Don Simón Luna: 
An Afro-Argentine Leader Among the Santiagueño Quichua

Gary Van Valen
University of West Georgia

Abstract: Although Argentina is widely considered to have the most European population among Latin American nations, descendants of indigenous people and Africans formed a large percent of the population before 1870. The province of Santiago del Estero had (and has) a population of especially diverse origins, including Quichua-speaking indigenous people and Africans. This paper will examine the intersection of these two groups through the life of Don Simón Luna, an Afro-Argentine military leader in the Federalist-Unitario civil wars of the 1830s and 1840s, who was given the nickname “Shimu Negro” by his Quichua-speaking followers. Although the Federalist Luna achieved considerable power during this period, the ultimately triumphant Unitarios began a historiographic attack on Luna in the 1870s that still informs popular conceptions of this leader in the twenty-first century. The final section of this paper analyses the historiographical treatment of Don Simón Luna as a reflection of the wider relations between whites and non-whites in Argentine history.

Keywords: Argentina, Santiago del Estero, Afro-Argentines, Santiagueño Quichua, Caudillos, Simón Luna, Juan Felipe Ibarra

Argentina is widely considered to have the most European population among Latin American nations. It is true that large parts of the country were resettled by a wave of European immigration between 1870 and 1930, when three million Europeans came to live permanently, and outnumbered the two million descendants of the Spanish colonial period. But before 1870, descendants of indigenous people and Africans formed a large percent of the population.

Although the nineteenth-century Argentine state displaced the indigenous population from the Pampas and Patagonia to make way for the resettlement of their lands by European immigrants, the experience of indigenous people varied both over time and between regions. The arrival of Europeans in the colonial period did not necessarily displace indigenous people, especially in the northwest region. The province of Santiago del Estero, located in this region, had (and has) a population of especially diverse origins. This diverse population emerged in the colonial period and was never displaced. Even at the height of European immigration in 1914, Santiago del Estero province registered only 3.6% of its population as foreign-born; this low rate of immigration to the province diminished even further, with only 0.7% foreign-born in 1970.¹

The province’s colonial history holds the key to understanding its diversity. The capital, also called Santiago del Estero, is the oldest European city in Argentina, founded in 1553. Its Spanish founders were outnumbered by the indigenous people among whom they settled, as well as other indigenous people from Bolivia and Peru who came as allies and servants (called yanaconas)

¹ Silva, Witter, and Santos 1990; and Tata 1970.
of the Europeans. By the later colonial period, all of these people spoke Quichua, a language with its ultimate origins in Peru, and which is still spoken in the province of Santiago del Estero. Scholars debate the degree to which Quichua reached the area in pre-Inca times, was brought to the Argentine northwest by the Incas, arrived with the aforementioned yanaconas, or was spread to local peoples by Spanish missionaries as a “general language” to facilitate evangelization. Conversion to Christianity did not necessitate the replacement of Quichua by Spanish; in fact, the Catholic Church required priests to study Quichua and prepared religious texts in that language for their use. The method of evangelization included the founding of at least nineteen towns called *pueblos de indios*. Their establishment could require relocation over a short distance, but they nevertheless helped maintain indigenous people on the land. In some cases, indigenous people received communal tenure to land grants known as *mercedes*; in others, they became tenants on large Spanish-owned ranches. So, while some were dispossessed of land, they were not dislocated from the province.

By the 1700s, the province had also received an influx of Africans, and a 1778 census recorded that 54% of its people were of African origin, reported either as “free Negroes, Zambos, and Mulattoes” or as “slaves” (as enslaved persons were then called). Similarly high African percentages were reported among the parishes within the province in the same census, with 91% of the people of Salavina, 90% of Sumampa, 68% of Santiago del Estero, and 65% of Guanagasta listed as of African origin. Here again, scholars debate the accuracy of colonial racial enumerations in general and of these percentages in particular. Racial terms were imposed by colonial authorities with the purpose of requiring indigenous people to pay a tribute tax or excluding Africans from certain privileges and professions. Classifying people as Africans not enslaved (“free Negroes”), mixtures of Africans and indigenous people (“Zambos”), and mixtures of Africans and Europeans (“Mulattoes”) depended on hearsay, the best guess of a priest or other informant, or a family’s reputation. Such labels could change over an individual’s lifetime, and a person might not even know their own state-designated “race” until they got married or attempted to enter a profession. Categories such “free Negroes, Zambos, and Mulattoes” could also serve as catch-all terms for nonwhite people who were neither enslaved nor paid the tribute tax. A recent genetic analysis notes that “the high incidence of African descendants in Sumampa reported in that census [of 1778] is not reflected in the gene pool of the current population,” and assumes that Indians who did not pay the tribute tax or had moved from their place of birth were included in the 88% listed as “free Negro, Zambo, or Mulatto.” Nevertheless, the African origin of people listed as enslaved in 1778 has not been questioned, and enslaved people made up 4% of the province and 28% of the capital city’s parish.

