

JACINTO VENTURA DE MOLINA
A Black *Letrado* in a White World of Letters, 1766–1841

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Abstract: Born free in 1766 along the American frontier separating the Spanish and Portuguese empires, the Afro-descendant Jacinto Ventura de Molina grew up to become a tireless writer of history, religious philosophy, and petitions for black nations and poor residents in Montevideo, Uruguay. After serving in black militias in the early 1800s and working as a shoemaker, he began a long career as a lawyer and was recognized with the title “defender of the poor.” Most impressive about this little-known prolific writer was that he operated in and moved between different social registers and contexts. He was a black letrado working in a white world of letters and knew well how to navigate multiple discourses and manipulate codes of the lettered city. His personality led in part to his popularity in 1820s and 1830s Montevideo. But he was best known for his writing, which spurred attacks from several contemporaries.

“Most excellent Sir . . . I present you the most singular history of the day, an unequivocally rare one for all times. At no previous moment has there been a black man whose name was supported by your Excellency with more enthusiasm than mine in this country” (Molina to Lecor, March 28, 1828, *Materiales Especiales*, Biblioteca Nacional [MEBN], T3:0050).¹ Thus wrote Jacinto Ventura de Molina in an 1828 letter to Carlos Federico Lecor, the commander of Brazilian forces occupying the Banda Oriental, soon to become the Republic of Uruguay. Who was Jacinto de Molina, and why did he believe his writings, a handful of which are referred to in the letter as “singular history,” to be so unique? Part of the answer stems from a life

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1. The three volumes of Molina's manuscripts at the National Library, as well as the pages he decided to include, are unnumbered. In 2006 I digitized these manuscripts and left a copy of the images on file with the National Library. The digital images allow for the exact location of pages within each of the three volumes. In this article references thus appear with the volume number (T1, T2, T3) followed by the image number corresponding to the page cited. All works that reference T1, T2, or T3 herein refer to the *Materiales Especiales* collection at the Biblioteca Nacional (MEBN).

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he devoted to writing. He did not pass up the opportunity to show how proud he was of this, either. Other clues come from the fact that Molina was a frontier figure.

Molina was born free in the town of Río Grande along the American frontier between the Spanish and Portuguese empires in 1766, located on what is today the eastern Brazil-Uruguay border. He was the son of the “amphibious” (i.e., born on a slave ship crossing the Atlantic from Dahomey) Ventura de Molina and Juana del Sacramento, who landed in Brazil from Benguela and had gained her freedom by escaping Portuguese encampments and joining the Spanish forces in Río Grande. Jacinto’s father had been granted his freedom in 1762 after saving the life of the Spanish brigadier Josef de Molina, his master and a leading military figure in the fight to wrest the outpost town of Colonia del Sacramento from the Portuguese. Ventura decided to stay on with Josef de Molina, who in turn pledged to take care of and educate Jacinto when he was born in the Spaniard’s house. After growing up in Río Grande, Santa Teresa, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo, Jacinto worked as a shoemaker for some time, served in black militias, and then, during and after the Portuguese-Brazilian occupation of the Banda Oriental, as a scribe, notary, historian, and lawyer who defended black nations and poor white residents in Montevideo.

Jacinto Ventura de Molina was a tireless writer who constantly negotiated the frontiers of racial divisions in the world of letters. He is the most prolific known Afro-Latin American writer prior to the end of the 1800s, by which time more and more Afro-descendants were taking up the pen. He wrote a biography of his caretaker and his father’s master, Josef de Molina, filled with autobiographical stories. His writings contain petitions he addressed to authorities of the Luso-Brazilian occupying forces, the kings of Spain and Portugal, the emperor of Brazil, the pope (yes, even the pope), and people in positions of power within the young Uruguayan state. These request protection and benefits, as well as support and funds to realize his dream of creating a black monastery in Montevideo, complete with an elementary school, a university, and black clergy, with himself as the lead priest. Molina included in his writings legal briefs of the black nations and peoples he represented in Montevideo, as well as responses to these from state authorities. He dabbled in poetry and wrote religious and political philosophy. What is more important to note, though, than the quantity of his writings, and what really makes him unique among the short list of Afro-descendants in Latin America who wrote before the late nineteenth century, is that he operated in and moved among so many different social registers and contexts. He was a black *letrado* working in a white world of letters and knew well how to navigate multiple discourses.² This commu-

2. I use the term *letrado*, or “lettered,” to refer to those who could interpret and produce legal, historical, religious, and political discourses in writing, and not as a synonym of liter-

nicative deftness aside, until his last days Molina strove to maintain his popular role within the community of African origin, which is suggestive of a powerful collective consciousness that permeates his writings.

The ramifications of this figure become clearer when placed against the backdrop of the relationship of Afro-Latin Americans to writing. Thousands of petitions for freedom and other benefits for slaves exist in archives throughout Latin America, though the overwhelming majority of these were not written by blacks and thus do not support a clear notion of literate slaves or provide much in the way of agency for those whose requests were being made. Moreover, few blacks left written records outside the Spanish legal system or police archives, facts that alone make Molina's writings stand out. Persons of African descent as well as others from marginalized populations successfully crossed boundaries and exploited forms of agency in colonial and nineteenth-century Latin America, but only a small number did so via the power and economy of writing.³

Of course, the details and significance of Molina's life would not be known were it not for the happy ending to the precarious journeys of his manuscripts. For decades these passed from one private collector to another before ending up at the National Library in Montevideo or being mixed in with personal papers at Uruguay's National Archives. Surviving the passage of time was not the only hurdle his writings had to overcome. With the exception of a letter he wrote on behalf of the free black Juan Colorado in 1804, the extant texts date from circa 1817 to 1837 (a selection of approximately half of these texts can be found in Acree and Borucki 2008). His first wife, María Rufina Campana, burned his military writings and probably many others in 1806 during the English invasions of the region because she feared their house would be searched (T2:9317–9318). And what he produced from 1807 to 1817, years in which he said he passed the time writing, seems to have been lost, most likely as a result of the constant state of war the city underwent in this period. The fate of his earlier compositions, however, did not discourage him from continuing to write after 1817.

