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A Terrible Inheritance: Queer Kinship and Diary Writing in Argentina's Age of Splendor 1890-1910

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At its core, *Argentine Intimacies* is about the paradoxes of kinship. It describes how political, economic, and cultural changes in Argentina in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries mobilized contradictory responses to what family meant, what it could mean, and for whom. In a broad sense, it is about the power of the family as an ideological framework and contradictory set of relational norms. It deals with the development of nationalism, the fear of social and demographic change, economic promise and decline, the relationship between normativity and queerness, and the intersections of sexuality, gender, race, and class.

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To approach these issues, I anchor this book in a particular place and time, and on four related individuals. The Bunge siblings, Carlos Octavio (1875-1918), Julia Valentina (1880-1969), Alejandro (1880-1943), and Delfina (1881-1952), were part of a generation of eight.<sup>1</sup> Carlos Octavio was a renowned social psychologist; Alejandro was a prominent economist; Julia was an educator and philanthropist, while Delfina, wrote numerous books of poetry, memoirs, and essays. They were part of the network of landed elite that consolidated power over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through strategic marriages, political alliances, and business savvy that came to be known as the Argentine oligarchy.<sup>2</sup> And they were a family of writers who wrote about family.

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In fact, the two sisters, Julia and Delfina collaborated on what, to my knowledge represents a unique coincidence in Argentine –and even Latin American—culture: they are sisters who 1) simultaneously kept a diary for an extended period of time, 2) shared, read, and commented on reading each other’s diaries, and 3) though under quite different circumstances, published them subsequently.

Delfina Bunge kept a diary from age 15 in 1897 until her death in 1952 at age 70, a voluminous archive of more than 10,000 handwritten and typed pages. Julia began her own journal in 1903 and wrote consistently until 1911, when, at least for a time, she gave up the practice. This text was eventually published by Emecé in 1965 under the title *Life: Marvelous Epoch 1903-1911*. [Emecé published the work of Jorge Luis Borges, among other important figures]. Delfina’s diary, in contrast, remained unpublished for decades until Lucía Gálvez, a historian and Delfina’s granddaughter, published a selection with commentary entitled *Delfina Bunge: Intimate Diaries of a Brilliant Epoch* with the multinational publishing house Planeta in 2000.

[Before moving to some examples, I want to explain a bit how I am thinking about queer kinship, and how I am approaching this particular archive and diary practice.]

### The Diary as a queer genre

The diary is a queer genre. It does not require a plot to make sense. It signifies in the moment of—and by virtue of—the very act of writing. What is more, the diary need not even *be* writing. It may include peritexts as well as objects: clippings of hair, pressed flowers, correspondence, sketches. That is, it may function simultaneously as text and archive. Its voice is

citational, filled with other voices both collective and individual, characteristically heteroglossic.<sup>3</sup> The diarist can relive previous moments by reading the text, which doubles back and leaps forward in time. This iterative nature relies on the relation between time and the diarist, even if the writing is not necessarily constant (a day, a week, a year may pass between entries). With neither the benefit of hindsight nor the imperative to link particular life moments through a cohesive narrative, the diary is often incomplete, full of gaps, non-linear, and open ended (Lejeune 170). But even if the diary may record the present, as it may reflect on the past, it always retains the possibility of a future. As Phillipe Lejeune notes: “All journal writing assumes the intention to write at least one more time, an entry that will call for yet another one, and so on without end” (188-89). Thus, the mode of the diary is dialogical and diachronic, but it always retains a sense of futurity. Those blank pages left to write point to more days, more writing, more life yet to record, a self-in-process.

The Bunge sisters write each other and themselves in their mutually defining diaries, which reveal the self to be part of an ongoing historical and familial legacy, but also a relational construct. If the form of the diary—in its structuring of rationality—defines the possibilities and limits of self-knowledge, then it also produces, rather than simply records the self who writes. That is, its form influences the personal, affective, and cognitive relationships that emerge on its pages. This means, finally, that the diary is not simply a record of self, but as Foucault would put it, a technology of self-making.

I should clarify that the archive that I am studying, these diaries, are not “original” manuscript diaries. In fact, Delfina copied, by hand and later in typescript, all of her own original diaries, a project of systematizing her notebooks that she began in 1928 and continued throughout her life. She actually refers to them as her “cuadernos-copia” (“journal copies”). This

was a monumental undertaking, one that Delfina describes in an introductory page, dated October of 1943, which is where I sourced the title of this talk:

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...I feel like I am leaving a terrible inheritance. And for whom? For my children? An obligation . . . But on the other hand I think, once again, what something like this would have been for me, written by my mother in her youth, or by my grandmother! It would have been *of enormous interest*. And then I think of Lucía, of Verónica, of other granddaughters who could come along . . . or grandsons. Among them one of them might turn out like me, a fan of authentic Diaries and intimate papers.