Argentina gained de facto independence from Spain in 1810, and extended freedoms to
nonwhites by abolishing the Indian tribute tax in 1811, enacting a law in 1813 which freed children born to enslaved Africans, and offering freedom to other Africans in exchange for military service. Such service also allowed Africans to achieve some measure of equal treatment. According to historian Seth Meisel, “During the early 1810s militia and veteran regiments were, for the first time, integrated. Black officers won the right to be addressed by the honorific ‘don’ and in several cases could even be found commanding white troops.” However, Argentina fell apart in 1820, as provincial military leaders (caudillos) abolished the national government (until 1852) and enacted an extreme federalism. In Santiago del Estero, federalism emerged in reaction to the national government’s subordination of the region to a larger province of Tucumán in 1814, and its execution of Santiagueño autonomist leader Juan Francisco Borges in 1817. The province of Santiago del Estero regained its autonomy under the Federalist caudillo Juan Felipe Ibarra, who ruled from 1820 to 1851. Much of the literature on caudillos emphasizes the support they received from poor, nonwhite, rural, and informally educated people, and Ibarra’s power was based on these same sectors of society.

One of the many minor Federalist leaders (caudillejos federales) to support Ibarra was Captain Don Simón Luna, who was Afro-Argentine. Although he was accorded the honorific “Don,” Luna, like the great majority of Afro-Argentine officers, was apparently never promoted to a higher rank than captain. His followers, who spoke Santiagueño Quichua, gave him the name Shimu (or Schimu) Negro following their normal practice, in which nicknames are typically of two syllables, always end in vowels, and always change the Spanish /s/ to /š/ and /o/ to /u/. Just as the names Concepción, Desiderio, Gaspar, Gonzalo, Isabel, Santiago, and Zacarias become respectively kunši, diši, gašpa, gunša, iša, šanti, and šaka, so Simón becomes šimu. Luna was born around 1803, the legitimate son of Antonio Luna and Cobamba Aquino. I have been able to find information on five moments connected to his later life: military and political actions in support of Ibarra in 1831, similar actions in 1840, his marriage in 1840, his death in 1843, and the birth of his son (who was baptized only in 1845). Following a description of the little that can be determined about the life of Don Simón Luna, I will analyze the historiography associated with this often overlooked and misinterpreted leader.

**History**

In early 1831, Ibarra was temporarily driven from power during a three-year civil war between Unitarios, who wished to restore a strong central government, and Federalists, who favored the status quo. The Unitario colonel Francisco Gama held the governorship of Santiago del Estero province from February until April, when Federalist forces reclaimed the capital city for Ibarra. According to an account published in the Buenos Aires newspaper *El Lucero* on June 1, 1831, Gama

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6 Meisel 2006; see also Andrews 1979.
9 De Reuse 1986.
sent a Unitario force under Captain Don Marcelo Castellanos to defend the city of Santiago del Estero from an approaching Federalist force under the command of Captain Don Simón Luna on April 15. In a battle at Los Flores near the city, Luna defeated Castellanos, who died in the fighting. Gama then fled west for the province of Tucumán, and Luna entered the city and occupied its main plaza for two days until his superior, Comandante Don José Santos Coronel, entered the plaza with his division at 10:00 a.m. on April 17. On April 18, their superior, Comandante Don Juan Francisco Herrera issued a proclamation to the citizens of Santiago del Estero celebrating recent Federalist successes. Among these, he noted, “Thursday the fourteenth, the strong Captain Don Simón Luna destroyed all of the band of the insolent Castellanos here in Los Flores. The wounds which were counted on his cadaver were in consequence of his crimes.”

The whole episode is typical of nineteenth-century caudillo warfare in Latin America, from Argentina to Mexico. One side tried to prevent its enemies from taking a city by meeting them in battle in the countryside outside the city limits. If the city defenders lost the battle, they would evacuate the city. The occupation of the plaza by the victors signified a change in authority. Cities were the centers of civilization but were unwalled, and both defenders and attackers saw little purpose in destroying them in house-to-house fighting. City elites, who had more reason than anyone to preserve their home, power center, and stage for their local politics and display of wealth, were eager to transfer authority quickly to the victors.

At this time, Santiago del Estero’s city elite exercised political power through control of the city council or ayuntamiento. The Actas Capitulares, the official record of the ayuntamiento, provide further details about the aftermath of Luna’s Federalist victory. The entry for April 19, 1831, states that Comandante General Coronel called for a cabildo abierto (an open meeting) to elect a new governor, since the province had remained acephalous since Gama’s flight to Tucumán. The assembled vecinos (householders) chose Don Santiago de Palacio. On April 26, Palacio called the vecinos together again for another cabildo abierto. He notified them that at 4:00 pm, Captain Luna and his entire division had left their encampment and ridden into the city plaza at a gallop. Luna then informed Palacio that Comandante General Coronel had moved his forces to the town of Loreto and had left Luna’s men behind as a garrison. However, Coronel had left Luna and his men without any kind of provisions, “despite having been the vanguard force which opened the way to this town by routing the party of Castellanos,” as Luna complained. Palacio explained to the vecinos that as Luna’s complaint was well-founded, they would have to raise 100 pesos among themselves to satisfy his “people” (gente, a common way to describe a party of soldiers in both Spanish and Santiagueño Quichua). The ayuntamiento then called on Luna to appear before them and told him that it was not its fault that he and his men had not been paid. They must have also told Luna that they would provide him with support, for the captain thanked them for agreeing to raise the money to satisfy his people, who would calm down and soon be ready to march to their next posting. A total of twenty-six vecinos contributed, with Palacio providing the second largest single donation, ten pesos. Don Pedro Antonio Vieira, a councilman of the ayuntamiento with the titles regidor alferes nacional and juez de segunda nominación, was the largest single contributor, for he provided five pesos as well as forty-five pesos in back taxes. The 100 pesos was used to buy cloth for Luna’s people, probably to make new underwear, as Coronel’s men had previously received cloth