In what follows I will situate Jacinto de Molina within the contexts of black written culture in colonial and early independent Latin America and then the Río de la Plata. Next we will look closely at his education and life dedicated to writing. Last, we will turn to what his critics—whom

ate. This use follows largely Angel Rama's (1996) portrayal of *letrados*. In contrast to Rama, my understanding of *letrado* is not exclusive to elites. As the case of Molina shows, there were lettered Latin Americans, including Afro-descendants and Amerindians, who were far from being members of the elite.

3. Military service was one way blacks could climb the social ladder (see, e.g., Landers and Robinson 2006).

he called the “philosophers”—and contemporaries said and wrote about him. Molina acquired fame in 1820s and 1830s Montevideo, thanks partly to his eccentricity and active participation in social circles. As one of his contemporaries remarked, he would show up at gatherings strutting with pride but dressed in a frock coat spotted with patches covering the holes made by moths, large trousers, and high-collared shirts (de María 1957, 242). Yet most people remembered him for what he wrote. He pursued this life of writing in a white world of letters whose members were reluctant to take him and his writings seriously at times, and at others threw up obstacles or addressed him in outright racist language. After all, being a black man of letters was not “normal” and posed a contradiction in terms for many.

BLACK WRITING IN LATIN AMERICA

We know of few Afro-Latin Americans who wrote, and whose textual production still exists, during the colonial period and the first half-century following independence (for theoretical discussions of “black writing,” see Jackson 1977, 1979; Luis 1984, 1990). This contrasts significantly with the case of the United States during the same period. One possible explanation for this difference in the Americas comes from the widespread support (material, financial, and emotional) abolitionist leaders and organizations lent black writers in the United States. These organizations encouraged slaves, runaways, and free blacks to write narratives of their lives and especially their suffering.⁴ This was the case of the best-known text of an Afro-descendant in Latin America, Juan Francisco Manzano’s *Autobiografía de un esclavo* (2007), written in 1835 at the request of the Cuban intellectual Domingo del Monte (on the production of this narrative, see Luis’s introduction to Manzano 2007; see also Branche 2001; Ghorbal 2007). Yet the abolitionist movements that operated in Spanish America and Brazil from 1810 to 1888 did not generate similar narrative accounts, or at least these have not been found yet. A second explanation may be rooted in the different conceptions of the power of writing. In Latin American countries, elite intellectuals and bureaucrats who made up Rama’s lettered city were successful at limiting access to reading and writing until well into the 1800s. Although there were clear holes in the barriers they put up, evidenced by a Felipe Guaman Poma, a Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, or figures like Manzano and Molina, they did not encourage blacks or Amerindians to learn to read the Bible, as was the case in many contexts in the United

4. Dozens of autobiographies of slaves were published in the United States between 1830 and 1850. One of the best-known examples of the relationship between abolitionist groups and slave narratives is Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*.

States. Despite laws that attempted to regulate or prohibit the education of slaves in the U.S. South, Protestantism, with its emphasis on a personal relationship to God, promoted a basic knowledge of Scripture, or at least an appreciation of the material importance of the word (for recent studies on the education of blacks, literacy, and Bible reading in the United States, see Cornelius 1991; Gutjahr 1999; Williams 2005). There are bound to be other explanations that a comparative study of black writing in the Americas could illuminate (comparative treatments include Jiménez 1995 and Davis and Gates 1990).

Aside from Manzano's autobiography, there are a limited number of texts of other Latin Americans of African ancestry. The Cuban poet Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, better known as Plácido, wrote during the same years as Manzano. During the second half of the 1800s, the mulatto Martín Morúa Delgado wrote two antislavery novels (published only after abolition) and was active in the Cuban press. Toward the end of the century, Ricardo Batrell Oviedo (1912) learned to read and write so he could recount his experience as an Afro-Cuban soldier in the last war for Cuban independence (see, too, Sanders's forthcoming introduction to and English translation of Batrell). The biography of Esteban Montejo could be included as well, as it is one of the few first-person narratives (albeit relayed through an anthropologist-novelist) of a Cuban slave, runaway slave, and freedman in the 1800s (Barnet 1966).

Examples become scarcer when we turn our attention to South America and the farther back we go in time. Perhaps the oldest known text produced by an Afro-descendant in the Americas is the spiritual diary of the nun Ursula de Jesús (van Deusen 2004), who lived in Lima in the seventeenth century. In contrast to the Cuban texts mentioned previously, the diary deals with Ursula's intimate relationship with God rather than themes connected to slavery, the slave trade, or colonial racial hierarchies. About a century later, another Afro-Peruvian left writings on music and a description of a machine to grind sugarcane, but these do not address slavery in Peru, either (de la Cadena y Herrera 2001). More in line with efforts to attract attention to Afro-descendants, in the second half of the nineteenth century the Afro-Colombian poet Candelario Obeso became widely recognized by politicians and produced verses that incorporated dialect of African communities (Jáuregui 1999).

In Brazil, the list is not much longer, despite it being the destination of most slaves brought to the Americas. Maria Firmina dos Reis's 1859 (reprinted in 2004) abolitionist novel *Úrsula* is often recognized as the first narrative written (or known) by an Afro-Brazilian. The Afro-Brazilian Luiz Gama published poetry around the same time, and there was a substantial amount of abolitionist literature produced by white authors such as the "slaves' poet," Antônio de Castro Alves. Many slaves worked in urban environments and were exposed to the written word. But prior

to the literary achievements and plentiful production of Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis at the end of the century, only a handful of other, less-frequently cited Afro-Brazilian writers can be mentioned. Domingos Caldas Barbosa was forced to participate in the Portuguese defense of Colonia del Sacramento (his time there ironically coincided with the arrival of Jacinto's father and caretaker), and in the last third of the eighteenth century he traveled to Lisbon, where his poetry enjoyed popularity in courtly circles. In the second half of the 1800s, José Carlos do Patrocinio, who wrote antislavery novels, and André Pinto Rebouças, an engineer who was an avid writer, too, were both active abolitionists. Last, recent attention has focused on Mahommah Gardo Baquaquá, a slave in Brazil who later escaped to the United States and spent time in Haiti, whose biography was put to paper by Samuel Moore (1854).⁵

