

"Stepping Up to the Mic":
Le Tigre Strategizes Third Wave Feminist Activism through Music and Performance

by

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the political music band Le Tigre, this thesis explores the strategies for Third Wave feminist activism that Le Tigre creates and pursues through music and performance. By way of a humanistic approach, which includes theories rooted in performance and cultural studies, as well as qualitative fan research conducted both face-to-face and online, this thesis demonstrates how Le Tigre sends messages of Third Wave feminist principles to their audience, ultimately encouraging their listeners to treat themselves and each other as equals.

After discussing the artistic and political background of each of Le Tigre's member, the thesis explores three aspects of Le Tigre's activism—music, live performance, and interactions with fans.

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Introduction

All of a sudden I saw the lights light up as my voice was traveling through the wires from the microphone.

And I realized that millions of women at one point or another would stand in front of a microphone and say things like I was saying, that were already said.

I felt like I was a process of continuum, some kind of weird historical thing was overtaking me, like I was Patsy Cline or Queen Latifah or somebody really important.

And I realized there was no time like now, and I didn't care if I was scared.

- Kathleen Hanna, "Stepping Up to the Mic"¹

The New York City art gallery was packed with about two hundred people, each one of us struggling to see the stage. Unfortunately, I was at a severe disadvantage stuck at the back of the room, but knew the music would relieve some of my frustrations about the size of the crowd. This was my second time seeing Le Tigre, and based on their show in Boston six months earlier, I expected an energetic performance. At the Boston show, they had most of the audience dancing to their medley of electronic punk music (a difficult feat when playing for a twenty-one and over crowd). Their fun sound, in addition to the band's friendly and humble attitude, had most of their fans glowing with happiness by the end of the night. I wondered if Le Tigre would win over this New York crowd also.

Once again, Le Tigre put on an exciting performance, one embellished with unique accessories, such as jump ropes, neon one-piece suits, and synchronized dancers in robot costumes. Like at the Boston show, their second to last song this night was "Hot Topic," in which front woman, Kathleen Hanna, sings the names of feminists that she and the band members find inspirational. Much of the audience bounced around to the upbeat sound, but they did not express as much enthusiasm

playing loud punk music, screaming out against sexual abuse and discrimination conjured up the very best and worst in people. For some young women the response was a sense of affinity for Hanna and others at the show, a feeling they often expressed by publicly telling their own stories of incest or molestation. Others became fired up with anger towards the band, which they released by yelling misogynist slurs at them.

Word about the intensity of Bikini Kill's shows spread. It was not long before mainstream press publications such as *The New York Times* and *Newsweek*, as well as the popular cable channel MTV reported on her performances with Bikini Kill, and the Riot Grrrl movement in which they originated. Unsure of how to treat an outspoken female performer, these stories focused on Hanna's style, her former profession as an exotic dancer, and her "anti-male" attitude, leaving her lying somewhere between bitch and tease on the American female continuum:

The singer Kathleen Hanna sashayed onto the stage to distribute lyric sheets before a recent Seattle appearance of her band, Bikini Kill. The men in the crowd surged forward, extending their arms to receive the word from this new punk Madonna, with her flailing magenta ponytail and seductive stage manner. But she slapped the men back. "Girls only," she scolded, putting copies of the lyrics in each upraised female hand.²

Their popularity incited major record labels to approach Bikini Kill with deals, but to no avail. Hanna and band members remained true to their anti-corporate convictions, and stayed on independent labels like Chainsaw and Kill Rock Stars. For a band interested in touching people by their music and message, one might think that independence would be counterproductive, resulting in a limited audience in terms of size and demographics. Yet for Bikini Kill, the quality of their work was more important than quantity of their sales. Independent labels offered the freedom to circulate their message of feminist politics, no matter how detailed, raw, or fierce. Without help from a major label, Bikini Kill continued to make music and tour until 1998.

Today, Hanna is still making an impact on her audience, now with her new band, Le Tigre. Through the electronic punk music and slideshows they create, Hanna and band members Johanna Fateman and JD Samson (taking over the place of Sadie Benning who left the band after their first tour) share their feminist politics with listeners, often inspiring them to do the same. Like Bikini Kill, Le Tigre is an independent band (the independent feminist, pro-queer label, Mr. Lady, distributes their albums). Since 1999, they have put out a full length, self-titled album and an EP, *From the Desk of Mr. Lady* (with one expected in October 2001). They have been on three tours in the United States, one in Europe, and one in Japan. They also played two of the year's biggest female-centered music festivals—Michigan Womyn's Festival and LadyFest Midwest—during the summer of 2001. They have managed to establish a loyal fan base, reflected in the sold-out live performances, fansites,³ fanzines such as *PoemFish Grrrl* and *Venus*, and a Yahoo e-group dedicated to discussion about them.

