

# ***A Conversation on Media and Logistics with Deborah Cowen and Kay Dickinson***

**Interviewed by Patrick Brodie**

At the Porting Media II conference at Concordia University in the Fall of 2017, I had a chance to organize a virtual conversation between Deborah Cowen, Associate Professor of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto and most recently the author of *The Deadly Life of Logistics* (2014b), and Kay Dickinson, Professor of Film Studies at Concordia University and most recently the author of *Arab Cinema Travels: Transnational Syria, Palestine, Dubai and Beyond* (2016). Over the last year or so, we have been corresponding back and forth, raising questions and ideas about the importance of studying logistics in media studies. With the two conversants' combined backgrounds in geography and media studies, they came up with some enlightening thoughts on everything from interdisciplinary collaboration, activism, education, infrastructures of resistance and exploitation, and struggle. What follows is a distillation of our conversation, presented in an interview format.

**This first question is for Deb. Working in the University of Toronto Department of Geography and Planning, what are some of your encounters with film and media studies at this (or other) universities?**

**Deb Cowen:** Geography—at least in its critical incarnations—is a wonderfully undisciplined discipline that has not only allowed but encouraged my

own interdisciplinary tendencies. I am deeply committed to questions of space, territory, landscape and materiality which have long been central to the discipline, yet this openness is also core to geography's appeal. I feel quite limited in my facility with film and media studies, though I have certainly had some wonderful encounters with these fields. The relationship between media studies and geography is absolutely crucial for engaging questions of time-space and circulation. I am also drawn to the particular ways that film and media studies speak to debates about materiality and materialism and can bridge questions and approaches from science and technology studies and cultural studies.

**Kay, while your research has taken you through sound studies, transnational theories of Arab cinema, with a key focus on labor throughout, one of your most recent chapter (forthcoming) articulates with extreme clarity the politics of film and media production in free trade zones (with special focus on Dubai). How did you come to start looking at the logistics of film production from your previous projects and areas of study?**

**Kay Dickinson:** It has been a fairly logical development, which hopefully gives a useful picture of how logistics absolutely figures within what we do in film and media studies. In broad brush-

strokes, my first monograph was dedicated to the politics of labour and my second engrossed itself with practices of travel. One sharp edge where the two meet is the logistical management and coordination of labour markets.

From the get-go, I knew I wanted to investigate what was going on in Dubai, which has gone to enormous lengths to establish itself a media industry over the last fifteen or so years. That sector, along with many others, is dedicated, in large part, to offshored manufacturing, split production and regional headquartering for major conglomerates, all serviced by a predominantly migrant workforce. It's estimated that at least 90% of Dubai's workers are non-citizens on temporary work permits. What renders Dubai competitive within transnationalized media production and circulation includes its global positioning as both one of the world's largest transshipment ports and a heavily trafficked airline transit hub. Logistics comes in here as a consciously wielded approach to quicken the flows of people and goods required for something as typically expensive and slow to make as, for example, a blockbuster movie (about a hundred of which have passed through Dubai this century, not that you would know it—hiding the tracks of the modes of production being another core characteristic of logistics). The logistical synchronization of legislation and the built environment to the demands of transnational production has been staggering and quite alarming here.

Without wanting to backtrack through *Arab Cinema Travels* too much here, two quick examples readily come to mind. Firstly, labour is entirely orchestrated to match the casualized short-term contract types we are familiar with from filmmaking (and work at large across the globe). A suitable media worker can be brought into Dubai within a matter of days, which loops the unwieldy process of making a film into the financially expedient proclivities of just-in-time manufacturing. These workers can just as easily be dispatched once their contract is up, given that they have no right to stay on in the country or access to its broader legal or welfare protections. This is all very tidy but carries massive implications for how people survive in the world and how their treatment is regulated. Construction, cleaning and domestic workers most definitely suffer this the most and it should be noted that the media industries can't run without them.

And then, secondly, Dubai situates media produc-

tion within an archipelago of sectorially-defined free zones, here Media City, Studio City and Internet City. Everything media runs through these, from the Dubai International Film Festival to *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* and *Masterchef Arabia*. The free zones are designed to the nth degree to attune to logistical demands, whatever that takes.