The existence of so few texts begs the question of why there is such an obvious void in black writing in Latin America. Afro-descendants surely produced other texts in this same period in Spanish America as well as Brazil. We know that there were fissures in the lettered city that allowed and, at times even required, people from lower positions in the social hierarchy to learn to read or write, or both, to carry out certain jobs. Where one lived—in the countryside or in a city—often determined the extent to which castes were exposed to the world of writing, but it is clear that Afro-Latin Americans interacted with written culture, and with more and more frequency after the wars of independence. José Ramón Jouve Martín (2005) has shown how Afro-Peruvians in colonial Lima worked as messengers, scribes, and ghostwriters, engaging with writing on different levels. Slaves, runaways, free blacks, and African nations in America likewise made use of mediators who could interpret and manipulate the written word in their communications with government and church officials (for a look at marginalized communities' intersections with writing in the colonial Caribbean, see Olsen 1998). In cases of African nations some of these mediators were Afro-descendants, though not necessarily members of the same African-based associations (for descriptions of the makeup of associations that took the name *African nations* in Buenos Aires, which hold true for those of Montevideo, see Andrews 1980, 142–155; Chamosa 2003). Toward the end of the nineteenth century, some African nations began publishing their own newspapers and magazines, though the editors of these did not often produce other forms of writing.

The scarcity of texts relating the experience of Africans and Afro-descendants through their own eyes that is characteristic of Latin Amer-

5. This is not an exhaustive list of Afro-Brazilians who engaged in writing, but it does highlight better-known cases. For more on the scarce textual production of Afro-Brazilians through the late 1800s, see Porter (1978) and Almeida Pereira (1995). On Baquaquá, see Law and Lovejoy (2003).

ica as a whole holds true for the region of the Río de la Plata, though with some slight variations. Written culture in the Plata began developing much later than it did in the colonial printing centers of Lima and Mexico. The first printing presses did not arrive in Buenos Aires and Montevideo until 1780 and 1807, respectively, and both cities had small populations until the end of the 1700s. Following the creation of the viceroyalty of the Plata in 1776, commerce and trade of animal products began attracting new settlers (and slaves), and with them and the new bureaucratic infrastructure came the scaffolding for a culture of print. Yet even with a small number of denizens who could manipulate the codes of writing around 1800, it is possible to identify several Afro-descendants who interacted at one level or another with reading or writing during this period.

The first records of blacks making use of writing in the region come from communications and petitions slaves and free blacks sent to colonial administrators. The number of these who actually wrote their own petitions without the help of scribes or ghostwriters was limited, but some did so (for some examples from Montevideo, see the Archivo General de la Nación, Uruguay [AGN], Escribanía de Gobierno y Hacienda, caja 52, exp. 51; caja 60, exp. 30; caja 63, exp. 105; caja 73, exp. 110; caja 82, exp. 64; for an example of Molina working as a ghostwriter, see the 1804 *solicitud* he wrote for Juan Colorado, AGN, Ex Archivo General Administrativo, caja 283, carpeta 3). Jacinto de Molina knew some of them in Montevideo, like the slave Miguel Piñeyro, a “moreno Congo” and officer of the nation Congos de Gunga who “understands reading,” and Antonio Esteban, “archivist” for the Urid Uriola nation (“Oracyon polytyca, moral, dedicada y presentada a la . . . Camara de Representac[ió]n de . . . Uruguay” 1834, T3:0120; “Discurso raro y singular del Licenciado Negro . . . ” 1833, T2:9431). Likewise, other Afro-descendants, such as the black actors who appeared in circus and theater performances in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, needed to be able to “interpret” lines and stage directions for formal theatrical productions but did not know necessarily how to write (Borucki 2006). The soldier and *payador*, or improvisational poet, Ansina, hints at other interactions of blacks with written culture. Ansina’s identity has been questioned, and serious doubts have been raised regarding his authorship of poems dealing with the revolution of José Artigas in Uruguay and Artigas’s exile in Paraguay (Gortázar 2003) (for poetry attributed to Ansina, see Equipo Interdisciplinario de Rescate de la Memoria de Ansina 1996). Yet the possibility that Ansina wrote his poems in addition to singing them is motive to study the connections between black soldiers and writing. Molina himself was second in command of a black militia, and there had to be others like him across Latin America who needed at least minimal reading skills to carry out and communicate military orders.

There are other figures from the period whose works have become canonical, yet whose race has not been mentioned often. One of these is

Bartolomé Hidalgo, among the first writers to connect oral traditions of popular classes, both urban and rural, to written culture. His *cielitos* and dialogues in the voice of gauchos inspired future generations to employ similar poetic voices, and they provided a series of characters and rhetorical devices that would reappear in poetry through the century (on the cielito dance form and its sung verses from which the poetic cielito derives, see Chasteen 2004, 149–154). His verses and plays were included in the first anthologies of “national literature” in both Argentina and Uruguay (Achugar 1998), but little has been made of Hidalgo being possibly mulatto. One of his contemporaries called him the “dark guy from Montevideo” (on Hidalgo’s race, see Praderio 1986, viii; Rama 1976, 56–59; de Torres 2000, 128 and 133). It may be hard to know just how “dark” he was, but it is easy to imagine Hidalgo finding inspiration for his writings in time spent mingling with black and mixed-race poets in dry-goods stores and dives in and around Montevideo and Buenos Aires. Luciano Lira, editor of the first Uruguayan book, *El parnaso oriental*, was also quietly reputed to be mulatto (Fernández Saldaña 1945, 752). One reason why it is difficult to trace the African origins of these writers is that they did not openly claim to be mulattoes, which was considered a mark of inferiority in the almost exclusively white literary world of the early 1800s. And for those whose fame or livelihood depended on writing, there was no reason to express pride in African roots when one could pass for white.

