CHAPTER 9

Colonial Reckoning: Reexamining the Slave Past in Catalonia

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Introduction

Colonial vestiges dominate the landscape of Vilanova i la Geltrú, a small city near Barcelona. From the eighteenth century onwards, Vilanova had very close links to the "ever-faithful isle" of Cuba to the extent that, during the nineteenth century, it was known as "*L'Havana Xica"* (Little Havana). These ties are notably visible in the town's central square, where a monument dedicated to Josep Tomàs Ventosa i Soler, an important merchant and politician in colonial Cuba, overlooks a porticoed plaza. In October 2016, this statue was desecrated by political activists critical of Spain's violent, colonial past. While the Spanish colonial past has left a substantial legacy in Catalonia, it is only recently that the role of slavery in its creation has come to the fore. This chapter presents the case study of the Mediterranean city of Vilanova i la Geltrú to help explain how this past is intertwined with other concerns that form part of the current political discourse, such as that about national identities.

Recent developments in Vilanova i la Geltrú are examples of the reckoning with the colonial legacy in Catalonia and highlight the need to both incorporate these legacies into global narratives of slavery, and to question Catalan and Spanish historiographies. Statues such as Ventosa's bear witness to an uncomfortable history that Spain has yet to fully face. Indeed, Spain was the last European power to abolish slavery, doing so only in 1886, and still lacks museums and spaces of collective memory that reflect on this past. This fact cannot continue to be neglected. It is by questioning the past–and weaving new stories, as this piece

does by examining Vilanova–that some influence can be exerted on how Catalan and Spanish national histories and identities are taught, lived, and remembered.

The involvement of individual citizens, Catalan cities, and the Spanish state in slavery and the slave trade have long been overlooked and ignored in both Catalan and Spanish historiographies. In the past few decades, several international scholars have addressed the issues of colonialism from a critical perspective, including María Lugones, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Rita Segato (Lugones 2008; Grosfoguel 2023; Segato 2013). This chapter draws on Charles Mills' "epistemologies of ignorance" and Aníbal Quijano's concept of "coloniality" as a theoretical framework through which to analyze Vilanova i la Geltrú's colonial past. Mills explained how certain gaps in knowledge have been deliberately produced to maintain colonial systems of oppression (Mills 1997). Similarly, Quijano examined how colonialism and imperialism shaped the societies of those who were colonized, as well as how knowledge has been produced and organized in the metropole (Quijano 2019). Therefore, the desecration of Ventosa's statue can be seen as an effort to challenge and disrupt this colonial historical narrative, "White ignorance", and the system of power and knowledge that underlie it.

In 1778, King Charles III of Spain promulgated a law allowing all citizens from the metropolis to trade with the American colonies. As a result, emigration to the colonies, especially Cuba and Puerto Rico, underwent massive growth. Most emigrants were fleeing poverty and searching for ways to enrich themselves in the New World, and they did so through an economy based on slavery. Many of them later returned to the Iberian Peninsula as wealthy businessmen and promoted industrialization, new architectural styles, art patronage, charitable organizations, and public institutions, such as hospitals and schools. These

individuals became known as *Indianos*.[1] Ventosa i Soler was one of the prominent, wealthy *Indianos* who used Cuba's colonial structures to make a fortune, while also deepening the connections between Vilanova and Cuba, at that time referred to as the "Pearl of the Antilles".

Since the 1980s and 1990s, the recovery of the *Indiano* heritage has been promoted in different Catalan towns, with the support of the Catalan regional government in the form of associations such as the *Xarxa de Municipis Indians* (Association of *Indiano* Towns), publications, exhibitions, and cultural routes and programs that vindicate this past. Vilanova i la Geltrú was no exception. For instance, in 1989, the *Exhibition about Americanos-Indianos*: *Architecture and Urban Planning in the Garraf, Penedès and Tarragonès (Baix Gaià), Eighteenth to Nineteenth Centuries* was mounted at the Víctor Balaguer Museum. In 1998, another exhibition on the subject, *Remembering Little Havana*, was organized (fig. 7).

The recovery of the memory of the Catalan *Indiano* past has been accompanied by an account of Catalonia as a maritime nation with men–specifically men–engaged in trading goods and entrepreneurship. In contrast to a decadent and dying Spanish society, with little social mobility, Catalonia emerged as a dynamic nation. Its agents were the merchants and industrialists who brought progress. Because of their profitable businesses, they left a cultural, economic, and social legacy to their hometowns and were thus remembered as great men. This narrative, however, did not focus on the origins of these fortunes or on the relationship between Catalonia and the Spanish Empire. Ulrike Schmeider (2022) recently pointed out that this contradiction can also be found in Catalan museums representing colonial America. The Catalan nationalist narrative, which posits Catalonia as a perennial victim of oppression by the central Spanish government, is incongruous with the historical reality of Catalan involvement in the enslavement and trade of enslaved individuals. By framing colonialism in

[1] Also known as *Americanos*.

the Americas as solely a Spanish endeavour, the significant role played by Catalan actors in Spanish imperialism is obscured. This simplistic and binary opposition between Catalonia and Spain, which is commonly employed within Catalan nationalism discourse, is rooted in the distortion and selective representation of historical memory.

