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Version: Published Version

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### **Article:**

Katachie, Solomon and Kessler, Asher (2024) Imagining identity in Meta's metaverse: a genealogy of imagined future realms in computer culture. *Communication, Culture & Critique*. ISSN 1753-9129

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcae015>


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# Imagining identity in Meta's metaverse: a genealogy of imagined future realms in computer culture

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## Abstract

Woven into the fabric of Meta's *Metaverse*, and core to its selling point, is a social imaginary of a new realm within our grasp, one in which individuals are imagined to possess greater control over their positionings and social markings. This liberational promise underlying Meta's metaverse is inherited from past visions of the future within the history of American computer culture. Employing a genealogical approach, we investigate some advertisements for imagined new realms at various points in that history—*The Whole Earth Catalog (WEC)*, an ad campaign for cyberspace, and Meta's "Are We There Yet"—focusing on how identity is (re)constructed in each.

**Keywords:** identity, Meta, Metaverse, social imaginary, genealogy, *Whole Earth Catalog (WEC)*.

In a keynote speech at *Facebook Connect 2021*, Mark Zuckerberg set out a bold "vision of the future," announcing that Facebook was working to build what would be nothing less than a new social reality: the *Metaverse*.<sup>1</sup> Underlining his commitment to this vision, Zuckerberg declared that Facebook, the company, would be renamed Meta, and would invest billions of dollars into creating this Metaverse, advertising it as the next step in the evolution of the Internet, technology, and social existence. Although Zuckerberg's vision of the future may never be realized, it demands our critical attention, both for what it tells us about our present-day imaginings, as well as its potential power to position and drive the present in a particular direction.

As Andersson (2018) argues, the future is best thought of as a "field of struggle." From this perspective, visions and predictions of the future are suffused with power. The construction and propagation of an imagined future, instilled with narratives of possibility and even inevitability, has social and political consequences for the present. Moreover, as Simon (2019) reminds us, expectations of the future also reshape the retelling of the past. Understanding the future as a "field of struggle" enables us to treat Meta's bid to shape the future (through its vision of the metaverse) as an act of power.

We argue that underlying these narratives and visions of the metaverse is a "social imaginary" (Taylor, 2002); one that is woven into the fabric of the Metaverse and core to its selling point. One central component of this social imaginary, we argue, is the promise of individuals gaining far greater power and control over their identities. To interrogate Meta's vision of the future, and how identity is constructed within it, we take a genealogical approach, returning to the past to investigate how this social imaginary has shaped, and been articulated in, past visions of the future in American computer culture. Our genealogical analysis takes us back to the *Whole Earth Catalog (WEC)* and the communes of the 1960s, as well as advertisements for cyberspace in the 1990s, which, although situated within U.S. computer culture, are rooted in

the kind of one-world universalism (Kahn, 2005) that Meta projects within its conception of the metaverse. Therefore, while situating our analysis within that specific culture, we maintain a peripheral consideration of how, fueled by projects of cultural globalization and imperialism (Aouragh & Chakravarty, 2016), certain contextual framings might have global implications.

We begin by setting out the theoretical considerations that inform our enquiry and our methodology. Examining advertisements for imagined realms and new ways of being, we argue that a social imaginary underlying these visions of the future is rearticulated and refolded in different ways, revealing other historical and social forces that have worked upon it. We contend that Meta's vision of the future inherits a liberational promise, embedded in previous visions of the future, to empower individuals to gain greater control of their positionings and social markings; and that, as a central component in how people are imagined to coexist in the future, it reveals productive forms of power.

## Imagined collective futures, social imaginaries, and identities

To explore the relationship between the past and future as an object of historical analysis, Koselleck (2004, p. 269) distinguishes between a "space of experience"—a personal or communal present past—and a "horizon of expectation"—a present future. The two categories are inextricably linked without being reducible to one another; as one shifts, the other is reshaped. The changeable nature of the content within and the relation between these categories makes them objects of contestation. From this perspective, the future is understood as a "field of struggle" (Andersson, 2018, p. 5), which can reorient how we come to remember the past, as well as our objectives in the present (Simon, 2019). We can, therefore, understand the imagining of a future realm, and its widespread dissemination, as acts of power, which work to reshape a "shared horizon of expectation." Yet, these

Received: 29 September 2023. Revised: 18 April 2024. Accepted: 26 April 2024

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imagined future realms do not emerge from a void. Instead, they are produced within a space of experience, and are permeated with social imaginaries, which have their own genealogies.

The notion of a single, interconnected, and fully immersive space, imagined to support alternate, desired versions of real-world existence, continues to underlie visions of the future held by actors in American computer culture. Inscribed within narratives of future worlds, across texts of dystopian science fiction and techno-utopian campaigns (Foster, 1999), where humans are imagined to transcend real-world inadequacies using integrated technologies, this notion has taken on collective meaning and legitimacy. The space comes to be perceived as real in the collective imagination, stabilized by the assumed possibility for collective action toward materializing it, as it becomes central to a prevailing social imaginary.