Between the publication of Hidalgo’s poetry in the 1810s and the newspapers of African-based societies in the 1870s was a long period during which popular literature, especially “gauchesque” literature, politicized popular classes—whites, blacks, and those in between. Authors like Luis Pérez in Buenos Aires published widely sold papers with passages in *bozal*, or parlance meant to represent ways of speaking in African communities. Pérez likewise published *La negrita* and *El negrito* (both in 1833), directed in part to readers from Buenos Aires’s black communities and meant to be read aloud (Acree 2007). Like Hidalgo, Pérez could not have composed these texts without having spent much time among Afro-Argentines. In Montevideo the same nexus of orality and print could be found in the papers of the Argentine exile Hilario Ascasubi, like *El gaucho Jacinto Cielo* and *El gaucho en campaña*, and in pamphlets and loose leaves that opposed the political faction of Manuel Oribe, as was the case of *El guerrillero de la línea* and *El tambor de la línea*. On the front page of each number of the short-lived *Tambor* appeared the image of a black soldier playing a drum, and on interior pages readers found drawings of black soldiers and conversations in *bozal* (*El tambor de la línea* 1843; Zinny 1883, 6, 175, 495). In addition, there were anonymous authors, some of them black, who published loose leaves with similar features, aimed at similar reading communities, from 1830 to 1870 (Becco 1953; Soler Cañas 1958). All of this material can

lend valuable insights to the participation of Afro-descendants in popular literary production.

Where does Jacinto Ventura de Molina fit into this overview of Afro-Latin American writing and print culture in the Plata? In many respects, he should be a central figure. My claim is based on the rich variety of his texts and the pride he took in writing them, as well as the multiple social spheres in which he acted as a writer. As he put it in not very modest terms in a letter to Pope Gregory XVI in 1833, he believed he was an example for “those of my color” (“Saludo al Sumo Pontífice Gregorio Decimo Sesto” 1833, T3:0544). Molina was confident in his ability to convey through reading and writing collective concerns and community values (some of which we will see subsequently) of blacks in Montevideo to audiences of Afro-descendants and white *letrados*. That his writings embody this collective spirit make them a valuable source for peering into forms of black identity. Of course, the story of the individual and his efforts to be recognized as an author and man of letters is an enlightening one. Last, his writings do not fit comfortably into traditional genres of autobiography or poetry like the texts of individuals mentioned previously. The very unique character of the body of his work, much of it inspired by legal discourse, makes Molina a central figure in these contexts because his texts are key to tracing a more complete profile of black writing in Latin America.

WRITING TO LIVE, LIVING TO WRITE

Any shoemaker-soldier who writes letters to the kings of Spain, Portugal, and Brazil; requests favors from the pope; and takes up the pen to defend fellow subjects and (later) citizens is bound to be an interesting figure. While his critics referred to shoemaking to belittle Molina and discourage him from participating in the world of letters, he saw this profession as a noble activity. Adam and Eve, he reasoned, had to wear something to protect their feet, so the first shoes were made for none other than “our forefathers” (T2:9527). Molina was profoundly religious, and he may well have believed in this divine connection of shoemaking with God, but his true profession was writing, and, as the claim about Adam and Eve’s shoes reveals, he was skilled at crafting arguments to suit his needs, especially when it came to defending his honor. He did work occasionally as a shoemaker, and he served as a soldier and lieutenant in black militias, yet during the last third of his life he earned a living as a scribe and employee in the Hospital de Caridad, in his work as the designated “defender of the poor,” and he became absorbed in his studies, which he began as a boy. Thus he wrote in 1833, “My good Señor’s virtues provided me with the principles that cemented my love for and dedication to my studies. Now,

at the age of sixty-six, I would like to spend my remaining days immersed in study" ("Saludo" 1833: T3:0543).

Josef de Molina took care to provide for Jacinto's education soon after he was born. By age five, Jacinto proclaimed that he already knew how to read, and from then on he would busy himself with his studies, first under the guidance of private teachers employed by his caretaker and later in different elementary schools. One of these schools was a make-shift classroom in the town of Río Grande, where Mateo Cabral, who was one of Jacinto's private tutors, taught a handful of children. Another was in Montevideo, where Jacinto was a classmate of some boys who would grow up to be among the leading white *letrados* of the city, like the director of the first public library, Dámaso Antonio Larrañaga. Some of the most interesting features about the education of Molina come from the process by which he learned and the memories he recalls of reading aloud to his caretaker, parents, teachers, and wife.

By the age of ten Jacinto declared that he knew how to write and count, thanks to the goodwill of Josef de Molina and respect he had for Jacinto's parents.⁶ Jacinto also recognized that he owed this knowledge to his tutors, who made him read lessons aloud three times per day. When he traveled to Buenos Aires in 1776, he had memorized Father Astete's catechism and began learning Latin, though not in any uniform way. While Jacinto's writings are peppered with sentences and short passages in Latin, usually biblical and legal references, he said his knowledge of the language was based on memorization. He had studied the six volumes of the legal work termed the *Digesto* that Josef de Molina brought from Spain, and that had the Spanish on one side of the page and the Latin on the other. With the *Digesto*, Astete's catechism, and other texts, Jacinto writes, "At night, while he drank eggnog or hot chocolate, I would recite my lesson from memory to my Señor in the presence of my father and the major-domo. My Señor would explain the Latin passages to me word by word. So not only do I read and understand this language, but I translate it without speaking it, for I do not know its rules for forming sentences or responses" ("Saludo" 1833, T3:0542–0543; T2:9805–9806).

