

# THE HISPANIC ATLANTIC'S TASAJO TRAIL

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*Abstract: Produced along the Río de la Plata during the nineteenth century, shipped to Havana, and consumed by African slaves, the salt-cured beef known as tasajo affected both of those places and, to some degree, the Atlantic world in general. Initial exploration of the tasajo trail that connected Buenos Aires and Cuba employs primary sources such as nineteenth-century descriptions and shipping records to characterize the landscapes, places, routes, and agents of the largely unexplored research territory of that anomalous commodity: one that, unlike others such as sugar, slaves not only produced but also consumed; one that underpinned more prominent, latitudinal transatlantic flows such as the slave trade, yet itself flowed meridionally; one that, like all those flows, had an oceanic component that comprised an actively lived space of flows rather than a dead space of separation; and one that might be mundane, yet helped fuel major transformations of two of the principal nodes of Hispanic Atlantic.*

Down in the narrow streets among the Spanish warehouses one encounters the same old smell of tasajo from the Argentines, dried or suncured beef in bales like sole-leather, codfish, oil, and garlic. The newcomer turns up his nose and sniffs contemptuously, as he wonders in what way Havana has been purified (Dawley 1901, 728).

## A TASAJO TRAIL IN AN ATLANTIC SPACE OF FLOWS

For a geographer, the rubric of transatlantic studies most immediately conjures up images of a suite of latitudinal currents and countercurrents sweeping across the ocean, each with its associated literature. An eastward setting current of precious metals like silver matches a westward one of pathogens like smallpox (e.g., Blaut 1993; Crosby 1972). Others of crops such as maize and potatoes flow counter to ones of cattle and rice (e.g., Carney 2001; Sauer 1966; Sluyter 2002). The flows of African slaves along the Middle Passage, of Caribbean sugar along the homeward one,

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of European and Creole geographical ideas, and of many other types similarly blow back and forth across the Atlantic on the prevailing trades and westerlies (Butzer 1992; Watts 1987). Only as afterthoughts do various meridional flows seep into consciousness, perhaps the most prominent being manufactured goods such as cloth from Europe to Africa along the outward passage. Such southward- and northward-setting currents might lack the prominence and well-developed literatures of the latitudinal flows, but they nonetheless affected the entire circulation and therefore remain as lasting in their effects and as deserving of thorough study.

The tasajo trail denominates one such meridional current within the space of flows through which the Atlantic world emerged during the nineteenth century (Sluyter 2008). Tasajo was the salt-cured beef produced along the Río de la Plata, shipped to Cuba, and consumed by African slaves. The rise of that trade after the 1810 May Revolution in Buenos Aires helped accumulate some of the capital that so transformed the pampas, ultimately into Europe's breadbasket and meat locker as well as a destination for many of its emigrants. In Cuba, tasajo fed the parallel conversion of that island into an enormous sugar plantation and unrelenting slave society. Present-day Havana and Buenos Aires—the first a key node of the African diaspora and the second a center of Europhilic hubris—thus might seem to have little more in common than language and Comrade Che but, through the tasajo trail, actually share a dynamic relational network that was and is simultaneously historical and present; material and representational; discursive and performative, local and global; natural and social; and fundamental to the emergent character of both places within the Atlantic space of flows.

Historians have reconstructed aspects of the statistical dimensions of the tasajo trail, as in figure 1, perhaps incompletely and assembled from sources only nominally commensurable, but nonetheless revealing (Amaral 1998, appendix C; Rosal 1998). With the ousting of the viceroy of the Río de la Plata in 1810, the end of colonial trade restrictions opened Buenos Aires to foreign shipping, and tasajo exports began their steady climb. Before independence, meat exports consisted only of small amounts of various sun-dried and salt-cured products variously called *charque*, *charqui*, *cecina*, and *carne salada*—the last, barrels of salt beef for the Spanish navy, being the most prominent. After independence, Britain, France, Belgium, and the United States of America became the major sources of manufactured imports for Buenos Aires and the destinations for its exports of livestock products such as cattle hides, sheepskins, wool, horsehair, and tallow. Cuba and Brazil, in contrast, became the major destinations for tasajo exports, which increased from hundreds of metric tons per annum in the 1810s to thousands during the 1820s through 1840s, albeit hindered by the 1811–1814 Spanish blockade of Buenos Aires, the 1825–

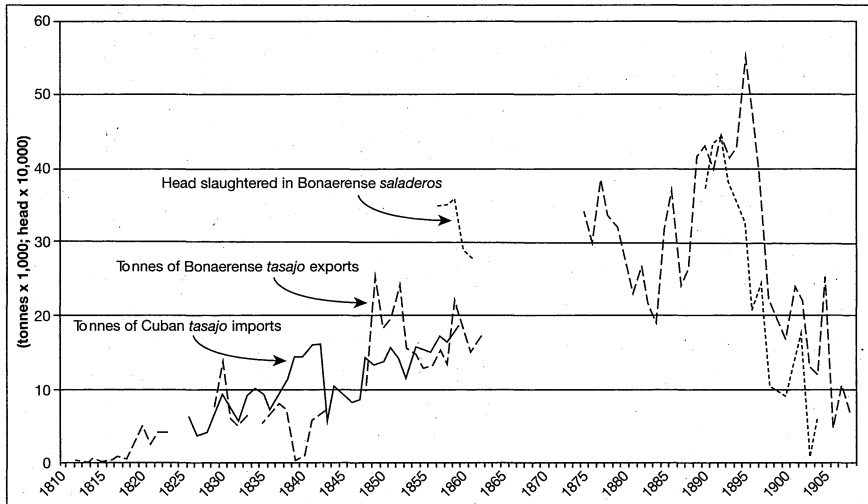


Figure 1 *Tasajo Exports from the Port of Buenos Aires, 1810–1908* (from Amaral 1998, table C.1; Latzina 1909); head slaughtered for saladeros in the province of Buenos Aires, 1823–1904 (Pillado 1909); and *tasajo* imports into Cuba, 1826–1859 (Pezuela 1863–1866). All references to tons in this article refer to the metric ton (1,000 kilograms), approximately 1.102 U.S. short tons (2,000 pounds). Drafted by A. Sluyter.

