

Intercultural group discussions on the misnamed "Negre de la Riba"

February 2025

Approach and objectives

In February 2025, within the framework of the exhibition "*El Negre de la Riba and other myths to scare children*", organized by the municipal facility Casa de la Barceloneta 1761 (Barcelona), two group discussions were promoted with the aim of reflecting on how cultural institutions and organizations should represent cultural diversity in their exhibitions and activities.

Following some criticism received on social media regarding the representation of the misnamed "Negre de la Riba" during the exhibition's opening parade and in the exhibition itself, these two sessions aimed to provide a space for debate to analyze how the figure of the "Negre de la Riba" has been treated both historically and today.

The first debate sought to create a space for dialogue among professionals and organizations involved in the historical and artistic conceptualization of the exhibition, as well as activists engaged in anti-racist efforts.

Participants included institutions such as the Ethnological and World Cultures Museum of Barcelona, the artisan workshop *Constructors de Fantasies* (creators of the fiberglass replica figurehead), and the cultural organization *Palo Q'Sea*, which features this figure in local popular festivals. Also, members of *Barceloneta Diversa* (Community Plan at the Barceloneta neighbourhood), local activists, and representatives from the Barceloneta Civic Center, the Barceloneta Library, the History Museum of Catalonia, the BCN Interculturality Program, and the *Ciutat Vella* District of the Barcelona City Council.

The second debate aimed to broaden the discussion to the general public to understand impressions, feelings, and perspectives on the figure of the "Negre de la Riba" from a wider viewpoint. This session allowed for deeper insight into the various perceptions of this historical figure and its role within the neighbourhood's identity.

Participants included not only local residents but also representatives from organizations such as the Federation of Latin American Associations in Catalonia (Fedelatina), historians, anthropologists, artists, and activists from diverse cultural backgrounds. The debate highlighted the importance of re-signifying certain figures to ensure an inclusive and respectful representation.

First group discussion – February 13, 2025

The conversation began with a brief introduction by the exhibition's curator, who explained that Casa de la Barceloneta 1761 is a facility dedicated to recovering and sharing the collective history and memory of the Barceloneta neighbourhood. He noted that the exhibition's goal was to reflect on historical narratives used to make children obey, comparing original pieces from the Ethnological and World Cultures Museum of Barcelona with a popular local figure, the *Negre de la Riba*, who, according to legend, would take away disobedient children. He concluded by pointing out that the exhibition included a section offering a critical approach to the colonial system and displayed 19th-century texts in which the figurehead was used to acknowledge Barcelona society's role in the slave trade.

Next, the coordinator of the *Barceloneta Diversa* project, who co-organized the debates, explained that the project is a community initiative that values the neighbourhood's cultural richness by highlighting different cultural traditions and working to combat stereotypes and racism. The main objective is to defend the right to live with dignity in Barceloneta and promote inclusive coexistence. She also noted that the project had previously presented the *Negre de la Riba* figure as a symbol of the neighbourhood's multiculturalism through activities like the guided tour "*Barceloneta, a welcoming neighbourhood*", and that this may now need to be reconsidered.



The role of museums and cultural institutions

The debate began by referencing the article "*Barcelona Exhibits a Monument to Racism*", published on the *Zona de Estrategia* website, which openly criticized how the

so-called *Negre de la Riba* has been treated, both popularly and institutionally. The Ethnological and World Cultures Museum emphasized that the journalist based the article on a brief text that accompanied the *Negre de la Riba* figure when it was installed in the museum's courtyard just days before the exhibition opened, and therefore argued the article was taken out of context. However, it was also noted that the case of the *Negre de la Riba* was critically addressed during the "Museu Habitat" conference series, an initiative by the Catalan Government's Culture Ministry to reflect on what 21st-century museums should be.

The Ethnological and World Cultures Museum acknowledged that society is demanding a reorientation of museum narratives in certain areas. This indicates there is conflict in how some topics are approached in exhibitions. In this regard, the Museum of the History of Catalonia cited its recent exhibition "*On the Run: Refugees*", which addressed migration and refugee issues, though some parts revealed a biased perspective.