While Josef de Molina was key in Jacinto's education, his parents and his wife encouraged him, too, to become educated. He noted that the support of his parents was "equal" to that of Josef de Molina, most likely because they recognized that Jacinto had a unique opportunity. Jacinto him-

6. Gortázar (2007) suggests that Jacinto had such an affinity for Josef de Molina because the Spaniard was his real father. None of either Josef de Molina's or Jacinto's contemporaries ever wrote or spoke about him being *pardo* or *mulato*, a category that certainly would have been noted during Jacinto's lifetime if true. If Jacinto were the son of Josef de Molina, he would have used his "whiteness" to back up his arguments to kings and state officials. Jacinto does the opposite and shows pride in being black.

self was proud of his education, asserting boldly that “no child in schools in Río Grande, Santa Teresa, Montevideo or Buenos Aires was ahead of me in the subjects of doctrine, math, reading, or knowledge of proper punctuation (periods, commas, semi-colons, question marks, exclamation marks)” (T2:9722). And years later, Jacinto remembered fondly that María Rufina “enjoyed seeing me read, interpret, and pontificate. I have seen her cry while reading to her and reflecting on moral principles” (T1:8810). Not surprisingly, Jacinto dedicated many of his writings to his deceased wife and planned to name the school and monastery for blacks in Montevideo after her—the Colegio de Negros María Rufina Campana.

His process of learning also took place through copying texts, an activity that reveals his initial contact with a wide variety of reading sources. His *cartas instructivas*, *memoriales*, *saludos*, legal writings, and other petitions illustrate his knowledge of the lettered city’s discourses and his ability to manipulate these. Molina had studied the rhetorical structures and formulas of these types of texts and modeled many of his own writings on them. In the biography of Josef de Molina, Jacinto recalls the process. The “doctor of law” Antonio Escarranea heard about Jacinto copying a legal document and was impressed: “Assured that I was black, he sent for me. Having observed my penchant for the sciences and that I was educated, he asked if I wanted to learn about law and how to practice it. My interest was clear. He gave me drafts of all the methods for writing memoriales and political expositions. He gave me a summary of laws and books where I could study these, which I did, and I purchased two books on Politics of the Indies from the executor of *Oidor* Cicerón’s will” (T1:8561).⁷

Aside from the interesting comment that Escarranea had to “assure” that Jacinto was black and that Molina purchased books that used to belong to a judge from Buenos Aires, this passage points to the key way in which Molina learned rhetorical styles and formulas. It also shows why in form, though not in content, many of his writings are similar to other memoriales, cartas, and the *probanza de mérito*, or merit report, of the colonial period. Copying texts, indeed, was a common way of learning formulas. One last thing to point out about his experiences copying texts is that they gave him the opportunity to read a range of authors.

Jacinto’s contacts with books and writing make up the second most interesting aspect of his education. We know he had access to Josef de Molina’s collection of books. Following the death of the Spaniard in 1782, his lover Catalina Gil gave Jacinto part of this collection (T1:8562). The wife of another Spanish commander in Montevideo, Francisca Ortega, also donated her husband’s personal library to Jacinto when she left the city (T1:8560, 8810). Little by little, then, Jacinto built up his own collection of books, which he valued more than any of his few other material belongings

7. Escarranea also gave Molina drafts of his own papers (T2:9553).

(T3:0037, 9835). His writings do not include a list of the titles he owned, but mentions of specific authors yield a glimpse of some of the books in his library. These included a breviary that he later gave to Dámaso Larrañaga, works on religious, military, and classical history; texts of the fathers of the church, like St. Augustine; Antonio Nebrija's book of grammar; and writings of Thomas Aquinas (T1:8560–8561; T2:9618; T3:0543). Jacinto also made use of the library of the Hospital de Caridad while working in the print shop, and during his three-year stint there as a patient and sacristan (1827–1830). It was in that library where he read Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, and Montesquieu. This access to reading material helps to explain the breadth of references he makes in his writings, spanning from words of Roman orators, feats of Alexander the Great, quotes from Homer and Pedro Calderón de la Barca, and mention of the "royal slave" Oroonoko, to Montesquieu's ideas regarding slavery and moral reasons to end the slave trade. If his education is impressive, rare as it was for an Afro-descendant in late colonial America, even more impressive is how he marshaled his knowledge through his writings.

That Molina composed a wide range of different types of texts makes the study of these challenging. But focusing on his petitions to people in positions of power and his work on behalf of black nations and as a "defender of the poor" can highlight some key features of his writings and how he understood the power of writing to achieve his goals. One prominent characteristic of many of Molina's writings is his pride in being a *letrado*. "I don't ignore," he wrote, "that I am the first black writer to be recognized in this country with the honorable and distinguished title of *Escritor de Cámara* for His Illustrious Majesty [the Brazilian emperor]" (T1:8807). In a speech he made on March 2, 1833, for the election of the princess of the Urid Uriola nation, he told the crowd: "Listen, all, to a man of your color speak about the most tendentious and delicate subject that has confronted all the monarchies of the universe [republicanism]." Shortly thereafter in the same speech he stressed that he spoke among "black men and women in the same way white *letrados* do among their kind" ("Discurso raro y singular . . ." T2:9432–9433). His role as black *letrado*, he argued elsewhere, is why he was elected to be the messenger and representative of the poor, and why he claimed that libraries in Lisbon, Madrid, and Rome housed printed copies of his book titled *Real unión* (Molina to Manuel Oribe, 1833, T3:0206). It was also why he served as the secretary of the *Cofradía de San Benito* and in several positions in the hierarchy of the *Congos de Gunga*. The satisfaction he found in his status inspired him to address figures of authority, though here he had to present his humility, too.

