speculative writing. This essay builds on said national histories written in the

second half of the twentieth century, at times as genealogical exercises, others as archival projects.

Taking those dormant archives as a point of departure, this research follows daguerreotypist John Armstrong Bennet and his operations across the continent through what Lisa Gitelman defines as *paper knowledge* when thinking about the document form and its reproducibility as a mundane but critical device of the history of knowledge. While Gitelman gives a series of examples on *paper knowledge* starting from 1870, I will work through this concept to present earlier examples that allow for an archaeology of Bennet's practice (Gitelman 1). The city directory, the newspaper ad, stationary and even paper itself, contribute to the analysis of daguerreotype portraits in the hemisphere as they entered the world of commodities. Some of these documents, both bureaucratic indexes of presence and technological equivalents of the photograph, have been reproduced in national histories of photography, others were located through archival research. Through a close reading of some of them, I will analyse the changing language with which an early practitioner presented the new medium as he moved through the hemisphere. The aim of this analysis is to contribute to a continental history of photography about daguerreotype portraits in their becoming products, and not just any product but specifically artistic image-objects.

In so doing, I argue that the discourse of 'the artistic' put forward by photographers like Bennet marked a turning point for continental visual culture in so far as the producer, often a merchant or a chemist, gradually became an author both through self-fashioning in the printed promotion of his craft and by inscribing himself in the multiple surfaces of the images he produced. The construction of such discourse however is not as straightforward as it seems considering that it was dependent upon context specificities and market demands. I will take this bond between the artistic image and the market as a point of departure for the study of Daguerrean portraits; a horizon often shared with the fine arts in the first half of the nineteenth century (Pinson 2).

#### AN IMPOSSIBLE BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN ARMSTRONG BENNET

In her pioneering study on daguerreotypes in Colombia, Pilar Moreno de Ángel presented a comprehensive biography of John Armstrong Bennet (2000). While Moreno focused mainly on his Colombian years, her chapter on Bennet delineated some of his continental endeavours, thanks in part to the collaboration of photography scholar Frances Robb Osborne who had encountered Bennet's name while surveying daguerreotypes in the South of the United States. However, the impossible task of a complete biography was already evident in Moreno's attempt at one, as is the case with many early practitioners, whose brief careers appear like asterisms, spanning throughout the first decades of the medium and then disappearing in the side-lines as operators and merchants. Moreno's text on Bennet is an invitation to move beyond the national and the authorial models of the history of photography and into the

analysis of the author as a producer, borrowing from Benjamin’s critique of ‘literary products’, by looking at a set of material and intellectual conditions, against which the work of photographers like Bennet’s should be read (Benjamin 2). In this sense, one might be able to approach authorship before the advent of modern discourses on the autonomy of art and focus instead on the ‘living social context’ that shaped hybrid forms of photographic authorship since the early years of the medium, amalgamating the scientific, the economic, the artistic and the affective. Because of the many written traces connected to his name, Bennet, who was one among many tradesmen of the Daguerrean era, is an exemplary case study for exploring said hybridity following Geoffrey Batchen’s urgency to ‘insist on the vernacularity of the art photograph’, as a device enmeshed within a larger social and political matrix than that prescribed by its private dimension and its exclusivity (Batchen 76). For this reason, mainly, the focus of this study falls not so much on the sitters but rather on what the photographer was offering and how, both through his advertisements and through the actual portraits made by him.

John Armstrong Bennet had a common name and a common profession for the nineteenth century: he was a merchant who experimented with photographic techniques following the official invention of daguerreotypes in 1839. Originally the owner of a dry-goods store in lower Manhattan, Bennet’s early interest in photography allowed him to change profession, company, and often class, as the medium gained hemispheric importance (*Longworth* 1839, 92). In fact, despite his commonality, he is briefly mentioned in several national histories of photography from Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia, Chile, and the United States. Between 1840 and 1856 he opened at least 6 photographic studios in important urban centres like New York, Mobile (AL), New Orleans (LA), Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and Bogotá.<sup>5</sup> In this key decade for the expansion of the medium, Bennet appears at times as owner and at others as a partner in these outfits. Through the present research, a handful of his daguerreotype portraits has been located, scattered in an equally small handful of western museums and collections such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Musée Quai Branly in Paris, the Museo Nacional de Colombia and the Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango in Colombia, the Museo Histórico Nacional in Argentina and in private collections. Some of these are portraits of well-known historical figures, while others portray either anonymous sitters or lesser-known members of local elites. Notwithstanding his wide-ranging mentions, Bennet’s work has not yet been studied within the wider contexts of the Daguerrean era, the second industrial revolution and the advent of global capitalism within which said era unfolded. A closer look into his practice by way of paper knowledge will evidence two significant features that contribute to the historiography of the medium: the first is the emergence and transformation of a photographic author in the first decades after the invention of photography and the second is Bennet’s early participation in the process of commodification of daguerreotypes through the discourse of American artistic products in South America.

## DAGUERREOTYPES IN THE SOUTH AT NEW YORK PRICES

The dry-goods store was an important predecessor for early photographic studios, offering new trends and merchandise to local bourgeoisies thus connecting them to a global market. The earliest available reference to John Armstrong Bennet comes from the Longworth's New York City directory from 1838, where his name is associated to a dry-goods store in Soho (*Longworth* 1838, 90). By 1840, Bennet was advertising in a different address nearby, offering his services as a daguerreotypist for the first time (Moreno 134). Later in the decade, Soho would become the photographic neighbourhood of New York, and Broadway, its main street, gathered numerous photographic studios, including the most prestigious in the Union such as those of Matthew Brady, Jeremiah Gurney, and Charles DeForest Fredericks (Newhall 56). Bennet's offer of daguerreotypes as early as 1840 is surprising compared to the foundation dates of soon-to-be reputed daguerreotype galleries including Brady's, founded four years later; a fact that testifies to Bennet's early encounter with the medium and some of its pioneers, although his first contact with daguerreotypy remains unknown.

