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Hiba Ali

**Abra**

October 9th - November 7th, 2020

**Amazon.com, Inc. is a warring nation**

The percussive beat that opens new media artist Hiba Ali's latest experimental music video *Abra* (2018) places us along the frontier of the Amazon.com empire, where a battle is raging between the exploitative company and its under-recognized workers. In this five-minute video, the artist exposes the technologies that Amazon.com and its holdings subject to its workers, while asking what new worlds might be birthed if we dismantle and re-appropriate its machinery. The video opens with Hiba taking the capitalist machinery in hand to produce a different beat, one that lays the foundation for a protest song that elucidates precisely how Amazon.com functions as a restless empire of expansion and domination.

CEO Jeff Bezos has built an abusive enterprise to satisfy his possessive desires. Working in tandem with other powerful neoliberal states, corporations and individuals that govern our world, Amazon.com aims to take hold of the world economy by transforming into what journalist Brad Stone calls "The Everything Store." Despite starting out as an online bookseller, Amazon.com now controls approximately 40% of all e-commerce in the United

States alone, with Amazon Web Services controlling almost half of the cloud-computing industry plans.<sup>1</sup> And they are aggressive. Amazon Web Services is continuing to wage a legal battle to win a contract with the US Department of Defense.<sup>2</sup> In the past few years, Amazon.com has expanded into new economies at a back-breaking pace, establishing themselves in security services, streaming services, health care, groceries, parcel delivery, and cloud computing, among others. And so, Amazon.com is the latest iteration of the warring family-turned-nation, saturated with all the prototypical abusive behaviour that you might expect. Hiba chants against the steel: Amazon.com and its subsidiary companies are neglectful (“can’t think twice”), withholding (“no insurance for your life”), controlling (“back-breaking is on sale”) and unwavering (“I only think in labour”).

Amazon.com brands itself as one of the good guys – an innocent do-gooder dedicated to public service. But in truth, the future that Jeff Bezos imagines is inflamed in orange. I recently found out that the official, national colours of Amazon.com – Orange Peel #FF9900 and Vivid Cerulean #00A8E1 – are drawn from an image that Jeff Bezos conjured of open fires raging through the rainforests of the Amazon river.<sup>3</sup> The sun may never set on the British empire, but Jeff Bezos wants to conjure the sun itself, in all its hot and fiery glory.<sup>4</sup> Confronting Amazon.com’s orange dreams in *Abra (2018)*, we watch as the company razes and paints over all the workers, laws, and unions that are getting in his way. It is unsurprising to hear that the company has deterred union formation by using aggressive digital surveillance tools and labour management tactics that include scanners, wristbands, navigation software, as well as thermal and security cameras against its racialized

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<sup>1</sup> For more about Amazon, read: [theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/11/what-jeff-bezos-wants/598363/](https://theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/11/what-jeff-bezos-wants/598363/)

<sup>2</sup> While the contract has been awarded to Microsoft, Amazon continues to protest. Read the full report here: <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/04/pentagon-says-it-will-stick-with-microsoft-for-jedi-cloud-contract.html> and for details about Amazon’s latest commentary on the situation, consult: <https://aws.amazon.com/blogs/publicsector/jedi-why-we-will-continue-protest-politically-corrupted-contract-award/>

<sup>3</sup> Amazon created a version of its logo that depicted fire spreading along the Amazon River. The treatment of orange as fire was concretized with the launch of Amazon FireTV. You can view the logo here: [turbologo.com/articles/amazon-logo/](https://turbologo.com/articles/amazon-logo/)

<sup>4</sup> For more about the metaphor of the sun and its relationship to imperial expansion, you can read this informative Wikipedia article: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_empire\\_on\\_which\\_the\\_sun\\_never\\_sets](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_empire_on_which_the_sun_never_sets)

workforce.<sup>5</sup> These technologies are wielded by Amazon.com to preemptively destroy anyone in its way.

Hiba Ali is one of those workers in the line of fire. A few years ago, Hiba entered the belly of the beast, working at an Amazon Fulfillment Centre outside of Austin, Texas. The experience offered them a firsthand experience about the nefarious labour practices that Amazon.com rolls out across its facilities. During their time at the high-tech digital sweatshop, Hiba began tearing away the layers of mystery that shroud Amazon.com's diverse portfolio of colonial possessions. Speaking over the phone, Hiba explained to me that Amazon.com serves as a orange front for a behind-the-scenes imperial lineup of products and services that are invested in developing a global, privatized all-knowing data hub and surveillance apparatus that is always up for sale to the highest bidder: police, states, bad men, you name it.

And that is why the orange workers, in yellow safety vests, employed by Amazon.com are picking up the tools in front of them and banging them together. Amazon is an ever-expanding surveillance bubble, economic bubble, abuse bubble. That is why Hiba is blowing bubbles for us, so that we might momentarily look beyond the orange paint and yellow vest and see the full scale of their labour. Visible one second and gone the next like bubbles, we must listen to the workers speak up, to sing about the labour that Amazon.com has already extracted and covered up. When language runs dry in the face of pain, I have come to learn that rage takes over and transmutes itself into percussive sound, exploding from the body into song. And so listen to Hiba chant and join the crowd. Make noise and jam the system with interference.

Otherwise Peccy might poison your mind. Peccy is the mascot you didn't know that Amazon had.<sup>6</sup> Peccy is an orange ball of fire, or perhaps a solar flare, who is heralded as the ideal Amazon worker. Plastered with an immutable smile and direct, surveillant gaze, Peccy is the ordinary policeman who maintains the arrangement of power. Images of Peccy are affixed to the walls of the every Amazon Fulfillment Centre, paired with didactic instructions about how to be a good worker. Peccy is a puppet; a virtual minion who takes his orders from Bezos himself. And so Hiba talks back to that bad man.

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<sup>5</sup> The surveillance technology that Amazon employs have been well documented. For the most recent writing, consult Nandita Bose: [ca.reuters.com/article/idCAKBN25R2L1-OCATC](https://ca.reuters.com/article/idCAKBN25R2L1-OCATC)

<sup>6</sup> This phrase was coined by Harry McCracken for an article published in Fast Company, where he writes more about Hiba Ali's work: [fastcompany.com/90329525/amazon-peccy](https://fastcompany.com/90329525/amazon-peccy)

Corrupt Peccy before he reduces you to manageable data. Chant the protest song and make noise interfere:

*No surveillance business.*

*No police business.*

*No oppression business.*

*No surveillance business.*

*No police business.*

*No oppression business.*

*No surveillance business.*

*No police business.*

*No oppression business.*

Jeff Bezos started a company named Amazon.com, named *Abra Cadabra*, named *Relentless.com*, named *Browse.com*. It is a company that is an empire that is a family that is a nation that is obsessed with fire, with expansion, with possession, with murder. And Hiba Ali wrote a song that is a chant that is a scream that is a free world that is magic. It is a song for the river, the under-recognized, the dead and the struggling.

- Sajdeep Soomal