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Trans-Imperial Networks in the South Atlantic: The Rio de Janeiro-Montevideo Connection, 1777-1805

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In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, a series of deep changes occasioned by revolutionary wars and imperial disputes shook the Atlantic World. In particular, the Spanish Empire faced multiple crises, which many historians regard as having paved the way for the Spanish American independence movements after 1808. Spain's involvement in intermittent warfare in Europe weakened the Spanish economy and loosened the Castilian Crown's control over commerce and governance in many regions of its American empire. Military conflicts, especially the French invasion of Iberia in 1808, severed the commercial flow between the Peninsula and the colonies and, subsequently, opened the colonial economies to foreigners in the early 1800s. These processes are mentioned as crucial to the collapse of the Spanish colonial system.¹ However, such explanations are mainly formulated based on documentary evidence produced by official records of the Spanish Empire deposited in the metropolitan archives. The analysis of historic sources generated by Portuguese authorities in the Americas, and records generated in colonial areas of the Spanish Empire, however, indicates the growing significance of commercial transactions between Spanish merchants and subjects of foreign empires.

The analysis of commercial records produced by local authorities of the Portuguese and the Spanish Empires in the late 18th century reveals that trade between Spain and its South Atlantic colonies was not paralyzed. During moments of war, trade

routes connecting Rio de la Plata merchants to their Portuguese counterparts in Rio de Janeiro assured the maintenance of commercial activity, communication, and the flow of goods and people between Cádiz and the River Plate. Thus, the Spanish-American merchants involved in such trade were able to profit from the commercial intercourse with foreigners and to shape imperial dynamics in the South Atlantic during the last decades of the eighteenth century.

Since the 1780s, colonial subjects throughout Spanish America actively engaged in trade with colonies of other Atlantic empires. Colonial merchants made full use of the laws promulgated by the Spanish Crown allowing colonies to trade with foreigners (trade with neutral nations) during periods of war. Additionally, Spanish American subjects used legal pretexts to carry on a semi-legal trade with the subjects of other Atlantic empires. In the Caribbean and the North Atlantic, commercial intercourse between Spanish, British, and North American traders became commonplace. Either by using neutral trade licenses or excuses for ransoming confiscated prizes in British ports, Spanish subjects found ways to actively conduct trade beyond imperial limits in the Caribbean.² Although the period is marked by a crisis affecting traditional Spanish commercial routes, the volume of trans-imperial trade grew substantially. Several authors have examined the growth in neutral trade, often considering it as contributing to the decline of Spanish colonial commercial and political control in the Americas and to a process that was a precursor of free trade and independence.³ Furthermore, these authors have understood trans-imperial trade as disconnected from Peninsular trade routes.

Nevertheless, a close analysis of the changing patterns of trade in the Rio de la Plata region based on inter-imperial sources shows a different picture.

In the 1780s and 1790s the flow of trade between Spain and its southernmost viceroyalty was not interrupted during periods of war. A close analysis of the trade patterns in the Rio de la Plata suggests that, since the 1780s, Rio de la Plata merchants used Portuguese routes to ship goods and information to Spain. Between 1780 and 1806, Rio de la Plata's merchants and some of their peninsular counterparts used previously existing networks of trade (legal and illegal) to the Portuguese Empire – mainly Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon – to avoid the dangerous crossing of the Atlantic under the Spanish flag. As a result, neutral trade routes enabled the movement of goods, people, silver, and information (including military, administrative, commercial, agricultural, financial, socio-political, and geopolitical intelligence) between Rio de la Plata and Spain via Portuguese America. As a result, despite the sharp decline in commerce between Spain and its Spanish American colonies, the deep involvement of colonial subjects in neutral trade contributed to the maintenance of imperial dominion in the colonies.

War against England undoubtedly disrupted traditional Spanish routes of trade, but a significant number of ships and goods found their way to the Peninsula using the Portuguese route. Consequently, the expansion of commercial connections between Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon was proven crucial in maintaining the flow of administrative, military and commercial information between Spain and its colonies in the South Atlantic. Furthermore, these trans-imperial routes allowed the export of silver and goods to Spain. To carry on their business, Spanish merchants and traders employed Portuguese vessels, and relied on merchants and ports in other parts of the Americas. By

utilizing the language of empire and reforms, by presenting trade with foreign colonies as fundamental to the growth and maintenance of the Spanish possessions in the region, Rio de la Plata merchants justified and pursued trans-imperial trade. Specifically, Montevidean merchants enjoyed new opportunities for trade with foreigners to enhanced the role Montevideo as an imperial center of power,

As a result, neutral trade regulations opened new possibilities not only for trade, but also shipping routes via Luso-Brazilian and Anglo-American ports. The neutral trade laws also encouraged the acquisition of slaves and ships from neutral powers. The scale of the neutral trade assumed an important size and provoked changes to the balance of power within the mercantile communities of the Spanish Empire. In this article, I argue that neutral trade and other forms of trans-imperial interactions did not represent the interruption of commerce and the flow of information between Spain and the South Atlantic colonies. Instead, new routes and connections linking Rio de la Plata and Brazil in general, and Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro specifically, acquired strength and significance. Because of the centrality of its port and the existing connections with Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo profited most among the Rio de la Plata ports after 1777 by becoming a regional hot-spot of neutral trade. As a result, trans-imperial networks between colonial subjects were responsible for the maintenance of Spanish dominion over Rio de la Plata in the late eighteenth-century, rather than its debilitation.

Trans-Imperial Trade in the Rio de la Plata in the Eighteenth Century

The Spanish conquest of Colonia do Sacramento in 1777, ended almost one hundred years of direct trade between Portuguese and Spanish American subjects in the

Rio de la Plata port complex. The expulsion of the Portuguese from the region triggered important changes within the estuary. The conquest of Colonia represented the empowerment of Buenos Aires elites in commercial matters affecting the entire region, and forced Rio de Janeiro's mercantile elites to negotiate new ways to access the silver and hides of the Rio de la Plata markets.⁴

By the end of the eighteenth century, Buenos Aires has become a thriving commercial center, partially, due to the ease with which colonial merchants could acquire foreign goods from foreign traders. Since Buenos Aires's second foundation (1580), the city was supposed to be supplied with goods within the Spanish commercial system via Lima. Nevertheless, direct and yet extra-legal trade with merchants from other Atlantic empires proved more profitable, and soon became as a characteristic of the region's commerce. Between 1580 and 1640, Portuguese merchants held the *asiento* (contract for introduction of slaves in Spanish dominions), and they were prominent players in the Buenos Aires commercial community. During the seventeenth century, Dutch, British, French, and Portuguese traders regularly arrived in the Rio de la Plata using different excuses for trade. After 1680 until the late 1700s, Portuguese Colonia offered a longstanding entrepot for what Spanish authorities considered contraband trade. The regular presence of foreign traders in the regions contrasted with the dearth of official Spanish vessels arriving in Buenos Aires, averaging less than two ships per decade in the eighteenth century. In Buenos Aires, a powerful merchant community emerged, which derived its wealth from acquiring cheap European and American goods as well as slaves from Portuguese and other European traders. By the mid of the 1750s, Buenos Aires merchants controlled commercial networks that spanned the interior of the region to Alto

Peru. As a result, Buenos Aires merchants supplied a vast market, often relying on foreign goods, and were able to tap huge amounts of silver from Alto Peru and the countryside. Access to silver was one of the main attractions of the region's commerce for foreigners. Because of the close connections between Luso-Brazilian and British traders, Colonia was not only a hub for Portuguese, but also for Anglo merchants. The longstanding presence of Portuguese Colonia meant easy access to cheap Atlantic goods provided by foreign powers. The creation of the viceroyalty and subsequent expulsion of the Portuguese from the region implied a rearrangement of ports and logistics within the estuary.

When the Spanish Empire's proclamation of free trade included the Rio de Plata in 1778, Montevideo joined Buenos Aires as an authorized Atlantic port. Endowed with an excellent natural harbor at the entrance of the River Plate, Montevideo became the region's Spanish naval base. Furthermore, the North Bank port became the mandatory port of call for Atlantic trading vessels and the administrative seat of the *Resguardo*, the office in charge of repressing contraband trade. Practically, Montevideo became the port of Buenos Aires and the seat of authorities in charge of naval, customs, and additional port logistics. Despite the conquest of Portuguese Colonia, Buenos Aires remained dependent on an Atlantic port, but now the city's principal commercial outlet was located on the North Bank of the Rio de la Plata. In the following decades, Montevideo became the main Atlantic port in the region, and replaced Colonia do Sacramento as the locus of trans-imperial commerce for the merchant elites of Buenos Aires and Portuguese America.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Rio de la Plata region was the fastest growing area in Spanish America. The bureaucratic reform that created the Viceroyalty and the economic policy that opened both Buenos Aires and Montevideo to Atlantic trade contributed to demographic and economic development. Although Buenos Aires became the seat of the viceroyalty and the Audiencia (High Court) and was home to the wealthiest merchants who controlled the commercial networks to the interior, Montevideo's status as the designated regional port of call for all trans-Atlantic vessels, as well as the only one authorized to disembark slaves ensured relative advantages in relation to the capital city.

