

## **‘A real lesbian wouldn’t touch a bisexual with a bargepole’: contesting boundaries in the construction of collective identity**

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### **Abstract**

Drawn from an investigation of the construction of collective identity in *DIVA* magazine between 1994 and 2004, this article considers the discursive contestation of the boundaries necessarily, though never straightforwardly, erected in the process. Analysing first a selection of articles and second (and more substantially) debates about who ‘we’ are in and between readers’ letters, the paper focuses on the ‘trouble’ posed by bisexuality in this era. Readers draw on and contest a cluster of interrelated characterisations of bisexuals: as undecided, as a kind of pollutant, and as inadequate facsimiles of ‘real lesbians’, as well as more or less open characterisations of ‘us’. These arguments are necessarily managed editorially, and always ‘end’ with calls for acceptance. This does not fully recover the ambiguity with which bisexuality is handled, however, and the article concludes by discussing the dilemma(s) faced by the imagined community.

**Keywords:** collective identity, lesbian, bisexuality, intersubjectivity, membership, discourse, magazines, media

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## **Introduction**

The work presented here comes from an investigation of the construction of collective identity in *DIVA*, Britain's first mainstream commercial lesbian magazine, in its first 10 years in print (1994-2004). Significantly, *DIVA* is still the only commercially successful, nationally distributed lesbian magazine<sup>1</sup>, celebrating in 2014 its 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, an unprecedented milestone for a lesbian magazine in the UK, commercial or otherwise. Where other titles (*Arena Three* in the 1960s and 70s, *Sappho* in the 1970s and 80s – see Turner, 2009, for more detail on the timeline of British lesbian publishing) more or less swiftly became the victims of circumstances both local and global, *DIVA* has survived in a period of considerable social and political change. As such, it is a text whose close analysis is both important and rewarding - the first 10 years, in which it found a foothold that had evaded its predecessors, particularly so. *DIVA* arrived at the height of lesbian chic, a trend that put lesbians everywhere and nowhere all at once (*ibid.*), with the promise that even and especially “regular dykes about town” would find in its pages a home (Williams, 1994, p. 4). Also hoping to make the publishing company Millivres Prowler a return on its investment, *DIVA* was a unique enterprise in more ways than one.

Despite this, it and other lesbian publications have gone largely untouched by academics. While we have extensive accounts of women's lifestyle magazines like *Cosmopolitan* (see, for example, Chang, 2004; Machin and Thornborrow, 2003; Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2003; McMahon, 1990; Ouellette, 1999), or teenage magazines (Carpenter, 1998; Massoni, 2004, 2006; Schlenker et al., 1998; have all written about *Seventeen* alone), very little work has been done on lesbian magazines. Even without comparison to the considerable literature on women's (and, since the early 2000s, men's) magazines, the body of work addressing

lesbian magazines looks small. Koller (2008), Driver (2007) and Lewis (1997) include texts from lesbian magazines in their studies (and in fact all include articles from *DIVA*), and several larger-scale studies of US gay and lesbian magazines exist (see Esterberg, 1990; Cutler, 2003; Streitmatter, 1993 and particularly Sender, 2001, 2003, 2004), but no other researcher has scrutinised a British lesbian magazine with any comprehensive remit.

The study from which this analysis is taken was largely motivated by a desire to address this gap in our knowledge, and thus a sizeable sample, including all 95 issues of *DIVA* published between the launch issue in May 1994 and May 2004, was chosen. This time period was not so arbitrary a selection as it may seem; being the first to critically examine this text with an interest in discourses of identity required the analysis of a substantial period of production, and this sample enables a comprehensive diachronic analysis across a period of important social change. It bridges two very different decades, 10 years in which the British lesbian (to use an insufficient but expedient construct) underwent significant changes in terms of politics, legislation and her visibility in mainstream media (cf. Turner 2009). Broadly speaking, the aim was to produce an overview of *DIVA* across 10 years, describing accurately the presence and/or absence of, or changes to, certain characteristics of the magazine's content; to explore the contexts of those characteristics; and pursue a deeper, hermeneutic analysis of the substance of the magazine and its (re)construction of lesbian identity.

Though the analysis presented in this article is predominantly discursive (see below for my approach to the specific texts analysed), a mixed method approach was taken, and the discussion also includes insights garnered using two additional and complementary methods: (quantitative) content analysis and (semi-

structured) interviews with key editorial staff. Content analysis was conducted taking each magazine (coding categories of content), each article (coding topic and person reference), and each advertisement (coding product, frequency and size) as the unit of study, allowing a kind of ‘mapping’ of the sample. The interviews, with founding editor Frances Williams, her successor Gillian Rodgerson, current deputy editor and long-time staff writer Louise Carolin and Kim Watson, who is now Millivres’ media and marketing director but served for many years in ad sales and marketing, were guided by Chouliaraki and Fairclough’s (1999: 62) advocacy of ethnographic work in discourse analytic projects in order to explore “the beliefs, values and desires” of participants. The interviews were designed as a means of learning more about the founding of the magazine, its staff (roles, routines, regulations), the feelings of those in positions of power, the imperatives set out by the publisher; and the relationship between *DIVA* and its readers.

### **Drawing boundaries**

Insights from both the quantitative analysis and the interviews informed and enriched the kind of closer, critical discourse analysis presented here. While the study broadly addressed the construction of a collective identity and the ‘us’ and ‘them’ produced (for an example of some early analysis along these lines, see Turner 2011), the focus of this article is specifically on the boundary management that such construction entails – defining ‘us’ is as much a process of defining ‘not us’ as anything else (Hall 1996) – for the magazine and its readers. The desire for distinction can barely help but induce the policing of who may or may not be accepted, and invests in ‘others’ a sense of threat (Rutherford 1990). Douglas (1966) discusses the need for order and unity of experience that produces attempts

at purification, a kind of tidying up of society, by recourse to notions of contagion and pollution. Much of Douglas's thesis revolves around morality and religion or belief and their function in maintaining social structure and discouraging transgression, and it is interesting that in her discussion of social control in a lesbian community, Robinson (2008) also highlights the ideas of deviance and trouble. Historically, one of the most 'troublesome' aspects of lesbians' discursive tidying-up has been the bisexual woman, whose (constructed) transgression of boundaries threatens to dissolve those boundaries and the identities that they delineate.

In the 1970s and 1980s, lesbian feminists quarrelled over definitions of lesbianism that appeared at times to include bisexuals (see Rich's (1980) lesbian continuum, which ultimately elided any perceived distinction between exclusively lesbian sexual activity and 'woman-identification') and by turn to cast bisexual existence as unwelcome 'infiltration and exploitation of the lesbian community' (Zita 1982: 164). The 'issue' of bisexual inclusion became increasingly visible as the gay liberation movement abandoned a constructionist critique of sexuality and gender categories and opted instead for an essentialist, quasi-ethnic homosexual identity. The idea of being 'born gay' produced campaign gains by problematising homophobic arguments revolving around choice, but simultaneously reinforced the homo-hetero binary (Epstein 1987; Evans 1993; Udis-Kessler 1990; Barker & Langridge 2008). In this way, an ethnic gayness rendered bisexuality indefinitely liminal; outside of both heterosexuality and homosexuality, and claimed by neither. Mainstream media, too, depicted sexuality as dichotomous (Barker *et al.* 2008).

