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The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade

The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade, Reading Deborah Cowen's University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (2014).

Introduction to the forum and to *The Deadly Life of Logistics*

Geoff Mann

This review forum came together after a packed “author meets the critics” session at the AAG's 2015 annual meeting in Chicago. The engagements with Deborah Cowen's *The Deadly Life of Logistics* first elaborated there have been reworked by Charmaine Chua, Anja Kannigieser and Mazen Labban for this forum. Cowen's response both confronts the comments and critique, and pushes the conversation into new territory. These introductory paragraphs are intended to introduce the text so that those who have not yet read it will be able to enjoy the contributions.

The Deadly Life of Logistics is a study of what Cowen calls “arguably the most under investigated revolution of the twentieth century, the *revolution in logistics*” (p. 23; emphasis in original). That revolution, as she shows through a series of compelling cases, has shaped modern capitalism far more, and far more violently, than many of have realized. Cowen argues that with “logistics comes new kinds of crises, new paradigms of security, new uses of law, new logics of killing, and a new map of the world” (p. 1). The evidence is delivered via examinations of the history of logistics as a “discipline”, a study of the ways labour and labouring bodies are burdened by increasingly securitized and vicious supply chains; a fascinating look at the case of Somali “pirates” as products of and problems for contemporary logistical capitalism; and what can only be described as a terrifying exposé of new “logistics cities” presently being assembled around the world.

Cowen argues that this logistics revolution has reconstructed contemporary capitalism into as a global supply chain, coordinated by complex spatio-temporal arrangements that disaggregate production and distribution according to the logic of unit cost, effectively globalizing elaborate commodity production systems across highly uneven economic and political domains (pp. 55, 81, 124). In other words, one might say Cowen shows that logistics is in some ways economics at its most geographic—the production of “complex social worlds animated by the violence of efficient global trade” (p. 231).

One might also say that the book is geography at its most geographic. *The Deadly Life of Logistics* is always attentive to the holy trinity—space, scale, and conjuncture or place—but it does not fetishize or get stuck on them. Geographers are sometimes accused of an “add space and mix” approach to social science, but that is not the case in this instance. Instead, book weaves these concepts into a theoretical and empirical investigation, both historical

and contemporary, of how and why logistics matter to modern global capitalism, and to the capacity to construct alternatives to it. She focuses her attention on the “absolute yet fundamentally tenuous distinction between the economic and the political” (p. 131) that underwrites the “new logistical imperialism” (p. 195).

This requires an intimacy with the work of logisticizing and being logisticized, and necessitates rethinking some of the key concepts by which we understand modern production systems and social formations. As Cowen writes, “the revolution in logistics is not a story of the militarization of trade but of a much more complicated coproduction of corporate and military calculation and space” (p. 200). Modern capitalism has eroded the “distinction between production and distribution” (p. 35), and consequently, “it is misleading to think about a singular site of production. Commodities today are manufactured *across logistics space*, rather than in a singular place” (p. 2).

Consequently, confronted by the ineradicable social and biophysical challenges to the smooth “circulation of stuff”, capital is reshaping the “citizenship of stuff”, and in the process radically rewriting the boundaries between civilian and military and the relations between sovereign power and territory. The problem is to maintain the borders, but, as Cowen says, to “*border differently*” (p. 213; emphasis in original). Ultimately, she writes, the “move to govern supply as a problem of security”, and to violently reconfigure sovereignty and international commerce, is an effort to make the nervous system of the global economy a realm of pure technique and domination, to “attempt to remove it from the realm of political consideration—to *make economy policy*”.

The sense the book gives the reader of a future ruled by security forces is daunting, but it is not without hope for the construction of a “*socially just supply chain*” (p. 231; emphasis in original). In a final chapter, Cowen turns her energy to “queering logistics”. This involves, first, a powerful examination of the gendered, racialized, and heteronormative logics of “nature” at the heart of logistics (the empirical focus is a fascinating deconstruction of a media marriage between UPS and *National Geographic*); and second, an effort to unsettle the “obviousness” of these ways of seeing—all in the interests of exposing the possibility of others beyond, beneath, or even within our presently hegemonic variation on free trade imperialism in a neoliberal age.

Who is the “we” that the supply chain brings into relation? Questions on solidarity and disruption after the logistics revolution

Charmaine Chua

In a locus of reading uncannily appropriate to the content, I read Deborah Cowen's *The Deadly Life of Logistics* on the deck of an 119,000 ton container ship, while stuck for days in the port of Los Angeles during late 2014's International Longshore and Warehouse

Union (ILWU) contract negotiations. Massive cargo ships all across the US west coast were grounded for a variety of reasons: an interruption in the supply of truck chassis to port terminals, work slowdowns in Oakland, and deliberate attempts by shipping companies to shift the blame of congestion onto workers. To sit, then, with gantry cranes towering overhead on a massive, immobile vessel, its 8000 containers of goods unloaded in a pin-drop quiet port, whilst reading about logistics' "emerging network of power and violence" (p. 17) was to feel enmeshed in a plot of some perverse play. On the one hand, I was directly encountering the monstrosity of the circulatory system which Cowen traces: from its grand infrastructures to its heavily securitized spaces — the seemingly mundane elements of logistical administration came alive as organizing frameworks for political economic life, morphing from "the practical afterthought to the calculative practice that defines thought" (p. 30; emphasis in original). On the other hand, being aboard a vessel that was supposed to be halfway to Taiwan, yet was suspended by various systemic inefficiencies, also provided an embodied experience of the physical slowing of the supply chain — an acute picture of the logistical system's deep vulnerabilities.