A social imaginary encompasses “the ways in which people imagine their social existence, (...) the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor, 2002, p.106). It contains and refers to a messy collection of tacit beliefs, expectations and understandings held by a collective; expectations that define common sense about how things work, and imaginings about how things should work (Taylor, 2002). These imaginings, as Appadurai (1990) observes, frame the social; informing collective ways of life that become defined within fields of possibility and within subjectively imagined prescriptions of what life ought to be. In this sense, the ways that a collective imagines its social existence—its shared practices, images, myths, etc.—are as much products of its imagined future as they are of its present, and these imaginings suggest matters of *culture*.

Within American computer culture, as Mansell (2012) argues, we might trace social imaginaries through the history of the institutionalization of the Internet, understanding them to be multiple and conflicting; overlapping, whether in competition or otherwise, shaping each other, as they develop and evolve across time and space, marking and (re)making sets of notions, narratives, and symbols that frame mutually defined expectations structuring the sociality of a collective.

Acknowledging that “notions of collective living, group identity (...) are vitally interconnected within the ambit of the social imaginary” (Dissanayake, 2009, p. 10), and, understanding the ways a collective conceives of what its culture *is* and what it must *be* as a matter of *identity*, our aim is to reveal components of this social imaginary by tracing how a specifically American computer culture imagines life in the present—its ways of *being*—and what it imagines life ought to be—what it must *become* (Hall, 1990). In our analysis, we extend Stuart Hall’s understanding of identity as the “different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (1990, p. 225), to examine points of “identification or suture” that are “made within the discourses of history and culture” (1990, p. 226), as they congeal within a perceived or mobilized sense of collectiveness.

Based upon this understanding we show how, across the social imaginary, identity is (re)constructed as *newness*; an idealized state of *being*, evolved, if not removed, from past configurations, always already primed toward *becoming*—through the (techno)cultural elevations the future is imagined to offer—something more, something better. In different historical moments, a new future identity is anticipated, one

which is always promised, although through different manifestations, to empower individuals with greater control over their positionings.

This approach is particularly useful in analyzing social imaginaries in computer culture as their logics are often reflected in virtual online worlds, which, although envision identity as disembodied, reinforce real-world embodied forms of identity (Schultze, 2014). Virtual worlds construct ideas of new futures based on the promise of outer-corporeal experiences within a kind of computing selfhood (Streeter, 2003); a detaching from real-world bodies, rules, norms, and the identities they define, in favor of newly created ones (Schultze, 2014). Computing selfhood is imagined as an opportunity for individuals to transcend old identities, and position themselves beyond the identity categories that have marked them in the non-virtual world. But, even in this promise of individuality, there is a latent promotion of the collective—a community of like individuals expressing their individuality while creating group dynamics that, although intended to be contrary to real-world norms of boundedness, end up reflecting them.

We focus on identity in order to consider collective narratives of identification that structure social imaginaries *and* the ways in which forms of individual self-conception are deployed in the visions of new futures that these imaginaries peddle. Scholars (e.g., Schultze, 2014; Turkle, 1997) have explored the centrality of identity to ideas of better imagined worlds and the experience of alternate realities. Building on this work, we explore how Meta depicts and constructs the notion of identity in the metaverse, selling this realm as a new space in which, and from which, users can have increased control over their identities. Control is embedded in narratives framing identity as something users hold power to refigure, reassemble, enhance outside of the real-world power configurations that preserve its meanings. We trace control through the different ways these narratives have been deployed across visions of the future in American computer culture, asking how historical identities (such as race, class, or gender, etc.) are depicted and constructed—in collective terms or in singular terms or both—in selected past visions of the future, and what that may tell us about Meta’s new vision of the future.

## Methodology

The narratives of inevitability and progress, and the promises that Meta has explicitly and implicitly communicated, make it an exemplary contemporary case of an actor attempting to shape expectations for the future. To critically interrogate Meta’s vision, this paper conducts a form of Foucauldian genealogy which enables us to reveal its lineage.

A Foucauldian genealogy is a form of critique; a method for unsettling the contemporary character and boundaries of knowledge that we take to be self-evident. As Foucault (1991, p. 82) writes, “the search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously thought immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.” Descent, here, refers to how a genealogy begins its analysis “from a question posed in the present” (Kritzman, 1988, p. 262), inviting us to take a tension or phenomenon from present-day knowledge and uncover a particular and contingent past and lineage that underlies it.

A genealogy is oriented towards revealing the discontinuities, contingencies, and disruptions that constitute history and which underlie the actual and real present. Our present is understood not as the result of stages of progressive development, but as one episode, and, amongst other determinants, as the result of power struggles and forces. In recovering the discontinuities of the past, genealogy enables us to think of our present as the result of power struggles, as being contingent, not always consistent with assumed norms and truths.

As May (2014) suggests, “the present that Foucault seeks to place before us (...) is a present that could have been otherwise and could be otherwise” (p. 420). Our relation to the present is changed by problematizing it “and we cannot—any longer take it as something natural or inevitable” (p. 420). In employing a genealogical method, we aim to highlight the contingency of the present, and in doing so, to unsettle the imagined inevitability which saturates Meta’s portrayal of the metaverse.