1828 war with Brazil, the 1838–1840 French blockade, and the 1845–1848 British-French blockade. After midcentury, with political stability along the Río de la Plata and continued growth of the Cuban slave population, *tasajo* exports increased to tens of thousands of tons per annum. The fin de siècle decline of that trade also related to changes at both ends of the trail: in Cuba, the 1886 abolition of slavery and 1898 Spanish-American War affected demand; in Buenos Aires, competition for beef from both the rapidly growing local population and from the new *frigoríficos*, which exported refrigerated beef to Europe, reduced supply to the *saladeros*, or meat-salting works. Even before the decline, however, the value of the *tasajo* trade never amounted to more than 10 percent of all livestock products exported from Buenos Aires, lagging far behind the more valuable trades in hides and wool (Amaral 1998).

Despite that relatively minor importance in the nineteenth-century Bonaerense economy, the *tasajo* trail has the distinction of relating directly to slavery in both Cuba and Buenos Aires, two major nodes of the Hispanic Atlantic. At the Bonaerense terminus, slaves produced many livestock products, all of them except *tasajo* exported as industrial inputs to Europe and North America. *Tasajo*, in contrast, fed slaves on sugar plantations at the Cuban terminus, and a low-value commodity thus be-

came essential to the production of a high-value commodity. Those two places consequently developed a relationship in which consistently more than half of all Bonaerense *tasajo* exports went to Cuba and, in turn, made up more than half of that island's *tasajo* imports (Amaral 1998, fig. 12.35).<sup>1</sup> Only as Bonaerense *tasajo* production declined at the end of the nineteenth century did Cuba's principal supplier become Uruguay, which at that same time found its main nineteenth-century market for *tasajo*, neighboring Brazil, closed by protective tariffs.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars to date have expressed little interest in that hemispheric *tasajo* trail, in spite of its potential importance for understanding some aspects of the emergence of the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. At one end of the trail, *tasajo* played too mundane a role in Cuban social relations to elicit much attention among scholars preoccupied with nation-states as units of analysis. At the other end, it played a minor role, at least relative to hides and wool, in early Bonaerense capital accumulation. Regarding the shipping between those two places, scholarship has, in general, treated the Atlantic as an uninteresting, dead space of separation rather than a living world of agency. Yet when viewed as part of an active space of flows, the *tasajo* trail begins to stand out as uniquely significant within the Atlantic world. It was a meridional flow. It was a commodity that slaves not only produced but also consumed. It underpinned the more prominent latitudinal flows of sugar and slaves that have defined so much of the understanding of the Atlantic world. It was a flow that swelled over the nineteenth century to link Buenos Aires and Cuba more closely together than they had ever been while both part of the Spanish colonial empire. And yet, at the same time, that flow fueled the transformations through which the two places emerged as increasingly dissimilar.

The prior lack of scholarly attention necessitates that this initial exploration of the *tasajo* trail cannot provide the sorts of definitive answers that such a potentially significant phenomenon deserves. This contribution's more modest ambitions involve the use of primary sources such as nineteenth-century descriptions and shipping records to begin to characterize the landscapes, places, routes, and agents involved in the *tasajo* trail as well as to define the conceptual framework, types of data, and modes of analysis appropriate to its further investigation.

1. Amaral (1998) calculates that as a percentage of all Bonaerense *tasajo* exports, those to Cuba amounted to 59 percent in 1822, 44 percent in 1842, 63 percent in 1851, 64 percent in 1862, and 50 percent in 1872. He also calculates, based on an 1848–1854 series of Cuban import figures, that during the period 1849–1854, 84.7 percent of Cuba's *tasajo* imports came from Buenos Aires.

2. This study does not treat regional Uruguayan and Brazilian trades in *tasajo*, as opposed to the hemispheric one linking Buenos Aires and Cuba, but see Zanotti de Medrano (1992), Montoya (1979), and Jones (1926).

## THE CUBAN TERMINUS

Cuba became a large *tasajo* importer because, over the nineteenth century, that island became Spain's leading plantation colony, with the most land and an enormous enslaved labor force dedicated to tobacco, coffee, and especially, sugar cane. The independence of Haiti in 1804, the outcome of more than a decade of violent revolt against French rule and slavery in the archetypal sugar colony of Saint-Domingue, so reduced sugar supply and inflated its price that, by 1810, Cuban planters had doubled their production relative the 1780s (Klein 1986; Knight 1970). As a direct consequence, Cuban slave imports boomed, numbering at least 550,000 between 1811 and 1867, despite the illegality of the trade after 1820 (Curtin 1969; Murray 1971) (clandestine trade precludes precise estimates). By 1867, slave imports had ended, but the island's enslaved population numbered about 370,000, some 40 percent of them working on sugar plantations and directly producing 41 percent of the world's cane (Bergad 1995; Klein 1986; Murray 1971) (the order of magnitude of the Cuban slave population seems clear despite limits on precision).

Within that system of human exploitation, fresh beef from nearby Florida and *tasajo* from Venezuela, Mexico, and Buenos Aires became critical sources of protein (Ortiz 1975 [1916]; Otto and Anderson 1986; von Grafenstein Gareis 2002). At the beginning of the century, Alexander von Humboldt, in Cuba between 1800 and 1804, noted that "[t]asajo (sun-dried meat) from Buenos Ayres and Caracas is given to the slaves; or salt cod (*bacalao*) when the *tasajo* is too expensive" (Humboldt 1826). By midcentury Buenos Aires was supplying around 85 percent of Cuba's *tasajo*, and the *tasajo* trail had become integral to sugar production and slavery (Amaral 1998). Cubans imported so much *tasajo* that Pezuela's *Diccionario geográfico* (1863–1866) lists it as one of the eight principal imports along with *bacalao* (salt cod), rice, wheat flour, fresh and salt pork, fresh beef, and wine. Although Havana dominated the *tasajo* trade through the 1840s, accounting for more than 90 percent of the tonnage imported, by midcentury, about a quarter of the swelling volume was entering through other ports (Pezuela 1863–1866).