Returning to the contents of "*El Negre de la Riba and Other Myths to Scare Children*", the representative from the BCN Interculturality Program pointed out that the critical approach to the colonial past and the slave trade was insufficient, suggesting a missed opportunity for deeper engagement. He posed the question of how we should deal with the city's uncomfortable cultural heritage. He also noted that in 2022, the network published a decalogue of criteria to promote interculturality in local areas, which could serve as a reference for drafting recommendations in this context.

Identity and tradition in the Barceloneta neighbourhood

At this point, Afro-Catalan artist Montserrat Anguiano called for greater Afro-descendant representation in the debate and expressed regret that some invited individuals had not responded. She also questioned whether racialized individuals had been consulted during the design of the Casa de la Barceloneta 1761 exhibition and its related activities, to avoid causing offense—arguing that failing to do so could be considered institutional racism.

This reflection led to an analysis of the parade held in the streets of Ciutat Vella on the exhibition's opening day, which may have demonstrated a lack of sensitivity toward racialized communities. The Ethnological and World Cultures Museum shared this critical perspective, acknowledging the folklorization of the parade and noting that traditions can be overtly racist, even if unconsciously so.

Conversely, an anthropologist and local activist defended the parade as a form of popular culture, arguing that street festivities should not be judged with institutional superiority—especially since two public cultural centers had featured the *Negre de la Riba* figure. In this sense, the artisan workshop *Constructors de Fantasies* defended the popular and anti-slavery image of the figurehead, which they have retained with its 19th-century name but have always claimed originally represented a Native American.

They added that the parade brings the figure closer to the public and helps address a part of the city's past.

In connection with this idea, the cultural organization *Palo Q'sea* defended the festive use of the figure and added that, at its core, this figurehead challenges slave traders and the powerful—making it essential for this image to be accessible to everyone. Finally, it was pointed out that the lyrics of the song created to accompany *Negre de la Riba* in popular festivities clearly reference the city's colonial and slave-trading past.

Rethinking the activities involving the "Negre de la Riba" figurehead

The Barceloneta Library noted that it is more difficult to adequately contextualize the *Negre de la Riba* figure in a street festival, whereas doing so in a museum setting is more feasible—and it seems that work is being done in this direction. The Barceloneta Civic Center added that the controversy and resulting debates could serve as a positive catalyst for better explaining the *Negre de la Riba* figure moving forward.

The representative from the Ciutat Vella District proposed that the local community—led by *Constructors de Fantasies*—rethink the vision of the *Negre de la Riba* figure from a perspective of inclusion and multiculturalism. The artisan workshop responded that they would reflect on the matter and make proposals, suggesting that one option could be to paint the figurehead in different colours each year to align it with various social causes. In the same vein, the Ethnological and World Cultures Museum suggested that the popular name of the figure could also be reconsidered, noting that for the exhibition in question, they deliberately referred to it as “*the misnamed Negre de la Riba*.”

Second group discussion – February 25, 2025

At the opening of this session, led by the curator of the exhibition “*El Negre de la Riba and Other Myths to Scare Children*” and the coordinator of the *Barceloneta Diversa* project, it was noted that the exhibition has sparked a deep local debate about the historical and social meaning of this figure and its connections to the city's colonial past.

Decolonizing the City

The representative of the Federation of Latin American Entities of Catalonia (*Fedelatina*) stated that the exhibition could serve as a good example of objective decolonial practice in the Barceloneta neighbourhood. She emphasized that museums have started to address colonialism critically, and that every neighbourhood should examine its own myths to determine whether some should be dismantled.

The Afro-descendant artist and activist Micaela Mahi considered it positive to give voice to figures like “Negre de la Riba,” but argued that the representation of historical characters such as this one must be broadened in order to promote alternative ways of viewing contemporary society. She stressed the importance of creating new stories that re-signify characters and symbols connected to the city—especially racialized ones—and criticized the lack of diverse perspectives in the historical narrative. She also warned that uncomfortable figures cannot simply be hidden just because they are racialized or belong to marginalized groups.

On the other hand, art historian and activist Mabel Llevat argued that certain expressions of popular culture cannot be analyzed naively, citing as an example the *Indians fairs* held in the Maresme region. She questioned to what extent colonial-era figures can be re-signified without the risk of portraying them in a positive light. She believed the exhibition should have included a more extensive critique of the slave trade and mentioned by name those who historically benefited from that system.

