

In the summer of 2000, readers of the Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia* could easily spot the following advertisement, in oversized font, occupying an entire page:

12 LA VANGUARDIA VIERNES, 4 AGOSTO 2000

Noches Marineras

**“El teu avi va anar a Cuba.”
Tú puedes ir mucho
más cerca**



Porque organizamos las noches marineras. Todos los viernes y sábados, una cena bufet de pescado y marisco, cantada de habaneras y para acabar la fiesta, el tradicional Cremat. En el Gran Casino de Barcelona disfrutar del mar es mucho más fácil, no hace falta que vayas a Cuba.

ENTRADA + CENA CON MARISCO + HABANERAS + CREMAT= 5.500 PTAS (+IVA)



**GRAN
CASINO**
BARCELONA

Fig. 1. Gran Casino de Barcelona. Advertisement. *La Vanguardia*. 4 Aug. 2000: 12.

The advertisement is a kind of invitation to voyage: “Your grandfather went to Cuba. You may go much closer. Because we organize sailor nights. Every Friday and Saturday, a buffet dinner of seafood and fish, and singing of habaneras, and to conclude the party, the traditional *Cremat*. It’s much easier to enjoy the sea in the Barcelona Gran Casino. You don’t have to go to Cuba.”

This essay seeks to explore to what meanings, exactly, does this hybrid bilingual sign point. What is the connection between the singing of habaneras, the “sailor nights” and Cuba, and why would the advertisers of the Barcelona Gran Casino appeal to the memory of “grandfathers who went to Cuba” to cater to the public, and do so by mixing the two languages spoken in Barcelona in a Spanish-language newspaper? The first line of this advertisement evokes perhaps the most popular Catalan habanera. Its almost obligatory performance at every *cantada*, public singing of habaneras in Catalonia, arguably makes it an emblem of cultural identity comparable to such broadly acknowledged cultural emblems as the *sardana*, the Catalan national dance, the *castells*, building and competitions of human towers that involve hundreds of participants; and the *Nova Cançó* movement of the sixties.⁽¹⁾ As Salvador Giner points out, Catalonia may be seen as a “small ‘advanced’ stateless nation” where “symbolic acts of ethnicocultural affirmation” continue to play a major role in the assertion of national identity ([Giner 1984](#): 10). These small nations, such as the Baltic nations of the former Soviet Union, survived the suppression of their languages and autochthonous cultures during the times of dictatorships and managed to preserve their cherished cultural identities through such cultural signs as traditional dances, festivals, or sports.

The exploration of the habanera, a musical genre whose very name points to the connection with the Cuban capital city, may offer a new perspective of Catalan culture and identity. Even though the habanera continues its trajectory in many regions of Spain, the permutations of this genre in Catalonia, a stateless nation with a strong feeling of a national identity, offers a privileged space to reflect on the ever-shifting nature of cultural identities.⁽²⁾ Since the nineteenth century, Catalan cultural identity was constructed on two major pillars: the attachment of the Catalans to their language, in which the literary

masterpieces of the early Renaissance were written, and on their national character, a complex of beliefs, values and practices attributed to the nation. As the philosopher Ferrater i Mora formulated it, the Catalans possess the following virtues: ironía (an ironic outlook on life), mesura (taking a measured, balanced view of things), continuitat (working persistently over the long term to achieve objectives), and seny (good, old commonsense) ([Ferrater i Mora 1967: 239-75](#)).⁽³⁾ The idealistic terms in which Ferrater i Mora and others described the Catalan national character definitely do not represent the richness of the national character. I will argue that the habanera, a transnational cultural sign, constitutes a site for viewing the emergence of an unconventional identity space for Catalonia. Through Catalan involvement in Spain's colonial enterprise reiterated in nostalgic songs that evoke a lost tropical paradise embodied in the figure of a mulatto woman, the habanera questions the traditional construction of Catalan identity, built on the opposition to the Other, the Castilian, with its black legend of involvement in slave trafficking. Songs, film and fiction that elaborate on the subject of Catalan involvement in Cuba and the Caribbean, create an identity that acquires new traits, which highlight Catalonia's complex space within a heterogeneous Spain and a new globalized world.⁽⁴⁾

Similar to other regions of Spain, the habanera gained popularity in Catalonia after 1898, with the return of immigrants and soldiers, and through its recurrent appearance in the zarzuela, a major source of entertainment at the turn of the twentieth century. A legacy of the massive immigration of Spaniards to Cuba, habaneras were transformed at the Costa Brava into a kind of fishermen's folklore as male trios sang them at taverns in Costa Brava towns all through the twentieth century. During the uneasy years of the civil war in Spain and the post-war decades, the escape into the images of Cuba and the Caribbean, with its palm trees, sensual women, and the sea, became a major means of entertainment. The recurrent motives of the habanera such as a desired mulatto woman left behind in a distant tropical paradise, the sea and a ship--an emblem that brings prosperity to the hard-working nation--arguably served the need for a self-fashioning of Catalonia as a seafaring nation with a place of its own in Spanish colonial enterprise.⁽⁵⁾

