

Writing Back Against Amazon's Empire: Science Fiction, Corporate Storytelling, and the Dignity of the Workers' Word

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Abstract: Since its founding in 1994 as an online bookstore, Amazon has “revolutionised” not only the market for literature but also expanded aggressively and transformatively in sectors including consumer retail, film and television, groceries, logistics, robotics, surveillance, AI, and web services. This growth and expansion is grounded in the firm’s internal and outward-facing rhetoric about its leading contribution to a brighter future, a narrative deeply inspired by the genre of science or speculative fiction (SF). But Amazon’s utopian vision is largely experienced as a dystopia by most of its rank-and-file workers, who labour under exploitative conditions of surveillance, robotization, and relentless managerial control. Hence our team inaugurated the Worker as Futurist project to support rank-and-file Amazon workers to read/watch SF stories to collectively understand their employer and its world, and also to write short, SF stories about “the world after Amazon.” In this preliminary report on the project, we explain the inspirations for the project and reflect on some of what we have learned from the participants, as well as some implications for the futures of platform workers generally.

Keywords: Amazon, science/speculative fiction (SF), workers’ inquiry, writing, big tech, logistics, future

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1. Introduction

Whether measured by market capitalization, by number of employees, by revenue or by transactions, Amazon is among the world’s largest corporations. Since its inauguration in 1994 as the online bookstore that forever changed book sales and publishing, it has applied its data-driven, customer-satisfaction-oriented approach to an expanding number of industries and sectors, “revolutionising” retail, logistics, robotics, film and television, groceries, web services and cloud computing, microtasks and more (Stone 2013; 2022). Today, the firm represents part of an emerging “big tech” oligopoly on the world stage. Its workers pay the price. Journalists, workers, and their representatives report gruelling conditions and high injury and burnout rates. This is thanks largely to the firm’s relentless quest for efficiency as dictated by data- and algorithmically-empowered managers obsessed with delivering clients fast and flawless service, warehouse workers, drivers who staff its logistics empire, and the tech teams that keep its servers humming (see Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2020).

This much is familiar to anyone who has followed the firm's meteoric rise. Less familiar is how important science or speculative fiction (SF) has been to the firm.¹ Jeff Bezos, Amazon's founder and former CEO (now executive chairman) has been a life-long SF fan (Stadler 2022; *Wired* 2019) and has, throughout the firm's history, leveraged optimistic SF themes and rhetoric into new product ideas (notably Alexa, the company's pathbreaking voice-recognizing home assistant device). This compelling futuristic rhetoric and mobilisation of the "technological imaginaire" (Flichy 2008) has enchanted shareholders for decades, which has been crucial to the firm's aggressive expansion into ever more sectors of the economy (see Stone 2013 and 2022). In the company's story of itself, Amazon is not just making money and satisfying customers, it is fashioning the future; it's "Day One" philosophy, which insists the firm and its executives must always act as if they are restarting from scratch and never become complacent in routine, indicates a kind of fanatical ambition to be on the bleeding edge, an obsession not only with being contemporary but being speculative (Dumaine 2020). Bezos' own private space corporation Blue Origin, financed almost entirely from his share of Amazon's profits, provides another layer to his utopian fantasy: firms like Amazon are part of bringing about a capitalist future that will see humanity become a starfaring species thanks to the enlightened leadership of visionary billionaires (Snow 2023).

These corporate utopian dreams are largely experienced as a dystopia for the Amazon's rank-and-file workers, who across its many holdings and their periphery endure chronic overwork, algorithmic surveillance, profound exploitation and fundamental insecurity (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2020; Henaway 2023). In 2018, the company made headlines when it was revealed it had patented designs for a chain-link cage with a robotic arm, intended for potential use in warehouses, allegedly to protect workers handling dangerous and heavy materials. The imagery cemented for many the way Amazon's sunny corporate rhetoric of relentless technological advance is, on its shadow side, the stuff of cyberpunk nightmares (Day and Romero 2018).

This paper takes it as given that Amazon represents the cutting edge of many of the most deleterious aspects of twenty-first century platform capitalism, and we leave it to others to detail the company's many infringements on workers' rights. Instead, we wish to focus on how the firm, through its actions and its rhetoric, seeks to gain command over the future, mobilising the tropes and conventions of the science fiction genre in order to redefine work and accumulation. We do so in order to contextualise, discuss, and reflect on our ongoing participatory research and research-creation project, *Worker as Futurist*, which has, since early 2023, supported rank-and-file Amazon workers (delivery drivers, warehouse workers, techies, copywriters and more) to write short SF about "the world after Amazon." We aim in this paper to make clear why we believe that SF writing, particularly when undertaken by workers, is particularly well-suited to questioning, resisting and confronting forms of technologically-driven platform capitalism today.

In this paper, we aim to shed light on several interconnected questions. How should we characterise Amazon relative to broader trends in digital capitalism and workers' struggles within, against, and beyond it? How should we account for the role of SF in Amazon's development and the recomposition of digital capitalism more broadly? After

¹ Our use of the acronym SF preserves the fraught ambiguity between science and speculative fiction (see Mancuso 2016), and also signals the broader set of "modes" of critical speculative fabulation that operate beyond the realm of fiction. On this, see Truman 2019.

addressing these questions, we present the Worker as Futurist project in general. However, we stop short of sharing or analysing the workers' writing because at this point in the project, we are still awaiting the worker-writers' final drafts. Instead, we reflect on the broader scope, ambitions, and approach of the project and its implications for the study of digital workers now and scholarly activism in the future (see also Haiven, Webb and Benivolski 2022).