It is precisely the imagining of bisexuality as something (constantly flitting) between these two supposedly immutable realms that appears to be at the

root of any ‘trouble’. Bisexuality has been conceived of by members of the gay community<sup>2</sup> as a ‘stage’ between rejecting a heterosexual identity and ‘coming out’ as homosexual (and as Chirrey (2012) shows, is constructed as such in coming out literature); those claiming it on a permanent basis have been derided as cowards who are ‘really’ gay, but wish to retain heterosexual privileges (Esterberg 1997; Evans 1993). Bisexuality in these terms is thus derogated as an illegitimate sexuality (McLean 2008), and is imagined as an alternation between two separate worlds, for which promiscuity is a necessary condition (even in positive appraisals of bisexuality, Welzer-Lang’s (2008) participants largely describe a sexual identity premised on multiple relationships; see also Klesse 2005). Both like and unlike ‘us’, the bisexual woman is able to move in either realm, an ‘amphibian’ (Babcock-Abrahams 1975) whose transgression between categories threatens boundaries and the identities constructed and maintained within – an ‘awkward reminder’ (Baker 2008: 145) of internal difference and potential inter-group similarities where (the illusion of) the opposite offers comfort and validation (Taylor 1998). The links they forge between the constructed lesbian and heterosexual worlds allow bisexuals to ‘infiltrate the lesbian and gay community, use its facilities for their own gratification, and then retreat into the sanctuary of heterosexual normalcy’ (Humphrey 1999: 233). It is in this light that we can understand McLean’s (2008) participants’ decision to preserve the assumption of homosexuality in ostensibly queer spaces. Bisexuals have been denigrated as neither committed to gay politics nor oppressed enough to be ‘our’ concern (Evans 1993; Ochs 1988). Further, by linking the lesbian and heterosexual worlds, bisexuals form what feminist lesbians consider(ed) a conduit through which ‘our world’ is contaminated by contact with men (see Wolf 1979). Bisexuals are thus dangerous pollutants, in Douglas’s (1966) terms.

Many of these ideas have been circulating since the 1970s but continue to find currency and relevance in some gay communities. In the mid-1990s, Ault (1994, 1996) and Rust (1992, 1993) encountered negative attitudes towards bisexuals among US lesbian interviewees, and more recently such attitudes were found still to be at work in lesbian contexts in both the US (e.g. McLean 2008; Hartman 2005; Thorne 2013; Yost & Thomas 2012;) and Europe (e.g. Baker 2008; Welzer-Lang 2008), as well as online (e.g. Crowley 2010). Discourses stemming directly from the fears and stereotypes of three decades ago were found: bisexuals as carriers of disease, as compromised homosexuals, as promiscuous, as scandalous, and as indecisive and untrustworthy. These ideas are highlighted in ongoing experiences of biphobia in the 2012 Bisexuality Report, which also discusses the issue of ‘LGB’ groups “dropping the B” (p.15). In her work on the interactions of a US lesbian community, Robinson (2008) found that texts produced by the group were written in inclusive terms, but that bisexual members were often still marginalised and their participation implicitly regulated by the reactions they received from lesbian members.

Interestingly, Thorne (2013) finds something similar in a bi group, with discussions of what bisexuality means making space for “under-the-radar operation of normative sexual expectations” (p.88) and thus producing a “disconnect between the overt values espoused by the group and the way that these values are applied, or rather, abandoned, in interactional practice” (pp.89-90). Accordingly, if it was not already clear, this analysis should not be taken as criticism of millennial *DIVA* and its readers, but as an exploration of the workings of self- and boundary-management, and the ways that a particular set of notions are brought in to play (and rejected) by participants.

## Holding our bisexual women at arms' length

*DIVA* (between 1994 and 2004, at least; the magazine has undergone considerable change in the last 10 years) makes an interesting case in this regard. Though my focus is on reader interactions, I want to start by looking at some editorial data, because it highlights some of the tensions that arise in constructing lesbian (and bisexual) identities. In the sample, *DIVA* refers explicitly to bisexuals relatively infrequently, a feature also noted by Baker (2008) in his analysis of the British and American national corpora. Bisexuality tends to be erased, ignored or sidelined (Ault 1994; Bisexuality Report 2012). Where this is not the case, 'lesbian' apparently denotes the 'us' category and 'bisexual' appears to refer to a category of people who are 'not us'.

### Extract 1 'For the girls: what's on offer in this year's Lesbian and Gay Film Tour package?' June 1998, p. 10

1 Card-carrying lesbians should get very angry watching  
2 *Slaves to the Underground*. For some reason, I really liked  
3 it (and last time I checked, my lesbian ID card was still in  
4 my back pocket), despite its flaws. [...] Basically, this is a  
5 feature film for the bisexual crowd, so take your straight  
6 and bi friends.

Here, line 1 refers to 'card-carrying lesbians', a category of apparently 'real' or 'authentic' lesbians who are separate from 'the bisexual crowd' (line 5). A film 'for' bisexuals is likely to displease and anger them – more, it *ought* to do so (note the deontic modality at work in line 1) by virtue of, and in order to protect, their card-carrying status. There is a certain facetiousness to the use of these categories, but it is interesting that the author frames her favourable opinion of the film as something like a confession (line 2). She also parenthetically reasserts her authenticity as a lesbian, which appears to be at stake in such an

admission, rather than become, by implication, a member of 'the bisexual crowd' - however light-heartedly these categories are invoked.

The stereotypes mentioned in the literature discussed above – indecision, promiscuity (and conduction), denial and so on – can all be found in the sample, from deliberately tongue-in-cheek references: 'Melissa! You're a turncoat bisexual and we'll burn all your CDs!',<sup>3</sup> to apparently less conscious instances: "Top 10 bisexual women: rockin' chicks who couldn't get enough".<sup>4</sup> It would be misleading, however, to assert that the stereotypes feature frequently or uniformly in *DIVA*, or that they go unchallenged. It would be helpful in setting the scene for the analysis to come to focus now on two articles, the second of which represents, on the whole, a stereotypically negative view of bisexual women, and the first an attempt at counter-discourse.

In September 2000, singer Melissa Etheridge and film director Julie Cypher announced their break-up; Cypher had left her husband 12 years earlier to begin the relationship. In October 2001, *DIVA* published Dianne Anderson-Minshall's (of US magazine *Curve*) criticisms of the way lesbian and gay media had behaved towards Cypher since. Anderson-Minshall is critical of Etheridge's recent media appearances, in which she had blamed Cypher's desire to sleep with kd lang before settling down - and her 'not really being gay' - for the split, and berates gay media for giving Etheridge the space to do so. She argues that Cypher deserves respect for the 12 years that she and Etheridge were together.