Sorry, this has proven a really long answer, but I am hoping it opens out some of the dimensions that I feel are under-studied within our discipline—particularly the treatment of workers—and not just in Dubai as a singular case, given that these practices impact a global workforce and are being increasingly rolled out elsewhere. We need to know where our media is made, what and who are moved in the process, and under what conditions, especially as the tidy, fantastical end results strive to obfuscate all this.

One other important thing that struck me while conducting fieldwork is the long durée of logistics. In this site, we are talking centuries of port activity and commerce-based human movement that shape the contemporary situation (however much Dubai projects a shiny and new image). I worry about the presentism that colours the consideration of logistics within media studies. Logistics has deep roots in slavery and colonization, as Deb's work and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's (2013) "Fantasy in the Hold" chapter clearly stress. We urgently need to attend to how contemporary logistics perpetuates these legacies.

**Deb, while your most recent book focuses on, obviously, logistics, we could perhaps say that a through-line of your work has been on the three keywords of your first edited collection: war, citizenship, territory.<sup>1</sup> What was your methodological and theoretical avenue into these discourses? How have these ideas shifted or transformed (or not) throughout your research?**

**DC:** I appreciate that thought. I think you are right about that through-line, though I would add "intimacy" and "labour" to the list. Work and labour have long been at the centre of my research, and Kay's thoughtful comments remind me to foreground them here. My first book—*Military Workfare* (2008)—was all about the labour of warfare, but in this exceptional field that is often bracketed from the concerns of labour studies. I embarked on that

work in order to understand what appeared to be an expansion of the *military* welfare state at a time when radical scholarship was tracing the neoliberal dismantling of social services and protection. Digging deeper, I learned of the long entanglement of war and welfare; the ways nation states experimented with social welfare and insurance to recruit soldiers and their loyalties and assembled state territoriality, long before civilian welfare provision. This concern with war work also provoked my interest in logistics—which emerged as a field historically to sustain troops on the battlefield. The long history of logistics as provisioning and sustaining the forces of war places labour and social reproduction at the centre of the frame.

By intimacy I do not mean a particular scale of relation – it is not simply the local or interpersonal – but a way of centering feminist and queer questions about the production of desire and subjectivity, for instance, within relations that can be as “big” as empires. I am interested in intimacy in the sense that Lisa Lowe and Lauren Berlant,<sup>2</sup> in distinct ways, open up the term. These concepts—war, citizenship, territory, intimacy—are so deeply entangled in the project of modern states, and all of my work is in some way or another oriented towards telling a different story of that entanglement. I have a persistent interest in the “how” of violence—especially in its organized state and corporate forms. Here I am referring to the practical necessities of re/producing and sustaining populations, militaries, or economies through the field of logistics—so, how do supplies or soldiers or commodities get from point A to point B? But I also mean something else. These “how” questions also ask that we look to the discursive re/production of “civilian” and “military” and related concepts like “domestic” and “foreign.” How can we have a polity that is entrenched in and premised upon war making it can only account for as exceptional?

**Logistics is a “hot” term at the moment in the humanities, particularly in media studies. But as with many such terms, it requires some nuance and specificity to avoid becoming a kind of blanket term for a variety of processes concerning the production, dissemination, and use of media. So, on a basic note to get the conversation started: What do each of you consider to be *the most crucial stakes* in the study of logistics or “logistification” of media?**

**DC:** I imagine Kay will offer something much more precise and thoughtful here, and I am sure she can speak to the challenge you identify in the context of film and media studies. I agree that logistics (and concepts more broadly) need to have some specificity in order to remain vital, yet I am better at questioning boundaries than drawing them. I would want to ask, what are the various things that media scholars are getting from the concept? What does it give them in practice that other terms don’t seem to offer? And perhaps I would also add for you Pat—what do you feel is getting lost in the current explosion of interest in the field and expanding use of the concept?

Logistics offers a cartography of geo-political economy. More specifically, in its focus on the most banal but practical necessities of circulation and sustainment, logistics offers us a map of contemporary imperialism. Neither capitalism nor imperialism are first and foremost ideas or abstractions, but relations, and the field of logistics is the management science that organizes empire. If logistics is understood in this way—as the calculative science of war and trade—then at stake in any critical engagement and with the practice of counterlogistics is nothing less than the future of life and death, at both the singular and planetary scale.