Our team is made up of humanities scholars, creative writers, and curators and our project is participatory insofar as it places the highest value on the transformative research experience itself, rather than the collection and analysis of data. In future papers we will share and reflect on the specifics of the writing of the workers we supported as well as the methodology as a whole. This paper may be read less as a formal social-scientific research article and more as a reflection on research in progress, setting forth the interdisciplinary constellation of theoretical, methodological, and empirical works that have influenced our approach, rather than seeking to make a specific intervention in or contribution to a particular academic debate. In future publications, we plan to share the data we gleaned from our project (in the form of an analysis of the worker-participants' published writing) and reflect on the methodology in greater detail.

In brief, since early 2023 our team has supported thirteen rank-and-file Amazon workers to write short, SF short stories about "the world after Amazon." Participants were recruited and took part in the project entirely online and had all worked or were still working for Amazon, or earned wages that were largely or entirely dependent on Amazon, but were not managers. Worker-writers were remunerated to join our team for online knowledge- and skill-building sessions, then work with our team and professional literary editors to draft, workshop, revise and edit their short fictional works. We will publish most of these stories in print, online and in audio format in the second half of 2024. This process was accompanied by the simultaneous production, in 2023, of a supplemental research podcast, *The Workers Speculative Society*, in which our team interviewed experts on Amazon, on the politics of SF, on creative writing as a form of activism, and on labour struggles in the twenty-first century.

2. Amazon as Dystopia

How should we characterise Amazon relative to broader trends in digital capitalism and workers' struggles within, against and beyond it?

Today, global movements are at a high water mark in terms of organising resistance to Amazon. At an October 2023 global summit in Manchester, organised by the Progressive International consortium of social movements and the UniGlobal alliance of trade unions, representatives from struggles in North America, Europe, and Asia met to coordinate around the slogan "Make Amazon Pay." While several important initiatives and independent trade unions were not at the gathering (especially those operating on a more grassroots level), it nonetheless represented a wide plurality of efforts to confront the power of one of the world's largest corporations. Amazon has, over the past thirty years, "revolutionised" capitalist retail, logistics, robotics, AI, web services, groceries, and other industries. Today, it emblemizes a dangerous and pervasive twenty-first century platform capitalism where the hardware and software of companies like Meta, Alphabet, or Amazon act as platforms at the centre of digital economic circulation (Langley and Leyshon 2017). By occupying this digital and economic space it has leveraged its staggering wealth, market valuation, and reputation to "disrupt" ever more sectors of the economy based on a strategy that combines ruthless competitiveness with a data-driven obsession with customer satisfaction (see Stone 2022; Ali-

mahomed-Wilson and Reese 2020; Delfanti 2021). In this sense, Amazon is both indicative of wider trends in the recomposition of labour and power in twenty-first century capitalism and also unique in important ways.

The costs of this approach for workers are, by now, well known. Blue-collar workers at Amazon's warehouses and throughout its logistics empire, while often more highly paid than at competitors, endure a punishing workplace where the pace of labour is set by algorithmically powered robotics. This has led to among the highest injury rates in the industry (Delfanti 2021). Drivers, most of whom work indirectly for the company through completely subordinated "independent" intermediary companies, are forced to use Amazon digital systems to coordinate deliveries at a pace that rivals the worst platform exploitation in the transportation sector (Reese and Alimahomed-Wilson 2022). Even white-collar corporate employees complain of a relentless workplace culture that demands constant success, efficiency, and innovation, modelled on the persona of the corporation's obsessive founder Jeff Bezos (Kantor and Streitfeld 2015; Stone 2022).

One of Amazon's slogans, to be found painted on the wall of nearly all of its offices and warehouses, encourages workers to "work hard, have fun, make history." But it is abundantly clear that only the first imperative is available to the vast majority of the company's workers. Officially, these numbers are somewhere in the range of 1.5 million, but this figure is deceptive (Goldberg 2023). If we include the much broader range of people who work on the company's proprietary systems (including Kindle authors, Amazon marketplace sellers, and gig workers on its M-Turk platform), or that work for subcontracted firms (like most of its global delivery fleet)—in other words whose labour generates profit for Amazon but who are not directly employed by the firm—it is easy to estimate Amazon's global workforce in the millions. As workers contend with exhaustion and injury-inducing scheduling, calculated by the company to generate as much labour power as possible and to prevent fraternisation that might lead to collective action, the responsibilities of everyday life are downloaded onto already strained support systems. As Chua and Cox (2023) argue, in the United States, the terrain of struggle against Amazon warehouses has in many ways shifted from the shop floor to the neighbourhood, from the site of economic production to the expanded field of social reproduction.

Amazon's antipathy to workers' power is also the stuff of legend and the company has notoriously fended off major efforts by well-organised unions. In the United States, despite Amazon Labour Union's unionisation victory at a Staten Island warehouse, the company's successful and high-profile anti-union campaign in Bessemer, Alabama remains the norm (Fuchs, Dannenberg, and Wiedemann 2022). In Germany, while workers at Amazon have been unionised for over a decade, the firm has systematically stymied attempts to win a collective agreement and uses casualisation and a reliance on precarious migrant workers to undermine such efforts (Kassem 2023).

The success of Amazon is summarised best in its ability to bring the ethos and techniques of a financially-driven West Coast American technology firm to bear on a wide variety of industries not immediately connected to technology (Alimahomed-Wilson, Allison, and Reese 2020). Since opening as an online bookseller in 1994, Amazon's retail operation has expanded to include supplying practically everything that can be carried by an individual human, from iPads to diapers. Its purchase of Whole Foods, and expansion of the Amazon Fresh brand, is emblematic of its desire to insinuate itself into the fabric of the everyday lives of consumers. Regardless of the field, Amazon touts its own unique approach and success as being based on an obsession with customer experience. However, behind this PR-speak is its collection and analysis of

massive amounts of data, used to not only increase efficiency and keep prices low but to develop aggressive, targeted market interventions aimed at annihilating competition (Stone 2022).