#### Extract 2 'Bye bi, Julie' October 2001, p. 10

- 1        How many lesbians, just coming out, don't want to test the
- 2        waters before they settle down with one woman? [...] How
- 3        many lesbians want to sleep with kd lang period? Hell, I've
- 4        been married to the same woman – monogamously, mind
- 5        you – for over a decade, and I still want to sleep with kd
- 6        lang. [...Etheridge told interviewers] that Cypher

7 complained repeatedly in therapy, “I’m just not gay”. [...]  
8 How often do queers jokingly say, “I’m obviously not a  
9 fag” or “I hate lesbians”? [...] We hold our bisexual women  
10 at arms’ length. [...] These women identify with lesbian  
11 culture; they share values with the queer community; they  
12 live their lives like dykes. [...] If a woman has lived with,  
13 loved, and fucked another woman for over a decade, if a  
14 woman has been one of the most visible supporters of queer  
15 rights, if a woman has been half of the duo that made queer  
16 families palatable to the masses, then that woman deserves  
17 to be called a lesbian. [...] Rather than painting her as a  
18 faithless fence-sitter, lesbians need to hear Cypher’s voice.

The article attempts to counter the negative attention Cypher has received, and in so doing, counter negativity towards bisexual women more generally. The author stresses the sacrifices that Cypher made to embark on the relationship, noting that she ‘soon divorced’ her husband (suggesting decisiveness) and ‘took up housekeeping with Etheridge’ (suggesting a willingness to nest, commitment). The article is filled with in-group category labels – lesbians, queers, dykes – that in rhetorical questions urge readers to note the similarities between their own experiences and Cypher’s. Further, Anderson-Minshall puts her own experience at stake in asserting the appropriateness of the comparison (line 4), and claims for bisexuals some kind of community membership – ‘our bisexual women’. The article finishes by arguing vociferously for respect for Cypher and women like her, the presupposition being that one’s position in the community can rely on, or at least be bolstered by, hard work.

This counter-discourse appears, however, to be doomed to perpetual failure thanks first to the terms upon which it relies and second to the apparent resilience of the attitude it opposes. Despite contesting a bi-negative stance, the article seems unable to avoid shifting bisexual experiences in to lesbian terms in order to defend them; it is their similarity to lesbian experience that makes Cypher’s desires and confessions acceptable. Her potential membership, too, is

based upon the ratification of a *lesbian* identity, which Cypher has ‘earned’ after years of contributing *as a lesbian* (though her status here is uncertain, ‘they live their lives *like dykes*’ [emphasis added] tastes rather like Lesbian Life Lite). As the contents listing of the article puts it, she has ‘paid her lesbian dues’ and therefore, according to this author at least, should be granted the honorary title ‘lesbian’. This argument seems to leave relatively intact the category of ‘bisexual’ as outside of or peripheral to ‘us’ and ‘faithless fence-sitters’ is still used synonymously with ‘bisexuals’. What is more, there appears to be some resistance within *DIVA* to this counter-discourse: the headline given to the piece, “Bye bi, Julie” denies her continued or re-classification as a lesbian and appears to be bidding her farewell.

Three months later *DIVA* featured an interview with Etheridge (that month’s cover star), now touring with a new album and a new girlfriend.

### Extract 3 ‘Skin deep’ January 2002, p. 6

1       Melissa talked to *DIVA* while on tour recently in Phoenix,  
2       Arizona, and told us the story. “A lot of my life I’d made  
3       choices to be attracted to unavailable women [...] When I  
4       first met Julie, I assumed she was gay. And when she said  
5       she was married I went, Huh? I didn’t switch her, I thought  
6       she was gay and didn’t know it. But then her bisexuality  
7       started coming in. She said, ‘I need something else’. [...]”  
8       Nervous about starting a relationship again, Melissa was  
9       initially cautious, but now she says she feels “much more  
10      fulfilled and happy as a person”, adding, “it’s good and  
11      healthy to go out with a lesbian.” Would Melissa go out  
12      with a straight woman again? “No! I’ve learned my lesson.  
13      After Julie I dated a few straight women and thought, What  
14      am I doing? They saw it as a chance to explore, but what  
15      would I get out of it?” It seems that dating a glamorous 26-  
16      year-old dyke has given Melissa a new lease of life.

Etheridge’s opportunity to speak several issues later – and offer the viewpoint so roundly criticised – not only undermines Anderson-Minshall’s

argument, but gives Etheridge the chance to have ‘the last word’ on the matter. Etheridge’s explanation of the failure of the relationship hinges on two things: first, her habit of being attracted to ‘unavailable women’ and second, Cypher’s ‘bisexuality’ ‘coming in’. In this construction, bisexuality appears to belong to a category like illness; a disease that began to encroach on their life together. Predicated on an apparent need for more (the greed stereotype), Etheridge’s notion of bisexuality is equated with (emotional) unavailability seemingly without challenge from the magazine. Stressing her new-found fulfilment and happiness, Etheridge’s claim that ‘it’s good and healthy to go out with a lesbian’ relies upon the missing premises that she was *not* fulfilled and happy before, and therefore was not seeing a lesbian before. The interviewer appears to take up this redefinition of Cypher and their relationship in her subsequent question (lines 11-12), and Etheridge rubber-stamps it with her emphatic response. Between these two speakers, Cypher is denied first her lesbian and then her bisexual identities.

### **I wouldn’t touch a bisexual woman with a bargepole**

The ambiguous handling of bisexuality reflects the struggle to stabilise constructed boundaries against the pull of fluid, and thus threatening, margins, and this appears to be felt no less keenly by readers. The sample included 28 articles coded as focusing primarily on bisexuality; of those, 21 are readers’ letters. This in itself is indicative of the nature of discourse on bisexuality as one of contest and debate, and these letters make up two separate (though very similar) discussions that take place between issues 31 and 35 (1998/1999; Discussion 1) and issues 48 and 51 (2000; Discussion 2). Interestingly, Gamson (1996: 404) also notes that the two major ‘letters column controversies’ in San Francisco’s *Bay Times* in the 1990s concern bisexuals and transgendered people.

Wakeford's (1998) interviewee, owner of lesbian listserve *Bay Area Cyber Dykes*, also highlights the prevalence of such debates: "It happens every couple of months and you can almost just count on it. It's like, gee we haven't had the Great Bisexual Debate in a while. It's coming!" (p. 187). Gamson's (1996) and Wakeford's (1998) data coincide, temporally, with mine. Though I emphasise again the historical nature this analysis, particularly in as far as it might be taken to characterise *DIVA*, I would point out that Crowley (2010: 397) much more recently refers to another, similar online discussion in which one poster writes, "seriously if I see this fucking thread one more time." These arguments continue to be topical in given contexts, even as they are acknowledged as being well-rehearsed.