I begin with this image not only because it conveys how much Cowen's book has been an indispensable companion as I've journeyed (literally) across the logistics oceans, but also because it depicts the tension between fragility and power at the heart of Cowen's illuminating work. In attending to both the systemic violence that logistical practices have instituted and to their vulnerabilities, Cowen has not only opened pathways into a new field of research in critical logistics, also calls our attention to the political urgency of understanding its simultaneous power *and* failures. Logistical life is "deadly" only insofar as efforts to secure its hegemonic and coercive apparatuses have come into direct conflict with "anticolonial struggles over lands and livelihoods" (p. 69) that constantly seek ways to contest its violence. If logistics has transformed the conceptualization and calculation of the "economic space of globalized capitalism" (p. 47), then, we must understand its revolutionary effects to have emerged in the dialectic between struggle and domination-exploitation.

Yet if, as Cowen argues, globalized capitalism has increasingly taken the form of a spatially dispersed supply chain, the implications for mounting a united struggle against its effects are tremendous. *The Deadly Life of Logistics* thus leaves us with a crucial political question: if the revolution in logistics has both dissipated *and* prompted a reorganization of struggle along the seams and chokepoints of the supply chain, what would a project that builds solidarity along this global supply chain look like?

Cowen shows us that managed as a totality, logistics drives transformations on a global scale. Temporally, just-in-time models of production aim to deliver goods on precise schedules that eliminate standing stock, calibrating "the worker's body to intermodal systems" in the interests of "transnational efficiency" (p. 109; emphasis in original). Spatially, logistics prompts the integration of global economic space: in prioritizing the networked space of supranational supply chains, states have extended security programs beyond territorial borders, stretching the management of trade movement from domestic transport networks to foreign ports and cities. As a result, geopolitical and geo-economic logics are locked in tight embrace, producing not only rule through markets, but also the production of space beyond territory. In prioritizing the circulatory system as the primary object of protection against vulnerability, Cowen shows that state policies, practices and technologies are poured not into securing human life, but into preempting the disruption of circulation. Thus the protection of trade comes to stand in *as* the protection of life. In this way, Cowen argues, far from simply being a techno-science of business management, logistics also plays a critical role in controlling and undermining labor

and political rights.

However, attempting to flatten the world into a frictionless space for speedy circulation does not elide the fact that supply chains prey upon spatial differentiations across a highly uneven international division of labor. To recognize this is to learn that logistics labor is characterized by two seemingly contradictory yet united strategies: On the one hand, supply chains exacerbate unevenness and inequality to offshore production and sidestep labor standards, hyper-exploiting different largely unorganized workers in the global south while undermining labor's bargaining power in the north. On the other hand, unifying production and distribution processes across an integrated intermodal system entails that spatially unconnected sectors of labor are drawn together at a previously unseen scale. Cowen notes that despite the fact that logistics labor is precarious, dangerous, and highly racialized, organizing efforts in logistics sectors have been growing "precisely by virtue of their global scale and strategic political geographies" (p. 126). The power of disruption lies precisely in the confluence of material circumstances and social relations: that is, in workers' ability to organize around exploiting the temporal sensitivity of just-in-time systems and spatial concentration of commodities in intermodal flows. Herein lies the power of ordinary people in a time of logistics capital: resistance in the form of labor actions, strikes, and blockades can "create impassible chokepoints" (p. 94) that "make circulation improbable or even impossible" (p. 115), attesting to the fact that disruption is a "profoundly political tactic" (p. 231).

This however, is the point at which Cowen's argument throws up crucial though ultimately unanswered questions: Spatially dispersed social orders, she suggests, thrown into new relations of rule through the organized violence of logistics, can now forge solidarities that "may become the connective tissues of alternative futures if they are occupied differently" (p. 227). But if scattered struggles are now more thickly connected in their common contestation of circulation's violence, what are the social and material requirements for them to consolidate into a mass revolutionary political struggle? How can these connective tissues be nurtured beyond the contingencies of bodily encounter? And how might we organize towards these "alternative futures"? Although Cowen provides the crucial map through which we might make sense of our new "time of logistics space" (p. 5), she does not answer the questions the book begins to pose. They are precisely the ones proper to understanding how episodic (albeit growing) resistance to circulatory systems can be moved from tactic to strategy.

The further we move away from organized labor in the global north and to the sites of circulation that remain entrenched in contingent, non-contracted work, the more this question of collective solidarity becomes fraught with the unevenness of labor conditions across the supply chain. It is one thing to recognize the power of dockworker strikes in the US and Shen Zhen, where the location dockworkers at crucial chokepoints gives them particular bargaining power, and quite another to recognize the constraints of Filipino seafarers who work on contingent six-month contracts, and whose labor is already becoming costly enough that maritime academies are starting to move to cheaper sources in Sri Lanka and China. In this sense, while the geographical spread of the supply chain provides connection, it also pays testament to the hypermobility of contemporary capitalism — which often further exacerbates, rather than brings together, these uneven modalities of work and life. The difficulties this raises in building forms of solidarity that can forge bonds between both precarious work as well as that of unionized labor should not be overlooked.

Such challenges to solidarity building become particularly apparent in the most overlooked spaces of the supply chain, especially where workers have not yet been radicalized. In my numerous interviews with Filipino seafarers, many responded

that they saw no connection between the larger supply chain and their mundane work. Take able-bodied seaman Rodriguez: “I’m not much – an insignificant worker. If I ever protest, if I ever disobey, they can just move to another person waiting for my job. So? I try to look happy. I follow orders. I do my job. It does not mean much” (interview with Filipino seafarer, January 2015). For these seafarers, their identity is not in their work: they locate a better future not as something to be negotiated within the terms of their contract, but in their futures as potentially rich entrepreneurs beyond seafaring labor: hoping to save enough to one day own a small business that will allow them to stay with their families. This ethnographic vignette may be synoptic, but it suggests that one cannot presume international solidarity to be an automatic or inevitable result of the supply chain’s new points of connectivity. A critical theory of the supply chain, in other words, is not the same as actively *organizing* around its highly uneven contours.