A watershed event in the story of the Catalan habanera took place in 1966 when a group of enthusiasts from a small Costa Brava town, Calella de Palafrugell, published a collection of songs, *Calella de Palafrugell i les havaneres*. The presentation of this book to friends and family turned into a spontaneous singing of beloved songs, and the participants decided to organize an annual public *cantada*, which took place for the first time during the summer of 1967. The organizers of this event were motivated by a desire to preserve traditional forms of popular culture that seemed threatened by drastic changes brought about by the boom of the tourist industry. The success of this nostalgic summer-night singing exceeded all expectations, and groups of habanera singers started to form all over Catalonia. Some specific facts underscore the outstanding place that the habanera has occupied in Catalan popular culture in recent decades. The annual Cantada d'Havaneres of Calella de Palafrugell has attracted between thirty-five and forty thousand spectators to a town with a winter population of three hundred people. Another popular event is the Mostra de l'Havanera Catalana in Palamós. The story of this highly acclaimed annual event itself presents an opportunity to reflect about the permutations of the habanera as an emblem of Catalan identity. Started as Festival de Cançó Marinerà de Palamós in 1972, it became Mostra de l'Havanera Antiga by 1982, and since 1984 is celebrated annually as Mostra de l'Havanera Catalana de Palamós. The change of the title reflects the transformation that the habanera underwent in Catalonia. The representation of the habanera as a dominant song genre on the one hand, and as sung exclusively in Catalan on the other, took place at the time when Spain and Catalonia were passing through a transition triggered by the changes after the death of Franco. Mostra de l'Havanera Catalana de Palamós, which only accepts habaneras in Catalan, may be viewed as a clear-cut attempt at representing the habanera as an autochthonous cultural sign that is an intrinsic part of Catalan identity.

However, habaneras were sung in Catalonia in Spanish for the most part of the twentieth century.⁽⁶⁾ As other forms of Spanish poetry and *cancionero*, they existed in oral tradition and were passed on from one generation to the other.⁽⁷⁾ The first collection of Spanish habaneras sung at the Costa Brava was

published by Xavier Montsalvatge in 1948.⁽⁸⁾ Lavishly illustrated by Josep Maria Prim with a prologue and comments by Néstor Luján, *Álbum de habaneras* can be seen as a successful attempt at giving folklore a written form.⁽⁹⁾ Both *Álbum de habaneras* and *Calella de Palafrugell i les havaneres* contained habaneras with lyrics only in Spanish. However, the title, the prologue and comments in *Calella de Palafrugell i les havaneres* were in Catalan. Soon after, the interest towards the habanera led to the massive creation of new habaneras in Catalan. These new habaneras sometimes continued the tradition of praising the beauty of a woman, often a woman of another race, but they also acquired new themes that sounded as an assertion of Catalan cultural identity and values. The juxtaposition of some habaneras that resound most frequently on the shorefronts of the coastal Catalonia may help to explore the phenomenon of the Catalan habanera, which includes traditional Spanish habaneras and new habaneras in Catalan. If one looks at the programs of Cantada d'Havaneres of Calella de Palafrugell from 1993 to 2003, one can see that the finale of this event always includes two habaneras--the traditional habanera "La bella Lola," whose author is unknown, and "El meu avi," the habanera by José Luís Ortega Monasterio (1918-2004). First notated in Montsalvatge's *Álbum de habaneras*, "La bella Lola" may be explored as a paradigm of a traditional habanera. It is performed in the two four time classical for the habanera, the lyrics are in Spanish, and the subject revolves around the encounter with a lovely woman left behind in an overseas port. The first stanza of this habanera offers an explanation of events whose meaning is transparent to anybody familiar with Spanish history:

Después de un año de no ver tierra
porque la guerra me lo impidió,
me fui al puerto donde se hallaba
la que adoraba mi corazón.

([Montsalvatge 1998](#): 65)

[After a year of not seeing land because the war did not allow me to, I went to the port where the woman whom my heart adored lived.]

The evocation of war reminds the audience of the participation in the Spanish colonial war at the end of the nineteenth century, which ended in a debacle known in Spanish history as “disaster.” The hyperbole of not being able to see the land and the beloved woman for a year creates the effect of the unjustified suffering of the protagonist, which invokes numerous victims of the last colonial war conducted by the Spanish officials “up to the last man and the last peseta.” The refrain of this habanera alludes to the sensual enjoyment and pleasure of the long-anticipated encounter:

¡Ay! qué placer sentía yo,
cuando en la playa
sacó el pañuelo y me saludó.
Pero después llegó hasta mí
me dio un abrazo, y en aquel acto creí morir.

