Who cares about the cargo? Container economies in a European transshipment port

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Abstract: While the shipping container has been hyped as the most potent symbol of global trade, it is simultaneously a unit of measure, a medium of exchange, and a material abstraction of heterogeneous use value. This article places the container and its anonymized cargo as part of the everyday logistics of commodity circulation in the Spanish Port of Algeciras Bay—a transshipment hub at the Strait of Gibraltar. By disentangling the shipping container's multiple repertoires, this article focuses on how the shipping container transforms and converts the value of cargo and mediates logistics labor in the port.

Keywords: logistics, mobility, ports, shipping containers, Spain

Surrounded by constant alarms from the cranes moving steel boxes above our orange helmets and with a container ship blocking the view of a sunny—and surprisingly silent—Strait of Gibraltar, the dockworker Sergio and I suddenly found ourselves witnessing a verbal dispute. Sergio, a 45-year-old foreman whose no-nonsense attitude has served him well over his 27 years on the docks of the Spanish Port of Algeciras Bay, had just directed me through the yard and along the streets of stacked colored steel shipping containers. Joining a group of workers gathered at the docks, we were now witnessing how one of Sergio's colleagues, a docker foreman, vocalized his frustration toward one of the terminal company employees. From the office building behind us where she usually observed the terminal operations from a computer screen, the terminal company employee had been called down to

the docks to observe and control a break bulk¹ operation. The task involved lifting a helicopter used for water bombings during forest fires that was shipped regularly between Latin America and Europe off a containership, and the operation was considered complex and required the labor of experienced workers.

The foreman responsible for leading the manual part of the operation was the one who was upset: "You can't fool me," he said to the woman from the office, "you could have fooled a younger foreman, but not me . . . what upsets me most is that this whole operation costs nothing for the terminal." The woman was interrupted as she attempted to explain why the terminal was economically compensating the gang of dockworkers for the equivalent of 23 container movements. "This is not what the union agreement says," the gray-haired dock-

worker continued insistently. “It says that break bulk is another category.”

Rather puzzled by the talk of categories, I turned to my friend Sergio who, in a reticent style, explained that the gang of workers was “losing production” because of the time it took to break the routine of moving the regular-shaped boxes and lift the helicopter off the ship. To be paid for the equivalent of 23 container movements was in conflict with the union agreement and was complicated by the fact that the work schedule had earlier that day moved the dockworker gang between two different cranes, which meant that both gangs at the two cranes were already, as Sergio put it, guaranteed 140 *movimientos* (container movements).

On the docks of Algeciras—like in many other ports—piece-rate pay is dependent on container movements, a salary system that is regarded by both employers and employees to secure a “high production.” It was precisely the piece-rate that was the core of disagreement between the dockworkers and the terminal administration, and during my fieldwork among workers and logistics intermediaries in the port, I came to learn that such conflicts were a daily occurrence. But what do such disputes over container mobility and compensation for “lost time” tell us about the internal logics of container economies and their implications for logistics labor?

In a recent revisit to the work of Marx’s extensive writings on political economy, David Harvey (2019) interrogates Marx’s definition of capital as “value in motion.” In a series of arguments, Harvey uses a “flow model of capital in motion” in order to lay out the fundamental processes that drive the circulation of capital (2019: 20).² In this article, I take the idea of “capital in motion” more literally and use it as a starting point for showing what sustaining the flow of global goods looks like on the ground and how container economies are dependent upon the labor of keeping capital in the form of cargo physically moving.

As a potent symbol of global trade, the shipping container appears as the very embodiment

of modern capitalism. The standardized intermodal shipping container was fully developed in the late 1960s and implemented on a wide scale in the 1970s. As part of an integrated transport system making it possible to deliver goods from door to door, it profoundly transformed global trade. The standardized container reduced the costs of shipping and made long distance trade more profitable. While goods had been transported in containers before, it was the very homogenization and regularization, in terms of size, of materials and locks that allowed for a new way of transporting goods without using different modes of loading, off-loading, and transport (Dua 2019; Martin 2016: 27).