Throughout his life, however, Bennet would underscore his connection to New York City, synonymous with photographic quality and artistry. Indeed, New York became one of the main centres for the expansion of photography as an industry and an art in the 1840s, bringing together inventors, operators, suppliers, and customers from the very early years (Newhall 15). Bennet's shop in Soho was only a few blocks away from Washington Square Park, where in 1839 Samuel Morse performed some of the earliest demonstrations of the Daguerreotype in the hemisphere (Moreno 133). This potential vicinity to Morse, inventor and artist like Daguerre himself, has been used historiographically to construct the myth of American daguerreotypes as both art and scientific invention but it is still uncertain whether Bennet had any real connection to Morse or not, as has also been speculated about Matthew Brady (Wilson 6).<sup>6</sup> Unlike Brady, Bennet did not create a photographic empire in the city. Instead, he took his business south, first to Mobile, Alabama, an important commercial seaport, then to New Orleans, and later to South America (Robb Osborne 12). Throughout these ventures, this constant reference to New York was central to his promotion of daguerreotype portraits as artistic products.<sup>7</sup>

But if photography was indeed so prosperous in New York City, why did Bennet move South? In the years preceding the American civil war, many photographers from the North travelled, offering their services in territories where there was less tender (Smith 53).<sup>8</sup> According to Frances Robb Osborne: "During the 1840s, Mobile was Alabama's largest, most cosmopolitan city, spiced with immigrants, traders, and visitors," with consulates of foreign nations such as Uruguay and New Granada (12). At the time, Mobile was one of the largest seaports in the Union, and trade with the North and the Caribbean was central to the antebellum economy in the South; an economy already fuelled

by the traffic of natural resources and human labour primarily in the form of slavery. Through Mobile’s growing importance in the Caribbean economy, Bennet became increasingly involved in the international trade of raw materials such as quinine, cotton, and manufactured goods, which eventually led him further South in 1841.<sup>9</sup>

So far, no daguerreotypes have been identified from Bennet’s early years in New York and Mobile, but his ads are telling about his craft and his continental wanderings. Between 1842 and 1852, Bennet appeared intermittently between New York and Mobile in the city directories and advertising in the local paper “The Mobile Register and Journal,” both as a trader *and* as a photographer, alternating between professions but rarely mixing them on print.<sup>10</sup> In 1842, he appears in *E.T. Wood’s Mobile directory* as co-owner of a dry-goods store with French-man Edouard Tournier, and was involved in the trade of quinine and cotton with no mention of daguerreotypes.<sup>11</sup> His offer of cotton, fabrics, and medicines, including quinine, at his dry-goods shops, was not only in high demand but also closely related to a burgeoning photographic practice in the south. In fact, Mobile was subject to the illnesses that raged tropical climates and seaports over the rainy seasons, as evidenced by some of Bennet advertisements from those years:

Only one week longer!!...Call immediately if you want *accurate and beautiful Miniatures* of yourselves or friends – for soon the raging epidemic may hurry many into the grave! And then oh! how will you regret that you had not obtained a true copy of those loved features, when you find them fading from your memory. Delay not then or you may spend years in the unavailing sorrow when it is too late to repair the loss! Finished in the most elegant style for only \$6, at No. 55 Royal Street, up-stairs. [*Mobile Daily Register and Chronicle*, January 25, 1843]. (quoted in Robb Osborne 13)

Those ‘*accurate and beautiful miniatures, true copies*’, could prevent oblivion if the medicines sold at the store could not prevent death. Although carefully advertised, Bennet’s portraits were but one among the many commodities stocked in his store. His approach changed, however, in 1842 when, according to Frances Robb and Pilar Moreno, Bennet left for Montevideo, capital of Uruguay and another seaport subject to war and illnesses (Robb Osborne 13; Moreno 135). However, his trip was cut short. Uruguayan photohistorian Juan Antonio Varese argues that Bennet never actually reached Uruguay in 1842 and recent scholarship on the early history of the medium in that country does not mention this first trip either.<sup>12</sup> Be it as it may, upon his return to Mobile the year after, Bennet’s language regarding daguerreotypes changed importantly, evidencing a newfound belief in the profession as a means for social affirmation. According to both authors, back in Mobile in 1843, Bennet published an ad on the *Mobile Daily Register* in which he offered his

services this time as ‘daguerreotypist’, giving a rather long explanation of the ‘process’ and highlighting its scientific and mimetic quality:

This invention of a celebrated French Chemist, by which light is caused to produce a picture superior to every effort of genius, is justly considered one of the most extraordinary discoveries of the age... The value of a portrait depends upon its accuracy, and... the likeness produced (by this process) will be the exact image of the object from the same causes which enables a perfect eye to see. The precise expression of the face... in its minutest features will be at once and forever fixed; engraved as it were by the sunbeams, and as the operation seldom exceeds a minute, and is often finished in a few seconds, it is evident that the expressions of the face may be fixed in the picture which are too fleeting to be caught by the painter. By such flashes of the soul we remember our friends, and these cannot appear on canvas. (quoted in Moreno 136; Robb Osborne 1)

In the short period of time lapsed between the publication of these two ads, Bennet goes from not mentioning the photographic technique and camouflaging it as miniature painting, to calling himself a daguerreotypist and praising the scientific character of the recent *invention* of a Chemist, subtly claiming the superiority of the *likeness* over the portrait painting. On March 4, 1844, Bennet advertised his Daguerreotype Portrait Gallery (Mobile Register and Journal 1844). This transition from the dry-goods store to the Daguerrean gallery marks the beginning of Bennet’s career as a professional photographer which, responding to a global trend of the decade, would distinguish him from other middle-class tradesmen, at least temporarily (Newhall 55).