To conduct this genealogy, we employed a method of visual discourse analysis to interrogate four documents from three different generational moments in the history of American computer culture: The 1968 *WEC*; MCI’s advert for cyberspace (1997); Mark Zuckerberg’s 2021 Facebook Connect Keynote speech; and finally an episode of *Are We There Yet* (2022). Each document is multimodal, combining text with images, video, and graphics. We followed Van Leeuwen (2008) in analyzing each text’s expression of language and imagery as a coherent whole, in which “visual materials and language are increasingly codified and used in interrelated ways” (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p. 36). Thus, we approached each historical and contemporary multimodal document as a coherent whole, interrogating its choice in language and other semiotic materials as loaded with particular meaning potentials. Specifically, we analyzed how identity and identities were constructed in these texts and wielded alongside temporal framings, as well as that which was left absent from the texts. Thus, we treated each discursive artifact as something that renders the world in ways that are “never innocent” but instead produces and constructs accounts of the social world (Rose, 2016, p. 6).

### The *WEC*

Originally published in 1968, the first *WEC* brought together product listings, theoretical writings, and DIY instructions. In supplements and later editions, the catalogue incorporated comments and responses from its readers and users. In doing so, it became an important medium of communication and information for what Turner (2006) called the “New Communalists,” the hundreds of thousands of Americans who, in the late 1960s and 1970s, left their homes to create or join a commune (Jerome, 1974).

The *WEC* has come to be understood as a foundational document in the history of computer culture (Turner, 2006). Its significance derives not only from its form, but the ideology within its pages, as well as the communities it served. The *WEC* was an early predecessor to what since has been called the “Californian Ideology” (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996), influencing early computer technology circles. Its creators wove countercultural ideas of spiritual transformation together with traditional American ideals of entrepreneurship and self-reliance, sanctifying the use and mastery of tools whether they were geodesic domes, computers, or LSD. Beyond computer and commune circles, the magazine quickly

attracted a mass readership and sold millions of copies across the US.

Viewing the *WEC* through an alternative lens, we argue that it is evidence of a particular social imaginary that reimagines individuals as having new forms of power and agency over their identities and their surroundings. The opening page of every *WEC* issue confronts its users with its purpose (see Figure 1).

The *WEC* imagines people as Gods with a near-infinite potential to shape the self and the world they create around them. Throughout its pages, individuals are depicted as holding the transformative power to shed old limitations and embrace a new all-consuming identity of the self-transformed self. Individuals are invited to enter a new realm in which they can choose to leave behind their old communities and identities, and, with the help of the liberational power of both tools and technologies, create new worlds and ways of being. As the catalogue progresses, individuals are positioned as not only omnipotent in their transformative agency, but also omniscient. With its embrace of systems theory and cybernetics (*WEC*, 1968, pp. 3–15, p. 34, p. 59), individuals are imagined as attaining a God-like vantage point from which they can see, understand, and shape different systems on various scales, be it ecology, the computer, or the body.

What makes the features of this particular social imaginary important is not only what it contains, but what it ignores, obscures, and promises to erase. In the *WEC*, socially and historically formed identities are ignored and erased. This is especially notable, given that the *WEC* was produced in the late 1960s; a time in which questions of identity were at the forefront of struggles over visions of an American future (Heale, 2005). In this context, the *WEC* imagined a new realm in which questions about the painful impact of identity markers on users’ existence were abandoned, replaced with a promised all-encompassing spiritual transformation. For example, the *WEC* ignores whether Black, Native American, Asian, or Latinx people could embody a new identity of being “as Gods” in 1960s America. This omission might reflect the fact that most New Communalists were White, and their communes often led to rental price rises and gentrification in the predominantly Black and Hispanic areas they settled in (Hedgepeth, 1970).

Similarly, although feminist movements had gained momentum by the time of its publication, the first *WEC* gave no consideration to women’s liberation. The few references to women primarily represented them as being defined by pregnancy, child rearing, and sensuality (*WEC*, 1968, pp. 45, 50, 58). It privileged the patriarchal structures that permeate a fantasy of exit; one in which men can exit their surroundings but women cannot exit the patriarchal system and responsibilities of care (Sharma, 2017). The communes themselves largely cemented and mythologized traditional gender roles (Turner, 2006).

The *WEC*’s erasure of normative identity categories is most evident in its treatment of Native American traditions and markers. Unlike other minority groups, markers of Native American ways of life run through the *WEC*. From Native American beads to guides for living in tipis, markers of Native American life are fantasized as integral to this new imagined realm. Yet, this appropriation of Native American markers is combined with a logic of replacement. In the imagined realm that permeates the *WEC*, it is those who claim their God-like identity who are depicted as inheriting Native

American culture, and even racially replacing them. Recommending Jung's *Psychological Reflections* (1961), the catalogue (WEC, 1968, p. 11, citing Jung, 1961) reprints this paragraph (see Figure 2, para 2).