Authors across several disciplines have recounted the container’s role in the transformation of global trade (Birtchnell et al. 2015; Bonacich and Wilson 2008; Carse 2014; Cresswell and Martin 2012; Dua 2019; Klose 2015; Levinson 2016; Martin 2014, 2016; Sekula 2014) and its central role in the spatial and social politics of logistics (Carse 2020; Chua et al. 2018; Cidell 2012; Cowen 2014; Gregson 2017; Haugen 2019; Khalili 2020; Neilson 2015). The helicopter operation in the Algeciras container terminal points us, however, in a slightly different direction. In this article, I argue that the shipping container, by resembling money, is a social relation, a material reality, and a symbolic system (Maurer 2006: 27). Many of the functions that social scientists have ascribed to money, as units of account, means of exchange, and as material abstractions of heterogeneous value, are also true for the shipping container.

By ethnographically zooming in on the shipping container’s movement in the container port, I show that—much like money—the shipping container is both a measurement and an evaluation of other objects, as well as of “relations, services and persons” (Maurer 2006: 16). At the same time, this colored steel box is a capitalistic object whose mobility and directions as the circulating capital of the global logistics industry is powered by money. By linking the shipping container to issues of containerization and waterfront labor in the port, the aim of this

article is to draw attention to the shipping container's multiple repertoires as symbolic, social, and material practices and systems.

This research draws from a total of seven months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Spanish Port of Algeciras Bay during 2018 and 2019. In Algeciras, I followed the daily work of logistics companies, dockers, and other laborers in the port and interacted and conducted interviews with logistics company managers, port authority, and local associations. The first part of this article shows how containerization has shaped the Spanish Port of Algeciras Bay with the symbolic role of the container as a measurement of production, global logistics comparison, and competition expressed through a mathematics of cargo. In the second half of the article, I return to how shipping containers mediate the value of labor on the docks, with the dockworker as a central broker between cargo and the port. In this part of the article, I also return to the materiality of the container, as a technology of concealment, by asking whether the abstraction of heterogeneous use value leads to particular forms of alienation.

Maersk's bedroom: Transshipment and the mathematics of containers

In August of 2019, the Algeciras Bay Port Authority announced an investment of €7 million. The money would be used to dredge the port's ocean floor in order to secure the easy flow of the latest generation of container megaships. The investment news was announced the same week as the *MSC Gülsün*, at that moment the world's largest containership with a carrying capacity of more than 23,000 20-foot containers, stopped in Algeciras on its maiden voyage from China to northern Europe. When the megaship arrived in 2019, the Port of Algeciras Bay had experienced decades of growth and had established itself as an important port in the Mediterranean through a variety of maritime operations, such as bunkering, ro-ro, ship repairs, and supplies.³ It is, however, the container, transshipped from

ships such as the *MSC Gülsün*, that has come to be emblematic for a port growth that *Lloyd's List* in 2012, after years of economic recession, signaled to bring "new hope to blighted Spanish economy."⁴ Port administration and container terminals use container megaships, like the *MSC Gülsün*, as evidence of the port's formidable success.

The capacity to receive such megaships is portrayed not only in the port authority and container terminal's statistics and press releases in the form of spectacular photographs, but also through a global mathematics of cargo consisting of scales and numbers. The variables in these "mathematical formulae" (Guyer 2016: 161) are the total tonnage of cargo, and the number of 20-foot equivalent units (TEUs) that are moved through the port and that form part of comparative processes. The TEU became an international standard of measure (ISO) in 1970, even though the standardized container also exists in other sizes such as 40 feet (Martin 2016: 37). The ordinal numerical expressions (Guyer 2016: 162) are central for the global system of port competition and ranking, where Algeciras during the time of my fieldwork was positioned fourth in Europe in terms of cargo tonnage.

