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Sitting Here with You in the Future: Reimagining the Human Through Digital Art

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Cover Page Footnote

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Sitting Here with You in the Future: Reimagining the Human through Digital Art

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Scholars like Frank Wilderson, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and Frantz Fanon have spent significant time exploring the nature of "the Human" as a construct of European colonization and Trans-Atlantic slavery. Wilderson and Jackson, among others, convincingly argue that not only do these constructions of the Human position Blackness as its nadir, the Black is the structuring principle behind the Human. Under this framework, instead of conceiving of Blackness as non-Human, it is recognized as embodying the limit of the Human. In fact, it is only through the nadir of Blackness that the Human can cohere as an analytical frame. However, this is where various critical schools diverge. Writing from a distinctly American perspective, Wilderson holds that to be Black in America is—and always has been—to be a Slave, and that "anti-Blackness is the genetic material of this organism called the United States." Thus, under his analysis it would be a contradiction in terms to have a United States that was not anti-Black.[72]

While this conclusion is not fundamentally different from the conclusions reached by generations of Black scholars (one can see echoes of Cesaire's equation "colonization = 'thingification'" here), Wilderson departs from others in where he takes his analysis.[73] Instead of taking up the charge of activists that have worked for generations to build a new society—one that would be unrecognizable as the "United States" that Wilderson discusses—he seems resigned to the perpetual enslavement of Black people. Here, I mark my point of departure from Wilderson. I contend that while the Human *must* be abolished in the pursuit of a truly free society, this abolitionist project, in the same vein as the generations of prison abolitionist organizers in the US, is primarily a constructive project focused on building new worlds rather than merely destroying the old. In an exploration of radical world-building, art is a fruitful venue for analysis as it welcomes explorations of the unreal and the not-yet-real. In keeping with M. Jacqui Alexander's call to "engage that confluence of the local and the global," we will

[72] Frank B. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, First published as a Liveright paperback (New York London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021): 196.

[73] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000): 42.

focus specifically on international and transnational art.[74] Through an exploration of digital art created by three Black and/or queer artists, we will work to construct a new understanding of the Human grounded in its fundamental opacity and malleability, enabling an emphasis on queer Black futurity.

Before we begin our analysis, we first need to introduce the three artists whose work forms the bedrock of this paper. Lucas LaRochelle is a queer Canadian artist who built the crowdsourced platform *Queering the Map* in 2017.[75] *Queering the Map* is a website where anonymous individuals can contribute their stories about queer experiences and pin them to location on a minimalistic, hot pink version of Google Maps. The site retains no information about who uploaded a particular story—there are no user profiles or data tracking embedded in the site—and steps are taken through moderation to prevent other identifying information from being shared in the stories. The stories shared here range from short snippets of joy ("As soon as I saw her I realized I was in love") to heart-wrenching tales of rejection and homophobia, to fictitious queer imaginings ("I met a gay shark here once").[76]

Arafa Hamadi is a non-binary Tanzanian artist whose work engages powerfully in envisioning new worlds for queer African bodies. Their recent project, Letu ("ours" in Kiswahili), utilizes 3D rendering software to create two individual worlds—one for them and one for Nyokabi Kimari, a queer Kenyan artist —that embody their personal utopias.[77] The viewer is invited to walk through their worlds and listen to the associated soundscape, although they are unable to interact with anything in the worlds.

Lastly, Natalie Paneng is a Black South African woman whose work draws heavily on the aesthetics of vaporwave (Fig. 4 offers an example of this) and "[centers] around the idea of being watched and engaged with by viewers and audiences."[78] One of her projects, "Hello Nice," consists of a series of YouTube videos and blog posts from the perspective of her alter ego, Nice, where she merges explorations of aesthetics with Afrofuturist imaginings of alien worlds. We will put these three works in conversation with one another to explore a new understanding of the Human.