In my fieldwork, what struck me was how much logistics is an industry where precarious and flexibilized work often means that different groups of spatially dispersed workers interact only briefly, before ships sail and crews rotate over and over again. Opportunities for engagement between workers – much less solidarity building – were few and far between. Two questions follow: First, given the planetary scope of logistics networks, given its highly differentiated structure and effects in sites across the globe, who is the “we” of a world increasingly structured around logistical systems? If indeed the supply chain has connected previously disparate sites of work, does logistics bring a new “we” – now stretched translocally across states and space – into relation, and if so, how do these relations frame the kinds of collectives we are to organize around? In invoking the “we” I mean neither a universalist nor a bounded notion of collectives. Rather, the challenge *The Deadly Life of Logistics* presents is how to rethink the “we” in global terms without collapsing heterogeneous forms of life into our imposed narratives.

To end, then, I want to speculate on the possibilities that holding on to this question of the ‘we’ might allow for those of us situated in academic institutions – institutions that in many ways are key nodes in the logistical supply chain. If ports are the chokepoints of commodity circulation at its point of arrival, the university may well be the chokepoint at its point of conception. The logistics industry, like many others, has increasingly relied on a division between intellectual and manual work: loading patterns are now controlled by distribution network designers and clerical workers in offices while seamen almost never know the contents of what they carry. Within this cognitive-manual division of labor however, so too are academics becoming an integral component in the architecture of logistics systems: supply chain management programs are on the rise in business schools, many of whose undergrad majors may sit in our classrooms. Professors in political science, economics and geography are increasingly asked to consult on processes of trade securitization and supply chain security. On one hand, perhaps this means that our cognitive labor, too, is being ensnared within the logics of ceaseless circulatory flow. But on the other, if interrupting the flows of commerce can today take the form of withdrawing our labor power, and especially in organizing and teaching our students to rearrange their desires towards building more creative solidarities across borders, then the global constitution of supply chains also makes it possible to think through a new more dispersed politics of resistance lodged in sites far from warehouses, factories, and ships.

The spatial displacements between sites of production and consumption under global capitalism may make solidarity building a challenging prospect, but they also enable possibilities for resistance in ways and spaces not previously available. If, as Cowen has shown, disparate sectors of supply chain workers across the world are now connected through logistical logics and systems, perhaps the factory also now stretches to encompass those of us

in academia – and we too can be part of a dispersed guerilla campaign to forcefully organize, disrupt, and reconfigure the supply chain. In demanding that we grapple with the ever-present possibility of mass mobilization through disruption, Cowen’s book leaves us with the prospect that those of us largely shielded from the direct violence of logistics’ deadly life must also work to organize towards its consequences.

Mandatory detention and the deadly reach of logistics

Anja Kanngieser

The worlds of logistics reach far beyond the circulation of goods, often with asymmetrical, exploitative and even violent consequences. In her paper with Neil Smith, “After geopolitics? From the geopolitical social to geoeconomics” (2009), Cowen argues that it is necessary to rethink national boundaries as wholly determined by state sovereignty. Putting logistical networks at the core of spatial governance, Cowen and Smith make a strong case for critically examining how capital, and the flows of materials, recasts relations between territory, labour, control and economics.

In *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, Cowen extends the central arguments made in this earlier paper to explore the ways in which logistics is reshaping global space through economies of capital and discipline. This aspect crucially highlights the deep entanglements of military, corporate and state economics and the effects these have on the biological and social reproduction of human and nonhuman subjects. By stressing these entanglements, what *The Deadly Life of Logistics* indicates is how logistics has become a primary form of biopower – no longer limited to the transportation and shipping of commodities and services, the carrying of personnel, as an industry – into a particular mode of organized violence. This observation is critical on two levels: firstly because it illuminates how formerly geopolitical systems of governance are changing, secondly because it indicates key sites for struggle.

These entanglements are seen by Cowen in the acute tracking and tracing of workers along the supply chain, where the bodies of workers become a battleground for productivity (see also Kanngieser, 2013); in the examples of maritime piracy by Somalis in the Gulf of Aden, where the links between imperialist foreign intervention and piracy are often overlooked; and in the domination and management of nonhuman bodies and mobilities. *The Deadly Life of Logistics* opens up key challenges for further exploration into the way in which “logistics space is produced through the intensification of both capital circulation and organized violence” (p. 11). I would like to further add to the compelling examples provided by Cowen by turning to practices of mandatory detention, which to my mind may be the quintessential example of logistics as biopower. As with the incarceration industry more generally, practices of indefinite detainment bring together state and corporate actors to manage and control the biological and social welfare of subjects. Global, ubiquitous firms such as Serco, G4S and Transfield act in partnership with national government to oversee the detainment, processing, housing, security, catering and medical needs of asylum seekers. This overarching service provision sees logistical axioms colonize and determine all forms of life.

Mandatory detention was instigated in Australia in 1992, the product of conservative government panic about increasing numbers of asylum seekers and refugees. Throughout the 1990s multiple detention centres were established in remote areas of the country, bringing with them heightened security protocols. Subsequent right wing governments through the 2000s inaugurated, and then amended, the “Pacific Solution”, which saw the instantiation of third country detention camps offshored onto surrounding colonized Pacific island nations, such as Christmas Island

and later Papua New Guinea on Manus Island and Nauru, along with the militarization of ocean border-zones (Grewcock, 2014; Weber, 2007).

