



PROJECT MUSE®

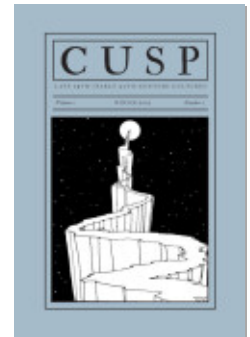
Reflecting on *Argentine Intimacies* , or Why I Love-Hate the Family

Joseph M. Pierce

CUSP: Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Cultures, Volume 1, Number 1, Winter 2023, pp. 66-74 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cusp.2023.0014>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/864445>

Reflecting on *Argentine Intimacies*, or Why I Love-Hate the Family

JOSEPH M. PIERCE

When I set out to write *Argentine Intimacies*,¹ I wanted to destroy the family. I wanted to shred it to pieces and show once and for all that kinship—the normative, patriarchal sex/gender system—was nothing more than a cudgel for bashing queers like me. Yes, it was personal. Yes, I was young and naïve. But there was a context for this desire to turn the family inside out, expose its repressive guts, and laugh.

I started working on what would become the book while I was a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, where I studied from 2005 to 2013. Those were years of same-sex marriage bans across the United States (let us recall, too, that *Lawrence v Texas* was decided in 2003). In fact, one of my first memories of graduate school is attending a protest of the Texas marriage amendment with a group of new friends, students, and faculty. I remember walking down Congress Avenue in short shorts on a sweltering late-summer day, processing through the center of the city, and wondering what could possibly be gained by this type of legislation. I was not advocating for gay marriage so much as rejecting the blatant homophobia that was on the rise, even in a supposedly liberal city like Austin, in those years. A friend was beaten outside a gay bar. A man yelled “faggot” at me from the open window of a truck. Another from a van, another from a rusted-out jeep, in those years, in that place. There and elsewhere. This and more.

I was determined to queer the family. But the more I worked on the idea, the more I realized that the family did not need to be subjected to a queer intervention at all. The family was already, essentially, a locus of queerness.

The realization came when I discovered the work of Carlos Octavio Bunge (1875–1918), an Argentine writer who had a number of siblings who were also writers. I first read about him in one of the most important works of *fin de siglo* criticism from Latin America, Jorge Salessi's *Médicos maleantes y maricas*.² Salessi's approach to gender and sexuality, along with the crucial interventions of Sylvia Molloy regarding the pose as a method of queer reading,³ allowed me to see Bunge's awkward presence in the Argentine intellectual tradition as part of a broader circuit of cultural and erotic negotiations. This changed how I approached the family as a container for literary and cultural criticism.

Bunge was a purportedly closeted homosexual active at the turn of the century, who in addition to mundane but occasionally intense fiction, wrote (and was well known for) sociological and psychosociological studies of Argentine society. He was blatantly racist (but also, perhaps gay?). And he was someone whose work had not been explored much other than surface readings of its Spencerian positivism, with the accompanying white supremacy and homophobia. A homophobic, racist homosexual. Interesting, I thought. And his sister Delfina (1881–1952) was a conservative feminist, decidedly Catholic (even mystical), who scandalized the upper class by becoming a woman writer in the early twentieth century. And then there was Julia (1880–1969), another sister, who dressed up as Sarah Bernhardt to impress her friends, and danced once with the princess of Spain, only to write about that moment that it was she, not the princess, who commanded the room's attention. And both sisters kept a diary, for decades. And, I would discover, those diaries still exist! *Who were these people?*

I was seduced. I was perplexed. The turn of the century, with its decadence and its splendor, became the stage for my thinking about the family. How could a moment see at once the rise of antinormative expressions of gender and sexuality, proto-queerness perhaps, and at the same time discourses and policies that enshrined the normative family as a national good, a bastion of stability in the face of these alternatives? Focusing on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is valuable precisely because of these ambiguities. This *cusp* is when the family was being defined (or redefined) as modern; the alternatives provided by anarchism, socialism, and early feminism were real and

viable, and because of their viability, they had to be taken either as possibilities, or as threats to the social order. This context, with its positivist science and naturalist literature, allowed me to see clearly what types of bodies, desires, and relationships the Argentine elite posited as “normative.” But the fact remained that these norms were clearly in flux, and while I had a sense of how they were shifting, I was not quite sure how queerness fit into the process of shoring up the normative family.