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[74] M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, eds. Judith Halberstam and Lisa Lowe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 264.

[75] Lucas LaRochelle, "Queering the Map," *LUCAS LAROCHELLE* (blog), http://lucaslarochelle.com/queering-the-map/.

[76] The examples of rejection that I could find were all too long (and exceptionally personal) to reproduce here. The fully anonymous nature of the site precludes crediting any direct quotes, but it also ensures that this reproduction maintains the individual's privacy as the entries are not searchable. An in-depth discussion of these privacy concerns can be found in: Emma Kirby, Ash Watson, Brendan Churchill, Brady Robards, and Lucas LaRochelle, "*Queering the Map*: Stories of Love, Loss and (Be)Longing within a Digital Cartographic Archive," *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 6 (September 2021): 1043–1060.

[77] Arafa Hamadi, "Letu," *ICAonline* (blog), https://icaonline.net/artwork/arafa-c-hamadi/.

[78] Natalie Paneng, "Artist Statement," *ICAonline* (blog), https://icaonline.net/artists/natalie-ann-paneng/.

With those introductions out of the way, we can now lay the groundwork for our commitment to better worlds. Boaventura de-Sousa Santos describes how neoliberal capitalism constructs a "conservative utopia" that is identified with the present moment rather than radical change.[79] These utopias claim that all present ills—poverty, starvation, exclusion, etc.—are merely the result of the incomplete application of the market. In such a utopia, no other possibilities exist; we have reached Francis Fukuyama's "End of History."[80] Jose Esteban Muñoz articulates a framework of queer utopia grounded in the work of philosopher Ernst Bloch.[81] Bloch (and, by extension, Muñoz) responds to a general perception of utopia as unreal fantasy, instead choosing to ground utopia in his idea of the "not-yet" as a realm of future potentiality and centering the importance of hope in articulating visions for a new future.[82] Queerness is central to Muñoz's utopia, as to be queer in his terms is to reject societal principles that seek to control the forms of pleasure and relationality that the individual is allowed. Following Muñoz's framework, art is a powerful means by which to challenge our conceptions of what is possible in our pursuit of the utopian.

Now that we have laid out our utopian pursuit, we can begin to explore more closely the digital world. Much has been written in recent years about the so-called fourth industrial revolution (4IR), characterized by the widespread use of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and wireless technologies.[83] It has been hailed by economists and many scientists as heralding new, unprecedented progress, especially for Africa and the rest of the global South. For those in the South, it promises expanded access to not only the internet but the entire world, while revolutionizing the nature of work for everyone as automation eliminates the need for humans in many jobs. Medical advancements, particularly in genetic modification and cybernetics, have the potential to lead to a new sort of human—one without many of the "flaws" that exist in humans today. However, scientific progress alone cannot fundamentally change the mechanisms of racial capitalist exploitation or imperial violence that form the constitutive elements of

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[79] Boaventura de-Sousa Santos, "The World Social Forum: Toward a Counter-Hegemonic Globalisation" in *World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*, eds. Jai Sen and Peter Waterman (Viveka Foundation, 2004): 235–245.

[80] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York;Toronto;New York: Free Press; Maxwell Macmillan Canada; Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992).

[81] Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, London: NYU Press, 2009).

[82] Muñoz, Cruising Utopia; For further articulation of Bloch's concept of the "not-yet," also see: Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "A Critique of Lazy Reason: Against the Waste of Experience and Toward the Sociology of Absences and the Sociology of Emergences" in *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016): 262–295.

[83] Landry Signé and Njuguna Ndung'u, "The Fourth Industrial Revolution and Digitization Will Transform Africa into a Global Powerhouse," *Brookings* (blog), January 8, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-and-digitization-will-transform-africa-into-a-global-powerhouse/.

