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(LGBTQ) History

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Howard Chiang, Editor in Chief

**Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay,
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Performance Artists in Latin America

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An overview of important queer performers, with a particular focus on those in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Mexico.

Performance is a body-and-action art form usually (but not exclusively) presented as solo interventions in public spaces and art galleries. Queer artists around the world have found performance art to be an ideal medium for the creation of memorable and provocative statements that affirm their identities and challenge homophobia and heteronormativity. While the pioneers of this art form as it is known today came primarily from Europe and the United States (Marina Abramović from Yugoslavia, Joseph Beuys from Germany, Carolee Schneemann and Chris Burden from the United States, to cite only a few), it is important to acknowledge the specific aesthetic and political genealogies of performance art stemming from countries of Asia and Latin America.

This article focuses on LGBTQ artists from Latin America and the Caribbean who not only resist entrenched patriarchal and homophobic social systems but also, as in the case of Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, confronted the right-wing military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. The current generation of LGBTQ performance artists in Latin America grapples with such issues as the ongoing AIDS epidemic, neoliberal globalization, violence and discrimination against LGBTQ people, transgender rights, and the affirmation of a politicized "postporn" sexuality. The work of these artists appropriates international queer politics from a decolonial *cuir* (that is, a Latin American iteration of *queer*) position mindful of how gender, class, and ethnicity intersect. They perform their specific identities grounded in local politics and cultural practice, using terms such as *joto* (faggot), *loca* (crazy woman), and *muxe* (a Zapotec term used by female-identified men in some indigenous communities from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, Mexico).

Context

The emergence of conceptual art in Latin America coincided with the political upheaval brought about by the 1959 Cuban Revolution and the ensuing coups d'état in many South American countries (Brazil in 1964, Chile in 1973, and Argentina in 1976, to name a few). In this Cold War scenario of right-wing forces versus left-wing student groups and rural guerrillas, violence took the form of systematic arrests, torture, and the physical disappearance of thousands of people, especially in the aforementioned countries, but also in Mexico, where a massacre of students and local residents was perpetrated by military forces on 2 October 1968 in a residential complex in Mexico City just days before the opening of the Olympic Games in the city.

During the 1960s and 1970s, several Latin American playwrights and directors began to "come out of the closet." In Brazil, Nelson Rodrigues (1912–1980) published his groundbreaking play *O beijo no asfalto* (The kiss on the asphalt) in 1960, dealing with the issue of homophobia (a first in Latin American theater), while in Paris, the legendary Copi (1939–1987), born and raised in Argentina, became known for his radically queer plays *Eva Perón* (1969) and *El homosexual, o la dificultad de expresarse* (1971; The homosexual, or the difficulty of sexpressing oneself). Although Copi's work was originally published in French, it has been widely translated and performed throughout Latin America. In Mexico, lesbian director Nancy Cárdenas's 1973 adaptation of Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1968) opened to much controversy in a mainstream theater in Mexico City. Years later, playwright José Antonio Alcaraz and actor-director Tito Vasconcelos were responsible for spearheading a Mexican gay theater movement with the 1980 production of *Y sin embargo se mueven* (And yet they move).

The political confidence and visibility gained by gay and lesbian activists after the New York Stonewall riots of 1969 influenced the early LGBT movement in Latin America and the Caribbean, which initially adopted the "sexual liberation" discourse, affirming visibility and demanding an end to homophobic persecution. The fight against violence and discrimination toward trans-identified people became visible much later, toward the beginning of the present century. The first publicly constituted homosexual group in South America, known as Nuestro Mundo (Our World), appeared in Argentina in 1967, with a worker- and union-based membership. Pioneering feminist and gay activists were keen on establishing solidarity with the larger progressive movement. For example, a manifesto published in 1975 by Mexican activists and writers Luis González de Alba, Carlos Monsiváis, and Juan Jacobo Hernández proclaimed that "homosexual liberation is another form of social liberation" (De la Garza 2017).