*Tasajo*'s cheapness drove the trade, with slave owners preferring it to the more expensive *bacalao*. The 1842 *Reglamento de esclavos* lists both, stipulating a minimum daily ration that included eight ounces of meat or salt cod (Ortiz 1975 [1916]). But the *Cartilla práctica del manejo de ingenios* (Un Montuno 1862) specified *tasajo*. And plantation owners lobbied to modify the Catholic restriction on Friday meat consumption so that their slaves had to abstain from *tasajo* only during the weeks of Lent (Moreno Fragnals 1976 [1964]). According to one long-lived former slave, Esteban Montejo (1860–1973), even the royal decree that abolished slavery in 1886 could not abolish *tasajo* as the protein that fueled plantation labor (Barnet 1968).

Tasajo thus became, and persists as, a fundamental element of Cuban culture—an ingredient in a cuisine born in slavery as well as a thread in its social memory.<sup>3</sup> The novelist Alejo Carpentier, in his 1962 *El siglo de las luces* (1967 [1962], 19), could therefore evoke colonial Havana for his modern readers with a reference to tasajo, making the port reek of its “pungent,” “bitter,” “omnipresent” smell to the degree that the stench of Cuban slavery defied even the pious “incense of Churches.” Foreigners similarly invoked tasajo’s social associations, as Thomas R. Dawley (1901, 728) did three years after U.S. troops had occupied Cuba in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War: “one encounters the same old smell of tasajo . . . and sniffs contemptuously, as he wonders in what way Havana has been purified.”

#### THE BONAERENSE TERMINUS

Unlike Cuba, an island with a fixed political boundary, nineteenth-century Buenos Aires underwent enormous spatial expansion over the nineteenth century. The city’s population grew an order of magnitude, from 55,416 in 1822 to 663,854 in 1895, and spread well beyond the colonial *traza* (Slatta 1992, appendix A). When the province of the same name came into being in 1820, native peoples controlled most of the territory that the new government claimed. Colonial ranching had remained confined to a 150-kilometer-wide strip between the Río Salado and the Río de la Plata-Paraná (figure 2). Carmen de Patagones and its *salinas* had formed an isolated outpost far to the south, connected mainly by sporadic coastal shipping. Over the nineteenth century, the ranching frontier pushed southward and westward only gradually until 1879, when the genocidal conquest of the desert asserted effective Bonaerense control over the entire area encompassed by the provincial boundaries (*Bonaerense* and *Buenos Aires* therefore refer to both city and province).

Besides that spatial dynamism, Buenos Aires differed from Cuba in that Bonaerense slaves produced rather than consumed tasajo. The documents record that between the late 1500s and 1750 some thirty-seven thousand African slaves disembarked at Buenos Aires, certainly only a fraction of an unrecorded, unknown, but probably much larger total number (Andrews 1980; de Studer 1984; Diggs 1951). Whether recorded or unrecorded, the vast majority passed through the port on their way to plantations and mines far upcountry. Those who stayed in Buenos Aires and their descendants had, by 1810, amounted to roughly a third of the total *porteño* population, about ten thousand people who, despite some colonial-period manumissions, were overwhelmingly slaves (Andrews 1980; Johnson

3. Dawdy’s (2002) explication of how various root crops play intermingled roles in Cuban cuisine, history, culture, and society provides a model for tasajo’s putatively similar role.



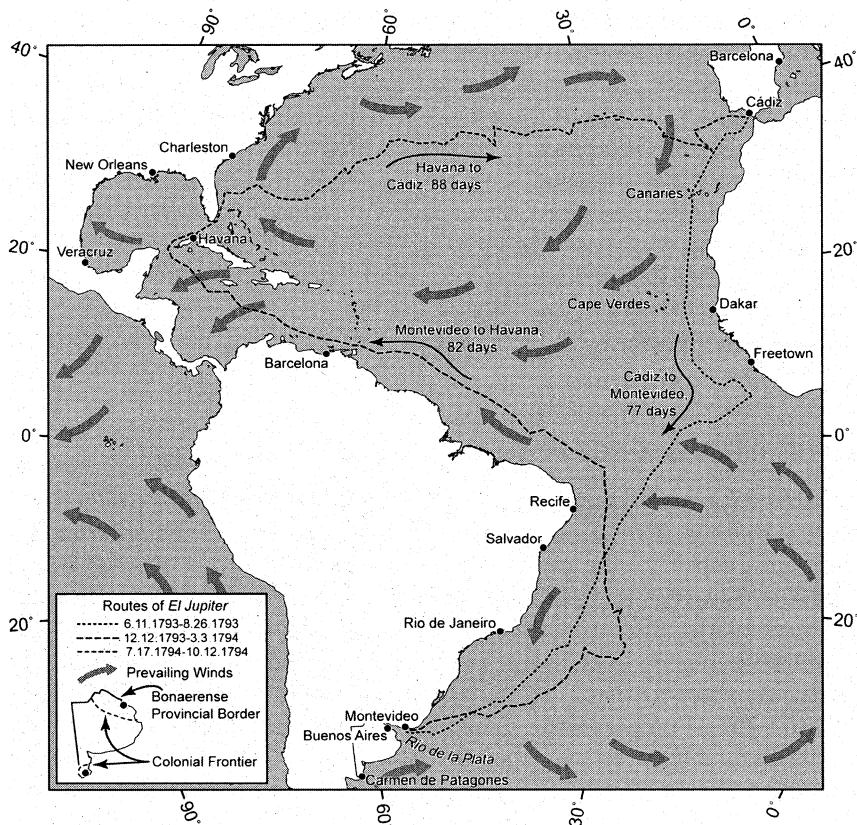


Figure 2 Some Aspects of the Atlantic World Relevant to the *Tasajo Trail* (base map and prevailing winds, after Lombardi and Lombardi 1983). Drafted by A. Sluyter.