Fig. 4: A screenshot from Paneng's project "Vaporwave Response Computer"

modernity.[84] Additionally, 4IR discourses are rife with Western imperial epistemologies and conceptions of the human. Foremost among these is the implicit claim that everything that exists in the world—including every person—is fully knowable with the right tools, allowing for the creation of universal frameworks that assimilate all ways of being. Édouard Glissant writes powerfully against such pursuits in his advocacy for a "right to opacity," arguing that we should not seek to reconcile and erase difference (which is inherent in any attempts at fully understanding others) but should hold it up as a bedrock of our ontology.[85]

Given these critiques, we would do well to look beyond the 4IR for technological salvation. Another analysis of technological change charts the transition from an economic model based on centralized, professional production of goods for consumption by the public into a system of "prosumption" where the public adds significant value to goods or services that are produced, generally with little to no compensation. Examples of prosumption include Ikea furniture, where the user has to build the items themselves; self-service checkouts, where they are responsible for scanning and bagging their own items; and crowdsourced projects like Wikipedia, where volunteer users produce the entire content of the website.[86] While prosumption, like the 4IR, won't radically improve our lives on its own, the sorts of crowdsourced digital platforms that it has engendered prove to be a ripe realm for exploring new worlds.

Queering the Map is one particularly relevant crowdsourced platform. In its design, what LaRochelle refers to as a "counter-mapping" project, *Queering the Map* functions to create a queer archive of queer stories, rejecting many of the traditional features of both maps and archives.[87] LaRochelle describes how many of the site's features all contribute to the queer form of the map.[88] Notably, the site abandons many features that one would normally expect from something which, at first glance, appears like a form of social media; it lacks user profiles; an algorithmically controlled, vertical feed; and a search bar. The combination of these absences functions to prevent users from easily finding specific entries again

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[84] Notions of "progress" need to be problematized to reflect the inherently partial nature of Western scientific development. Since such concerns are somewhat tangential to the topic at hand, it is nonetheless a suitable shorthand here.

[85] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997): 189.

[86] Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin, "Crowdsourced Cartography: Mapping Experience and Knowledge," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 45, no. 1 (January 2013): 19–36. While this source is relatively old, especially for discussions about technology, it should be apparent that this phenomena of prosumption has only gotten more pronounced over time, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic encouraging more people to limit physical interactions.

[87] LaRochelle, "Queering the Map."

[88] Lucas LaRochelle, "Queering the Map: On Designing Digital Queer Space" in *Queer Sites in Global Contexts: Technologies, Spaces, and Otherness*, eds. Regner Ramos and Sharif Mowlabocus (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2021): 133–147.

and returns a level of explorational agency to the user, encouraging them to "get lost" in the stories.[89]

All these features position *Queering the Map* as an important venue for reimagining the Human. While all the stories that are shared on the platform came from someone, their anonymity serves to distance the user from an individualistic perspective, thereby creating a sense of collectivity. Even within stories that express profound loneliness, these stories are located next to others that document a queer presence.[90] Rather than focusing on the individual behind each story, the platform unifies the individual users into a shared, queer humanity. In this way, it helps to deconstruct the humanist investment in the individual in favor of a humanity vested in all members of the community. Thus, since all users share equally in the Human imagined by the platform, there is little room for the development of a strict Other to this formulation of the Human. Returning to our initial emphasis on Blackness and particularly transnational Blackness, however, Africa is one place where the limits of *Queering the Map* become apparent.