Intending to promote feminist practice through their music, Hanna openly speaks about Le Tigre's desire to encourage listeners to create their own political art. According to the performer, a song "works" if "[listeners] feel inspired by [it]" to "do something," causing the musician to "feel totally inspired back."⁴ In other words, Hanna wants her songs to impact Le Tigre's audience just like the way music by artists like Patti Smyth impacted her, something she details in "Stepping Up to the Mic." A spoken word piece about becoming politically active, Hanna tells of the excitement she and her friend felt about Patti Smyth's music when hearing it for the first time. Inspired by its feminist message, in the opening verse Hanna says:

And suddenly it seemed that everything was possible for us in that moment, that time we listened to the headphones and we heard Patti Smyth say, "all right then, let's get to it."⁵

and feelings as a fan that is not yet politically active:

And I'm waiting.
And I'm listening.
And I feel scared, but scared feels so good.

In the next verse, the transition made is reflected in Hanna's description of being on stage for the first time. She has moved from being on the verge of activism to publicly speaking out about her political beliefs in front of a live microphone:

All of a sudden I saw the lights light up as my voice was traveling through the wires from the microphone.
And I realized that millions of women at one point or another would stand in front of a microphone and say things like I was saying, that were already said.
... And I realized there was no time like now, and I didn't care if I was scared.

The final chorus echoes this change. While reminiscent of the first in structure, this chorus is made distinct by a couple of words:

I'm not waiting,
But I'm listening,
And I feel scared, but scared can feel so good.
Shaking in the most incredible way.

Whereas, throughout the song "feeling scared" has been wrapped up in the "overwhelming" excitement about feminist music, here it evolves into being a part of the activist's life, a source of incitement. Such a transformation reflects the development of this now active performer, one initially inspired by music of a feminist performer.

Hanna recognizes that she has hopes of being an influential performer to her fans like Smyth was to her, however, she does not see herself as a leader or role model. For Hanna, to claim leadership is to introduce a hierarchical system of power, similar to patriarchy, into the movement, something she wants to discourage: "I think role models are stupid; it's just another hierarchy, just another way for capitalism to keep us looking up at impossible images, instead of looking at

ourselves, our neighbors, or our friends."⁶ Leader or not, for the past twelve years (now with Le Tigre), Hanna has been a major contributor to the feminist movement through her art. Seeing her art and political activism as united, she creates experimental forms of music and performance to inspire political consciousness among her listeners. By doing so, she keeps up a feminist tradition of political art that not only encourages, but serves as a form of action.

Le Tigre's Activism

In *Manifesta*, an exploration of Third Wave feminism—the latest rise of the feminist movement—Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards posit that activism of the Third Wave is not limited to street protests. Instead, for these feminists, activism includes a variety of political responses, such as refusing to make coffee for a boss who designates it a "woman's job", organizing a boycott of a product that encourages sexism, as well as creating and distributing political art and/or media.⁷ According to Baumgardner and Richards, each of these actions satisfies the basic requirement of political activism—in each situation, a woman "rights some glaring human mistake, or recognizes a positive model of equality and takes the opportunity to build on it."⁸

Based on Baumgardner and Richards' definition, it is easy to see how Le Tigre's art is a form of Third Wave activism since they intentionally create music and performance that addresses feminist concepts in an effort to raise the political consciousness of their audience. They challenge the mainstream by expressing a Third Wave feminist voice which encompasses a variety of marginalized positions, thereby generating awareness among their listeners for political and social issues that are frequently overlooked. By doing so, they potentially inspire social attachment to these issues, something that professor of Africana studies Tricia Rose describes to be an important political act. Citing the political significance of hip-hop culture, in a recent *Nation* article Rose points out:

"The creation, and then tenacious holding on, of cultural forms that go against certain kinds of grains in society is an important process of subversion." It is "about a carving out of more social space, more identity space. This is critical to political organizing. It's critical to political consciousness." Because of its osmotic infusion into the mainstream, Rose argues, hip-hop culture could be used to create a conversation about social justice among young people, much as black religious culture influenced the civil rights discourse of the sixties.⁹

However, while she sees the political impact that rap music has made on American society, the New York University scholar recognizes its limitations in terms of impacting policy. Such is my contention about Le Tigre in this thesis as well. While certainly an ideal, I do not argue that Le Tigre's music and performance is directly related to any policy change favorable to Third Wave feminism. At the same time, unlike some critics and artists such as Baz Kershaw (1999) and Augusto Boal (1998), I do not think that political performance must only be measured according to degrees of political progress, or even audience-effect. Regardless of the band's intentions, it is impossible for me to know if Le Tigre's activism turns fans into politically active individuals due to the number of variables that influence a person, that go into assembling her consciousness. For this reason, I do not discuss findings regarding policy and audience transformation in this thesis.