Performance artists in Latin America derive material from local cultural traditions, such as carnivals and *carpa* theater (Mexican variety shows of the early twentieth century, full of sexual puns and political parodies). For example, Hélio Oiticica (1937–1980), a key Brazilian artist of the tropicalist movement of the 1960s, played with gender ambiguity and carnivalesque cross-dressing, wearing his *parangolés* (sculptural costumes) as he danced in public spaces to the rhythm of samba or abstract music. In Mexico, a thriving political cabaret scene emerged in the 1980s, thanks mainly to the work of Jesusa Rodríguez and Tito Vasconcelos, with shows that celebrated lesbian and gay identities while using drag to parody everyone, from the Mexican president to the pope. The crossover success of these performances owed much to the political urgency that recalled classic *carpa* numbers (Prieto-Stambaugh 2000). Rodríguez and Vasconcelos have also been prominent activists in Mexico's LGBTQ movement, often making performative interventions in the local pride parades. The following sections take a closer look at some of the key groups and artists from Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Mexico.

Performance Artists in Brazil

Queer performance art in Brazil includes DZI Croquettes, a trailblazing group that emerged in Rio de Janeiro during the early 1970s. DZI Croquettes became famous for the use of radical cabaret and burlesque shows full of defiant drag numbers, a remarkable achievement considering this was the height of Brazil's violently repressive military dictatorship (1964–1985). The all-male group's name pays homage to the Croquettes, a San Francisco-based countercultural theater ensemble of the 1960s. The Brazilian group had a language of its own derived from the use of cross-dressing and sensuality in the Rio Carnival, as well as the psychedelic motifs and musical innovations of the 1960s tropicalist movement.

DZI Croquettes' first show, *Gente computada igual a você* (1972; *Computed people just like you*), combined monologues with dance numbers in drag. Performed initially in underground clubs in Rio, the show was later taken to venues in the city of São Paulo. This and other gleefully raucous performances defied conservative morality, making the group an easy target for censorship—which, of course, only increased the public's interest. The performances were full of irony and double-entendres, and their extravagant frocks, made of recycled clothes from all walks of life, mixed colorful skirts with football stockings and other garments. The group lived as a queer family, less concerned with “gay power” issues—which they deemed as too commercial—than with the need to include all sexualities and races (Aliaga and Cortés 2014).

DZI Croquettes gained international fame when they performed in Paris in 1973 and 1974, earning the

admiration of stars like American entertainer Liza Minnelli. The thirteen-member group (which included choreographer Lennie Dale, writer Wagner Ribeiro de Souza, and performer Ciro Barcelos) was at one point joined by women performers but ultimately disbanded in 1976. The award-winning documentary *DZI Croquettes* (2009; directed by Raphael Alvarez and Tatiana Issa) has helped keep the legacy of this group alive for contemporary audiences.

After the turn of the millennium, a new generation of LGBTQ artists emerged in Brazil, working with trans and postporn issues. Pêdra Costa is a trans artist and anthropologist based in Vienna, Austria, as of 2018, whose work articulates a critique of neocolonialism and an affirmation of the queer immigrant body. The group Coletivo Coiote (Coyote Collective) became known in 2012 for their aggressive interventions in the streets of Rio de Janeiro, vowing to undertake “terrorism with the asshole” (“*terrorismo com o cu*”) to destabilize compulsive heteronormativity (Vergara 2015, 27). Miro Spinelli, based in Rio de Janeiro, gained attention with the 2015–2017 project *Gordura trans* (Trans fatness), where h/she explores the politics of subjectivation and the abject display of the queer/trans fat body.

Performance Artists of Chile and Argentina

Chile and Argentina are two Latin American countries from the so-called Southern Cone that suffered US-backed military coups, followed in the first case by the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet (r. 1973–1990), and in the second by a highly repressive military junta (1976–1983). This section focuses mainly on Chile, where, during the dictatorship, conceptual artists managed to speak truth to power by means of codified performances and unannounced public interventions. One of the first artists to do so was Carlos Leppe (1952–2015), whose *Happening de las gallinas* (1974; *Happening of the Hens*) “challenged traditional concepts and taboos associated with the body, sexuality, and gender in Chile” (Neustadt 2008, 163). Leppe went on to produce work with photography and video, displaying his body in poses that suggested torture and at the same time a queer sexuality under siege by the military regime. In 1975 he created an installation in a gallery of the capital city of Santiago that was made of a wooden frame with three hangers, each one with a large-format photograph of the artist suspended upside down. Two images showed him dressed in a gown that suggested a female opera singer. The images were unsettling, as the artist's body wore the prostheses of female breasts breaking through the gown's fabric. The middle image was of the artist's naked torso wearing surgical gauzes over his breasts and genitals.

