

JUAN LATINO “EL NEGRO” POET AND HUMANIST : AFRO-HISPANIC  
HISTORICAL MEMORY

In the historical novel written by José Vicente Pascual, a writer from Granada, the city where Juan Latino (1518?-1599?) lived and taught, published in 1998, under the title of *Juan Latino*, tells the story of Juan “El Negro” who in his autobiographical narrative keeps a critical attitude towards the established political and religious system of Emperor Charles I of Spain, inheritor of the Catholic queen Isabel and her husband, Ferdinand’s kingdom, who were his maternal grandparents. The Catholic queen insisted in defending the Christian faith and the cleansing of “pure catholic blood” at all costs, while Latino laments the poor situation of the “moriscos” of Granada (those who had converted from the Islam into Catholicism under the Reconquest of the territories of Granada by the Catholic Queen). Latino condemns the severity and military violence exerted against the “moriscos” by the emperor’s brother, Don Juan de Austria.

Juan Latino belongs to the illustrious class of the cultured people of Granada, he teaches Latin at the “colegio catedralicio” of the cathedral, he attends the “tertulia” or social literary gathering at “La Cuadra Dorada.” Notwithstanding his past as a slave, he has an easy life, surrounded by the love of his wife and children, by his faithful servants, who procure him daily consolation in his elderly years after he goes blind. It is at this point that the novel written by Pascual takes off, when Juan decides to write his memoirs, under the title *Aethiopum terries venit* in 1594, where he intends to give testimony of his race, of his intellect, and of his culture. His culture, he claims, is western, Christian and catholic. On a conversation with Don Juan de Austria, he confesses never to have been ashamed of his race, and reaching towards latin mythology, he cites the neolatin poets, when he asserts that the black

color has a “preferential value” citing the example of the Bible with the book *The Song of Songs* where Solomon describes the soul as being “Black.”...”Do not look at me because I’m brown:/ its because the sun has browned me.” (Pascual 209)

This fictional rendering of the life of Juan Latino, written in the first person, accounts for the elder years of Juan de Sessa, also known as Latino at the eclipse of his life, around 1594, in the aftermath of the splendor of the city of Granada, after the Reconquest, the war against the moriscos, the death of many of his friends, all senior officials from the church, or from the townhall, narrating the decline of the city, that by 1568 has transformed into a sad, poor and ignorant place, together with the declining of Juan’s private latin academy. Latin, a language formerly demanded by the nobility so that their sons would grow as cultured men as well as warriors, is reduced now to the priests –to the sons of the poor, who look in the church for a bit of relief and some bread, but who have very little interest in learning the language.

However, the author of the novel, Pascual, never directly associates the success of Juan as teacher of Latin, with the necessity that the Emperor had of spreading the knowledge about Latin as the high language of science and humanities during the Renaissance. Besides, Latin became the vehicle of transmission of Catholicism around the globe: from Palestine to Europe, from the Americas to Africa. Juan Latino became an instrument of the Spanish Empire for Christian knowledge to expand and to root. It is for this reason, and this is my own opinion, that Latino become a key figure for the humanist and catholic project of the emperor Charles, and this is the main reason why nobody in Spain opposed the fact that Juan was a black man from Ethiopia.

His figure grew into such an importance based on his legitimate intellectual capacities, that not even the racist comments of a few learned citizens of Granada such as Roque de Santiago, could touch his reputation as a teacher and man of letters. He was respected by everybody because he had become a “magister” so much so that his former owner, Don Gonzalo Fernandez, together with the highest politicians of Granada, or the Emperor’s brother, Juan de Austria, did not hesitate to ask for his advice about the war against the moriscos. But Juan Latino had to remain quiet many times, exhibiting his political cleverness, in order not to disappoint the powerful, risking in this way his status in society and that of his mulatto sons and daughters. He had married Ana de Carvajal, the daughter of his former’s owner personal secretary. In this way Juan became the poet who upraised The Austrias with his majestic latin compositions such as *The Austriadis Carmen*, referring to the Lepanto Battle, against the turkish army, and printed in October 1572 which exhibited his clear and profound knowledge of the classics, especially Virgilio. Besides, this was the first book printed and published by a black man in Latin, magnifying his legacy to the African Diaspora.

The second volume of Juan Latino was *De Translatione Corporum Regalium* published in Madrid in 1576. It narrates the transportation of the remains of the Royal Family from Madrid to Granada to be buried there upon the wish of Felipe II, son of the Emperor Charles. The third of his publications *Ad Excellentissimum et Invictissimum D. D. Gonzalum Fernandez a Corduba...*, is an intimate and personal eulogy narrating the deeds of his former owner and friend Gonzalo and his father, both members of the military class at the service of the Emperor. It is worth mentioning that the Latin written by Juan is of extreme complexity and not easy to read even today. He was an illustrious representative of the literary Renaissance in

Latin on the 16<sup>th</sup> century, especially his *Austriadis Carmen*, a book of immense literary and historical interest, which meant an enormous advance with respect to previous literary works in Latin. According to critic Menéndez Pelayo, this book is, today, the most singular tribute paid to Felipe II, winner of the battle of Lepanto.