A container economy in the Port of Algeciras Bay was initiated in 1975 when Sea-Land, an American company originally established by Malcolm McLean, the man often credited as the inventor of containerization (see Levinson 2016 and the introduction to this issue), inaugurated the first container terminal in the Spanish town. Ten years later, the Danish shipping company Maersk came to Algeciras and eventually bought out the American company. With Maersk's new container terminal inaugurated in 1995, outfitted with the latest in port technologies, Algeciras was chosen as one of the company's transshipment hubs. Because of its position by the Strait of Gibraltar, where one hundred thousand vessels pass on an annual basis, the port was considered a strategic location to transfer containers from larger vessels onto smaller feeders to serve the maritime routes of Asia–Middle East–Mediterranean and North Europe–America.

FIGURE 1. The *MSC Gülsün* in the Port of Algeciras. Photo by Carlos Duclos.

In 2007, the Korean-owned Hanjin Shipping (see Schober, this issue) won the bid to develop and run a second container terminal in Algeciras, and in order to lower labor costs, opted for a semi-automatic model.⁵ The multinational companies' strategy in Algeciras meant that more than 95 percent of the containers that arrive to the port also leave again by ship. The transshipment system has become central for how cargo is transported in the new global economy, providing a form of "world-world logistics" with goods supposedly not entering Spanish territory beyond the port where they are transshipped (Rothenberg 2018).

What has come to be historicized as containerization had major consequences for maritime labor, not least on the docks in ports the world over. In Algeciras workers usually talk about port labor in terms of before and after the container; a technology that also here transformed maritime labor and, according to most workers in the port, brought economic prosperity. Historically, dock work was heavy manual labor as-

sociated with low status. But during the 1990s, the container boom in Algeciras introduced a revaluation of dock labor. While dockers also historically had received piece-rate pay, along with the international traffic and transshipment in Algeciras came the development of a container economy that made the docks into a place of economic potentiality.

This story of the changing potentiality of the docks overlaps with that of many other ports. In his well-cited historical account of containerization, *The Box* (2016 [2006]), Marc Levinson shows how the pay gains that came with the container's entrance into the ports lead to dock work becoming a well-paid blue-collar occupation and "dockers, long disparaged for their insular culture and unique mores, were envied as the elite of the working class" (2016: 372). But while containerization and increased automation of cargo handling implied a massive loss of dockworker jobs in large parts of the world, increased traffic allowed the collective of workers in Algeciras to grow considerably from the

1990s until the present date, accounting for a workforce of more than two thousand.

But while the dockworkers have been granted limited access to extracting value from container mobility, the container's ubiquitous presence comes with other sets of social problems (Levinson 2016: 387). This is also the case in Algeciras. In a town of only 120,000 inhabitants, the port infrastructure—developed to keep up with fierce international port competition—had during the 1990s and 2000s taken over the shoreline, concreted beaches, and led to increased pollution. In a conversation we had about the future of the port and its economic impact, a dockworker called the port “Maersk's bedroom” in reference to a transshipment system that has provided Algeciras with a steady amount of container traffic and thus made its port administration and companies “sleepy.” The bedroom is the port where containers only rest before they are moved on. The containers, as this dockworker saw it, do not “do” anything for the port town of Algeciras. A transshipment strategy with a minor import-export rate in cargo traffic has, on the other hand, made the port particularly vulnerable to port competition and dependent on the strategies of a few multinational shipping companies. The next section returns to the docks of the container terminal in order to look at the container's concealment of value.

What's inside the box? Technologies of abstraction and moral concealment

Whether resting on top of a ship waiting to enter the port, piled up high like Lego towers inside the container terminal, or passing on the back of semi-trucks on its way to a warehouse, the shipping container is a ubiquitous sight in the Spanish port town of Algeciras. But with its contents well sealed behind steel walls, few people in the port actually know what is inside the steel boxes. In this section, I return to the docks of the Port of Algeciras to interrogate the container's abstraction of heterogeneous value. As

Craig Martin (2014: 440) explains, sealed containers protected cargo from both damage and theft. But the shipping container has become a politicized space of “enclosure and movement” (Chu 2016: 404), and its capacity to conceal also has come with different sets of problems: potential radioactive material and terrorist threats pose “a major headache for security officials,” as Levinson puts it (2016: 387).