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And later:

I say that this is fun. But on the other hand, it does me violence; I have to hurt myself, in order to copy things just as they are, when correcting them could improve so much. When I see that some term is lacking—in those years of my youth—to better express what I want, and that I couldn't find it then, and since it is so easy for me to add it now; I have to leave it like it is! . . . The remedy to this pain are the notes that I add in red ink.

(Notebook V, pp. 1703-4, emphasis and ellipses original)

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[So, you can see here the palimpsest of the diary. Here is an original page that was cut out and glued. The copy. And the annotation in red. I will refer to the materiality of these archives later.]

For now: what is this terrible inheritance?

First, this note documents the labor that Delfina invests in organizing, copying, and *not editing* the diaries. This is no small task, and one that, as she points out, seems “violent” precisely because copying the text sparks her desire to perfect the narration of memory. She finds it difficult to relive this past without imagining—even creating—a different past. The effect of transcribing and not simply rereading the diary adds a layer of affective labor, of pain. Second, this is a project that Delfina carries out explicitly in the name of kinship. The Lucía that she mentions in the text is the same Lucía Gálvez who would, half a century later, actually take up the task of editing these diaries for publication. The diary presages the connection between these two women, seeming to map a future project, or rather the continuation of a project of conserving the notebooks for her family. Even those seemingly banal details that the diary inevitably contains might—in the future—prove important.

Delfina describes these notebooks as a family legacy that she would have liked to possess, a way of knowing the past, of relating to her family through the textual archive. The diary here functions, again, dialogically, stretching the present of writing to the present of copying, to the future-present of reading, editing, and eventually publishing. This is the *what if* of the diary, its gesture toward not only a future self yet to be lived, but also other future selves/readers/family members yet to emerge on the horizon of subjective possibility. This introductory note is written in one present (1943) about writing a past life lived that also recognizes possible future readers.

I wonder if Delfina could have imagined us, here, now, this book, this lecture?

Sisters Writing, Sisters Reading

Julia, for her part, begins her published diary with a matter of fact statement: “Me decidí por fin, pero lo que a otros les parece lo más natural, escribir cada día lo que se piensa” (“I have decided at last, what for other people seems so natural, to write down my thoughts each day”; 15). As with most diarists, she starts by describing the origin of her writing practice and her commitment to daily entries, what Lejeune would call opening “a new territory of writing” (187). Almost apologetic, Julia frames the practice of keeping a diary as an individual decision that also responds to “what for other people seems so natural”. This individual decision is part of a cultural landscape. This territory may be new, but it is already populated by others. What is more, when Julia likens the practice of diary writing to an archival record, she also reveals the fragmentation of the self who writes the diary. The grammatical shift from the active voice, “me decidí” (I decided, in the preterit), to the passive “lo que se piensa” (what one thinks), underscores that writing the self is not always a direct transposition of the writer’s thoughts. Rather, what we see in this case is a negotiation of different selves. This multiplicity takes shape as Julia continues, “I have put myself before my conscience and I ask it: what do you feel?—I need to know” (15). Her individual consciousness emerges out of a call and response that is initiated by the self and which is carried out through the process of writing. The pages of the journal are imagined as a mirror that reflects back not the physical image of self—not Julia’s body—but the consciousness of she who interrogates herself through it. Not a Lacanian mirroring that gives way to subjective identification, but rather a refraction of self through the technology of the diary. The question, “what do you feel?” becomes both the narrative device whereby the diarist is authorized to write and a stimulus that responds to a “need to know” the self.

Writing the diary structures a horizon of cognitive possibilities, as the final lines of Julia's diary entry confirm:

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And that is why I write, because the moment has arrived for me to live [in] reality, to know what I think and to own my feelings, and that is what I hope to get out of writing, writing everything that I think and feel, without thinking about what I write, because if I were to think [to deliberate] about it, it will appear just as I want it to appear but it would not end up being the intimate self that I have hidden so far away and who I want to get to know. (15)

Writing the diary raises specters of other selves who must be negotiated with, recorded or not recorded. Even if she wants to record a self that emerges unfiltered onto the pages of her diary, that self is nevertheless one out of many that she willfully sets out to express. The diarist dialogues with other possible selves who jostle for position; her "intimate self" is part of a project of self-making that implies the conscientious crafting of a desired interlocutor.