My Exploration of Le Tigre

What this thesis contains is a rich exploration of Le Tigre's art-oriented activism of music and performance, which is intended to inspire their audience to treat themselves and each other as equals regardless of sex, race, class, sexuality, and gender. In order to understand the workings of this Third Wave action, I perform an analysis guided by the concept of "thick description" made popular by Clifford Geertz (one he "borrows" from Gilbert Ryles' *Collected Papers*) in "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture." With regard to the place of cultural analysis within ethnography, Geertz asserts that culture is decipherable by providing "a context, something within which [social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes]

can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described."¹⁰ Once a researcher takes into account all aspects of culture, she can then assess their "deep structure"—cultural significance. Geertz explains that theory has a fundamental role in making such an assessment. Theory offers the researcher a system by which to interpret:

Our double task is to uncover conceptual structures that inform our subjects' acts, the 'said' of social discourse, and to construct a system of analysis in whose terms what is generic to those structures, what belongs to them because they are what they are, will stand out against the other determinants of human nature. In ethnography, the office of theory is to provide a vocabulary in which what symbolic action has to say about itself—that is, about the role of culture in human life—can be expressed.¹¹

In this thesis, I apply Geertz's approach to understanding a culture—by combining close observation with theoretical concepts—to my study of Le Tigre.

The subjects of analysis are the band members, music (form and content), production tools, aspects of live performance, and audience. In order to demonstrate the broader significance of Le Tigre in American feminist music, political performance, and popular culture, I apply theoretical concepts rooted in cultural and performance studies to these facets of the band. Additionally, underlying this thesis is Third Wave feminist thought which is informed mainly, but not exclusively, by the work of Baumgardner and Richards. I position Le Tigre as responding to the fight for equal rights founded and sustained by earlier generations of feminists, and evolving out of the latest wave of feminism characterized by its loose definition and acceptance of contradictions. Most importantly, taking my lead from the authors of *Manifesta*, in this thesis I broaden the definition of feminist activism to include acts of artistic and/or media production, such as Le Tigre's music and performance.

It is important to note that this thesis is a personal exploration of Le Tigre's activism. In this context, the term "personal" relates to both the scholarly approach to and the inspiration for this project.

As part of a unique interdisciplinary graduate program that assumes a broad cross-media perspective when examining media technology and cultural phenomena,

my look at Le Tigre is guided by what I consider to be an untraditional approach to academic studies. Instead of rooting myself in one discipline, acquainting myself with its major and/or popular theories (at the time), and basing this thesis on a structural model that is already considered acceptable by most academics, within this thesis I apply theories from a number of disciplines, including cultural and performance studies. Because of the small degree of academic work dealing with contemporary popular media that assumes an interdisciplinary approach, it has been difficult to find models to guide this project. For this reason, much of this thesis is experimental in its application of theory, and ways of expressing such academic thought. For some, this untraditional approach may be unacceptable, thereby discrediting the validity of this work. I recognize that by conducting my study of Le Tigre in this fashion I run the risk of losing the respect of these scholars. However, I hope this thesis is recognized for its effort to carve out a new space in academia, one that embraces thinking across borders.

The liberal academic environment that I have been exposed to for the past two years made it easy for me to choose to study a subject for which I have an emotional affinity. Le Tigre is one of my favorite bands, and has been since 2000.¹² After discovering them at a performance, the research for this thesis began. I bought a copy of their first album and listened to it every day. Although at the time I was unaware that this interest would develop into a scholarly work, I diligently searched for information about the band in magazines, and on the web. With each new fact I learned about the band, I wanted to know more. Who are the members? What is their history? What are their politics? What have they made before? How could I gain access to it? I now see this fan curiosity as laying the foundation for this project.

As any scholar knows, when conducting research, one must be conscious of a personal bias, and make efforts to inform it. Since this thesis developed from my own experience with fandom, I considered it important to find other fan accounts,

and diversify my perspective. With this in mind, I sought out other Le Tigre fans to interview about their interests in the band. In order to find these individuals, I first spread the word about the project among friends and co-workers. I then contacted the authors of fansites, and asked if they would participate, or had friends that might be willing. These steps yielded fourteen fans for me to interview either face-to-face or via email.¹³

The information these fans shared with me served as entry points into this exploration of the band. As I demonstrate throughout the thesis by use of their quotes, their answers helped to form my interpretation of Le Tigre's music and performance. Like the theories of performance and cultural studies, their responses possess insight and wisdom which have brought me closer to understanding the shape of the band's contribution to the feminist movement.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter 1, I look at the history of the band and its original members. I discuss how Hanna, Fateman, and Benning began their individual art careers, and their relationship to the Riot Grrrl movement. Then, using Le Tigre's members as entry points into a discussion of this period, I describe the complexities of the Riot Grrrl movement, from the variety of artwork and aesthetics it inspired to the oppressive truths it revealed. Additionally, I explore the importance of this period to Le Tigre, as a time in which band members' nurtured and developed their Third Wave politics that are currently synonymous with the band. Besides offering a close look at Hanna, Fateman, and Benning, this chapter examines Le Tigre's past to provide insight into their present work.

Le Tigre's music is the focus of Chapter 2. Beginning with a look at Le Tigre's place in relation to the pop music industry, I trace Hanna's musical career, looking at lesser-known projects like The Fakes and Julie Ruin, and point to themes and

political strategies that she has developed over the past twelve years. Then, in a detailed fashion, I examine the form and content of Le Tigre's music, including the electronic punk style, use of sampling, unconventional structure, variety of genres, and lyrics. I demonstrate how the feminist theories of Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Hélène Cixous influence Le Tigre's music, inspiring an interconnected relationship between the sound and lyrics. I also discuss the political significance of Le Tigre's production tools, as well as the place of female musicians in the electronic music industry.