In 2018, Barcelona removed the statue of marquis and businessman Antonio López due to local pressure and movements by migrants against an individual who had been active in the slave trade. This received much attention on a national level. Nevertheless, two years before, on October 12, 2016, a group of pro-independence and far-left Catalan activists targeted the statue of Josep Tomàs Ventosa i Soler in Vilanova by throwing paint on it. They intended to bring attention to the colonial past of prominent local figures. The timing of the action was significant. It occurred on the Spanish national holiday, which marks the commemoration of *Hispanidad* –the belief in a shared Hispanic heritage and culture–and Christopher Columbus' so-called discovery of America. It highlights the complexities of the Catalan national identity and how it relates to the colonial past, a past that is often seen as belonging to Spain rather than Catalonia. Hence, in addition to politicizing statues in the age of #TakeItDown, this act of iconoclasm illustrates the complexities underpinning the Catalan national imaginary.

Since then, the monument has been the focus of a number of protests by community organizations, and the local government has initiated a review of the names of its streets, squares, and other historical sites that may be associated with the institution of slavery. In fact, on October 12, 2020, after the assassination of George Floyd in the US, the pro-independence Vilanova i la Geltrú City Council announced that it was funding a study on the city's *Indiano* heritage in public spaces. The purpose of this study was to initiate a discussion on the way in which local history has been represented (Ajuntament de Vilanova 2020). This

extensive study (Álvarez and Rama 2021), which is unique in both the Catalan and Spanish contexts, was published in 2021 and is the starting point of the local government's actions concerning the memory and legacy of the *Indianos* and their links to slavery and the slave trade (Eix Diari 2021).

This chapter is structured into five parts. First, it is provided an overview of the historical colonial context and the relationship between Vilanova and Cuba. Second, it is detailed the life of Ventosa and the history of his statue. The third section examines the events of October 12, 2016, as articulated by the activists involved. The fourth section examines the ongoing efforts to redress the *Indiano* history in Vilanova through the examination of two interviews conducted with local political representatives. The conclusions offer an analysis of the broader implications of these actions from a global perspective.

The Historical Context

After the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), Cuba became the most important sugar producer in the world. It was during this period that the *sacarocracia* ("sugarocracy")–the ruling political and economic class whose interests were tied to the maintenance of slavery and the colonial status of the Spanish Empire–developed (Moreno Fraginals 2001). According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (TSTD), in the period after the slave trade was abolished in Spain in 1817, Cuba alone took in more than 550,000 slaves who had been shipped illegally. In this regard, it helps to understand slavery in Cuba in the nineteenth century as part of the "second Atlantic slavery" (Tomich 2020). Slavery was an institution at the heart of modern, technologically advanced capitalism, offering the production of high-value commodities for European and American industrial markets on an unprecedented scale. In turn, the profits generated reverted to the expansion of slavery. Consequently, for much of the nineteenth century, Cuba was one of the centres of the Atlantic world economy.

Further, one of the fundamental pillars of the eighteenth-century reforms of the Spanish colonial system introduced under the Bourbon dynasty was the 1778 Free Trade Act, enacted by Charles III. This law facilitated the active participation of different social and economic actors who had not played a major role in the Spanish colonial system before that time in trade and establishing settlements. In particular, a significant number of Catalan individuals, families, and companies entered the colonial world directly in the last third of the eighteenth century, continuing throughout the nineteenth century (Delgado 1982: 115-137). Catalan participation in Spain's colonial empire was of paramount significance in the largest of the Caribbean islands, Cuba.

Many Catalans settled in different locations on the "ever-faithful isle" and thrived in businesses based on shipping and trading food, participating in the slave trade, establishing sugar and coffee plantations, and managing the political life of the colonial administration. During the nineteenth century, Catalans became the largest group of emigrants from the Iberian Peninsula, with some gaining significant shares of power both on the island of Cuba and in the metropolis. It was common for emigrants to return to their native towns to retire, which were often on the Catalan coast. Within this so-called *Indiano* phenomenon, they would then reinvest the capital they had acquired in the colonial world in other businesses, public works, art, and technology (Jou 1994; Castañeda and Rodrigo 2004; Enríquez Àlvaro 2022).

The links of Catalan patrician culture to the survival of slavery in the Spanish Caribbean, and the use of that capital in Catalan industry, have been widely studied in the last few decades (Delgado and Fradera 1985; Fradera 1987; Rodrigo 1998; Rodrigo 2007; Nerín 2015). Martin Rodrigo showed that, after the Spanish-American War, Enric Prat de la Riba's Catalan nationalism instrumentalized the Spanish defeat so that it appeared that "neither Catalonia nor Catalans had had anything to do with a colonial policy that had led to the

'Disaster of 1898'" (2009: 317-318). The idea that Spanish colonialism is separate from Catalonia's past, Rodrigo continued, has survived in the works of contemporary historians and in the popular imagination.