In the scholarly worlds that I travel there is a growing critical body of work on logistics. In fact, a special issue dedicated to “critical logistics” that I co-edited with Charmaine Chua, Martin Danyluk, and Laleh Khalili is about to launch in *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space*.<sup>3</sup> I also see a lot of promising work in social and labour movements that are increasingly focussing on the politics of circulation. I tried to address some of these questions in a short piece on disruption (Cowen 2014a) in *Viewpoint* a few years ago, and if anything, I see these tendencies growing.

**KD:** I totally agree with Deb here and hope, if these pathways into media studies proliferate (and pathways are infrastructure, so require our critical scrutiny), that what has to come maintains her activist focus. For that, the more hands on deck the better.

I say this with a concern for certain inclinations within the discipline and academia more generally. We do have a tendency simply to pick up a paradigm and then simply stretch it to a different site of inquiry. Ta-da, finished, “a new contribution to

knowledge.” We should be wary of how that ambition overlaps with the conquest models that drive logistics. What we can learn from logistics is its drive to connect, to see whether this focus can inspire modes of (to quote Jasper Bernes) “counter-logistics” (Bernes 2013)—as Deb, Danyluk and Khalili are extrapolating in their special issue too. What binds us, globally? How are we all inhabitants of the worlds logistics creates? How can we form networks of solidarity? I will admit that, through my own research, I have yet to encounter too many people who’ve devised clear-cut tactics to fight the injustices of supply chain capitalism’s hold on media production. But a more collective struggle against its wrongs, where scholars contribute what they can through deep connection with other workers seems a highly pressing objective.

I feel there’s scholarship the humanities can offer to help intervene into the biopolitics that logistics exacts. To take media studies’ objects and interrelationships as a case study: how are workers trained, by our own institutions, to slot into the logistics of production and circulation? Even at the most privileged levels, how is creative work figured as a labour of passion, just as, all the while, the industry’s just-in-time, precarious and flight-ready employment formations demand long hours for low or often no pay without security or benefits? What is higher education’s role in easing into place globally competitive, extremely replaceable workers? How are these jobs still presented as fulfilling one’s dreams without too much attention to the risk and debt incurred? Across the planet, media is produced under sweatshop conditions. Logistics’ dedication to speed above all else destructively impacts upon the people who make and sustain media hardware, the sets and costumes we see on screen, the networks for circulating each piece of a dispersed puzzle that goes towards the end product, and the hasty dispatch and reception of media commodities.

These are two really amazing answers. Because as both of you are saying, the stakes are way higher than academic study, and “the more hands on deck the better.” To answer your question Deb, I feel like exactly what is getting lost is the specificity. What *The Deadly Life of Logistics* does so well, among other works like Jesse Lecavalier’s *The Rule of Logistics* (2016), I think, is to historically place the development of logistics as a military-cum-cor-

porate strategy. And something that I myself have been guilty of is to focus on the top-down, who’s pulling the levers kind of studies, whereas focusing on and giving voice to struggles and movements against logistics—or at the very least, how workers and communities are dealing with logistics in their everyday lives—may ultimately be a more effective way of approaching the subject.

There seems to be some obvious points of entry into a media theory of logistics, but some not so obvious. In Ned Rossiter’s *Software, Infrastructure, Labor* (2016),<sup>4</sup> he uses the perhaps brilliant or maybe unfortunate term “logistical media”: the incorporation of media, software, radar, gadgets, etc. in forms of biometric policing and tracking; and the proliferation of advertising, books, and films on the subject, which force an analysis of logistics as both a phenomenon and a buzzword. What imaginations drive these approaches, and how can we ensure a continued focus on the *materiality of logistics* as one of its crucial contributions to studies of global capitalism?

**DC:** I am very keen to insist on the materiality of logistics, but materiality is, of course, not a simple word. Rail and cable and containers are crucial and material, but so are the calculative knowledges and affective orientations that keep them running.

**KD:** Well put. Hopefully this conversation is giving some sense of how all these factors interlink.

**Good point. Approaching “materiality” as a concept would certainly go beyond the purview of this conversation.**

In *Deadly Life of Logistics*, Deb talks about the bio- (or necro-) political dynamics of disruption involved in the sheer scale of global trade, and the implications for labor and organization. How can these networks of global trade produce the conditions for their own demise if we seem to be witnessing, along with the financialization of everything, a logistification of everything traveling along these routes of capital?