11 Coronel 1831. See also Puentes 1944; Juárez 1968.
12 Figueroa 1920. See also Juárez 1968.
for this purpose.\textsuperscript{13}

The next day (April 27), Palacio called the vecinos together in another cabildo abierto at 9:00 am. He informed them that Luna had reclaimed that, having distributed the \textit{lienzos} (linen, or more probably, cotton cloth) among his people, forty-six men had received nothing. The captain calculated that, to give each man five yards \textit{varas} of cloth, this would make 230 varas, and at a price of one and a quarter reales per vara, the vecinos would need to donate a further thirty-five pesos, seven and a half reales (one peso equaled eight reales). The vecinos assembled fifteen pesos and seventy-five varas of cloth, to which Palacio added ten pesos to make thirty-six pesos’ worth in total. After receiving the new donation, Luna and his men left the city almost immediately, for later that same day, Palacio wrote the following to Ibarra:

\begin{quote}
The other day of my reception the Choyanos rose up asking for pay, and yesterday, after the march of Jhp. \textit{sic} for José Santos [Coronel], Simo Negro with his 120 men advanced to the plaza, saber in hand, asking for aid for his people, as Coronel had not shared the 960 pesos that he had received in silver, and cloth \textit{lienzo}, and a load and a half of cane liquor \textit{aguardiente} with them. And I was barely able to contain them with another subscription of 140 pesos. They have already left for La Punta, but I still shudder, fearing some novelty on the way.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

The Choyanos were men from the department of Choya to the southwest of the capital, and La Punta (or Punta de Maquijata) is a town in Choya, so named for its position at the southern point of the Sierra de Guasayán. Coronel’s men were thus Choyanos, as were Luna’s, since they left the capital for La Punta. Luna and Coronel thus appear to have raised their forces in Choya and perhaps to have been from there themselves. While many parts of Santiago del Estero province were agricultural, Choya was a region of “large and small ranches…where are found pastures and water sources which the animals prefer.” La Punta was described in 1889 as being a “settlement of many people, rich in livestock \textit{numerosa población, rica en hacienda},” so that it would have been a likely place to raise a Federalist \textit{montonera}, or mounted band of provincial irregular soldiers.\textsuperscript{15}

According to several secondary sources, Don Simón Luna again played a key role in provincial history as a loyal supporter of Ibarra nine years later. In 1840, the Unitarios created a Coalition of the North between the interior provinces of Jujuy, Salta, Tucumán, Catamarca, and La Rioja and challenged the Federalist littoral provinces and their interior allies. The main body of Santiagueño troops, encamped just west of the city, rebelled against Ibarra on September 25 under Santiago Herrera and joined the Unitario cause. When their comandante, Ibarra’s brother Francisco, attempted to stop them, the mutinous troops killed him with their lances. Juan Felipe Ibarra escaped across the nearby Río Dulce, and after passing through the backcountry, he reached the Federalist encampment at Pitambalá, a pueblo de indios dating from the colonial period. This

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Actas Capitulares} 1831; see also Puentes 1944. For the use of \textit{gente} for a party of soldiers, see Granda 1997. My use of the term “men” from this point on reflects the fact that military service was a role reserved for males at this time, and is not purposely non-gender neutral.

\textsuperscript{14} Gargaro 1941.

\textsuperscript{15} Fazio 1889.
military camp was in Atimisque (formerly Soconcho), a district with a nonwhite population over 90%
and most likely a center of support for Ibarra. At Pitambalá, the Federalist caudillo gathered a
group of 400 men and (according to the secondary sources) sent Captain Luna to attack the capital
with 200 men.\textsuperscript{16} As I have been unable to trace these accounts to a primary source, I consider
Luna’s actions to be unproven; nevertheless, it is plausible to assume that Luna supported Ibarra in
this crisis.

