

Deprivation of freedom

Depriving a human being of their freedom -reducing their body and personhood to a mere condition of property with commercial value, subjected to sexual exploitation, forced labor, mutilation, sale or annihilation-, is an inhuman and unacceptable action. This form of freedom deprivation is known as *esclavització*, enslavement. This act submits a person to a state of *esclavitud*, slavery -as in captivity or bondage-, which in some societies turns into a legal and economic system, acquiring thus the name *esclavismo*, also slavery in English, but understood as such a system. Knowing and making known that this act has happened in diverse moments of history, either as an individual or collective decision effected towards persons or societies, and that it still happens today in a similar or diverse manner, is an unavoidable responsibility. Yet, this is also the case for the need of valorizing those persons and social movements that opposed the existence of such a phenomenon and defended its abolition, especially in one’s closest setting and history.

Transatlantic Barcelona

While it is a fact that there have been enslaved persons present in Barcelona since the organization of the first societies that populated its territory, either from the participation of Barcelonans in trans-Mediterranean slavery dynamics, as well as in trans-Pyrenean or

through the Atlantic Africa, this project is particularly interested in the transatlantic space of this phenomenon. Contrary to what is commonly thought, transatlantic slavery didn’t start from Africa to the Antilles, but from this Caribbean area to Europe, and concretely to Barcelona, beginning with Columbus’ first voyage in 1492. In the same sense, while slavery as a system of human bondage ceased in the Spanish colonies in 1886, specifically in Cuba, it is less known that slavery as a system of economic investment wouldn’t be abolished until 1890, with the payment of the last compensations to previous owners of enslaved persons in Puerto Rico. The repatriation of the capital accumulated in the colonies by investment, sale, exploitation or compensation through the slavery system, would be an important element in the economic and urban development of Barcelona and many other Catalan localities.

Not only negreros

In countries with Hispanic-influenced history, it is common to hear or read the

“... the stupid ferocity of the African race, which not knowing nor being able to appreciate the grace that their government has granted them, show their recognition by giving into the sentiments that are natural to them; burning, killing and destroying.”

Preamble of the Bando negro, by Captain General Joan Prim i Prats (1848)

word *negrero*, in relation to those that organized or collaborated in the forced transportation of black persons from Africa to any other overseas destination. Yet, these traders only constitute a part of all the persons that actively participated in the sustenance and strengthening of slavery as a system. Other than captors, factors, and

transferrers -such as ship captains and quartermasters-, these traders would find their actions complemented by the final sell of enslaved persons to those who would exploit them with forced labor. Moreover, the slavery system was also composed by other actors that were no less decisive in its existence, such as investors, law makers, governors and antiabolitionists in general. Among these, we can find in Barcelona’s history some who were openly and actively involved and whose names have become monumentalized, such as Joan Güell i Ferrer and Antonio López i López, together with a considerable number of persons and institutions. Still, we can also find names of those who opposed slavery and were committed with its abolition, such as politicians like Estanislao Figueras i Moragas and Francesc Pi i Margall, the musician Clotilde Cerdà i Bosch, as well as protests by citizens of Barcelona and surrounding municipalities.

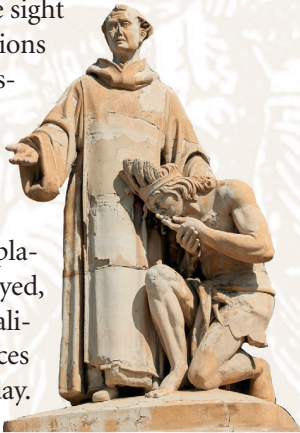
Histories and Memories

History as a discipline strives for the verification and interpretation, in the best objective way possible, of documented events of the past, always avoiding judging these from the human principles of the present. Nonetheless, collective memory studies demand taking into account the views that the diverse groups that compose a society in the present have towards

“And keep in mind that the destiny of a freed Cuba wouldn’t be that of the Republics in the Continent [...] but that of the Island of Santo Domingo, completely ruined by the indolence and tedium of the African classes and the consequent propensity to vices and demoralization...”