In practice, Montevideo became the port of Buenos Aires, and *porteño* merchants became dependent on Montevideo's bureaucracy and local merchants in order to conduct trans-Atlantic trade. As a result, Montevideo merchants and authorities occupied a strategic position regarding Atlantic commercial networks: a hub for trans-imperial trade, and the port of the Viceregal capital. Merchants in Montevideo served as proxies to ensure the logistics, payment of legal fees, and additional commercial agencies necessary for the merchants of Buenos Aires to conduct long-distance trade.

Montevideo's emerging merchant community derived extensive economic and political benefits from being the Atlantic harbor for Buenos Aires's trade. After 1778, Montevideo, became the primary exporter of hides in the region. Argentine historian Juan Carlos Garavaglia showed that between 1779 and 1784, Montevideo accounted for 53% of all hide exports of the Rio de la Plata.⁵ In 1790, Montevideo's share of total hide exports was 56%, compared to Buenos Aires's 46% of the total hides export from Rio de la Plata.⁶ Garavaglia also demonstrates, based on tax records, that both Montevideo and

Buenos Aires experienced fast-paced economic growth, with the total wealth collected by the Crown jumping from 3,000 pesos and 16,000 pesos in 1761-1765, to 21,000 pesos and 35,000 in 1798 for Montevideo and Buenos Aires respectively.⁷

Montevideo's inhabitants benefited extensively from outfitting ships at the port. Local merchants, artisans, urban plebeians, and peasants found new opportunities in supplying the mercantile trade and professions. The costs involved in loading a ship and outfitting it, included many port fees, food supplies, labor, warehouses, interpreters, divers, and other human resources necessary in the dock. To load a vessel at Montevideo, a merchant would have exhausted nearly a month of time and spent around 7,000 pesos while his ship was at dock. ⁸ Furthermore, most Buenos Aires merchants who were involved in trans-Atlantic trade, either with Spain or other foreign countries, had to maintain agents in Montevideo.

The merchants of Buenos Aires relied on local agents acting as proxies for all logistical and legal procedures involved in sending and receiving goods because Montevideo's deep water port hosted its own independent customs and port authorities.. Local *apoderados* (attorneys) were responsible for paying customs, posting bails for ships, acting on legal disputes, reporting prices, and other commercial information, storing and moving the merchandise, and other informal agencies, including contraband trade. Between 1778 and the British Invasions (1806-1807), out of approximately 77 Montevideo merchants, twenty-one were agents or attorneys of more than twenty-six Buenos Aires merchants and commercial houses.⁹ Prominent and successful merchants from all branches of trade employed proxies in Montevideo, including Tomas Antonio Romero, Martin de Alzaga, Casimiro Necochea, and Gaspar de Santa Coloma.¹⁰

Merchants such as Pasqual Parodi and Juan de Aguirre operated commercial houses in partnership with Buenos Aires merchants. Montevidean merchants also profited from their connections with *porteños* traders to obtain access to credit and commercial networks in Buenos Aires and in the interior. By the turn of 1800, five merchant houses of Buenos Aires had more than 25.000pesos loaned to Montevidean merchants.¹¹ As a result, the growth of Montevideo as an Atlantic port was intimately connected with the growth of the merchant community of Buenos Aires. By 1803, Montevideo's port was responsible for 73% of all trans-Atlantic naval movement in the Rio de la Plata estuary, effectively functioning as the principal port of Buenos Aires.¹²

Imperial wars had not only made these commercial connections possible in the Rio de la Plata, but encouraged the region's merchants and traders to adapt their commercial strategies in order to make trans-imperial trade viable during wartime. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, intermittent conflict among European powers led merchants to adapt their commercial strategies in order to make trade viable during wartime. In the 1780s and 1790s, merchants and captains manipulated colonial law to engage in trans-imperial trade by obtaining licenses for trade with neutrals nations, or ensuring that confiscated vessels and cargo were auctioned back into the market place. These transactions ultimately allowed trans-imperial trade to acquire semi-legal status within the Spanish empire. Rather than paralyzing colonial trade, war fostered colonial subjects' participation in trans-imperial commerce and facilitated the use of legal excuses provided by the new Atlantic conjuncture.¹³

Merchants in Rio de la Plata used neutral trade laws and also appealed to the traditional right to emergency landing as a pretext to admit foreign vessels in their ports and to enter into foreign ports, mostly on the Brazilian coast.¹⁴ Ship captains and merchants were well-practiced in this commercial strategy, and customs authorities and coast guard officials cooperated in the corruption. In the Rio de la Plata, such a tactic was commonplace, and Dutch, French, British, and Portuguese captains had employed it to enter the port Buenos Aires since the early-seventeenth century.¹⁵ The emergency landings were known in Spanish law as *arribada forzoza*. Such usages of maritime distress became less common during the eighteenth century, while Portuguese Colonia provided a safe haven for Portuguese and British vessels. However after 1777, Portuguese and other foreign vessels began to appear off the port of Montevideo and to request the right of emergency landing.¹⁶ Under Spanish regulations of *arribadas*, only goods necessary to repair and supply the distressed ship were permitted to be sold.¹⁷ In practice, this law was largely ignored, and vast quantities of merchandise were disembarked in the port of call. The use of this ploy allowed merchants from different empires to engage in commercial intercourse, even during periods of war.¹⁸ Such was the case of the Portuguese ship *Nossa Senhora de Belen y San Josef*, of captain Miguel Josef de Fleytas (an experienced Rio de la Plata captain since the days of Sacramento). The ship left Rio de Janeiro in 1782 originally bounded to Rio Grande, a southern Brazilian port, but a weather emergency led the ship to dock in Montevideo. After the ship was in the harbor, authorities authorized the captain to disembark sugar, textiles, timber and 130 slaves that eventually were sold in Montevideo and Buenos Aires.¹⁹ In the following years, operation like this became commonplace.

Trans-imperial networks of trade took different forms. Many ships that engaged in trade with neutrals did not have a foreign port as the final destination for its cargo, and, on occasion, the foreign port was not the final port of call of the vessel itself. Making use of well-known routes in the South Atlantic, Rio de la Plata merchants and their associates in Cádiz were able not only to trade with neutrals, but to trans-ship merchandise to Europe from Spanish to Portuguese ships using the Brazilian route. On other occasions, Spanish vessels departing from Montevideo would seek the protection of the Rio de Janeiro convoy to cross the Atlantic with the Portuguese flag on their masts. Sometimes, the Portuguese flag was deployed for the navigation between the *Fluminense* and Platine ports as well.²⁰ These strategies sometimes bordered on illegality and they were not regulated clearly by imperial authorities. Consequently, colonial merchants found the ways and means to conduct their business regardless of whether or not imperial officers had authorized their commerce.

In practice, regulations that authorized only Spanish vessels to engage in trade with foreigners did not constrain “neutral trade.” In fact, commercial data indicates that a high degree of inter-colonial trade and contact took place between both mercantile communities utilizing the ships of many different nations. Between 1778 and 1806, a minimum of 231 ships were involved in trans-imperial trade with the Rio de la Plata (Montevideo). Of these, 116 were Portuguese ships (48.1%), 81 Spanish (33.6%), fourteen Anglo- American (5.8%), eight British ships (3.3%), three French (1.2%) and one Danish ship. In some cases, there was no information, and in other the documents were mutilated in a way that the flag of origin was not legible in 18 records (7.1%).²¹

These ships arrived in the ports of Montevideo (85), Rio de Janeiro (47), Santa Catarina (3), and Lisbon (4).²² Such a pattern shows the strength of the connection between Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro mercantile elites during this period. Among the eighty-one Spanish vessels thirty-two had arrived in Montevideo, having passed through Portuguese ports, and forty-four others had declared Rio de Janeiro as a port of call when leaving the port. Three ships arrived in Santa Catarina and only one ship touched the port of Lisbon on its passage to Montevideo. As the distribution of the vessels' ports of origin and flags shows, trans-imperial trade was not only carried out by Spanish vessels sailing to foreign ports, but also concentrated heavily at Montevideo, where a considerable number of Portuguese merchant ships delivered cargos belonging to Spanish, Montevidean, Portuguese and Buenos Aires merchants. The majority of Spanish vessels that arrived in Montevideo touched Portuguese ports before entering Montevideo. The data shows the central role of Montevideo as the main hub for trans-imperial trade in Rio de la Plata. By 1804, 78% of all trans-Atlantic shipping in Rio de la Plata was concentrated at Montevideo.