1979). After 1813, the republican government abolished the slave trade, as least in law, and passed two general emancipation acts that created a much larger number of free, albeit conditionally so, blacks: children escaped slavery at birth and men through enlistment in the army (Andrews 1980; Chamosa 2003; Goldberg 1976; Rosal 2002, 2006; Rout 1976). Despite continued slave imports, whether clandestinely or under various legal exceptions, slaves became increasingly rare over the nineteenth century until, in 1861, Bonaerense ratification of the constitution of the Argentine Confederation abolished slavery altogether (Andrews 1980). Sources from newspaper advertisements and account ledgers to probate inventories and censuses, to literature and paintings, all demonstrate that some of those blacks, whether slaves or emancipated, labored on the *estancias* (ranches), in the *mataderos* (abattoirs), and for the *saladeros* that produced the *tasajo* of nineteenth-century Buenos Aires (Amaral 1998; Andrews 1980; García

Belsunce and Frías 1976; Goldberg and Mallo 1993; Rodríguez Molas 1968, 1970; Schávelzon 2003; Slatta 1992).

Artists such as Emeric Essex Vidal (1791–1861), César Hipólito Bacle (1794–1838), Carlos E. Pellegrini (1800–1875), and Juan León Palliere (1823–1887) captured images of the gauchos and other workers, whether black or not and whether enslaved or not, who labored to produce tasajo.<sup>4</sup> Such art depicts gauchos on horseback, using lassos to drag cattle by the horns while others cut the hamstrings or hocks so that the animals fall rolling in the dirt of the matadero yard. Other workers kill the cattle by cutting their throats. Yet others slaughter the dead animals while bending over them or sitting on their severed heads. Workers load various pieces of the carcasses into wheelbarrows and two-wheeled carts. Dogs and pigs gorge on offal. The salting sheds rise in the background: thatched roofs supported by poles, sides either entirely open or walled with insubstantial screens. To the side, corrals of close-set wooden pickets hold the next cohort of victims. Above all wheel birds waiting to pick clean the scattered skeletons. And on the horizon, the masts of vessels wait to load cargoes of tasajo, hides, and tallow for shipment to Atlantic ports.

Various contemporaries such as the naturalists Charles Darwin (1839) and Alcides d'Orbigny (1835–1847) described those scenes. Orbigny, in particular, provides detailed insight into the tasajo production process. It was April 1829, and each evening the gauchos would herd the next day's cattle into a corral adjoining the large salting shed. Beginning at dawn, mounted gauchos would rope each animal by the horns and lead it out of the corral to just before the shed, dexterously avoiding the horns and kicks of the frantic animals. Then, without dismounting, they would reach down with a knife to cut the hocks of the rear feet and leave the animals rolling in the dust, unable to escape the executioner who approached to slit their throats or, in the case of difficult bulls, to drive a long knife into the nape of the neck to sever the spinal cord. At times, the cattle groveled in the dirt for hours, awaiting their executioners—lowing, abandoned to the slaughter-yard dogs that ripped at their tongues. By eight or nine o'clock, the hundred or so head to be processed that day lay dead and the gauchos proceeded to slaughter them, a spectacle of eight to ten men dripping with blood, knives in hand, working in the small yard in front of the shed. Two men to an animal, they cut open the skin of the belly from head to tail and then down the inside of each leg to the knee, chopping off the lower legs and head, dividing the carcass into quarters, and extracting the intestines.

4. For example, César Hipólito Bacle's *Corrales de abasto* at the Museo de Arte Hispanoamericano Isaac Fernández Blanco, in Buenos Aires; Juan León Palliere's *El saladero*, also in the Museo de Arte Hispanoamericano; *El matadero del sudoeste en Buenos Aires* by Emeric Essex Vidal at the Museo de Artes Plásticas Eduardo Sívori, also in Buenos Aires; and Carlos E. Pellegrini's *El matadero* at the Museo Histórico de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires.



After the slaughter, describes Orbigny, children removed the suet from the intestines while the gauchos carried the hides and carcasses into the shed. There they hung the quarters from the rafters on iron hooks and butchered them into large pieces, tossing the bones to one side and the meat to the other, onto hides stretched on the ground. Once they had roughly butchered the hundred or so carcasses, they removed the fat from the cuts of beef, covered some hides with a thick layer of coarse salt, followed with a layer of pieces of meat, then another of salt, another of meat, and so on, until they had built a square pile capped by a second hide. For ten to fifteen days, those piles remained untouched while the hygroscopic salt absorbed much of the meat's water content. Thereafter, the gauchos daily disassembled each pile in the morning, hung the meat on cords to air dry, and then reassembled each pile in the evening to allow the salt to draw out more water until the *tasajo* was ready.

That end product had several advantageous characteristics over other forms of preserved beef, such as the *carne salada* that colonial Buenos Aires had brined, packed in barrels between layers of salt, and shipped to Cádiz for the Spanish navy. *Tasajo*'s greater dryness relative to *carne salada* reduced both weight and volume to lower shipping costs. The greater dryness also allowed bulk loading into the holds of vessels (Giberti 1961). *Tasajo* thus shipped "in bales like sole-leather" (Dawley 1901, 728), with no need for expensive, heavy, bulky barrels or any other sort of container. *Tasajo*'s greater dryness also preserved the beef for many months after slaughter, even in tropical climates such as Cuba's. Those same characteristics, however, precluded *tasajo*'s sale to anyone except plantation owners, who could force their captive workers to consume a product that had lost a portion of its soluble proteins and required tedious mincing and soaking to reconstitute and desalinize before cooking (for the chemistry of *tasajo*, see Barat, Andujar, Andrés, Argüelles, and Fito 2001). Those characteristics made Bonaerense *tasajo* the cheap protein of choice to provision the enslaved workers of a distant island dedicated to the production of an expensive carbohydrate.