Thus, normativity and queerness became key terms that circled each other, but never quite touched (Foucault had taught us to think in spirals). The more I explored these issues, the less sure I became about the norms that the turn of the century both defended and rejected. I was confused about what normativity meant as well as how it functioned in queer studies. As I came to understand it, and as I would attempt to describe in *Argentine Intimacies*, normativity has actually obscured the forces at play, the power dynamics and the ambiguities that are embedded in contemporary processes of gendering, sexualizing, and racializing bodies that have always been the subject, the locus, of the flows of disciplinary power. It seemed to me that queer theory had taken the normative for granted. I came to realize that in seeking to undermine its violent structuring of the social, queer scholarship had not paid close enough attention to what, precisely, it means by “normativity.”

I attempted to devise a method of reading what I was calling “queer kinship” in the work of the members of this family, so different from my own, and yet still inhabiting a structure that I recognized. This recognition, now that I think of it, was not because of the family’s normative hierarchy, but rather its malleability. There was room for queerness in this family—at the edges, but there nonetheless. I would write: “this queerness is found in kinship’s incitement to normativity that nevertheless opens up possibilities for eroding, refashioning, or adapting the norm from within the logics of family.”⁴ At the turn of the century, as the logics of kinship changed and as the pressures of modernity mounted, I did not see a disavowal of queerness so much as a dynamic appropriation of its effects. By now you likely understand that I was trying to figure out how to say that the family is queer, not normative, and that the norms of normativity are not as stable as we often make them out to be.

This question was thoughtfully posed by Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson around the same time I was working on these issues.⁵ They argue, pointedly, that “antinormativity misses what is engaging about a norm: that in collating the world, it gathers up everything.”⁶ The intervention that they make is methodological: they are disrupting the hold that antinormative queer studies has had on the field by asking whether we really know what a norm is. By assuming that the norm is stable because it is statistically centered (the median, mode, or average), queer theory has overlooked the fact that because they are measures of processes of social engagements, of relations, norms are themselves constantly negotiating their own stability.

I had a similar intuition about the late nineteenth century in Argentina, a specific moment of gender, sexual, and ethnic instability, in which nationalism and normativity became part of the fundamental apparatus of state-building and modernization. I agree with Wiegman and Wilson when they suggest that queer theory’s antinormativity tends to “project stability and immobility onto normativity.”⁷ The norm is not a prescriptive identity category, but, as I argue, “one that accrues value and meaning through its negotiation with sexual, gender, and erotic differences.”⁸ (Why I hid this in a footnote, I do not know.) Norms cannot function without that which exists outside of them. The norm depends on that constitutive outside, that contrast, to be understood as such. But norms are also mobile. And that agility, that capacity to endure across time and bodies is something that, in my view, needed to be further explored.

And while I think I have managed to do so in the book, I also think that doing so required a dense reading of multiple forms of cultural production. This is a question of scope. How does one make an argument about normativity at the turn of the century, while at the same time laying out the context through which those norms actually mean something in their own milieu? If I had it to do over again, I still would choose to develop the method and the context, rather than positing a comparative or transnational approach. That is a different project, and one that would certainly have value, but I wouldn’t have been able to do that without first wading into the mire of memoirs, diaries, essays, pedagogical works, fiction, poetry, and photographs, all of which make up the corpus of production by members of this family.