This approach is most evidently seen in the firm's expansion into film and television. Leveraging its own Prime platform, and informed through rigorous data collection and powerful computing, it has become one of the world's top entertainment producers by creating content that appeals to discrete market segments (Klatt 2022). These strategies have also shaped the company's expansion into other fields including healthcare, insurance, and more. In recent years, Amazon has even offloaded the risk of buying and warehousing stock by leveraging itself into a warehousing and fulfilment mainframe for hundreds of thousands of "independent" sellers who are locked into Amazon's systems and pay a heavy price (Silva 2023).

Amazon might be seen to be creating a walled garden or a heterotopian form of capitalism by replacing the chaotic free market with a clean, customer-focused proxy. In essence, it is leveraging its massive size, wealth, and reputation into a transnational commercial empire *within* capitalism (see Giblin and Doctorow 2022; Silva 2023).

3. Digital Capitalism and Speculative Fiction

How should we account for the role of SF in Amazon's development and the recomposition of digital capitalism more broadly?

The behemoth's slogan, "work hard, have fun, make history" is indicative of the firm's focus on the future and its highly ambitious goals to transform the economy and perhaps society at large. Since Amazon's earliest days, its visionary founder Jeff Bezos has never shied away from language reminiscent of or taken from SF (Roberts and Andrews 2021). Such prophetic language is mobilised in order to convince shareholders, regulators, and employees that the firm is what we might, borrowing from Walter Benjamin, call an "angel of creative destruction:" blown out of heaven by the forces of capitalist innovation, both an agent of and a witness to the ruination that came before (Benjamin 1969; see Haiven 2014).

This future orientation has recently been brought to light by studies by Alessandro Delfanti and Bronwyn Frey (2021) and also by Cecilia Rikap (2020) that focus on the firm's abundant publicly filed patent applications. The patent application for the cage-crane is only one among many futuristic designs that focus on ever more precise control of space and time in the warehouse and the broader logistical field aimed at expediting and rendering ever more efficient the interval between a customer's wish and its fulfilment. However, more broadly these patent applications, the bulk of which simply aim to claim speculative intellectual property rights to hedge future risks, reveal a firm that invests heavily not only in short-term research and development but in an expansive vision of a transformed future.

But this is only one way in which the firm aims to dominate the future itself. It is also important to note Amazon's control over discourse and the imagination. The firm is almost certainly the world's largest purveyor of words, seen in its unparalleled domination of global book sales, the unrivalled popularity of its proprietary ebook platform Kindle (on which tens of thousands of authors publish exclusively), its almost total domination of the audiobook market, the popularity of its acquired user-generated platform Goodreads, and its Amazon Web Services (AWS) cloud computing division, which supplies cloud infrastructure to an estimated 50% of the public-facing internet (Runkevicius 2020). In this sense, Amazon's influence over literature and social narrative cannot be underestimated in that it mediates a significant percentage of the words humans read today. Literary critic Mark McGurl (2021) insightfully looks to the firm's

own narrative of itself and recognizes many of the hallmarks and tropes of twentieth century American commercial SF, such as the triumphant march of technology, space-conquering hyper-masculine heroes, and the projection of current social realities into the future mystified as the natural and inevitable evolution human nature.

The kernel of Amazon's obsession with the future is Jeff Bezos who is, according to his own testimony and those of his friends and colleagues, an "obsessive" SF fan (see Stone 2013 and 2022). Indeed, he initially considered naming the firm "MakeltSo.com" after the catchphrase of Jean-Luc Picard, the iconic captain of the Enterprise in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (broadcast 1987-1994), after whom Bezos is also reported to have modelled his own bald-headed appearance and assertive and demanding demeanour (*Wired* 2019; Roberts and Andrews 2021). Furthermore, Amazon's path-breaking voice-recognizing "home assistant" device Alexa, was modelled on the talking computers of that television series and its predecessor (Stone 2022). In many ways, the *Star Trek* series is responsible for many of the SF tropes and references that are enthusiastically sprinkled throughout the last quarter-century of Bezos's famous annual letter to shareholders. While on the surface such allusions are farcical, this rhetoric of technology and hope—to travel where no man had gone before—were pivotal in charming the financial sector essential to Amazon's breakneck expansion throughout America and around the world (Stone 2022).

In post-war American capitalism, SF was seen as a largely niche and somewhat distasteful commercial genre (see Vint 2021). Today, however, it has moved in many ways to the centre of what we might call capitalist storytelling (Jameson 2005; Davies 2018; Michaud 2020). Certainly, it is the case that, since the late 1990s, new advances in computer animation have allowed SF films and tropes (for instance in superhero films) to dominate the box office and streaming rankings, and SF franchises like *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, or *Dune* to become major sources of income across a range of sectors. Beyond this, the new generation of capitalist leaders who capitalised at the intersection of high finance and big tech (by their own admission) grew up with a great love of SF narratives in books and film—a passion for the genre that continues to profoundly shape their world-view, ambitions, and self-presentation. Figures such as Bill Gates, Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, and Jeff Bezos are all candid about and celebratory of their debt to SF and unashamed to cast their efforts in the most bombastic terms drawn from that genre (Lepore 2021). The space race between Musk and Bezos has seen both cast themselves as conquering space heroes, enlightened billionaires who not only aim to compete for glory but, indeed, help humanity transcend its "blue origins" on Earth and head for the stars (Stadler 2022).

