The commodification of Africa – an ethnographic study on Africa's first metaverse

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Ubuntuland at dusk, captured by the author

Introduction

The acacia tree sways, leaving a discreet trail of pixels; the soft cicada ring is a welcomed white noise, avatars interact, and the sun seems to be in perpetual dusk. Ubuntuland, a metaverse created by Africarare, calls itself the *first African Metaverse* – a virtual environment and NFT marketplace where African artists can access the digital economy (Africarare 2022). Over the past two decades, virtual environments have engendered cultural formation, exploration, and solace for many users. Virtual environments can reframe and rearticulate societies and ideologies, a heterotopia where the rest of society is put on hold (Foucault 1967). However, the associated ecosystems of culture, law, economy, and regulation from which they arise can perpetuate hegemonic structures and unequal experiences of power and access, particularly in the context of digital colonialism (Harley 2022). Ubuntuland was launched in March 2021 and is home to art galleries, communal areas, wilderness, wellness centers, industry, and a collection of active users. While Ubuntuland promises to be the voice and identity of Africa and ingress African artists into the digital economy, it can also be said to reaffirm an entrenched social status quo that centers the experiences and perspectives of those in power. Like history repeating itself, Ubuntuland welcomes anybody to be "an early settler in Africa" and build wealth, but only if you can afford the $300 price tag for a plot of land.

This research paper is grounded theoretically in literature but geographically in the Ubuntuland metaverse and the region it represents. Qualitative data is collected through interviews with avatars in Ubuntuland, interviews with artists that the marketplace caters to, immersion in the digital environment, and participant observation. Through the descriptive articulation of this data, the potentials of Ubuntuland and virtual environments will be examined, as well as the connected ecosystems and structures of power and access from which it arises. In addition, this research paper aims to explore the digital pioneering of Ubunutland as it relates to colonialism and imperialism and examines whether the marketplace supports African artists in gaining access to the digital economy and promotes a sense of community or other sidelines for those

that need the strengthening of the most. Finally, the relationship between land ownership in digital environments and land-based issues in Africa will be explored, raising questions about the commodification of Africa.

Virtual environments

Neal Stephenson's 1992 speculative fiction novel first coined the term *Metaverse*, expressing a location for simulation and collaboration in a parallel virtual environment where digital avatars interact (Lee et al. 2021). Virtual environments allow individuals to create digital avatars analogous to their physical selves and experience an alternative life in a manufactured digital world. Metaverses are immersive, 3D worlds where individuals can interact through avatars to entertain, work and transact with crypto assets (UN Report 2022). Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) are digital assets linked to blockchain technology, giving each support a unique code and allowing for specific ownership (Lee et al. 2021).

Michel Foucault coined the term "heterotopias,' a place where upon entering, the outside rules of society are temporarily put on hold (Foucault 1967). These places exist on the edges of organizations and have clearly defined rules and regulations. If we consider virtual environments as heterotopias, it allows us to question the rules and structures of society and consider which we would like to keep and which we would like to recreate.

Over the last two decades, virtual environments have allowed individuals to explore, express, conduct research, and articulate themselves differently, questioning the rigidity and polarity of the categorization of 'virtual' and 'real' (Foucault 1967). While virtual environments have been active locations of cultural formation, exploration, and creativity for the past two decades, Mark Zuckerberg's rebrand of Facebook to Meta in late 2021 catapulted the concept and word to the forefront of our collective mind (Lee et al. 2021).

With the popularization of the internet in the 1990s, our lives and how we engage with the digital have been evolving rapidly (Lee et al. 2021). Each day we text, exercise, stream, immerse, transact, Zoom, and engage with one another through data centers, cables, satellite dishes, and devices. The digital is the zeitgeist of our current milieu. Culture, laws, economy, social norms, and regulations are enmeshed with digital infrastructure, processes, and power. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated quarantines increased the acceptability and prevalence of digital social life and have shown a heightened integration of digital in life and business (UN Report 2022). In addition, the emergence of a decentralized internet in recent years that is driven by blockchain applications allows people to interact directly with one another (UN Report 2022).

Significant and substantial investment into the industry is boosting developments, and many global powers consider the Metaverse the next internet battleground (UN Report 2022). Along with significant cultural and economic development, virtual environments can risk being owned and controlled by the tech sector, which will steer algorithms, policy, and the automation of economic transactions (UN Report 2022). While the Metaverse and blockchain have the potential to drive change and give rise to new structures and systems, they can also further the status quo and allow history to repeat itself.