To highlight Catalan links to Spanish colonialism in America, Rodrigo pointed to several elements: Catalan voluntary expeditions to Cuba during the Ten Years' War (1868-1878); Catalan centrality in platforms like the *Círculo Hispano Ultramarino*, the *Liga Nacional* and the *Agrupación de Hacendados de Ultramar*, and companies such as the *Banco Hispano Colonial* and *Compañía General de Tabacos de Filipinas*; and the demonstrations in Barcelona in favor of maintaining the colonial empire. The participation of one of the fathers of Catalan nationalism, Valentí Almirall, in the 1885 demonstrations over the Carolines Crisis between Spain and Germany–just months before he published *Lo Catalanisme*, one of the founding texts of political Catalan nationalism–provided Rodrigo with proof that "this early Catalan nationalism did not express itself yet as a movement or ideology opposing Spanish patriotism, nor even as an alternative" (2009: 351). In other words, as Josep Maria Fradera (1992) noted years ago, in the central decades of the nineteenth century and before the political articulation of Catalan nationalism, Catalonia operated within a "dual loyalty".

According to migration scholar Michael Zeuske, in the Antillean context, the word "Catalan" itself acquired the meaning of slave trader and/or foreman, both occupations related to the trafficking and exploitation of enslaved people. The fact that these professions were identified as Catalan rather than Spanish or Cuban, illustrates the importance of Catalans within the Spanish imperial system (Zeuske 2017). Catalan historiography, under the influence of the nationalist narrative advocated by Prat de la Riba, has traditionally obscured this direct participation in the most violent aspects of the colonial system. One of the main

reasons may have been, as mentioned previously, to separate Catalans from Spaniards, with the former being seen in a positive light, and the latter in an unfavourable one.

Vilanova i la Geltrú reflects most aspects of Catalan migration to America. This coastal city to the south of Barcelona had a fixed population of just over 6,000 inhabitants throughout the nineteenth century. Together with neighbouring Sitges and Barcelona, it contributed the largest number of Catalan emigrants to Cuba, over a third, in the first decades of the century (Maluquer de Motes 1988). More specifically, people from Vilanova i la Geltrú largely settled on the Western part of the island, where Havana and Matanzas are located, both of which had numerous *ingenios* (sugar cane mills). Like the majority of Catalans in Cuba, most of the emigrants from Vilanova organized themselves into family businesses. This generated a pull effect, creating intense migration flows that lasted beyond Cuba's independence in 1898 (Dorel-Ferré 1985). Family ties and the prospect of rapid economic growth and social prominence led to the constant migration of inhabitants from Vilanova i la Geltrú (Martí 1997).

With the repatriation of large amounts of capital from the colonies, Vilanova became known as *L'Havana Xica*. During the period of Cuban migration, consequently, Vilanova became an important Catalan industrial and cultural centre, hosting events like the 1882 Regional Exhibition, a forerunner of Barcelona's 1888 Universal Exhibition, founding the Víctor Balaguer Library-Museum in 1884, and creating several banks that reflected the economic expansion of the city and the emergence of a bourgeois class made up of wealthy *Indianos*. However, the second half of the nineteenth century also coincided with an agricultural crisis brought on by the phylloxera plague, and trade declined substantially as a result of the American Civil War (1861-65) and Spain's ultimate loss of the American colonies in 1898 (Martí 1997).

This deep colonial connection had a lasting impact on the city, both in terms of culture and material traces. Individual undertakings by a variety of local men who had become wealthy in Cuba created a culture of its own in the city, seen in the *Indiano* architecture, urban restructuring (such as the opening of the main boulevard in the centre of town), public lighting, and, most notably, a railroad connection. This was largely the result of the influence of Francesc Gumà i Ferran, another successful emigrant, whose company, *Gumà y Hermanos*, operated several mills.(records show that he voted against the abolition of slavery) (Álvarez and Rama 2021: 144-145). Other important local figures included Salvador Samà, the first Marquis of Marianao, who became wealthy from the slave trade and reinvested his capital in charity and estates (Pérez Tarrau 2007), and Josep Tomàs Ventosa i Soler, the subject of this study and a key figure in the history and identity of Vilanova i la Geltrú.

The Statue

The bronze statue of Josep Tomàs Ventosa i Soler is prominently located in the central square of Vilanova, in front of the city hall. The statue is mounted on a stepped base with a pedestal, on which there are two plaques: one bearing Ventosa's name ("To the eminent patrician José Tomás Ventosa"), and the other displaying the date of its dedication, February 26, 1883. In addition, there are four inscriptions, one indicating the year of its construction, and the remaining three with the coats of arms of Vilanova, Barcelona, and Matanzas. The statue depicts Ventosa holding a book in his right hand, which bears an inscription that references his philanthropic endeavours and his promotion of education. This choice of depicting these aspects of his life serves to accentuate the political nature of the monument.