The Unitario rebellion quickly collapsed, and by September 28, Ibarra had emerged
victorious once again, probably with Luna’s assistance. Over the next several years, the caudillo
exacted a terrible revenge for the death of his brother, ordering the torture and execution of
several of the rebellion’s leaders.\textsuperscript{17} Simón Luna apparently chose the right side in the dispute,
for he survived the crisis and soon began a new domestic life. On October 24, 1840, he married
Josefa Sanches, the legitimate daughter of Pío Sanches and María Maydan, in the Catholic parish
church of Nuestra Señora del Carmen on the plaza of the city of Santiago del Estero. Manuel
Santos Bravo and Manuela Santellán served as wedding sponsors [padrinos].\textsuperscript{18} However, whatever
happiness Luna might have found was short-lived. In 1843, he traveled over 1,000 kilometers
to the province of Buenos Aires and died suddenly in the town of Luján. Francisco Cortaberría
recorded his death in the parish register as follows: “On the 27\textsuperscript{th} of August of 1843, was buried
in the cemetery of this town the cadaver of Simón Luna, spouse of Josefa Sanches, both natives
of Santiago del Estero; he died at the age of forty years, without making a will.”\textsuperscript{19} The reason for
Luna’s travel to Luján and the cause of his death (which was apparently rapid and unexpected)
are unknown. He could have been on a mission from Ibarra to his ally, Buenos Aires caudillo Juan
Manuel de Rosas. He could have taken the trip for personal reasons, perhaps as a pilgrimage to
the important shrine of Our Lady of Luján. Luna may have suffered a prosaic fate and died from
disease or an accident. A late colonial traveler considered the region around Luján “very healthy”
but noted that “two thirds of those who die are from falls from horses or goring by bulls.”\textsuperscript{20} And
although it may seem unlikely, we must also consider the possibility that Luna had opposed Ibarra
in 1840, had fled to Luján, and was killed there by Ibarra’s or Rosas’ men.

Equally unclear is whether Josefa Sanches had accompanied her spouse to Luján or
not. She was apparently pregnant at the time of Luna’s death, for on April 3, 1845, the priest
Father Antonio Bidal baptized Francisco Solano Luna at the parish church of Nuestra Señora
del Carmen in the city of Santiago del Estero, as the legitimate son of Simón Luna and Josefa
Sanches, and recorded the event in the baptismal book reserved for people of African ancestry.\textsuperscript{21}
Two explanations suggest themselves for the lapse of time between the death of Simón and the
baptism of Francisco Solano. Josefa may have remained in Santiago del Estero, given birth, and
waited for her spouse’s return before baptizing their son, until eventually receiving the news of his

\textsuperscript{16} Figueroa 1920; Juárez 1968; Bravo 1968; Alen Lascano 1992; and Punzi 1997. The primary source used by
Figueroa is uncited.
\textsuperscript{17} Alen Lascano 1992.
\textsuperscript{18} “Argentina, Santiago del Estero, registros parroquiales, 1581-1961,” b. The parish church of Nuestra Señora
del Carmen is now the cathedral of Santiago del Estero.
\textsuperscript{19} “Argentina, Buenos Aires, registros parroquiales, 1635-1981.”
\textsuperscript{20} Concolorcorvo 1997.
\textsuperscript{21} “Argentina, Santiago del Estero, registros parroquiales, 1581-1961 a.
death. Alternately, she could have given birth in Luján and stayed there long enough for her baby to be able to make the trip back to Santiago del Estero to be baptized in her home province. Either Josefa or Simón was conscious of Santiago del Estero’s history, for one of them chose to name their son after St. Francis Solano, who had worked as a missionary in the city in the sixteenth century.

Don Simón Luna left behind a widow and a son in Santiago del Estero. His spouse was probably one of two widowed women named Josefa Sanches recorded in the census of 1869. One, born around 1815, was a weaver living in the department of Robles across the Río Dulce from the capital. The other, born around 1812, was a spinner living in the department of Sumampa in the south of the province. Simón and Josefa’s son followed in his father’s footsteps and became a soldier; he is listed in the census of 1869 as Solano Luna, born about 1845, and stationed at the frontier post called Fortín Doña Lorenza. Simón Luna’s other legacy was the impression he, as an Afro-Argentine leader, made on the white elite of the provincial capital. White Argentine intellectuals began to write about Luna almost forty years after his death, and since then, rarely has more than a decade passed without some reference to him in the historiography of Santiago del Estero in the age of Ibarra.

**Historiography**

Although no other data have yet emerged regarding the historical actions of Don Simón Luna, the Federalist captain has been a topic of historiography for the last 140 years. He gained notoriety after the final Unitario consolidation of Argentina, when white, upper-class historians noted that he was a lower-class Afro-Argentine who briefly took control of the city and who, they claimed, rose to the unprecedented position of governor of the province of Santiago del Estero. This first phase of the historiography, which was not kind to Simón Luna, began with the work of the Gibraltar-born Buenos Aires lawyer, journalist, historian, and educator Antonio Zinny. In 1879-82, he published his *Historia de los gobernadores de las provincias argentinas*, which included two very different accounts of Simón Luna’s actions in 1831. Zinny began with a historical narrative of Luna’s victory over Castellanos, derived from (but without citing) the account published in *El Lucero* on June 1, 1831. Deviating from the primary source represented by the newspaper account, Zinny mentioned that Simón Luna was also known as “the celebrated Schimu Negro,” and called him a “black, better known in Santiago by the name of Schimu Negro.” He also claimed that Luna, formerly a lowly oxcart driver, took the title of provisional governor on his arrival in the city. Luna’s former boss [patrón] Don Santiago [de] Palacio, described as “a respectable gentleman and of noble qualities, very philanthropic, both patriotic and of distinguished ancestry,” felt shame at seeing a person of Luna’s position in the governorship, “not for his color, but because of his background and his relaxed life [loose morals].” When Palacio offered him 5,000 pesos to renounce the governorship, Luna supposedly answered: “You are wrong, my patrón, if you think that I will leave the post I