*Aethiopum Terries Venit* is a narrative which begins with Latino's gratitude towards those who helped him first in Baena—like the priest who advised him to pursue the search for freedom through literacy, and that poses Latino as antecessor of this strong message found in slave narratives such as that of Douglass in the US three centuries later. Latino was born in Africa, and taken to Spain as a slave when he was a child, educated by the duque of Sessa and Count of Cabra, and manumitted by Gonzalo Fernandez, the duque's son so that Juan could marry a lady from Granada. In Granada he started to study Latin and in February 1546 he earned his Bachelor's degree. He must have been 28 years old. Later on he won the "catedra" or full teaching position at the Cathedral when he was 58 years old. He had the honor of delivering the opening speech of the schoolyear of the newly created university of Granada. The university of Granada had been created in 1526. (Pascual 245) The above information can be found in his book *The Traslacione Corporum Regalium*. In the narrative written by Pascual Juan sees himself as a shadow, a phenomom, a rarity... he has felt the difference, the incomprehension, the hate, the perplexity caused by the colour of his skin...being able to survive because of his willingness to remain quiet about so many things... His autobiography relies on sincerity, on politeness, to record in memory the strange and rare events of his life. Latino has printed 100 copies of his *Aethiopum Terries Venit* to personally sign and dedicate each book to 100 professors, noblemen and royal poets. In the narrative Latino gives an account of the difficult voyage from Senegal and Guinea to

Portugal, on a slave boat, telling how the worst thing at the end of the trip was to be a slave without an owner. Slaves were known in Spain as men, women or children without a soul, and for this reason they were baptized up to seven times upon arrival. Slaves were bought for in between 10 and 20 thousand maravedies, and as chattel they acquired worth, and were protected under the law. From Moguer, in Huelva, they would travel to Seville to be sold. Mulattoes were known as *verii hominis*, and considered more human than fully blood blacks, thus they costed more. There were also white slaves from Constantinopla. But most black slaves were bought by the church and destined to work in the fields until they had learned their catequism. Later, they would be sold to well-to-do families or as companions for widows or spinsters who had secluded themselves in monasteries. Latino ends up in the emperor's court and is given as a present to the family of Fernandez de Córdoba. Taken first to labor the country, the family confessor García Biedma spots him as companion for his master's son, Don Gonzalo, upon which, García advises Juan to take this opportunity as his only way to survive: to study hard. As he progresses on his studies, he moves to Granada with the family: there he will be allowed to pursue his Bachelor degree in latin. Around this time, Emperor Carlos decides to establish himself in Granada. He was a great lover of the classic latin poets and with the project of making Granada the great capital of his empire, turning it into Christianopolis, promoting the Renaissance of the humanities, and opening new centers of knowledge and study where Christian ideas substituted the muslim ones.

When Juan asks Don Gonzalo for permission to marry Ana de Carvajal, in clear opposition from her father, Don Gonzalo asserts his confidence and trust on the value of Juan as a human being, not only granting permission but also manumitting him and allowing him 6,000 maravedies, so that he can establish by himself. Don

Gonzalo calls Juan *Rara Avis in Terra*, claiming that his family is so worthy that the lowest of their slaves is better than any other white man.

As Pascual concludes, the Granada of the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a newly created territorial unity had become a crucible of cultures and races, which grew towards the unity brought forward by Christian Humanism, lacking the stiffness and severity of protestant northern European societies. It seems that the fame of Juan Latino expanded throughout Spain inspiring *The Famous Comedy of Juan Latino* written by Juan de Enciso in 1652 and a romance by Rodrigo Arzilla. He is also cited in Lope de Vega's drama *La Dama Boba* (1613).

The legacy of this illustrious scholar remains mostly hidden, and for this reason we considered it necessary in this paper to review the legacy of Juan Latino, mentioned by Cervantes in the prologue to *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Latino published a printed book as early as 1571 (the first black person known to have been published by this time). He became the educator of noble families in Granada, acting discreetly and without ambition, suffering for the unjust destiny of one of his beloved disciples, Luis Pedro Ibáñez, who was falsely accused of treachery against the empire. Latino felt on his own skin the suffering of his pupil and friend, more a son than anything else, feeling impotence for not being able to save his life.

The paper has analyzed the different issues and socio-cultural contexts which led to Juan Latino's success in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain, by then a country at the head of the international slave trade, and has shown the ways in which Latino's historical figure contributes to the legacies of the African Diaspora through historical memory.

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