I do wish I had done a better job of toggling between the norms expressed by the elite (by members of the Bunge family) and those expressed by the emergent and politically daring anarchist and free love movements, and by the proletarian masses. A comparative project of Latin American queer kinship might take those tensions as a core thematic while also attending to the different processes of racialization that national cultures were taking up at the turn of the century. Such an approach might ask how the Argentine case differs from that of Peru or Mexico or Brazil (or all three) in terms of the models of kinship that became possible (or were foreclosed) considering the nationalization of the idealized (and differently racialized) family as a model of social cohesion. It is a common enough dilemma: what we gain in contrast through comparison, we lose in specificity and focus through deep contextualization. But I am also, now, circumspect about the utility of nation-to-nation case studies, which reify the state as a viable locus of analysis. In the epilogue of *Argentine Intimacies*, I attempted to chart some possible modes of engagement with and as Latin American queer studies (if such a thing exists). As I note there, I am interested in developing scalar methods that can shift from local to regional to hemispheric American understandings of cultural expression. This impulse was also one of the motivating factors behind the collective editorial project that produced a 2021 special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, entitled “Cuir/Queer Américas: Translation, Decoloniality, and the Incommensurable.”⁹

Throughout the book, I had to navigate the role of Latin American and Argentine discourses on racial and class decadence, immigration, disease, gender and sexuality, and family, while not presuming in advance that those discourses would be the same as what emerged in Europe at this time. Obviously, the Argentines were aware of the developments in science, literature, and medicine in Europe. The elite often spoke French and English fluently, read widely, and saw the grand tour of Europe’s capitols as a rite of passage, but this does not mean that, for example, European ideas of racial decadence could be applied in the same way in a different context where the reality of racial mixing was both omnipresent and a national “problem” to be solved. In fact, I sometimes imagine that the book is also a meditation on whiteness in Argentina—on how elite discourses around Euro-Argentine

(*criollo*) populations, with the family as synecdoche, generated instability, rather than fixity with regard to their own understanding of what it meant to be Argentine. The imaginary of Argentina's supposed whiteness is something that needs to be understood and critiqued again and again. The point is that without studying the contradictions between social, political, and intimate writing, I would not have been able to understand how the norms that are described in public are in fact undermined by the desires expressed in private.

I was left with a crucial methodological question: how do I read the cultural, artistic, and political discourses of this period not for what they ought to say (not what I expected), but for how they destabilize established hierarchies and forms of relating to power that are located in the family? Attending to this problem, I tried not to limit my research to the construction of a public, national identity, but to home in on the tensions that emerged from within spaces of intimacy and domesticity. Contrasting public (national) and private (domestic) cultural production allowed me to chart fluctuations in the norm. I was able to see how gender, sexual, and racial norms were shaped not only as a matter of public policy, but rather as a set of intimate negotiations.

Let me give an example. When I was researching the diaries of Julia and Delfina Bunge, I expected to find that each sister wrote an account of her life as part of the upper class. They were young women in the prime of their youth, members of the landed elite in Buenos Aires, and well connected by virtue of their siblings and their parents. I thought their diaries would relate how they, too, sought to participate in the courtship rituals of young women (“*niñas*,” as they were called) in this era of opulence in the late nineteenth century. But what I found was that they were quite dissatisfied with what the family had planned for them. This is particularly true of Delfina. She expressed on several occasions a desire to be a pianist or a writer. But neither of these professions were available to her as a member of the elite. To be a woman writer was taboo. On several occasions, in fact, Delfina transcribes conversations with her mother, María Luisa Arteaga (1853–1934). And in those conversations Delfina tells her mother that she does not ever want to marry and that she does not see marriage as anything more than a form of limiting women's freedom. I knew she did eventually

marry, and the man she married was a Catholic nationalist named Manuel Gálvez (1882–1962), who was himself a prolific novelist. But I did not know that she was not keen on marrying at all before they met. Now, what to make of this?

This contradiction is interesting because it reveals how the normative—maintaining a heteronormative, patriarchal, elite family structure—was being undermined from within just such a family. Delfina did not want to become what the family was prescribing for her, and would proudly exclaim in her youth a desire to remain a spinster. But what I find fascinating about this evidence is not simply that she admitted as much in her diary, but that her diary actually records conversations that she had with her mother. They had these conversations. They negotiated what it would have meant for Delfina to become a writer, not to marry, or, as I also document, to move out of the family home to go live with her brother, Carlos Octavio. Again, I could not reconcile what I was reading with what I thought I would find.