Digital colonialism

Infrastructure, telegraph lines, roads, and railways, considered the "tools of empire," facilitated the extraction of resources for imperial centers while at the same time limiting the movement and agency of colonized bodies (Cupers 2021). These significant power relations and the coloniality of infrastructure are constitutive of modern global life and not merely a thing of the past. Achille Mbembe urges us to examine the relenting promise of infrastructure today as entangled with history (Cupers 2021). The cry to modernize, develop and deliver progress is ensnared with the colonial way of knowing, doing, and being (ibid).

Similarly, digital colonialism replicates colonial infrastructure projects in digital connectivity infrastructure (Jutel 2022). Technology ecosystems favor profit and plunder, destabilizing local economies and industries, extracting data, and concentrating power and resources in the West. The legacy of colonialism has left the Majority World behind, vulnerable to new exploitation.

It is from this intersection that Ubuntuland is paradoxical. On the one hand, it aims to give African artists access to the digital economy and acknowledges power dynamics. Yet, on the other hand, it extends unequal experiences of power concerning intersecting identity markers of race, class, and ability.


Looking out to sea, captured by the author

Research Approach

The above critical orientation offers a foundation for my qualitative approach to frame my analysis. In this research paper, I use a descriptive research paradigm to explore my findings and an intrinsic case study method within a qualitative framework (Shem-Tov, 2020). Ubuntuland, the place and individuals to which it caters, is the field site of this study. I use informal and formal interviewing with participants, media analysis, immersion in Ubunutland, and participant observation to explore its users' beliefs, thoughts, positions, and the African artists it caters to. I further draw from relevant literature, archival material, and media. The

informants I interviewed are active users in Ubuntuland, artists who have their work featured on the site, and external South African artists who *could* use the platform to access the digital economy. Creating meaning in my research required a critical and illustrative analysis of the themes, concepts, and patterns exhibited. I rely on 'soft' qualitative interview data to establish the perspective and beliefs of the participants. Still, I include 'hard' quantitative data to understand contributing factors such as historical and contemporary context, public discourse and perception, and theoretical grounding.

I interviewed four individuals during my research process, including South African artists and active users of Ubuntuland. Two artists I interviewed were outsiders of the marketplace, while the third's work was featured in the *Kraal,* the main communal center in Ubuntuland. The avatars and active users with whom I spoke are not artists and participate as land owners, visitors, and explorers. The artists I interviewed are from different ethnicities and socio-economic standing and at various levels of their careers. These perspectives were valuable in collecting other thoughts, ideas, and feelings to create meaning.
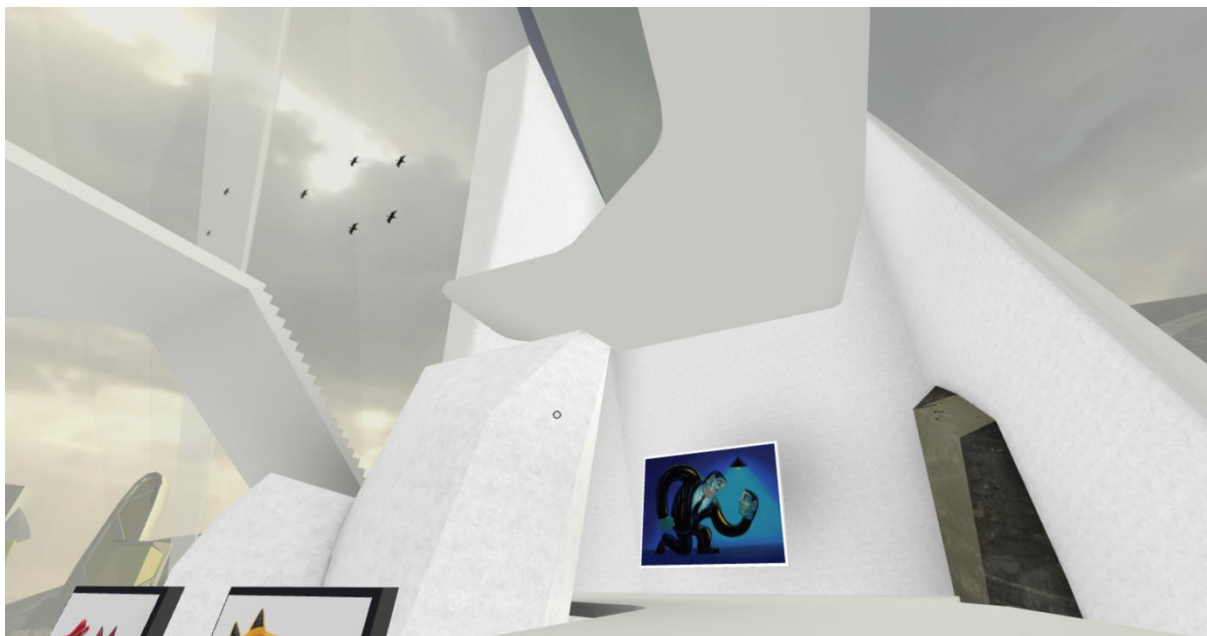
Digital exhibition in Ubuntuland, captured by the author