As *tasajo* exports reached tens of thousands of tons per annum after midcentury, a wealth of contemporary observers noted how *saladero* owners invested capital in innovations that made production more labor efficient and consumed absolutely every part of the slaughtered cattle (Anonymous 1851; Hinchliff 1863; Hutchinson 1865; Latham 1866; MacCann 1853; Mansfield 1856; Marmier 1851; Page 1859; Pellegrini 1853; Seymour 1869). In these new *saladeros*, a small round or triangular *brete* (holding pen) connected via a gate in its base with the main corral. Both the corral and the pen consisted of a stockade of closely set, vertical poplar trunks or of windrows of discarded bones, skulls, and horns. The apex of the pen connected to an open-sided slaughtering *galpón* (shed) via a passageway along which a four-wheeled cart ran on rails. The workers,

by now specialist peons rather than generalist gauchos, would drive a dozen or so head at a time from the corral into the brete. The *capataz* (foreman) stood near the apex of the brete on a raised gallery about four feet (1.2 meters) above ground level. From that vantage, he would lasso an animal around the horns, sometimes two at the same time. The tail rope of the lasso passed around a pulley fixed at the apex of the brete to a team of horses or oxen, and on a signal (“¡Dale!”) from the *capataz*, the team would run out and thereby haul the animal across the wood-floored brete into the throat of the passageway. There, the horns of the victim pulled up tight against a beam across the passageway, the *capataz* would sever the spinal cord. As the carcass fell onto the cart, a gang of workers would pull the beam out and push the cart along the passageway to the slaughtering shed, roll the carcass off onto the *playa* (planked floor), and push the cart back to await the next victim. In the open-sided galpón, butchers skinned, gutted, and quartered the carcasses in about five minutes apiece. As the blood ran off the sloping *playa* into the ditch that surrounded the entire *saladero*, the butchers loaded the various pieces into wheelbarrows for distribution to specialized processing areas where everything became an industrial input for export: horn for utensil handles, grease for cooking, bone ash for fertilizer and bone china, bone char for sugar refining, tallow for candles and soap, tails for oxtail soup, lower legs for neat’s-foot oil, and hides for leather (Brown 1979; Olivera 1861). The beef quarters hung from hooks in a walled shed to cool for about an hour before butchers cut out and deboned the slabs of meat for salting. As in Orbigny’s earlier description, workers still created piles of alternating layers of meat and salt, measuring about six meters square, but some *saladeros* now used a brine wash to accelerate, or “force,” the process when demand for *tasajo* became particularly high. Wooden rails set on posts in the yard in front of the galpón had replaced the earlier hanging cords in the air-drying step, and during the day, the workers would disassemble the piles to drape the meat over those *tendales*. The entire process took from one to two weeks. Once dry enough, the workers either loaded the *tasajo* directly into the holds of vessels anchored in the stream adjoining the *saladero* or stacked it along the bank and covered it with tarpaulins.

The same observers commented on the labor relations of the midcentury *saladeros*. Slaughtering and *tasajo* production still took place in summer, when pastures were lush, cattle had more meat on their bones, and warmer temperatures dried it faster. French Basque and Irish immigrants had come to dominate the labor force, though, largely displacing the Creole gauchos, some of them blacks, who had labored in the earlier *saladeros*. The largest salting works, such as that owned by the Frenchman Antoine Cambacères, employed about three hundred workers during the summer and could slaughter, quarter, and hang three to four hundred head between three in the morning and three in the afternoon each day. The new *salade-*

ros retained some of those workers throughout the year to process ancillary products such as bone ash and char. Each area of specialization—from the corral to the galpón to the yard full of drying piles and tendales—had its own capataz. The mayordomo, overseeing all, lived on the premises in a house that also served as the bookkeeping office.

As the saladeros grew in number and output over the nineteenth century, the ones ringing Buenos Aires increasingly competed with its citizens for meat and polluted their water and air. The half dozen principal porteño saladeros and their many minor neighbors concentrated along the banks of the Riachuelo on the southern margin of the city had, by midcentury, become the main Bonaerense producers and were slaughtering some 325,000 head per year to produce an average annual output of 18,162 tons of tasajo (Brown 1979). Some celebrated the mechanization and labor specialization of those so-called *saladeros perfeccionados*, or perfected salting works, as harbingers of modernization; others decried the corollary destruction of the self-sufficient gaucho culture at the heart of Bonaerense identity; but most mainly noted the associated pollution (Silvestri 2003). One observer in the early 1850s described “ditches filled with blood *instead* of water, actually in all stages of putrefaction” (Mansfield 1856, 164–165). The cattle packed those corrals for days during the summer, awaiting slaughter, standing in their accumulating excrement, unfed and uncared for as their waste ran off into the Riachuelo. As bone ash and char had become profitable exports, the fires that reduced the bones added air pollution, creating a stench that blew into the city on the south wind (Seymour 1869). The use of excess bone and every other waste scrap of hide, sinew, hair, and offal not consumed by the pigs and dogs to fuel the steam vats of the *fábrica* that rendered the marrow, fat, and suet created yet more air pollution. As the porteño population grew rapidly after midcentury, from 140,000 in 1864 to 663,854 in 1895, the citizenry became increasingly hostile toward the saladeros (de Paula, Gutierrez, and Viñuales 1974; Slatta 1992, appendix A). Government initially reacted by regulating the saladeros with public health and hygiene ordinances but eventually, prompted especially by the cholera and yellow fever epidemics of 1868 and 1871, largely banished the industry from the city and its environs (Montoya 1956; Silvestri 2003). Saladeros relocated elsewhere in Buenos Aires province or across the Río Paraná and up the Río Uruguay to neighboring Entre Ríos province (Hernández 1882).

By the end of the nineteenth century, saladeros had reached an undeniably industrial scale and were producing a true commodity, namely a relatively uniform product differentiated into standardized classes that sold in bulk at a common price determined by the market. For example, the Cambacères saladero relocated to La Plata in 1872, expanded, and together with the neighboring one owned by Juan Berisso, came to employ some two thousand workers (Cestino 1949 [1882]). Although the saladeros

had become larger than those of midcentury, they continued with generally the same technology (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1900).

Despite the long Bonaerense relationship with *saladeros*, from the rudimentary ones that Orbigny observed to the prototypical factories of midcentury and the *fin-de-siècle* industrial plants that the *frigoríficos* finally put out of business, *tasajo* has disappeared from the life and memory of Buenos Aires. The vast majority of *porteños* have never tasted *tasajo*, do not recognize the word, and do not realize that their predecessors exported many thousands of tons of it to Cuba. Nor do they realize that some of those predecessors were enslaved blacks. Nor do they realize that Cuban production of sugar relied on Bonaerense *tasajo* to feed the enslaved plantation laborers.