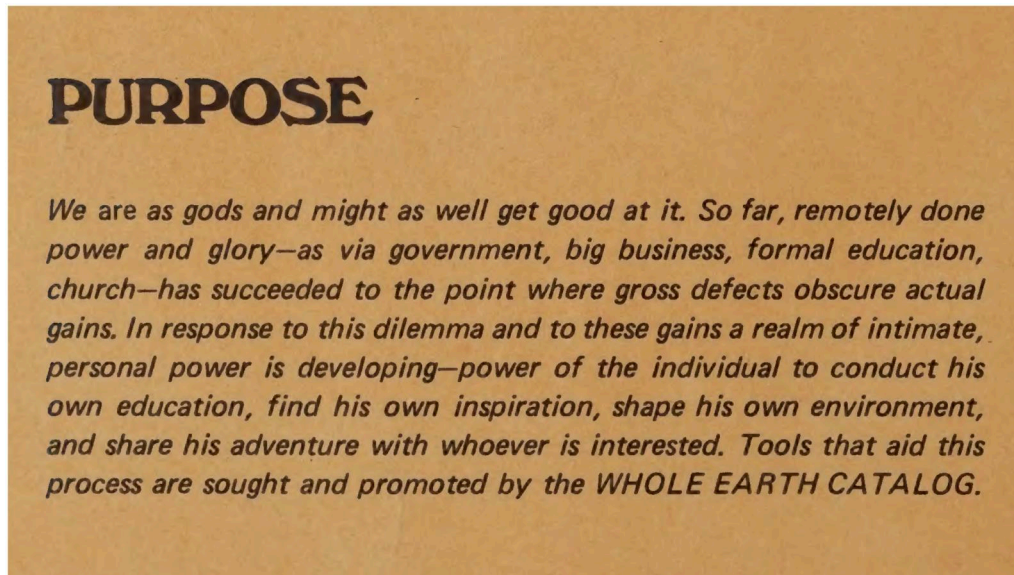
Tied into this social imaginary are notions of the intrinsic and essential nature of race and soil; the American soil "Indianizes" those who live there. It is not only that non-indigenous Americans come to possess an unconscious image of this secret of the soil, but also that their bodies come to evolve the physical features that bound a Native American body. Here, we find traces and fantasies of settler-colonial imagery and logic. It is largely young White Americans who, embracing their new positionings "as Gods," are imagined to be replacing Native Americans in a spiritual, territorial, and even racial sense. This imagined future identity, then, becomes an evolved state of settler-colonial being, which—although already subjugating, already erasive—must take up a new omnipotence in its idealized perfection. Control is embedded both in the imagination of this Godlike state, and in the promise of its attainment for the already privileged. Historical identity positions of the marginalized are largely

treated as insignificant, or else appropriated through a logic of replacement.

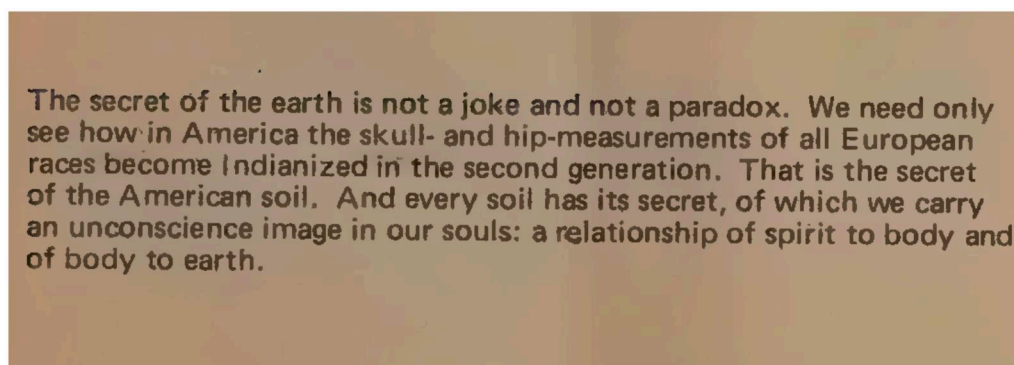
### MCI's vision of cyberspace

In 1997, U.S. telecommunication company, MCI, launched an advertising campaign for its new Internet networking service, emphasizing the liberational potential of cyberspace.<sup>2</sup> *Anthem*, an advert that became a centerpiece of this campaign, is a particularly revealing expression of the social imaginary at the heart of this culture, especially in the ways that notions of identity are made central.

The advert consists of multiple interchanging frames, most of which feature human subjects, appearing individually or in groups. Some frames are textual references supporting the main voiced copy: "People here communicate mind to mind. There is no race, there are no genders, there is no age, there are no infirmities. There are only minds. Minds. Utopia? No. The internet. Where minds, doors and lives open up. Is this a great time or what?" delivered by actors marked by visual cues that correspond with normative representations of the identity markers depicted.



**Figure 1.** WEC Purpose. Source: <https://wholeearth.info/p/whole-earth-catalog-fall-1968>. A paragraph from the Fall 1968 issue of the Whole Earth Catalog describing its purpose.



**Figure 2.** WEC Whole Systems. Source: <https://wholeearth.info/p/whole-earth-catalog-fall-1968>. A paragraph from the Fall 1968 issue of the Whole Earth Catalog citing Carl Jung's *Psychological Reflections* (1961).