Openly gay artists Pedro Lemebel and Francisco Casas worked together from 1988 until 1997 under the name *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* (The Mares of the

Apocalypse), orchestrating provocative performances such as *La conquista de América* (1989; The conquest of America), staged on Columbus Day (12 October) at the central patio of the Chilean Commission of Human Rights. In that piece, Lemebel and Casas danced together, barefoot and shirtless, wearing only black trousers and their hands holding white scarves, over a map of South America covered with shards of broken Coca-Cola bottles. They were dancing La Cueca Sola, a national dance that was often performed in plazas by the mothers and wives of young activists that had been “disappeared” by the regime. With this deceptively simple yet powerful performance, Lemebel and Casas denounced the wounding of bodies of its citizens (suggested by the broken Coke bottles covering the map) by imperialist intervention in South America and the violence exerted by the Pinochet dictatorship on sexual diversity. Las Yeguas moved on to create their most emblematic work, *Las dos Fridas* (1989–1990; The two Fridas), a photo performance and installation piece where they replicated the famous self-portrait by Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), in which she is depicted as two women holding hands and with their hearts exposed. Lemebel and Casas crossed-dressed as Frida—their torsos again exposed—in an image that suggests queer suffering and solidarity. The photo-performance was printed as a postcard and circulated widely among LGBTQ groups across Latin America and beyond.

More recently, Chilean activist and performer Víctor Hugo Robles (1969–) gained international attention



Víctor Hugo Robles as El Che de los Gays. In his persona *El Che de los Gays*, Robles queered the revolutionary icon of Che Guevara as part of his activist work in Chile. PHOTO BY RODRIGO DORFMAN

through his persona *El Che de los Gays* (The Che Guevara of the Gays), created in 1997. By queering the iconic symbol of the Cuban Revolution, Robles’s public performances seek to raise awareness of homophobic public policies and the ongoing AIDS epidemic, which is especially deadly for poor and working-class gay youth. The thirty-two-minute documentary *El Che de los Gays*, directed by Arturo Álvarez in 2005, chronicles Robles’s *activist* (artist-activist) work. In 2015 Robles published in Chile his memoirs, titled *El diario del Che de los Gays* (The Che of the Gays’ diary).

A younger generation of radical *artists* in Chile is represented by the Colectivo Universitario de Disidencia Sexual (CUDS; University Collective of Sexual Dissidence), founded in 2002. CUDS members define themselves as “postfeminist sexual dissidents who organize bodies to create actions of sexual terrorism in authoritarian spaces” (quoted in Aliaga 2014, 84; translation by Antonio Prieto-Stambaugh), in reference to the *pornoterrorismo* or “pornoterrorist” movement. The collective’s founder, Felipe Rivas San Martín (1982–), performed a controversial piece titled *Ideología* (2011; Ideology), in which he walked around an installation that displayed archival material on Chile’s history. At one point, he stopped before a picture portrait of Salvador Allende (1908–1973), the socialist president deposed during the 1973 military coup. To the dismay of the audience, Rivas masturbated and ejaculated over the picture of this iconic hero of the Latin American Left. Critic Juan Vicente Aliaga read this gesture as “an exercise that demystifies the Father figure, a queer performance of dissidence before a symbolic order that is oppressively heteronormative” (2014, 84; translation by Antonio Prieto-Stambaugh).