Josep Tomàs Ventosa i Soler was born in 1797 in Vilanova i la Geltrú. In 1809, at the young age of twelve, he emigrated to Cuba in the midst of the Peninsular War. He quickly became part of the world of textile production companies, becoming known for his economic

successes and his active participation in the cultural life of Matanzas. His economic prosperity allowed him to pursue a political career, and in 1830 he gained a position on the Patriotic Council, an institution dedicated to the promotion of public schools. From there he held different offices until he became mayor of Matanzas on two separate occasions, in 1847 and 1852. Ventosa was committed to education and the eradication of illiteracy in the lower classes in his hometown, and built public schools for boys and girls, which opened in 1854. He also built a public library and schools in 1847 in Matanzas (Cotarelo 2010).

Ventosa's consistent charitable efforts, as well as his frequent financial contributions to the *Casa de la Beneficencia*, sparked resentment from his brother, Francesc Ventosa i Soler, who initiated legal proceedings to have him declared mentally incapacitated. Supporters of the *Indiano* memory movement have frequently cited this as evidence of Ventosa's benevolent nature and charitable actions (Jiménez de la Cal 2022). As a result of these legal proceedings, Josep Tomàs was declared insane and lost control over his fortune. On July 30, 1874, after falling ill during one of his many trips between Catalonia and Cuba, he died in Havana. In Vilanova i la Geltrú, almost a decade after Ventosa's death, a statue dedicated to him was erected in the main political centre of the town. An identical sculpture erected during his lifetime is located in Matanzas, at the entrance to the public school he established. Today, Vilanova i la Geltrú and Matanzas are sister cities in remembrance of Josep Tomàs Ventosa i Soler (fig. 1).

The first stone of the monument to Ventosa i Soler was laid in 1881, when the railway between Vilanova and Barcelona was inaugurated. It was dedicated in 1883 and paid for by popular subscription.[2] Although the builder of the sculpted figure is unknown, it has been suggested that Damià Campeny designed it. However, it is likely that the author of the

[2] The City Council made a public call for all the citizens that would like to contribute by giving money to erect the statue.

pedestal was the municipal architect, Bonaventura Pollés i Vivó. The monument is located in the centre of the town's central square, a colonial style plaza with porticoes. In fact, Ventosa had acquired the lands of an old Capuchin convent in 1846, after the friars were excommunicated in 1835 and their property confiscated the following year in the context of the ecclesiastical confiscations carried out under Minister of Finance Juan Álvarez Mendizábal. This facilitated the demolition of the convent, the development of the new extended *Eixample* district, and the construction of the new town hall. The sculpture stands imposingly in front of it, overseeing the square, formerly called Ventosa Square (Roselló and Marsé 1987).

Due to its location in the administrative and commercial centre of the town, the statue has often been the object of different actions performed by the residents. In 2011, for example, when the Final Four of the CERS Roller Hockey Cup was held in the city, Ventosa was equipped with a hockey stick and the shirt, gloves, and knee pads of the local club. In a more sombre moment, when Laia Alsina, a thirteen-year-old girl, was sexually assaulted and murdered in June 2018, the statue was quickly surrounded by candles, bouquets of flowers, and messages dedicated to the young victim. Also in 2018, in the context of protests against the preventive detention without bail and later trial of a number of Catalan independence leaders, pro-independence groups in Vilanova placed an *Estelada* Catalan independence flag on the statue. Indeed, the statue has been a protagonist in several pro-independence demonstrations. In 2020, in a demand for more pedestrian space, a chair was hung on the statue. Each year during Carnival, which is a holiday with deep roots in the town, the statue is decorated. The statue has thus become a site of celebration, memory, mourning, and political expression (Eix Diari 2020; Flores 2018; Ajuntament de Vilanova 2011).

(Fig. 2)

(Fig. 3)

(Fig. 4)

(Fig. 5)

The Attack

The attack on the statue by Arran, a pro-independence revolutionary left youth organization, took place on October 12, 2016. The protesters threw eight litres of red paint at the statue, symbolizing the blood shed during the colonization. In addition, graffiti appeared on other monuments and plaques around the city, defacing names of *indianos* with more red paint. The events were recorded and the video was posted on social media (Eix Diari 2016), generating much controversy (Arran 2016).

(Fig. 6)

In the same video footage of the incident, the individuals responsible for Arran provided the following rationale for their actions:

> Salvador Samà, Soler Morell, the Almirante Colom, Francesc Gumà i Ferran, Tomàs Ventosa, among many others from Vilanova, went to the Americas to do business through the slave trade, imposing European imperialism, and collaborating in one of the most horrifying genocides in history. For that and more, we have nothing to celebrate in Vilanova [on October 12]. (Eix Diari 2016)

Additionally, they referenced a well-known statement from a prominent anti-colonial writer from the Americas, Eduardo Galeano:

> They came. They had the Bible, and we had the land. They told us: "Close your eyes and pray", and when we opened our eyes, they had the land, and we had the Bible.