In his ads after 1842, Bennet seems to be coming to terms with the language that was to define his daguerreotype portraits: an amalgam of science and art, invented in France but perfected in New York. The new-found awareness coincided with the growing notion of an ‘American process’ more suited for portraiture, often including illumination (Gillespie 2; Newhall 115; Rinnhart 57). This can be sensed in some of his ads from Mobile from 1843 and 1844 where Bennet offered to “take daguerreotype likenesses,” although he also referred to them as “colored portraits in metal” (Mobile Daily Register and Journal 1843; Moreno 136). The ambiguity towards mechanical reproduction was symptomatic of the defensiveness with which early practitioners presented the medium despite its popularity.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Bennet’s ads insisted on the artistic qualities of his daguerreotypes in an attempt to cast off any hostilities towards it (Mobile Daily Chronicle 1843-1844; City Directory 1844). References to printmaking persisted in Bennet’s language, as in ‘engraved by the sunbeams’, although in this case it was through the action of the sun, of nature, that these portraits were fixed with little, or no mediation attributed yet to the producer or potential author. This authorial struggle can be sensed further in two ads published on the same day on the Mobile Daily Register, revealing



some of the local debates surrounding daguerreotype portraits (Mobile Daily Register and Journal 1844).<sup>14</sup> They are ads of two competing businesses on Mobile’s main street, one is of a portrait painter named Parker and the second is of Bennet’s studio:

Parker’s Daguerreotype portraits. Coloured in a superior matter. C.R. Parker, (Portrait Painter) who from his long experience as an Artist, has been able greatly to improve the coloring of Daguerreotypes, rendering them superior in many respects to Miniatures taken on Ivory. Mr. P. informs the public that he has connected with him Mr. Cordon of New York, who has been engaged in taking Daguerreotype miniatures since the science was first practiced, (about four years) and can be recommended as a perfect master of his Profession. Portraits painted as usual. Room in Mrs. Robb’s buildings, No. 55 Royal street, next door to the office of the Register and Journal, where the public are respectfully invited to call and examine specimens in both branches. Instructions given, apparatus and all kinds of materials furnished cheaper than at any other establishment in the southern country.

*Mobile Register and Journal.* January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1844.

-> J.A. BENNET. Daguerreotypist, would invite the attention of the public generally, and strangers visiting here, to the large collection of specimens now exhibiting at his old established DAGUERREOTYPE PORTRAIT GALLERY, No. 59 Royal Street. As there are two operators within a door of each other, and mistakes being daily made about the entrance, it will be well for those visiting the subscriber’s room, to look for his NAME, which will be found upon the canvases at the door.

-> Mr. B. colors them BEAUTIFULLY for those who wish. Instructions given. Apparatus and materials at New-York prices – call and see. Feb 16. 64t\* J.A. BENNET, Daguerreotypist.

*Mobile Register and Journal.* February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1844. [Republished Monday March 4<sup>th</sup>]

The ads have a similar structure: both Parker and Bennet have a similar offer of portraits, instructions and materials, and the possibility of visiting and *seeing in person* the available inventory; all recurring features of photographic studios of that period. Parker’s reference to a Mr. Cordon of New York, his mastery, and the duration of his practice, competed with Bennet’s background. But while Parker offered portraits both in painting and daguerreotype with prices “cheaper than any establishment in the southern country,” Bennet calls himself ‘Daguerreotypist’ and mentions New York pricing as a form of prestige,

speculating on value without discussing amounts. In so doing, he was underscoring his own personal and professional origins in the city – connections that Parker could only boast of enjoying second hand.

Additionally, both ads emphasise colour, a reference to painting and a reminder of the hybrid nature of such images, as colour could not be achieved yet through photography and had to be added manually. The hand-made quality of colour was exploited by Bennet as a surplus to his ‘specimens’. This characteristic trait aimed at breaching the gap between mediums, foreseeing any claim of painting’s superiority as to reproduce the colours of life. Bennet would continue to offer illuminated daguerreotypes as one of his signature skills later in Argentina, Uruguay, and Colombia, promoting illumination as an artistic feature of his ‘canvases’ and teaching it to his pupils.

In 1844, Bennet left again for South America escaping the yearly season of malaria and yellow fever (Moreno, 137).<sup>15</sup> Before leaving, he published several ads in the city paper inviting customers to visit the Mobile studio before his departure to South America in 1845 (Moreno 137; Robb 13). An advertisement from later that year (May 1844) informs that his pupil, Norman Bugby, would take over his studio, although he ended up selling it to Marcus Aurelius Root, a daguerreotypist from Philadelphia with whom Bennet held a studio in New Orleans later in 1856 (Smith 401; Robb 13). Uncoincidentally, Root was a strong advocate of American photography as an art form throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, eventually publishing one of the earliest histories of the medium (1864). As we shall see, Root may also have supplied Bennet with photographic materials to embellish his portraits throughout his continental journeys.

In sum, even without any surviving portraits, Bennet’s early years in the United States can be traced by his presence in print be it in the newspaper or the city directories, following the proliferation of this type of bureaucratic print culture. Bennet’s early practice points, furthermore, towards the formation of an early network of collaborators linking New York City, Philadelphia, Mobile, and New Orleans, a network which he would continue to expand in his travels to South America through photography.

#### THE ARTIST FROM NEW YORK

As Bennet moved south, he encountered changing attitudes towards daguerreotypes, which destabilise general assumptions about the flow of information between latitudes, particularly about the medium’s reception in the emerging republican metropolises. Bennet arrived in Buenos Aires in 1845 according to several national histories of photography from Argentina. Although he was not the first daguerreotypist in the country, he took what is thought to be one of the oldest surviving daguerreotypes in Argentina to date, according to photo historian Miguel Ángel Cuarterolo and collector Carlos Vertanessian (Fig. 2.1). It is a daguerreotype portrait accompanied by a piece of paper inserted as a form of epigraph inside the case of the photograph. The

handwritten note specifies that this portrait of Miguel Otero, aged 55 years minus a month and a few weeks, was taken with the Daguerreotype by Dn. Juan A. Bennet (his name hispanized), in Buenos Aires, on October 15, 1845, closing with the signature of the owner who probably wrote the note (Fig. 2.3). The pairing of image and text speaks of Bennet’s presence in the country as an active photographer, this time not only through his printed advertisements. The double nature of the image-object and the handwritten note on paper underscores the photograph’s value as both an image for private contemplation and a historical document for posterity, allowing it to reach us with its singular story. The note vaguely reminds of colonial portraiture which was so often accompanied by a painted inscription with information about the sitter and less often about the author, in an attempt to preserve their identity. In fact, because daguerreotypes yielded a reversed image, early photography and text could hardly coexist on the same surface until paper photography and photomechanical processes were developed later in the second half of the century. Thus, the handwritten note distinguishes this portrait from the many anonymous daguerreotypes from the decade and makes a claim for both the sitter’s and the author’s identity, certifying this as the only known portrait by Bennet in Argentina and as his earliest surviving work known to date.