Joan Güell i Ferrer, *Rebelión cubana* (1871)

that past. While it is true that no individual person is responsible for the actions committed by their ancestors, when talking about a collective person such as a country or a city that assumes and defends its existence throughout history, this subject matter takes a more complex aspect. In the case of Barcelona, there are places in its public space that memorialize the deeds of resistance done by its citizens during the Succession War ended in 1714, as well as others that aim for the reparation of the consequences brought upon by the loss of democracy with the end of the Civil War in 1939. It is therefore necessary to reflect upon the participation of this same collective in both pro-slavery and abolitionist acts and in a near timeframe. Reducing the reflection about transatlantic slavery to a matter of social normalcy or legality of another time, by applying a simplistic mode of historic relativity, would be to lose sight of the repercussions left by such a system. The social and individual vestiges left by the transatlantic slavery gave place to yields enjoyed, as well as inequalities and prejudices still suffered today.



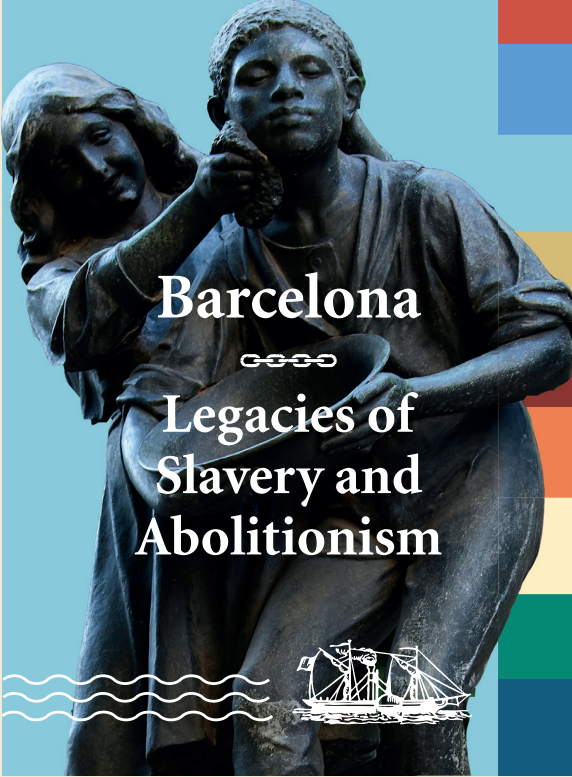
Sculpture at the Columbus monument

The Real Life of Antonio López y López, by his brother-in-law Francisco Bru (1885)

While Antonio López y López was openly a slaver in his active anti-abolitionism, the book by his brother-in-law, Francisco Bru, can be considered the central element around which the main accusations of *negrero* or trader of enslaved black African people came about. Although Bru was reviled back then for this publication, considered a slander out of family spite, the mystery of his participation in this trading variant of slavery is beginning to clear up:

“López dealt with slave-trading captains, and when ships arrived, he bought the whole shipment or a great part of it, with or without the company of others, depending on the occasion and the resources. This way he made a great deal of money, although he always hid what he really did and produced from my father. The commerce of slaves had been practiced and was still practiced in the Island; but even when its population benefited from the results, considered it low and despicable, looking upon those who did it as the vilest and most hideous traders.”

[...]



“Here’s the guy to whom Barcelona has dedicated a plaza and a monument. What do you think, Spaniards, of this dignity? What do Barcelonans think about this? They can be very proud of having, in one of their public plazas, the statue of a trader of human flesh, famous for his vile cruelty in the Island of Cuba, before being so on the Peninsula with his millions and lavishness.

Not without reason, that plaza could well be called the Plaza of the Negreros because it will be the monumental rehabilitation and the radiant apotheosis of all traders of human flesh.”

Text: Omar R. Guzmán Ralat / Photography: Enric Berenguer, ACH
Advisor: Javier Laviña / Design: La PAGE Original

Comisiones Obreras, together with cultural and historical memory associations, have expressed their will to rethink those elements of the city which exalt a past that can be uncomfortable to others. The itinerary you have in your hands is an invitation to be mindful and know about some of these spaces in Barcelona related to the slavery derived from the transatlantic trade and its abolition.



With the support of:



“And after I arrived to the Indies, in the first island that I found, I took by force some of them so that they would learn and give insight of what there was in those lands [...] and of these and others I bring with me Indians as proof [...] and you may see, your Highnesses, that I will give you as much gold as you please, with very little help on your behalf [...] and slaves, as many as you command to be shipped, and these will be from among the idolatrous...”