Unlike Cuba—where Carpentier could, even generations after abolition, use *tasajo* to evoke the stench of the slave past—the Bonaerense African past has all but disappeared (Andrews 1980; Chamosa 2003; Cottrol 2007; Goldberg 1976; Johnson 1979; Rosal 2002, 2006; Rout 1976). Between the 1810 and 1887 censuses, the black enumeration of Buenos Aires fell from 9,615 to 8,005, from 30 percent to less than 2 percent of the total population. Explanations for that decline revolve around abolition, at least in law, of the slave trade in 1813; disproportionately high death rates among black men in the many regional and civil wars of the nineteenth century and among blacks in general because of poverty; miscegenation with whites and the overwhelming influx of European immigrants; and discursive elision through the obfuscation of blacks in censuses and historiography to represent Argentina as European, modern, and progressive. Blacks had helped form the *gaucho* armies that maintained Juan Manuel de Rosas as the dictator of Buenos Aires from 1838 to 1851 and one of its largest cattle barons, but the Eurocentric liberals who ousted him categorized Rosas, *gauchos*, blacks, and natives as barbaric to promote a white, Europeanized nation-state through every material and representational means possible. The social memory of *tasajo* thus disappeared together with that of the black workers who had once helped produce it.

#### THE ATLANTIC TRAIL

At midcentury, a Havana doctor evoked the Atlantic as an active space of flows rather than a passive space of separation when he reported that yellow fever particularly affected the sailors who labored to transport *tasajo* along its meridional trail: “On board the vessels from Buenos Aires, which come laden with *tasajo*, the disease generally proves very fatal on account of the virulent exhalations to which the men are continuously exposed” (Jacinto Le-Riverend 1847–1848, 241). Yet those sailors—their labors, joys, and sufferings—remain largely unknown. So do the types of vessels they crewed, the conditions aboard them, their owners, and their

routes. And, therefore, so do the ways in which those agents might have enabled the circulation of people, things, capital, and ideas among Buenos Aires, Cuba, and the rest of the Atlantic world.

Woodbine Parish, British *chargé d'affaires* at Buenos Aires from 1825 to 1832, identifies no more than a few of those agents, and even so merely in the rather imprecise terms of nationality. Parish (1839, 346–348) claimed that, “[b]esides their direct trade, the North Americans have at times found a profitable employment for their shipping in carrying Buenos Ayrean produce (jerk beef) to the Havana.” Certainly, at least before midcentury, U.S. shipping had a relatively prominent place in the Río de la Plata: in 1820, of the 68 vessels engaged in overseas trade through Buenos Aires, 15 percent flew the U.S. flag while 13 percent were French and 62 percent British; and even as late as 1850–1851, while the total number of vessels had increased more than fivefold, to 377, and the entry of the Spaniards and Sardinians had reduced the British component to 28 percent, the United States and France had held relatively steady at 14 percent each (Kroeber 1957).<sup>5</sup>

Although Parish claimed U.S. dominance of the *tasajo* trail during its formative phase, British vessels certainly also participated. Some sailed directly from England: for example, the *Peter Ellis*, a vessel of 262 tons with a crew of twelve arrived in Buenos Aires under Master Robert Rhodes on February 16, 1829, with a cargo of dry goods from Liverpool valued at £1,646; it departed for Havana on April 15 with a load of *tasajo* worth £2,833.<sup>6</sup> Others carried Spanish goods, Buenos Aires being closed to Spanish vessels until 1836: for example, the *Nautilus*, a vessel of 135 tons with a crew of nine arrived on September 30, 1834, from Málaga with a cargo of wine and oil valued at £3,224; it departed for Havana on December 15 with a hold full of *tasajo* worth £1,403.<sup>7</sup>

The decline of the U.S. merchant marine after midcentury, however, especially relative to the rise of British steamship lines, seems to have ended most, if not all, U.S. participation in the *tasajo* trail. By 1887, compared to the 363 British, 172 French, 151 German, 130 Belgian, ninety-nine Italian, and forty-three Spanish steamships that called at Buenos Aires, the United States sent only seven, all of them opportunistic tramp freighters rather than vessels on regularly scheduled routes (Curtis 1889). The U.S. trade with Buenos Aires certainly grew steadily after midcentury, but the lack of direct shipping routes ensured that the bulk of the Bonaerense hides and wool as well as the U.S. flour, cottons, woolens, lumber, furniture, and agricultural machinery traveled via European ports on European vessels (Amaral 1998; Curtis 1889; Peterson 1964).

5. The numbers in Kroeber's tables do not always reconcile but remain the best estimates to date.

6. United Kingdom National Archives (UKNA), FO (Foreign Office) 6, vol. 28, ff. 66, 70.

7. UKNA, FO 6, vol. 49, f. 65.



European vessels thus dominated overseas shipping in the Río de la Plata, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century as the magnitude of the tasajo trail swelled to tens of thousands of tons per year, while the Argentine merchant marine remained largely limited to coastal and riverine regional trade. In 1820, of the sixty-eight vessels engaged in overseas trade through Buenos Aires, 84 percent were European (Kroeber 1957). As the total number of vessels grew to 377 by 1850–1851, the same proportion remained European (Kroeber 1957). And by the 1880s, seventeen European steamship lines were providing regularly scheduled service from Buenos Aires to Britain, France, Italy, Spain, and Germany (Curtis 1889; Zaefferer de Goyeneche 1987). The routes typically followed an oceanic triangle that carried, for example, manufactured goods from Britain to Buenos Aires, wool from there to the United States, and then lumber back to Britain.