Chapter 3 is a detailed analysis of Le Tigre's stage performance. Moving from a discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival and Victor Turner's notion of liminoid space, I look at several elements of Le Tigre's live performance, including music, jump roping, speeches, and skits. Applying to them Gerry Bloustein's take on identity construction through acts of play, I examine these performance elements as political techniques—ways of sending Third Wave feminist messages to their audience. I also relate such strategies to the ones of destabilization, locating them in a historical context of political art.

In Chapter 4, I address how consumerism affects Le Tigre's relationship with their audience. Using the work of Grant McCracken and Henry Jenkins, I discuss practices of consumerism. After locating the celebrity in a consumerist system by looking at P. David Marshall's *Celebrity and Power*, I examine Hanna's intention to break down a fan-star hierarchy, and the negotiations she makes between the consumerist and feminist desires of her audience.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I revisit the term "political activism" and define it according to Third Wave thought as articulated in *Manifesta*. Using the words of fans, I explain how Le Tigre is politically active and the results of such work.

¹ Hanna, Kathleen. "Stepping Up to the Mic." *Featuring... Internal/External*. K Records, 2000.

² Japenga, Ann. "Riot Acts," *The New York Times*. 15 Nov. 1992, Section 2: 30.

³ Several web addresses for current Le Tigre fansites: <<http://www.envy.nu/letigre/>>, <<http://busygrrrl.homestead.com/letigre.html>>, <<http://chickpages.com/girlbands/letigre/>>

⁴ Wolk, Douglas. "Grrrl talk: Kathleen Hanna resurfaces as Julie Ruin," *The Boston Phoenix*. 24 Sep. - 1 Oct. 1998. 24 Jan. 2001. http://www.bostonphoenix.com/music/98/09/24/KATHLEEN_HANNA.html

⁵ Hanna, Kathleen. "Stepping Up to the Mic." *Featuring... Internal/External*. K Records, 2000.

⁶ Hanna, Kathleen. "Rebel Girl: Interview with Kathleen Hanna." *Bust*. Spring 1999.

⁷ Baumgardner, Jennifer & Amy Richards. *Manifesta: young women, feminism and the future*. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 281-3.

⁸ Baumgardner & Richards. *Manifesta: young women, feminism and the future*, 282.

⁹ Ards, Angela. "Rhyme and Resist: Organizing the Hip Hop Generation." *The Nation* 4. 26 Jul. - 2 Aug. 1999: 11-20.

¹⁰ Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture." *The Interpretation of Cultures*. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 14.

¹¹ Geertz. "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture," 27.

¹² I found Le Tigre knowing next to nothing about Hanna, unlike many fans. In fact, many started listening to the band because of Hanna, having followed her work since the early 90s. This information comes from six months of fan research. I conducted online and face-to-face interviews with thirteen individuals who recognized themselves as "fans" of Le Tigre. Out of the fourteen, ten individuals state that they started listening to Le Tigre because of a prior interest in Hanna. For example, when asked how she became interested in the band, one fan replies: "Kathleen Hanna is an icon in the Riot Grrrl movement, so I've been interested in her work...for a while. She is one of very few riotous, politically active, lyrically influential and aware musicians of 'our generation.' She is one of the very few musicians (including women like Ani DiFranco) who've been able to spread the word about their work without having to sell out or worry about what they look like—or record for a major label." (Amy [fan]. Personal Interview conducted via email. 20 Mar. - 10 Apr. 2001.)

¹³ Before beginning this research, I saw the flaws with my approach, the first being inconsistency in collecting information. Clearly, the context for an interview in-person and digitally is worlds apart, thereby, producing different results. With a face-to-face interview, the fact that the subject and interviewer are in the same place privileges the interviewer with various pieces of information. Not only does physical position allow her to immediately follow-up on answers provided by the subject, an interviewer can factor other details such as the subject's environment, facial expressions, mannerisms, speech intonations, and style of dress into their assessment of the material. Obviously, email interviews do not present such rich details. Not to mention, more often than not, an email interview is the equivalent of a questionnaire: one list of questions that a subject receives, answers privately, and sends back to the interviewer with no expectation for follow-up. To address these disparities, I structured email interviews to have a serial form; instead of sending a questionnaire to a subject, I asked two to three questions in each new message. These questions either came from a list composed for all subjects, or were follow-ups to their previous reply. For the most part, this arrangement offered articulate responses that were frequently characterized by depth. However, some subjects took advantage of the elusive nature of email communication, and needless to say, after answering one or two sets of questions, I never heard from them again, something that a face-to-face interviewer does not expect to encounter. Unless a hostile eruption occurs during the interview, an interviewer does not expect her subject to walk out in the middle of responding.