In providing concealed spaces passing through transnational space, the shipping container furthermore has become a central material technology for the smuggling of both illegal goods and human cargo (Chu 2016; Greenland 2018). Not all the containers passing through the port even have anything inside them: 30 percent of all shipping containers that are transported around the world are actually empty, reflecting the geographical and economic asymmetries of global trade, where it has become economically viable to send full containers from China and transport the empty ones back from the United States or Europe (Neilson 2015: 49).

When I was standing with the dockworker Sergio in the beating May sun on the docks of the container terminal in the Port of Algeciras Bay, eight years had passed since the container ship *Deneb*, operated by Xpress Container Line, became unstable and listed at the same quay, with hundreds of containers falling off the ship and into the sea. People in Algeciras can still remember the intense smell of rotten octopus that spread across the port area and into the center of town for weeks and months until the containers could be recovered. The rotten octopus reminds of a similar case, related by Tim Cresswell and Martin (2012), about the overflow of container contents on a Devon beach after an accident involving the containership *MS Napoli*. Accidents like these are reminders of the fragility of logistics and the inherent turbulence of the seemingly frictionless global flow of goods (see Schubert, this issue). But they also draw our attention to the sudden disclosure of container cargo from standardized shipping containers that usually keep the contents hidden from view.

FIGURE 2. Containers. Photo by Hege Høyer Leivestad.

While moving containers through the port relies on the labor of a range of logistics intermediaries, few workers have any knowledge about what forms of cargo are moved through the port. The cargo lists provided by shipping companies and accessed by a limited number of people in the container terminals and shipping agencies give information about the origin and destination ports of transshipped containers, but vary in the amount of information they give about the container contents. As an abstraction of heterogeneous value, the containers provide a particular form of alienation. Although the port workers have neither produced the contents nor their containers, seen through Marxist eyes, they are alienated from the very thing that they produce: the transport of concealed goods.

But as a material technology of abstraction, the containers further complicate the relation-

ship between cargo value and workers. The same day in May that the dockworker Sergio and I were walking around the terminal in the Port of Algeciras, we stopped to chat with one of his colleagues to have a look at the loading sheets provided for the operations of a 320-meter-long container ship. Marked with codes and indicating what containers to load and unload, the contents of the sheet said little to me. But for the responsible dockworker on shift, it was just enough information. “If I know what’s inside these containers? Thank God I don’t. And I don’t want to either.” From the sheets, the dockworkers knew what containers to load and unload and what their next destination would be. But all the information he and his colleagues had about the content of the containers was the warning signs plastered on the container revealing that it contained dangerous goods and the category of dangerous goods, while the white

containers hide refrigerated goods of which they know the temperature. “But I usually say when someone asks me,” my friend Sergio smiled, “What’s inside these containers is everything you see around you. What you have on your table . . . everything. But thankfully we don’t know exactly what’s inside.”

The dockworker who preferred not to know the contents of the steel containers that he had spent the last 15 years moving serves as an important counterpoint to the Marxian argument of workers being alienated from the commodities they produce. It was factory discipline that created “alienation,” according to Marx (1959 [1844]), resulting in commodities reaching the market without retaining worker’s personal engagement with them. I have already suggested that dockworkers and other logistical intermediaries are in some ways alienated from what they actually produce; not through commodity production but through the mobility of cargo. But when we in the continuation of this see how the dockworkers reason around the anonymity of the cargo, the analysis is met with complications. Here, we see how the dockworkers in question claim to actually prefer the alienation. They express satisfaction with the fact that the lack of knowledge about the container contents makes them unable to evaluate the value of the cargo.