The maritime border, or the seam, is where “the border between the police and military authority is blurred, and so too is the line between crime and terror” (p. 82). The offshoring of asylum seekers garnered popular support through government and media association of refugees with terrorism, particularly those fleeing persecution from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Asylum seekers arriving without official documentation were slammed as illegal queue jumpers looking to steal places from “proper” refugees. Fear of a foreign invasion ostensibly justified policy trumped up with the rhetoric of “turning back the boats” and “protecting Australia’s borders”. Operations Relex and Sovereign Borders were established to intercept ocean vessels carrying asylum seekers, deploying a combination of Australian Defence Force resources and private security firms (Select Committee, 2002; Australia Customs and Border Protection Services, n.d.).

As *The Deadly Life of Logistics* reminds us, the “science of systems” is inherently capital-oriented. Mandatory detention, especially offshore detention, brought with it huge outsourced logistics contracts. Since 1992, these contracts, worth several hundreds of millions of dollars, have changed hands within a small, interlinked group of corporate providers that offer the full gamut of logistical related private and public services from security, government, corporate and industrial, financial, retail, private energy and utilities, ports and airports, consumers, leisure and tourism, transport and welfare (XBorder Operational Matters, 2014). What the privatization of immigration detention effectively does is remove direct ministerial control over the daily operation of detention centres and their material resources, allowing governments to not only distance themselves from practices and sites condemned as abusive, but also to stall public discussion.

The encroachment of a logistical logic into issues of health and welfare is particularly alarming. Privatization is rife within aid and defence responses, with logistics companies rebranding themselves as “humane” through the provision of health and welfare services. Aside from being contracted for security and construction services to camps on Nauru and Manus Island, activists from *Beyond Borders* (2014) note that Transfield has also been paid to provide “welfare” services to detainees, taking over from the Salvation Army. Even before the offshoring process began, serious allegations of human rights abuses, overcrowding, poor access to food and shelter, medical attention and legal aid had been made from within the compounds, with detainees engaging protests including sewing their lips shut and hunger strikes, and instances of mental health distress, self-harm and suicide attempts being high (HREOC, 2006). After the offshore camps were established, it was revealed that instances of child sexual abuse, rape and torture were also in evidence (Zajac, Shearer, Roddan, & Iser, 2014). In 2013 a whistleblower, previously employed by G4S to manage risks to staff and detainees at the Manus facility, quit after finding himself unable to respond to incidents including the rape of detainees (Davis, 2013). Despite this, the Transfield Services contracts remained in place. This terrible legitimization of certain bodies as vulnerable to institutionally mandated violence through the privatization and securitization of welfare, shows precisely how logistics becomes what Cowen calls a “biopolitical logistics that enables the economy and so prosperity, vitality and life itself” (p. 218).

As Stephanie Lusby (2014) has pointed out, issues of power and precariousness between guards further institutionalizes necropolitical calculation in the camps, placing the power to determine life and death into the hands of variegated market interests. Militarized workplace cultures and tensions around unequal working conditions between undertrained and underpaid local Papuan

security guards and salaried, highly trained expatriate guards with Transfield/Wilson Security, have underscored the brutal treatment of detainees by security personnel; this includes the murder of the 23-year-old Iranian asylum seeker Reza Barati at the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre by local security staff. In all instances, the logistics companies and the workplaces they differentially enable for separated “classes” of employee have been subject to far less scrutiny and criticism than the Papuan guards as a highly racialized and stereotyped group.

What *The Deadly Life of Logistics* offers is a way to understand how the securitization and privatization of life through logistics sees a shift from national borders to global seams that validate new forms of organized violence. Cowen writes that, “whereas the national border (the privileged spatial boundary within a territorial model of security) was governed directly by the geopolitical state, the security of the corridor cartography of the supply chain is delegated to the components of the system” (p. 87). While this distributes and obfuscates responsibility it also provokes inventive responses to this diffusion. Projects such as *XBorder Operational Matters* (2014) are making clear the links along the detention logistics supply chain; divestment campaigns have pushed for arts institutions, asylum seeker legal support services, superannuation providers and health-care providers to cut ties with companies profiting from detention (see *Hesta Divest*, for instance). In illustrating the entanglements of military, corporate, and state interests in not only the circulation of goods but the re-territorialization of global and local space and social and biological reproduction, *The Deadly Life of Logistics* can thus integrally inform initiatives on the ground to evidence the far reaching impact that logistics has on the subjectivation of life, as a technique for the governance of bodies and matter.

Logistics and emancipation from the abstract machine of capital

Mazen Labban

Deborah Cowen’s *The Deadly Life of Logistics* is a doubly generous book. It is generous in that it yields more the more you work through it and in that it does not require the reader to accept contentious postulates for its arguments to work—except, perhaps, for the concluding argument concerning “queering logistics”. From the outset Cowen (p. 17) concedes that there are limitations in her ‘sketch’ and invites the reader to interpret those as open questions. Calling this meticulously researched and closely argued tome a sketch is an understatement. But it is certainly inviting, and in the spirit of responding to Cowen’s invitation I offer the following critique as one way to open further the questions that Cowen poses and some that she doesn’t.

The argument concerning the emancipatory potential of logistics is premised on an assumption common among some leftists: that capitalist technologies, the very means of exploitation and domination, embody an emancipatory potential that is realizable through creative reuse or reconfiguration. There is much in Cowen’s analysis of logistics, however, that leaves no doubt about the physical and political violence immanent to the technologies, infrastructure, landscapes and spaces of logistics, and thus dispel any belief in its emancipatory potential. There is also much that hints at logistics as a technology of power that permeates social life and transforms “our political relations to our world and ourselves” (p. 4). Think of logistics as an “abstract machine” that functions through the concrete arrangements (*agencements*) and mechanisms (*dispositifs*) it produces: logistics cities, transportation corridors and gateways, distribution centres and hubs, and so on. As Deleuze (1988, p. 39) put it, “machines are social before being technical”. The relations of power that sustain logistics are therefore not

confined to the logistics industry—logistics qua abstract machine would be coextensive with the social field and operate at the level of the social as a whole. How is it then that the planetary machine of logistics, a vast network of “infrastructures of oppression” (p. 229), might be creatively transformed into a political tool to deploy against capitalism? Creative transformation and reuse of the technologies of oppression may ‘potentially reframe the master’s house’ (p. 229), but then the oppressive master gets to keep his house for, as Audre Lorde (2007, p. 112) says, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change”. Sans surprise then that the political potential of queering logistics is confined to disruption, which can build networks of solidarity and resistance among organized labor and other social movements, but cannot it in itself become a political project. If such potential would arise from queering logistics, it is not sufficiently argued in *The Deadly Life of Logistics*. Cowen’s engagement with queering logistics, however, appears as an opening to another kind of project, and since it is presented as an open engagement it is perhaps better kept an open question (Cowen, 2014b) has recently developed some of those ideas.