The second vulnerability with my fan research is the majority of the subjects were self-selected. I discovered the nine subjects interviewed through email by way of other subjects. In fact, one subject, in particular, connected me with five others. As with any self-selected group, the Le Tigre fans I spoke with cannot be considered representative of the majority. Fortunately, this is not a fan ethnography, so I do not have intentions of describing the Le Tigre fan community. Instead, this thesis uses the information provided by subjects to inform, at times even guide, an exploration of Le Tigre and their performance.

Chapter 1

Kathleen Hanna, Johanna Fateman, Sadie Benning:

The Making of Le Tigre

Le Tigre did not expect to create original music. Developing out of Kathleen Hanna's *Julie Ruin* (1998) album—something she wrote, composed, and recorded on her own—Le Tigre's members, Hanna, Johanna Fateman, and Sadie Benning came together in 1999 to bring Hanna's recently recorded music to the stage. As they explain on their website: "The idea was to rework the songs so that we could play them live and go on tour. Johanna would help with performing the music, and Sadie would make visuals—slides or video projections." Additionally, since Fateman's work consisted primarily of making zines¹, while Benning created films and animation, they had originally expected to bring their individually developed talents honed during the early nineties to Le Tigre. However, once they started working together, the three realized they should go beyond their original intentions; in addition to writing new songs, Le Tigre decided to establish what they call a "collaborative relationship with more fluid roles."² In other words, each member would have the opportunity to sing, play music, and work on the visual component of performances, instead of being limited to what she had already been doing.

At the same time, Hanna, Fateman, and Benning wanted to combine the raw, electronic sound of their music with a feminist message of equality in an attempt to spread a democratic message to fans. To do so, they called on the political and aesthetic sensibilities they developed as artists of the Riot Grrrl movement. A period of pronounced youth feminism, Riot Grrrl was one of several political uprisings that broke through the Second Wave backlash of the 80s and contributed to the birth of the latest incarnation of feminism. Beginning around 1991 and lasting for about five

years, the Riot Grrrl movement inspired girls and young women from all over the United States to speak openly about sex and gender discrimination they witnessed and experienced. The movement is also known for the creative acts of self-expression by its members, which came in the forms of artwork (including music, zines, and films), style (such as clothes and accessories), and weekly discussion meetings (similar to conscious-raising groups of the Second Wave).

Kathleen Hanna

Soon *Newsweek* and *Rolling Stone* would point to Hanna as the leader of the Riot Grrrl movement, but Hanna and women who were a part of the movement hold a different opinion. Riot Grrrl did not come from any one person, but rather developed out of a search for sex equality by women belonging to the early 90s punk scene, which evolved from that of the 70s. Many female punks were looking to challenge social gender roles and patriarchal beliefs. Attracted to punk's anarchist attitudes and alternative style, they expected to find peers with whom they could voice their political values and dissatisfaction with social conventions; they sought out a space in which they could freely dress and act, without concern for playing the social roles assigned by a traditional notion of femininity. However, to their dismay, female punks did not discover the hoped for camaraderie in their male counterparts. Instead, they encountered the same male discrimination within the punk scene that they found in mainstream society. From this disappointment came the inspiration to create a feminist punk movement, one built upon political action and expression. As one self-proclaimed "punk feminist" explains:

For me, the foreshadowing of my punk feminism was the frustration I felt when I would go out with my boyfriend, who was in a band, and other boys would come over, sit down without saying hello to me and start talking to him about music and "the revolution," which was mainly one of aesthetics rather than politics. I began to wonder what was so damned revolutionary about staying up all night and combing your hair a certain way, when I had gotten

up at four o'clock on a freezing January morning to hold hands with other women defending [an abortion] clinic.³

Ironically, around this time when young women were getting the courage to express their political beliefs, the mainstream media claimed otherwise. Commenting on the 1980s backlash against the "women's lib" movement—a hostile reaction epitomized in conservative political commentator Rush Limbaugh's term "femi-nazi"—*Newsweek* printed "The Failure of Feminism," on November 19, 1990, arguing "the women's movement had done nothing to improve women's lives."⁴

As Baumgardner and Richards point out, reading the *Newsweek* article inspired Hanna to spread the word about feminism's life:

I was like, "[Feminism's] not dead, I just saw it in [my friend Tammy's] face." And I felt like I had to go get a bullhorn and tell everyone, because what about these fourteen-year-old girls all over the country who believe that it's over? What if they believe that it's already happened?⁵

To tell young women about their passion for feminism, Hanna and friends Billy Karren, Tobi Vail, and Kathi Wilcox, formed Bikini Kill, a punk band featuring a raw sound, screaming female vocals, and confrontational lyrics that detailed acts of rape, incest, and sexism. Along with the band Bratmobile, Bikini Kill moved from Olympia, Washington to Washington D.C. and helped to make D.C. the center of the Riot Grrrl movement—"an all-out gathering of momentum toward action" that addressed "young women's anger and questioning."⁶

Beginning in summer 1991, Hanna and Bikini Kill worked toward creating a youth-oriented active feminist community in D.C. According to Hanna, this effort began at their shows where they played music that women wanted to hear, and just as importantly, in a safe space for a female audience: "we had to make a specific attempt to reach out to [women] to come to our shows. ... Any time we were hassled invariably involved men so, for safety reasons, we wanted to have more women there too."⁷ In this way, Bikini Kill incorporated their feminist message of equality into the space of their shows.