However, what often goes unsaid, but is nonetheless clear, is that capitalism and its angels will succeed where democratic states failed: space will be colonised by capitalism (Snow 2023). For these prophets of progress, capitalism is seen as a system that humanity's naturally acquisitive and competitive nature. What equally goes unsaid, is who will be left behind on earth. It is a telling irony that one of the most popular and complex depictions of class struggle in space in film and television, *The Expanse* series, was allegedly single-handedly rescued from cancellation by Bezos (Snowden 2020). A huge fan of the series, upon hearing the news of its impending cancellation at a Hollywood dinner, he ordered his company's studio to buy the franchise, leading to an additional three seasons. The series' iconic depiction of the violent rebellion of an oppressed working class and the villainous appearance of an unscrupulous tycoon seemed to have titillated, rather than disturbed Amazon's founder (on the politics of the series, see Woodcock 2023).

Beyond the optimistic SF rhetoric of today's tech firms rests a cynical and calculated propaganda. When met with the high costs of its operations to workers, communities, legacy companies, and whole markets, Amazon constantly defends and presents itself to regulators and the media as a savvy but largely helpless angel blown by the winds of capitalist innovation. The apocryphal words attributed to Bezos, that "Amazon didn't happen to bookstores, the future happened to bookstores" are emblematic of this approach, which neatly dodges responsibility for the calamitous effects of the firm's activities (Stone 2013). Such an articulation conveniently combines a linear narrative of technological innovation with the supposedly progressive force of the market in the form of an active, benevolent, if occasionally violent entity, simply known as "the future." Amazon here is merely an avatar or agent of "the future." Like a force of nature, capitalist "progress" is ruthless, necessary and inevitable. But progress in whose interest, in what direction? And who pays the price? This perspective has recently animated a new wave of "techno-optimism" precisely at the intersection of high tech and high finance, which makes explicit what is often left unsaid: the linear but disruptive ascent of capital, technology and progress is a necessarily violent and destructive process which, while it may lead to death and catastrophe for many, must not be inhibited because, in some mathematically certain future, it will produce not only untold wealth and possibility, it will permit the transcendence of the human body and the emergence of a new form of hybrid life: the fabled "singularity" (Andreesen 2023).

It can be tempting to see such speculative prognostications as merely the vanity projects of tech billionaires and their hangers-on. But we should also attend to the way SF and narratives help recompose capitalism in more practical ways. Such stories and tropes help cohere a corporate culture around "making history" in ways that can, for example, convince highly skilled employees to accept stock options in lieu of wages, based on their future returns. It even motivates blue-collar rank-and-file employees, who take pride (in spite of the harsh working conditions) in working for a firm that is changing the world and using state-of-the-art technology to do it. At a certain point, SF narratives help inspire and shape the strategies of corporate leadership. The success of this discourse can be seen in terms of its effects on governments insofar as it was parroted by the hundreds of municipalities that entered into a bidding war to charm Amazon into establishing its secondary headquarters in 2019 (Woolf 2019). More generally, it is also echoed in the speeches of politicians who have publicly praised the firm's commitment to "innovation" (and fears of stifling it) as an excuse for failing to tax it appropriately or pursue meaningful regulation and anti-monopoly proceedings against it (until very recently, at least) (see Culpepper and Thelen 2020).

Most profoundly, the SF-inspired rhetoric is evidently immensely popular with investors, whose cash is needed to drive the relentless and rapid pace of corporate expansion (Stone 2022). The resonance of this myth of progress, technology, and limitless growth and potential with the investor community can not be downplayed. Without such enthusiasm, Amazon would likely never have been able to expand so rapidly. This expansion is thanks in no small part to Amazon's highly unique financial practice of forcing investors to do without their dividends and satisfy themselves solely with ever-rising share prices and occasional buy-backs, allowing the company to retain profits to be ploughed into development and expansion.

Given all these significant political-economic functions of the firm and its founder's futuristic rhetoric, we must consider the power of what might be termed "corporate storytelling," taking into account the way that digital capitalism takes up, renovates and exploits humans' profound power to transform self and society through narrative (Salmon 2017; Wynter and McKittrick 2015). What is necessary then, is to dwell, in

tandem with Will Davies (2018) and his collaborators, on the “economic science fictions” that have permeated governmental and industry discourses. Such discourses have moved from the margins, closer to the centre of a financialized moment of capitalism that is, after all, built fundamentally on speculation about the future. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the American Empire and Soviet Bloc presented two rival “dreamworlds,” competing to present their system as the fulfilment of the promise of modernity (Buck-Morss 2000). More than three decades after the “end of history,” in an era of profound pessimism and cynicism towards collective potential, this scenario has perhaps been replaced by a warring archipelago of corporate and billionaire fantasies, emblemized by the privatisation of what were once public speculative projects. Today, the orientation of space exploration, the elongation of lifespans, and the birth of artificial intelligence are set by corporate and financial magnates whose massive and unanswerable power appears to rival or exceed the greatest fears of SF authors of the past (see Torres 2023).

Taken together, an important but undeveloped hypothesis emerges: The case of Amazon reveals that SF may be a non-trivial part of the way capitalism is recomposing itself in an era of financialization and digitization. Capitalism is a system and its modes of reflexive self-transformation are institutional. Elsewhere Haiven (2011) has framed the financial sector as “capitalism’s imagination.” In other words, it is a set of institutional networks that affords the system a sense of its own potential futures and a means to intervene in them, albeit in a profoundly inhuman, contradictory, and chaotic way. But, especially in a moment when the concentration of capitalist wealth is at an extreme, it is essential to attend to the way individual capitalist actors, notably extremely rich and influential billionaires and investors, themselves reflect on the future and calibrate their strategies and choices around this imagination. And here the SF genre appears to have an outsized and in many ways unrivalled influence.