Finally, the video ended with the claim that:

The local police initiated investigations against the activists involved (Eix Diari 2016). Some people accused Arran of being a terrorist organization and compared them to ISIS and the Taliban. The action also faced criticism, with some arguing that not all of the individuals targeted as slave traders were actually involved in such criminal activity. Additionally, it was pointed out that some *indianos*, such as Josep Tomàs Ventosa, had also been involved in charitable works in the city. In a manifesto that was published by Arran a few days later in a local newspaper, the organization defended the action, acknowledging that while Ventosa was the mayor of a significant port city that was involved in the slave trade, there was no concrete evidence of his personal involvement in such activities.[3]

In the manifesto, there was a shift in the argumentation as compared to the video recording, where Ventosa was no longer portrayed as a slave trader but rather as the mayor of a significant regional centre of the slave trade. Historically, it is true that Matanzas is in the part of Cuba where the most sugar was produced and with the largest slaveholding plantations (Moreno Fraginals 2001; Murray 1983). However, enslaved people from Africa arrived at several points on the island before being moved to their destination by land (Rodrigo 2021: 63-90). In addition, the manifesto emphasized the necessity of taking "spectacular" actions to generate social debate. The Arran manifesto demanded that the exaltation of *Indiano* figures ceases and that a statue be erected instead dedicated to "workers in the cotton fields and

[3] In 2022, Arnaldo Jiménez de la Cal published *José Tomás Ventosa, el Benefactor*, a biography of Ventosa in which he revealed that Ventosa had owned domestic slaves and had participated in his family's sugar plantations. Also commented on in the recent book chapter of Álvarez and Rama (2022).

textile factories" because they were the ones that really shaped the history of Vilanova and Matanzas (Arran 2016).

The figure of Ventosa, the statement continued, was chosen for its symbolism. Replying to their critics who had underlined Ventosa's local charity works, the activists claimed that "they do not believe that the ways a fortune is invested can justify the ways used to obtain it". Further, they answered their critics accusing them of terrorism by arguing that their action against Ventosa "is not comparable to the destruction of Palmira's ruins". Finally, "our fight for Socialism and Feminism in the Catalan Countries is not comparable with Wahhabism". They ended by saying that "we expect these comparisons to be stopped because these are conflicts too serious to be banalized like this".

Exactly four years after the attack, on October 12, 2020, the Vilanova i la Geltrú City Council announced the initiation of a study to tackle the city's colonial and slavery past. The Councilman of Historical Memory, Enric Garriga, stated that the announcement was made on the *Dia de la Hispanidad* because:

> There is no better day than October 12, a day to remember the genocide of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, to start the work that we have long delayed as a city: rethinking how we have explained our own history, and how we have omitted slavery and colonialism from which we benefitted through these "illustrious" names. This silence must come to an end and that is why we begin this project. (Ajuntament de Vilanova 2020)

Restorative Actions

Vilanova i la Geltrú's City Council began to take steps to address the town's links to slavery. As noted, it commissioned a study published in 2021, designed to serve as the basis for political and restorative actions. The report, written jointly by an art historian and a historian that are part of the staff of the local museums of Vilanova, featured a photograph of the statue of Ventosa on its cover. The 216 pages long study aimed to "draw a map of the

Indiano heritage of Vilanova i la Geltrú that explains who they were and what they did" (Álvarez and Rama 2021). The first section of the study traced the links between Vilanova i la Geltrú and Catalan emigration to America between the end of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, highlighting the centrality of Vilanova and the Garraf region in this phenomenon. The second part of the study catalogued more than a hundred *Indiano* elements, including civil and religious buildings in both urban and rural areas, squares, monuments, streets, and so forth. Finally, biographies of the *Indiano* individuals with a presence in the local heritage were presented, including references to their economic and commercial activities, as well as to the origin of their fortunes; it was this section that contained information about their relationship with practices of enslavement.

Concretely, the objective of these biographies was to identify those *indianos* who left an imprint on the city's local heritage – in the form of monuments, houses, and street names – and who had a direct or indirect relationship with the practices of the slave trade. Indirect participation would consider, for example, holding shares in sugar-mill production. The focus was on direct participation in the slave trade, especially during illegal times in most of the 19th century. The results were that at least 16% of *indianos* related to local heritage participated directly in the *odious commerce,* and 32% in an indirect way. The other nearly 50%, did not fit in any of the two previous categories.