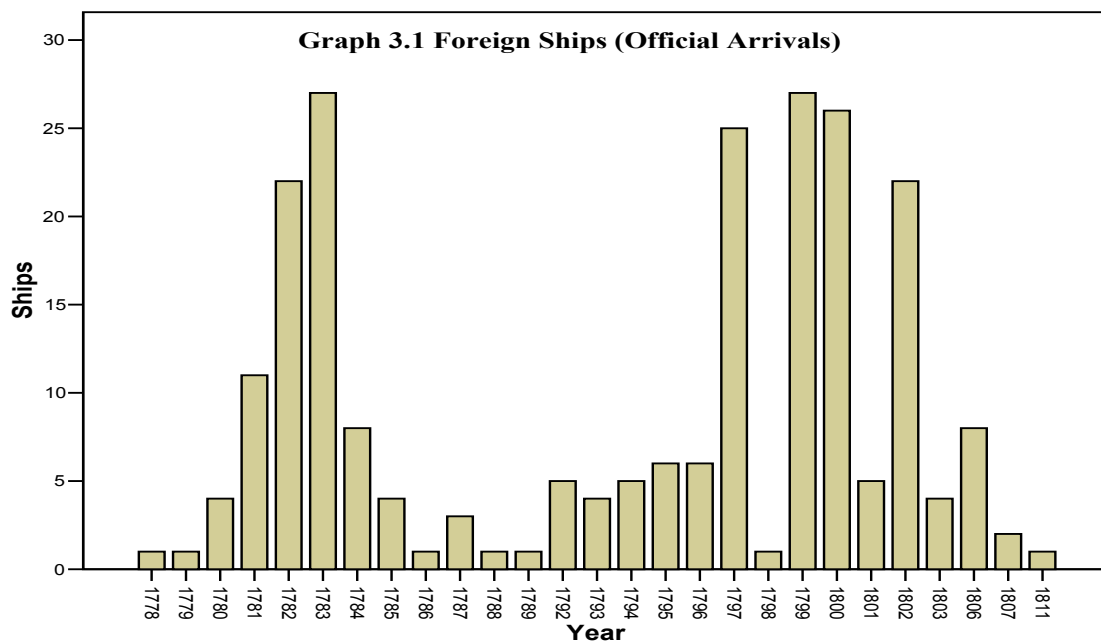
The ships' itineraries were extremely varied and involved navigation via South American, European, North American, Caribbean, Pacific, West and East African, and Atlantic Island ports. From Montevideo, Spanish ships most frequently declared Cádiz or other ports in Spain (Santander) as their final destination, but these vessels commonly docked in Rio de Janeiro. Other regular destinations included Spanish ports in the Americas such as Havana and Callao (eight vessels), or foreign ports such as Islas Mauricio, Manila, the coast of Africa, Cayenne (five vessels), Providence, Boston, or simply "Foreign Colonies." A significant number of ships sailed officially from

Montevideo to Rio de Janeiro (nine vessels), using the formal prerogatives of neutral trade, although at times their merchandise would be trans-shipped to Portuguese vessels or the boats would proceed to Europe in Portuguese convoy. Discrepancies between the official destinations and the actual routes trading vessels at Montevideo sailed reveals that colonial subjects enjoyed a level of autonomy and confidence in conducting trans-imperial trade.

Colonial subjects of both the Spanish and Portuguese Empires adopted such maneuvers during warfare, and the commercial practices enjoyed a semi-legal status with the tacit approval of metropolitan authorities. Spanish officials in Sevilla were aware that sending information, people, and goods via the Portuguese route of Rio de Janeiro - Lisbon was the safest way across the Atlantic. Conversely, Portuguese authorities saw in this system of cooperation a possibility to obtain Spanish silver and hides, which had not arrived on a regular basis since the fall of Colonia. Nonetheless, a series of restrictions applied to such trade, but during periods of war new opportunities and regulations could be deployed. As a result, colonial subjects adopted imperial law according to local authorities' and merchants' interpretation in a way that suited local elites' interests.

The records of foreign ships entering into Rio de Janeiro and Montevideo provide evidence of the higher number of vessels admitted in the ports beyond imperial boundaries. For the period between 1778 until 1792, considering all the available data, 67 official arrivals of Portuguese vessels in Rio de la Plata were recorded.²³ For the same period, Custom's officials inspected fifteen Spanish vessels that entered Rio de Janeiro's harbor. From 1793 to 1802, a total of 53 Portuguese ships arrived in Montevideo (and a total of 64 counting the arrivals to Buenos Aires' ports).²⁴ Between 1793 and 1802, the

number of Spanish ships entering into Rio de Janeiro amounted to 57. Historian Ernst Pijning estimates that the coastal trade between Rio de Janeiro and Rio de la Plata, in the early nineteenth century, involved from thirty to forty ships of varied sizes annually.²⁵ The compiled data shows the active role of Portuguese merchants in sending ships to Montevideo in the first half of the 1780s. These arrivals were favored by lax regulations during periods of war, but also counted with the lenience of port authorities of Montevideo.



As the primary port of the Rio de la Plata counting with its own imperial agencies to control trade and naval movement, Montevideo merchants and authorities benefited from the new arrangements for trade in the region. According to Uruguayan historian Arturo Bentancur, Montevidean merchants profited from being "intermediaries,"

"attorneys," and "agents" of merchants from Buenos Aires, Cadiz and Brazil.²⁶ A significant part of the naval movement of Montevideo was derived from commercial operations conducted by Buenos Aires merchants. Moreover, merchants from Montevideo, such as Matteo Magariños, Francisco de Medina, Manuel Diago, Berro y Errasquin, and Francisco Viana were able to acquire ships and dispatch their own vessels into Atlantic enterprises.²⁷ By the early 1790s, traders from Buenos Aires would comment on the "increasing number of merchants" located in Montevideo, and the need to pay attorneys in the same port to conduct business.²⁸

The 1790s was a turning point, a moment when trade between Portuguese American ports and the Rio de la Plata grew in scale and became more regular. Considering both the Spanish vessels arriving in Rio and their final itineraries, and the Portuguese ships entering Rio de la Plata, trade with neutrals not only changed the characteristics of Spanish imperial trade but also permitted a flexible use of commercial regulations. It is noteworthy that the number of Spanish vessels arriving in Rio de Janeiro reached its peak during the 1790s, especially from 1797 to 1799. During the 1790s, Spain experienced intermittent warfare, and the laws for trade with neutrals were renewed constantly. These laws and decrees allowed trade between Spanish colonists and foreign colonies—including Rio de Janeiro—during moments of warfare. However, the justifications recorded for such arrivals evince that European ports rather than Rio de Janeiro were the final destination for many of those ships and/or their cargos. During this period, at least forty vessels used Portuguese routes to reach Spanish ports. In other cases although the final destination was not Europe, trans-shipment of merchandise to the

Peninsula occurred. Thus, the notion of the Atlantic as being closed to Spanish commerce must be reconsidered in light of such trans-imperial networks of cooperation. Foreign shipping allowed for the maintenance of 20%-40% of the regular trans-Atlantic naval movement of periods of peace.²⁹

The importance of the route connecting Rio de Janeiro and Rio de la Plata had grown to such an extent, that in 1799, a petition of merchants and farmers from the “road to Minas Gerais” presented a list of more than two hundred products to export to Rio de la Plata, with information on prices and rates of profitability. The list included Luso-Brazilian and European goods.³⁰ Ernst Pijning in his Ph.D. dissertation about contraband trade in Rio de Janeiro makes clear the integration of the Rio de la Plata trade into Rio de Janeiro’s mercantile circuit via contraband trade and/or semi-legal operations.³¹ Local authorities and merchants interpreted imperial laws according to their best interests. Under ambiguous regulations, local mercantile elites who were connected with local authorities could use the gray areas of legislation to control trans-imperial trade.

The trade data for the earlier period from 1778 to 1792, already indicated a short-lived but significant commerce between Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro. These years followed immediately after the fall of Colonia and reflect the diplomatic moment between both Iberian empires in 1777.³² By the early 1780s, Montevideo had replaced Colonia as the main Atlantic port for trans-imperial trade in Rio de la Plata.

Reconnecting Rio de la Plata to Rio de Janeiro

While the Bourbon reforms may have elevated Montevideo’s political and economic stature by turning it into the principal Atlantic port of the Viceroyalty of the

Rio de la Plata, it was trade with the Portuguese after 1777 that contributed most to enriching the city and its merchant class. Montevideo benefited more than other Platine ports from the Spanish conquest of Colonia and the subsequent decline of Portuguese arrivals upriver, and the relocation of merchants and ship captains from Colonia into the city. As a result, Montevideo not Colonia as the new center of trans-imperial trade, and its community was able to benefit from the relative commercial advantages in relation to Buenos Aires, the main political and commercial center in Rio de la Plata.

By the 1770s, Colonia was a very important and reliable source of cheap European and Luso-Brazilian goods and of slaves for the powerful merchants of Buenos Aires. Although illegal, the trade between Portuguese and Spanish merchants flourished. As an example of the vitality of such trade, in the period between 1765 and 1775, more than one thousand slaves were allegedly confiscated as contraband by Spanish authorities.³³ Nevertheless, Spanish efforts were never sufficient to suppress smuggling or to discourage Buenos Aires merchants from carrying out extra-legal commerce. The mercantile transactions between Colonia and Buenos Aires merchants, although informal for the most part, were conducted based on stable networks of trade, family and friendship, involving authorities on both banks of the River Plate.³⁴ In 1777 however, the Spanish conquest of Colonia and the destruction of the town caused important changes to trade and society in the Rio de la Plata.

Despite the fact that Buenos Aires became the capital of the viceroyalty, the seat of the Audiencia after 1777, it was Montevideo that benefited most from the fall of Colonia and the subsequent Portuguese arrivals.³⁵ Since the 1750s, the city was already a safe haven for Portuguese settlers, deserters, and artisans.³⁶ After 1777, Portuguese

traders that resettled in Spanish possessions brought their families, capital, and Brazilian connections with them. In 1778, Manuel Cipriano de Melo, a Lisbon-born Portuguese previously established in Colonia do Sacramento, was appointed as one of the *Comandantes del Resguardo*, the newly created office to repress contraband trade. Cipriano de Melo naturalized as a Spaniard and rapidly became one of the wealthiest merchants of Montevideo.³⁷ Possessing many connections within the local community as well as in Brazil, he was able to convert his family's real estate from Colonia into credit in Montevideo, and in the following years he asked permission to bring back another 30,000 pesos from Brazil.³⁸ As a result, Montevideo's merchants and authorities profited economically and politically from the expulsion of the Portuguese from Colonia, by reconnecting the trade routes between Brazil and Rio de la Plata.