Several of Jacinto's petitions paint him as a humble servant in search of support for his idea of creating the *Colegio María Rufina Campana* to educate Afro-descendants in Montevideo. He requested the support of the

emperor of Brazil to realize this goal, stating that his written petition was exactly how a “humble black” should make use of his knowledge of letters (it was always good to show humility when addressing kings) (T1:9025, 8652; “Oracion de el Licenciado . . .” T2:9355). It was the “humble” Jacinto who later wrote to representatives of the young Uruguayan state for the same purpose, as well as for benefits for himself, such as book purchases, pens and paper, clothing and laundry, and protection from his “rivals” (Molina to Joaquín Sagra y Périz, AGN, Archivos Particulares, caja 15, carpeta 6; T3:0034–0035). He offered to use his contacts and skills as a writer to acquire bricks for the construction of the *colegio* at half price (Molina to Joaquín Sagra y Périz, AGN, Ex Archivo y Museo Histórico Nacional, caja 205, carpeta 7). And in 1833 he wrote to Pope Gregory XVI, “My impoverished, although desirous reflection [about the María Rufina school] emerges, most saintly Father, amidst philosophical pomp, without more support than that which derives from my humble obedience to the most Excellent Vicar, local priest and prelate in this new state of Uruguay,” asking him, as well, to support his plans for what would be the first institution of its kind “in the world.” “Oh, how it will be the admiration of the entire universe!” Of course Jacinto did not hesitate to request the favor of being named head priest of the new school and monastery (“Saludo” 1833, T3:0537, 0543, 0551).

But if his hopes to establish these institutions were far-fetched—in fact, they never came to fruition, and he knew the odds were against them—Molina was more realistic and arguably more passionate in his petitions to improve living conditions of blacks in Montevideo. Slavery and the slave trade were at the root of so many problems for Afro-descendants, wrote Molina, but they were not the only causes. He argued that not teaching blacks to read or giving them an education was not only contrary to Christian principles but also a way to keep them from becoming “men in the eyes of the republic, religion, and the Church” (T1:8510). Here Jacinto cites as an example the experience of María Rufina, who was forced to abandon her reading lessons, hence his insistence on creating educational venues for blacks. Jacinto attempted to improve living conditions, as well, by serving as the mediator between groups of Afro-descendants and the state.

He was especially active on behalf of the group Congos de Gunga, the Cofradía de San Benito, and the previously mentioned nation Urid Uriola. In the early 1830s he wrote several petitions to Uruguayan officials requesting permission for the members of Congos de Gunga to have a place where they could gather without fear of being prosecuted, especially for the celebration of San Baltasar on January 6. In one of these, he states: “Through my association with the Uruguayan state . . . I have been charged with the defense of blacks. Laws do not exist to protect them as slaves, as blacks, as unhappy neophytes who have been expatriated from their homelands, yet they are still judged according to laws of the State,

Religion, and Politics. . . . Sir Minister, you will be most gracious and dignified in permitting the nation Congos de Gunga to have their house to dance to their drums on Sundays and holidays, until prayer time, and at night with their *chrimias* until dawn" (Molina to minister of Uruguayan state, 1834, T3:0226, 0231).

State officials made fun of Jacinto's style of exposition and rudely rejected this petition as it was written on paper that did not have the state seal, but this did not discourage him from repeating the request in future texts (Molina to minister of Uruguayan state, 1834, T3:0232). A printed petition from late 1834 deals with this same question, though presented with a new strategy. These gatherings are not at all secretive, he notes, so (white) officials have nothing to worry about. Instead, they contribute to public order, "for they foment morality, religion, and piety, which are the solid foundations of both thrones and states." On behalf of the leaders of Congos de Gunga, Molina is careful to cite the benefits the new constitution and liberal institutions will bestow on the nation's members and children. If this appeal to moral and religious components of the reunions and praise of the state were not enough, he mentions at the end of the petition that this African nation was able to gather during the old regime and that the *patria* owes its members the same right (Molina to *juez político*, November 11, 1834, MEBN, *impreso*). Molina made use of yet another strategy in his defense of the Congos de Gunga and the Minas in an 1833 letter to the military leader Manuel Oribe. Here he related his military honors as a soldier in black militias and then attempted to strike an emotional chord by referencing his friendships with Oribe's grandfather and uncle, the latter of which backed him when he faced challenges from "that indignant philosophy preached by white men against a black one" (Molina to Oribe, T3:0182–0186).

Molina's skill at negotiating in multiple social registers and managing their distinct discourses carried over into his service as a lawyer for both black and white residents of Montevideo. He began this work at least as early as 1823. In this year he wrote the last will and testament of María Castro as secretary of the *Cofradía San Benito* and with his new title of "licenciado en reales derechos." Jacinto described having received this title from João VI and Pedro I in 1821 and 1823, and from then on his writings boasted it in their titles and at their end. The Uruguayan state would later recognize him as a *licenciado*, too, in 1832. In 1828 Molina took up the case of Pedro Gómez, an immigrant from Murcia, who claimed that he had for no reason been attacked by another immigrant, Marcial Carvelo, from the Canary Islands. The colorful but tragic story of Gómez was first related to officials of the Hospital de Caridad, and when they did not rule in his favor, Molina threatened to take the matter to the city court of appeals. The point here is that he was acutely aware of how the legal system functioned and how to rely on writing to weave his way through it. This shows through even more clearly in the judicial briefs he wrote representing the

freedman Domingo Lima, who wanted to separate his assets from those of his wife who had taken to a life of prostitution, and *la morena* Teresa Mojica, who sought legal protection from the rogue son of her recently deceased husband.

Despite his knowledge of the judicial system, and though he was recognized by Luso-Brazilian and Uruguayan authorities as licenciado and defender of the poor, these badges did not guarantee that he would always be taken seriously. Molina thought highly of himself and his writing: "not a single author in America has written like I have. . . . God gave me life so I could write" (Molina to Oribe, T3:0182–0186, 0206; T2, 9830). He considered his work, whether autobiographical, historical, judicial, philosophical, or poetic, literary and worthy of qualifying him as a man of letters. But he ran into constant hurdles put up by the defenders of a white lettered city who were not nearly as eager to see him in equal literary light.

STRUGGLING IN A WHITE WORLD OF LETTERS

Such a productive writer and public figure was destined to acquire fame and attract critics, especially because he was black in a white world of letters. He remained loyal to the Spanish king when patriot troops from Buenos Aires occupied Montevideo, as well as when José Artigas laid siege to the city, for joining the revolutionary cause would have equaled betrayal of Josef de Molina, whom he defended until his last breath. This position earned him time in the stocks in 1815. But the problems with him being a black letrado began in the early 1820s, when he held a position of a scribe of sorts during the Brazilian occupation of the Banda Oriental. He had the support of the Brazilian commander but faced steady abuse from the *oriental* Tomás García de Zúñiga. In charge of the encampment of Guadalupe where Molina was stationed, García played a number of pranks on him, like locking him in the stocks, discouraging him from continuing to write, and spreading the rumor that he was literally crazy (T1:8680, 8668–8699). Apparently García was not at all comfortable with Jacinto being a black letrado, nor with his new title of licenciado.