Catalan shipping seems to have dominated the tasajo component of that European triangular trade after the 1836 reopening of Buenos Aires to Spanish vessels. A major sea power in the Mediterranean during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Catalans barely participated in Atlantic trade until the Bourbon reforms of the late eighteenth century ended the Andalusian monopoly (Yáñez 2006). First the decree of 1765 allowed Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia, and other selected Spanish ports to trade directly with the Caribbean. Then, in 1778, the Crown extended that so-called *comercio libre* more generally to other parts of the empire, including Buenos Aires. The policy renewed Spanish emigration to the colonies, and during the 1800s, Catalans became so dominant among Cuba's merchants that they "virtually controlled the importation and distribution of merchandise throughout the island" (Knight 1977a, 1977b; Schmidt-Nowara 1998). The *Compañía Transatlántica Española* conducted much of that trade, its founder Antonio López having made his fortune in Cuba before resettling in Catalonia as the Marqués de Comillas (Rodrigo y Alharilla 2000). After 1836, Catalans likewise became active in the Río de la Plata, so that by the seven-year period 1850–1856, 17 percent of the foreign vessels calling at Buenos Aires were Spanish, with 63 percent of them originating in the Andalusian ports of Cádiz and Málaga but the other 37 percent in the Catalan ports of Barcelona and Tarragona (Kroeber 1957; Zaefferer de Goyeneche 1987).

Catalan shipping followed three major routes across the Atlantic (Fradera 1984, 1995; Prohom Durán and Barriandos Vallvé 2004; Schmidt-Nowara 1998; Yáñez 2006). The first participated in the slave trade and marked a triangle from Catalonia, to Africa, to Cuba, and back with sugar, tobacco, and coffee. The second involved a more direct trade with Cuba, without firsthand involvement in the slave trade. And the third carried Catalan flour, wine, aguardiente, olive oil, paper, cork, textiles, dried fruit, and shoes to Buenos Aires; took on tasajo for Cuba; and there loaded

sugar, coffee, and tobacco for Spain. One variation on that Catalan tasajo trail involved unloading the tasajo in Cuba and then proceeded in ballast to New Orleans or Charleston to take on raw cotton for the Catalan textile mills. Another variation involved loading hides as well as tasajo in Buenos Aires, unloading the tasajo in Cuba, and sailing on to Spain with a mixed cargo of hides and sugar, coffee, or tobacco.

The some 579 logbooks archived in the seventeen maritime and other museums of Catalonia hold great potential for understanding several aspects of that Catalan tasajo trail. Geographers studying historical climate have analyzed a sample of those logbooks to assess their potential for reconstructing daily vessel position, wind direction, and sea condition (Prohom Durán and Barriendos Vallvé 2004). That sample, numbering 164 logbooks, ranges in date from the mid-1700s to the mid-1900s. About half pertain to the Compañía Transatlántica Española. More than half relate mainly to nontasajo routes, with most of those recording voyages to Cuba, but fully 37 percent pertain to the Catalan tasajo trail. If a similar percentage of the total corpus also does so, the logbooks should yield a map with daily positions for two hundred vessels that cumulatively define the triangle route. The database remains incomplete, however, lacking not only the remainder of the 579 logbooks but also any of the daily vessel positions (Grup de Climatologia and Grup GAMA 2001).<sup>8</sup>

The Climatological Database for the World's Oceans (CLIWOC), another historical climate database, provides a preview of what those two hundred or so voyages might look like (García-Herrera, Können, Wheeler, Prieto, Jones, and Koek 2006). The CLIWOC database includes daily positional and other data from more than three thousand Spanish, English, French, and Dutch logbooks that record some five thousand voyages between 1750 and 1854 (CLIWOC Team 2007). It, however, includes few Spanish vessels after 1794, few French for any year, no U.S. ones, and no British ones after 1829. Instead, Dutch voyages dominate the nineteenth-century coverage, irrelevant to understanding the tasajo trail. In the entire database, in fact, only two records connect the Río de la Plata to Cuba, but those two voyages illustrate the potential utility of the Catalan logbooks for defining that meridional trade route. As figure 2 maps, the frigate *El Júpiter* and a mail packet, apparently of the same name, sailed together in June 1793 from Cádiz for the Río de la Plata, skirting Africa as far south as the Guinea coast and arriving in Montevideo in August. They departed in December for Cuba and arrived at Havana in March 1794. They left there in July, following the coast of Florida northward into the zone of westerlies and arrived back in Cádiz in October. The purpose of the voyage seems to have been to carry mail during the war with France, with

8. Mariano Barriendos Vallvé, e-mail correspondence with author between April 4, 2008, and April 15, 2008.

the frigate providing protection for the packet. More pertinently, the route of *El Júpiter* suggests several points about the tasajo trail. First, the voyage from Spain to the Río de la Plata largely followed prevailing winds, took seventy-seven days, and passed near the slave factories of the Guinea coast and the salt mines of Cape Verde. Second, the voyage from the Río de la Plata to Cuba bucked the prevailing winds south of the equator, necessitating a long leg eastward before making northward progress with the trades, but it nonetheless took only eighty-two days. And third, the homeward passage followed the prevailing westerlies and could easily call at ports in the U.S. South, such as Charleston or New Orleans, and took eighty-eight days.

If the two hundred potential Catalan logbooks yield equally as precise route information, questions about the relationship between the tasajo and slave trades would become tractable. In 1817, Spain signed a treaty with Britain to end the slave trade north of the equator and extend that ban to south of the equator in 1820, but until 1867, the flow of slaves from Africa to Cuba continued nonetheless (Murray 1971). As the British and others withdrew from the trade, Catalan slavers increasingly came to dominate it.<sup>9</sup> Most of them likely sailed directly from Africa to Cuba, but Catalans sailing for the Río de la Plata might also have stopped along the Slave Coast or the Bight of Benin to pick up limited numbers of slaves for Buenos Aires. The Bonaerense government abolished the slave trade in 1813, but legal exceptions and clandestine landings certainly continued. For example, during the 1825–1828 war with Brazil, Bonaerense privateers who captured Brazilian ships could legally sell the cargoes, including slaves, in Buenos Aires (Andrews 1998). Enough precise route maps of Catalan vessels bound for Buenos Aires might reveal involvement, or lack thereof, in such a trade in slaves to Buenos Aires—for example, through consistent proximity to slave factories even if the vessels' masters obfuscated African landings in their logbooks.