Merchants and authorities in Montevideo developed commercial and political networks to ensure the viability trans-imperial trade. Local authorities, such as Cipriano de Melo, played a crucial role in controlling and participating in smuggling activities, since they had power over determining whether the entrance of ships was legal or not.³⁹ Therefore, Cipriano's allies, Montevideo merchants Francisco de Medina, Melchor de Viana, Francisco Maciel, Francisco Joanico, together with other traders interested in the business of Brazil, enjoyed a pivotal role in re-structuring the connections between Rio de la Plata and Portuguese America. These merchants were commercially supported by important Buenos Aires merchants, including Tomas Antonio Romero, Manuel de Aguirre, Domingo Belgrano Perez, who could assure access to the trade networks to the interior of the Viceroyalty.⁴⁰ The involvement and full support of merchants and local

authorities in Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro ensured that colonial subjects were effectively disposing over trade with foreigners along the coasts of America Meridional.

In 1778, the port authorities of Rio de Janeiro recorded the arrival of the Spanish ship *Nsa. Senhora – Begonha* coming from Montevideo, under pretext of *arribada forzoza*. The *Begonha* was carrying soldiers and correspondence to Cádiz.⁴¹ This was the beginning of the restoration of a route that would become well-established in the following decades. It was also the beginning of the route in which Rio de Janeiro functioned as a dominant port of call between Rio de la Plata and Spain. A few months later, the Viceroy of Brazil, in a letter to the Overseas Council, detailed part of the new arrangements in order to keep the trade going, even if it went against previous regulations.

In January of 1780, the Spanish ship *San Juan e San Jose* docked in Rio de Janeiro under the pretext of an *arribada*. Although they never disembarked their official cargo, Brazilian Viceroy Vasconcelos reported to the Overseas Council in Lisbon that the officers of this vessel came prepared with silver to acquire tobacco, iron, sugar, and also slaves from Brazil. The Viceroy also stated that was of his interest in ensuring the retention of as much silver as possible in Rio.⁴² Therefore, he made arrangements to supply the Spanish crew with all the goods that they demanded including slaves. The total value of the operation exceeded 22:000\$000réis (28,947pesos), and could have been even greater:

The amount of silver that remained here could have been much larger if I could had provided more tobacco than the three hundred and sixty five *arrobas* and twenty eight *arreteis*, which was the product of their (Spaniards) biggest interest. They also took much timber, goldsmiths tools, some wine, thirty *arrobas* of sweets, textiles, iron, wire, and, finally, 93 slaves. Regarding the slave transaction, in the first place I tried to create difficulties, but I ended up allowing such transaction as a big favor. Similar resolution, in truth, went against the

prohibition of selling slaves for areas that are not under the dominion of Your Majesty, passed in October, 14th 1751. However, after the publication of this resolution, practices on the contrary had been common, from Colonia and other locations of this Government, slaves always had been exported to Spanish dominions without any action against such trade by the Authorities, and this is due because such law had been passed only to satisfy Foreigners that complained about slave contraband trade.⁴³

In this letter, Vasconcelos reveals the adaptation of already tested methods from previous experiences dating back to the mid-18th century. Although the original destination of the ship was another port in the Spanish Empire, the captains arrived “prepared” with silver to acquire goods and buy slaves. All these signs suggest that, in 1780, old networks of trade were being reestablished. The portfolio of products purchased also reveals the clear knowledge of Spanish traders about what they needed to acquire in Rio: tobacco, timber, iron and slaves. All these products were typically exported to the Rio de la Plata via Colonia do Sacramento prior to 1777. Platine merchants’ acquisition of slaves in Rio de Janeiro revealed the continuity of trans-imperial trade networks between Rio de la Plata and Brazil, an old practice employed since the days of Sacramento.

After the 1780s, Montevideo became the main hub of trans-imperial trade in the region and the gateway for the introduction of slaves from Brazil. In 1783, powerful merchant Domingo Belgrano Perez owed Montevideo customs around 20.000pesos for taxes on his slave trade operation.⁴⁴ Such an episode illustrates the strategic situation of Montevideo for profiting on trans-Atlantic commerce, and exposes the relationship between the Montevideo's port activity and Buenos Aires merchant community. Montevideo's merchants and authorities benefited

directly from the fees and services necessary to conduct trans-Atlantic trade, especially from its connections with Brazil.

Brazilian Viceroy Vasconcelos's communication evidenced the Portuguese interest in retaining silver and the high level of autonomy local authorities and merchants enjoyed. The Viceroy boldly stated that his main goal in welcoming the Spanish *arribadas* was to obtain the maximum amount of silver possible from those transactions, even though the transaction could contradict imperial laws. The sale of significant amounts of tobacco, wood, iron, and tools were not supplies strictly necessary for the vessel to continue its voyage or to return to its port of origin. Most noticeable, however, was the sale of 93 slaves to the Spaniards. Although it went against a Royal Ordinance of 1751, the Viceroy's correspondence shows that this law was never observed, and many Portuguese authorities used to think that such decree was meant to divert the attention of foreign powers. Furthermore, Vasconcelos mentioned the example of the role of Colonia as the source of slaves for Rio de la Plata, and how in practice, such trade was always conducted without official impediments.⁴⁵ In his assessment of the benefits of the trade, Vasconcelos emphasized the recovery of the flow of silver, the incorporation of the Spanish market into economic routes of Rio de Janeiro, and the increased tax income that would result for the Crown.

Although trade with foreigners was specifically regulated, the authorities and merchants of Rio de Janeiro and their partners in Rio de la Plata did enjoy a relative level of autonomy in their transactions. With the formal support of local

authorities, no previous authorizations were needed from metropolitan powers. On the contrary, the Viceroy only informed authorities in Lisbon *a posteriori*. Colonial subjects were, *de facto*, deciding over trade with foreigners in the colonial space.

Less than one year later when the same subject was again brought to the attention of the *Concelho Ultramarino* in Lisbon, the Viceroy reported in greater detail about the growth of the trade with the Rio de la Plata. In this report of 1781, Vasconcelos revealed that the number of Spanish vessels arriving in the port of Rio, and other Brazilian ports had increased because of the war between Spain and Britain. If in the past the Spaniards were willing to come to Rio, now, they were also willing to harbor Portuguese vessels in the La Plata estuary.⁴⁶ Moreover, Rio de la Plata authorities wanted to make clear to the merchants in Rio that Portuguese vessels would be welcomed in Montevideo. In the port, the authorities:

would welcome Portuguese ships that would ask for harbor presenting a pretext of *arribada*, but in fact wanted to trade. In order to emphasize their interest he brought more than one hundred thousand pesos to show that they are willing to spend such amount in the trade, and this convinced some ship owners to send their ships officially to Santa Catarina, Rio Grande and other Southern ports, but the vessels would sail to Montevideo with pretext of *arribada*.⁴⁷

In addition, the Spanish envoy assured that such ships would return “loaded with hides and silver, since the Spaniards would facilitate that with abundance.”

The captains that arrived from Rio de la Plata in Rio also wanted to establish partnerships with Rio de Janeiro merchants because the Atlantic was becoming progressively more dangerous for Spanish vessels. The merchant

emissaries from Rio de la Plata wanted to ensure that traders from Montevideo and Buenos Aires could ship large quantities of hides, silver, and other products from the River Plate to Europe using Portuguese ships.⁴⁸ The Viceroy confirmed that some merchants from Rio had already sent a ship to Montevideo a couple of months earlier and had been welcomed by the port authorities.

The authorities in Brazil, however, were somewhat suspicious of the “good faith” of Rio de la Plata merchants. Vasconcelos mentioned to the Overseas Council that the Spaniards could use such excuses to make cheaper shipments to Europe, since the difference in prices between Rio de Janeiro and Rio de la Plata could reach 60% of the total cargo price to Europe.⁴⁹ Moreover, the Brazilian Viceroy manifested his concerns about possible smuggling activities, since the growth in the number of Spanish vessels arriving in Rio would make the control of illegal interactions more difficult. Nevertheless, the Viceroy himself was in favor of the trade, and, thus, he attached to his memorandum documents supporting this viewpoint. Among these documents was a letter from the powerful and respected merchant of Rio de Janeiro, Brás Carneiro Leão.

Carneiro Leão supported the creation of partnerships to trans-ship Rio de la Plata products to Europe, as well as to send Portuguese vessels to Montevideo. According to Carneiro Leão, the war had made the ocean crossing too risky for Spanish ships, and some Cádiz merchants had authorizations to send capital and information via Portugal. Moreover, the circuitous route offered several advantages to the merchants of Rio. Namely, almost all the silver transported would remain in Rio de Janeiro because such type of product was not shipped

across the Atlantic, rather sent in *letras de cambio* (silver remittances from Rio de la Plata was a common operation, even after 1808). Finally, the existence of friendly and trustworthy merchants both in Cádiz and Montevideo should have been considered as an advantage in terms of safety for the enterprises.

