In this chapter I bring digital humanities research into the domain of logistical industries. The primary task of the global logistics industry is to manage the movement of people and things in the interests of communication, transport, and economic efficiencies. The software applications special to logistics visualize and organize these mobilities, producing knowledge about the world in transit. Yet for the most part the enterprise resource planning (ERP) software remains a black box for those not directly using these systems as a matter of routine in their daily work across a range of industries, which include but are not limited to logistical industries. The health care, medical insurance, education, mining, and energy industries, along with retail and service sectors, also adopt ERP systems to manage organizational activities. One key reason for the scarce critical attention to ERP systems is related to the prohibitive price of obtaining proprietary software, which often costs millions of dollars for companies to implement. The aesthetics of ERP software are also notoriously unattractive, and the design is frequently not conducive to ease or pleasure of use.

The result for the digital humanities is that ERP software analysis is limited to IT services and programmers associated with the shipping, warehousing, aviation, rail, and road transport industries, and procurement, human resource, inventory, and supply chain management. As such, logistical software may seem to hold little relevance as an object of study for digital humanities researchers. However, I argue in this chapter that logistics has a broad social reach and impact in terms of how people undertake work. Logistical software functions as a technology of governance and control, measuring the productivity of labour using real-time key performance indicators (KPIs). Central to logistics is the production of new subjectivities of labour. More than any other aspect of logistical industries, this characteristic of logistics software makes it relevant to researchers in digital humanities. Why? Because such techniques of management are finding their way into academic workplace settings, which are undergoing a transformation into what I would term the logistical university (Rossiter 2010, 2014a). The recent rise of MOOCs (massive open online courses) is a logistical operation that will result in the offshoring and outsourcing of knowledge production. As neoliberal capitalism diversifies its modes of accumulation from the debt economy of housing to the
Critical Curation

extraction of wealth from student debt and global education markets (Anonymous 2012; Lazzarato 2012; Ross 2009, 2014), logistical critique becomes ever more pressing as a political, social, and intellectual undertaking. A focus on logistical media is one line of entry into the development of such a critique.

Methods developed within the digital humanities also have an important role to play in the critique of logistical power. Rather than turn to established humanities methods, or even those developed from within the digital humanities proper, this chapter outlines how the process of devising questions and the problem of method coextensive with research on logistics industries lends digital humanities an occasion to reorient research methods as well as the production of concepts. I explore such possibilities for digital humanities research with reference to the material dimensions of software systems operative within global logistics industries. Particular focus is given to transport and shipping activities undertaken at Port Botany in Sydney in order to highlight the multiplicity of logistical forces exerted upon labour. The development of a digital visualization drawing on data from productivity reports of the port is foregrounded to register the relation between design and research practice with regard to the question of method within digital humanities research. While the aesthetic logic of the visualization is not markedly different from the many visualizations developed in digital humanities, it is nonetheless distinct for the way in which it brings to the fore the practice of method through the process of designing a visualization. In the case of the Port Botany study, the visualization served two key purposes: first, as a methodological device in the practice of transdisciplinary research, and second, as a media form that made visible the pressures on labour within the shipping and transport industries. Both aspects of the visualization enable a critique of logistics, with the visualization providing a kind of substitute interface in the absence of access to the software actually used in logistical industries.

Jangling in the background of this chapter is an interest in developing a theory of logistical media. Forecasted in the work on ‘logistical modernities’ by urban theorist and military historian Paul Virilio (2006), and elaborated to some extent in the study on gameplay and war simulations by media philosopher Patrick Crogan (2011), the term ‘logistical media’ is named as such by communication historian and social theorist John Durham Peters (2012, 2013). For Peters, the concept of logistical media ‘stresses the infrastructural role of media’ (2012, 43). In addition to storage, transmission, and processing systems, I would suggest that the larger study of logistical media might also include attention to how the aesthetic qualities peculiar to the banality of spreadsheets, ERP systems, and software applications have arisen from particular histories in military theatres, cybernetics, infrastructural design, transport, and communications. Given the elusiveness of logistical software as an object of encounter, in this chapter I instead shadow such logistical media with recourse to digital visualizations of logistical operations. I emphasize how the digital visualizations are not just a method of aggregating disparate datasets into a new synthetic form that provides insight into conditions of labour; they also work as a mediating apparatus in terms of the sociality and design of research. In other words, the visualizations mediate the relation between