Figure. 2.1. John Armstrong Bennet. Hand-tinted Daguerreotype portrait of Miguel Otero, Governor by proxy of the Province of Salta. Courtesy of Museo Histórico Nacional, Buenos Aires.

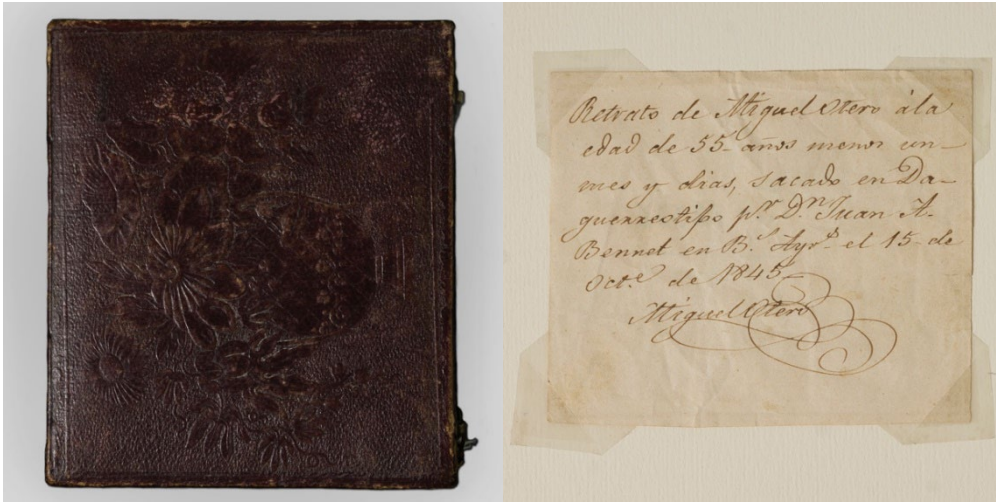


Figure 2.2. Daguerreotype case, front. (Left)  
Courtesy of Museo Histórico Nacional, Buenos Aires.

Figure 2.3. Handwritten note within daguerreotype case. (Right)  
Courtesy of Museo Histórico Nacional, Buenos Aires.

The hand-coloured portrait shows Otero, sitting, resting his arm on a book. The illuminated jewels in gold underscore his status, as the two visible chains serve to keep a watch and a stamp at hand (neither of them visible), pointing towards the sitter's literacy and belonging to a global, unified time system. Otero wears a red satin vest and a red ribbon, also known as 'divisa punzó,' underscoring his sympathies for Rosas's federalist government (Álvarez Gutiérrez, 25). Here the use of colour is not only a handmade trait of Bennet's artistic portraiture, but it also attests to Otero's political allegiances at a time of extreme partisanship. When the picture was allegedly taken, Otero was governor of Salta, a northern province and historically a mining region rich in silver and gold, precious metals which were essential in the production of daguerreotypes. This correlation between the sitters' source of wealth and their possibility to have a daguerreotype portrait taken is common among South American sitters, and Bennet's sitters are no exception in this sense. Otero's family was also captured through the daguerreotype, but the authorship of the family portraits located at the Museo Pampeano de Chascomús is uncertain because there is no inscription to confirm it (Gómez 41).

No other daguerreotypes have been effectively attributed to Bennet in Argentina, besides Otero's despite there being many anonymous portraits from the 1840s. Yet, the links between daguerreotypy's late proliferation and Argentina's political isolation during the years of Rosas are tantalising, opening questions about the early expansion of the medium in the country (Vertanessian 113). Unlike other American territories, Argentina's access to photography had been delayed by the French and British blockade of the port as an offensive towards the Rosas dictatorship (Cuarterolo 18). As is the case with many other

territories, photography arrived first in the written form in Argentina, as news of the invention reached Buenos Aires already in 1840, but it was not until 1843 that the first photographs were effectively taken in the capital by another American named John Elliot who captured views of the city which have not survived (Cuarterolo 18). It is not strange then, considering the blockade by European powers, that some of the earliest studio photographers in the country were North American, a trend that extended to neighbouring South American nations such as Peru and Bolivia (Cuarterolo 22; Buck 97).<sup>16</sup> This proliferation may have contributed to the expansion of photographic portraits as American commodities in countries where European presence was prestigious but was also seen with suspicion after the independence wars of the beginning of the century. Effectively, many European practitioners and travellers offered their photographic services throughout the forties and fifties but Bennet’s early practice and that of later North American practitioners taking ‘likenesses’ was symptomatic of a growing presence of the United States in the South of the continent through photography, as one among other forms of informal empire, which capitalised on the elite’s interest in new foreign technologies (Hannavy 71).

The importance of Bennet’s sitters evidences a clear codeterminacy of material and social-symbolic value that is furthered throughout his South American enterprises. The celebrity of a few early portraits has guaranteed their survival even when they lack inscriptions regarding the author or the sitter, this is partly because of the social status of those portrayed. Yet, according to an article from 1846, during his second recorded stay in the southern cone, Bennet made more than 600 daguerreotypes in Buenos Aires and 300 in Uruguay in the brief period of his stays:

El señor Bennet, que se hace tan recomendable por su condescendencia y cortesía como por su talento, se va dentro de ocho días para los Estados Unidos, después de haber ejecutado en Buenos Aires más de 600 retratos y dejado como 300 en esta capital (Montevideo). Debe sucederle en su ejercicio aquí, su discípulo el Sr. Helsby, a quien nos ha recomendado como muy capaz. [*El Nacional*, 1846]. (quoted in Varese 51)

It is no surprise that the possibility of having a portrait taken with the new medium was an attractive prospect at the time of Bennet’s second trip to South America when daguerreotype making had become faster and slightly more accessible. What is strange is the survival of so few attributed portraits if he had indeed taken so many during his second trip. Was the short chronicle in the Uruguayan newspaper inflating the number of portraits produced either to benefit the photographer and to confer a certain cosmopolitan status on the isolated capitals of the southern cone? Or is it rather a matter of lack of conservation of visual culture which, as a field of difference, has been neglected, leaving behind these hybrid images and the intertextual relations which are so

difficult to archive and preserve? (Rogoff 25). The lack of inscriptions may have had to do with the private dimension of these early portraits but as we shall see, inscriptions became increasingly important to a burgeoning market. Ultimately, what the advertisement suggests is that besides the customary reference to New York City, numbers were becoming an important indicator for the popularity and promotion of the medium.