Carneiro Leão, one of the wealthiest merchants of Rio, had lengthy experience in dealing with the Platine market dating back to the years of Colonia. In 1775, he had a partnership with Colonia based merchant João de Azevedo Souza, and together they had advanced to the Colonia administration more than 1:000\$000rs (1.315pesos). Between 1778 and 1786, Brás Carneiro Leão appeared repeatedly as a trade partner of Don Manuel Cipriano de Melo, the *Comandante del Resguardo* of Montevideo. Brás Carneiro Leão attested that Cipriano de Melo had credits in Rio de Janeiro that amounted to 30,000 pesos, as well as that he had traded slaves and other goods in partnership with the *Comandante del Resguardo*. Furthermore, Carneiro Leão was also involved with captains and merchants that were commonly seen in Rio de la Plata, such as Manuel João da Cunha and the popular contrabandist known as Captain Barriga (Belly), who was close friends with Cipriano de Melo.⁵⁰

The justifications used to legitimize the disobedience to imperial regulations emphasized the benefits of the Rio de la Plata trade and its relative legality. The growth of commerce and the access to silver would be highly significant in economic terms for Rio de Janeiro economy. Furthermore, the Viceroy also mentioned the fake licenses given by Spanish authorities, namely the Viceroy of La Plata and the Superintendent, for Spanish ships and traders to arrive

in Rio de Janeiro. Portuguese authorities could not deny help or admittance to Spanish ships according to the dictates of natural law because of the neutral status of Portugal. Viceroy Vasconcelos also mentioned the possible advantages of such trade:

as for the intended purpose of these shipments, (it seems to me) the merchants can make great use of the neutrality of our flag and of the liberties assured by the agreements between Portugal and Great Britain that declare free and exempt, the merchandize of enemies on board of our ships.⁵¹

According to the Viceroy, warfare could be profitable to the Portuguese, because they would benefit from the legal treaties between the Atlantic Empires. Without undermining Portugal's position of neutrality and as a primary partner of Britain, trans-shipment of Spanish cargo allowed Portuguese ship owners and merchants to profit as well as to reinforce trade and political alliances with Spanish subjects. It is important to recall that in Portugal, some politicians were still able to remember the lack of support and protections given by Britain in 1777. At that moment, Portuguese intelligence reports were clear about the Spanish expedition to Rio de la Plata that culminated with the dislodgment of Colonia; however, British authorities insisted in denying the veracity of the Portuguese information.⁵²

Finally, at the end of this long memorandum for the Overseas Council, the Viceroy reminded metropolitan agents of the commitment of local authorities in Rio de la Plata. With the real goal of trading and trans-shipping merchandise, Platine officers were already authorizing Spanish subjects to sail from Montevideo under many different pretexts to Brazilian ports. An example was the 1781 arrival of Don Francisco de Medina, one of the very merchants in charge of negotiating these informal agreements with merchants in Rio. Medina, who was also a trading partner of Don Cipriano de Melo,

was officially sent by Montevidean merchants to research tobacco cultivation and to buy skilled slaves for such agriculture. Medina returned with large amounts of tobacco and slaves to Rio de la Plata. However, he brought back neither a single captive worker able to produce tobacco nor plans or information about tobacco factories.⁵³

The positive results of these preliminary arrangements may be observed in another memorandum of 1783, which indicates that trans-shipment and the incorporation of Spanish ships into the Brazilian fleet were already a fact of commercial life in the Rio de la Plata. On March 19, 1783, the Portuguese Viceroy reported to the Overseas Council that he would not allow ships to sail from Rio de Janeiro straight to Cádiz, nor accept Spanish ships coming straight from Spanish ports to Rio de Janeiro. According to him, such itineraries would be extremely suspicious if those ships were intercepted in the passage; thus, Spanish ships should only sail from Portuguese ports to Rio de Janeiro. Nonetheless, the viceroy was afraid that the direct trade would facilitate contraband and the avoidance of payment of the trans-shipment fees in Portuguese ports.⁵⁴

During the early years of the 1780s, war between Spain and England allowed colonial subjects of the Iberian empires to deepen trans-imperial cooperation. In helping Spanish authorities and merchants, Portuguese traders could have privileged access to Spanish territories and markets. In 1782 while transporting the Spanish *demarcators* to establish the boundary limits stipulated in 1777, the ship *Carlota* was caught by British privateers close to the Madeira Islands. The *Carlota's* crew, officers, astronomers, and some of its cargo was transported in Portuguese ships to Rio, where Domingos Mendes Viana, the powerful director of the whaling contract in Rio, offered help. Viana provided

loans and cash advances to be collected in Montevideo, as well as providing the crew and passengers of the *Carlota* with transportation to the same port.⁵⁵

Similar acts of explicit cooperation were recorded in Montevideo almost two decades later, when French corsairs arrived with Portuguese ships that were caught with cargo and crew in crossing the Atlantic. Authorities in Rio soon reported on the important help provided by the “Spanish friend Francisco de Medina.” In 1799, Medina not only housed and provided loans for the officers of the three ships caught by French privateers, but also helped the Portuguese officer in charge of liberating the confiscated ships. Medina interceded with local authorities in order to reinforce the Portuguese claim of illegal apprehension of the ships and the legal implications for the Spanish authorities in allowing such transactions to happen.⁵⁶

The exchange of information on prices, markets, political developments, naval movement, and social unrest was another important form of trans-imperial cooperation, which also revealed the overlapping interests of Luso-Brazilians and Spanish-American subjects. In 1799 when the French privateers arrived in Montevideo, the authorities and merchants of Rio de la Plata were vigilant of the foreign crews. On the one hand, the French provided confiscated ships and goods and new business opportunities. On the other hand, it also meant that Portuguese ships entering the estuary were potentially endangered by the French war ships. Without losing time, Rio de la Plata’s authorities and merchants sent fast-sailing boats to Sta. Catharina and Rio de Janeiro to warn Luso-Brazilian authorities and merchants about the French presence in the region.

The acting Viceroy of Rio de la Plata, a former Governor of Montevideo, Antonio Alguer Feliu (1797-1799), was explicit in saying that he had no idea about the plans and

strategies of the French ships, and that consequently he was sending this warning message in a fast ship with an experienced crew to spread the news. The Spanish Viceroy also asked the Luso-Brazilians to be careful in sending ships to Rio de la Plata:

Not having received any orders from my Corte that would allow me to dock [merchant] ships, and because it goes against the law and Royal ordinances that I am supposed to enforce, I can not avoid asking V. Ex. to be sensitive of the repercussions of such news; because I am not a legislator, but only in charge of executing orders that I have sworn to protect, I would be delighted in helping the Vassals of *S. Mag. Fidelissima* if it was an option to me without sacrificing our respective responsibilities.⁵⁷

The Platine Viceroy wanted to be clear that he and the Rio de la Plata merchants were unable to protect and harbor Portuguese merchant ships. Although such type of interaction appeared to be ordinary, it was an illegal route. Again this illustrates how despite imperial laws, colonial subjects in the Americas possessed powerful networks of trade and information that crossed imperial boundaries.

The war between Britain and Spain was both an important element and a pretext for trade interactions in the early years of the 1780s, but the end of hostilities after 1783 did not stop the commercial flow between the Portuguese and Spanish possessions through the Rio de la Plata. To ship silver and hides via the Portuguese fleet and to acquire slaves and other goods in Rio de Janeiro after 1783, Spanish ships continued to sail into the *Fluminense* port on their way to Cádiz. The most frequently used excuse for the forced arrivals was that the ships had faced storms in the Atlantic, and Rio was the nearest port for repairs.⁵⁸ After they entered the port, they would be granted time to perform repairs, that could vary from fifteen days to six months. In many cases, Spanish captains would manage to trans-ship their cargo to Portuguese ships in order to reach their final destination in Cádiz, via Lisbon. The fees of four percent for trans-shipment

and three percent for port use were normally applied in Rio de Janeiro. The existence of such procedures and fees shows the everyday character of such interactions.

The use of *arribadas* as a pretext for trade was a pre-conceived and predictable commercial strategy. On one occasion in 1785, Captain Ignacio Sestiaga declared it necessary to sell his cargo of hides, copper, and some silver in order to pay for repairs and acquire other necessary goods. This case is emblematic of how pre-conceived and predictable the *arribadas* were in such context. Captain Sestiaga prepared his vessel to carry silver and 11,000 hides to have the necessary means to pay for services and goods in Rio de Janeiro.⁵⁹

These interactions reveal that semi-legalized commercial transactions that were permitted during moments of war were continued during times of peace. The patterns of *arribadas*, the trans-shipment of merchandise, and the acquisition of goods remained the same. Moreover, the cargos transported were virtually the same as those transported in the previous years. Once again, imperial laws against trade with foreigners did not impede the cooperation between merchant communities of the Rio de la Plata and Rio de Janeiro.

Another important factor in allowing such interactions was the new laws favoring the slave trade in the Spanish Empire enacted from 1791 onwards. Based on Physiocratic ideas, Spanish reformers aimed to increase Spanish participation in the slave trade. Thus, the Crown granted licenses to Spanish colonial subjects to acquire slaves from Africa and even from neutral powers.⁶⁰ Such licenses, however, explicitly forbade any other type of trade interaction between Spanish subjects and foreigners. During the 1780s, merchants

from Rio de la Plata obtained licenses to bring significant number of slaves from the Coast of Brazil. Nevertheless, as Alex Borucki identifies, it is in the 1790s that such traffic increased substantially.⁶¹ However, if the slave trade alone was authorized, it did not prevent merchants from conducting other types of trade.