I would like to focus the rest of my critique on the concept of circulation that animates *The Deadly Life of Logistics* because of its political implications on the conclusions that can be drawn from the book. Even though Cowen draws on Marx to explain the significance of circulation to the accumulation of capital, the notion of circulation that underpins her analysis derives mostly from Foucault’s (2007) lectures on security, although this is not made explicit until chapter 5 where the problem of circulation in urban space is addressed directly. Here also the relation between circulation and security could be extended beyond the problem of securing circulation networks to the proposition that uninterrupted circulation (especially the circulation of money capital) as itself a source of security.

Marx (1973) distinguishes between three forms of circulation: “circulation itself”, the metamorphoses of value in simple exchange (M–C; C–M); the “circulation of capital as a whole”, the metamorphoses of value in the process of capital’s self-valorization (M–C ... P ... C’–M’); and “real circulation (in space)”, that is the physical movement of commodities within production or from production to market—what Marx (Marx, 1973, p. 534) calls the “locational moment” or the “spatial moment” of circulation. Cowen is mindful of the distinction between the latter two forms, but she is concerned almost exclusively with the spatial moment, particularly the mobility of commodities, or “stuff”. The circulating of commodities as physical things in physical space takes precedence over the circulation of value and supplants it (this is somewhat evident in Cowen’s use of the term “stuff” to refer to commodities, thus emphasizing their physical aspects over their determination as value). Reiterating Harvey’s dictum that “capital is value in motion” Cowen (p. 100) asserts, in reference to the transport industry, “without a doubt” that Marx’s analysis of “the circulation of capital ... insists on this mobility”. Cowen then goes on to argue that “[c]ommodities need to remain in physical motion if capital will continue to circulate” (p. 116). These are strange assertions not only because Marx is emphatic about distinguishing between the circulation of capital and its physical mobility, but also because for capital to continue to circulate—to expand and to accumulate—commodities *must* come to a standstill and exit circulation, realize their value in the *salto mortale* from C to M’. Commodities remaining in physical motion are as good as commodities languishing in storage—value threatened by devaluation and which has to be maintained at a cost lest it perish in the deteriorating bodies of those commodities. More important, part of capital has to be fixed so that other parts can circulate—value fixed in the means of production including those fixed in space: the immobile means

of production, including the built environment, whose leap from C to M’ (from the commodity form to the realization of profit) may take decades or may not happen at all. The only commodities that need to move constantly so that the value in them is valorized are the commodities that constitute the mobile components of fixed capital, insofar as they circulate as fixed capital: ships, planes, trains and trucks.

For Marx capital is value in *process*, not in motion. (Nowhere in Marx’s *oeuvre* does he describe capital as value in motion. This only occurs once in the English translation of volume II of *Capital* published by International Publishers (Marx, 1967, p. 133), which is a mistranslation of the original German *prozessierender Wert* that was corrected in the later English translation by Fernbach as “value in process” (Marx, 1978, p. 211)). All capital is circulating capital, regardless of its mobility. This is not to downplay the significance of the mobility of commodities to the circulation of capital as a whole—significance which has only increased, and one may argue has become “an extraordinary necessity” (Marx, 1973, p. 524), with the expansion of the world market and the stretching of production networks across planetary space. The movement of things in space, however, does not tell us much about the circulation of value through fixed capital, its mobile components and immobile components that constitute what we might call, to borrow from Harvey (1999), the built environment for logistics.

Take the logistics city. “In the logistics city”, Cowen (p. 171) argues, “urban space is conceived for the singular purpose of securing the management and movement of globally bound *stuff*”. The logistics city is “dedicated to servicing the system of stuff in motion” (p. 182). This is the same with cities more generally where, as a result of geographic shifts such as rapid urbanization and the relocation of large department stores to cities, private companies face the problem of optimizing transport activities in urban areas. Cities are a “major obstacle to circulation”, i.e. obstacle to the movement of things through the supply chain all the way to the big-box retailer (p. 187). This may be the acute problem that stimulated growth in city logistics, but on another level the logistics city is itself “a major obstacle to circulation” in another sense. As Harvey (1999) has long argued the circulation of capital in any form depends on the fixity of a portion of capital in space over relatively longer periods of time, creating the spatial structures that become the very barriers to further accumulation. *Ceteris paribus*, the degree of fixity increases with the durability of that particular kind of fixed capital, which makes it more vulnerable to devaluation. Thus the contradiction of the logistics city is not only between “flow and containment” but more fundamentally a contradiction between circulation and fixity. The built environment for logistics “servicing the system of stuff in motion” is itself an interruption in the circulation of value. Indeed, I would argue that advances in the efficiency and rapidity of the movement of commodities in logistics space is driven by the necessity to valorize capital fixed in logistics space as much as any need to speed up the process of bringing commodities to markets. From the standpoint of the circulation of capital as a whole the circulation of value through the built environment for logistics—the circulation of the built environment for logistics in the circuits of value—is as important as the uninterrupted circulation of commodities in logistics space.