To get a better understanding of the relations between the attack on the statue and the restorative actions in the city, we conducted two different interviews in 2021 with political representatives from Vilanova. The interviewees were Jordi Medina, the councilman for Economy and Historical Heritage, and Enric Garriga, the councilman for Historical Memory (Medina 2021; Garriga 2021). Medina belonged to the center-left independentist party Esquerra Republicana (ERC) and Garriga to Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP), a pro-

independence far-left party, of which Arran was one of the youth organizations. Garriga's party joined the municipal government for the first time after the election in 2019, and he noted in the interview that his party wanted to reconsider Vilanova's *Indiano* past as part of their "transformative" political programme. In his view, the debate around the *Indianos* and the city council's role in rewriting the popular narrative unfolded at the grassroots level for years. Both councilmen co-sponsored the new study on the *indiano* past and their personal links with slavery and the slave trade (Álvarez and Rama 2021).[4]

Councilman Medina had a very critical view of the attack of October 2016. Even though he understood why that particular date was chosen, on a more personal level, Medina confessed that he was hurt to see "the cultural heritage of my city vandalized when it has not been proven that this gentleman [Ventosa] had a direct relationship to slavery." In this respect, he appealed to caution and expressed regret that "all *Indianos* are mistakenly put in the same bag." Contrary, Enric Garriga, on this topic, confessed that he was in favour of the attack because "if you are looking for a colonialist symbol in the city, the Ventosa statue is one of them. It makes sense." He said that it was incorrect to claim that colonialism was exclusively Spanish, since Catalans also partook in the colonial administration. However, he continued by saying, when asked about it, that he did not believe that tying narratives on slavery to national and pro-independence questions would be an appropriate framework of analysis. Nevertheless, he was open to starting a debate on Catalan identity and historical memory. This, he stated, in turn, may pre-empt future conflicts related to memory and

[4] These interviews were conducted before Ventosa's biography was published (Jiménez de la Cal 2022), and, therefore, the direct implication of Ventosa in the processes of enslavement in Cuba was not known. Further, Garriga left the government of Vilanova in June of 2022 after internal discrepancies within the CUP.

identity, as people from northwest Africa and Latin America further integrate into Catalan society.

Beyond, following the protests against police brutality and racism in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the US, Jordi Medina, said that he was concerned about the "trivialization of heritage." He stated that institutions could engage in "serious" debates that may even lead to the removal of elements that represented episodes of violence in the past. Medina believed that institutions bear the responsibility to define the parameters of public debate. For this reason, he sponsored the 2021 Vilanova i la Geltrú City Council study, in coordination with the councilman for Culture and Historical Memory to ensure "that it is respectful of our heritage but also firm."

On the one hand, Councilman Garriga insisted on the need for the Historical Memory Commission in Vilanova to tackle the colonial past of the city, a commission that only focused its actions on the period of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco regime. Even though fascism dominates historical memory policies, Garriga believed that, in order to be consistent, the colonial legacy should also be treated within that framework. Garriga asked himself: "What story are we telling? Why do we have this legacy?" He was worried that the history being taught in schools left out a substantial portion of the facts. To him, how the city defined itself was of utmost importance, as was the extent to which he could influence that definition. Aware that this was a sensitive issue at the core of many people's identities and that it could generate a backlash, he softened his stance accordingly. Therefore, he accepted the proposal by councilman Medina of applying a case-by-case approach.

On the other hand, Medina believed that if any element in the public space was found to be directly related to slavery, it had to be the administration that provided the relevant documentation to prove it. Attention had to focus on direct links to slavery, defined as the

ownership of enslaved individuals or slave trading practices. "*This* is where the debate should be," he added. In other words, the process of reviewing cultural heritage had to be conducted institutionally, even if it raised from popular concern and unrest. The proposal to change the names of the town's streets and other public spaces was one such example.

Garriga understood that the general idea of slavery referred to the slave trade, although he regretted that the definition was not broader. He argued that the fact that there was no record, at least at that moment, of a direct relationship between Ventosa and others with slavery did not mean that it did not exist. From his perspective, it was necessary to examine colonialism as a whole, and not solely the slave trade facet. Even though he disagreed with Councilman Medina on this issue, he thought that it was better to begin the debate somewhere. However, problems were raised when renaming streets was the only action to be taken because there were other cultural elements linked to slavery that go beyond the nomenclature. In his view, what was important was to start the debate, so that the public could re-evaluate their heritage. He intended to start working with schools about colonialism, as he was attempting to go beyond changing street names.