In the early years of the 1790s, contacts between Spanish and Portuguese subjects intensified. During this period commercial trends observed in the 1780s developed even further. The combination of imperial laws liberalizing the slave trade and trade with neutrals during periods of war enabled colonists to pursue their own commercial interests.⁶² By the turn of the century, direct trade between Rio de Janeiro and Rio de la Plata as well as the use of Portuguese ships to transport merchandise through the Atlantic became commonplace. Cooperation between colonial subjects allowed the maintenance of the connections between Spain and its colonies in South America, as the Empire progressively depended more on the resources of the colonists.

In the 1790s, the number of ships from Rio de la Plata entering the port of Rio de Janeiro rose significantly. The stated reasons presented for the arrival of Spanish ships in Rio de Janeiro were of three types: first, to seek protection to cross the Atlantic with the Portuguese convoy or to trans-ship goods to Portuguese ships to be sent to Europe; second, forced arrival due to storms in the Atlantic that would allow Spanish captains to trans-ship merchandise to Portuguese ships, or to sell their goods in Rio de Janeiro; and, third, to use official licenses to perform commerce with neutrals and to acquire slaves and even ships in order to “nationalize” them in Rio de la Plata.

The operations in which ships sought protection to cross the Atlantic could involve the substitution of the Spanish flag for the Portuguese or the transfer of merchandise from Spanish ships to Portuguese ships. In this last case, Spanish ships normally returned to La Plata loaded with Brazilian and European products, and/or slaves. Such pretexts were normally used during periods of war, when British ships would prevent Spanish ships from sailing to Europe.⁶³ Nevertheless in 1796, during a brief interregnum in warfare, such excuses were also used by captains, who claimed to have licenses granted prior to the cessation of hostilities. This strategy was also used to ship merchandise from Cádiz to Rio de la Plata via Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro, either using trans-shipment of merchandise or substituting flags.⁶⁴ Both methods proved to be effective. As the Captain of *La Judit* reported, his ship sailed from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro with a cargo from Cádiz owned by Buenos Aires merchants, and had Montevideo as its final destination. *La Judit* crossed the Atlantic in a convoy of 136 ships. At 5 degrees North the convoy was approached by two British privateers, but Portuguese officers made sure that none of the Spanish ships were confiscated.⁶⁵

The use of Portuguese ports, ships, and intermediaries became ordinary. In 1802, Buenos Aires merchant Francisco de Necochea presented a petition in Brazil and in Lisbon in order to prevent Spanish merchants from paying port fees and trans-shipment fees twice in Brazil and in Portugal. Necochea asked for a standard regulation for Spaniards to use the Portuguese routes, and mentioned that this would benefit their Portuguese associates from Rio and from Lisbon. Necochea's main complaint was the required payment of two port fees of three percent. Instead of paying the two port fees and the mandatory four percent fee for trans-shipment, Necochea proposed a total fee of

seven percent, arguing that these fees made the costs of such transactions too high.

Although we do not know the outcome of this case, it shows the importance and regular usage of the Portuguese route by Spanish merchants. Although merchants from Rio de la Plata were officially using their prerogative for neutral trade, their transactions did not end in Rio de Janeiro or other Brazilian ports. They used their knowledge and networks in Brazil to maintain the flow of goods and information between Rio de la Plata and the Iberian Peninsula during the 1790s and early 1800s.

During the 1790s and early 1800s, the most frequently used pretext by Spanish captains to enter Luso-Brazilian ports was to claim they needed repairs due to storms encountered in the South Atlantic. Even during periods of war, such an excuse was deployed by a large number of captains.⁶⁶ In 1796, for example, a Spanish ship owned by an influential Buenos Aires merchant, Tomás Antonio Romero, faced problems while trying to enter Rio de Janeiro. Local authorities initially considered the arrival of his ship *Jesus Maria José*, illegitimate. Captain José Antonio Sarzetea was originally bound for the Cape of Good Hope but he entered Rio de Janeiro seeking protection. The admittance into Rio de Janeiro harbor was allowed after the captain and the high officers—who were Luso-Brazilians—explained the need for repairs to the ship's sails and rigging. Such an excuse granted them not only permission to harbor but also the potential to sell part of their cargo.⁶⁷ It is noteworthy that Portuguese ships would deploy the same excuses when docking in Rio de la Plata ports. As ship captains used the weather as a pretext to enter foreign ports, this also allowed them the use of the benefits that trade with neutrals' regulations entitled them. Nevertheless, storms were a pretext that would never go out of fashion, and would allow authorities to admit foreign ships into a port. From 1800 to

1806, 70% of the Spanish ships that arrived in Rio de Janeiro claimed to need repairs because of damages caused by storms they faced in the South Atlantic.⁶⁸

The first couple of years of the nineteenth century were marked by war between Spain and Portugal. During periods of war, in addition to use storms as a pretext, captains also deployed the rights of emergency landing due to warfare in the Atlantic. In the year 1800, when a large number of Spanish vessels arrived in Rio de Janeiro, some Spanish ships asked for protection from British corsairs, others entered the harbor seeking repairs after naval conflicts, and still others used the weather as the pretext. Interestingly enough, the war waged over the territories in southern Brazil apparently did not prevent trade between Spanish and Portuguese subjects even though this was trade with the enemy. Because licenses for neutral trade were granted and revoked periodically, I believe that by the 1800s, Spanish-American subjects had acquired enough experience to know that the right of *arribada* conventions was more reliable.

Merchants from Rio de la Plata used licenses to acquire slaves in foreign ports to arrive in Rio de Janeiro (as an *arribada* or not). In doing so, they bought slaves and goods like tobacco, cachaça, sugar, and textiles, and trans-shipped merchandise to Europe. Although Spanish laws explicitly forbade the introduction of any other goods together with slaves, this prohibition was widely ignored.⁶⁹ In many cases, the number of slaves transported on these voyages was relatively small, sometimes fewer than a dozen.⁷⁰ The main difference in the use of this pretext as compared to the other two patterns previously analyzed is that these ships did not cross the Atlantic, nor were they officially sending cargos to Europe.

The slave trade route between Brazil and the Rio de la Plata also attested to the high level of cooperation between Iberian subjects in the South Atlantic. In the 1790s, new Portuguese regulations forbidding the export of slaves to foreign regions were enforced. According to Luso-Brazilian authorities, the high numbers of slaves sent to Rio de la Plata had provoked the rise of slave prices in Rio de Janeiro from 50\$000rs (66 pesos) to 100\$000 (132 pesos), damaging rural producers, since slaves were “the arms of the farmers in this land.”⁷¹ Nevertheless, contraband trade involving slaves was extremely hard to stop. Authorities continuously complained that they could not patrol the harbor properly, since Rio de Janeiro merchants would send small boats with slaves to other areas along the nearby coast and then embark slaves directly onto Spanish ships after they had left the harbor.⁷² Again, the importance of pre-existing networks of trade proved to be important for the logistics of such operations. During times of war or peace, colonial subjects were able to find legal excuses to cross imperial boundaries, as well as to find illegal ways of doing so.

Another important opportunity provided by the liberalization for trade in slaves for Rio de la Plata merchants involved the possibility of acquiring ships from foreign nations and "nationalizing" them in a Spanish port. Often, the ship to be “nationalized” would arrive in the Rio de la Plata with a cargo of slaves and other products.⁷³ The acquisition of ships represented another level of trans-imperial cooperation, since Spanish-American subjects were expanding their trade and naval capacity relying on foreign suppliers. These transactions also depended on stable networks of trade, since credit was a crucial element. I have identified transactions that varied from 3,000 pesos to 38,000 pesos.⁷⁴ Although such transactions often involved a great amount of silver as the

method of payment, traders also purchased on credit and through consignments of merchandise, revealing the dynamic role of trans-imperial networks of trade.⁷⁵

Conclusion

In the late-eighteenth century, intermittent warfare between European empires provoked a profound change in the Atlantic patterns of trade. After experiencing an impressive growth in the commerce with its colonies after the reforms of free trade in the late 1770s, the Spanish trade system was disrupted by wars in the last decades of the century. Historians have argued that Spanish ships were impeded from crossing the Atlantic in the 1790s and that Spain was left without control over trade and communication with its colonies. In order to allow the colonies to obtain supplies, imperial officials allowed trade with neutral powers and permitted Spanish subjects to acquire goods in other regions of the Americas. However, analysis of both Portuguese and Spanish sources demonstrates that Spanish colonists from Rio de la Plata used Portuguese ships to send silver, goods, commercial administrative information, and people to Spain. Moreover, on many occasions Spanish ships crossed the Atlantic in the Portuguese convoys.