Bennet's advertisements during this trip to South America point towards yet another shift in his discourse about daguerreotypes after 1845. Ads no longer mentioned the fidelity of the invention but focused instead on the ability of the artist-photographer to interpret nature, perfecting it rather than copying it. In some announcements from his time in Argentina, Bennet offered two or three photographic attempts until the subject was satisfied with the portrait, subtly playing with the sitter's vanity and putting forward a business model based on the potential multiplicity of the photographic image and on the photographer's artistry. In another advertisement from this time in Buenos Aires, Bennet invited his customers to get "the best copy of themselves" again insisting on the medium's capability to offer many versions of a sitter, and on the necessity to aim for the best one. And what was the best copy if not one in which sitter and photographer mutually agreed upon. To create this best version of the self, the photographer was offering his personal skills: his mediation, which included a technical and an artistic background, attention to detail, and last but not least an amicable character, which distinguished him from other practitioners and allowed him to create affective and eventually commercial bonds with his sitters.

In 1846 Bennet travelled back to Uruguay, as conflicts between Federalists and Unitarians escalated in Argentina, leaving his Buenos Aires studio to his apprentices and later partners, the Helsby brothers, who would later expand their practice into Chile too (González Aranda 228; Hannavy 291; Hanon). Bennet's ads in Uruguay demonstrate similar such business acumen and cultural sensitivity, appealing to the fragile self-perception of the nations' elites as would-be participants in world history despite their all temporal and geographical isolation. In January of 1846, Bennet advertised in *El Comercio y El Nacional* of Montevideo:

Magníficos retratos por el daguerrotipo, ejecutados por J.A. Bennett, artista de Nueva York. [2 de enero 1846]. (quoted Varese 50)

The recurring association with the New York art scene was especially useful in South America where it gave his portraits a surplus value in the form of foreign merchandise on which later itinerant photographers would capitalise. In so doing, Bennet was aligning himself with an American artistic legacy and subtly putting forward a discourse of photography as an idiosyncratic artistic practice that provided a space for subjectivity. The artistic nature of his daguerreotypes features importantly in his second recorded trip to the Southern cone. The promise of an aesthetic experience, rather than a disillusioned truth, fuelled

business, justifying the need to acquire more than one photograph. Meanwhile, the anxieties of war and illness continued to play a key role in luring potential South American consumers into getting a likeness taken, thus putting in motion a series of affective economies that shaped the representation of an imagined community as would-be cosmopolitan subjects (Anderson 5).

According to Bennet’s ad below, only a good portrait could preserve the sitter’s image in the afterlife, once again creating an association between quality and legacy:

*Febrero, 1846. Aviso bilingüe. Comercio de la Plata, Montevideo, 5 de Febrero, 1846.*

Jueces competentes ha [sic] declarado estos retratos iguales a los mejores que se sacan en Europa y en norte América; y superiores, inmensamente superiores, a los que hasta ahora se han visto en esta ciudad. La vida es incierta, y peligrosa a toda demora: ahora es el tiempo de obtener lo que todos deben apreciar como un buen retrato. (quoted in Varese 52)

As evidenced by the ad, grief and attachment were just some of the determinations of value placed on the photographs. By mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the heads of the new nation-states were hungry for new modes of representation and daguerreotypes appeared as a medium of equivalent value between the new nation-states and the old world, a possible common currency for the growing bourgeoisie. These portraits, which claimed to be “like the best taken in Europe or North America”, promised coevalness and continuity; an improvement too, because they were “immensely better than those seen before in this city” again pointing towards an Anglo-American hegemony of knowledge that promised to supersede French photographic practices as yet another form of progress. If indeed it was through the language of photography that the sitter could enter a common ground shared with sitters all over the globe, it was also through it that the subject could stay up to date, be actualized and brought into the present, a global present.

This commonality proved to be as episodic as the daguerreotype itself, as many of the sitters achieved photographic immortality but lost their identity surviving in anonymous portraits or were discarded when paper photography was introduced commercially. However, daguerreotypes could act as a common currency and held an exchange value (Murray 41). The production of daguerreotypes, those engraved miniatures, required metals also used for coinage and jewellery such as silver, gold, copper, and mercury or liquid gold, and as such, they held intrinsic, concrete value as objects that could be exchanged and whose material value could be quantified (Levine 16). Additionally, these precious objects offered to amalgam materials from all over the world in one private image of devotion that could be purchased.<sup>17</sup> The materials of the image and its case increasingly became signifiers of these objects as commodities of an international market: velvet, leather, mother of

pearl made American cases stand out from the plain European cases and frames (Edwards 15). Daguerreotypists like Bennet strove to inscribe the distinctiveness of their practice onto these surfaces, underscoring the intellectual labour behind their production besides their intrinsic material value. This commodification of daguerreotypes as luxury objects is especially evident in Bennet's cases from later years in Colombia, in which he paid especial attention to the surfaces that contain his portraits (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. John Armstrong Bennet. Daguerreotype portrait of anonymous sitter. FT1833. Colección Pilar Moreno de Ángel (1850 - 1950) Colección de Archivos Especiales. Sala de Libros Raros y Manuscritos. Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango Bogotá. Photograph by the author.

### LA GALERÍA DEL DAGUERROTIPO IN BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

After his brief stay in Rio de la Plata, Bennet left the studio to his partners and returned to the United States in 1846, according to the manifesto of a boat travelling from Montevideo to New York (The National Archives RG: 36). His trace is then lost for a couple of years although some photohistorians mention that he continued to supply his partners in the Southern cone (Cuarterolo 18). He resurfaced in 1848 in Bogotá, where he opened a dry-goods store and his “Galería del Daguerrotipo”, a business which stimulated a small but already existing market for photography started by earlier travelling photographers (Serrano 44). Bennet's arrival in Colombia is intrinsically linked to the advent of liberalism in the new nation, at the time named Republic of New Granada. The reason for his first trip is still unknown, however, between 1846 and 1848, the United States signed and ratified the Bidlack-Mallarino treaty on commerce across the Panama isthmus, which opened the stunted national economy to imports from the Union as well as immigration of non-Catholic travellers (Delpar 58). The set of liberal reforms introduced by the government of Tomás



Cipriano de Mosquera transformed continental travel and market economies as the crossing of Panama saved many days of travel and hardship when sailing from the East Coast of the United States to reach California, without having to circumvent South America. Uncoincidentally, most historians place the beginning of the Gold Rush in 1848.<sup>18</sup> Protestant immigrants brought new forms of merchandise including photography as well as other manufactured goods consumed by locals and travellers alike.