The circulation of capital is irreducible to the movement of stuff. Circulation is not “what bourgeois economists call distribution”, as Joe Allen (2015) would have it. And, contra Reifer (quoted in Cowen, 2014a, p. 104), if Marx was writing *Capital* today he would certainly still begin with the analysis of the commodity, not with the container and its contents, because in the commodity-form lies the secret of capitalist exploitation. Nor can the circulation of capital be confined to the realm of production, including transportation. Production constitutes one moment, an interruption, in the circulation of capital. The circulation of capital—its “vital process”, as

Marx (1973, p. 517) has it—entails not only the reproduction and expansion of value but the reproduction of the value relation, hence the reproduction labour–power. Reducing the circulation of capital as a whole to the movement of commodities subsumes it within the production of commodities. This raises the question: how social then is the “global social factory” when it coincides with and becomes synonymous with the “global supply chain”? Indeed, how global is it?

Cowen never tires of reminding us that the production of “spaces of movement and flow” has entailed the simultaneous production of “spaces of bordering and containment”. This is a necessary corrective to the fetishization of “flows” and metaphors of fluidity in discourses about global capital. As James Ferguson (2006) has argued in the context of Africa’s experience of globalization, capital does not flow—it *hops* instead. Thus, a more apt concept to describe logistics space would be what I would call, drawing on Clyde Woods (2007), a fragmented and integrated global plantation system. The plantation model, Woods argues, is a model of governance characterized by intense regulation of work, family, community and thought and a “militarized diminution” of rights. It extends beyond the semi-feudal form of agriculture with which it is often associated, to free-trade and export zones, gated communities, ghettos, tourist resorts, mines, prisons, and so on. We may add logistics cities, distribution centres and superhubs, container ships, etc. More to the point, the global plantation system would extend beyond the spaces of commodity production to include spaces of social reproduction.

The basic premise of the social factory thesis, as developed by an older generation of autonomist and feminist marxists, is negated in the notion that confines it to the spaces of commodity production, no matter how much that is stretched over planetary space. The social factory, or the factory-society, transcends the distinction between production and reproduction and posits the circulation of value at the level of society as a whole. It does not simply include the production of labour–power but points to the valorization of the social activities involved in that process. Indeed, as Cowen’s meditation on everyday life and the queering of logistics in the final chapter implies, her delving into logistics is not, or ought not be confined to global supply chains and the problem of their security. It comes as a surprise therefore that although the social factory is invoked several times the consideration of logistics seldom leaves the economic field and its military origins. This leaves us—this reader at least—with a host of questions: should we start thinking of the logistical society or perhaps the logistification of everyday life? Has logistics, as a diagram of power, permeated society and does it now operate at the level of the social field? Is logistics deployed to facilitate the circulation of value in society, not only to accelerate the movement of “stuff” in the global supply chain? Has the revolution in logistics produced new forms of sociality and new subjectivities, including the subjectivities capable of rendering logistical space inoperable and perhaps overthrowing capitalism? Can we proclaim the coming of logistical society—or that we have “entered a time of logistics space”—and in the same breath proclaim the emancipatory potential of logistics? On what grounds?

Cartographies of empire, and beyond: the logistics of life and death

Deborah Cowen

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to these generous interventions. With this space, I elaborate on questions of materiality, circulation, and empire to make some of the conceptual infrastructure of *The Deadly Life of Logistics* more explicit. I try to explain why, in an era of seemingly instant and immaterial movement of

everything, I centre my lens on the *spatial* circulation and *material* flows that underpin capital circulation. The stakes in the study of logistics are more than just strictly economic; it not only about the uneven development of capitalism, but also the uneven distribution of life itself through empire and war and colonial violence. With this book I ask what happens if, instead of “following the money” in our analyses of local and global power (as the popular dictum might have it), or following first the circulation of capital (as Labban might have it), instead we follow the circulation of stuff? This includes the movements of commodities that make the capitalist circulation of value possible, but it also includes the distribution of the necessities of life and the implements of organized death which together distribute life itself and its collective reproduction so unevenly. When we do this, I suggest we are much better equipped to map contemporary imperialism – not as an abstract system, but in the specific violence it enacts over a complex network of infrastructures and lived spaces. When we do this, we are also able to better see creative forms of resistance, contestation and alternative futurity.

I also appreciate this opportunity to elaborate on the radical potential I see, not so much in the logistics industry, or even specifically in the practice of “counter logistics” – as resistance in this sector has been conceptualized, and about which both Labban and Chua are somewhat anxious. Rather, I am invested in an emergent politics – a set of movements, subjectivities and desires – that are simultaneously constituted by this logistical era and potentially capable of transforming it. This involves some meditation on the nature of revolt and social change, and here I insist on a politics of *reproduction* that locates a logistical mode of production within a (logistical) social factory and a (logistical) war machine. This is a politics infused with feminist, queer, anti-racist and anti-imperialist sensibilities that – despite the book’s main focus on the space of the supply chain – goes well beyond practices, processes, and spaces immediately productive of exchange value.

My interventions with regards to materiality and resistance are connected; a more robust sense of alternative futurity demands this engagement with the materiality and spatiality of logistics. Here, I work through this entanglement with the help of Indigenous, Two Spirited artist Kent Monkman. His recent installation, *The Rise and Fall of Civilization*, engages the logistics of a violent genocidal settler colonial past and present, while offering a form of futurity arising from its demise, one that sees re/production and desire as necessary sites for radical transformation.