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22 “Argentina, censo nacional 1869 b.
23 “Argentina, censo nacional 1869 c.
24 “Argentina, censo nacional 1869 a.
25 For an overview of Santiagueño historiography, see Tenti de Laitán 1995.
26 Zinny 1920; and Coronel 1831.
occupy for that sum, and I’m warning you that if you don’t give me 50 pesos, I’ll incite all the rabble to rise up.” Palacio, dumbfounded at the governor’s ignorance, handed him fifty pesos, saying, “Here is what you ask for, Schimu.” Luna then surrendered his post to Palacio, took the money, went to a bar or pulperia with his assistants, Pedro Alcántara Medina and Venancio Medina, and drank until the fifty pesos were gone. The story of an ignorant Luna obtaining and then selling the governorship to Palacio for fifty pesos thus conflicts with the documented account of the captain simply occupying the city and passing control to a superior officer in the Federalist forces. The defamatory version was probably invented and propagated by the ascendant Unitarios, including both the leadership of Santiago del Estero and Zinny himself. Reinforcing the theme of the venality of Federalist governors, Zinny then noted a similar story of how Palacio bought the governorship a second time (this time from Luna’s superior, Coronel), for 200 bundles of Tucumán tobacco, two barrels of cane liquor, twelve pesos fuertes (undebased silver coins), one bag of yerba mate, and another of sugar.27

Zinny’s Historia de los gobernadores was extremely influential; an introductory note to its new edition of 1920 stated that “Today it is impossible to write about national history without consulting his works.” Despite Zinny’s presentation of two clearly different versions of Luna’s actions in April 1831, only the defamatory version gained wide currency. And while Luna never served as governor (proved by the Actas Capitulares, which state that the province remained acaephalous from the flight of Gama until the election of Palacio), Zinny’s idea that Luna held the office of governor (necessary for him to be able to sell it) also found acceptance. Beginning in 1884, Luna figured in several published lists of the governors of Santiago del Estero as “Capitan Simon Luna, intruso,” indicating that the list’s original author, Pedro Rivas, both consulted Zinny’s work and considered Luna’s power to be illegitimate.28 The Santiagueño author Baltasar Olaechea y Alcorta, whose family included notable opponents of Ibarra, called Luna intruso and beodo (an intruder and a drunkard) in his 1907 Crónica y geografía de Santiago del Estero.29 In 1910, the Buenos Aires normal school teacher José María Aubín repeated Zinny’s defamatory story, mostly word for word, in his Anecdotario argentino. If anything, Aubín was even more negative than Zinny, describing Luna as a “moreno [a dark skinned person] of relaxed customs, and ignorant beyond all imagining, known among the lower orders by the name of Schimu Negro,” and as a “barbarous black,” who took his “grotesque court” out drinking with his fifty pesos.30 In the same year, Juan P. Ramos elaborated on the Zinny story with equally unsubstantiated information (and replaced Palacio with Ibarra) in his Historia de la instrucción primaria en la República Argentina, 1810-1910. Ramos wrote that the early schoolmaster Fray Juan Grande was one of the few people able to reproach Ibarra to his face, including the time when “the drunkard Shimu Negro, [was] elevated to Most Excellent Lord Governor and Captain General of the Province, [and] Ibarra bought the government from him.”31 The lawyer, historian, and teacher Honorio J. Senet repeated the Zinny account yet again in La obra nacional in 1926.32 In an age of white elite ascendency, when the progress of the nation was linked

27 Zinny 1920.
28 Rivas 1884; Morin 1888; Fazio 1889.
29 Olaechea y Alcorta 1907.
30 Aubín 1910.
31 Ramos 1910.
32 Senet 1926.
to a further whitening of the population through European immigration, Zinny and his imitators served a political and social purpose. Nonwhite and lower-class individuals had to be shown to be ridiculously incompetent when they achieved some degree of power in the early national period, to justify their exclusion from power in the age of liberal state-building.

Despite the persistence of the Zinny story, several Argentine historians have questioned it. In the second phase of the historiography, historians discounted the more preposterous elements of the Zinny account while continuing to portray Luna and other Federalist leaders as ignorant, violent *gauchos malos* in the classical liberal tradition. These historians tended to refer to Luna by the nickname Shimu Negro, and while most accorded Luna the rank of captain, none used the honorific “Don” before his name, thus emphasizing Luna’s race while denying his social respectability.

Santiagueño historian Andrés Figueroa is an exemplar of the new approach. In 1920, he asked of the stories of the sale of the governorship, “Is this not simply improbable?” Figueroa criticized Zinny’s publication of an unfounded story and lamented its impact on the province’s reputation:

And from where would Mr. Zinny get such information? On which document was he able to base such affirmations? He does not even tell us that it was a reference, which, in the end, would lessen the serious fault of assigning these depressing pettinesses to a whole Argentine province.

The case is that he gives it as authentic, without saying from where he got it. The nonsense surely reached Mr. Zinny in tragicomic form, and he transmitted it, neither more nor less, than as a paradox, whose consequences (from which many have taken this town to be an encampment of Indians) we have paid harshly, because no son of Santiago has since occupied himself with determining the truth; and earlier, on the contrary, some have contributed to unconsciously propagating that falsehood.  