García de Zúñiga was not the only one, though, who did not like Jacinto trespassing on the sacred turf of letters, nor would he be the only one who tried to discredit him by calling him mad. Molina's increasingly public presence, whether speaking to African nations, attending the theater, or writing to authorities, was accompanied by a growing number of attacks. The more active he became in public affairs, the harsher the response was from white counterparts. An anonymous "friend" directed a poem to him that read:

Move on now blackie, filthy and crazy
don't be impertinent or an idiot,
work as a shoemaker, that's your trade,

don't be an idler or lazy.
 Stop writing those rash compositions
 that are not made for anything but a great hoot.
 A friend who loves you offers this bit of advice,
 so let's see if you mend your barbarous ways.

Another "friend" seconded this opinion and said it was the word around town about Jacinto (anonymous to Molina, T2:9375).

A certain J. Oyuela wrote a letter to General Manuel Oribe in which the criticism was accompanied by a hair-raising proposal. Oyuela detailed how a naturalist traveling through the region had come across some of Jacinto's writings and wanted to take them back to Bologna to put on display. The naturalist was impressed by the writing of "an Ethiopian . . . with such a logical and sublime imagination." Molina's interaction with international visitors was not liked. Oyuela tried to convince the traveler to leave the texts, and when that failed, he proposed to Oribe the following: "When a senile Ethiopian distracts us with his impertinent writings from the precious time we have to devote to our obligations, I am of the opinion, Sir General, that, in the future, and in order for the licenciado Molina not to be uncomfortable any longer, we ship him off the first chance we have to the ward at Buenos Aires, or the panopticon of New York. Enclosed there, he can finish his days in peace" (J. Oyuela to Manuel Oribe, May 11, 1833, T3:0211–0215).

Clearly the last thing Oyuela had in mind was Molina's well-being, and clearly he, and others, were fed up with Molina's writings. Somehow this letter was later sent to Jacinto, and he responded in kind by invoking Christian morals and attacking the "philosophers" who were pulling a "humble, black letrado's Chariot of Glory." He continued, saying that Christianity's only enemies were the arrogant, the ignorant, and those who were disguised atheists, all of which were explicit references to his critics. If the philosophers did not have writings that could show up Jacinto's, then they will be listening to him sing victory (Molina to the vicar, 1833, T3:0218–0223). Perhaps he decided to include Oyuela's letter together with his last retort among his bound papers to illustrate what he saw as vast differences in writing skill and moral clarity.

This type of criticism did have an effect on him, part of which can be seen in his witty responses and comments like the one he addressed to Oyuela. In a rare moment, however, he did mention the possibility of not writing anymore for citizens who "did not know how to appreciate his work," which also translated into a lack of respect for those who ordered him to write. But he resolved to keep at it. In one instance, he spun the criticism of his writing into a broader attack on figures of authority: "Not only is the politics of such philosophers base and uneducated," he wrote, "but foolish, crass, very crass indeed, and supine, for it does no harm to me; it wounds the August Sovereigns who ordered me to write. And

since I have no other means by which to live, I had and have to obey and write, or die" (T1:9061). Tomás García de Zúñiga and subsequent white critics employed other forms of criticism, too. One was accusing Molina of having been born a slave, which he vehemently rejected, again because it spoke poorly of his caretaker ("Oración a . . . el estado [asamblea] de el Uruguay . . ." 1834, T3:0241). Another came in the form of rude responses to his letters that mimicked his at times long-winded style and made fun of his use of neologisms. Pedro de Nava and Diego Bermúdez de Castro drafted one such response. They went so far as to call Molina an "iletrado" who sent a "nonsensical petition" full of Gallicisms, which, as it was on "common paper" (without the state seal), demonstrated a "lack of chronical respectation" that resulted in returning to him his "unexpected, unsolicited un-petition" (De Nava and Bermúdez de Castro to Molina, April 16, 1834, T3:0232; see also Mamerto Lechiguano to Molina, November 15, 1832, T2:9497). On the other hand, his critics and what they wrote help sketch the outline of just how popular a figure Jacinto grew to be in 1820s and 1830s Montevideo.

Some of his contemporaries relayed his fame. The artist Juan Manuel Besnes e Irigoyen drew his portrait (see Figure 1).

Below the image in the portrait is a caption that blends ridicule with respect, perhaps reflective of Besnes's ambiguous relationship to other artists, saying that Molina founded a new literary genre that will make him as famous as Dulcinea did Toboso. This was not exactly the nicest of compliments, but along with the portrait itself, it nonetheless points to him being a widely known figure. Furthermore, the glasses resting on Molina's forehead speak directly to a popular idea of his connection to letters in Montevidean society. How many other Afro-descendants in Uruguay or other parts of Latin America became the subjects of portraits or such ridicule? A more positive mention of him and his writing appears in a local paper from 1832. In a note criticizing a minister in President Fructuoso Rivera's government, the anonymous author writes: "[the minister] says he has read everything written from Beroso, Orfeo, Sanchoniaton, and Foie, to the thick bundles of papers of the licenciado Molina" (*La diablada o el robo de la bolsa* 1832, 5–6). The Uruguayan chronicler Isidoro de María, who was in his early twenties during Molina's last days, also wrote about him in his *Montevideo antiguo*. De María said he had read some of Jacinto's writings and that he was held in high esteem by many "important social figures." But de María shared other contemporaries' discomfort with Jacinto's writing skills and entrance into the white world of letters. At the end of his recollection, he writes: "Plump Molina, if he was lacking in color, he had more than enough honesty and good manners, just like the darnedest most proper white man" (De María 1957, 240–242). His outgoing (and eccentric) personality seems to have garnered him part of his reputation, but his fame came primarily from being known as a writer.