If we observe the geographical clustering of pins as a key source of the platform's collectivism, we must also consider the vast regions that are nearly entirely devoid of pins. While most metropolitan areas are so densely packed with pins that if you zoom out too far all you can see is black, there are many rural regions where there isn't a single pin for miles. Returning to Wilderson and other Black scholars like Alexander as our motivating force behind this endeavor, we further see that Africa embodies this lack of presence in the map (see Fig. 5 for a comparison between Africa and the UK). In this observation, I want to be careful to not reproduce discourse that essentializes rural and non-Western queerness as inherently alienating or perhaps aberrational, but to call attention to the exclusions that become apparent in a critical analysis of the platform. In discussing this urban/rural divide, Dodge and Kitchin's discussion of mapping bears relevance as they claim, "blank spaces on a map are not 'empty' but, rather, voids awaiting ascribed meaning."[91] While this lack of a queer African presence is largely unsurprising given both global asymmetries of internet access and the homophobia present in much of the continent, there are many African artists who are actively filling these voids with their work.[92]

Mbembe discusses the ways in which Western study of Africa constructs the continent as "a figure of lack."[93] We now turn our focus to the queer Black artists who are working to challenge this perception, asserting the existence of vibrant

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[89] LaRochelle, "Queering the Map," 144.

[90] Kirby, Watson, Churchill, Robards, and LaRochelle, "*Queering the Map*."

[91] Dodge and Kitchin, "Crowdsourced Cartography," 31.

[92] Evan Mwangi, "Queer Agency in Kenya's Digital Media," *African Studies Review* 57, no. 2 (September 2014): 93–113; Arafa Hamadi, "Artist Talk with Arafa Cynthia Hamadi" (Haverford College, April 18, 2022).

[93] Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021): 26.

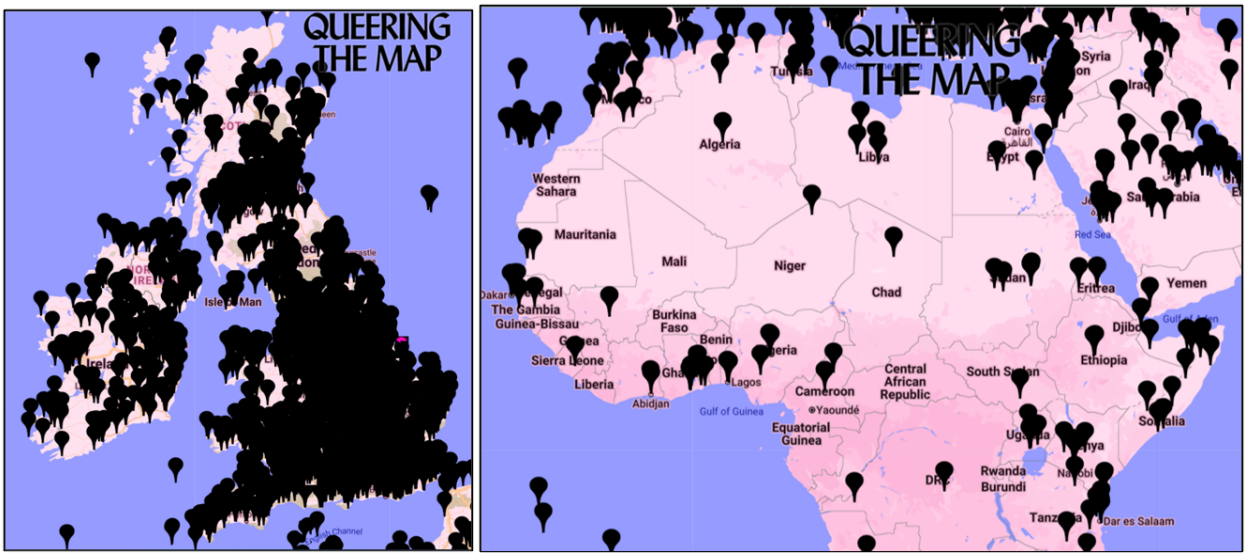

Fig. 5: A comparison of pins in the UK and Africa on *Queering the Map*

queerness on the continent and further challenging our understanding of the Human in the process. We look first at Arafa Hamadi's Letu, where their conception of the work and of the role of technology in it, resonates with Dodge and Kitchin's voids, describing how the tools they used became "empty stages for my queer body to occupy."[94] Their world-building is further an excellent example of Muñoz's queer utopia, as they explain that "my world's ideal, my worlds are unreal, my worlds are the worlds that do not exist in reality," echoing Muñoz's description of queerness as an ideal that we have never and may never truly experience, but nonetheless must strive towards.[95]