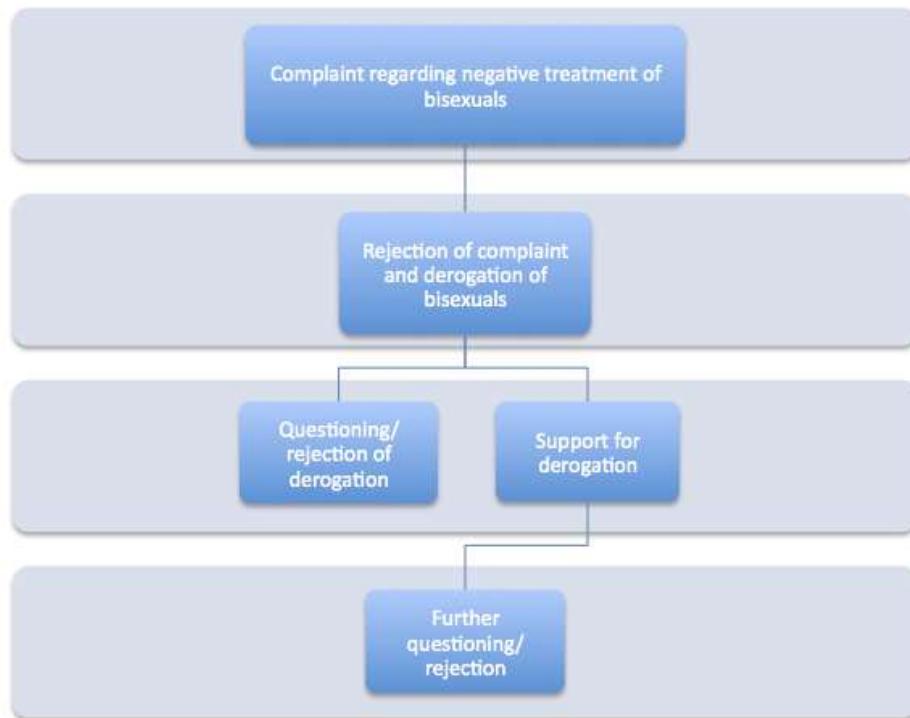
Though readers' letters have typically been considered in the context of newspapers or news magazines, previous research has repeatedly identified letters sections as sites for public opinion articulation, debate and development, and section editors approach their role with this function in mind (Mummery & Rodan 2007; Wahl-Jorgenson 2002; Hynds 1991). In reality, the democratic capability of letters sections is limited by editorial conventions and equal access, amongst other factors – but this should not dim their discursive significance here, for several reasons.

First, at the time of the sample (i.e. pre-weblogging and social networking) the letters page was one of few opportunities for women to discuss such issues in the public domain and before such a large (generally sympathetic and interested) audience. Second, Gillian Rodgerson, editor at the time of the discussions analysed below, believed passionately in the notion of *DIVA* as precisely the place for women to have those discussions, and expanded the letters section accordingly. These discussions 'meant something' to those contributing to and

marshalling them. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the editorial intervention in these debates does not prohibit a meaningful consideration of the letters that are published in order to assess ‘the kinds of arguments or framings of the issue that circulate and receive validation in the public sphere’ (Hull 2001: 212). To Hull’s mention of validation I would add rejection and interrogation. Arguers typically choose the premises of their arguments on the basis of, among other things, notions they consider likely to be shared by their audience (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 1999). Therefore they and their reception (temperature, premising, framing) offer potentially crucial insights in terms of identity and gate-keeping. In short, *DIVA*’s letters page is ‘a battlefield for ideas’ (Seigel 1972: 3) and though it may be impossible to see every sword swung in vain, analysing the blows that landed is revealing.

Here I consider the letters’ editorial handling, topical structure and the rhetorical moves readers make as they endeavour to produce a more or less inclusive definition of ‘us’ and ‘our’ boundaries. In doing so I make use of several argumentation theories (particularly van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004) and of Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004: 494) *tactics of intersubjectivity*, linguistic strategies that ‘may position the self, the other, or (most often) both’ by constructing as similar, real and legitimate certain properties while rendering others different, artificial and illegitimate. Each discussion in *DIVA* follows a similar pattern (Figure 1, below), beginning with a letter from a bisexual reader that refers to upsetting or thought-provoking events or articles in the recent past. This letter prompts responses published over the course of the subsequent two or three issues:

**Figure 1 Discussions of bisexuality on *DIVA*'s letters page**



In interview, the former editor Gillian Rodgerson spoke of her belief in the value of the “constant conversation” between readers. In the case of bisexuality, *DIVA* was forced to mediate more noticeably because of the number of letters the magazine received. Without editing and selection, “this one subject could have consumed the letters section”. The structure of these discussions, then, has at least some design, a notion supported by the fact that interlocutors on both sides are given the chance to speak (though bi-negative<sup>5</sup> letters do not appear without ‘warrant’, in the form of earlier letters). Rodgerson explained that letters were chosen according, predominantly, to their “wit and brevity”, though available space often played a part, as did the geographical dispersion of letters received. Most of the letters published advocate inclusion, and this, said Rodgerson, reflected the balance of opinion received by the magazine and the editorial staff.

In each discussion, two further rounds of multiple-speaker debate are published; according to Rodgerson, “it’s always best to let the readers have ‘the last word’.” The editorial management of the last phase *as a closing phase* is

indicated in the headings given to these letters: “The last word (for now) on bisexuals...” (Discussion 1) and “The bisexuality ‘debate’ continues. Here are some excerpts from this month’s replies” (Discussion 2). Both suggest that a number of further letters were received, but include a number of bi-positive voices that lend a feeling not only of closure but of bi-negative voices being shouted down, overwhelmed by the volume of their opposition. Rodgerson and her team decided “enough was enough when a subject had been examined from every side and nobody was saying anything new”.