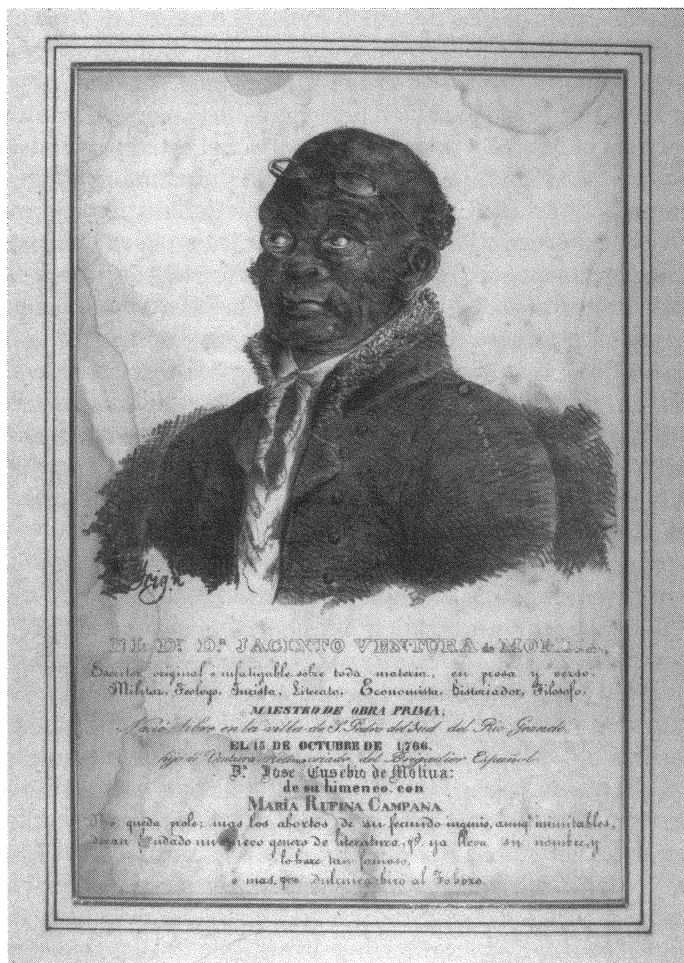


Figure 1 Portrait of Molina drawn by Juan Manuel Besnes e Irigoyen, circa 1830. After listing the different professions Molina held and information regarding his birth, Besnes notes that Jacinto's marriage to María Rufina did not produce any "offspring." It did, however, result in the "unmatched miscarriages of his fecund imagination that have founded a new literary genre bearing Molina's name, which will make him as famous or more so than Dulcinea did Toboso." Image courtesy of the Biblioteca Nacional, Montevideo.

CONCLUSIONS

We have seen how the tireless writer Jacinto Ventura de Molina led a life devoted to his studies and writing, both of which began when he was a young boy. Thanks to his father's master, Josef de Molina, he learned how to read by age five and discovered the power and benefits of an education.

He learned rhetorical and stylistic formalities of different modes of writing. He developed a keen sense of the discourses of the lettered city and learned to manipulate these. And he skillfully operated among various social sectors, serving in many instances as a mediator, through writing, between Afro-descendants and people in positions of power. Molina died close to age seventy-five in August 1841, though he does not appear to have been active in the debates surrounding abolition in Uruguay in the early 1840s, which suggests that he was too ill physically or mentally to continue writing after 1837, the last year appearing on his manuscripts. Otherwise he would not have missed the chance to make his voice heard on the subject (on abolition, see Borucki n.d.; Borucki, Chagas, and Stalla 2004).

Jacinto de Molina helps us to develop a more complete picture of black writing in Latin America prior to 1900. Like his Afro-Latin American colonial counterparts who could write, he had to work within the race-based restrictions of a white world of letters. In contrast to figures like Ursula de Jesús, María Firmina dos Reis, and Juan Francisco Manzano, Molina did not produce a unified narrative that lends itself to concise analysis. Nor was writing a form of resistance for him like it was for authors of antislavery narratives, at least not uniformly so. Molina was aware of having to prove his worthiness to wield the pen, and he was not shy about defending in writing his honor or his devotion to his studies. But he was not trying to “be white” through his writings, nor was he interested in winning the graces of the people he addressed simply to better his position in the social hierarchy. He understood his writing as a means to bringing about improvements in living conditions for blacks in Uruguay and for himself. For Jacinto writing was a way of life, occasionally a way to pass time, and a professional obligation. In fact, it would have been impossible for Jacinto not to exercise his education through his writing, for that would have dishonored Josef de Molina.

On the other hand, signs of resistance can hardly be absent from someone who moved between the most powerful and the weakest social groups, who was passionately opposed to the system of slavery and who, despite having been officially recognized as a licenciado, had to rebuke his critics. Molina’s variety of texts illustrates his thought processes in different contexts and moments, the way he crafted arguments to address the problem at hand, and how he navigated a world where the odds were against him becoming first a letrado and then a man of urban fame who elicited strong criticism. Although it remains uncertain (and unlikely) if copies of his texts addressed to the kings of Spain and Portugal or the pope ever made it into such hands, it is clear that he had a much more personal link to the emperor of Brazil through the commanding officer of the occupation of the Banda Oriental. And there is no doubt that the texts he wrote to officials of the Uruguayan state were read and commented, as can be seen in the collection of Molina’s writings. That he succeeded as

a black writer who was proud of his African origins makes his story an uplifting one, and all the more worthy of study as it points to another marginalized individual who engaged what for so long has been seen as an exclusively white world of writing. Molina and other Afro-descendants who were capable of understanding and manipulating written discourse do not constitute widespread participation in this world. But they do show how people from popular classes interacted with the written word, even mastered it, and thus add one more piece to the puzzle of understanding the ways in which written culture spread in colonial and early independent Latin America.

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