Whatever the case, as we have seen, for workers at Amazon, the “technofeudal” (Morozov 2022; Varoufakis 2023) rule of these billionaire’s companies is essentially the stuff of dystopian speculative fiction. This brutalising work, which has catastrophic effects on workers bodies and has seen the firm condemned for its injury rates and high employee turnover, is packaged in a saccharine corporate rhetoric that addresses exploited workers as equal “Amazonians,” “associates” in the company’s noble mission to provide the unrivalled best for customers (and most Amazon workers are, of course, also customers) (Henaway 2023). Corporate culture promotes a focus on safety and well-being that places nearly all responsibility on the workers themselves, and that champions workers’ forms of mutual aid and solidarity as part of the company’s caring culture (rather than, as is usually the case, in spite of that culture) (Chua and Cox 2023; Henaway 2023).

This wrapping of a dystopian reality inside of utopian rhetoric is important because, when combined with the company’s aggressive techniques to prevent not only unions but even the kind of worker interactions that might lead to a platform for unionisation or organising, these narratives typically go uncontested. In our research, we learned that workers gain meaning and dignity from the utopian rhetoric of Amazon, while at the same time, being sceptical and even resentful of it. In the absence of other narratives to help explain their suffering and sacrifice, Amazon’s preferred narrative becomes a resource for many workers that helps them sustain themselves and feel a sense of meaning and community. Labour and community organisers, therefore, would be well advised to attend not just to the falseness of this narrative, but also to the work the narrative performs and the uses to which workers put this narrative. It will likely be important for such organisers to not only promise workers “bread and butter” gains

(improvements to wages, scheduling, working conditions, health and safety, recourse for disciplinary procedures, etc.) but also provide other dignifying narratives that focus on collective struggle and have a hopeful horizon.

4. Worker as Futurist

The Worker as Futurist project was initiated against the backdrop of Amazon's ongoing adoption of the rhetorics of the technological imaginary seen in optimistic SF. While these rhetorics are often grounded in messianic figures radically disrupting and re-shaping the future, the truth of the situation is that these utopian visions are built on the backs of the firm's rank-and-file workers, who have no influence or control whatsoever over the future they are compelled to create. But what if these voices were heard? What would they say about the world after Amazon? And what exactly would the process of supporting rank-and-file Amazon workers to write and publish these short speculative stories be?

An emerging methodology developed by Black and racialized activists—including adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha (2015) and more recently Lola Olufemi (2021)—has productively mobilised the spirit of an interventionist and activist SF. These methods see SF writing workshops as a space to encourage and cultivate the radical imagination: the collective power to envision other futures that might inspire and guide social justice action and activism in the present. This is especially important for groups that have, historically and today, been denied influence over the future within dominant systems. Notably, in the case of brown and Imarisha as well as Olufemi, Black people who must contend with the forms of domination and oppression that emerged from the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and the particularities of anti-Black racism. Within the racist worldview that enabled these horrors and that continues to plague our world, Blackness is framed as the antithesis of white modernity, which claims science, progress, and intelligence as its domain (see da Silva 2007). These are tropes that have historically (and still to this day) shaped the history of SF, which typically (and with increasing exceptions) presents future worlds based on normative ideas and ideals of race that not only exclude racialized people but reaffirm the values, beliefs and ideologies that led to that exclusion in the first place (Carrington 2016). Thus, the writing of SF by racialized people is an act of defiance and of common courage. An insistence that our collective imagination of the future is a political matter and a zone of contestation, not simply the “scientific” extrapolation of selectively chosen current trends in technology and society.

Inspired by this approach, our Worker as Futurist project places the tools of SF writing in the hands of another oppressed and exploited group: workers at Amazon. To be clear, the domination faced by these workers is not the same as that faced by Black and racialized people—although many workers at Amazon are also Black or racialized, and their experience of domination is intersectional (Alimohamed-Wilson and Reese 2021). In that sense, we were roused by the long tradition of social and socially-conscious SF that focuses on workers and the working class. Mary Shelley's seminal *Frankenstein* is widely acknowledged to have been influenced by both the Luddite worker rebellions in her native England as well as the controversial ways bourgeois scientists would experiment on the corpses of poor and working-class people. Fritz Lang's pivotal silent film *Metropolis* centres around a workers' revolt in a futuristic city. In the twentieth century, SF novels and short stories were largely marketed as “light” or low-brow working-class entertainment, and often included working-class characters and situations, a tendency which would be politicised in the early work of Ursula K. Le

Guin in novels like *The Dispossessed*. More recently, popular SF texts like *Snowpiercer* or *The Expanse* highlight class struggle. Our project aims to take up and explore this genealogy and the particular connection between SF and the world of work.

As noted, the Worker as Futurist Project aims to support rank-and-file Amazon workers to write SF short stories. It builds on a pilot project we undertook in the fall of 2021 to understand how spaces might be created to empower workers to critically engage with pieces of SF. Having successfully recruited about twenty five current and former, rank-and-file Amazon workers we created a “film club” where they would view and collectively discuss SF movies, TV shows, and independently made video games. The film club took place over five weeks and coincided with the exploding popularity of the South Korean survival drama series *Squid Game*. This served as an entree into the first week’s discussion of exploitation, class disparity, and capitalism. *Squid Game* revolves around a secret contest between hundreds of players, all of whom are experiencing financial distress, risking their lives taking part in a series of deadly children’s games for the chance to win a large sum of money. In subsequent weeks we also had participants watch the 2013 movie adaptation of *Snowpiercer* which was based on a French post-apocalyptic, climate fiction graphic novel, and selected episodes of *Black Mirror* and classic *Star Trek* exploring issues of labour and life under capitalism, and also play the online game *To Build a Better Mousetrap*, by radical game designer Paolo Pedercini, which critiques the oppression and automation found in factory work.