We believe that Garriga was right in pointing out that rethinking heritage involves more than renaming streets. To offer coherent historical narratives, debates on heritage must be accompanied by reflections on the historical accounts they present. For instance, this need for contextualization is evident in the interior of the Víctor Balaguer Museum, an institution founded by the eminent politician, writer, and historian, who was Minister of Colonial Affairs at several points in time. The museum contains explicit references to characters with links to the slave trade. One such example is Salvador Samà i Martí (Pérez Tarrau 2007), who is represented in the entrance room. While his name is expected to be removed from one of the streets of the city, it seems that his portrait will continue to be exhibited in the museum

without any additional information regarding his business activities. Faced with this discordance in historical memory practices, Councilman Medina argued that "it has not been documented" that Samà or any other slave trader sponsored this institution, which was unique at the time of its founding. However, at the entrance to the museum, there is a commemorative plaque with the names of illustrious citizens who supported the initial collections. The names of accredited slave traders such as the Marquis of Comillas and the Marquis of Samà are among them. In Medina's opinion, the Víctor Balaguer Library-Museum was crucial to the Catalan Republic because "it is the cultural proposal for the Catalan national project that is best suited to reflect where we come from and why we have come to the point where we are now" (Medina 2017).

Vilanova offers tourist routes that focus on the architectural part of the town's heritage, and these tours fall under Medina's purview. It could be argued, however, that they neither present a comprehensive historical context nor explore the problematic nature of the source of the wealth that made it all possible. In fact, the councilman, who is a trained cultural manager, wrote about the *Indiano* legacy in Vilanova, highlighting its architectural elements and the charitable donations and investments made by *Indianos* in the town, without referring to either colonialism or slavery (Medina 2015). Indeed, for several years, Vilanova was part of the Association of *Indiano* Towns, an organization that celebrates the past of the *Indianos*, but often does not elucidate the problematic facets of the phenomenon, such as slavery. Medina explained that Vilanova left the association for practical reasons, as "there was no return on its investment", and it was considered a waste of money. Although Medina challenged our assessment of this organization, which we depicted as "obscuring many historical facts," he stressed the importance of understanding the slaveholding past and not normalizing it.

The report by the city council to investigate the events was intentionally announced on October 12, because, in the opinion of Garriga, it was “a day vindicating colonialism.” For both councilmen, the attack and the report announcement happened on that day because it was a communicative issue against *Hispanidad*. Therefore, they saw this as an action that simply opposed Spanish colonialism, not as a reflection of Catalan identity. Further, since public memory policies are designed for citizens, the study is publicly accessible on the Internet. It remains to be seen whether it will alter Vilanova’s guided tours and the other cultural activities offered by the city. As of now, however, the city’s culture does not seem to be under scrutiny. In Medina’s words: “We do not deny our *Indiano* past, but we do not validate bad practices.” He maintained that it was important to explain the context of each thing, without legitimizing it, and to not lose sight of the fact that “a lot of people went to America, and all did not prosper. Most did not make a fortune in America.”

Conclusion

We believe that keeping the statue of Ventosa in its place in Vilanova i la Geltrú is the right choice as long as research on the *Indianos* continues to be done. Providing information about the relationship between Vilanova i la Geltrú and slavery in the Spanish colonies and disseminating that information is an important task. As new data becomes available, an increasing number of symbolic actions to remedy the city’s public spaces can be carried out. The study commissioned by the Vilanova City Council was a good first step towards a re-examination of the past and of how the history of the city is told. If a comprehensive historical memory program is not further carried out institutionally, however, the study may be insufficient as a restorative action. Despite the Vilanova City Council’s initial critique of slavery, a lack of understanding among of whole colonial context, its networks and entanglements, and of slavery in a broad sense–both socially and economically– could leave

substantial gaps in public memory and in the reconstruction of the past (Zeuske 2018). Educational programs must be developed at the same time.

On the other hand, and despite the study being an initiative of both councilmen, the interviews revealed different opinions regarding the question of where the limits on restorative actions are. We agree with Councilman Garriga that elaborating and expanding historical memory policies–also based on education–can be one of the most appropriate ways to respond to citizens' concerns. This could develop into a reexamination of the city's past and its leading men, among them Ventosa. At any rate, what is notable in this case is that Vilanova i la Geltrú is one of the first towns in Spain to have explicitly decided to review its past with a focus on slavery (Rodrigo 2022: 11). Indeed, this goal of creating a decolonial memory, recognizing the violence of the men who came from the city and have been traditionally viewed as great, is already in itself remarkable. In contrast, the country of Spain, where slavery was not abolished until 1886, has no specific museums or spaces of memory that reflect the colonial past.

Nonetheless, it took five years after the 2016 attack for institutional action–which has been essential to the study of Vilanova's links to slavery–to be pursued. It will take even more time to engage in material action, be it educational programs, changes in the city's nomenclature, exhibitions, memorials, and so forth. In this respect, popular pressure has proven to be an essential tool in speeding up these processes. We believe that the study and the redefinition of the past in which the City Council got engaged would not have happened without the 2016 attack. We think that it is necessary to underscore the importance that social activism had in creating a space for the collective memory of Vilanova's colonial past related to slavery.