The (re)construction of identity is central to the advert, presented through traditional markers such as race, gender, and age, in explicit and implicit visual, audio, and textual cues. In many scenes, all three formats are used in representing each marker. For the age marker, for example, five scenes are employed: an opening scene with a middle-aged man and a small child behind a laptop in their home, followed directly by one in which a pre-teen boy looks into the camera and delivers the copy “no age.” The voice of a middle-aged man in the background delivers the same copy simultaneously. The next frame features the same copy presented in repeated lines of on-screen text followed abruptly by the word “AGE” written on a chalkboard as though by a child. The final scene for this marker features an elderly woman smiling into the camera as a group of children of different ages run playfully around the park bench she is seated on. The simultaneous voiceover effect of both the middle-aged man and the pre-teen boy can be heard echoing as the sequence ends.

This sequence works to capture the fluidity and multiplicity of this identity marker and the possible simultaneity of its various manifestations in the “here” of the Internet; a treatment of identity that is applied to all the other identity markers across the advert. However, this imagined “here” of the Internet is also the alternate reality where “people” become “only minds,” idealized states of *being* imagined within the computing self (Streeter, 2003), transcending the corporeal features that mark them in the real world. If all people experience this place in the same form—as only minds—then, this treatment of identity, in the erasure of all its markers, also singularizes the experience of identity. By being neither raced, aged, gendered, nor marked by (dis)ability, this “here” enables a collective sameness, as everyone becomes, paradoxically and, to a great extent, fixedly, just a mind.

The “here” becomes a place where these “minds” open up to the possibilities of new “doors” of opportunity and to new “lives”; a place comparable to a utopia. In its suggestion that identity markers can be cancelled in this new place, the advert addresses these identity markers as things of the past, and, by suggesting lines of connection to a utopia, it draws attention to the future. However, this future is brought into connection with the present in a latent “the future is now” trope that becomes stabilized by the mention of the Internet. The present is solidified further in the explicit suggestion that this moment is a “great time.” As Oomen, Hoffman, & Hajer (2022, pp. 253–254) note, imaginaries “shape social relationships between past, present, and future. The relationships between the past versions of the identity markers for age (old and young actors), gender (a woman), and disability (a speech-impaired actor performing sign language) are brought into conversation with their possible future/present representations through the audio-visual cues deployed in the advert.

Strikingly, the marker for race is not presented in this way. There are four scenes that cover this marker: an opening frame with the on-screen text “there is no race,” which is cut abruptly to the zoomed-in face of a young White woman delivering the same copy verbally; a third scene shows a young White girl crossing out the word “Race” written on a chalkboard (see Figure 3); and a final frame in which the same young girl stands next to the crossed out “Race” on the chalkboard, now facing the camera. The advert does not represent real-world manifestations of racial diversity as it does with the other markers of identity. This omission is suggestive

of the predominance of notions of color-blindness in attitudes towards questions of race in the 1990s (Kolko et al., 2000); a color-blindness that informed much of the utopian rhetoric suggesting race did not matter in cyberspace.

More broadly, in this referencing of a feature of the social imaginary, historically constructed identities such as race and gender are portrayed as burdens that can finally be lifted. The Internet is sold as a quick and painless fix to centuries of racism and patriarchy, a place where people can shed the real-life experiences and violences that these structures of power exert. For those living with disability, it is the Internet that enables them, and others within its “here”, to surpass the debilitating effects of identity—their “infirmities”—that they may face in “the real world”. Identity, as imagined in cyberspace, becomes a *new* disembodied positioning against the old corporealized narratives of race, gender, etc.; and control becomes promised in their erasure, their shedding. As Chun (2008, p.133) observes, “[f]or those always already marked, the Internet supposedly relieves (...) their problem, of their flesh that races, genders, ages, and handicaps, of their body from which they usually cannot escape.”

In this vision of the future, individuals are sold the promise of a new computing self, which is imagined to offer individuals the power of transcendence over the materiality that partially structures real-world identity positionings. Cyberspace becomes a vision of a liberatory future in which all the tensions, violences, and burdens, associated with historically constructed identities, become things of the past.