The nature of these worlds is further explicated through the lens of prosumerism and in conversation with *Queering the Map.* While *Queering the Map* is a characteristic prosumer platform built from user contributions, Letu consciously rejects interactivity. The user is invited to walk through the world, observing it and the people inside, but is unable to interact with any of it. In a talk they gave on their work, Hamadi explains that this isn't merely a limit of the technology they used but an intentional choice to preserve their worlds given the difficulty they describe of communicating a queer Black experience; if we don't share those experiences, we can enter Hamadi's world, but we can never truly embody it and therefore are unable to interact with it.[96]

Another African artist whose work speaks to questions of utopia and interactivity is Paneng. Through her avatar Nice, Paneng plays with the freedom and malleability of digital selves, not bound to any one personality or identity. Her work is also highly interactive. While blogs are generally not a very interactive medium, her "Hello Nice" series explicitly explores the performative nature of art, making it clear to the viewer that "she too is observing them observe her."[97] This sense of watching and being watched invokes modern debates about the tension between visibility and security.

All three of these artists negotiate the tension between visibility and security, which is highly salient to issues of racism and violence. For many activists on the Left, visibility is essential to security, emblemized in the successes of copwatching initiatives in various countries.[98] Conversely, the racialized surveillance of the state is instrumental in the maintenance of White supremacist power.[99] The strict

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[94] Dodge and Kitchin, "Crowdsourced Cartography"; Arafa Hamadi, "Artist Statement," *ICAonline* (blog), December 12, 2020, https://icaonline.net/artists/arafa-c-hamadi/.

[95] Hamadi, "Artist Talk with Arafa Cynthia Hamadi"; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia.*

[96] Hamadi, "Artist Talk with Arafa Cynthia Hamadi."

[97] Her blog doesn't accept comments. Natalie Paneng, "Building My Internet Universe," *Ellipses*, no. 3 (2020), http://www.ellipses.org.za/project/vaporwave/.

[98] Bärbel Harju, "'Stay Vigilant': Copwatching in Germany," *Surveillance & Society* 18, no. 2 (June 17, 2020): 280–283.

[99] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Duke University Press, 2015); Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures,* Sexual Cultures series (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

anonymity of *Queering the Map* emphasizes security while still making visible the collective queer stories. Conversely, Paneng's project creates the impression of hypervisibility through Nice's videos and blogs while hiding her real self behind the avatar, challenging us to question the impacts of such extreme visibility. Lastly, Hamadi negotiates this boundary through the malleability and impermanence of the digital, finding a sense of freedom online to control what kind of presence they create. Security is particularly relevant for them as a queer African person, where safety concerns are highly salient (homosexuality is strictly illegal in both Kenya and Tanzania). They describe finding a lot of power in the visibility that the internet can offer them, particularly insofar as it allows them to find queer community. Therefore, they emphasize how beneficial the impermanence of the internet is, making it so that they can be as visible as they want and, "if [they] do feel unsafe, [they] can delete it, and it becomes non-existent again."[100]

While malleability is particularly emphasized by Hamadi, it is present in all three works. The archival function of *Queering the Map* would seem to insist upon a certain degree of permanence, but this is challenged by the collectivized nature of the stories on the platform. Understanding the stories to collectively embody a singular queer community, the sheer number of different perspectives, experiences, and even languages present on the site make it impossible to assign any sort of fixed identity to the picture of the Human embodied by the platform. Similarly, Paneng's playful use of a digital avatar challenges our notion of what a human is, always retaining the ability to reinvent "herself" and resisting any fixed identity.