Like many foreigners, Bennet arrived in the midst of this liberalisation of the nation’s economy, and although he worked as a daguerreotypist from the beginning, he continued to exercise as tradesman of manufactured products including medicines and luxury goods such as Hazelton pianos, throughout his many years in New Granada. In the books of the Customs Administration, held at Archivo General de la Nación in Bogotá, Bennet appears often between 1848 and 1852, at times as a resident in the capital, importing a broad variety of the merchandise from his trips, which ranged from medicines, liquors, and textiles to musical instruments, firearms, and photographic materials including pigments among others (Fig. 4). The featured detail evidences that among the many elements in the list Bennet imported “5 ‘fine machines to produce daguerreotypes, 14 dozens of copper plates for daguerreotypes portraits, 2 frames for portraits, 52 4/12 dozens of assorted boxes for the same and 8 lines boxes for the same purpose.”<sup>19</sup> The quantities of Bennet’s imports are small compared to other merchants from those years, but the number of photographic supplies and the variety of products speak to a growing bourgeois market (AGN Aduanas 1851, 103). This also reflected on an increasing corpus of paper knowledge, which supported the liberalisation of the economy.

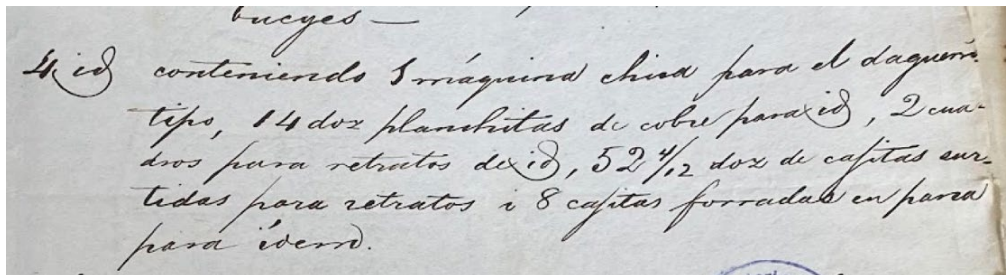


Figure 4. Detail. Customs document. Sección República, Fondo Aduanas, Tomo 5, Folio 13. Archivo General de la Nación Jorge Palacios Preciado - AGN. Photograph by the author.

Most of Bennet’s extant photographs are from his years in Colombia and testify to the new socioeconomic relations brought by the aperture of the relatively young nation-state. In his Colombian portraits that span almost a decade of work, the figure of Bennet as a photographer consolidates in a style that is, in the words of Molly Nesbit, a claim to authorship in so far as it is concerned with distinguishing cultural labour, as material and intellectual (Nesbit 238). These portraits offer important insight into the strategies deployed

by Bennet to inscribe himself, his vision as an artist and his trade, into his portraits.



Figure 5. John Armstrong Bennet. Daguerreotype portrait of anonymous sitter. PM000182. 1848-1850 © Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.

One material manifestation of this claim to authorship can be found in some of Bennet's Colombian portraits, where the last name "Bennet" is stamped either on the protective mat or on the velvet pad inside the case (Fig. 3, Fig. 5). Following Steve Edwards's study of daguerreotype businesses, this stamped signature appears as a claim to property, intellectual property, and a brand which is present in Bennet's most famous portraits from his Colombian years as if to create an immediate association between the status of the sitter and that of the photographer even though other operators may have worked for the brand (Edwards 37). The double inscription of author and subject on the body of the image can also be read in a key of complicity through both the printed word and the printed image as utterly modern languages. This symbolic, almost contractual operation can be seen in his many portraits of political leaders and intellectuals, including José María Obando, José María Melo, Francisco Javier Zaldúa, recognised liberals, but also in those of conservatives such as Jose Manuel Restrepo y José Eusebio Caro, many of whom Bennet knew personally (Moreno 289).<sup>20</sup> The mutual legitimation between sitter and photographer performed in the image is a pact that seals the moment of photographic capture shared by both, fixing the moment in one continuous material surface that

acquires an additional documentary dimension with posterity and allows for identification today.

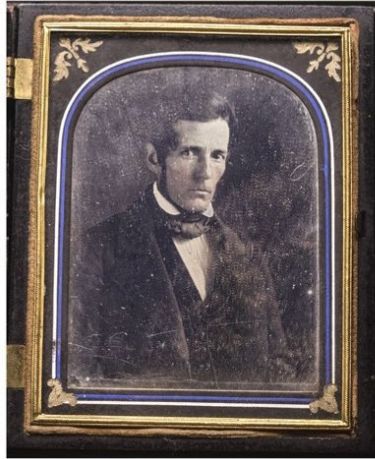


Figure 6. Attributed to Luis García Evia. Daguerreotype portrait, possibly Victoriano de Diego Paredes. PM000179. Ca.1843-1850. © Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac (Left)

Figure 7. Attributed to Luis García Evia. Daguerreotype portrait, possibly Manuel Murillo Toro. PM000180. Ca.1843-1850. © Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac (Right)

Another trait that reflects on how the material qualities of Bennet’s daguerreotypes can be traced into the undercurrents of socioeconomic networks is the black paper mount present in some portraits attributed to Bennet and to his assistant Luis García Evia (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8). Repeating the standard bullet-shaped format characteristic of many of Bennet’s portraits, the black paper mat is hand-made, as opposed to the metallic frame of semi-industrial origin found in other daguerreotypes. Each paper mat is unique, offering an exclusive alternative to other supplies, and serving as a reminder that paper was, like photography, a modern commodity in post-colonial contexts like Colombia, where it had been traditionally imported from the Spanish peninsula into the colonies (Rubio and Murillo 143). This paper mat in particular is associated with Daguerreotypes from Philadelphia, where it was widely used by Bennet’s former partner from Mobile and New Orleans, Marcus Aurelius Root who, as mentioned earlier, was an important promoter of photography as an American artistic product (Library Company of Philadelphia 2010).<sup>21</sup> The black mat operates then as a homogenizing frame with handmade qualities, and a marginal connector between practitioners, suppliers, and consumers of photographic portraits.