Paper trails

I want to start with a brief point on the revelations that emerge with the release of the Panama Papers in early 2016. Where better to open reflections on the circulation of physical, material stuff than with seemingly “immaterial” flows of wealth? The leak of thousands of confidential documents from Panama law firm Mossack Fonseca shook the mainstream media, exposing some of the sordid details of the global elite’s manipulation of uneven legal geographies, deepening already extreme inequality at every scale. The papers expose mass transfers of wealth from public to private hands, and from southern to northern pockets. US corporations alone shift as much as \$700 billion to tax havens annually, with direct implications for shrinking budgets and the domestic distribution of resources. Oxfam (2016) directly traces this loss of public funds to cuts to US income supports and food stamps. Some of the most reprehensible revelations illuminate the scale of dispossession in Africa, where G7 based companies have smuggled billions out of public coffers – more than enough to fund the health response to Ebola in all the most affected countries (Oxfam, 2016).

These revelations appear to confirm a widespread sense that the dynamism of the economy has largely left its materiality behind. In

fact, the practices documented in the Panama Papers borrow a logic and form from much older shipping industry strategies for accumulating wealth by reconstituting geography. Such tax sheltering schemes should really be understood as *financial flags of convenience*. The Panama Papers expose legal practices developed by the US government and financial companies in Panama in the 1970s, but these piggyback on efforts many decades earlier – also in Panama – to delink the geography of ship ownership from the legal geography of regulation via the flag of convenience. Formally known as the “Open Registry”, this tool was created in Panama in 1919 as the result of Standard Oil’s search for ways to escape US taxes and regulations and, especially, the improved working conditions won by labor militancy. Flag of convenience shipping enabled firms to deepen exploitation: radically cutting costs through international sourcing of labor and manufactured goods and swiftly reducing transportation costs. The Open Registry originated in maritime goods movement, but the logic quickly seeped from this sector into many others.

The Open Registry allowed for a kind of offshoring of the shipping industry, upon which the offshore economy was built. It ushered in the revolution in logistics that constituted logistics as a field of corporate management and propelled it to the centre of corporate power. Remaking the maritime circulation of commodities was inseparable from the remaking of postwar capitalism more broadly, both in its immediate impact on physical circulation and in the larger lessons it taught regarding re-making the space of legal jurisdiction for desired forms of circulation. The Open Registry also reveals how manipulating the legal geographies of the economy is not simply a matter of hiding or hoarding wealth, but of accumulating it. Indeed, logistics management has become a powerful industry, and governs a field that produces value at a remarkable scale. We need only need to look to Wal-Mart—one of the largest corporations in the world, heavily implicated by the Panama Papers—whose enormous riches are due to its specialization in logistics management as much as in retail.

The location of all this “innovation” is no accident; the history of Panama is completely wrapped up in Imperial histories of circulation. Imperial theft – an American land grab from Columbia for control of this key transport corridor – constitutes the very birth of the country. And at the centre of Panama in every literal and figurative way is the Panama Canal Zone, operated until very recently under direct US control. The Canal Zone’s rule is now in the hands of the Panamanian elite, but the current canal expansion relies on old methods: the expropriation of Black and Indigenous people’s lands to make way for the movement of goods (Danyluk, forthcoming).

Indeed, while the bulk of *The Deadly Life of Logistics* focuses on the postwar corporate life of logistics, it is explicitly situated within the field’s longstanding imperial contours. It is precisely the ways in which logistics holds empire together across time and space that makes it such a valuable lens. These questions are the *how* of empire, and the hopeful *how* of empire-made-otherwise. Indeed, if Harvey’s assertion that capital as “value in motion” is a misread of Marx as Labban suggests, it is both a very popular and constructive one. While the circulation of capital certainly cannot be reduced to the physical circulation of stuff, it is also true that the two can never be meaningfully delinked. At stake in the distinction between the words “process” and “motion” is geography, and so too the social ordering and social violence of empire.

Redistributing reproduction?

Given this imperial pedigree, Labban and Chua’s concern for the revolutionary potential of logistics is well warranted. Their questions highlight the stakes in contemporary debates about “counter logistics”. These debates centre on the radical potential of the

relations, infrastructures and technologies that constitute logistics space, especially if workers turned these upon themselves. Counter-logistics is consumed with the blockade as strategic response to logistics systems’ vulnerability to disruption, and I am invested in this potential in more than scholarly ways. Yet, while struggles over labour along the supply chain are important and have high stakes, they do not exhaust the terrain of struggle. If we approach logistics as a calculative science of empire, as the management of the materiality of war and trade and bodies and economies (as Kanngieser illustrates so well), then a focus on resistance only in the most formal sectors of commodity movement is far too narrow. Engagement with anti-colonial, feminist and queer politics demands a lot more questions about the who and the how of disruption and an engagement with the reproductive relations of production in their social, intimate and biological forms. This engagement also forces us to acknowledge that a logistical society remains tightly tethered to a deeply racial biopolitics that sustains and provisions some lives at the expense of others.

Highlighting questions of the social factory and social reproduction, I am clearly indebted to a large body of feminist materialist work much larger than I can acknowledge here, though the contributions of Dalla Costa and James (1972) and Federici (1975) are central. I am also inspired by the work of those who have long insisted on a queered politics of reproduction in the intimate operations of empire, especially Jacqui Alexander (2006). A recent contribution by Michelle Murphy (2013) offers some specific insights on thinking “reproduction” differently. Murphy draws on diverse but specific feminisms – women of colour, indigenous, Marxist, queer, and techno-scientific – to elaborate the ways that reproduction is a practice “occurring beyond bodies within uneven spatial and temporal infrastructures”. She approaches reproduction as something “assisted” by state and military infrastructures, but also by chemical, ecological, and architectural ones that “alter, rearrange, foreclose, harm, and participate in the process of creating, maintaining, averting, and transforming life in inter-generational time”. Thus reproduction, even in its strictly biological form, is not just something individual bodies do. “Assisted reproduction” is distributed along profoundly racialized lines and violently uneven. For Murphy, what is crucial to the politics of distributed reproduction is not “the maintenance of proper heteronormative human and nonhuman bodies, but instead is the sustaining of capacities to live intergenerationally”. This resonates with Ruthie Gilmore’s profoundly materialist conception of racism as, “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (2007, p. 28).