Going beyond her own concerts, Hanna and friend Allison Wolfe (Bratmobile) would regularly go to rock clubs in order to meet girls and women interested in becoming politically active. Between sets, Hanna would get up on stage and make announcements about all-female meetings she was organizing: "I'd say, 'We're going to have this meeting for only women at the Positive Force house at this time and day and here's the address. Any women who want to come, see me, and I'll put your name on the list of people to call to remind about the meeting.'"⁸ During these meetings, which eventually became weekly events, women discussed "sexism in the women's punk-rock community, in their homes, their relationships, their towns, and the world."⁹ The enthusiasm for the gatherings, in addition to the sense of community that was evolving, inspired Hanna and her friends to put together a Riot Grrrl convention during the summer of 1992. Taking its name from a zine made by Bratmobile members Wolfe and Molly Neuman, the weekend-long convention in D.C., contained "workshops on topics including sexuality, rape, unlearning racism, domestic violence, and self-defense," as well as "two shows featuring female-bands and spoken-word performers, and the 'All-Girl All-Night Dance Party.'"¹⁰

With more than one hundred young women attending the Riot Grrrl conference, chapters forming all over the country, and an overwhelming interest in the music and messages of Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, Hanna's slogan "Revolution Grrrl Style Now" was taking hold. It was getting to the point that the mainstream media could no longer ignore the young feminist energy that demanded the end of patriarchy. Clearly, Hanna and her friends were having an impact. However, according to Hanna, corporate media's journalists made little effort to fairly cover the movement: "It's scary to see something that at one point in time was really important to you turned into a sound bite."¹¹ Instead of discussing the part of Riot Grrrl's political message that confronted taboo subjects like incest and sexism, newspapers and magazines such as *The New York Times* and *Seventeen* reported on

It's gross when things like Riot Grrrl or feminism become a product. It's like, "Let's get this in as many magazines as possible so then everyone will know about it." I don't necessarily think that's the way to go about things because that's still reproducing a market economy. That's still saying, 'Here are the managers that know the product that's best for you and you're just stupid consumers that are supposed to consume it.' Whether that product is feminism or that product is Colgate, as long as you're using those marketing concepts, you're still treating people like they're idiots and you're still reinforcing capitalism.¹⁶

Third Wave Feminism

Although not detailed in the mainstream media, the Riot Grrrl movement was making feminist history. Before publicly voicing their political beliefs, Hanna and other members of the Riot Grrrl movement were forced to consider and reconsider their understandings of feminism and activism. From their women's studies courses, they knew about the generations of feminists before them—First Wavers like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth, and Susan B. Anthony who in the mid to late nineteenth century fought for civil and voting rights; and Second Wavers like Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, and Betty Friedan of the women's liberation movement who introduced the notion of a patriarchal system and worked for an Equal Rights Amendment. This knowledge of history and theory allowed them to start constructing their notions of feminism, asking questions like, what kind of feminism fits my identity? How do I feel about the feminist convictions of the sixties and seventies? As a young woman living in the nineties, what does my feminism look like?

By asking and answering these questions, members of Riot Grrrl were participating in the latest wave of the feminist movement. Putting into action the popular slogan invented by women libbers, "the personal is political," these young women examined their lives, and formed political positions that fit their situations. As an initial step in forming this latest wave of feminism, Hanna and her friends addressed what they perceived to be the Second Wave's restrictive position on sex, sexual identity, and the sex industry. Although prominent members of the Second

Wave preached sexual freedom and reproductive rights, including Steinem, Kate Millett, and Adrienne Rich, the media backlash against feminism presented feminists as unattractive, asexual, angry women who are undesirable to men. This image was burned into the minds of young American women and because of its stigma, it served as a model for what they did not want to be. Additionally Riot Grrrl members took issue with the position of two well-known Second Wavers, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, who argue that pornography results in violence towards women. Concerned about the impact of anti-pornography policies on sex industry workers, as well as the media's image of feminism, these young feminists sought to distance themselves from the Second Wave and create a new understanding of feminism. They started by promoting personal and public sexual experimentation, declaring the freedom to choose their partners regardless of sex, gender, race, class, or commitment, and demanded the resources to finding pleasure including information, sex-toys, erotica, and pornography. Hanna, a former stripper, also advocated for female sex-trade workers—a group she saw as excluded from feminism by the older generation.