The film club meetings were facilitated by the project organisers and followed a consistent formula. Each week the sessions were divided into sections where the show of the week would be described and summarised followed by a discussion of the material which was often directed by pre-crafted questions or activities. For example, participants would be asked to imagine their life in the year 2268 (the year in which *Star Trek* is set) or to reorganise the layout of the *Snowpiercer* train which had been dominated by a classist hierarchy where the have-nots are relegated to what amounted to the luggage cars and given nutrient-rich sludge while the rich drink champagne and eat fresh sushi harvested from fish tanks on board.

While such directed activities yielded wide-ranging and productive discussions with the participants, the main purpose of the pilot project was to trial-run a set of methodologies around workers’ inquiry and convocation method of imagination. Based on the idea that “the radical imagination is something we do, and something that we do together” (Khasnabish and Haiven 2012, 411) the project sought to “convoke” together Amazon workers by engaging with SF texts in the hopes that new, alternative visions emerge.

Building off the success of this pilot project, reflections from organisers, and feedback from participants in exit interviews, project organisers launched the Worker as Futurist project in early 2023. Over the course of eight months, the project focused on supporting 13 rank-and-file Amazon workers to write short, speculative fiction stories about “the world after Amazon.” To facilitate this process, participants first took part in a series of capacity-building and consciousness-raising workshops. While those who were invited to join the project from a larger pool of applicants had a demonstrative interest in SF, writing abilities across the group varied greatly. The purpose of the workshops was to introduce key skills around world-building, character and plot development, and descriptive writing. For example, participants had been asked to read Ursula K. Le Guin’s provocative short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” about a utopian city that required the pain and suffering of a single child. During the online session, they were placed into breakout rooms to discuss not just the ways in which the story is a parable for a capitalist society where the wealth of the few is predicated

on the labour and oppression of the many, but also how Le Guin uses imagery and the way the narrator invites the reader to co-create the utopia. Following this, participants were given out-of-session homework to create a response to Le Guin's *Omelas* (inspired by author N.K. Jemisin's famous response story) through writing, drawing, video, audio, or collage. These responses were then uploaded online to an instant messaging server where all participants could take in and comment on their peers' submissions.

Other successful workshops included using Stuart Candy's "The Thing from the Future" card game to imagine interesting, funny, or thought-provoking ideas for "things" from the future. Drawing on SF author Frederik Pohl's famous quote, "a good science fiction story should be able to predict not the automobile but the traffic jam," participants were able to use the productive space that play creates to make strange and practice world-building in a low-stakes environment. In addition to writing workshops, a series of speakers were also brought in each session to speak with and discuss about Amazon. These speakers were predominantly academics or labour organisers who focused on Amazon, its business practices, and the world that companies like it are purposefully creating. With the end goal of the Worker as Futurist project being a series of short stories crafted by participants about how they imagined the world after Amazon, the speakers were meant to add extra insight to the expertise that participants brought with them from working within the proverbial belly of the beast.

After these sessions and thus equipped, over a series of 12 weeks participants created their 1500-2500 word short stories. During this time, they were given a series of internal deadlines to write two drafts on which they would receive substantive feedback before a final version was due. To help facilitate this process, bi-monthly communities of practice were set up where participants could drop in during set times to discuss their work with their peers and organisers. Throughout this process, a series of checkpoints were created by organisers so that if participants regularly took part in sessions and submitted drafts and final versions of their stories, they would receive honorariums for their participation. Of the thirteen participants, nine completed and submitted final versions of their short stories.

Currently in the editing process, project organisers are looking to self-publish these stories in a collection that will include commentary by other academics and union organisers. While this remains in the first stages of development, the short stories themselves have yielded a few productive and intriguing insights into the workers' inquiry and convection process and how SF as a form of fictioning might give shape to new radical subjectivities.

5. The Potentials of Workers' Creative Writing

Why write SF with Amazon workers? The nature of this project is itself speculative: we are aiming to discover the answer to this question, rather than begin with an answer. Our hypothesis is necessarily and purposefully vague: many factors convince us it is worth the experiment. How might this process be transformative or beneficial to workers, individually or collectively? How might the experience or the results (the short stories) help inform workers' struggles in the future? To what extent can workers' speculative writing supplement a broader movement against Amazon's power? Does the writing of fiction (and particularly SF) reveal some encoded, embedded, or embodied knowledge about Amazon and the broader order of digital capitalism that might prove motivating, sustaining, inspiring, or even strategic? Can such a process inspire or convoke the radical imagination, and if so with what consequences and benefits?

In recent years, SF has been lauded for its capacities to open new horizons of the imagination in ways that might potentially trigger social action (Vint 2021). There have been a proliferation of activists and participatory action research projects that encouraged members of marginalised groups to read, discuss, and write SF for this reason (brown and Imarisha 2015; Truman 2021). To our knowledge, however, none of these has yet concerned itself with workers as such (though, of course, most people who are marginalised are also workers, and usually highly exploited). Indeed, in the Worker as Futurist Project we also discuss and contend with the fact that the workers who participate are also many other things: parents, migrants, racialized, gendered, poor, educated (or not), and so on.