Anna Tsing argues that the gap between worker’s engagement and market value has become a more severe problem under supply chain capitalism, where discipline of labor is no longer the point but rather the discipline of inventory (2013: 25). One of her points is that capitalism’s reliance on non-capitalist relations is particularly obvious under supply chain capitalism, where “lead firms do not even try to discipline labor and natural resources, limiting their discipline to inventory” (2013: 37). The dockworker’s engagement with the containers and their anonymized cargo, however, is slightly more difficult to place. At this point it might be useful to turn to Alan Sekula’s *Fish Story* in which he critically exposes the politics and life of labor after containerization:

Sailors and dockers are in the position to see the global patterns of intrigue hidden in the mundane details of commerce. Sometimes the evidence is in fact bizarrely close at hand: Weapons for the Iraqis in the forward hold. Weapons for the Iranians in the aft hold. Spanish dockers in Barcelona laugh at the irony of loading cargo with antagonistic destinations. For a moment the global supply network is comically localized, as pictorially condensed as a good political cartoon. Better to scuttle the ship at the dock. But limpet mines are tools of governments, not of workers. (Sekula 2014: 32)

Sekula’s story from the docks shows how global politics of commerce trickles down to the mundane mobility of cargo. Here, the workers remain at a somewhat ironic distance to the cargo, which they in this context seem to have more knowledge about than the mere destination. In the case from Algeciras there is a moral ambivalence in the dockworkers’ comments about the unknown cargo. Through its concealment of value the container is instated as a moral object; as “good” in an ethical production-sense through the workers’ sustenance of the supply chain but also potentially “bad” or risky in terms of the wider politics of the cargo.

The potentially morally “bad” is particularly tense in a context where smuggling and illegal goods are omnipresent. One of Sergio’s colleagues would refer to the risks of knowing with an example of how he found two cars inside a container he was sent to close because it was registered as empty: “imagine the economy in these things,” he said. The dockworkers’ unwillingness to know what lies hidden inside the box is thus also a moral stance, because as long as the value of the goods remain unknown, one’s own position as a worker in the chain is also a more secure one.

The moral acts of “not knowing” are situational, depending not only on the worker’s rank and position but also on the wider political situation. Sergio, who was from a family of dock-

workers generations back and at the time of our walk around the docks talked about his pride at how his eldest son had also become a dockworker, would, like most of his colleagues, talk about his critical job on the docks as a question of “sustaining the chain.” Pride lies also in the work of moving what is believed to be essential cargo through the port infrastructure. During the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the dockworkers were actively waiting for deliveries of Chinese protection masks to be transported in containers through the port and thereby also affirming their political position as essential workers in the sustenance of the global supply chain.

In the sustenance of the supply chain, the shipping container is the “boundary object,” flexible enough to be interpreted and adapted to local contexts and constraints but also robust enough to maintain its common identity, through which labor value is read (Star and Griesemer 1989). On the docks of the port, the container’s uniform material qualities serve to hide value and transform the labor of moving global goods into a number of movements made within set time frames. The container is a commensurable object and one that mediates between the abstract and the concrete, enabling “an imagination that focuses on action rather than form and that measures distance in time” (LeCavalier 2016: 43). The next section continues on the docks with the processes wherein container mobility is converted into pay for the workers and the conflicts arising around these conversions.

Container conversions

While container movements figure as a measure to calculate profit and gains through grand volumes in the port, the dispute over payment on the docks of Algeciras from where I started this article indicates how containers are also parts of other forms of conversions. In this section, I will look at how money is generated from container mobility and the disputes over labor value that arise from these conversions.

The cause of the verbal dispute between the dockworker and the terminal administration was what on the docks of Algeciras is known as *la producción* (the production). *La producción* is a piecework system of pay similar to those found in other sectors, such as in factory and assembly-line work. The basic idea with the piece-rate scheme is to reward productivity, where the piece-rate is a “productivity bonus” forming an integral part of the salary system and agreements between the union and the companies. The piece-rate system is not new for the dock work sector. When the job relied on a casual labor force, the workers were paid for the cargo they moved. For centuries, dockers were paid for the bulk they moved manually, in material forms of sacks, boxes, bundles, or raw materials (see Commons 1905).