Another participant in the debate, an anthropologist, commented that the figure of “Negre de la Riba” is not comparable to other expressions or practices that glorify Catalonia’s colonial past, such as the *Indians fairs*, which in practice serve to create tourist markets while commemorating families that made fortunes in the colonies. She added that debates like this help construct symbolic reference points for confronting the past.



Racism and its impact on society

The *Fedelatina* representative pointed out that the "bogeyman" figure does not have to be racialized, but in the case of "Negre de la Riba," fear is generated specifically because of his skin color. She warned of the rise in hate speech and insisted that any action to counter it is positive, since this racism, in her view, is institutional.

Micaela Mahi emphasized the harmful nature of stereotypes linked to Blackness and the differing social perceptions between Black and white individuals. She also introduced the concept of *racial capitalism*, which has historically harmed Black people. She argued that fighting racism requires finding common ground and added that the re-signification of historical figures is only valid if marginalized communities are also involved in the process.

Mabel Llevat argued that we live in a racist society and that it is difficult to escape from it. She stated that the story of "Negre de la Riba" carries a strong emotional resonance because it is part of the local popular culture, and she believed that these kinds of expressions are sometimes not sufficiently rethought or updated. She added that just because the figure is beloved does not mean it can serve as a refuge to preserve a character that, in her view, embodies racist traits.

The re-signification of the "Negre de la Riba"

Local residents expressed the need to update the figure of "Negre de la Riba" in order to transform it into a critical symbol of popular resistance while maintaining its important role in Barceloneta's festivities.

Others pointed out that the main issue was the parade featuring the "Negre de la Riba" organized for the exhibition's opening, particularly the fact that it took place outside the neighbourhood.

Some local women felt that within the neighbourhood, the controversy has had a possibly exaggerated impact, and that celebrations involving this figure have always been positive—though certain aspects may need to be reconsidered going forward.

The artisan workshop *Constructors de Fantasies* acknowledged that, initially, they were unaware of the potential racist interpretations of the figure due to its name and appearance. Their intention had always been to recover the historic "bogeyman" of the neighbourhood and bring him to public attention. However, the *Constructors de Fantasies* association is now reassessing this approach in order to present the figurehead as a liberated and anti-slavery man.

Another local resident reinforced the idea that the *Negre de la Riba* is primarily a ship's figurehead and that it is important to distinguish it from the racist connotations that have been attributed to it over time.

Conclusions

These debates have provided an opportunity to reflect on the construction of collective memory and the importance of representing cultural diversity in an inclusive and critical manner. Most of the opinions highlighted the need to review representations of myths and historical figures in order to understand their impact on contemporary society

The re-signification of figures like the “*Negre de la Riba*” can become an educational and empowering tool if managed appropriately. For this reason, it is essential that cultural institutions work together with the public from an intercultural perspective to ensure the respectful and transformative transmission of history and collective memory.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for cultural institutions and organizations addressing issues related to the colonial past:

1. Reinterpretation of the “*Negre de la Riba*”

- Explore the possibility of changing or adapting the popular name to avoid negative connotations.
- Include a critical and contextualized explanation in any public representation of this figure.
- Actively involve racialized communities in decisions about its use and representation.

2. Responsible musealization and dissemination

- Promote exhibitions and activities that clearly and educationally explain Barcelona’s colonial and slave-trading past.
- Ensure that museum narratives are plural and inclusive.
- Incorporate anti-racist discourse, challenging the current order that perpetuates racist practices in an unequal society.
- Avoid the exoticization and folklorization of historical figures, as these reinforce racial hierarchies.

3. Inclusion of diverse perspectives

- Define subjects and audiences in order to develop intercultural initiatives that center the interests and needs of local residents.
- Encourage the active participation of racialized communities in designing memory-related policies or initiatives.

- Organize more debate spaces or workshops on cultural diversity with the community and schools.
- Develop educational materials and explanatory guides to accompany festive activities with a discourse that fosters critical thinking.

4. Management of memory in public space

- Rethink the presence and meaning of certain symbols in public spaces.
- Consider creating new visual representations that highlight historical figures linked to anti-racist struggles.

5. Communication and response to social criticism

- Establish mechanisms to receive and respond to public criticism, treating it as an opportunity to improve cultural representation.
- Regularly review and adapt content and narratives based on social debates and advancements in anti-racism and historical memory.