6
Negotiating Authentic Style and Practice

As illustrated in the previous chapter, the Stompers were able to construct an idealised ‘authentic’ identity, through a range of interactive tactics, by positioning themselves (or others) in line with or against two core personae – Dyke and Girl. In doing so, the women were able to project their knowledge of the group norms and practices and, accordingly, to index an authentic lesbian self. An important aspect of this identity work, therefore, was their construction of an oppositional structure in which Dykes and Girls were binary; in this way, they were able to position a Dyke as authentic and a Girl as inauthentic. This chapter considers this concept by presenting the women’s clear rejection of feminised, Girly practices. The relevance of opposition in the women’s construction of authentic lesbian identity (where an inauthentic identity must exist and be rejected in order to highlight that which is authentic) is explored in depth, here.

The use of binaries, Baker argues, is a typical part of identity construction, since identities typically acquire meaning only when they are cast ‘in opposition to something else’ (2008: 121). Men may position themselves as being fundamentally different from women, gay people from straight people, young people from old, and so on. Furthermore, as Baker shows, it is typically the case in an ideological binary that one side is more valued than the other. In gender, for example, women are often considered to be deviant from men (who are usually defined as neutral and normative). For the Stomper women to not only construct a clear binary, but to also evaluate one side of it as positive and the other as negative, is therefore not an unusual method of identity construction. Indeed, it represents the broader ideological structures of society. Furthermore, it is clear that their knowledge and understanding of binary structures were directly influenced by their experiences as gay
women, a status which, one might argue, automatically positioned them on the ‘negative’ side of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy. The women seemingly responded to the heteronormative world in which they were placed, therefore, by constructing a normative identity for themselves as a minority group. Koller (2008: 18) supports this point, arguing that lesbian discourses exist in relation to broader sociocultural factors rather than in isolation; they are ‘embedded within a host culture that is organized in diametrically opposed terms’. As women, the Stompers constructed a specifically female identity but, as lesbians, they rejected that which was heteronormatively so.

This chapter will reveal that, at times, this identity construction occurred in a rather predictable way; the women rejected that which was traditionally and broadly salient as symbolic of femininity, such as lipstick. It will also show, however, that at times certain ‘feminine’ practices were not collectively agreed upon as being indexical of lesbian inauthenticity. By virtue of the fact that not all of the women were identical in every aspect of their style and behaviour, yet endeavoured to mutually construct a shared identity as lesbians, the Stompers had to continually negotiate and redefine what the personae of Dyke and Girl actually meant in order to accommodate their individual differences. Through ethnographic accounts and the analysis of one long extract, this chapter argues that the two oppositional personae were constantly redefined in order for them to remain clearly distinct from one another.

### 6.1 Rejecting Girly practices

For the Stompers, there were certain clear markers of lesbian inauthenticity. Typically, as shown in Section 5.1, these revolved around styles such as hair length or signs of vanity. Practices which the women perceived as being Girly were often positioned by the Stompers as being inauthentic, as shown by a lesbian couple in Section 5.1.1 who were delegitimised because of their clothing, hairstyles and use of make-up. Make-up, in particular, was typically perceived as being non-lesbian due to its close association with heteronormative ideals of femininity and attractiveness. I was particularly conscious of this because, unlike the other women, I usually wore a little make-up. At times, this positioned me as ‘other’, such as at a daytime birthday party for one of the Stompers, where I found myself talking to a woman who was a fairly regular hiker with the group. Although we had briefly met once before, this particular woman did not remember me. Upon telling her that I had been on