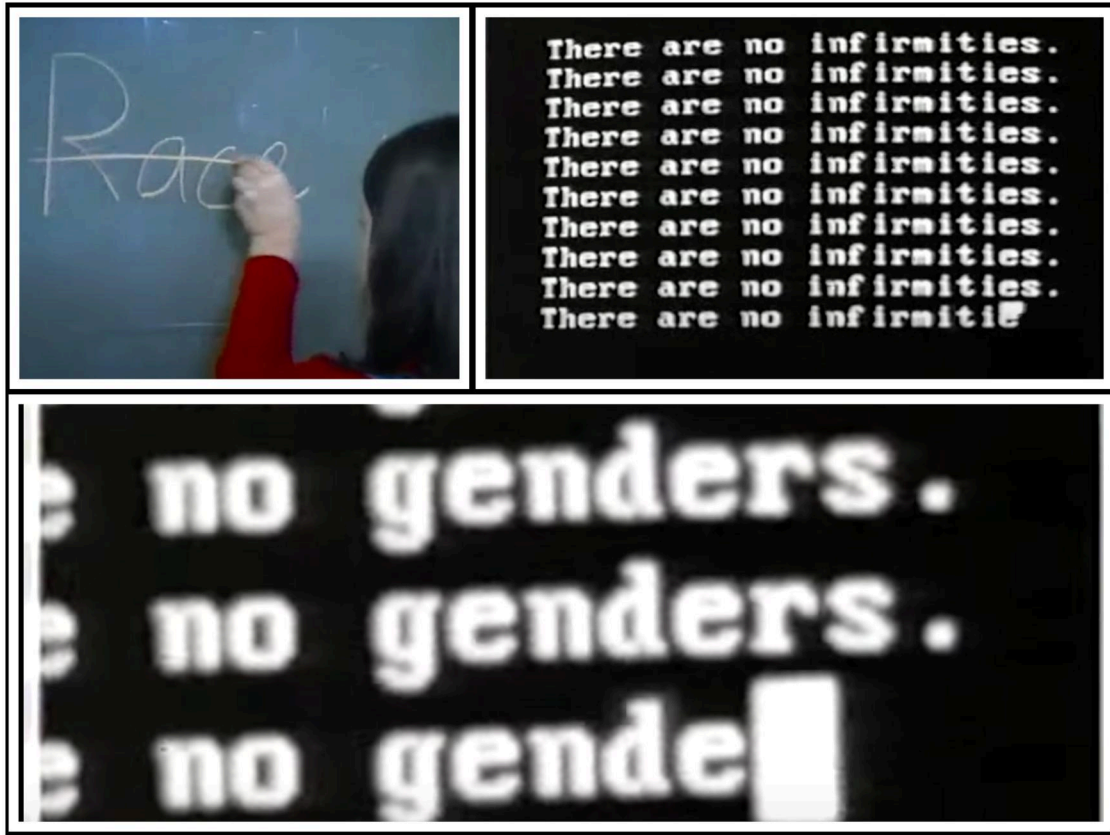
### Meta’s vision of the Metaverse

In October 2021, Mark Zuckerberg broadcasted a vision of the future in which humans would transcend “the limits of distance and physics.” The metaverse, Zuckerberg announced, would allow people to “be together with anyone, to be able to teleport anywhere, and to create and experience anything” (Meta, 2021). In this quasi-utopian vision, people would be radically freed from the laws of nature. Geography, distance, and gravity would no longer be a limitation for humanity.

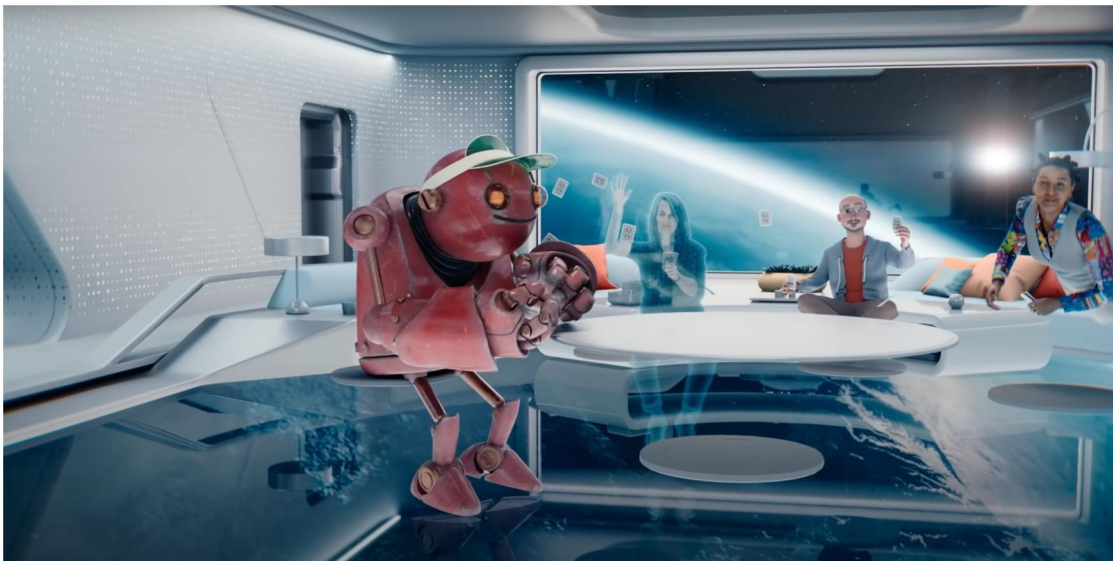
We can understand Zuckerberg’s address as an advertisement for a future; one that is permeated by a social imaginary in which users are imagined having control over identities that they were once positioned by, in the soon-to-be transcended physical world. In one of the first scenes explicitly set within the Metaverse, viewers are introduced to four different avatars (see Figure 4).

Here, we encounter several bodies, each marked with different discernible identities: a red Robot avatar, a transparent and blurred avatar of a White woman, a cartoon-like avatar of a White man, and a photo-realistic levitating avatar of a Black woman. The scene informs the viewer that, in the metaverse, one can bring the identities that position them in the physical world. These identities can be combined with new dimensions, features, and possibilities, such as translucence and different levels of realistic representation. The red Robot avatar—the representation of the chosen identity of Andrew Bosworth, Meta’s Chief Technology Officer—demonstrates that this Metaverse empowers users with the choice of bringing historically constructed identities or to shed them, replacing them with new ones.