Bias, reflexivity, and positionality

As I began my research and interviews, I was aware that I quickly developed certain biases about Ubuntuland based on the inappropriate language and symbolism they use in their communications. It is more difficult in qualitative research to establish reflexive perspectives of subjectivity during research and analysis. Bhattacharjee cautions that interpretation and analysis of findings in qualitative research undertakings can be determined by the observational ability of the researcher (Bhattacharjee 2012). Colin Bell warns that 'the researcher's and the respondent's position in the social structure will determine what he or she will see' (Bell and Newby 1971). With this, the social structure and dynamics of the interviewer and interviewee may determine how participants respond. He further stipulates that respondents are not in a position to perform these checks, which should be conducted by the researcher (Bell and Newby 1971). When undertaking interviews, I was aware of my biases on the subject and remained neutral to accurately gather insights from the participants without influencing them. During interviews with the South African artists, I was aware of my position as a white female,

enquiring about their access to the digital economy, the potential of virtual environments, and Ubuntuland. I remained cautious of my positionality and bias and how it might impact the participants. Because the one interviewee is a friend of mine, I was careful that this would not influence his answers.

Ubuntuland and discourse analysis

The initial phase of my research process included investigating the commercial framework behind Ubuntuland, the associated website's language, and discourse, and the site's media and public perception. This work was essential in understanding the power differentials within the address of Ubuntuland that promote its current use and adoption and to which it is attached. Racialized language and symbols are used across Ubuntuland and its associated website. Each avatar group structured hierarchically based on availability is named 'Tribes,' a term in its pejorative sense used to exoticize indigenous individuals and groups. Similarly, the avatars are caricatured sketches with overly ornamented and colonial stereotypical representations symbolizing different African ethnic and cultural groups. Ubuntuland welcomes anybody to "join a tribe," "stake your claim in Africa," and be "an early settler." This language is profoundly imperialistic and displays an entanglement between colonial and digital discourse.

Caricatured avatars, compiled by the author

The five Ubuntuland employees listed on LinkedIn are all white and male, much like other 'pioneering' tech developers. While their proclaimed goal is to uplift African artists and become a beacon of unity for Africa in the digital economy, separating the problematic discourse and representations perpetuating entrenched colonial ideologies is difficult. However, by joining Ubuntuland, there is a promise of building wealth if you get in early, just like the promise to early explorers and colonizers.

The media perception of Ubuntuland is mainly positive, framing the site as innovative, groundbreaking, and a first-of-a-kind in Africa. Many outlets reported positively on the Ubunutland as a landmark for South Africa and Africa. Interviewers framed questions around *"what is the Metaverse"* instead of *"what does this mean for African artists and the economy."* In all 24 articles I read that covered Ubuntuland, only one raised questions about whether an African metaverse would contribute to the redistribution of power and wealth in Africa and the world.

In discourse and public perception, the Metaverse is considered 'new' and 'pioneering,' although existing for over 20 decades and conceptually since the early 1900s (Harley 2022). Lisa Nakamura describes "newness" as the 'toxic embodiment' of another's experience under the pretense of connection and empathy, as well as coming at the cost of problematic representation, unequal access, and racialized labor (Nakamura 2020). Ubuntuland promises to uplift the people of Africa but reinforces archetypal colonialist representations of Africa as 'exotic' and does little to reframe and redistribute hegemonic power relations. I provide this context to show the framework and power dynamics upon which Ubuntuland is built and the representation apparatus that it employs.

Tribe artwork in Vegas, courtesy of the artist

In my interviews, it became clear that most active users and the artist were there because Ubuntuland allowed them to try something 'new,' with the concept of the Metaverse being pioneering and innovative. During my informal interview with a South African artist and friend whose work features in the main center of Ubuntuland, it became clear that he wasn't aware of the site's details. Upon sending him a screenshot of his Tribe artwork in the digital world, he

responded by saying, "where is that?" When I explained a little further, he remembered that the CEO and Founder of Ubuntuland had asked if his work could be included. He had shared the design files without looking into the site and had not yet seen the final product in the *Kraal*. As a well-established and globally renowned artist, this indicates an unguarded and eager approach to NFTs and the digital economy, with no hesitancy or questioning. The 'newness' and 'pioneering' nature of the Metaverse meant that Sam and his team had affirmed participating without looking into the structures from which the site arose. For Sam and his team, NFT art is something they have been exploring over the past year, and they have digital art for sale on their website. Sam considered the idea of an African Metaverse as exciting and novel, an opportunity for African artists and industry to unite.