**DC:** I am not sure that “these networks produce the conditions for their own demise.” Doesn’t this give too much power to logistics manage-

ment and infrastructures, rather than those who contest them? I would rather say that *struggles over* networks of global trade may produce the conditions for the demise of those formations. These networks—formed through myriad negotiations, contestations, and dispossessions—might give shape to the occasion and the cartography for their own disruption. I have found Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh’s work in *The Many Headed Hydra* (2012) to be incredibly helpful on this question. They trace the ways in which transatlantic imperialism forged new configurations and relations across places and peoples that may not have otherwise come into relation. The book emphasizes the unexpected, everyday, and extraordinary ways that disparate groups, across unlikely geographies could sometimes produce creative solidarities. This work reminds us to look at the particular formations and cartographies that shape the violence of our present as opportunities and resources for opening up radically different futures. I would be happy to talk more about finance and logistics, but I am also not sure that logistics follows finance (or financialization) in this way.

**KD:** I would be similarly wary about adopting, let’s say, an accelerationist take on all of this. But what you’re asking, Pat, does position us *in medias res*, amidst the stakes and struggles against the injustices logistics imposes.

I would like to home in, for a minute, on one variant of that “us” to assess what it might usefully contribute. I personally feel that it’s vital to grapple with our own placement within these systems as they pertain to the university. It’s not hard to understand the globalized university as a nodal point in how it increasingly aggregates the people it draws in (and under what terms) and how it organizes its manufacture and dissemination of “products.” I find it enormously revealing to seek out how the university is being made to function, in a variety of ways, like a distribution centre. This isn’t to say they’re the same thing, of course, but comparisons like this can be illuminating.

To start on a more hopeful foot, education has something of a delivery system modality to it and one that can run counter to the greater objectives of supply chain capitalism. So, in simple and classic terms, it’s an effective means of everyone involved sharing awareness of, to pick two ready “counter-logistical” examples: the history and continuance

of pipeline activism, or the struggles against the construction of the apartheid road system build for settlers only in the West Bank, Palestine. This transport network is at once a colonial land grab, a means for frontier colonists to effortlessly commute to Jerusalem for work, and the infrastructure that enables the flow of products out of factories illegally built under international law in the West Bank, and which rely on exploiting almost literally captive Palestinian labour. It doesn’t take much to bring discussions of these situations into any number of different classes. A PhD colleague’s “Contemporary Chinese Cinemas” class, to take another case study, included a film that lays out the global supply chain and, during the session, she made sure to tell the students that “all your trash goes to China.” These are ways in which we can become more cognizant of the inequality that logistics produces and can continue to question where everything comes from and goes to, how and what relations are forged by these movements.

But, of course, mere familiarity with these issues isn’t enough, and can even exacerbate differentials of privilege. If education does mean to aid in challenging the motivations for and repercussions of logistics, it would do well to explore what we can contribute, for instance, to the Amazon worker strikes in Europe, or Walmart employee organizing in Chile (Carolina Bank Muñoz’s research is fantastic in this respect).<sup>5</sup> Given how implicated, as ordinary people, we already are in these networks, this isn’t a stretch. But these commitments should join forces with knowledge about how these sorts of transnational corporations are simultaneously making inroads into education too. Marc Bousquet’s chapter “Students are Already Workers” in *How the University Works* (2008) proves this point. He investigates how UPS has struck deals with higher education institutions in Louisville, Kentucky, the home of one of its largest processing hubs. The arrangements leverage the promise of education to lure in a cheap, indebted workforce under conditions that make it almost entirely impossible to preserve the time and energy necessary for successful study (including through satellite classes held within the complex itself and at particularly antisocial hours). Examples like this bring “home” (as logistics itself does) what Pat’s identified as “the logistification of everything” and I can only see these sorts of hand-in-glove arrangements between the logistics industries and educa-

tion ramping up. Teasing out these operations is imperative, so too the provision of information on tactics of opposition and the fostering of solidarity links.