While this may seem far from the field of logistics, *provisioning* is in fact the “essence” of the field. Logistics has historically been responsible for provisioning human life and the non-human animals, machines and infrastructures that constitute battlefields and now consumer societies. It is an art and science that has crafted empires, enabling them to function practically and materially. And yet, provisioning and sustaining are the highly gendered and racialized labors of social reproduction, not a terrain that could ever be fully ceded to the corporate and military worlds where it is practiced so violently and professionally today.

The Rise and Fall of Civilization

Kent Monkman’s bold installation *The Rise and Fall of Civilization* opened in Toronto in Fall 2015 at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art. A seemingly unlikely location, Monkman is known for taking on hard topics – cultural genocide, racism and sexual violence – often through a flamboyantly queer lens, while the ceramic museum is known for its collection of rare antique china. Monkman’s installation finds the former in the latter.

Monkman's work powerfully exposes the entanglement of racial and sexual oppression in the history of North American settler colonialism. In earlier work, for instance, Monkman revisits nineteenth-century painter and pseudo-ethnographer George Catlin's fascination and disgust with the Berdashe tradition, which opened up a third gender in North American Indigenous culture, outside a binary gender system. Described by Catlin as "one of the most unaccountable and disgusting customs that I have ever met in the Indian country... and where I should wish that it might be extinguished before it be more fully recorded". In response, Monkman offers his own piece by the same name – an unapologetic celebration of campy indigenous gender play in the form of an electronic drag music video.

With *The Rise and Fall of Civilization*, Monkman offers a meditation on the museum's bone china collection, and the violent colonial history of this nineteenth-century commodity: a massive installation that filled a large hall, anchored by a rock cliff rising from the floor a dozen feet into the air. At the top of the cliff stands Miss Chief Eagle Testikle, Monkman's alter ego, tall, in red gown and headdress, gesturing forward. Life sized stuffed bison surround Miss Chief, one leaping in the air.



The installation retells the story of the colonial decimation and near-extinction of North America's bison population. In just a few decades, European settlers killed 50 million, destroying the herds and lives of the peoples they supported. The bison were killed as part of a land grab, for their fur and bones. But most important, the bison were killed to exterminate Indigenous peoples. As General Custer put it, "Kill every buffalo you can! Every buffalo dead is an Indian

gone". The railways were central to the simultaneous slaughter of the bison herds and the fragmentation of Indigenous lands. According to the Smithsonian, "massive slaughter" was "made possible by the railroad". By the late nineteenth century only 300 bison remained on the plains; this was in effect the end of the Indian Wars. Indigenous people who survived were imprisoned on reserves.

Monkman never uses the language of logistics. And yet this genocide was a logistical project *par excellence*. General Sheridan of the US Army emphasized this at the time, deploying the language of military logistics to describe the slaughter. Speaking before the Texas Legislature in 1875, he said:

The buffalo hunters have done more in the last two years and will do more in the next year to settle the vexed Indian question ... They are destroying the Indian's commissar, and it is a well known fact that an army losing its base of supplies is placed at a great disadvantage. Send them powder and lead, if you will; for the sake of a lasting peace, let them kill, skin and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated.

While the logistics of war is associated historically with supplying "men and materials" to the front and sustaining both on the battlefield, the military logistics of genocide are front and centre in *The Rise and Fall of Civilization*. Monkman recounts this gruesome history, highlighting not only the logistics of colonial death and destruction but also the logistics of commodity circulation. Land itself was propertized; spinoff industries emerged. Bone china, for instance, directly connects this past to the contemporary life of settler colonialism, hidden in plain view in a ceramics museum.

Yet, while Monkman retells a story, he also tells it differently. He re-centres the scene of violence on the millennia-old sustainable Indigenous hunting practice of the Buffalo Jump. The Buffalo Jump – a practice of both using and sculpting the landscape in such a way that herds could be skillfully driven to and off the edge of cliffs – provided food, shelter and sustenance for plains people. But in Miss Chief's jump, it is not the buffalo but the bone china that is broken. In pieces below the cliff is the commodity built on genocide, and perhaps too its hard yet fragile whiteness. In this telling, crucially, a small herd of modernist cyborg bison crawl out from the rubble, leading the way toward a very different future. It is not the same creature as before, but a frame, a gesture, a potential. Monkman does not give us a logistics plan, but he does give us a trail to follow.



Finally

As logistics has become more and more critical to managing the everyday life of empire, it has also become a potent force of resistance and revolt. In *The Deadly Life of Logistics* I argue that we can see a kind of “queer” coalitional politics animating struggles in the logistics industry, connecting across issues as they also connect across places. The most obvious take the form of labour actions within transportation and logistics infrastructures, where, for instance, port truckers, longshore and warehouse workers strike along infrastructures of circulation. In other cases, these infrastructures become the target of actions for movements beyond the industry proper, in recognition of the power of circulatory systems. Rail corridors in Toronto become a place to contest the disappearance and murder of thousands of indigenous women; expressways across US cities become sites of blockades by Black Lives Matter movements. In both cases, disruptions of critical infrastructures of circulation garner attention for the struggle, though there are also more significant connections between the issues and the infrastructures. Rail lines, as noted above, were crucial to the settler colonization of Indigenous North America, and urban expressways were plowed through Black neighbourhoods under US federal urban renewal programs with such persistence that James Baldwin referred to them as “negro removal”. Finally, we might trace the growing importance of logistics to social transformation, as social movements become deliberately *internally* logistical. All movements operating at any significant scale today have a logistics team or tent where the work of sustaining actions – with food, shelter, and waste management, and so forth – are key. Logistics is already a vital terrain of struggle in a profoundly material world.

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1 April 2017

Available online xxx