Crucially, her entry reminds us that keeping a diary is not only about writing, but also about reading and imagining a reader. If the diary is commonly thought of as a private, intimate space, one in which the diarist enjoys the freedom to write those thoughts reserved 'for my eyes only', what happens when the writing of the diary is not done exclusively *for yourself* but also for others? What happens when the diary is not private, but shared?

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I have in mind the following passage from Delfina's journal-copy:

I am in the spirit of Julia. In that of her diary. I have been reading it all day. [. . .] When I read it, I imagine—without wanting to and I don't know why—that I am a man, that I am

X, that it is he, or any of them who is reading this, and I feel as they must feel if they were to read it, what they should understand and love” (J. Bunge 9-12).

This is Delfina Bunge writing about reading the diary of her sister, Julia. Importantly, to be “in the spirit of” her sister, implies an empathetic relation not only to the writer, but also to other potential readers. By reading Julia’s diary Delfina contemplates the reactions of others were they also to read it, as she imagines the way that the writer positions herself in relation to them. Here Delfina shows that the diary can also serve to imagine the *self as other*.

This is a queer process enacted not only by the cross-gender identification of the writer with potential male readers, but also through the strangeness by which this feeling emerges, “without wanting it to or understanding why”. This is the seductive power of reading the diary, a moment in which the reader (Delfina) identifies as the object of desire of the writer of the text (Julia). For Delfina, to be “him, or any of them (ellos)” is thus to imagine herself as desired by her sister, on the one hand, and on the other, to imagine her feelings as them were they also to read the text. The diary frames the expression of erotic desire between sisters by virtue of its form of address and the particularity of the sisters’ practice of both writing and reading each other’s diaries. Furthermore, this expression of desire is not written as projection, but the effect of reading. More like an admission than speculation, Delfina describes the link between imagining and feeling as a statement of fact. The diary actually produces this queer feeling between sisters. This is *queer kinship*. Here, to understand oneself as a sister is to feel desired as and by a sister.

For me, *queer kinship* is a form of orienting the body and its desires through the structural norms that adhere to kinship over time, and yet also question or eschew those norms in order to gesture toward a different form of relationality that may not yet exist. 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. I am trying to advocate for a more capacious understanding of queerness, one that does not tether itself to a particular subject position or disciplinary logic, but rather exists as the reverberating interface between surfaces, forms, and bodies. This is a potentially erotic orientation that is psychic and corporeal, historical and immediate, uncanny and comforting. By bringing to bear these formal mechanisms on the lived experience of relationality, we can better understand how queerness becomes integrated into the possibility of expressing the self as potential.

In this case to experience sisterhood is to negotiate the social and psychological processes by which the self learns not simply that it is different from others, but that it must also negotiate this difference by learning to feel as the self toward others. This is the work that the diary makes possible for the Bunge sisters. The shared diary becomes a space of negotiation of sibling difference, where the "intimate self" is textualized as part of an ongoing epistemological project.

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A final example: On February 17, 1901 Julia and her friend Stella Achával organized a party at the Hotel Edén in La Falda, Córdoba. While Julia's diary does not include an entry for this date, I know this party existed because it appears in Delfina's diary on the verso of a drawing that was done on hotel letterhead and signed Carlos Kier. Curiously, the diary entry on which the drawing is fastened is dated 26 October 1900, and thus precedes the events described on the letterhead and, presumably, the completion of the drawing. The diachronic nature of the diary surfaces again, as it is likely that Delfina saved the drawing that was made in 1901, and in the process of copying her diary later, fastened it to this particular page, dated the previous year.

This presents a simple question: why did Delfina choose to fasten the drawing there? The entry from 1900 details a ball that Julia attended with Carlos Octavio and their mother, Maria Luisa. Delfina did not join them, however, and missed a “marvelous” evening during which Julia met several handsome Brazilian dignitaries (Journal IV, 1322). It may be coincidence, but I think it is more likely that this drawing illustrates something about Delfina that she wanted to display on that particular evening in October of 1900.

This portrait is *of* Delfina. It suggests a longing gaze that would recur in *cartes de visite* that Delfina had commissioned during this same period. Intimate, personal, an ink drawing on the back of a scrap of notebook paper. Its materiality connects Delfina’s cultivation of the diary to her representation as a visual object. This particular illustration reveals a sense of desire that also points to the public difference between the two sisters.

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This image reflects back on, though it actually precedes, Julia’s portrait as Sara Bernhardt in the role of Mélissinde in *La Princesse Lointaine*. Sara Bernhardt was **the** celebrity of the turn of the century. Here, Julia, appropriating Bernhardt’s splendor, is a princess for the ages; Delfina, in contrast, is a orients herself toward the private, toward memory.