Despite Figueroa’s critical approach, he nevertheless characterized Luna as an “assassin” and wrote about “the entry of the horde of *Shimu Negro* into the city” in 1840. And while denying that neither Luna nor Coronel held the governorship in 1831, he nevertheless imagined that Zinny’s story could have been inspired by an incident in which “the assassin *Shimu Negro*” was drunk, and someone gave him money or tobacco to avoid trouble, which Luna then shared with “his people, they who exterminated Castellanos at Los Flores.” Furthermore, while Figueroa took the position of an empiricist, scientific historian in demanding documentary proof for Zinny’s statements, he himself committed the same error. Ironically, Figueroa is the first secondary source to describe Simón Luna’s actions in aid of Ibarra in 1840, and he cites no primary source for his assertions. Not only does Figueroa relate that “the already famous Simón Luna (alias *Shimu Negro*), an assassin who was counted among his [Ibarra’s] most loyal men,” led a force of two hundred men into the capital, he describes Luna “obliterating everything that he encountered in his way, without giving quarter to any person that did not have time to hide, killing without distinction of sex or age.” Figueroa then went on to link Luna’s supposed brutal reconquest of the city to an account of one

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33 Figueroa 1920.
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witness to Ibarra’s vengeance, originally published in the Buenos Aires newspaper La Religión in 1858, with an introduction by Benjamin Poucel. The witness, Agustina Palacio de Liberona, was the daughter of Santiago de Palacio (deceased in 1835) and the spouse of Spanish merchant José M. Liberona, one of the conspirators who attempted to overthrow Ibarra, and whom Ibarra later tortured and killed.34 Palacio de Liberona describes a Federalist attack on the city, during which Federalist troops shot at her house and then broke in, and how she survived by hiding in a well in her house and later in a monastery. However, she never mentions Don Simón Luna in her memoir, and certainly never identifies him as leading or participating in the reconquest of the city or the attack on her house.35

Figueroa not only failed to cite a source regarding the events of 1840; his account also introduced subtle prejudices into the historiography on Don Simón Luna. Luna was depicted as a savage, killing men, women, and children regardless of their culpability or innocence. But while Ibarra was also brutal to his victims, the caudillo’s actions seem more rational and honorable as vengeance for his brother’s death and focused on those individuals who had plotted against him. Additionally, by linking the story of Palacio de Liberona’s suffering to an attack led by Luna, Figueroa created the opportunity for white readers to imagine a virtuous white woman imperiled by an uncontrolled and barbaric Black man.

In 1941, the Italian-born Santiagueño historian Alfredo Gargaro continued the trend of questioning Zinny’s details while maintaining a dim view of Luna’s personal qualities. He stated that Simón Luna occupied the capital city only hours after Gama’s flight, but that “A false history has been propagated about this occupation, which it is necessary to destroy.” In Gargaro’s estimation, based on the letter which Santiago de Palacio wrote to Ibarra on April 27, 1831, “Simón Luna, alias Schimu Negro… was really an individual of the most ruinous instincts, but he was in no way in charge of the government of the province, as Zinny affirms in his Historia de los gobernadores, much less did he sell it for fifty pesos.”36 Although Gargaro took the opportunity to make a negative judgment of Luna’s moral character, he did not speculate on the captain’s actions in 1840. Recognizing that no primary source supported Figueroa’s assertions, Gargaro makes no mention of Luna’s participation in the events of that year.

Raúl A. Juárez’s Vida de Felipe Ibarra (1968) continued in this vein. After recounting Luna’s defeat of Castellanos, he states that Felipe Ibarra appointed his nephew Manuel Ibarra “to keep order in the city, because serious disturbances had been observed in it, almost all among the troops of Shimu Negro and Coronel, who were addicted to it.” Regarding Luna’s role in the retaking of the city in 1840, Juárez writes that his troops, “with the bloodcurdling cries of a mob anxious for a fight and revenge, twirling ponchos, pikes, and bolas, penetrated the city, defiant and spirited, taking shots in the air at the doors and windows of the conspirators. They took shots at the residence of Libarona, so that it can be inferred that his action in the conspiracy must have been outstanding.” Juárez goes on to connect the plight of Agustina Palacio de Libarona to the attack of Don Simón Luna in much the same way as Figueroa.37 As late as 1982, teacher and Quichua scholar Maximina Gorostiaga de Mema repeated essentially the same story of a brutal reconquest of the city by

34 Figueroa 1920.
35 Palacio 2012.
36 Gargaro 1941. See also Newton 1973, which quotes Gargaro’s text when describing Simón Luna.
37 Juárez 1968.
Luna, derived from Figueroa.  

Nevertheless, a third phase of historiography had already begun when Gabriel A. Puentes, in his work *Juan Felipe Ibarra, 1828-1832* (1944), became the first historian to treat the Santiagueño caudillo in a nonjudgmental fashion. His objectivity extended to Ibarra’s supporters, including Simón Luna. Puentes avoided any unconfirmed accounts of Luna’s activities, and merely stated that “it was known that Don Simón Luna had defeated Don Marcelo Castellanos at Los Flores,” and later that “the comandante Luna demanded the turning over of one hundred pesos for the pay of his soldiers, abandoned by the chief at the time he withdrew; fifty five pesos were gathered and a debtor to the government completed the sum.” And unlike earlier historians, Puentes cited all of his sources. Puentes also introduced several subtle changes which characterize the third phase: he used the title Don, avoided using the nickname Shimu Negro, and used a military title which made Luna equal to the other Federalist leaders (in this case, calling Luna a comandante rather than a captain).  