Such precise route maps would also address whether Catalan vessels provided the Bonaerense *saladeros* with salt, their major input other than cattle. According to Darwin (1839, 75–76), the locally available “snow-white” salt mined from *salinas* in the vicinity of Carmen de Patagones was too pure to produce good *tasajo*, and therefore the *saladeros* mixed it with salt imported from Cape Verde. That archipelago became one of the major salt suppliers of the Atlantic during the long nineteenth century (Piasecki 1999). Before midcentury, British ships partially loaded with

9. To escape detection, slavers did not record African ports of call in their logbooks, making precise estimates of Catalan involvement impossible, but Fradera (1984) determines that Catalan ships comprised 23 percent of the interceptions between 1821 and 1845 by the English antislaving patrols off the African coast and, on that basis, concludes that Catalan ships made an average of 8.46 slave voyages per year during that period.

manufactured goods for Buenos Aires would stop en route at the Cape Verde Islands to load salt, but as the Bonaerense population and demand for manufactured goods grew, the British abandoned that practice in favor of departing fully loaded with higher value cargoes (Kroeber 1957; Parish 1839). The saladeros of midcentury seem to have imported some of their salt from the highly productive salt pans of Cádiz (Hutchinson 1865). But they also imported so much salt from Cape Verde that, during the seven-year period from 1850 through 1856, one hundred ships arrived in Buenos Aires from Cape Verde, some 4 percent of the total foreign shipping for that period (Kroeber 1957). The Argentine Confederation even established a vice-consul on the island of Sal, the main salt producer of the archipelago (Travassos Valdez 1861). Route maps derived from the logbooks of Catalan vessels should certainly demonstrate whether they carried salt from Cádiz and Cape Verde to the saladeros of Buenos Aires.

Detailed analysis of the logbooks would also reveal the types of vessels that worked the Catalan tasajo trail. The Catalans used a wide variety of sailing vessels in their Atlantic trade, denominated by hull size and shape as well as sail plan, from frigates as large as 1,000 tons displacement to brigs as small as 150 tons (Zaplana 1986). Of those vessels, medium-sized, shallow draft ones seem most likely to have carried the tasajo trade, given the poor port facilities of Buenos Aires until improvements began in the 1870s and steam vessels increasingly became ascendant. At midcentury, then, the twenty thousand tons of tasajo annually exported from Buenos Aires would have filled perhaps fifty to seventy-five such vessels.

Seasonal rhythms of the tasajo trail might also become apparent through analysis of the Catalan logbooks. Cuban demand for slaves increased during the cane harvest from January through June and decreased during the *tiempo muerto* of July through December (Klein 1978). Most slavers therefore made their voyages during the six months of January through June. Demand for tasajo would also have been highest during that period, but tasajo production took place during the nine months of October through June. The logbooks should reveal whether, and if so how, Catalan shippers timed the use of their vessels in the various transatlantic trades, latitudinal and meridional, to take advantage of such seasonal fluctuations.<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Such initial exploration of the tasajo trail maps out the topography and characterizes the landscapes and agents of the largely unexplored research territory of a rather anomalous Atlantic commodity. Like other

10. The work of the *Annales* school on colonial shipping in the Hispanic Atlantic provides a technical example of the analytic and representational possibilities (Arbellot, Bertin, Chaunu, and Chaunu 1957).

foodstuffs and agricultural commodities such as the tortilla and sugar, *tasajo* involves a dynamic relational network that is simultaneously material and discursive, economic and cultural, natural and social, historic and present, and global and local (Latour 1993; Lind and Barham 2004; Mandelblatt 2008; Mintz 1985; Sluyter 2002, 2006). But unlike commodities such as sugar, slaves not only produced *tasajo* but also consumed it. And while *tasajo* flowed meridionally, it nonetheless underpinned the more prominent, latitudinal commodity flows and thus helped fuel the dramatic nineteenth-century material-conceptual landscape transformations of Havana and Buenos Aires—of Cuba and the pampas (on material-conceptual landscape transformation, see Sluyter 1999, 2001, 2002).

The relationship of *tasajo* to landscape transformation at the Cuban terminus remains less well understood than at the Bonaerense terminus because slave consumption seems to leave behind fewer obvious sources than slave production. Although this demonstration of *tasajo*'s import to the broader Atlantic world will hopefully stimulate scholars who specialize in Cuba to begin to take enough of an interest in *tasajo* to ferret out more sources, the initial results suggest that *tasajo* consumption resulted in little more than some import statistics, sporadic and succinct observations in travelers' accounts, mention in the slave code, and so on. Somewhat ironically, then, *tasajo* has persisted as an integral if mundane element in everyday Cuban life.

In contrast, *tasajo* has virtually disappeared from the Bonaerense scene. In Buenos Aires, *tasajo* was also associated with slavery, through both the production process and its market destination. Production and shipping generated not only census and port statistics but also detailed descriptions and images of the increasingly industrial *saladeros* as well as laws to regulate their hygiene, pollution, and location. Yet despite the wealth of traces that *tasajo* has left behind in Bonaerense museums, archives, and nineteenth-century publications, the social memory of *tasajo* and its relationship to the black Atlantic has, again ironically, all but disappeared from everyday life. *Tasajo* reemerges now only as an element in the more general scholarly process of reassessing the roles of blacks as active contributors rather than mere passive laborers in the emergence of the Atlantic world over the past five centuries (Andrews 2008; Sluyter 2009).

The oceanic sector remains the blankest one on the emergent research map. Even such basics as the shipping route that connected the two termini remains unclear, let alone how that route related to the broader networks of Atlantic flows, how it enabled or foreclosed the movements of other actors, and how they in turn affected places such as Cuba and Buenos Aires or the Atlantic world in general. The extant logbooks of Catalan vessels, recently assembled into a database by geographers for the purposes of historical climatology, hold great potential to reveal the oceanic aspects of the *tasajo* trail, such as its relationship to the slave and salt trades, the sea-



sonality of the shipping, the types of vessels involved, and perhaps even the people who owned and sailed them. Such climatological databases, in fact, though typically ignored by those in the humanities, seem broadly pertinent to the study of the Atlantic as an active space of flows (see, e.g., the image of daily vessel positions at <http://www.knmi.nl/cliwoc>).

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