[Oh, what pleasure did I experience when she got out her kerchief and greeted me on the beach. But then she came up to me, hugged me, and in this act I thought I would die.]

The first instant of the greeting on behalf of Lola brings the sailor pleasure, perhaps mixed with vanity as other sailors can observe him and Lola together. Habaneras often tell a story of a soldier or a sailor--a story traversed by his sentiments, deeds and nostalgia for the adventures left behind in an outlandish place across the Atlantic. The sailor’s pleasure is collectively embraced today when the public massively participates in the performance of this song waving white kerchiefs during the singing of the refrain, thus physically reenacting the cultural myth each time that the habanera is performed.⁽¹⁰⁾ The pleasure achieves its climax when the woman approaches and embraces the protagonist, which is underscored through the hyperbolic metaphor of death of love when the narrative voice / protagonist believes that he dies in the woman’s arms, which evokes another trope frequent in Spanish poetry, that of *morir de amor*, to die of love. In Montsalvatge’s transcription, the refrain is followed by the second stanza:⁽¹¹⁾

Cuando en la playa la bella Lola,
su larga cola luciendo va
los marineros se vuelven locos
y hasta el piloto pierde el compás.

[When the lovely Lola walks on the beach, graciously showing the long tail of her dress, the sailors go insane and even the pilot loses direction.]

In this stanza the first person narrator disappears, and the story loses the emotional quality of a personal narrative. However, it acquires a universality that can be projected on other males, who become insane because of Lola's beauty. The love madness of the sailors achieves its climax in the fact that "even the pilot" loses direction. The metaphor of pilot and direction points to the maritime lexicon and mindset of those for whom the song was once created and by whom it was sung and preserved. Habaneras sung in Spanish may be seen through the prism of Catalan involvement in Spain's colonial enterprise that made Catalonia economically the most prosperous region within Spain. As with the flamenco in flamenco bars in Andalusia, the habanera is performed in taverns and casinos in Catalonia regularly. The regular singing of habaneras by hired habanera singers at taverns and restaurants in Catalonia represents a reenactment of what may well be another cultural myth. It is the myth of habanera singing at the Costa Brava--nostalgic songs that evoke the times of the lost empire represent the yearning for times long gone when the beaches were not crowded, the problem of parking did not exist, and the fishermen sang the songs in the intimate atmosphere of the tavern for a few sophisticated fans that would come from the big cities during the summer.

In the late 1960s, the time of the tourist boom all over Spain, habaneras not only leapt from the intimacy of a small tavern to the megawatt amplification of town squares and stages by the Mediterranean, but they also started addressing the audience in Catalan. Some habaneras were then translated from Spanish as well as many new habaneras were created. Among these new habaneras, "El meu avi," composed in 1968 and first sung in public in 1971, may be viewed as a crucial point in the story of Catalan habanera. On the one

hand, “El meu avi” followed the tradition of wartime narrative habaneras such as “Adiós mi península hermosa,” “El adiós del soldado,” “El Catalán.” On the other, it told a story that had a precise “local” connection: the protagonists of this habanera were from Calella de Palafrugell, a specific location that gave the audience and singers a chance to identify themselves with the imagined past and with Catalan “small motherland.” At the time of the creation and the first public singing of this habanera, Calella de Palafrugell was becoming more and more popular every year with its newly established tradition of public *cantades*. The song told the story of “my grandfather” and of fourteen sailors from Calella de Palafrugell who during the colonial war were sent to Cuba on board of a ship with an emblematic name Catalán. A triple evocation of the grandfather, “el meu avi,” at the beginning of the song tuned the audience into a mood suggestive of collective memory:

El meu avi ... El meu avi ... El meu avi ...
El meu avi va anar a Cuba, a *bordo* del “Catalán,”
el millor *barco* de guerra de la flota d’Ultramar.
El timoner i el nostramo i catorze mariners,
eren nascuts a Calella, eren nascuts a Palafrugell.

([XXXVI](#) *Cantada* 2002: 16)

[My grandpa, my grandpa, my grandpa... My grandpa went to Cuba on board of the *Catalan*, the best warship of the overseas fleet. The helmsman, and our master, and fourteen sailors were born in Calella, were born in Palafrugell.]