Over the years, I revised the way I framed the project. In the end, rather than an intellectual history of family life, the book (much different than the dissertation) became a case study of how queerness and normativity negotiate and were negotiated by members of the elite in order to maintain power. I do not trace deviations from the norm, as in Foucault, and as in much queer studies scholarship, but rather attempt to highlight the very ambiguities that emerge from within the locus of normativity: the family.

Another way of thinking about this is to say that normativity is invested in discovering queerness so that it can become queer, and thus incorporate that queerness into the norm. The norm thus shifts the margins of what counts as norm and what counts as queer, expanding and contracting as part of a historical process by which the structures of patriarchal domination, heteronormativity, and capitalist production adapt to emergent contexts.

But I am often struck by the question posed by my own work, which, perhaps, I still do not know how to answer: what does such a normative family have to say about queerness? The answer may reside in squarely interrogating the field of desire that the family mobilizes in its constantly adapting configurations. To do so, we have to look at how

members of the elite—those wielding normativity (and the family) like a cudgel—describe the threats they see, the strategies they take up to neutralize, erase, or absorb those threats, and what Faustian pacts they make to uphold their own sense of moral and social superiority. And we have to look at how those very families undermine the family from within its sacred structures.

Let me conclude with a confession: I purposefully did not examine the photograph that I use on the cover of the book in the text itself. It is an arresting image, lush and layered. I want you to ask, as I did, who are those girls(?)? I want you to examine their clothing and their pose, their ability to hold the photographer's gaze, and I want you to turn the first page and see: *Augusto and Carlos Octavio Bunge, ca. 1880*. What did you expect, what gendered expectations enveloped this book, by virtue of its cover image, and you with it? Perhaps there is in this tactile invitation to place yourself in relation to the children on the book's cover a sense of the ambivalence that the family both desires and fears. Perhaps, and this is my hope, you can recall a photograph of your own, of your family—chosen, made, constructed—and in that recollection, feel at once a hint of nostalgia for a lost stability and the possibilities of an otherwise kinship. In this regard, I am encouraged by a forthcoming volume edited by Elizabeth Freeman and Tyler Bradway, entitled *Queer Kinship: Erotic Affinities and the Politics of Belonging*. If the essays there are any indication, we are approaching a moment when the norms that have governed family life across contexts and historical periods are no longer left unexamined and unquestioned but taken as the prime location for the interdisciplinary study of how power functions, how it has always functioned, in the modern world. Crucially, this work cannot (and does not) limit itself to the study of our present moment in which legal gains for inclusion into the state (i.e., marriage equality) are taken as isolated expressions of activism, but rather, as fluctuating, ambivalent processes with long histories and uneven distributions across geopolitical borders. That is the work, at the margins, on the cusp, overflowing and contradictory.

Stony Brook University

NOTES

- 1 Joseph M. Pierce, *Argentine Intimacies: Queer Kinship in an Age of Splendor, 1890–1910* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019).
- 2 Jorge Salessi, *Médicos maleantes y maricas: Higiene, criminología y homosexualidad en la construcción de la nación Argentina (Buenos Aires, 1871–1914)* (Rosario, Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo, 1995).
- 3 Sylvia Molloy, “The Politics of Posing” in *Hispanisms and Homosexualities*, ed. Sylvia Molloy and Robert McKee Irwin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).
- 4 Pierce, *Argentine Intimacies*, 16.
- 5 Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, “Introduction: Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 26, no. 1 (2015): 1–25.
- 6 Wiegman and Wilson, “Introduction,” 17.
- 7 Wiegman and Wilson, “Introduction,” 13.
- 8 Pierce, 285n8.
- 9 Joseph M. Pierce, María Amelia Viteri, Diego Falconí Trávez, Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, and Lourdes Martínez-Echazábal, “Introduction: Cuir/Queer Américas: Translation, Decoloniality, and the Incommensurable,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 27, no. 3 (2021): 321–27.