At the same time, an acknowledgement of the ubiquity of logistics takes us to the fact that we are all probably best matched to struggling within the conditions we know best and then hooking them into solidarity networks. For example, we can't just study logistics as a distant thing exacted on others that implicates us only in what we consume. How are our own educational environments managed according to logistics, from VLE expediency to just-in-time teaching hires and casualization? This also connects to what you were asking about financialization, Pat: how, at the same time, are students slipstreamed into the high stakes gamble of futures through what they pay out (often through debt) to be educated for an uncertain post-graduation life? Within all these processes of imbrication, there's the issue of how university education (especially in countries like the UK) categorically aims to produce graduates who match the requirements of contemporary job markets, a process that can cajole students into complying with, rather than challenging these logistics-friendly formations of work. I wouldn't advocate here for a special status for media studies, more for it to join a broader struggle that questions and refuses the multiplying exploitation and extraction that logistics eases into place. What are we helping to enable, allowing to flourish, encouraging in the work-ready preparation of students that can be diverted away from these sorts of control?

**I would like to clarify, I suppose, that I was referencing the classical Marxian dictum that the contradictions of capitalist modes of production and accumulation eventually leads to systemic crisis, at which point revolution is seen as imminent. While these ideas definitely risk overdetermining capital as an unstoppable force of change, I think with financialization, maybe what I am getting at is that endemic crisis seems continuous and productive for these kinds of accumulation.**

**Briefly, I think it's useful to tie what Kay's saying here to what Deb mentioned earlier about the "calculative knowledges" of logistics, key to their functional (material) operation. Because I think that on the one hand, we can talk**

**about supply chain management programs in business schools, and how, as Kay says, these—and really, so many other programs in universities—encourage such an uncritical, growth-oriented approach to the circulation of goods and information. But on the other hand, we can talk about how so-called "immaterial labor" factors into the affective circulations that push capital movements and logics forward, as well as the literal cognitive labor that goes into the algorithms of tracking and biometric technology. To tie this to the broader issue theme, I think it's the specificity of these particular strategic entanglements—and their embeddedness within global business cultures—of the calculative technologies and management logics of logistics that make it so important to focus on infrastructure, the built and so-called "natural" environment, and the particular sites at which work (and friction) relate to these environments.**

**Jumping off of Kay's final points here, then, and to give Deb the last word, how can we perhaps see these struggles organized around sites of financial or logistical circulation (such as Occupy and the NDAPL struggle), particularly with regard to natural resources and land rights, within a historical framework? I am thinking of something like Joshua Clover's (2016) idea of these as "circulation struggles," which he draws out by tracing a kind of world systems analysis of cycles of accumulation, where during periods of more industrialized production, strikes arise as more effective, whereas riots are the operable form of struggle in eras of heightened financialization. Because I think these are responses to particular kinds of violence, in particular historical formations of capitalism and imperialism. But what other models and methods can we propose?**

**DC:** I have tried to make some parallel arguments about the intensity of labour actions and anti-colonial struggles around ports and other key nodes of logistics infrastructure in my book. Clover's ideas here are helpful, and I find Tim Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* (2011) to be inspiring in terms of thinking about the rise of these sectors and their contestation in a way that centres materiality, ecology and geography. At the same time, I have found myself in bank archives lately, looking back to the

circulation of capital from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade into infrastructures of the 19th century. The force of finance in that era—especially in the context of the forced circulation of millions of human beings—has me thinking carefully about the long entanglements of these fields. If we think with Moten and Harney about the slave trade as the first large scale modern experiment with logistics, then there remains a different story of counterlogistics to be told that would require starting from the tradition of anti-colonial thought and action.

**We will end there for now. I would like to sincerely thank you both for your thoughtful and generous contributions.**

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## Endnotes

- 1 This refers to Cowen and Gilbert (2008).
- 2 See, for example, Lowe (2015) and Berlant (2008, 2011).
- 3 See Chua et al. (2018).
- 4 This book became an interesting crux of the conversation, but never fully fleshed out in this finished version. Rossiter borrows the term “logistical media” from John Durham Peters (2015), who argues for an expansive umbrella for what (environmental) media is. Such an understanding could probably use a heavy dose of specificity, but there is something in the “becoming environmental” (Gabrys 2016) of logistical technology that is worth keeping tabs on. See our editorial introduction.
- 5 See Muñoz et al. (2018).