Columbus’ Letter to the King and Queen of Spain, February 15th 1493



Relief at the Columbus monument

10. Old Customs House of Barcelona and seat of the Civil Government

Avda. del Marquès de l’Argentera, 2

On December 22nd 1872, a march which was presided by a red banner with gold letters that read “Immediate abolition of slavery”, left from Plaça Catalunya heading towards the seat of the Civil Government. Here the protesters presented their claim to then Governor Joaquim Fiol i Pujol, an abolitionist sympathizer, who, from the balcony, thanked the demonstrators, closing his discourse with “Long live the honest people of Barcelona!”



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11. Homage to Pi i Margall

Plaça de la República

On April 1936 a monument to Francesc Pi i Margall, the second president of the First Spanish Republic, was inaugurated in the old plaza known as Cinc d’Oros. He, as well as his predecessor, defended the abolition of slavery in the Antillean colonies. In 1939, the allegory to the Republic that crowned the monument and the medallion with his portrait in relief were removed. In 1990 both elements were reintegrated as part of a new monument in a plaza that was finally renamed Plaça de la República in 2016.



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12. Romea Theater

Carrer de l’Hospital, 51

This theater, inaugurated in 1863, saw the premiere of the play *Llibertat!* by Santiago Rusiñol, on October 1901. In it, a Catalan emigrant to the colonies, temporarily comes back enriched, with a black boy that had been his slave, a fact that caused diverse reactions in his hometown. The author also proposes a link with laborers’ exploitation, making a sharp criticism to racism and classism in the Catalan social context of his era.



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13. The fountain of the black boy

Avda. Diagonal / Carrer del Bruc

This fountain from 1915 has been popularly known as that of the Black Boy or of the Washbowl. A common interpretation suggests that the boy was an adopted son of the sculptor, Eduard Alentorn, who asked his sister to clean and scrub his face with persistence to try to whiten his skin. It is certain that the sculptor titled his work: *Impossible!*. Today, the internalization of racial prejudice is considered as one of the consequences of slavery.



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Detail of image on cover

1. Monument to Joan Güell i Ferrer

Gran Via / Rambla de Catalunya

The original version of the monument was inaugurated in 1888 in the context of the Universal Exposition of Barcelona. Initially located at the crossroads between Gran Via and Rambla de Catalunya, its statue was torn down in 1936 and the base reused as a pedestal to honor the victims of a frustrated coup against the Republic. Eventually, it was entirely destroyed, yet a smaller scale replica was reconstructed in 1945 a few meters away from its initial location, maintaining some of its original allegories.

2. Palau Marc

La Rambla, 8

Tomás Ribalta, an owner of plantations in Cuba and member of the Liga Nacional, after acquiring and adapting the Palau Marc in 1876, left a relief on its facade that gives proof of his past as slaveholder.

Apart from the symbols that are usual for navigation and commerce, as well as tropical fruits, the chimney and sugarcanes of the plantation are distinguishable, clearly pointing to the forced labor of enslaved Africans.



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3. Monument to Christopher Columbus

Plaça del Portal de la Pau

This monument was finished in 1888 for the Universal Exposition of Barcelona, as an anticipation for the commemoration of the fourth centenary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas. A bas-relief between the shields of Puerto Rico and Cuba –then still Spanish colonies- reproduces the encounter with the first captives that were unwillingly brought from the Antilles, and the following shows their presentation to the kings Ferdinand and Isabella.

On the base of the monument there are two sculptures of Indians in a kneeling position, each in front of friar Bernat de Boil and captain Pere Margarit. These references point to the religious and political submission forced upon the Indians, which became the first enslaved peoples in the Americas.

“Finally, he went into the Court, [...] presented the gold and things that he brought from the other world to the kings [...]; that which they looked at most were the men. [...] The six Indians were baptized, that the other [four] did not arrive to the Court; and the king, the queen and the prince don Juan, their son, were the godparents...”