It also gave a very personal note to the story as it created a feeling of close connection between the younger generation of Catalans and the nation’s history—in this case a larger nation, imperial Spain. By focusing on the sacrifice of the sailors from Calella de Palafrugell killed by the Americans, the song highlighted Catalonia not only in its secular opposition to the central government, but also to the “Americans,” in other words, it represented Catalonia as a nation directly involved in the colonial enterprise in its own right, identifying Catalan sacrifice with the sacrifice of a larger Spanish empire:

Arribaren temps de guerra, de perfidies i traïcions,
i en el mar de les Antilles retronaren els canons.
I els mariners de Calella, el meu avi enmig de tots,
varen morir a coberta, varen morir al peu del canó!
Quan el “Catalán” sortia a la mar
cridava el meu avi: Apa nois que és tard.
Però els valents de a bordo no varen tornar;
tingueren la culpa els americans.

[Wartime came, the time of perfidy and treachery, and cannons thundered in the sea of the Antilles. And the sailors from Calella, my grandpa among them, died on the ship's deck, died by the cannons. When the *Catalán* was going to the sea my grandpa shouted, “Up, fellows, it is late.” But the courageous sailors did not return, the Americans were to blame.]

However, asserting this identification with the interests of Spain's and Catalan bourgeoisie, the song went far beyond in using the feelings of the audience. Through the connection of the protagonists to a small town, “El meu avi” enhanced the significance of the small motherland and asserted familiar values of Catalan nationhood and identity. “El meu avi,” probably for the first time in habanera history in Catalonia was a self-reflexive habanera, a habanera that acknowledged the habanera tradition as part of local identity. The refrain of the song evoked both the tradition of singing in Calella de Palafrugell and the emblematic *cremat*, a hot beverage made of rum put on fire to evaporate the alcohol--hence its name--which assumed the status of a ritual accompanying the singing of habaneras. In recent years, during public *cantades*, cremat in small plastic cups is offered to the audience as part of the festivity at the expense of the organizers, usually the municipal authorities:

Quan el “Catalán” sortia a la mar
els nois de Calella feien un cremat;
mans a la guitarra solien cantar:
Visca Catalunya! Visca el “Catalán”!

[When the *Catalan* went out to the sea, fellows from Calella made a cremat; they palyed their guitars and sang: Long live Catalonia! Long live the *Catalan*!]

Most importantly, at the time of its creation through the present, “El meu avi” contained an exclusively significant line, “Visca Catalunya! Visca el “Catalán”! (Long live Catalonia! Long live the Catalan!). These words that apparently escaped the censor’s attention turned “El meu avi” into an emblem of identity unanimously embraced by the nation. Behind the name of the ship, the performers and the audience perceived a second meaning with a transparent allusion to the vernacular language and its significance for Catalan cultural identity. The importance these words had during the last years of a dictatorship that sought to eradicate the language and all traces of national culture and identity is self-evident. “El meu avi” may be viewed as a kind of a simulacrum, a nostalgic evocation of a song genre that did not exist in Catalan, however, was accepted as such by the whole nation. The “unisonance” highlighted by Benedict Anderson “for the echoed physical realization of the imagined community,” when national anthems or the like are performed, was and is evident in the case of “El meu avi,” as the audience tended and continue to get up and sway sideways with their arms on each other shoulders during the singing of this song thus reenacting the unity of the nation.(12)

The impact of “El meu avi” on Catalan cultural imaginary can be seen through the prism of other works of different genres that responded to it. The habanera-sardana, “L’avi Quim no va anar a Cuba,” by Francesc A. Picas and Paco Viciano, pretended to give tribute to those who refused to collaborate with the colonial politics of Spain’s imperial machine. The author speculated that if the sailors of Palafrugell had followed the example of his grandfather Quim who refused to be recruited to go to the war in 1898 and hid in the Pyrenees, they would not have died in the Caribbean. Thus this unique hybrid--a pacifist habanera-sardana--entered into a polemic dialogue with “El meu avi.” However, even as it created this opposition, it enhanced the mythical stature of the sailors from Calella de Palafrugell. Though seemingly opposed to “El meu avi,” “L’avi Quim” reiterated the slogan that made so significant the habanera “El meu avi.” Slightly changed, “Visca, sempre, Catalunya,” it was now enhanced by a

religious formula, “i el bon Déu que ens l’ha donat,” (and the good God who gave it to us). It evoked the senyera, the Catalan flag, and Montserrat, a geographic and religious symbol of Catalonia,⁽¹³⁾ underscoring established national emblems.

The habanera “La meva àvia,” “My grandma” by A. J. Carrau, bore a transparent allusion to “El meu avi” in its title and in the first verse, “Quan per anar a fer la guerra a Cuba, el meu avi va embarcar,” when my grandpa embarked to make war in Cuba. It told a life-long story of a woman, the narrator’s grandmother and a wife of a sailor who left her to go to war in Cuba. The woman left behind on land is a traditional motif for the habanera. Yet in this habanera the motif was reinvented. When the grandma was told that the Catalans would not return--another evocation of “El meu avi”--she remembered the words that her husband said to her before he left:

En els teus fills i els teus néts, tu els hi has d’ensenyar,
les quatre regles primeres per a ser un bon català.
Que s’ha d’estimar la llengua, que s’ha d’estimar la llar,
que s’ha d’estimar la terra, que s’ha d’estimar la mar.