In Argentina, there was, as mentioned above, a tradition of gay theater dating back to the 1960s. Performance art has thrived since then, with two particularly noteworthy trans performance artists active today. Susy Shock (1968–) is a Buenos Aires-based singer, activist, writer, poet, and fanzine artist known for her performance-manifesto “Yo reivindico mi derecho a ser monstruo” (2011; I affirm my right to be a monster), calling for a depathologizing of trans identity. Her activism contributed to the passing of a historic 2012 gender-identity law in Argentina allowing individuals to alter their gender on official documents without having first to undergo surgery or receive an official diagnosis. In a similar vein, Naty Menstrual (1975–) is a trans woman who began cross-dressing during the 1990s in underground venues of Buenos Aires, where her spoken-word performances caught the eye of editors who offered to publish her poems. Her work draws inspiration from the aforementioned Copi and Pedro Lemebel, as well as Manuel Puig, Charles Bukowski, and Truman Capote.

Performance Artists of Peru

Peru has a rich cultural heritage, being the home of the ancient Mochica, Nasca, and Inca indigenous civilizations, as well as present-day Quechua and Aymaras. The country was besieged by internal conflict when the Maoist-inspired Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) guerrillas waged war on the government from 1980 to 1992. Notable theater and performance groups have emerged in this context, such as Yuyachkani, founded in 1971 and still active today.

The Chaclacayo group (1983–1990), formed by Helmut Psotta, Sergio Zevallos, and Raúl Avellaneda, created performances in public spaces such as city streets and beaches that responded to the surrounding political violence while challenging heteronormative sexuality. Zevallos's *Rosa Cordis* (1986) was a performance tableau mixing religious and queer imagery, in which he cross-dressed as an eroticized Saint Rose of Lima (1586–1617), the patron saint of the capital city of Lima. The Chaclacayo group “aimed to define a beauty made up of obscenities and link it to a magnificent and miserable dramatic *mise-en-scène* that resembled an opera of abjection” (Lerner Rizo-Patrón and Villacorta Chávez 2008, 152; translation by Antonio Prieto-Stambaugh).

Artist Giuseppe Campuzano (1969–2013) created the Museo Travesti del Perú (Peru's Transvestite Museum), an ambitious performance and installation project that aimed at queering his country's official history. Under the provocative slogan “toda peruanidad es un travestismo” (all Peruvianness is transvestism), the traveling exhibit made a critical revision of archive materials and objects from the pre-Columbian, colonial, and contemporary periods, demonstrating an underlying queer aesthetic sensibility in images ranging from androgynous Catholic saints to cross-dressing in indigenous dance traditions. The Museo Travesti del Perú directly challenged official history as a heteronormative and colonialist construct. Campuzano published a richly illustrated book to accompany the exhibit in 2008. Additional information in English, along with images and a video clip are available online at the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics website (<http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/campuzano-presentation>).

Performance Artists of Puerto Rico

The island of Puerto Rico has a uniquely complex geopolitical situation, as its commonwealth status makes it a de facto Latin American colony of the United States. Queer Puerto Rican performance artists usually move back and forth between the island and the mainland United States, which makes them translocal artists, but also, as scholar Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (2011) argues, *translocas*, a term that suggests the “transgeneric

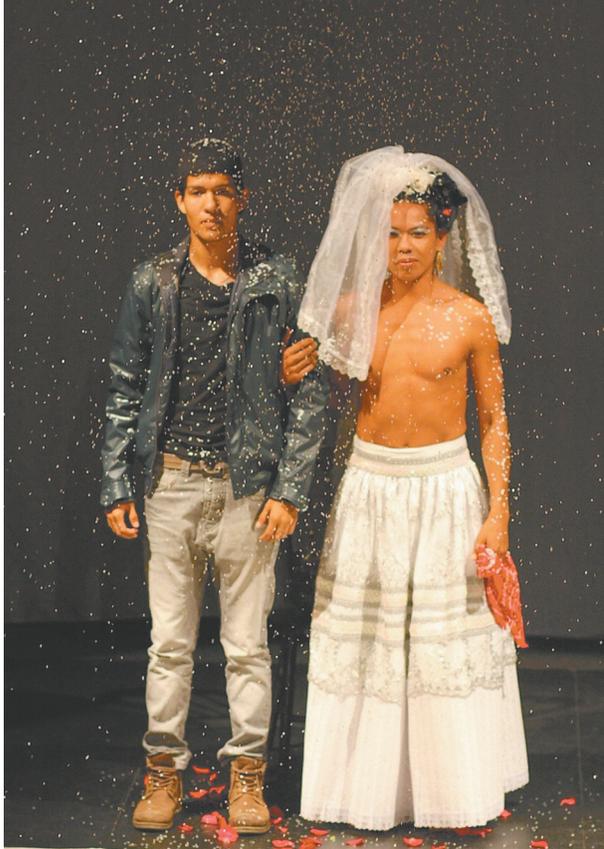
transitoriness” of artists with a queer diasporic subjectivity. *Transloca* playfully uses the Spanish word *loca* (literally “crazy woman,” but also “effeminate”), which gay people in Latin America embrace as an affirmation of defiant femininity.