Underlying this vision of the future is the promise that for those who can afford to pay, there is a realm in which individual users have control over their identities and how their



**Figure 3.** MCI *Anthem* advert. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioVMoeCbrig>. A collage of still images from MCI's *Anthem* advert, featuring a young girl in a classroom setting crossing out the word 'Race' written in white chalk on a green chalkboard; and repeated on-screen "there are no infirmities" and "no genders" inscriptions.



**Figure 4.** Connect 2021. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uvufun6xer8>. A still image from Meta's *The Metaverse and How We Will Build It* video, featuring avatars of a red robot, a translucent middle-aged White woman, a cartoonized White man, and a photorealistic Black woman all depicted in the same futuristic outer-space living room area.

bodies are identified. This advertisement for the metaverse articulates a liberational dimension: the potential to unchain the self from historical forces that have identified individuals within rigid configurations. The metaverse promises not only to set the individual free of gravity and from distance, but,

arguably, to a large degree, from the productive power of history itself.

Soon after Facebook rebranded as Meta, the company started releasing a talk-show-style series on Instagram titled *Are We There Yet* (see Figure 5). In *Episode 2* released



**Figure 5.** Are We There Yet? Episode 2. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=583074483319234>. A still image from the second episode of Meta's *Are We There Yet?* advert series for the company's metaverse, featuring a man and a woman in an animated vehicle with background art producing the effect of floating through space.

August 2022, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) creator, Don Allen Stevenson III, is interviewed by actress and series host, Keke Palmer, about what motivates him. After narrating a story about surviving brain surgery as a teenager, Stevenson says:

It made me realize that I didn't have so much control over physical reality, which is what inspires me so much about AR and VR. It's giving that sense of control and agency back, how I want to represent myself and my identity. I am half *black* and half Italian. My whole life you know I didn't fit easily into these normal tribes that were available to me. People would typecast me into these into a binary system of this and that, and that will pretty much be erased. It will just be a gradient of identity.

In a startling but revealing vision of the future, Stevenson moves seamlessly from the trauma of brain surgery to the trauma of identity. The promise is one of an exit from the traumatic and uncontrollable nature of the physical world,

and the traumatic and uncontrollable nature of visible identity in 21st century America. Replacing this present is an imagined future realm in which users have greater control and agency, of their surroundings, of nature itself, and of their very selfhood. It is the movement from a world of uncertainty to a world of omnipotence.

For Stevenson, and for Meta, which produced and broadcast this series, an important liberational dimension of the metaverse is the potential to leave behind, in the physical world, the violence and power relations tied to historically and socially formed identities. The harsh binaries of in or out within a group or tribe are promised to dissipate, replaced by a "gradient of identity". Stevenson's use of this phrase illustrates a tension within this vision of the future. A gradient of identity is imagined as an escape from the rigid binaries of identity. A gradient of identity suggests fluidity and multiplicity. Yet, across these two advertisements, there is also a focus on how people imagine they might fit together with others and with their multiple selves within communities of others like them. And, like the freedom with which they can create



and demarcate these communities, participants in the metaverse are promised limitless liberty to choose and assert full control over their identities.

### A refolding social imaginary

Underlying these visions of the future, we argue, is a social imaginary—one which focalizes visions of a new realm offering increased control and power over identity—that has been refigured in different ways. Despite the promise of individuality, these visions of the future imagine realms built on ideas of community; despite narratives of fluidity and multiplicity, they end up constructing identity as a singularity.

While each vision of the future promises greater control over identity, the articulation of that imagined identity, suffused with greater individual agency, manifests in different ways in each historical moment. In the *WEC*, identity in the future realm is imagined as a new self-transformed state, God-like in its transcendence over old ways of being; and control is embedded in the reinforcement of an audacity to both attain this state and to create new surroundings, new ways of living, and a new consciousness. In the *MCI* campaign, identity is imagined as a sort of computing self, removed from the corporeality that defines it in the real world. Here, control manifests not in the enhancement of old identity positions, but in the invitation to their erasure through a logic of disembodiment. Meta imagines identity as a malleable state of being and control is promised in its modifiability, even for those identity positions transferred from real-world representations. It is not that the identity on offer in each vision of the future is the same, but, rather, that the promise of a new realm in which individuals gain greater control over their identity, through an imagined self in the future-now, is shared. In this sense, then, we understand each vision of the future as refolding and refiguring a social imaginary embedded with the liberational promise of unprecedented control over one's identity. Control, within this social imaginary, is situated in the latent juxtaposition of the liberational potential of *new* states of being against the absence of self-determination often found in socially imposed real-world identity positions.

Uncovering how this social imaginary is rearticulated in each moment can help inform us of how discursive practices shifted across time. Our genealogical analysis points to the ruptures and breaks within and between these different visions of the future, and how this social imaginary has been refolded and refigured over the past 60 years. We have emphasized that in the 1960s, the imagined realm was directed towards the physical world, inciting people to settle on land in physical spaces. The territorial nature of this articulated social imaginary is suffused with fantasies of settler-colonialism. These fantasies were not limited to the audiovisual and textual representations. Communes often took land away from local people which raised rents, and they were complicit in cementing traditional gender roles. In the case of the *WEC*, the social imaginary is legitimized by the promise of transformational omnipotence; the ability to transcend historically constructed identities. In the *MCI* advertisement campaign of the 1990s, this promise is more explicit and centralized. Here, the realm is deterritorialized, imagined within the flat plane of cyberspace, constituted by “minds” in disembodied state, in contrast to pioneering God-like individuals.