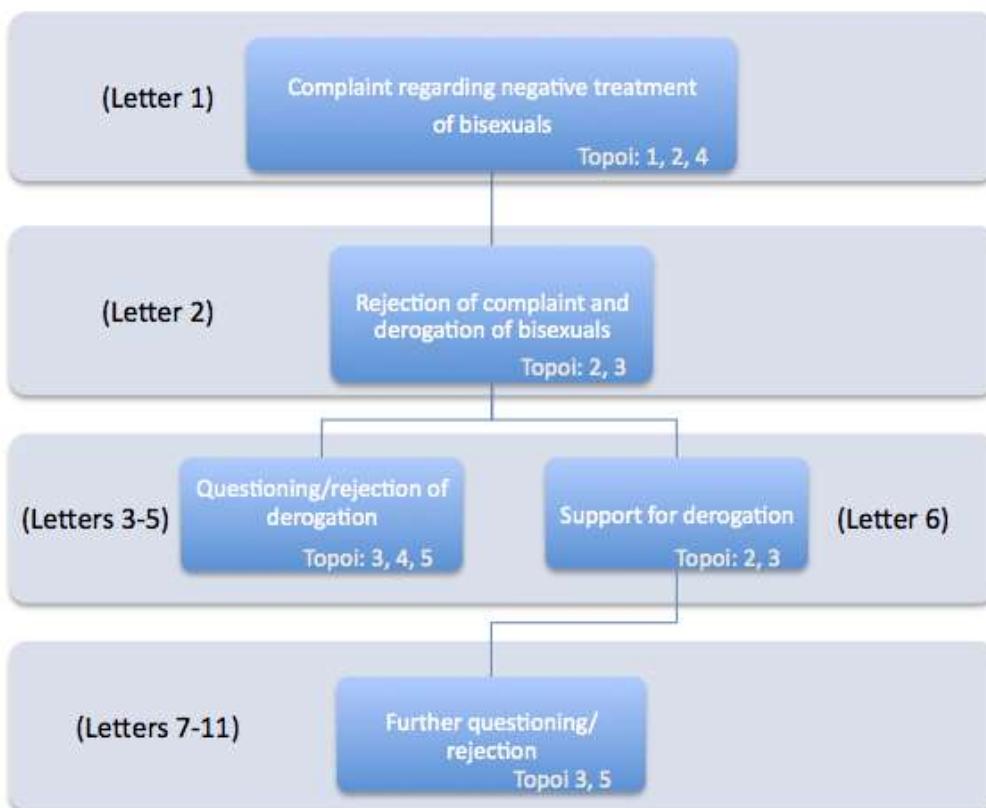
Given the constructed nature of these discussions, the analysis below, which focuses on Discussion 2, does not consider ‘who wins’. Though pragma-dialectical theories of argumentation are useful in deconstructing the arguments presented in these letters, the analysis is not strictly dialectical. My interest is not in the soundness of the arguments presented *per se*, but in their topical and rhetorical nature. This is first and foremost because it is particularly revealing of the discourses surrounding bisexuality and gatekeeping in *DIVA* at this time. Second, a pragma-dialectical assessment relies upon critical discussions meeting a set of standards, including the requirement that the engaged parties are willing to be persuaded (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004). Where discussants are not arguing for resolution, as appears to be the case here, the discussion takes on an eristic<sup>6</sup> complexion and becomes a quarrel or ‘adversary argument’ (Flowers, McGuire & Birnbaum 1982). Such discussions are produced as much for the judgement of the ‘audience’ as for specific interlocutors. Therefore my interest is in the central topoi (for clarity, take ‘topos’ as referring to a concept) writers draw upon as being relevant to the debate and their standpoint, five of which were identified:

1. Bisexuals are undecided and/or promiscuous

2. Bisexuals are tainted by men
3. ‘Real’ lesbians
4. Other ‘others’
5. Bi-negativity is bigotry (a heterosexual trait)

Some of these were used by bi-positive and bi-negative writers. The strategies that writers adopt in invoking these topoi and making them relevant and persuasive, and the way further writers respond to them, are considered below.

**Figure 2 The topical structure of Discussion 2**



*Phase 1: complaint (topoi 1, 2 and 4)*

Discussion 2 is opened by ACD<sup>7</sup>, who orients to a recently published article about bisexuality. She sets out two standpoints – ‘It is a shame that “a lot

of people can't hack bisexuals”, and ‘Defining people’s sexual identities is complicated’ – invoking several topoi:

Extract 4 ‘Bisexuality isn’t promiscuity’  
(Letter 1, ACD) May 2000, p. 4

1       A former partner of mine was certainly a gay man – our sex  
2       life was far from complete and, let’s face it, he looked like  
3       a reject from the line-up of the Village People. Fortunately  
4       we are talking a very long time ago. I think there are a lot  
5       of people who can’t hack bisexuals. This is a shame.  
6       Although I know many people who are damn sure about  
7       their sexuality, many remain in that grey area. [...]  
8       I am currently in a relationship with a woman, and most  
9       people I know would describe me as a lesbian. However,  
10      being honest, if I was dumped tomorrow and a period of  
11      time passed without a sniff of sex, I would probably  
12      consider having a one-night stand with a man.  
13      Although I couldn’t actually envisage having another  
14      *relationship* with a man, does that make me bisexual?  
15      Probably, I guess.

In lines 5-7, ACD tacitly suggests that dislike of bisexuals may be down to their being perceived as undecided between hetero- and homosexuality (topos 1). Her letter undoubtedly belongs to the bi-positive side of the argument, yet she appears, through anaphoric inference, to concur with this perception by labelling bisexuality “that grey area” – in which exist people who are *not* “damn sure” about their sexuality (lines 6-7). Though she offers no overt value judgment of bisexuality as an undecided state, she does not problematise it. Indeed, she appears to personify it, seemingly unable to decide if she is bisexual or not.

The notion of tainting is missing (at least not *explicit*) in ACD’s account, but she acknowledges contact with men (topos 2) as something that distances lesbian from bisexual experience in reflecting on whether she better fits the ‘lesbian’ or ‘bisexual’ category. This idea of best fit is premised primarily on (desired) contact with men and its effect on one’s ability to claim a lesbian identity (which ACD may be making a tentative claim for in lines 13-14). She attempts to close the gap by differentiating between one-off sexual contact and

long-term, emotional involvement (the emphasis in line 14 is hers) but appears, somewhat reluctantly, to accept that openness to any contact with men is what separates lesbian and bisexual identities (line 15).

Lines 1-4 come from ACD's opening paragraph, and this placement appears to be significant in light of the functions the anecdote may serve; it immediately flags the writer's sexual history and thus has implications for her category identification. This attends to her epistemic entitlement to speak on the subject, but also (potentially) threatens her affiliation with readers. "Let's face it," (line 2) offers a remedy by positioning writer and readers together as 'us'. Since we define ourselves, at least in part, according to what we are *not* (van Dijk 1998; Oktar 2001), ACD offers a third group - gay men - as an alternative territorial marker of 'not us' (topos 4, other 'others'). The derogatory description positions gay men very far from being 'like us', and with inferior status. Later in Phase 3 (Extract 6, below, shows some of this letter), JS argues on the 'same side' as ACD, though she does not refer to Letter 1. In arguing against discrimination, JS also constructs a group of other 'others', saying that, "As a lesbian, I can understand some feeling that transvestites and drag queens are perpetuating a silly and false stereotype of womanly behaviour". Rhetorically, JS appears to be saying '*Because I am a lesbian, I understand that there are some groups that 'we' find distasteful*'. This display of understanding then makes her assertion that prejudicial behaviour is unhelpful more powerful, though she does not quite rescue transvestites and drag queens.

#### *Phase 2: rejection and derogation (topoi 2 and 3)*

In Phase 2, JL (Extract 5, below) takes exception to the idea of bisexual inclusion espoused in the first letter<sup>8</sup>. She ends her letter by questioning the

magazine's selection of letters from bisexuals, implicitly pointing to ACD's letter in the previous issue. She does not take up directly any of ACD's points, but offers an explication of *topos 2* (men) and invokes *topos 3* ('real' lesbians).

Extract 5 'Boys in DIVA' (Letter 2, JL) June 2000 p. 5

1     While we're on the subject of men – I don't know why you  
2     continue to publish letters and waste space from so-called  
3     'bisexual' women carping on about being bisexual. Let  
4     them stew in their males' juices and leave us real lesbians  
5     to get on with it.