The Rio de la Plata was one of the most dynamic regions of the Spanish empire in the last decades of the eighteenth century. After expelling the Portuguese from the Rio de la Plata and securing both banks of the estuary, the Spanish empire opened both the ports of Buenos Aires and Montevideo for Atlantic trade within the Spanish Empire. During this process, Montevideo became the principal deep-water port of the region. The centrality of Montevideo's port made Buenos Aires merchants dependent on agents and authorities located on the port of the North bank. The requirement that most legal and

logistical procedures for shipping across the Atlantic had to be conducted in Montevideo (e.g. paying port fees and leasing warehouses), coupled with the renewed connections with Portuguese America gave the city's merchants relative advantages in relation to Buenos Aires. Between 1778 and 1806, more than two hundred ships sailed between Brazil and Rio de la Plata. Montevideo became the hub for trans-imperial trade. Montevideo benefited from the re-location of merchants and ship captains from Colonia, after 1777, to Montevideo. The new arrivals brought not only their capital, but also their commercial connections. As a result, these new commercial and political opportunities involving trans-Atlantic trade and operating as the deep-water port of Buenos Aires allowed for the fast-paced growth of Montevideo's merchant community and institutions.

Benefiting from laws for trade with neutrals and previously existing networks of trade, Spanish subjects in Rio de la Plata were able to keep at least a partial flow of goods between Spain and its southern Atlantic colonies. Such commercial routes involved stable partnerships, credit, and cooperation between Luso-Brazilian and Spanish-American merchants and authorities. Such interactions were not always legal, and a variety of legal excuses were officially used in an attempt to legalize this route. Despite the extra-legality of these trans-imperial networks, such arrangements allowed the Spanish Empire to keep contact with its colonies to a greater degree than the historiography has previously suggested. The agency of colonial subjects in establishing these connections with foreign merchants shaped Spanish colonialism in the last decades of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century.

¹ This explanation was originally advanced by the works of John Fisher, "Commerce and Imperial Decline:

² During wartime, British privateer confiscated Spanish vessels and took them to Jamaica, or other Caribbean Islands. Spanish American merchants were able to re-gain the vessel and cargo by paying ransom. Merchants abused this practice, often using the ransoming of a ship to introduce more goods than the original confiscated shipment. Adrian Pearce, *British Trade with Spanish America, 1763-1808* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 80-119.

³ Stein and Stein, *Edge of Crisis*, Chapter 8. Also: Jerry Cooney, "Oceanic Commerce and Platine Merchants, 1796-1806: The Challenge of War," *The Americas*, 45 No. 4 (April 1989), 509-24.

⁴ Pearce emphasizes the role of Colonia del Sacramento for British trade with the Spanish empires before 1777. The author suggests that up to 40% of the British trade conducted with Brazil was destined for the Rio de la Plata. See Pearce, *British Trade with Spanish America*, 10.

⁵ Juan Carlos Garavaglia, "Economic Growth and Regional Differentiations: the River Plate Region at the End of the Eighteenth Century," *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 65 no.1 (February, 1985), 57.

⁶ Juan Carlos Garavaglia, "Economic Growth," 53.

⁷ Juan Carlos Garavaglia, "Economic Growth," 54.

⁸ Arturo Bentancur, *El Puerto Colonial de Montevideo*, 1 204.

⁹ AGN-Montevideo, Protocolos de Marina - Registro de Protocolizaciones 1803-1809.

¹⁰ Bentancur, *El Puerto Colonial de Montevideo*, I, 148. AGN-Montevideo, Protocolos de Marina - Registro de Protocolizaciones 1803-1809.

¹¹ Merchants obtaining loans from Buenos Aires merchants included: Matteo Magariños, Francisco Xavier Ferrer, Eusebio Vidal, Jaime Posadas, Juan Francisco Zuñiga and Jorge de la Carreras. The 25,000 pesos were provided by Buenos Aires's Maria Bernarda Lezica, Jose Inchaguerri, Benito de Olazabal, and Esteban de Villanueva. Arturo Bentancour, *El Puerto Colonial*, I, 42-43.

¹² *Semanario de Agricultura*. 1803-1804.

¹³ Such phenomena have been recorded for the Caribbean region as well. Pearce has examined in detail the use of pretexts such as *rescates* (ransom of ships) as a means to sail to British colonies in order to conduct trade. See Pearce, *British Trade with Spanish America*, Chapter 4.

¹⁴ I was unable to find any records of *rescate* expeditions conducted from the Rio de la Plata to any foreign port. Pearce has identified twelve *rescate* operations between 1798 and 1803, but estimates that this number was just a fraction of the total carried out. See Pearce, *British Trade with Spanish America*, 138-39.

¹⁵ Zacarias Moutoukias, *Contrabando e Control Colonial* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de Latino America, 1988), Chapter 4.

¹⁶ AHU RJ D 9294. 30 de Marco 1780.

¹⁷ Moutoukias, *Contrabando y Control Colonial*. For the standard formulaic text of *Autos de Embarcação* see AN Cx 492 Pc 02.

¹⁸ I use administrative reports, *auto de embarcações*, and letters exchanged by Portuguese and Spanish authorities between 1778 and 1806 in order to examine the scale, route, and significance of the trade between Spanish colonial subjects from Rio de la Plata and Portuguese merchants from Brazil. These sources were deposited in the Archivo General de la Nacion, Montevideo (AGNU), in the Arquivo Nacional, Rio de Janeiro (AN), in the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino of Lisbon (AHU), and in the Archivo General de Indias, Seville (AGI). The cross-referencing of such information allowed me to detect a high degree of association between colonial subjects of different empires, especially during periods of war.

¹⁹ AGN - Montevideo. EHG Caja 2. Auto de Embarcación. 02/XI/1784

²⁰ IANTT - MNE Livro 199 - For the year 1789, the arrival of 160 Portuguese ships was recorded in Cadiz. Only one of these vessels carried silver, and the most common products were: oranges, fish, olive oil, rocks, salt and Brazil wood. Montevideo became the primary port city of Rio de la Plata because of its privileged natural harbor, which was more protected and larger than the port of Buenos Aires. Thus, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, Montevideo was the gateway for most of the Rio de la Plata commerce, and, to a certain extent, it became the port of Buenos Aires. See Arturo Bentancur, *El Puerto Colonial de Montevideo* (Montevideo: Facultad de Filosofía y Ciencias Sociales - Universidad de La Republica, 1984).

²¹ One ship, originally of Portuguese origin which was nationalized by Spanish authorities and merchants, is counted as Portuguese and Spanish. In other words, it was registered twice because it falls into both categories.

²² Not enough information for twenty-seven ships.