The peculiar part of the current piecework in ports is that the basic component is the shipping container—the circulating capital of the logistics industry. In Algeciras, with a 60 percent piece-rate pay, a dockworker is paid a collectively bargained amount per container movement from the 83rd movement during the standard shift. A standard shift is six hours; from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., from 2:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., from 8:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. and from 2:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. A container movement is the handling process, when the box is moved from ship to shore or vice versa. An average of 60,000 TEUs are moved through the port’s two container terminals on a weekly basis. When Sergio and I were inspecting the cargo lists for instance, the ship lying in front of us was being handled in a double process; loaded and unloaded at the same time, with two cranes operating the same ship.

The number of container movements is planned and calculated through the more invisible and computed work of vessel planners in the terminal offices, but the actual movement of containers relies on manual labor. This mobility of the shipping container requires a range of different tasks to be performed at the docks; from manually locking and unlocking the twist locks onboard the ships to the high-technological monitoring of the crane used to pluck boxes

from the ship and transport them smoothly onto the quay and on the return trip deposit them precisely inside the cells of the ship's deck. For the dockworkers standing on the ground, the shipping container is transported above their heads in a constant intense sound of alarms and machinery and the sudden shocks of metal hitting metal when the boxes are dropped off by the crane. For the dockworkers onboard the ship who are doing the locking and unlocking of twist locks, the containers form walls of colored metal, heated by the sun and requiring heavy manual labor in order to allow for their movement.

The amount paid per container movement—ranging from about €14 to €20—depends on the dockworker category, of which there are four, and with foremen like Sergio ranking highest on the salary ladder. Value is extracted from the mobility of the box and the container usually produces value twice, with both loading and unloading of containers from the ships counting as movements. A skilled crane operator, referred to in Algeciras as a *“gruista fino,”* is known to be an advantage to the gang of workers by smoothening and speeding up the handling process. With their pay increased depending on how many containers are moved during the shift, there is often a collective pressure for speed within the gangs of workers, and Sergio explained how young dockworkers often would rush and run to their tasks, making sure to secure a “high production” for their gang.

The container movements, as the incident with the upset foreman showed, turn the containers into commensurable objects that mediate between different modes of dock labor. Different types of work, such as moving a damaged container or breakbulk, are compensated based on a calculation of lost time. The problem I witnessed at the docks was that the dockworkers reckoned that the helicopter operation was so complex it made them lose time, and thus piece-rate pay they could have earned by moving regular containers. Return payments for dock work, thus, are finally based on calculations of the speed of container mobility, where

workers and terminal operators all carry expectations on how many containers it is possible to move within a set time frame.

The production of container movement entails political, economic, and moral concerns. As we can read from the conflict concerning what the union agreement says about compensation for a break bulk operation, defining the equivalence of container mobility forms part of negotiations between the labor union and the representatives from the container terminals run by multinational companies. Container movements are used as a basis to form agreements between the workers' majority union and the multinational companies operating in the port.

In the aftermath of a deep conflict in the Spanish dock work sector in 2017, following a European Union-imposed liberalization of the sector, the dockworkers in Algeciras were forced to reduce their salary by 10 percent with the piece-rate pay starting at the 83rd container during a shift, compared with the 79th in the previous local agreement. During the fall of 2019, however, in the midst of continued national negotiations regarding the Spanish legislation of dock work, the Danish multinational shipping company Maersk announced a planned reduction of 30 percent in container movements through the port of Algeciras, blaming high labor costs. While the Algeciras APM terminal's director went to the local press to complain about what he called uncompetitive labor costs, the worker's union pointed to APM and Maersk's agreed commitment to run a minimum volume of 2,200,000 containers through the port annually to guarantee work.