Freddie Mercado (1967–) uses flamboyant drag alluding to Puerto Rican pop culture and religiosity. Mercado avails himself of his training in theater and visual arts to create bizarre personas with elaborate makeup and spectacular self-made dresses, sartorial installations that often include papier-mâché dolls and other objects. Thus transformed, the artist can be seen strutting down the streets of the capital city of San Juan or appearing in gallery exhibits and theatrical performances. Mercado's work is at the same time grotesque, humorous, and dreamlike, using surreal montage techniques that challenge not only gender normativity but also mainstream notions of race, nationality, and Caribbean identity (La Fountain-Stokes 2009).

Pepe Álvarez (1980–) belongs to a more recent generation of queer Puerto Rican artists. His work mixes dance, multimedia, and conceptual performance addressing the relationship of body, space, and identity. Performances such as *Parentela* (2005; Family) and *A dos aguas* (2013; Slanted rooftop) use a small wooden house as a leitmotif, suggesting the quest for a safe space that requires the collaboration of a family or community to be built. The latter performance was developed with several young artists who worked with people from their working-class neighborhoods in order to develop a participatory “community map” that involved the idea of home building as a way of collective empowerment.

Performance Artists of Mexico

Outside the thriving political cabaret scene mentioned above, Mexican performance artists have only recently begun to openly address LGBTQ issues. One of the first to do so was Katia Tirado (1965–) with *Exhivilización: Las perras en celo* (1995; Ex-civilization: Bitches in heat), a powerful performance that was staged as a two-woman wrestling match in a ring surrounded with four sculptures of erect penises. Tirado and her co-performer wore Mexican wrestler masks, facing away from each other, their bodies linked by elastic ropes and a rubber hose connecting their vaginas. During the match, they struggled to reach the tips of the penis sculptures to make them “ejaculate” with fireworks. As they did so, the performers appeared to both fight and caress each other, in a paradoxical dance of phallic pain and homoerotic pleasure (Prieto-Stambaugh 2003). More recently, Tirado teamed up with Austrian visual artists Gin Müller and Jan Machacek to create *Melodrom: The Making of a Rebellious Telenovela* (2014), a multimedia



Lukas Avendaño Performing Réquiem para un Alcaraván, Veracruz, Mexico (2012). Mexican performance artist Avendaño is known for his work that addresses his muxe identity. In this performance piece, Avendaño (right) performs a muxe wedding with an audience member. PHOTO TAKEN BY LUIS YAMÁ, COURTESY OF ANTONIO PRIETO STAMBAUGH.

performance featuring Tirado cross-dressed as She Guevara, a trans version of Che Guevara.

Lukas Avendaño (1977–) has emerged as one of the most noteworthy performance artists in Mexico for work that addresses his *muxe* identity. *Muxe* is the local term for male homosexuals in the indigenous Zapotec community of Juchitán, Oaxaca, known for social acceptance. In his piece *Réquiem para un alcaraván* (2012; Requiem for a stone-curlew bird), Avendaño queers Mexican nationalist representations of Zapotec women (whose traditional dress was made famous by Frida Kahlo), while at the same time embodying the mixed pleasure and pain of being identified as *muxe*. His cross-dressing performance interweaves ritual dances with autobiographical passages, and includes moments that involve audience members, as when a traditional *muxe* wedding is staged between Avendaño and a male spectator, at a time when same-sex marriage was being hotly debated in Mexico (Prieto-Stambaugh 2014).