Additionally, members of Riot Grrrl encouraged women to look sexy. Hanna recalls frequently saying, "It's really great to be beautiful and powerful and sexy," meaning, "you don't have to look a certain way or have a certain hairstyle to be a feminist; that just because a girl wears lipstick doesn't mean she's not a feminist."¹⁷ She now admits that part of her stance was based on stereotypes found within the mainstream media and a wavering sense of self:

when I first started [getting involved with Riot Grrrl], I was on shaky ground in terms of my identity and my personality. And in order to feel like I was a strong person, I kind of based myself in opposition to what I perceived as being Second Wave feminism, which was really ignorant, and based on all of the stereotypes. Like that they have hairy legs and they are anti-sex and so on. And I was, like, "I'm a sexy feminist, and I'm going to wear makeup and blah blah blah."¹⁸

In retrospect, Hanna regrets the role that misogynist, homophobic stereotypes played in shaping her position. Now, she is more interested in challenging societal expectations of beauty that are placed on women and men.

Although an impulsive and reactionary move, Hanna found unity with members of her audience by acting on such misconceptions. With the harsh backlash leaving many people believing the aforementioned stereotypes about political women, young women had difficulty assuming the "feminist" label, knowing full well how they would be judged. Hanna inadvertently struck accord with many young women by publicly addressing and embracing these fears about feminism. As one fan explains, by making a call for sexy feminists, Hanna made it easier for her to be publicly political:

Kathleen sort of dissolved all the image stereotypes attached to women who are feminists. When I was younger I would think, "Feminist, she's unattractive, frumpy, hairy, butch, obnoxious, overly academic and angry." Because I was attached to that image of feminists, I was quite unattracted to calling myself a feminist and openly speaking out about feminist issues. When I was introduced to Kathleen, when I was about 16 or so, that all changed. I saw that Kathleen was attractive, "girly", you know, wore cute skirts with knee highs, wore make-up, fixed her hair, shaved her legs, etc. and still fearlessly voiced her opinions and disempowering experiences. She gave feminism a face for me. She made me realize that all women, not just hairy ones, are feminists.¹⁹

Like in this case, Hanna's ability to present her truth without censorship frequently brings her closer to her fans. Regardless of how ugly or scary, she voices hidden secrets and silenced fears which, more often than not, are shared by other women. This point is not meant to sugarcoat Hanna's early position on Second Wave feminism, which clearly had consequences, such as propagation of misogynist and homophobic ideas among young women. Rather, it shows why Hanna's behavior, at times unpolished and flawed, attracts many people, specifically young women.

Besides an affinity between Hanna and her fans, this example speaks to a quality that is typical of Third Wave feminism: contradiction. Members of the latest feminist phase are more accepting of political inconsistencies within individuals and the

feminist movement as a whole. According to Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, editors of *Third Wave Agenda*, such flexibility evolved from Third Wavers' exposure to a multitude of feminisms:

young women ... grew up with equity feminism, got gender feminism in college, along with poststructuralism, and are now hard at work on a feminism that strategically combines elements of these feminisms, along with black feminism, women-of-color feminism, working-class feminism, pro-sex feminism, and so on. A third wave goal that comes directly out of learning from these histories and working among these traditions is the development of modes of thinking that can come to terms with the multiple, interpenetrating axes of identity, and the creation of coalition politics based on these understandings.²⁰

Third Wave feminists tend to be comfortable exploring issues of race, class, and gender, and typically do not shy away from discussions of political and social disparity among feminists. In an article about the Riot Grrrl movement, Ednie Kaeh Garrison explains that Third Wavers believe that difference is central to feminism:

The shift from speaking about "women" as a unified subject to a recognition that women are not all the same, nor should they be, is something most feminists, young and not young, take for granted in the 1990s. This isn't to say the issue of difference has been solved, but difference is a core component of the Third Wave consciousness.²¹

Being "products of all the contradictory definitions of and differences within feminism, beasts of ... a hybrid kind,"²² it is easy to see why Third Wavers do not have a sense of one feminist identity. Whereas many Second Wavers would have seen this as a vulnerability of the movement, it is an irrefutable strength of the Third Wave. As Garrison explains, by choosing not to be defined, feminists make their movement all-inclusive, allowing a wide diversity of people to work towards dismantling the form of patriarchy that is familiar to them:

The refusal to claim ownership of feminism allows these Third Wavers to maintain a sense of their own and other feminist-identified individuals' tactical subjectivity. When we understand that feminism is not about fitting into a mold but about expanding our ability to be revolutionary from within the worlds and communities and scenes we move around and through, then collective action becomes possible across the differences that affect people differently.²³

Also part of the Third Wave's quality of inclusion is the belief that discrimination is discrimination, regardless of the racial, sexual, or class identity of the victim. In other words, Third Wave feminists recognize that there are similarities between different forms of hate, and know that in order to defeat patriarchy, they must fight racism, classism, heterosexism, *and* sexism.