- ²³ The numbers presented in this work are part of a database collected from the following sources: AN Cx 492 Pct 02, AGNU EHG Cj 34, AGNU EHG Cj 18, AGNU EHG Cj 40, AGNU EHG Cj 2, AGNU EHG Cj 24, AGNU AHG Cj 15, AGNU EHG Cj 23, AGNU EHG Cj 27, AGNU EHG Cj 28, AGNU EHG Cj 31, AGNU EHG Cj 32, AGNU EHG Cj 34, EGNU EHG Cj 41, AGNU EHG Cj 56, AGNU EHG Cj 55, AGNU EHG Cj 54, AGNU EHG Cj 48, AGNU EHG Cj 45, AGNU EHG Cj 28, AGNU Ex-Museo Historico Cj 4, AHU RJ D. 10056, AHU RJ D. 10215, AHU RJ D. 10215, AHU RJ D. 10532, AHU RJ D. 10607, AHU RJ D. 11714, AHU RJ D. 13396, AHU RJ D. 13397, AHU RJ D. 13398, AHU RJ D. 13399, AHU RJ D. 13406, AHU RJ D. 13405, AHU RJ D. 13407, AHU RJ D. 13408, AHU RJ D. 13412, AHU RJ D. 13408, AHU RJ D. 13413, AHU RJ D. 13415, AHU RJ D. 13418, AHU RJ D. 13419, AHU RJ D. 13421, AHU RJ D. 13422, AHU RJ D. 13436, AHU RJ D. 13437, AHU RJ D. 13438, AHU RJ D. 13437, AHU RJ D. 13441, AHU RJ D. 13437, AHU RJ D. 13446, AHU RJ D. 13452, AHU RJ D. 13458, AHU RJ D. 13462, AHU RJ D. 13470, AHU RJ D. 14058, AHU RJ D. 14121, AHU RJ D. 14099, AHU RJ D. 14500, AHU RJ D. 14506, AHU RJ D. 14500, AHU RJ D. 14511, AHU RJ D. 15946, AHU RJ D. 15946, AHU RJ D. 15953, AHU RJ D. 15958, AHU RJ D. 15959, AHU RJ D. 16130, AHU RJ D. 16233, AHU RJ D. 16268, AHU RJ D. 16341, AHU RJ D. 16541, AHU RJ D. 16824, AHU RJ D. 18013, AHU RJ D. 9567, AHU RJ D. 9028, AHU RJ D. 9326, AHU RJ D. 9772, AHU RJ D. 9859, AHU RJ D. 9772, AHU RJ D. 9932, AHU RJ D. 10052. AGI Buenos Aires Gobierno Leg.: 141. *Declaración de Entrada de Puerto*. Additional information is provided by Alex Borucki's database including slave vessels, information about its sources can be found in: Borucki, "The Slave Trade to Rio de la Plata, 1777-1812: Trans-Imperial Networks and Atlantic Warfare," *Colonial Latin American Review*, 20 no.1.
- ²⁴ Borucki, "The Slave Trade to Rio de la Plata..."
- ²⁵ Ernst Pijning, "Controlling Contraband: Mentality, Economy and Society in Eighteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro" (PhD diss., John Hopkins University, 1997), 163.
- ²⁶ Bentancur, *El Puerto Colonial*, I, 265.
- ²⁷ AGN Montevideo *Fianzas y Protocolizaciones*.
- ²⁸ Bentancur, *El Puerto Colonial de Montevideo*, I, 36.
- ²⁹ *Semanario de Agricultura Industria y Comercio*. Junta de Historia Numismática Americana: Buenos Aires. 1928-1937. AGN, Montevideo, AGA - Libros de Aduana 95, 96, 99.
- ³⁰ "RELAÇÃO dos GÊNEROS e Fazendas próprias do consumo da Colônia do Rio da Prata, Reyno do Perú e Presidência do Chili: os preços que permitem na paz, guerra, e os que demonstrarão maior utilidade." 04 de Abril 1799. AHU RJ Cx. 171 doc. 12655
- ³¹ Pijning, "Controlling Contraband," Chapter 4.
- ³² Dauril Alden, "The Undeclared War of 1773-1777: Climax of Luso-Spanish Platine Rivalry," *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 41 no. 1 (February 1961), 55-74.
- ³³ Biblioteca Nacional (BN) Lisboa – Manuscritos Época Pompalina - Códice 10855– Cartas de Francisco José da Rocha.
- ³⁴ Fernando Jumar, "Le commerce atlantique au Rio de la Plata" (PhD diss., École des Hautes Études en Science Sociales, 2000). Fabricio Prado, *A Colônia do Sacramento – O Extremo Sul da América Portuguesa* (Porto Alegre: Fumproarte, 2002). For the general involvement of authorities in contraband see Moutoukias, *Contrabando y Control Colonial*; Moutoukias, "Redes Personales y Autoridad Colonial," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* (May-June 1992). (Traduzido com finalidades didáticas por Maria Zapiola. Universidade de Buenos Aires. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1998.)
- ³⁵ In addition to the Portuguese settlers, demographic growth was due to a new wave of immigrants from Spain and from the interior provinces of Rio de la Plata and to the growing slave trade.
- ³⁶ Marcela Tejerina, *Luso-Brasileños en el Buenos Aires Virreinal* (Bahia Blanca: Ediuns, 2004); Emir Reitano, "Los Portugueses del Buenos Aires Tardo Colonial" (PhD diss., Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación, 2004); *Documentos Para la Historia Argentina*, Vol. 12 (Buenos Aires: Senado de la Nación, 1960). Vol. 12 - Padrón de 1778. The following decrees targeted specifically the Portuguese population in Buenos Aires, imposing restriction on mobility, location for living and property. AGN IX 8-10-8 - 11-Dez-1801, AGN IX 8-10-13 - 2-22-1765, AGN IX 8-10-2 - 1-26-1763, AGN IX 8-10-4 - 11-Out-1777.
- ³⁷ For more on Cipriano de Melo and his role in Montevideo's community, see Fabricio Prado, "A Carreira Trans-Imperial de Don Manuel Cipriano de Melo," *Topoi*. 2012.

- ³⁸ AGI. Buenos Aires - Codice 333, 24 May 1785. Regarding exchange rates: for this period 1 peso = \$750 reis.
- ³⁹ Moutoukias, *Contrabando y Control Colonial*; Pijning, "Controlling Contraband"; Bentancur, *El Puerto Colonial de Montevideo*.
- ⁴⁰ Bentancur, *El Puerto Colonial de Montevideo*, I, 289-298.
- ⁴¹ Em 30 de Setembro. AHU - RJ D. 9028. Although the ships are Spanish, the sources record the names using Portuguese spellings.
- ⁴² AHU RJ D 9294. 30 de Marco 1780. Ernst Pijning also identified this ship and this letters as being the key moment in the La Plata contraband trade for the period.
- ⁴³ AHU RJ D 9294. 30 de Marco 1780.
- ⁴⁴ See Alex Borucki, "From Shipmates to Soldiers," 51.
- ⁴⁵ The 1751 ordinance must be understood within the context of the negotiations of the Treaty of Madrid. For Spanish authorities, the main goal of the accord in the Rio de la Plata was to cease contraband trade.
- ⁴⁶ AHU RJ Cx 117 D 9561 – 12 Julho 1781.
- ⁴⁷ AHU RJ Cx 117 D 9561 – 12 Julho 1781.
- ⁴⁸ "avultadissima quantidade de coiros, e prata (...) para Corte e dela para Espanha." AHU RJ Cx 117 D 9561.
- ⁴⁹ The price for a shipment in Rio to Lisbon was twenty Cruzados, while from the river Plate the price was sixty cruzados on average. AHU RJ D 9561.
- ⁵⁰ Biblioteca Nacional (BN) Lisboa – Manuscritos Pombalinos Códice 10855 – Colonia do Sacramento 08 Junho 1776; AGI – Buenos Aires 333 – 14 Junho 1785. In 1783, transactions involving Cipriano de Melo, Francisco Maciel and Bras Carneiro Leão involved more than 13,000 pesos fuertes.
- ⁵¹ AHU RJ D 9561 – 12 Julho 1781.
- ⁵² IANTT – MNE Cx 915 – Papéis Varios de Hespanha. Pasta No. 3 "Primeiro e Segundo Compêndio que o Marques de Pombal entregou a Raynha Nossa Senhora para Ser Apresentado ao Rey D. José." 1776-1777.
- ⁵³ AGN IX 25-5-6 – Reales Comunicaciones. 7 Jan 1781.
- ⁵⁴ AHU RJ D 9772 - 19 Mar 1783.
- ⁵⁵ AHU RJ D 9622 - 20 Abr 1782.
- ⁵⁶ AHU RJ D 12729 - 11 Jun 1799.
- ⁵⁷ AHU RJ D.13319. 08 de Jan 1800.
- ⁵⁸ AHU RJ Documents: 9326, 10052, 9567, 10215, 10607, 10056.
- ⁵⁹ AHU RJ, Cx. 125 Doc 10052 29-Abril-1785.
- ⁶⁰ From 1791 onwards, a series of Royal Orders allowed Spanish merchants to acquire slaves in Brazil, as well as allowed foreign ships to introduce slaves. Real Academia de Historia de Madrid, Coleccion Mata Linares, Tomo LXVIII, 9, 1723; fls 998-1001.
- ⁶¹ Borucki, "The Slave Trade to Rio de la Plata, 1777-1812: Trans-Imperial Networks and Atlantic Warfare," *Colonial Latin American Review*, 20 No. 1 (April 2011): 81-107.
- ⁶² Laws liberalizing the slave trade were enacted in 1789-1791 in the Spanish Empire. See Adelman *Sovereignty and Revolution*, Chapter 2; and Borucki, "Slave Trade to Rio de la Plata,"
- ⁶³ AGNU EHG Cj 40. 7 Nov. 1799, 25 Dec. 1799, 18 Nov 1799, IANTT MNE Cx 915 17 Maio 1802.
- ⁶⁴ AGNU EHG Cj 55. 1802, AGNU EHG Cj 55. 1802 exp 194, AGNU EHG Cj 56 Exp 216, AGNU EHG Cj 40 21 Jan 1799, AGNU EHG Cj 40 16 Setp 1798, AGNU EHG Cj 40 5 Sept 1799.
- ⁶⁵ AGNU AHG Cj 40. 5 Sept 1799.
- ⁶⁶ AHU-RJ 10215, AHU-RJ 10532, AHU-RJ 10607, AHU-RJ 13396, AHU-RJ 13397, AHU-RJ 13398, AHU-RJ 13399, AHU-RJ 13407, AHU-RJ 13412, AHU-RJ 13408.
- ⁶⁷ "Com prerrogativas que lhe guardam as leis do Estado." AN-RJ – Cx 492 Pct. 02. 10 de Out de 1796.
- ⁶⁸ I have information for twenty-six vessels in the 1800s. Captains on eighteen of those vessels alleged that storms were the reason they sought entry at Rio de Janeiro.
- ⁶⁹ AGNU - EHG Cx 79. 1788 12-Jun-1788 and AGI - Buenos Aires - Codice 346, 30 Abr 1798.
- ⁷⁰ For a detailed analysis of the slave trade in Rio de la Plata see Borucki, "The Slave Trade to Rio de la Plata."
- ⁷¹ AHU RJ Cx. 164 12265. 28 Abril 1798.
- ⁷² AHU RJ Cx. 155 11714. 17 Jul 1795.

⁷³ AGNU - EHG Cj. 34. and Cj. 40. Among the products imported were wax, sugar, cachaça, iron, rice and indigo. For an extensive analysis of the acquisition of foreign vessels by Rio de la Plata merchants, see Jerry W. Cooney, "Neutral Vessels and Platine Slavers: Building a Viceregal Merchant Marine," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 18 no. 1 (May 1986), 25-39.

⁷⁴ AGNU EHG Cj 34. 20 Feb. 1797. AGNU EHG Cj. 34. 12 Dic. 1797. AGNU EHG Cj. 34 15 Dic. 1797. AGNU EHG Cj 40. 5 Abr. 1799. AGNU, AGA *Libro de Fianzas del Puerto de Montevideo*.

⁷⁵ AGNU EHG Cj. 34. 15 Dec. 1797.