A younger artist who has caught the attention of the local LGBTTTQ community is Felipe Osornio (also known as Lechedevirgen Trimegisto). Born in the city of Querétaro in 1991, Osornio has collaborated with Spanish *pornoterrorismo* artist Diana Torres and is known for a series of performances and photo montages based on his manifesto “Pensamiento puñal” (2013; “Fag way of thinking”). In this text, Osornio affirms his identity as a *puñal* (a derogatory term in Mexico equivalent to “faggot”) while also creating a radical epistemology of subaltern queerness where marginalized sexuality, class, and ethnicity converge to powerful effect: “I’m a bronze *puñal*, an old-fashioned cyborg, my gadgets are needles and blades, an ethno-cyber-punk covered with barbed wire, a *cholo* dream-catcher. I’m brown, my skin burnished like an Apocalyptic Jesus Christ” (Osornio 2013; translation by Antonio Prieto-Stambaugh).

In 2014 Avendaño and Osornio cocreated *Amarra-navajas* (Blade tier), performed in a community-funded student center in downtown Mexico City, in which they aimed to articulate “a decolonial-*cuir* semantics” (using the Spanish-inflected rendering of the term *queer*) (Prieto-Stambaugh 2016, 41). Avendaño appeared dressed as an extravagant trans-dominatrix Aztec warrior, naked except for his shiny red high-heeled boots and scarlet loincloth. He performed a defiant choreography surrounded by the audience, as he recited passages of the “Pensamiento puñal” manifesto. Osornio wore a red long-sleeved shirt and red leather pants with cowboy boots depicting painted images of “souls of the Purgatory.” His “Mexican Macho” appearance contrasted with actions that suggested a body vulnerable to pain and disease, using religious imagery in combination with medical instruments. As the performance progressed, the artist’s pain was transformed into a call for community empowerment and resistance to all forms of discrimination.

Another young artist who queers Mexican stereotypes of gender is Lia García (1989–), a transgender woman whose work plays with images of the *quinceañera* (the coming of age celebration for Mexican girls turning fifteen) and the bride to address social perceptions of women’s rituals in Mexico. In her performance *Voz en construcción* (2015; Voice under construction), she appears as an archetypal mermaid who “seduces” the audience with her masculine voice as a way of exploring the social anxiety provoked by a transgender body in the public sphere.

Conclusion

LGBTQ performance artists in Latin America are gaining increased global recognition for their way of challenging dominant stereotypes of gender, sexuality, religiosity, nationality, ethnicity, and class. Although this entry has

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focused mainly on Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Mexico, there are other countries with important artistic scenes, such as Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. However, in these countries there is a relative scarcity of published information about queer performers, who often work in underground venues or appear in unannounced urban interventions. It is hoped that new research will fill in this void.

The artists featured in this entry often also work as activists, challenging hetero- and homonormative ideologies, celebrating queer/*cuir* bodies and erotic desires, and working on alternative community building. Some, like “The Che Guevara of the Gays,” promote public policies to make available retroviral medicine for lower-class youth exposed to HIV. After the turn of the millennium, new issues came to the forefront, such as same-sex marriage and transgender rights. Latin American performance artists embody a decolonial politics by affirming local identities and grassroots movements, demonstrating that English terms such as *gay* or *queer* need not erase the diversity of gender subject positions worldwide.

SEE ALSO *Cabaret Theater in Latin America and the Caribbean; Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library; Madame Satã (1900–1976); Museo Travesti del Perú; Pornoterrorismo and Post-Porn; Vargas, Chavela (1919–2012)*

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Phone Apps

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The cultural impact of dating apps aimed at LGBTQ individuals.

The web-based online dating platforms Gay.com, Gaydar, and PlanetRomeo paved the way for phone apps aimed at LGBTQ communities. When the first geosocial smartphone app, Grindr, was released in 2009 it quickly became an important tool for gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM) to engage in different forms of sociability, including dating, friendship, and networking (Goedel and Duncan 2015; McGlotten 2013; Woo 2013). However, it is primarily known as a hookup app for casual sex. A then-unique affordance of this dating app was geolocation, which allowed users to identify one another via proximity.

Other apps quickly followed, including Scruff, Jack’d, Hornet, and Surge, as well as ones aimed at