Historia general de las Indias, de Francisco López de Gómara (c. 1550)

4. Baptismal font of the Cathedral of the Holy Cross and Saint Eulalia

Pla de la Seu

Over the baptismal font of the Cathedral of Barcelona, sculpted in 1433, a plaque states a sacralized story that oscillates between what oral tradition and the first chronicles from Indies recounted. It narrates the baptism, performed in this temple, of the six captive Indians that made it to Barcelona on the return trip of Columbus’s first voyage.



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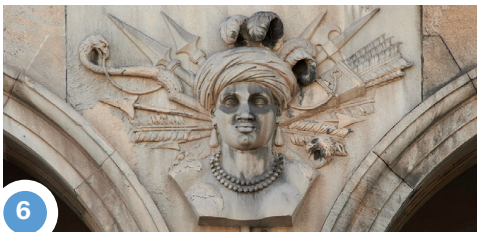
5. Banco Hispano-Colonial

Carrer Ample, 3

Created in 1876, it had as a main founder its first president, Antonio López y López. This institution channeled the funds given by its investors with the aim of helping Spain confront the Ten Year War in Cuba, which began in 1868. The interrelation between the defense of the colonial status quo and the ongoing economic interests that included the slavery system was extremely tight. Today, the last headquarters of this bank have become a hotel in Via Laietana, 3.



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6. Casa Xifré

Passeig d’Isabel II, 14

Josep Xifré i Casas, accumulated his capital in Cuba and reinvested it in New York. Upon his return to Barcelona in 1830, he acquired the lands where he built a house a decade later. Casa Xifré is well known for its portico, but also for the abundance of allegoric reliefs embedded in its facade, such as the image of an African and an Indian among symbols of commerce, navigation and fortune, as well as children with plumes or carrying sugarcane, intermixed with medallions of colonizers and conquistadors.

7. Llotja de Mar

Passeig d’Isabel II, 1

This historic chamber of maritime commerce was also the setting for the creation of the Círculo Hispano-Ultramarino in 1871, which had Joan Güell and Antonio López as president and vice-president, respectively. It was also the founding place in 1873 of the Liga Nacional, a league opposed to the immediate and imminent abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico. Its first vice-president was Antonio López, and among its 72 representatives there were Tomás Ribalta and Eusebi Güell.



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8. Monument to Antonio López y López

Plaça d’Antonio López

This monument was erected in 1884, only a year after the death of the founder of the Compañía Trasatlántica de Barcelona in 1881. He had been given the title of Marquee of Comillas, in honor of his native town in Cantabria. The plot of land for its first location was ceded by the City Council of Barcelona, also renaming the old Plaza San Sebastian after Antonio López. The original statue was torn down in 1936 and substituted with an image of captain Maximiliano Biardeau as “Martyr of Liberty”, for being mortally wounded on October 6th 1934 after offering his services to the Catalan State. The statue of López was recreated by Frederic Marès and reinstated in the actual plaza in 1944, from where it was again taken down in 2018 for the specific reason of his relationship with slavery.

Bas-relief at the monument to Antonio López y López

The ‘negro Domingo’ was a recurring character in 19th century theatrical works. From one of these plays came about the song “Canción del Negro Domingo” in 1865, which could still be found in popular Spanish songbooks in 1895. Far from the illogical interpretation which assigns this nickname to Antonio López, it is most probable that it was meant to be a popular reinterpretation of the monument, by focusing on the black child that alludes to the allegory of the Compañía General de Tabaco de Filipinas.



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9. Monument to Joan Prim i Prats

Parc de la Ciutadella

The monument *Barcelona a Prim* was erected in 1887 within the context of the Universal Exposition held the following year. The statue was torn down and melted in 1936, yet reconstructed in 1948. Barcelona remembers him for having ceded to the city in December 1869, as president of the Council of Ministers, the Fortress of the Ciutadella, allowing for its demolition and conversion into a park.

Yet, two decades before, Prim had been named Captain General of Puerto Rico in October 1847, a position that lasted only until June 1848, in great part because of the unpopular authoritarianism reflected in the extreme measures of repression against the rebellions of enslaved Africans.

Song of the Negro Domingo

I am Domingo the negro, the little black boy of quality who wants to live fully free in the countryside.

Do go now! Do leave me! See that I ask this with much need.

Pachica, the teasing one, says that I’m a nobody if I let a white man take command in my house.



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