(*XXXII Cantada* 1998: 4)

[You will teach your children and your grandchildren four major rules of being a good Catalan. That one should love the language, that one should love the home, that one should love the land, and should love the sea.]

The song clearly identified the major values of the nation, which were necessary “to be a good Catalan.” The reiterated representation of the sea in the habanera reasserted Catalonia’s self-fashioning as a maritime community. New habaneras were indicative of a transition from the nostalgia for a lost tropical paradise in the Caribbean, explicit in “La bella Lola” and other traditional habaneras, to the reiteration of Catalan traditional values. The switch from Spanish to Catalan as well as the shift in the subject were explicit in the habanera “La ciutat cremada,” created by Manuel Valls Gorina as the main theme of the musical score for Antoni Ribas’s film *La ciutat cremada* (1976).

This complex historical saga concerned with issues crucial for the construction of Catalan nation and identity was perceived at the time of its release as the foundation for a new Catalan cinema. “La ciutat cremada” invoked the subject of popular habaneras--participation in the war in Cuba--and in this function may be explored as a tribute to the traditional habanera. Yet it was also indicative of more complex processes that showed the ambivalence of the habanera in Catalonia. The first stanza of this habanera sung with the opening credits of the film was in Spanish, even though the rest of it was in Catalan. One can explore this sign as an evocation of the traditional genre, on the one hand, and as a conscious and explicit antecedent to the switch to Catalan, which was taking place at the time, on the other:

En mi Cuba me espera una mulata gentil,
de labios rojos de fresa, de dientes blanco jazmín.
Sus ojos son dos luceros, su nuca perfume de abril.
Ay mulatita querida, escucha el triste son
que te canta mi vida un soldado español.

([Febrés 1986](#): 12)

[A graceful mulatto woman, with red lips like strawberries and teeth like white jasmine, is waiting for me in my Cuba. Her eyes are two stars, her neck is April's perfume. Oh, dear *mulatita*, listen to the sad song sung to you, my life, by a Spanish soldier.]

The description of the *mulata's* attractiveness evoked the lavish language of traditional habaneras, one of those “rebuscado” texts, in the words of Luján, that were typical of professional habanera authors at the end of the nineteenth century ([Luján 1998](#): viii). However, the second stanza switched to Catalan language and was concerned with a new subject. The protagonist, represented before as “a Spanish soldier,” was now an explicit Catalan patriot who was leaving Cuba for good and who would not return to “his” *mulata*, and neither would he sing her a habanera. He would also find his real love in his native country:

Mulata meva, no tornaré a cantar l'havanera
dels teus ulls presoner. A Catalunya em quedaré:
Perquè en retornar a aquesta terra oblidada la pena, retrobo al meu cor;
perquè a la bella patria nostrada terra catalana retrobo l'amor.

[My *mulata*, imprisoned by your eyes, I will not come back to you to sing you a habanera. I will stay in Catalonia because upon return to that land I forget my pain, I find my heart again; because in our beautiful motherland, Catalan country, I find love again.]

The perception of the habanera as a signifier of a relationship between a white man and a mulatto woman in this song may be viewed as a self-reflective discourse concerned with the relevance of the habanera for Catalan identity.

New times bring along new songs. Some new Catalan habaneras followed the tradition of the discourse of love and desire for a woman, frequently a *mulata*, while some may be viewed as self-reflection and parody of the stereotypes of the habanera. The representation of the protagonist in "Lola la tavernera," by Carles Casanovas, sounds as a self-indulging parody due to a detailed description of the protagonist's masculinist virtues: "mariner jove, tibet i fort/ amb fulard negre lligat al coll/ alt, roda-soques, perdonavides i adulador," (a young sailor, conceited, strong, / with a black scarf tied around his neck, / tall, a drifter, a bully and a flatterer), enters a tavern and asks Lola--an evocation of "La bella Lola"--to run and bring him a glass of wine while he will be singing his song to her (*XXXVI Cantada* 2002: 5).⁽¹⁴⁾ The linguistic means chosen by the author parody the romantic and evasive language of the traditional habanera. While in the traditional habanera the beauty of a mulatto woman was hidden behind the descriptions of flowers and allusions to exotic tropical fruit, aimed at inflaming the imagination of singers and listeners, this habanera is frivolously naming the parts of the woman's body in a plain and straightforward language: "ella mou el cul, balanceja els pits, xiscla una rialla," (she sways her hips, swing her breasts, screams a laugh). "Lola la tavernera" can be perceived as a post-modern evocation of motives and themes of the traditional habanera as the protagonist tells "mulateta bella," (beautiful mulatto woman), how her body