And yet we have chosen to focus particularly on workers because we are convinced that today's form of capitalism, especially as expressed by Amazon, places them in a unique position. And just as Amazon proceeds from its own chosen SF narrative, so do we. In many twentieth century SF stories, characters possess (or perhaps are possessed by) some important knowledge which they are not immediately conscious of. In Philip K. Dick's 1966 short story "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale," adapted into film in 1990 as *Total Recall*, the main earth-bound character slowly realises that what he imagines are his personal dreams to visit the colony of Mars are actually recollections. Despite his employers erasing his memory to conceal his past as a covert agent, these flashbacks persist, posing a threat to the regime about which he, unwittingly, holds damning information. In the first *Star Wars* movie, the innocuous robot worker R2D2 is secretly carrying plans that will allow rebels to destroy an evil empire's seemingly invincible space station. In Dick's famous 1968 *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, adapted as *Blade Runner* in 1982, the main character's skill at hunting down rogue androids stems from the fact (which he slowly discovers) that he is also, in fact, an android. In Douglas Adams' hugely influential *Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy* the main character, a human, slowly discovers that he is being relentlessly pursued through space by entities who created the earth as a giant organic supercomputer built to compute the elusive meaning of life, precious knowledge that he (a fragment of that computer) unconsciously possesses. In all these popular texts and many more, the protagonists have a valuable unconscious or embodied knowledge that needs to be decoded, redeemed, or recognized in order to make some profound change to the world. While on the one hand rejecting the individual macho heroism and metaphysical bombast of much of twentieth century SF, we do want to borrow this trope to think through the potential of Amazon workers and the knowledge they might possess, and its utility to struggles within, against, and beyond twenty-first century digital capitalism.

Perhaps Amazon workers, by virtue of the fact that they are compelled to labour in dystopian conditions to reproduce someone else's utopia, bear within themselves some unconscious form of knowledge about how to fight for different futures? Here we are curious about what the body knows that might not yet surface into conscious thought, but that might emerge in creative expression. While we reject the idea that some expert needs to come and mine this stream of data, we do want to hold open the possibility that these workers might produce some insights into the world Amazon is creating—insights that might not be otherwise available to those who struggle against the firm. Or more romantically, the possibility that by writing, imagining, and working together, Amazon workers might produce a vision for the world after Amazon.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that the writing workshop is a kind of psychoanalytic therapy wherein the now collective subject, through the "talking cure," reveals the unconscious trauma at the core of their misery. We are also cautious about roman-

ticising workers' knowledge and perspectives. A century of research on class and ideology is categorical: all social subjects, regardless of their class, are shaped by the contradictions of capitalism and we should expect contradictions, ambivalences and dissonance from every imagination (Eagleton 2007). But we are suggesting, in a long lineage of worker-focused theory and practice, that the view from the proverbial "shop floor" matters. This is especially true when that view is articulated in groups of workers talking about and reflecting on the nuances of their shared condition and explicitly linking this to structural, systemic, and historical social forces. One of the conjectures that animates our project is that the act of writing fiction might be uniquely useful in allowing access to this knowledge.

For rank-and-file Amazon workers, this knowledge may be borne largely in the body, a body that has been drilled, disciplined and surveilled to work at the rhythm of robots and protocols that are themselves calibrated centrally by algorithms and senior managers at Amazon's corporate headquarters. What does the embodied imagination of the Amazon worker know that eludes or exceeds the imagination of even those of us who are paid to study the company from afar? How might workers be supported to consciously grasp and share these insights? Perhaps these insights will not simply express themselves in terms of facts and figures, descriptions of protocols and theories of exploitation. Perhaps they will also express themselves in terms of affects and relationships, feelings and conjectures, hopes and fears, and a sense of purpose or purposelessness. Fiction, and especially fiction writing is a phenomenal medium for coming to terms with these ineffable and ambivalent forms of knowledge (Steven 2023).

The use of the written word to inspire or instigate class struggle predates capitalism, and is the subject of a great deal of scholarly inquiry, predominantly but not exclusively in the field of critical literary studies (Williams 2022; Steven 2023). Less well established is the role of SF fiction, which often has an ambivalent relation to class struggle. In many of its earliest depictions, proletarian masses and bodies were presented as threats to the dominant order or monstrous manifestations of its cruelties, but rarely with much real agency (see Mazierska and Suppia 2016). Since that time, in both popular and alternative texts, working class struggles have been more capaciously and sympathetically represented, and scholars have argued that such representations indeed matter politically in various ways.

What has not been investigated at all (so far as we know) is the potential for the writing of science fiction to supplement working-class struggles. There is a long history of workers and their allies supporting one another to write about their experiences of exploitation or of life in general (Woodin 2018). Such a practice can be traced to the nineteenth-century when workers' clubs and associations promoted literacy and the writing of narrative and poetry not only to share information and analysis but also to dignify and enrich the life of the worker (Hoggart 1998). This became even more prevalent with the advent of cheaper media of print communication, leading to, for example, a thriving culture of independent pamphlets and other self-published platforms in the 1970s and 80s (Woodin 2018). Our project takes particular inspiration from the Workers Writers School, an ongoing initiative that carries forward this tradition today, offering regular free workshops to working people in the New York area with a special focus on poetry (Hsu 2017; Nowak 2012).

These efforts to support working people's creative writing can be fruitfully placed beside a long tradition of workers' inquiry or militant inquiry, in which radical organisers and activists create situations and structures to encourage workers to reflect on and study their own objective conditions of exploitation (see Woodcock 2014). Many work-

ing in this tradition take inspiration from Marx and Engels' early attempts to send surveys to workers in France to obtain, from the shop floor, a sense of the way the labour process was changing and the new axes of struggle (see Haider and Mohandesi 2013). This method was most fully realised in the Workerist turn in Italian militant working class organising in the 1960s and 70s (Woodcock 2014). Faced with the growing complacency of traditional trade unions and with a new wave of industrialisation and labour migration, organisers sought to form study groups and other forms of collective inquiry with increasingly dissatisfied workers. These approaches emerged concurrently with a theory of the composition and decomposition of both labour and capital, which focused on the way capitalism's constant crises and reconfigurations arrived as a response to workers' protagonism and resistance (see Ovetz 2020). Further, these methodologies sought to capture the emergence of new subjectivities that were otherwise not heard or seen by either consumer capitalism or traditional workers' organisations.