The first part of JL's letter is a complaint about an article by a male writer being published by *DIVA*, and she moves from this complaint to the one featured above via "the subject of men". This bridge equates bisexuals and men, rendering both 'not us'. Robinson (2008) also notes talk about men used to differentiate (and therefore exclude) bisexual women. Mummery & Rodan (2007) identify this kind of move, in anti-immigration letters, as 'protectivism', whereby the incompatibility between what 'we' are and do, and 'them', is stressed as immutable. Ault (1994) found that (her sample of) lesbians defined bisexuals in male-identified terms, and that for them, "bisexual women represent the phallus itself" (p.119). JL's subsequent imperative in line 4 suggests something similar by focusing on ejaculate (as a contaminant, *topos 2*). Other bi-negative writers in both discussions also rely on visceral descriptions of bisexuality – in Discussion 1, AK asserts that she is "sick of seeing bisexual women flirt around with dykes when a few hours later she's *on her knees with some bloke*" [emphasis added]. Ault (*ibid.*) theorises that the sexualisation of bisexuals by lesbians is a (de)legitimisation strategy that mirrors their own sexualisation (and rejection) by dominant discourses. This move also helps towards the construction of distinction

(Bucholtz and Hall 2004), highlighting and making salient heterosexual sex acts as antithetical to lesbianism.

Like all other bi-negative writers in these debates, JL invokes *topos 3*, here in line 4's nominal determiner "real lesbians". This is important in terms of gatekeeping, because it implies that bisexuals are inadequate facsimiles (also worked up in line 2) – that is, that bisexuality is not a sexual identity in itself, but a failure to be a 'real' lesbian. This, of course, relies on the notion that bisexuals are *trying* to be (accepted as) lesbians, and thus produces them as a threat to 'our' borders. Watson and Weinberg (1982) found that interviewees differentiated those who *were* gay from those who *performed* gay behaviour (see also Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990 on the distinction between 'being' and 'doing' in subcultural identification). JL uses "us real lesbians" without further definitional work, which suggests that 'our' authenticity is predicated primarily on the absence of contact with men, and further that a recognisable, coherent (in)group is indexed. Calling on the term in this way, JL disrupts, or denaturalises (Bucholtz and Hall 2004) bisexuality, and attempts to authenticate her version of lesbian identity without having to produce numerous similarities and alignments.

### *Phase 3: questioning/rejection of derogation (*topoi 3 and 4*)*

This appears to fail, however, since in Phase 3 of both discussions a number of readers respond negatively by interrogating and rebuffing, implicitly or explicitly, the idea of 'real' lesbians.

#### Extract 6 'Who's a real lesbian?' (Letter 3, JS) July 2000, p. 5

1 I am feeling outraged at the audacity of [JL] (*Diva*, June)  
2 who believes only 'real lesbians' should be able to speak in  
3 this magazine. I myself am a dyke; I like women. In the  
4 past, however, I have slept with men – regrettable, but it  
5 happened.

Extract 7 ‘Who’s a real lesbian?’ (Letter 4, RW) July 2000, p. 5

1 After reading the letter from [JL] (*Diva*, June) I am left  
2 wondering what she thinks a ‘real’ lesbian is. I don’t think  
3 *Diva* would last very long if it demanded 100% dyke  
4 credentials.

More than half of those expressing a broadly bi-positive stance begin by referring to their strong, emotional reaction to what has been said – ranging from outrage to upset to irritation. These are not appeals to emotion in the typical, pathetic sense, but instead act first as a warrant – the letter writer was forced to respond by the strength of her feelings – and second as an illustration of the negative (and therefore undesirable) effects of the previous writer’s standpoint. Walton (1992) further suggests that the demonstration of anger strengthens one’s perceived commitment to the standpoint expressed, which may have implications for the framing of the remainder of the discussion.

The majority of letters in each discussion that oppose or question the *topos* ‘real lesbians’ also feature some kind of statement of sexual identification, usually in the first few lines, as here. They fulfil part of what van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004: 61) call a discussion’s ‘opening stage’, whereby “interlocutors manifest themselves as parties”. JS’s self-identification (Extract 6, line 3) serves a further argumentative purpose: by calling herself a “dyke”, which appears to be synonymous with ‘real lesbian’ (line 2), and reiterating this in the sub-clause “I like women”, she then jeopardises the stability of JL’s ‘real lesbian’ by referring to past experience with men. Both letters attempt to deconstruct (and redefine) JL’s category. In Extract 7, RW undermines the idea of a (singular) ‘real’ lesbian by insinuating that the readership of *Diva* would be dramatically reduced if only those who have never had sexual contact with men were included. These arguments provide an interesting contrast to Martin’s (1996) suggestion

that lesbians attempting to stabilise their present lesbian identity – that is, authenticate it – construct any past heterosexuality as somehow different to the heterosexual potential of a bisexual identity. Instead, here, women use their past heterosexual experiences precisely to undermine the notion of an authentic lesbian identity, even if this is “regrettable”.

The letters more directly question *topos 3* by posing rhetorical questions using *topos 5* (bi-negative feeling is bigotry), the single most common (explicit) argument in bi-positive letters. The rhetorical value of questions such as those posed below (Extract 8), which typically have limited ‘acceptable’ answers, lies in their invitation to the reader to come to the conclusion they assert ‘by themselves’, encouraging their agreement (Bickenbach & Davies 1997).

Extract 8 ‘Who’s a real lesbian?’ (Letter 3, JS) July 2000, p. 5

- 1       Do we really want to turn this wonderful magazine into the
- 2       same silly kind of puritan exclusivity that the het world
- 3       practices?

Combining this device with *topos 5* appears to be particularly effective in responding to the invocation of the ‘real’ lesbian. Questions like JS’s, above, are incredibly difficult to answer satisfactorily: how to argue that this particular discrimination is okay? Answers will be far less defensible even than their reification of the ‘real lesbian’. In fact, in configuring discrimination as heterosexual practice – other writers suggest that JL’s letter is “eerily similar to the narrow-minded and discriminatory comments that have always been inflicted on gay people by ignorant heterosexuals” – these questions further undermine their opponents’ self-identification as ‘real’ lesbians by discrediting the ‘lesbianness’ of their views.

*Phase 3: support for derogation (topos 3)*

In this phase of both discussions, another letter is published that adopts the bi-negative standpoint expressed at Phase 2. This letter is, in both instances, featured last, downgrading its strength and apparent correlation with *DIVA*'s stance, while simultaneously inviting further comment.

Extract 9 ‘I wouldn’t touch a bi woman’

(Letter 6, JD) July 2000, p.5

- 1 I felt compelled to respond to [ACD] (*Diva*, May),
- 2 concerning her views on bisexuality. [...]
- 3 As a gay woman, I wouldn’t touch a bisexual woman with a
- 4 barge pole. None of the real, woman-identified lesbians I
- 5 know have given up hope of finding a partner and slept
- 6 with the enemy.