In addition, neither the attack nor the presentation of the initiative to study Vilanova's slave past on October 12, Spain's national day, can solely be understood on the basis of opposing Spanish colonialism. It is not just a "communicative issue," as Garriga suggested. On the contrary, it also reveals a Catalan concept of colonialism. It uncovers a specific and deeply rooted idea of the past and of Catalan identity, based in part on the figure of the Catalan entrepreneur, while central elements to this history, such as the systemic violence of slavery, have been obscured. However, the 2016 attack on Ventosa's statue and the ensuing debates around his person and legacy show that these ideas are in the process of demystification and transformation. Interestingly, when it comes to the role of Ventosa in the ongoing process of re-evaluating Vilanova's colonial past, we are faced with a paradox: comparably little was known about this individual, yet he became central to Vilanova's *Indiano* past and local identity. It has only been recently, with new political parties in the local government bodies, that this figure is being re-examined.

Partly, Catalan identity has been historically configurated with the migration and colonial schemes to America. Political Catalanism, therefore, has had difficulties fully developing a complete set of criticisms of the Spanish colonial system without blurring the Catalan importance within it during the nineteenth century. Overall, although it was renounced by a portion of the townspeople, the attack on the statue served as a turning point in the process of rethinking the colonial past of Vilanova i la Geltrú, which the city appears to be preparing to face. Given its substantial colonial heritage, this is no easy task. Yet its success could open the door to other towns re-examining their own *Indiano* pasts. This bottom-up process may eventually enable national histories to be questioned and new narratives to be advanced as well. By the same performative action against monuments, and of reflection and research on the colonial and slavery past, the town may have started a reconfiguration of political reference points. Arran's claim on recognizing the workers from

the textile factories as the people that were really shaping the history of Vilanova or the concerns of Garriga about the self-referential story of the city are some examples.

The *indiano* memory should not, however, solely focus on re-evaluating the role of the plantation owners, merchants, and politicians who maintained colonial domination of the island. We believe that *indiano* memory must also centre the experiences and perspectives of enslaved black individuals in the broader Cuban historical narrative. The systematic omission of key actors in the colonial world—enslaved people—is more than merely a knowledge gap. This memory gap has been actively produced with a purpose: preserving racial hierarchies and systems of oppression. Building on Charles Mills' epistemologies of ignorance, most historiography on *indianos* has systematically sustained a racist and nationalist perspective. Catalonia's politics of heritage have been elaborated based on white ignorance (Llorens DeCesaris). This has generated a national abstraction from historical reality in which white men are celebrated for their entrepreneurship and enslaved people are absent. Nevertheless, some questions might arise here, as until what point are Vilanovans responsible for incurring in white ignorance? Or, indeed, how far back should this responsibility go?

All in all, these memorial debates on slavery inscribe Vilanova i la Geltrú's local history and dynamics within global issues. This past must be explained and developed, as debates about slavery and its connections to the present have generally taken place in non-Hispanic societies. That might be beginning to change. The attack on statues of colonialists in Britain, slaveholders in the US, and intellectual racists in France, are part of a global colonial reckoning in which Catalonia also takes part within its own dynamics. While it is still early to say what will happen in Vilanova i la Geltrú, a shift concerning monument removal has occurred. It has become clear that these decades-long silenced pasts are realities that can no longer be ignored.

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Images

Although authors have already made considerable efforts to obtain permits or purchase quality image files, some of the images included in this manuscript will be purchased upon acceptance by the reviewers. Therefore, some of the images in this volume are still water-marked.

Fig. 1. *Statue of Ventosa.* Adrià Enríquez & Gerard Llorens

Fig. 2. *Ventosa amb la samarreta del Club Patí Vilanova*. Ajuntament de Vilanova. Available at https://live.staticflickr.com/5303/5592250953_7787ac8996_b.jpg (accessed 08/31/2021)

Fig. 3. *Les pancartes contra els "presos polítics" tornen a exhibir-se a l'Ajuntament de Vilanova i la Geltrú*. CCMA. Available for download at https://www.ccma.cat/324/lajuntament-de-vilanova-denuncia-als-mossos-la-retirada-de-la-pancarta-contra-els-presos-politics-per-part-dencaputxats/noticia/2874416/ (accessed 08/31/2021)

Fig. 4. *Els bombers retiren una cadira penjada sobre el monument de la plaça de la Vila de Vilanova*. *Eix Diari*. Accessible at https://www.eixdiari.cat/territori/doc/90789/els-bombers-retiren-una-cadira-penjada-al-monument-de-la-placa-de-la-vila-de-vilanova.html (accessed 08/31/2021)

Fig. 5. *Comparses de Vilanova*. Available at https://carnavaldevilanova.cat/el-nostre-carnaval/historia/ (accessed 08/31/2021)

Fig. 6. *Vuit litres de sang a Tomàs Ventosa.* Arran Vilanova. Released on social media and the online journal *Eix Diari* by Arran. Accessible at https://www.eixdiari.cat/opinio/doc/66513/vuit-litres-de-sang-a-tomas-ventosa.html (accessed 08/31/2021)

Fig. 7. *Panoramic view from the Vilanova City Council balcony.* Adrià Enríquez & Gerard Llorens