Malleability is further tied to Glissant's concept of opacity discussed earlier.[101] The anonymity embedded in *Queering the Map's* design immediately invokes a sense of opacity. However, if we consider that opacity is less about one's tangible visibility and more about their ontological status as different and therefore unknowable, we can consider some of the tensions embedded in the design. While the collectivizing nature of the platform can have the effect of flattening our understanding of queerness into a single identity, the persistent malleability of the site forcefully resists any monolithic descriptions of queerness, preserving its opacity in relation to heteronormative society. We find a similar level of opacity in Paneng's work where her engagement with futuristic worlds prevents an assimilation of her identity into hegemonic Western norms. Finally, Hamadi's insistence on the "look but don't touch" nature of their work can be read as an understanding of the inherent opacity of the medium. In articulating his framework, Glissant suggests that all literature is opaque, as it is merely a representation of the true intention of the author.[102] Therefore, if "even (...) the

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[100] Quoted in Valerie Amani, "'Living in Digital Utopias': On Existing and Art-Making | Tanzania," *Emergent Art Space*, February 18, 2021, https://emergentartspace.org/?forum=living-digital-utopias-existing-art-making.

[101] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.

[102] *Ibid.*

Fig. 6: "Sitting here with you in the future" from *QT.bot*

most harmless sonnet" possesses an "irreducible opacity," how could we ever fully understand a piece of art?[103] However, despite the potentially isolating nature of their approach, Hamadi's work also functions as an invitation to the viewer to create our own worlds, to find spaces where we can construct the lives that we want to live.

Any extensive treatment of the Human as an analytical category would be remiss without some discussion of the position of non-human animals. Many scholars have documented the frequent use of animalistic language to reify anti-Blackness.[104] These scholars describe how non-White people (and particularly Black people) are associated with animals in order to justify their subjection and eradication. In considering the implications of our analysis for this dynamic, Kyla Schuller's formulation will be particularly useful.[105] She describes how notions of differential levels of malleability among different racial groups served as the foundations for early 20th century racial hierarchies. However, the picture of the Human that emerges from these artists' works is one that powerfully asserts its malleability, thus resisting such hierarchy. While my analysis does not address the claims of animal rights advocates who would challenge that any framework that reifies the separation between humans and other animals is problematic, I would contend that the vision of the human produced by these artists, grounded in principles of malleability and opacity, can be at least partially extended to non-humans, where an investment in opacity would resist human claims to dominance over animals based in our supposedly universal understanding of the world.

In his discussion of queer utopias, Muñoz emphasizes the importance of the future. By imagining new, utopian worlds, we preserve hope for a future that is all too often denied to marginalized people. Such futurity can be seen in another of LaRochelle's projects since the creation of *Queering the Map*. The project, called *QT.bot*, consists of two AI programs—one of which was trained on the stories submitted to *Queering the Map,* and another that was trained on Google Street View images from the pinned locations—that produce computer-generated versions of the entries. While many of them are just as nonsensical as other AI-generated text, one can see the software capturing certain themes from the platform. While there is clearly a lot of pain in many of the stories, there seems to be even more joy. So many of the stories generated by *QT.bot* capture snapshots of moments shared between lovers, people finding acceptance in their families (biological or chosen), and the magic and wonder of queer existence. When they started *QT.bot,* the first

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[103] *Ibid*: 115.

[104] Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, "Vermin Beings," *Social Text* 29, no. 1 (2011): 151–176; Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, Sexual Cultures series (New York: New York University Press, 2020); Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, Anima series (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[105] Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling.*

phrase it spit out was "Sitting here with you in the future."[106] By radically reimagining the Human as something that is both perpetually malleable and essentially unknowable, we prevent the fixing of a defined Other, thereby preserving the futurity of all peoples and looking towards the queer utopia embodied in *QT.bot's* statement.

[106] Lucas LaRochelle, "QT.Bot," *LUCAS LAROCHELLE* (blog), 2022, http://lucaslarochelle.com/qtbot/.

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