In the same way that other letters in Issue 50 begin with *emotional* reactions, this letter is framed by its author as a *reasonable* reaction; in line 1 JD implies that the strength of her opposition to (and therefore the weakness of) ACD's standpoint makes her letter necessary. Similarly, in Discussion 1, AK, who complains that bisexuals should not be allowed to participate in Pride events, begins by saying that she is “sick and tired” of bisexuals “attaching themselves to lesbians”. This opening presupposes not only that bisexuals are very different to lesbians and therefore *should not* “attach themselves”, but that they *have been trying to* “attach themselves” to lesbian groups, and that it is this transgression that forces AK to say the things she says. Formulating their letters in this way enables speakers to come across as defensive, rather than offensive, which may be intended to cast their standpoint as based on witnessed ‘real’ events and therefore more reasonable (Edwards 2003).

Most interesting about these letters, however, is the fact that they take up – and often elaborate – topos 3, ‘real’ lesbians, despite its consistent (and usually

sound) resistance by their opponents in both discussions. This suggests a kind of dogmatic commitment to bi-negative prejudice that is difficult to defend (convincingly) in an argument. Lines 4-5, above, illustrate a strategy used by some of these writers in an attempt to do so: *argumentum ad populum* (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1987). Here JD calls on the experiences of a number of ‘real’ lesbians (this is unquantified, but applies to *all* of those she knows) to demonstrate the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Later, in Phase 4, FL insists: “I know many dykes share my discomfort”. This is, of course, a fallacious move, but it seems as pertinent to these writers as the ‘real’ lesbian *topos* itself. Perhaps their perception of the debate in metaphorically tribal terms (that is, ‘us’ and ‘them’) makes the numbers on either ‘side’ relevant.

*Phase 4: further questioning and rejection (topoi 3 – ‘real’ lesbians – and 5, bigotry)*

The positioning of these letters at the ‘end’ of Phase 3 also seems designed to stimulate further debate – since in both discussions we find one further phase which reacts most explicitly to the last letter. In Phase 4 of Discussion 2, five letters were published, one of which offered (mitigated) support for the bi-negative stance while the remainder oppose it.

Extract 10 ‘The bisexuality debate continues’

(Letter 7, FL) August 2000, p. 5

- 1 I admit to discomfort with the greater inclusion of bisexuals
- 2 in our gay media in recent years. [...]
- 3 I know many dykes share my discomfort and we, like [JD],
- 4 would not consider sleeping with a bisexual. Having said
- 5 that, last year I met and have since developed a good
- 6 friendship with a bisexual woman for the first time in my
- 7 life. Had she told me straightaway about her sexuality, I
- 8 undoubtedly would not have allowed the friendship to
- 9 grow. This has resulted in my having to confront and

10 question my views/prejudices, which can probably only be  
11 healthy. [...] My community will always be gay.

FL's letter, above, is the only bi-negative letter to feature in response to Letter 6, and its position between Letter 6 and the bi-positive responses is perhaps indicative of the diplomatic work it does in adopting but de-hyperbolising JD's standpoint. FL frames her letter as a confession, suggesting an awareness of the opposition already published in Phase 3 and perhaps anticipation of further opposition in this or subsequent phases. This is certainly suggested by the proleptic work done in lines 4-9, where FL insists that she "would not consider" any sexual contact with a bisexual before immediately referring to her "good friendship" with a bisexual woman. This narrative works in the same way as "Some of my best friends are black" when prefacing a hearably racist remark (Jackman & Crane 1986; Bonilla-Silva 2002). FL is now someone with a 'good friend' amongst those she still concludes ought to be excluded, which has implications for her supposed intent (with regards to offence), and the veracity of her standpoint, which remains the same *despite* this friendship.

*DIVA* publishes four (excerpts of) bi-positive letters in succession beneath this, which contain similar topoi to those in the previous phase – topos 5, which calls out biphobia, figures highly, as does the continued questioning of the 'real' lesbian topos. The way this is done in this phase is rather different however: the writers to whom *DIVA* gives 'the last word' tend to ridicule their opponents, and close their letters with requests for a change in people's attitudes and values.

Extract 11 'The bisexuality debate continues'  
(Letter 8, AL) August 2000, p. 5

1 All this lesbians versus bisexuals nonsense is just  
2 ridiculous. I would like [JD] to explain what a 'woman-  
3 identified lesbian' is. And does she possess a bargepole?  
4 Very phallic.

In line 1, above, AL makes explicit her ridicule of JD's "nonsense" arguments. The appeal to ridicule is typically considered fallacious, since it tends to lack backing and attacks the delivery, rather than the substance, of an argument. In lines 2-3, however, AL offers some syllogistic reasoning: her request for an explanation from JD implies that, even as a member of the relevant audience, AL does not recognise the category 'woman-identified lesbian'. Since it is not recognisable, it does not constitute a reliable 'truth', and so to use it as the basis for pitting lesbians against bisexuals is ridiculous. AL's final comment picks up on JD's assertion that she "wouldn't touch a bisexual woman with a bargepole", in a move that threatens JD's 'real lesbian' status (as predicated upon the absence of men and men's bodies) by highlighting its ironically phallic properties.

Extract 12 'Who's a 'real' lesbian?'

(Letter 10, AC) August 2000, p. 5

- 1        As for 'sleeping with the enemy', for heaven's sake,
- 2        what is the point of so many lesbians being so elitist and
- 3        separatist? There is too much pain in the world; love a
- 4        woman for who she is, not for whom she's slept with.

In her contribution to Discussion 2's close (above), AC makes an emotive appeal for a change in the way readers evaluate other (bisexual) women, premised upon the needless harm caused by buying into the idea of bisexuality as promiscuity and men as a contagion. JS makes a similar appeal earlier in the discussion, saying "Let's leave discrimination to the bigots and get on with learning to be happy within this rainbow-coloured community". These requests revolve around values - that is, communally shared dispositions (Jasinski 2001), and their appeals to the benefit of 'the community', rather than only (bisexual) individuals, carry a certain gravitas.

## **Discussion**

A sense of unity has very real benefits at individual (belonging) and group (political organising) levels, but its ability to admit internal difference is compromised in the pursuit. According to Douglas (1966: 121), “all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered.” Rendering the margins safe involves sacrificing the complexity and difference of ‘real life’ (Martin 1996). In promoting a sense of ‘us’, any group must rely to some extent on common denominators (Taylor 1998) that sediment around the core. For Joseph (2004), the danger of collective identity construction is precisely the capacity for that core to deny or delegitimise membership by pointing up difference. In Anderson-Minshall’s article (Extract 2), difference is subsumed, not accommodated, and similarity emphasised in its stead. Speaking in 2009<sup>9</sup> *DIVA*’s deputy editor, Louise Carolin, rued the negative reaction the magazine received after featuring the bisexual celebrity Rebecca Loos on the cover<sup>10</sup>, yet her appraisal of Loos’ interview, in which she “really showed she knew lesbian culture, she knew the kind of women she was attracted to”, relies upon Loos’ informed affinity with *lesbians* even as Carolin “recognised her as a fellow bi”. I refer to this not (only) to highlight the relevance of this discussion beyond the sample analysed here, but to evidence an additional context-specific difficulty: what Thorne (2013: 73) describes as the difficulty of performing an identity legible as being specifically bisexual (and therefore “gay enough” (*ibid.*: 79) to pass muster in predominantly gay spaces or groups).