While containerization reduced the dockworker labor force in many ports of the world, for the remaining unionized dockworkers, the containers have also provided them with a weapon for bargaining. With large and expensive containerships operating global cargo routes based on a just-in-time logic, any stoppage is a costly matter for ship owners, leading terminal operating companies to try and reach agreements instead of risking strikes (Levinson 2016: 372). The threat of slowing down—or halting—

container movement is ultimately one of the most potent weapons of union power.

Conclusion

The shipping container provides a productive analytical entry point for trying to grapple with the logistical worlds of the in-between spaces that maintains contemporary capitalism. Paying ethnographic attention to container economies' dynamics in a port urges us, in the words of Hannah Appel, "to consider the 'how' of certain forms of global capitalism" (2012: 698). In this article, I have shown that container mobility is considered to be the very foundation of profit in a transshipment port.

Mover contenedores (moving containers) lies at the very heart of how the global supply chain plays out in the Spanish Port of Algeciras. From the port administration and container terminals that operate with a particular mathematics of cargo by calculating economic success or failure in forms of cargo tonnage and the number of TEUs moved through the port to the dockworkers whose salaries and futures depend on the speed with which they are able to move steel boxes.

In the port, it is not the container itself but the container movements that figure as the representative value. Before containers enter the port, they are a "storage" of value that is only realized in its exchange value, through moving them. Container capital is realized through the labor acts of mediated mobility performed in order to maintain a "high production." In the Port of Algeciras Bay, a sort of container mobility fetishism is intimately linked with a broader "ethics of productivity" (Bear 2015) where both the port's global importance and port employees' visions of their own labor are measured through box movement. The standardized shipping containers carry global capital that is only realized through the labor of controlling and managing the mobility upon which the very viability of the port is dependent.

In focusing on container mobility in the port, this article adds to the literature that has

disentangled the relationship between containerization and logistics labor at the sea-land interface. Containers as a material technology were used, in the words of Deborah Cowen, "to attack organised labour in the port" (2014: 42). That containerization would largely eliminate dockworkers in large parts of the world was a consequence of technological innovation and change (Levinson 2016: xiv) and one that has been well documented in the literature.

What we find less discussed in the literature on logistics labor is the role the container continues to play in negotiating labor value and as a mediating object under supply chain capitalism (Tsing 2009). In the dispute over economic compensation between the terminal and the dockworkers, the container is instated as a unit of measure that acts as a specific form of currency. Ethnographic attention to such forms of magical conversions taking place around the circulation of shipping containers allows us to examine how the relationship between logistics labor and aspirations of global capital is mediated.

And yet, the content of the containers and its use value is concealed to laborers, such as the dockworker Sergio, who actually prefer not to know what is hidden inside the steel box. This container concealment leads us back to the paradoxes of global trade from where I started this article. The logic of container economies is based on the work of keeping capital moving, a logic that is interrelated with the basic processes of capital circulation, as David Harvey (2019) explains them. What this article points to, however, is the internal contradictions and often unexpected conversions that take place within and around container economies.

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Notes

1. Break bulk is non-containerized cargo that must be loaded individually.
2. These processes are, according to Harvey, “that of valorisation where capital is produced in the form of surplus value in production; that of realisation when value is transformed back into the money form through the market exchange of commodities; that of distribution of value and surplus value among various claimants; and, finally, that of capturing some of the money that circulates among claimants and converting it back into money capital from whence it continues on its way through valorisation” (2019: 20–21).
3. But the port also relies on traffic serving a massive oil refinery, steel factory, and multinational electricity producer, as well as a busy ferry terminal that annually transports millions of passengers across the Strait.

4. *Europa Sur*, 11 May 2012. “Lloyd’s List alza al puerto como una esperanza de la economía española.”
5. After Hanjin’s bankruptcy (see the introduction and Schober’s article in this issue), the South Korean shipping line Hyundai Merchant Marine went in as sole shareholder in the container terminal Total Terminal International Algeciras (TTIA).

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