ignites him, the sailor, who will love her until the end of his days if she wants to be his. In response to this offer, the beautiful Lola “llença el dalantal,” (throws away her apron), perhaps an evocation of the “dalantal” of the traditional habanera “La caña dulce,” and dances gracefully for her lover.⁽¹⁵⁾ Interestingly, the encounter between Lola and the sailor is directly associated with the habanera as a means of communication between the man and Lola. In addition to an indirect evocation of the traditional habanera through linguistic means, “Lola la tavernera” directly evoked the traditional habanera, a song originated in Cuba, with its paradigmatic elements, a mulatto woman and the sea: “amb la guitarra i un got de vi, / cantarà alegre tota la nit, / cançons de Cuba, cants de mulates i blau mari,” (with a guitar and a glass of wine, / he will happily during the entire night sing songs of Cuba, and of mulattas and the deep blue sea). “Lola la tavernera” is performed together with “El meu avi” as the finale of the annual Mostra de l’Havanera Catalana in Palamós. Thus it tends to represent a Catalan analogue of “La bella Lola,” a paradigmatic traditional habanera.

The perception of the habanera as a beloved genre resounds in the habanera “Vestida de nit,” lyrics by Gloria Cruz and music by Càstor Pérez. A sensitive artist, Cruz fills her lyrics with pictorial images. Some of these images are frequently used and abused in habaneras, however, Cruz offers a non-trivial perspective of what makes the habanera the beloved genre for a century and a half. Her perspective is visual and auditory at the same time:

Pinto les notes d’una havanera
blava com l’aigua d’un mar antic.
Blanca d’escuma, dolça com l’aire,
gris de gavina, daurada d’imatges,
vestida de nit.

([Pérez Diz](#) 1995: 117)

[I am painting the notes of a habanera, blue as the water of an ancient sea.
White as sea foam, sweet as the air, gray as a seagull, gilded with images,
embellished by the night.]

The refrain of this habanera with its search for the images of the past represents the quintessence of the habanera not only through the evocation of the world long gone with its nostalgia, love and calmness, but also through the implicit nostalgia for this world. Thus this habanera arguably represents a kind of nostalgia for nostalgia. This longing is created through familiar tropes often reiterated in the traditional habanera: the moon, fire and rum, palm trees and sea shells. Yet in this habanera they invoke the milieu that is associated in Catalonia with the singing of habaneras:

Si pogués fer-me escata
i amagar-me a la platja
per sentir sons i tardes
del passat,
d'aquell món d'enyorança,
amor i calma,
perfumat de lluna, foc i rom.

[If I could cover myself with scale / and hide on the beach / to hear the
music and the nightfalls of the past, / of that world of longing, love and
calmness / fragrant of the moon, fire and rhum.]

A refined and sophisticated picture of the habanera as a genre with its major themes is envisioned in the last stanza. At the same time, it evokes the maritime identity of the protagonists of the songs and gives tribute to them as “princes of fishing nets,” “heroes of tempests,” “friends of good times.” The sea and its attributes continue to be a major theme in the habanera, which becomes a truly seafaring song in Catalonia:

Els vells em parlen plens de tendresa
d'hores viscudes amb emoció.
Joves encara, forts i valents,

prínceps de xarxa, herois de tempesta,
amics del bon temps.

Els ulls inventen noves històries,
vaixells que tornen d'un lloc de sol.

Porten tonades enamorades,
Dones i pàtria, veles i flors.

[Full of freshness, the sails speak to us / of hours lived with emotions. / So far young, strong and courageous, / princes of fishing nets, heroes of tempests, / friends of good times. / The eyes invent new stories, / ships that return from the place of sun. / They bring enamored songs, / women and motherland, sails and flowers.]

A proof of the viability of the habanera can be seen through its propensity to influence other forms of popular culture. Among such newly created cultural traditions is the creation of *gegants*, gigantic figures maneuvered from the inside.⁽¹⁶⁾ In the coastal community of Vilassar de Mar, Barcelona, this couple is formed by a figure of a legendary captain nicknamed El Pigat,⁽¹⁷⁾ the Freckled, and his beloved mulatto woman La Lucía brought by him from the Caribbean, according to a local legend. They perform their dance to the music of a habanera composed for them. Thus the mythical *mulata*, a frequent addressee and / or desired object of longing in the traditional habanera, acquires new visual forms in Catalonia. In Badalona, a community with strong maritime tradition, the couple of giants, la Maria i l'Anastàsia, also perform a complicated dance to the music of the habanera.