In the contemporary vision of the metaverse, this imagined realm is re-territorialized. Although territory is still imagined within a virtual world, it is a finite space that is waiting to be settled in. Here, we find traces of colonial fantasies of unplundered territory ready to enrich early pioneers. Unlike *MCI*'s advertisement for cyberspace, the contemporary vision of the future is not one that only explicitly promises a realm without “real world” identities; it is one that promises the affordance of transference, of transporting real-world identities and the choice to either maintain or modify them.

*Foucault (1978)* demonstrates how promises of liberational change can be suffused with new forms of productive power that control and constrain populations in new ways. It is the promise of liberation itself, *Foucault* argues, that sustains new forms of control. With this as a starting point, we suggest that in all three visions of the future, liberational narratives of control over identity become infused with those of possession of and dominion over space. A suggestion of a new frontier, accessible to a privileged few, waiting to be discovered—and, perhaps, conquered—is present in each of them. Similar to logics of colonial (re)settlement and dispossession, these representations pay no attention to the inequalities they (re)create; to the populations they disregard, those they dispossess, or to real-world realities of systemic racism and misogyny that cannot simply be shed. The freedoms the new frontier promises are new manifestations of old forms of power, new ways to extract and exploit, new borders demarcating space separating those with means from those without. To make this promise digestible, the power structures that already enforce these demarcations are rendered invisible, concealing the identity markers that enforce their inequalities. We suggest that this is why identity is so prevalent in the narratives that construct this social imaginary—that is, to escape the exploitative violences of power in the real world, one must shed the markers that resign them to its influences; an escape claimed to be possible in the elsewhere of a new techno-cultural future.

A contemporary vision of a realm where people are able to escape the identities that mark them in the real world and to exert control over these identities works within and on logics of power. By promising control in the future, Meta takes ownership of the mechanics of power that create and sustain real social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities and conceal them behind narratives of eradication/modification. This veiled application of power is not new; it has persisted, as we have emphasized, within notions of new futures across multiple eras within computer culture, structuring and being structured by a social imaginary. As Meta works to build its new future, there are, in its promise, replications of historical inequalities born of the exploitative violences of power; the same colonial logics that underpinned the new futures imagined before its metaverse.

### Conclusion

In 2021, Meta stabilized the notion of the metaverse using a narrative of a future existing within a shared horizon of expectation. We focused on one dimension of this future: how identity has been (re)constructed in past and present visions of this shared horizon. Underlying this representation of the future, we argue, is a social imaginary; an enduring component of which is an imagined new realm that promises to liberate paying users from the historical forces that position and

mark them, and, more broadly, to release humanity from the burdens of the past, as humans enter it.

We suggest that a simultaneous treatment of identity in individual and collective terms, and as something to be enhanced, permeates the social imaginary that underlies the vision of the future articulated in Meta's metaverse. By tracing this imaginary to past articulations, we have shown how it has been refolded and refigured in different ways. We emphasize the inheritances that structured narratives persisting from the WEC to the metaverse and their rearticulation across different historical contexts. Doing so has enabled us to explore the historical and social forces that converged at different moments, and to consider the contingent ruptures and inheritances that shape the contemporary.

In this article, we do not focus on how users interact with these new realms. We examine how identities are depicted in advertisements for Meta's metaverse to demonstrate that people not only go into the metaverse to explore their identities within new contexts, but that they enter this space already imagining it as a realm from which and within which they can and should have control over their identities. A genealogy of selected moments in the history of American computer culture aids our endeavor, as we reveal shifting practices and conceptions manifest within advertisements for imagined new realms. By exploring where our contemporary future emerged from, we seek to unsettle the imagined inevitability woven into narratives that structure the metaverse, to shed light on the contingency of the present, thereby emphasizing that the future remains uncertain and open.

## Data availability

Data analysed in this article are publicly available at the hyperlinks provided/indicated in the text.

## Funding

This work was supported with funding from a [London School of Economics and Political Science \(LSE\)](#) Doctoral Studentship and an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Doctoral Studentship.

*Conflicts of interest:* There are no conflicts of interest.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank everyone who helped us develop this article, including all those who engaged with our presentations at Oxford Connect 2022 and LSE Media Futures 2023. In particular, we would like to thank the very thoughtful feedback from Professor Emerita Robin Mansell during our initial drafting stage, and the anonymous reviewers who helped strengthen the text enormously.

## NOTES

1. In this article we are referring only to Meta's vision of the metaverse as expressed in advertisements to the public. This is distinct to other conceptualizations of the metaverse, the actual experience of using Meta's Horizon World, or other technologies that have been described as the metaverse or as a proto-metaverse.
2. Within 90's American computer culture, cyberspace was understood as "a world unto itself (...) a parallel realm that obeys its own laws (...)," constituted from the network of technological convergences and social relationships the Internet afforded (Agre, 2002, p.173).

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