Figure 8. Anonymous daguerreotype portrait. John Armstrong Bennet. 2004.4. ca. 1850, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The best example of this format is the daguerreotype of President José María Obando whose whereabouts are unknown. However, the Metropolitan Museum in New York houses a daguerreotype portrait of two small children, stamped with the last name “Bennet” on the black paper mat, using a similar typographic family as the one found in his Colombian portraits. (Fig. 9). The black paper mat was also used in the portraits of two prominent sitters from Colombia kept at Quai Branly, which may portray liberal politicians and tobacco merchants Victoriano de Diego Paredes (Fig. 7) and Manuel Murillo Toro (Fig. 8). These portraits have been attributed to one of Bennet’s partners in Bogotá, Luis García Evia, for whom Bennet may have continued to supply materials after leaving the country, as suggested by supplies shared by both practitioners (Gómez Cely 122). As such, the paper format binds these diverse portraits and their producers with the material and intellectual networks of liberalism.

These are but a few physical traits of Bennet’s portraits, which together with other forms of paper knowledge, delineate a constellation of producers, sitters, and suppliers from all over the continent, accounting for the expansion of a photographic frontier in the early years of the medium, even as daguerreotype portraits remained exclusive and expensive devices for self-fashioning. Through the study of these material traces, the definition of a photographic author set at the crossroads between art, science, and entrepreneurship seems to transition from the language of the printed word in newspaper advertisements to that of the photographic image as the main conduit for an emerging form of authorship during the Daguerrean era. Because of its often liminal presence, this hybrid form of authorship would remain under contention well into the twentieth century.

## CODA

By the end of the 1850s, daguerreotypes were becoming rare with the spread of other photographic technologies such as ambrotypes, tintypes, and paper photography. Although still relatively expensive, photography became much more accessible although not as exclusive with the diversification of the market once multiple mechanical reproduction was no longer a promise but a reality. In 1857 Bennet left Colombia, according to an ad mentioned by Moreno in which he offered to take his last daguerreotype portraits (Moreno 189). His trace is lost for several years except for a couple of pieces of paper knowledge that evidence one last shift in Bennet’s discourse, a romantic and rather disillusioned turn towards the literary as the ultimate art form, leaving behind the visual realm in which he had previously operated with enthusiasm. Bennet’s dissociation from photography, daguerreotypy in particular, is indicative of the rise and fall of this first photographic technology as the value of daguerreotypes as luxury objects was outgrown in the second half of the century.

An ad from 1865 from Mexico City reveals that Bennet had once again changed country and profession completely. At “La Tienda de la Salud,” Juan A. Bennet offered all sort of remedies, and concoctions promising to cure a wide range of conditions from cancer and baldness to digestive and nervous illnesses. The pages long advertisement is printed at the end of a pamphlet titled *Gloria, Ventura y Salud en la choza del Pastor*, pastorela by R.A. Romero from 1865. Bennet’s trade was no longer a matter of life or death but of health, a growing concern in the second half of the century (Romero 3-8). Pharmaceuticals, that odd companion to Bennet’s photography, reappears as one of the many threads uniting his journeys, raising questions about the shared networks of photography and chemistry in the continent before both fields became industries in the 1860s. There is no mention to daguerreotypy nor to photography in general among the wide catalogue of products, however, the pamphlet also offered Hazelton Pianos from New York City, a trace to Bennet’s earlier life in South America that confirms that it is indeed the same person.

The last piece of paper knowledge linked to Bennet is a chronicle written by him, entitled “My First Trip up the Magdalena, and Life in the Heart of the Andes” (Moreno 139). Published in 1877 by the New York Geographical Society, the article condensed Bennet’s many trips to Colombia in one retrospective account. With no mention to photography either nor to any of his activities as a merchant, the chronicle offers a personal narrative of his journeys to New Granada, building on the Humboldtian tradition of travel writing. In it, Bennet performs one last metamorphosis of the tradesman-cum-photographer as he narrates his impressions of “the heart of the Andes.” By way of this travel narrative, Bennet seems to offer one last *likeness*, his own, a display of knowledge and personal experience as a traveller in the Southern hemisphere. Citing Frederic Church’s homonymous painting, the chronicle captures Bennet’s *best version of himself*, in his epic discovery of the south; a reminder

too that he, the photographer, the artist, and the author, is the subject who looks but is rarely seen.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study of John Armstrong Bennet's journeys through paper knowledge required a historiographic revision of the multiple narratives connected to his work in the American continent. Overall, this yielded to several amendments in the narratives surrounding this practitioner and allowed, furthermore, to connect several national histories of photography and to think of them as another form of print culture surrounding photographic archives. An important corpus of printed traces left by Bennet resulted from archival work and from this survey of national histories. This corpus amassed bureaucratic sources such as city directories and immigration documents, as well as Bennet's own texts, either in the form of his advertisements, his own travel chronicle or inscribed in the body of his photographs, sources in which Bennet seems to negotiate the notion of authorship. The diversity of these sources, furthermore, sheds light on the proliferation of bourgeois print culture in the mid nineteenth century, as a modern frame for the promotion and expansion of Daguerreotypy among its customers. At the same time, the critical revision of these textual elements evidences how the status of Daguerrean portraits transitioned from suspicious curiosities to artistic commodities; a phenomenon that was not exclusive to Bennet's practice but which, given his active and ubiquitous presence in print, sheds light on the complexity of the early years of the medium before paper photography became an industry. Ultimately, when analysed together, these snippets of paper knowledge testify to the emergence of a photographic author that traced new geographies of the image and to burgeoning forms of subjectivity that manifested in print culture in the form of potential customers and markets.