Tribe artwork in the Kraal, captured by the author

I spoke with two further South African artists, one an interior architect and furniture designer and a photographer and filmmaker whose work is featured in South Africa's largest museum of African contemporary art. Both artists saw the digitalization of art and NFTs as something they were tentative about but understood that it is something that they might need to participate in to "*not be left behind,*" as mentioned by Luvuyo. The furniture designer, Yaniv, described his first impression of the site as "incredibly problematic, and to be frank, ugly." Luvuyo said there is no way his art, which predominantly centers on the voices and experiences of black bodies, would feature on the platform. It became clear that upon doing research and considering where they would like to represent their work, they were vocal in not wanting to display their art on a website that perpetuated archetypal colonial representations. It has to be noted that both Luvuyo and Yaniv have found significant success in the traditional art world, and finding success in the digital world is not a necessity or primary drive for either of them right now. Nevertheless, both are cautiously interested in digital art and see its potential as something they might consider.

Across all three of these interviews with artists, it became clear that they were participating or considering participating in the digital economy based on the trepidation of being eclipsed by it and its potential.

Quiz night and immersion in the space

During my research, I spent hours in the Ubuntuland Metaverse exploring and interacting with other avatars. The nascent virtual environments do not yet bring in as much traffic as others that are more established, so at times, I was all alone on the site, and at other times, I was surrounded by other Ubuntulanders. I spent time walking through the world, taking in the different locations and surroundings. One evening, Ubuntuland hosted a virtual quiz night in which I participated, along with over eighty others. I felt a sense of community during this event and the mutual support and engagement of the others while we all interacted with the platform and the hosts in a fun and encouraging way. This is when I most felt the Ubuntuland message of *I am because you are* and the goal of the virtual environment rang true. The communication around the participants in the quiz was positive and created a sense of community and unity, placing Africa on the map.

I had informal interviews with the participants within Ubuntuland; all individuals were there because they felt excited about what the space offers. Most of the individuals I spoke with were from South Africa, with a few others from Europe, Australia, or the US. The participants from the African continent had predominantly gotten involved because it made them feel proud of their respective countries and continent, and they wanted to "*get in early.*" I felt a sense of community and comradery there too.

Quiz night in Ubuntuland, captured by the author

Ubuntuland exists to give African artists access to the global economy. Historically, Africa must catch up in the digitalization race, falling behind in infrastructure, access, and affordability. The legacy of colonialism has left an unequal distribution of power and access. NFTs hold high potential to boost the African art economy and support artists in ways that the traditional art industry cannot. However, due to exorbitant gas prices minting NFTs is costly and requires knowledge. During my interview with Luvuyo, he mentioned that he knew many friends who would benefit from stamping their artwork, but this wasn't an affordable or accessible open for them. According to Luvuyo, Ubuntuland is no different – you have invited to mint your artwork if featuring your work will benefit the virtual environment. With this, this business model of Ubuntuland is reframed as one of profit and the further commodification of

Africa. Displaying your art in Ubuntuland requires you to have an existing presence in the art world or the capital to purchase land and mint your NFTs.

Purchasing one plot of land in Ubuntuland currently costs $300. This price tag is just under half the average monthly African salary for individuals employed in the formal economy (Jutel 2022). This cost is not accessible or realistic for the vast majority of people on the African continent who spend their salary on the essentials for survival, such as shelter, food, and fresh drinking water.

Active participation is not accessible to the vast majority of African individuals. With this, Ubuntuland displays a subtle exclusionary mechanism that further increases the socio-economic gap in Africa between those who 'have' and those who don't.

"*I would love to see an African metaverse set up by a coalition of African artists and change makers who have the agency to represent themselves and others like them.*" – Luvuyo extract.

Into the wilderness, captured by the author

Conclusion

On the surface, the vision of Ubuntuland is one of empowerment and empathy, but the hegemonic power relations and representational apparatus it employs perpetuate imperialist structures. Throughout my research, it became clear that the 'newness' of Ubuntuland blinded users and potential users to the problematic discourse and subtle exclusionary mechanism that support the perspectives and experiences of the hegemony. The sense of community in Ubuntuland was tangible to other participants and me. Yet this community is invited based on systems of unequal access and a colonial framework. In the words of Donella Meadows, living and thriving in a world of systems "requires our full humanity – our rationality, our ability to sort out truth from falsehood, our intuition, our compassion, our vision, and our morality" (Meadows 1999). The Metaverse holds the potential to be a flourishing location of exploration, connection, and empathy that, with the redistribution of the power of data and digital technologies, can promise a re-examination and re-order of entrenched systems and ideologies and allow for policies for a more equitable world.

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