Fig. 2. The giants El Pigat and La Lucía, Vilassar de Mar. Photo courtesy of Mayor's Office,

Vilassar de Mar, Barcelona. June 24, 1998. Cuba is fantasized as a nostalgic space associated with the exotic beauty of an outlandish mulatto woman by Catalan nation that for centuries has fashioned itself in opposition to the central government. Yet, from nostalgic songs that invoke what may be perceived as colonial desire, the habanera evolves into a new cultural sign that contributes to representing Catalonia as a maritime community with strong overseas links and its own history of colonial enterprise. The permutations of the habanera in Catalonia are directly related to the complex issue of the Catalan language and diglossia characteristic for Catalonia. Language is perceived as a basic element of national identities in most models of nation building, yet in Catalonia it has been continuously claimed as a core issue of identity. The story of the Catalan habanera underscores it. The linguistic transformation of the habanera in Catalonia may be seen as a key element in this nation's self-representation related to its overseas adventure. At the time of the renewed assertion of Catalan nationhood, the habanera becomes an emblem claimed by certain circles as an autochthonous Catalan cultural sign and therefore part of Catalan cultural identity. However, the exploration of the habanera phenomenon in Catalonia shows that the habanera in Spanish forms an intrinsic part of Catalan cultural imaginary. Thus the exclusion of habaneras in Spanish from such highly reputed event as the Mostra de l'Havanera Catalana in Palamós contradicts the inclusive character of Catalan identity propagated by its ideologists. The analogy with the *sardana* is useful here, as the Catalan national dance is represented as inclusive, in which everybody may participate; however, to be able to do it one should master the steps and be able to follow a rather complicated rhythm. Both *sardana* circles and audiences of *cantades* of habaneras are formed mostly by mature population. It will be interesting further to see if the habanera and the sardana will continue to survive and fulfill their functions as emblems of cultural identity in the twenty-first century with further globalization and disappearance of national and economic frontiers and barriers.

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NOTES

1 - The *sardana* is traditionally considered to be the most distinguished element of Catalan popular culture. One can see it performed regularly by the public that gathers at parks and squares in Catalan cities and towns. In Barcelona, one can join the *sardana* circle on Sunday mornings in front of the Barcelona cathedral. About the *sardana* as a distinctive feature of Catalan society and a basis for Catalanism, a theory and a practice of Catalan nationalist movement, see [Balcells 1996](#): 52; [Brandes 1990](#): 24-40; [Conversi 1997](#): 133-134. The movement of the builders of human towers is growing definitely into the twenty-first century as it embraces more participants outside of the traditional areas of Valls or Tarragona where it originated. The Nova Cançó movement, which started in the sixties, combined highly politically charged auteur songs with the folk elements and flourished in the last decade of the Franco regime. Its political repercussions, in the words of Salvador Giner, went beyond anyone's expectations ([Giner 1984](#): 62). Having started with translations of songs in the style of Joan Baez and George Brassens, soon the creators of the Nova Cançó turned to highly politically charged texts by Catalan authors. About the role of the Nova Cançó for the promotion of Catalan language and for the assertion of Catalan national identity see [Balcells 1996](#): 146; [Giner 1984](#): 62-63; [Johnston 1991](#): 178-183, 220.

2 - One can hear old and new habaneras in regions with traditionally strong links to the Americas, such as Alicante, the Basque Country, Cádiz, the Canary Islands, Catalonia, Murcia, and even Castile. Different regions of Spain claim to sing the habanera with their own distinctive features. In the Basque Country, habaneras are performed by traditional *otxotes*, groups of eight men divided into four voices. In Totana, Murcia, habaneras are sung by female *corales*, a

practice dating back to the times of the massive packaging of fruit for export in this rural area. A clear indicator of habanera's popularity across Spain and elsewhere is the Annual Habanera Choral Festival of Torrevieja, Alicante, celebrated since 1954 and broadcast nationwide, attracting choirs from all over the world.

3 - *Seny*, however, tends to be the most controversial of these qualities, as Catalan history arguably abounds in outbursts of rage and uncontrolled actions. John Hargreaves mentions *rauxa* as “the other side of *seny*--a propensity to seek relief, on occasion, from social constraint by indulging in uncontrollable emotion and outbursts of irrational behavior: from getting drunk and fornicating to burning churches and convents” ([Hargreaves 2000](#): 22).

4 - Antoni Verdaguer's TV miniseries *Habanera 1820* highlighted the participation of Catalans in Spain's colonial enterprise. The protagonists of this cinematic habanera are Catalans involved in slave trafficking in Cuba in the early nineteenth century. Likewise, the habanera was reinvented in popular novels published at the time when Spain and Catalonia were rethinking the impact of the disaster associated with the end of Spanish colonial empire in 1898. Two recent novels, *En el mar de les Antilles* (1998), in Catalan by Manel Alonso i Català, and *Habanera: El reencuentro con un oculto pasado antillano* (1999), in Spanish by Ángeles Dalmau, may be explored as a space where one can view a reinvention of popular discourse concerned with the participation of Catalonia in Spain's colonial enterprise from the perspective of the late twentieth century.