In this attempt to pursue an archaeology of the daguerreotype portrait through a singular photographer, the focus on paper knowledge allows us to grapple with the constantly changing language used to present the photographic medium in the early years and consequently, with the instability of its reception and value according to market and affective demands. Through this analysis it is possible to glimpse at the links between Bennet's photographic practice, liberalism, and the growing presence of the United States in the hemisphere in the 1840s, and how this influence was tied up to the process of commodification of daguerreotype portraits as artistic products in the continent. More importantly, to understand daguerreotypes in their becoming commodities is also to dwell on photography's hybrid nature from the very outset, placing it within the context of new markets but moving beyond its use-value. This in turn allows for a reconsideration of photography's potential multiplicity, its latency, even before the advent of multiple reproduction, and how this multiplicity challenged earlier definitions of an artistic image in the nineteenth century.

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### Notes

1. Most national histories of photography were written in the second half of the XXth century following archival or curatorial enterprises, these include McElroy's history of photography in Peru (1875), Serrano's from Colombia (1983), Gomez's from Argentina (1986), Rodriguez's from Chile (2011), and Varese's from Uruguay (2007) to mention some of the most well-known. Recent studies of focused research regarding early photography and its political and aesthetic implications in local contexts include Fox-Amato, Lanctot and Turazzi.
2. A few examples of critical studies on singular photographers include Pinson and DeCourcy among others.
3. See Moreno de Ángel; Varese; Cuarterolo; and Robb Osborne.
4. Among the most ambitious and well-known are the compendia by John Hannavy, and by Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn. These first cataloguing efforts have served as reference works for the history of the medium. Only a couple of continental histories of photography have been written by Robert Levine (1989) and Vicente Gesualdo (1990) contributing to the general historiography of the medium. No sources have been found that focus exclusively on daguerreotypes in the continent.
5. The main authors that discuss Bennet include Robb Osborne (2004), Moreno de Ángel (2000), Serrano (1983), Varese (2007), Facio (1995) and Cuarterolo (1995). Other authors that mention Bennet include Gómez, *La fotografía en la Argentina*; Rodriguez, “Historia de la fotografía en Chile...;” Serrano, *Historia de la fotografía en Colombia*; Varese, *Los comienzos de la fotografía en Uruguay*.
6. Some authors including Robert Wilson believe that even Matthew Brady was Morse's student as was Gurney (Wilson 6, Hannavy 626). Moreover, Beaumont Newhall in his book on the Daguerreotype in America mentions that Gurney claimed to have had the oldest photographic studio of New York, founded in 1840 (Newhall 60). The possibility that he may have been Bennet's pupil or partner is not mentioned.
7. Regarding American Daguerreotypes as artistic products see Gillespie; Newhall; Root.
8. Regarding traveller photographers looking for new markets see Lundgren; Hannavy; Waggoner et al.
9. According to France Robb Osborne, by 1841 Bennet was advertising in Mobile (Robb Osborne 13). According to Pilar Moreno he was already advertising in Mobile in 1840 but no source was found in Pilar Moreno (Moreno 134).
10. The microfilms of the Mobile Daily Register between 1839 and 1843 were reviewed by the author at Mobile Public Library on July 20, 2016.

Additionally, the database Pioneer American Photographers 1839-1860 reproduces two ads offering daguerreotypes by a J.A. Bennet from *The Corrector*, from Long Island, New York in 1843. [pioneeramericanphotographers.com/2018/04/03/j-a-bennet/](http://pioneeramericanphotographers.com/2018/04/03/j-a-bennet/)

11. See *E.T. Wood's Mobile directory*, Mobile, 1842. Frances Robb Osborne mentions that Bennet shop was already open in 1841 (13). Pilar Moreno mentions Bennet opened a dry goods store in Mobile in 1840, however the source for this information is not referenced (134).
12. Pilar Moreno states that Bennet opened a Daguerrean Gallery in Montevideo in 1842 in the corner of Calle Solís and Cerrito (135). Juan Antonio Varese suggests that Bennet never reached Montevideo in 1842 as there is no evidence of his presence in the press from that year (49). Also, Magdalena Broquetas's thorough study of printed accounts of photography in Uruguay omits Bennet's alleged first trip to the country.
13. City directory. Mobile, Alabama, 1844; *Mobile Daily Chronicle*, October 1843, January 1844.
14. *Mobile Daily Register Chronicle*, January 25, 1843; Moreno, 136.
15. John Hannavy's *Encyclopedia of 19<sup>th</sup> century photographers* indicates that Bennet went to Uruguay in 1842-43 and to Bogota, Colombia in 1845, which is three years earlier than what Eduardo Serrano and Pilar Moreno have indicated for the Colombian case. Hannavy 71; Moreno, 137.
16. Miguel Ángel Cuarterolo records the presence of several other American daguerreotypists including Walter Bradley, William Weston, Arthur Terry, George Penambert, J. J. Ostrander, Joseph Meeks and Charles DeForest Fredericks; with Elliott and Bennet being the first. See also Cuarterolo 22; Hannavy 1064.
17. This material value is manifest in the fact that photographers at the time actually exchanged their daguerreotypes for other goods. The case of Charles DeForest Fredericks is one of the most well-known. See Murray and Lanctot.
18. See Drew Heath Johnson and Marcy Eymann, *Silver & Gold: Cased Images of the California Gold Rush*; Luce Lebart, *Gold and Silver: Daguerreotypes Ambrotypes and Tintypes from the Gold Rush*.
19. Unfortunately, the custom archives from these years only contained documents of gold exports, none of which were related to Bennet, making it almost impossible to locate Bennet's exports.
20. In fact, as Pilar Moreno and Beatriz González Aranda have exposed, Bennet skilfully inserted himself within the Colombian commercial and intellectual circles of his sitters, often participating in ventures such as the Bogota Philharmonic Society where he sang and played the piano with some of his commercial partners (González Aranda 289).
21. See online exhibition on daguerreotypes in Philadelphia, "Catching a Shadow, Daguerreotypes in Philadelphia, 1839-1860," curated by Sarah Weatherwax for the Library Company of Philadelphia, 2010: [www.librarycompany.org/catchingashadow/section5/index.htm](http://www.librarycompany.org/catchingashadow/section5/index.htm).



This was also confirmed through correspondence with Kevin Kunz at Capitol Gallery. September 14, 2023.

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