6. Learning from the Project

In the Worker as Futurist project, we have posed the question: what role might creative writing, in particular SF, play in renewing and expanding the tactics and ambit of workers'/militant inquiry? Traditionally, the approach has focused on non-fiction and testimonial forms that efficiently and directly reveal the conditions of the workplace. This is important. But more generally speaking, workers' inquiry seeks to uncover two other key insights that SF writing may help render transparent.

First, workers' inquiry has always dedicated itself to trying to understand the immanent tendencies and contradictions that emerge from the changing conflict of capital and labour and that might, therefore, set the stage for movements, struggles, and uprisings yet to come. It is, in a sense, an inherently speculative pursuit, even when it is dedicated to understanding the here and now of shop floor conflict. It aims to give workers and organisers a set of insights that help them anticipate, plan, and organise based on the way present-day tensions might yet manifest as collective action.

In the Worker as Futurist project, many of the worker-writers responded to the prompt on "the world after Amazon" by asking questions about the future axes of struggle. One wrote about the possibility of solidarity and even love between human workers and robots. Another focused on the nightmare scenario in which Amazon takes over the private prison industry. These future projections are more than fantasy: they represent the application of an analysis of contradictions in the present to a vision of the future with strategic implications.

Second, given that workers' inquiry is dedicated to understanding the changing nature of subjectivity, then writing, and in particular SF writing, may be an exceptional approach. There is a massive corpus of high-level debates in literary studies, including among Marxist literary critics, on how the process of both reading and writing is reflexive and transformative for the subject (see Horowitz 2023, for example). That literature is too abundant to gloss over, but suffice to say that it is not simply that writing makes a subject transparent to itself or its readers. Rather, writing is also a process of subjective transformation, and one that, in spite of the fact it is usually a solitary activity, still one that is intersubjective: the writer (even the private diarist) always anticipates a reader or readers. As such, we should see creative writing as a portable laboratory for exploring and refusing the process of capitalism's subjectivation.

When workers write, and especially when they write supported by a structure or framework that encourages sharing and reflexivity, they (we all) transform. That transformation is, necessarily, prompted by lived, embodied conditions of capitalist exploi-

tation. However, it also always exceeds it. If we are interested in learning how capitalism shapes the subjectivity of workers and how workers are, in their individual and collective bodies, resisting and refusing that subjectivation and exploring new, rebellious modes of subjecthood, we should not only pay attention to but also foster creative, speculative writing.

In the Worker as Futurist Project, we often observed workers writing about how the struggle within or against “the world after Amazon” creates conditions of subjective transformation. One story follows a maid in a gated community as she transitions from a lonely, fear-filled existence to one of rebellious solidarity and shared kinship with other workers. Several other writers explored using experimental or multiple voices in their stories, which on some level represents the authors’ own experiments with subjective form. In our future work we hope to use the tools of literary analysis to understand more about the subjectivities revealed through their work, and if and when they are resistant to Amazon’s capitalist mode of domination. Regardless, we are convinced they are important.

Third, writing dignifies us, and having that writing published even in a minor way doubles the effect. Typical and traditional labour organising that exclusively focuses on bread-and-butter issues is vitally important, but it rarely takes seriously the role of dignity in struggle. Victories certainly afford workers a sense of dignity—“we fought and we won!” But in a reality where defeat is common, we can be more intentional. A sense of dignity—that one’s voice and existence matter in the world, is undeniably a huge motivator for any struggle. Indeed, successful social movements throughout history have made affording the oppressed a sense of dignity a priority. Under an older moment of Marxist-inspired organising, the working class was dignified as, to borrow Benjamin’s (1969) poetic and secularised religious terms, “the last oppressed class,” destined to redeem history itself and, because of their unique role as capitalism’s gravediggers, imbued with a “messianic power.” Today, very few Marxists and working-class organisers can tolerate, let alone believe in, such prophecies—for better or for worse (see Dean 2012). In the absence of such triumphant narratives based on a so-called “science of history,” it becomes more important to take tactics of dignification seriously.

In our individualist, capitalist society, where the author and the artist are held up (wrongly) as the icons of unalienated labour and creative freedom, we should not underestimate how dignified people and workers become by being recognized as writers. This of course can become toxic when it is only associated with the cult of bourgeois genius, as a triumph of the individual (see Haiven 2018). But when achieved as part of a collective writing project, such as the Worker as Futurist experiment, we suggest it can be transformative. Dignity here stems from the simple recognition that a worker deserves to imagine the future, not simply be a pawn or a drone in someone else’s future-making. None of the writers we work with are under any illusion that their writing will change the world in a large way, or that their stories can rival the story Amazon is telling about itself. But they take courage and inspiration from the fact that their imaginations matter: they tell their side of the story. This sense of mattering, and of mattering to one another, cannot help but conflict with the everyday experience of the vast majority of workers at Amazon and other platform capitalist companies, where the workers’ bodies and minds are relentlessly exploited and their imaginations do not matter, and within a broader narrative that implies or explicitly states that this condition is the unquestionable future. Dignity here is a vital condition in the infrastructure of resistance.

In many of the stories written as part of the Worker as Futurist project, workers are able to band together and rise up (or simply survive post-apocalyptic scenarios) because they are able to move from an undignified space of drudgery and servitude to a set of relations with others that afford them a sense of dignity and purpose. Importantly, in most cases, these characters are not dignified by some authoritative power structure but by other workers or generally powerless people.

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