5 - Catalan connections with overseas colonies, among which Cuba and Puerto Rico remained within the Spanish empire until 1898, have received much attention in recent Catalan historical discourse as well as in fiction and film. Between 1985 and 1993, the Generalitat de Catalunya, the Catalan regional government, sponsored five conferences, entitled *Jornades d'Estudis Catalanos-Americans* that explored the economic, political, sociological, and cultural aspects of Catalan immigration to the Caribbean. In view of 1998, the year when Spain was rethinking the impact of the loss of the last overseas

colonies of the Spanish empire, various exhibits were held at the museums of Barcelona and other Catalan cities and towns. See Comissió Catalana del Cinqué Centenari del Descobriment d'Amèrica, *Jornades d'Estudis Catalanos-Americans*. (Barcelona, 1985, 1987, 1990, 1992, 1993). [Catalunya i Ultramar: Poder i negoci a les colònies espanyoles \(1750-1914\)](#) (Barcelona, 1995); ["Americanos" "Indianos": arquitectura i urbanisme al Garraf, Penedès i Tarragonès \(Baix Gaià\), segles XVIII-XX,](#) (Vilanova i la Geltrú, 1998); [Escolta Espanya: Catalunya i la crisi del 98,](#) (Barcelona, 1998).

6 - Xavier Febrés mentions a collection of habaneras published in 1927 that contained various habaneras in Catalan, however this collection is lost and is not available ([Febrés 1995](#): 97-98). According to Anna Vicens, the first known habanera in Catalan dates back to 1868 ([Vicens 1993](#)).

7 - In addition to the recurrent appearance in the *zarzuela*, habaneras together with other popular songs were transmitted all over Spain by the blind who sold *pliegos de cordel*, lyrics printed on separate folded sheets of paper. The popularity of *pliegos de cordel* offers an opportunity to reflect how oral and written traditions converge. The Centro Etnográfico de la Diputación de Valladolid has a broad collection of *pliegos de cordel* with various habaneras. According to Mendoza Díaz-Maroto, it was women who bought, read and very often learned by heart the contents of these popular sheets sold by the blind ([Mendoza Díaz-Maroto 2000](#): 19).

8 - The late composer Xavier Montsalvatge (1912-2002) mentioned in his autobiographical notes that habaneras which he heard once in 1945 in coastal Catalonia not only opened to him a whole world of overseas images, but also, in a certain way, suggested the style of his "Canciones negras" and gave birth to the *antillanismo* of some of his works ([Montsalvatge 1988](#): 71-75).

9 - As only a thousand copies were published, *Álbum de habaneras* soon became a bibliographic rarity. A facsimile edition was published in 1998. An analogy with *Cancionero de palacio* and other collections of Spanish traditional

lyrics is useful here, as these anthologies preserved poetry that already existed for decades or even centuries in oral tradition.

10 - At the annual Cantada of Calella de Palafrugel, the booklet with lyrics of the performed songs includes a white kerchief thus suggesting an opportunity for the audience to sing along and wave the kerchiefs.

11 - In some printed versions of this song, the second and the first stanzas are interchanged.

12 - Benedict Anderson attributes a central role to poetry and songs in the realization of imagined communities: “[T]here is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests--above all in the form of poetry or songs. Take national anthems, for example, sung on national holidays. No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance. Singing the Marseillaise, Waltzing Matilda, and Indonesia Raya provide occasions for unisonality, for the echoed physical realization of the imagined community.” ([Anderson 1983](#): 132-33)

13 - As is well known, Montserrat hosts the most prominent religious center of Catalonia, a monastery and a sanctuary of the major Catalan religious relic, the Virgin of Montserrat. This religious center played an exceptional role in the organization of the silent protest of the Catalans against the Franco dictatorship.

14 - I am grateful to P. C. Garriga for help with the translation of “Lola la tavernera.”

15 - See Montsalvatge 1998: 13.

16 - These figures usually form a couple, which represents a town, a city or a district, during annual processions of *festes majors* at which they perform their dance. Though historically the roots of the creation of giants can be traced back to medieval Corpus Christi processions, Vilassar de Mar, a coastal town with

250 year-old history, never had a pair of giants. The giants were created in 1998.

17 - El Pigat was the nickname of Pere Mas i Roig, a native of Vilassar de Mar who in 1868 made a failed attempt at slave trafficking from Africa long after the prohibition of slave trade in 1820 ([Masriera 1926](#): 160, [Fradera 1984](#): 44). Mas i Roig is also one of the protagonists of the three part documentary *Retrats d'indians* produced by the Catalan network TV-3 and first aired on July 11, 18 and 25, 2001.