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Rather than expose this image to the world, Delfina archives it in the pages of her diary. If Julia sought to harness the queerness of European modernity in a gesture of celebrity, Delfina in contrast, includes a portrait of herself gazing backward at the pages of her own diary. This drawing reveals a side of Delfina that did not belong in the family album, but rather her own journal-copy. And yet it contributes to the kinship imaginary of the Bunge family; it marks the

relationality of bodies, the desire to be seen as and by others, as it manifests the queerness of sibling publicity as an archival process.

### Conclusion

The Bunge sisters' diaries allow us to view, from multiple vantage points, the ways in which the self that emerges through the process of writing the diary is mutually constructed by the process of reading as and by the sister. I am proposing that the experience of self is oriented by the formative properties of the family, on the one hand, and the refractive qualities of the diary, on the other. Bodies become individuated by virtue of the relationships that the diary frames and makes possible; Julia and Delfina become sisters not only by blood relation but also by virtue of the relationships that the text allows them to imagine, reproduce, and record. These are not synonymous processes, however. The diary is a type of text that is already populated with multiple versions of self that emerge, as well as affective connections with others that must be addressed. The diary shapes these imaginaries as its form influences what can be recorded as meaningful to both the writer and the future reader(s) of the text. Bodies discover themselves in the flows of the narrative, however fragmentary; gendered sisters find their gender and their individuality through the psychic prism of the diary. If we can think of the diary not simply as a textual record but a technology of self-making, then we can begin to understand the contradictions between individual desires and the compulsions of family life, class alliance, and national belonging that emerge through this archive. The aggregative dimensions of the diary reveal it to be a genre that makes possible the mutual subjective employment of each sister as related, as a sister, as part of an ongoing narrative of family.

The diary stages and enacts this queer kinship— asynchronous, intersubjective, forms of remembering one moment by connecting it to another that waits to be read, appreciated, even

cared for, in a series of encounters with the self as emerging, as constituted, through these palimpsestic constellations.

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<sup>1</sup> The entire generation of eight includes: Carlos Octavio (1875-1918), Augusto (1877-1943), Roberto (1878-1931), Alejandro (1880-1943), Julia Valentina (1880-1969), Delfina (1881-1952), Eduardo (1884-1968), and Jorge (1893-1961).

<sup>2</sup> Mayra Navarro Gerassi defines the Argentine *oligarquía* in the following terms: “la oligarquía comprendía al pequeño grupo de terratenientes adinerados—no más de 300 familias—que había resultado más beneficiado por el desarrollo del país. La inmigración europea había significado mano de obra barata para sus estancias, y los pedidos europeos de carne argentina les habían significado firmes ingresos. Parte de las ganancias era reinvertida, aunque en poca cantidad; la mayor parte, sin embargo, era gastada en promover un ‘modo de vida’ oligarca simbolizado por el título de abogado, por el acceso a la Sociedad Rural, al Círculo de Armas y al Jockey Club, por uno o dos viajes a Europa y por lujosas mansiones construidas en Buenos Aires por arquitectos europeos y embellecidas con mobiliarios y obras de arte importadas” (“the Argentine oligarchy was comprised of the small group of wealthy landowners—no more than 300 families—who had most benefitted from the development of the country. European immigration had resulted in cheap labor for their estates, and European orders for Argentine beef had resulted in a steady income. Part of their earnings was reinvested, though in small quantity; the majority, though, was spent promoting an oligarchical ‘lifestyle’ symbolized by a law degree, access to the Sociedad Rural, the Círculo de Armas and the Jockey Club, by one or two trips to Europe and by luxurious mansions constructed in Buenos Aires by European architects and adorned with imported furniture and art”; 25). This particular generation of Bunges was not as wealthy as other branches of the family, who did make fortunes in beef and grain exports. The now billion-dollar multinational corporation Bunge y Born is the most obvious example. For more about the development of the Argentine oligarchy as a class, see Sebreli, *Apogeo y ocaso de los Anchorena*. For an excellent history of family politics in 19<sup>th</sup> century Chile, see Chambers *Families in War and Peace*.

<sup>3</sup> Heteroglossia is taken from Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination*. In addition, Françoise Lionnet’s term *métissage* invokes a braiding of voices in postcolonial texts. See her *Autobiographical Voices*. Nancy K. Miller and Paul John Eakin have expanded this notion to argue that all narratives are relational, involving a dialogic process that combines the assertion of individual autonomy and the recognition of intersubjective relations. See Miller “Representing Others” and Eakin *How Our Lives Become Stories* 43-98.