In the same year, Argentine political economist Luis Roque Gondra criticized both Zinny’s and Figueroa’s treatment of Luna as lacking factual basis in his *De la tiranía de Rosas a la libertad*. Gondra recounted Zinny’s story of the sale of the governorship and wrote that “Here the honor of Santiago imposes the task of turning the archive upside down to prove Zinny wrong.” After discussing Figueroa’s accurate description of Ibarra’s punishment of the rebels of 1840, Gondra added that “On the other hand, the intervention he attributes to Captain Simón Luna, alias Shimu Negro, of the guard of Ibarra, is contradictory and even laughable.”

The more sympathetic approach continued during the 1960s and 1970s, which saw the rise of social history, a leftward lean among intellectuals, and Argentina’s return to Peronist populism (1973-76). The most important Santiagueño historian of these decades, Luis Alen Lascano, reevaluated Ibarra’s rule as a period when the government supported “social justice.” He also claimed that the liberal denigration of Federalist caudillos was unjust, as the Unitarios behaved just as badly or worse. In 1968, Alen Lascano stated that “the historical calumny was raised to accuse those *montoneros* [mounted provincial soldiers] of ‘barbarism.’ And there have even been some who spread the denigrating fable that those captains bartered the government for tobacco and money… Historical documentation proves the contrary. Because scarcely after arriving in the city, the montoneras guaranteed the realization of a plebiscite to elect a governor, owing to the acephaly which they found.”

In 1976, Alen Lascano wrote a revisionist biography of Ibarra which reevaluated the “classical history” of Federalist barbarism during this period in Santiago del Estero. Alen Lascano states that the Unitario forces committed atrocities and sackings in the province, and that the gauchos and other countryside *paisanos* flocked to Ibarra’s side to free “their piece of ground [terruño] and their homes” from the Unitarios. Simón Luna was one of several Federalist captains (along with, and of equal rank to, José Santos Coronel, Juan José Díaz, and Juan Francisco Herrera) tasked with distracting and wearing out the enemy forces until they abandoned the capital. Despite the Unitarios’ ‘innumerable acts of terror, … The classical history, on the other hand, remembers

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30 Gorostiaga de Mema 1982.
31 Puentes 1944. While captain was a formal military rank, the title comandante could be applied to any officer in command of a unit of soldiers.
40 Gondra 1944.
41 Alen Lascano 1968.
the uncultured montoneras of the Ibarriista lieutenants, desirous to compensate their expenses in money or provisions in order to pay their troops. A legend is even told that one of them, Simón Luna, bartered the government for bundles of tobacco, which is incorrect and is so proven ad nauseam, but these apocryphal deeds are stressed to hide the depth of Unitario atrocities. In 1992, Alen Lascano used much the same words as in 1968 when discussing the actions of the Federalist captains (including Luna) in 1831. He went further, citing Zinny’s book as inventing the two sales of the governorship, by Luna and Coronel, to Palacio, and as beginning the liberal historiographical attack on the age of Ibarra.

Alen Lascano’s revisionism helped to inspire Abelardo Arias’ 1971 novel Polvo y espanto, which recounts the events of 1840 and 1841 from both the Unitario and Federalist perspectives, in two sections labelled “notebooks.” The “Unitario Notebook” opens with Agustina Palacio de Liberona hiding in her well from the Federalist militia that had broken into her courtyard; she overhears the men discussing their orders from “Lunita” and concludes, “Lunita would have to be the atrocious captain Simón Luna, Shimu Negro.” The “Federalist Notebook” begins with Ibarra fleeing the city after the murder of his brother: “He clenched his teeth and spurred the horse’s flanks. Nobody had to see the tears of Felipe Ibarra for Francisco. Nobody, not even his faithful Simón Luna.” The Federalist Notebook casts Luna as Ibarra’s loyal servant, waiting for him on the other side of the Río Dulce. Earlier, according to the novel, Ibarra had debated whether to put Luna in the stocks or make him a sergeant. Ultimately, he raised Luna to the rank of captain in order to “put him in moveable stocks of loyalty... what he needed, like his gauchos, was to have loyalty to someone...” Luna’s fierce loyalty leads to his death in the Battle of Famaillá in 1841, as a kind of sacrifice for the ultimate Federalist victory. Ibarra sends Luna to attack the Unitario force, and then has a premonition of Luna’s body being carried off the field: “He saw him dead, as if a part of his own body had died. Also, part of the body of Santiago del Estero.” The vision soon becomes reality:

> Before noon, two of his gauchos from Loreto brought the cadaver of Simón Luna on a stretcher... His body was riddled with lance and saber wounds, like that of his brother Pancho. It still astounded him that the entrails of his people did not have the color of the land. They had it now. He saw an interminable line of Simón Lunas, he kept looking at it, welling up and sinking in time. He remained immobile, contemplating it.