In *DIVA*’s past handling of bisexuals and bisexuality there is a certain ambiguity which may reflect the struggle between acknowledging bisexual women and deciding on what terms that should be done. This was evidently a live

matter not just for the ‘community’ more broadly, but for the magazine and its brand identity. From Issue 78 (November 2002) to the end of my sample (Issue 95, May 2004), *DIVA*’s strapline was altered from “LESBIAN life and style” (not my emphasis) to “For the lesbian in you”, a change made with bisexual inclusion in mind. “[*DIVA*] was for any women who had any interest in having sex with women,” said Gillian Rodgerson. This move seems to fit with Hartman’s (2006) discussion of the LGBT community’s support for bisexuals’ ‘gay side’ rather than their bisexual identities. Hartman’s participants allude to the difficulties posed by opposite-sex activity within queer space: “Like when we do a love in we aren’t there to hold hands with people of the opposite sex” (p. 69).

Extract 13 ‘Both sides of the ballroom’ April 2000, p. 35

1       A couple of years ago I was at Pride with my girlfriend and  
2       we found ourselves next to a heavily petting man and  
3       woman. This is guaranteed to make my girlfriend see red.  
4       ‘They can do that anywhere,’ she huffs. ‘This is queer  
5       space’. [...] She goes over to tell them that heterosexuals  
6       can snog anywhere [...] ‘We’re bisexual,’ they say, and  
7       stick their tongues back in each other’s mouths. Tricky one.  
8       My girlfriend retreats. I suppose that, even when you’ve got  
9       a foot in both camps, you can only really have your mouth  
10      in one camp at a time.

In Extract 13, which comes from the article that prompted Discussion 2, this struggle is explicitly played out. How can activities readable as heterosexual, even when practiced by those identifying as queer, be accommodated in queer space *to the satisfaction of other members?* *DIVA*’s historically ambiguous handling of bisexuals and bisexuality here may be a reflection of this tricky question, which at the time was itself inflected by the mainstream’s failure to represent lesbians fully and authentically as well as the ongoing struggles for legal and social equality, and the heightened sense of the importance of specifically *lesbian* visibility that these two, intertwined, invoked (though any sufficiently

brief summary fails to capture the detail and subtlety of these things, see Turner, 2009 for more on this era and its bearing on the magazine, as well as the discussion below). Irrespective of era and social context, where this question presents itself, there is perhaps no straightforward way in which a less ambiguous ideal can be reached. Though some readers' arguments rely on, to greater or lesser extents, queer logic – that differentiation and hierarchy on the basis of sexuality and gender is flawed because *no* such categories ‘really’ exist – the debate continues in this data and beyond<sup>11</sup>. Barker’s suggestion that “we [bisexuals] want to fuck with gender or we don’t think it’s important at all” (Barker *et al.* 2008: 158) remains anathema to some lesbian, gay, and heterosexual people even now.

Jones’s study of a lesbian community of practice (a walking group in the north of England; see 2012 and 2013) highlights just how temporary and local the construction of a mutual and ‘authentic’ lesbian identity can be, with members continually negotiating and reframing practices and standpoints in order to accommodate difference – and thus preserve their own and others’ membership. Sauntson and Morrish (2012) similarly found an inclusive process of erasure of sexual difference in a university women’s football team. Several things are vital in considering such findings alongside the analysis here – not least timing, with the studies by Jones, Sauntson and Morrish focusing on groups in the mid- to late-2000s. Perhaps the most crucial differences, though, are in proximity and purpose. Those communities of practice (CoPs) meet face-to-face, in the first instance to participate in a shared activity (walking and football) but also, presumably, to build friendships. These are local interactions. Though it feels appropriate, at least some of the time, to consider *DIVA* a kind of CoP (the magazine and its readers sharing certain linguistic practices, ideas and iconographies), the imagined community it constructs is a more global one.

Further, it was recognised and valued as such by readers, some of whom considered it a “*bona fide* item of queer (pop) culture” of “great influence on how [they see themselves and others]” (Driver, 2007: 12). According to Wakeford (1998: 184), “players in the lesbian definition game have differing degrees of influence in terms of who may present their contextual construction as the standardised definition and act to include or exclude on the basis of it”; *DIVA* – even more so in the period studied than now - is well placed to produce ‘standardised definitions’ of lesbian life, since its definition comes “with its authority fused to it” (Bakhtin 1981: 344). The magazine is a medium “through which members communicate to themselves in concert about the characters of their collectivities” (Handelman 1998: 15). In the 1990s and early 2000s if not today, it was arguably the kind of text that Arlene Stein (1993) was talking about when she recalled being asked by a woman if there was a book she could read in order to learn how to be a lesbian. Its readers were often women coming to terms with their sexuality, for whom the solidity of an identity label, however deceptive, was reassuring. Many, in rural locations, were finding others “like them” for the first time. Mainstream media still routinely ignored or caricatured lesbians, and here was this magazine full of “real” lesbians. It is in this context that we might understand the tempered attractiveness of deconstructing sexual identity in the way that some letters advocate, and also in this historical context – rather than in light of the fact that these debates would be unlikely to be printed in the magazine today – that their editorial management, which in both instances airs but rejects, convincingly, a bi-negative position, should be (ap)praised. Though Yost & Thomas (2012) and others continue to find bi-negativity in gay and lesbian communities, Crowley (2010) finds younger lesbians and bi women mocking the

sorts of assertions found in my reader data. It is perhaps not the fact of these discussions, but rather their premises, that change over time.

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<sup>1</sup> Some free titles, such as *g3*, are distributed nationally, but *DIVA* is the sole commercial title.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term ‘community’ in this paper with a note of caution. At times it is used to refer to *DIVA*’s reading community. Where it does not do so, it should be understood as an expedient shorthand term, rather than suggesting that a single lesbian or gay community exists.

<sup>3</sup> Jocular reaction to the singer Melissa Etheridge saying she could ‘almost turn’ for Brad Pitt (Issue 13).

<sup>4</sup> Headline from Issue 95.

<sup>5</sup> Following the terms used in prominent literature on bisexuality and specifically biphobia, the letters in these discussions will be described as ‘bi-negative’ or ‘bi-positive’. These terms will be assigned according to the letters’ inferred central standpoint *in relation to* one another, ignoring internal tensions or mitigations. This is a necessary simplification given the nature of the analysis and the limited space in which it must be set out.

<sup>6</sup> Walton (1992: 214) defines eristic discussions as purely adversarial, having no truth-seeking goal, and in which participants will resist persuasion no matter what.

<sup>7</sup> Initials are used to protect the identities of letter writers.

<sup>8</sup> This is replicated in Discussion 1.

<sup>9</sup> Speaking at ‘15 years of Diva’ event at the Women’s Library, London, 19 February 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Issue 114, November 2005

<sup>11</sup> Even in 2008, the inclusion of an article about relationships with men prompted heated debate amongst *DIVA* readers, despite a strong shift towards bisexual inclusion since current editor Jane Czyselska took over in 2004.

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