And so, with much dramatic license, Simón Luna took his place in an award-winning work of literature. Arias skillfully demonstrates how Luna could be viewed differently by partisans of the two sides in the civil wars. He is only atrocious and Shimu Negro to the Unitarios, while the Federalists view him as loyal and brave. Even so, while Arias does not represent Luna as ignorant in either notebook, neither does he call him “Don” or show him winning battles or demanding payment from the white elite of Santiago del Estero. He can be nothing more than a loyal servant,

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42 Alen Lascano 1976.
44 Arias 1971.
and his character could easily be replaced by a loyal enslaved person, or even a loyal dog. This fictional Luna’s death at Famaillá serves merely to emphasize his loyalty to Ibarra (not a personal commitment to Federalism as a cause), and provides an occasion for the fictional Ibarra to show his human emotions. Despite his familiarity with Alen Lascano’s scholarship, Arias created a Simón Luna apparently more in line with what his readership wanted to believe about the Afro-Argentine leader.

Yet, despite the advances in the historiographic treatment of Luna, and the idealized stereotype created by Arias, the most common popular treatment of Luna remained the defamatory account created by Zinny, which has proved to be remarkably durable. This version reached the United States and survives in twenty-first century Argentina.

In 1940, writer, historian, and lawyer Arturo Capdevila resuscitated the Zinny account in his ¿Quién vive? ¡La libertad! Crónica, evocación e historia de la organización nacional. In this work of historical fiction, Capdevila imagines a series of conversations between the provincial delegates who met at San Nicolás, Buenos Aires province, in 1852 to plan a new national government after the fall of Rosas. One provincial governor reflects on the post-independence era: “It was as if civilization had fled from among us.” Santiago del Estero governor Manuel Taboada (the nephew of Ibarra) is then immediately reminded of “Schimu Negro, who was the rudest black in the land and nevertheless took control of the government.” Capdevila then has another delegate ask Taboada, “But aren’t the deeds that are told of him exaggerations?” to which Taboada replies in the negative before proceeding to recount the entire Zinny story of Luna’s and Coronel’s sales of the governorship to Palacio, and Luna’s spending of the fifty pesos on alcohol at the pulpería. In this short passage, then, Capdevila negated the questioning of Zinny begun by Figueroa, and reaffirmed Zinny’s account as accurate history.45

In 1953, Morgan State College anthropology professor Irene Diggs published a short account of Luna in The Crisis, the official journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Relying entirely on Zinny, she simply repeated the story of Luna’s sale of the governorship for fifty pesos.46 In the August 1967 edition of the popular Argentine magazine Todo es historia, historian León Benarós also repeated the negative account, quoting Zinny word for word without naming him. This article, “Corto gobierno de ‘Shimu Negro,’” formed one of Benarós’ contributions to the section titled “El desván de Clio,” and was reprinted with 144 other such contributions in 1990. Tellingly, in this volume it was placed at the head of a section labelled “Sonríe, por favor…” (“Smile, please…”).47

In a chapter of Espadas y corazones: el otro costado de la historia argentina titled “Mi reino por cincuenta pesos” (My Kingdom for Fifty Pesos), published in 2015, journalist and historian Daniel Balmaceda once again related the Zinny story of the ignorant governor who renounced his post for one one-hundredth the price originally offered by Palacio. Instead of threatening to incite the “rabble” [la canalla], however, Balmaceda has Luna promise to cause an uprising of “all the blacks of the city.”48 To Balmaceda, the threat to the dominance of formally educated white elites in 1831 (and by extension in 2015), lay not so much with a class-based rabble, as with a racially-defined

45 Capdevila 1940.
46 Diggs 1953.
47 Benarós 1967; Benarós 1990.
48 Balmaceda 2015 (originally published 2004).
group of blacks.

**Conclusion**

Don Simón Luna was clearly nothing like this caricature. Far from being incapable of telling the difference between five thousand and fifty pesos, the Actas Capitulares demonstrate that he was well able to calculate complicated monetary values. The defamatory account was created at a time when the triumphant Unitarios had adopted European ideas of scientific racism and were trying to whiten the country through European immigration. They also had an interest in denigrating the Federalist caudillos as barbaric, a trend established by Domingo Sarmiento’s famous *Facundo, or, Civilization and Barbarism*, originally published in 1845. Although serious Argentine historians had discounted inaccuracies in this account by the 1920s and begun to completely reevaluate the caudillos by the 1960s, Zinny’s version depicting an ignorant black leader was by now well-known and easily accessible, and repetition made it seem to be true. As we have seen, later authors also implied that Luna was a danger to white women and a loyal servant of a white male leader. The historiographical treatment of Don Simón Luna is a reflection of the wider relations between whites and nonwhites in Argentine history. It is as if, with actual documented facts about Luna being so few, white Argentine writers felt compelled to fill in the gaps with their own stereotypes of Afro-Argentines. The misconceptions about Luna do not go away because many modern white Argentines, who refer to the masses of nonwhite poor as *la negrada* and who fear their rise to power under populist movements such as Peronism and Kirchnerism, are still only too willing to accept these stories.

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40 Sarmiento 1998.
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