Because Third Wave feminism is undefined, it is difficult for some to attribute a cause or history to the movement. Such is the case for Jo Trigilio, a feminist scholar at the Bentley College, who sees Third Wave feminism as "an academic construction, used to mark the development of postmodernist critiques of Second Wave feminism." Unlike the First Wave which was "concerned with women's suffrage," and the Second Wave which focused on "the radical reconstruction or elimination of sex roles and struggles for equal rights," there is "no large, distinctive activist feminist movement ... out of which Third Wave feminism is rising."²⁴ While useful to recognize its postmodern context, Trigilio's assertion that the Third Wave lacks activist roots is questionable, especially when juxtaposed with the actions and words of Hanna and members of the Riot Grrrl movement. These young women spoke out against sexual abuse and discrimination, and worked towards reproductive rights. They made political art and music which inspired women all over the country to share isolating secrets and connect with other feminists. Knowing the importance and effects of such work, why was Riot Grrrl and why is Third Wave feminism not considered a "distinctive activist movement"?

Like feminism itself, activism is assuming a new form, something that is not yet recognized as such. As Baumgardner and Richards explain, an activist is commonly thought of as "someone who hoists picket signs in front of the Pakistani Embassy, marches on the Washington Mall demanding money for cancer research, or chains him- or her-self to trees."²⁵ Compared to the sixties and seventies, street protests are now few and far between. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that

activism has ceased to exist; it might just be that the day of the street activist has passed, something Patricia Zimmerman suggests in "The Female Bodywars":

The days when political activity focused solely on the streets, aiming to change the world and make it a better place are gone, ... Activist politics needs a different kind of vehicle, one with more power and ability to maneuver over multiple terrains—real, discursive, and representational. We must recapture pleasure and desire in our consumption of media images just as we must see we need new technologies like camcorders. Picket signs alone are not enough, as they will cast residual modes and rendered ineffective and impotent—quaint signposts from another era demanding a different kind of intervention.²⁶

Garrison uses Zimmerman's point, that media is a useful and timely tool of political activism, to address the significance of new media, such as the internet, within the Riot Grrrl movement. She recognizes the "intimacy and immediacy of [Third Wavers'] relationships with much of today's technology," which results in "a distinct impact on our consciousness."²⁷ Members of Riot Grrrl used the internet, video, zines, and music to "network" and create a sense of political unity with feminist peers dispersed around the United States. Garrison demonstrates that technologies of media are becoming a comfortable and effective means of political expression for young women.

Simply put, the definition of political activism is changing. Rather than adhering to historical notions of an activist (such as a person who attends large street demonstrations), Third Wavers look for the politics in all actions, regardless of their size. For Baumgardner and Richards, activism can be "grand or all-consuming," and it can be "common and short-term," such as speaking out against a racist joke or calling a Senator to protest a possible law.²⁸ Continuing with this thought, creating political art is another form of activism, one that Hanna feels suits her best: "There are certain rallies that I want to go to, but I don't necessarily think that it's the place where I want to be political. All I've ever wanted to be since I was little was some kind of artist. I want to be a part of political activism and I want to be a part of the community, but I have to figure out how best to do that."²⁹ As it was, Fateman and

Benning felt similarly about activism through art, and contributed to the Riot Grrrl movement, and thereby to the feminist struggle for equality and all peoples, by making zines and films.

Johanna Fateman

Known to the fans of *Le Tigre* as the "Zine Queen,"³⁰ Fateman began making zines while a teenager in Berkeley during the early nineties. Taking advantage of a medium that for many subcultures is a practical and creative way of circulating important information among members, the zine is "[a] noncommercial nonprofessional, small-circulation magazine [that its] creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves."³¹ An assemblage of handwritten or typed text and hand-drawn or clipped images on pages of paper, a zine is affordable to make and distribute (one of the reasons it was a popular art form of the Riot Grrrl movement). Instead of expensive equipment such as computers, cameras, and software, zine-makers need pens, paper, scissors, and access to a photocopier machine. In her first-person article on being an Asian, queer, female creator of zines, Mimi Nguyen details her obsessions with projects and zine-making tools:

I wrote constantly, researched articles, hawked my wares to distributors and record stores across the country, spent late nights cutting and pasting. The skin between my fingers turned a nasty shade of gray. I was always distracted by prophetic visions of future manifestos I'd compose, magnificent covers I'd design. I often made art for 'zines I never did finish; I still have a file cabinet full of clippings I *swore* I'd use someday, fat envelopes stuffed with newspaper articles, patterned paper, and Xeroxed graphics. And I wasn't the only one obsessed with low-tech paper product; it was a communal punk malaise, a widespread phenomenon of kids hooked on glue sticks, typewriter ribbon, and paper cuts, and what they made possible.³²

Additionally, because of its underground quality, the creator of a zine is not expected to be a professional writer, graphic designer, or publisher, so young women did not need prior technical experience or credentials to begin zine-making. As Nguyen points out, such accessibility reflects the DIY (do-it-yourself)³³ philosophy of the

punk movement—the belief that anybody can make anything they want to because art comes from passion, not expertise. Without professional expectations or standards, punks make music, clothes, zines, and films by way of raw talent and affordable supplies. This DIY ethic leads to an aesthetic preference for unpolished works of art, which typically do not hide mistakes and brandish the seams of production.

Needless to say, the rough, disjointed DIY aesthetics do not suit popular American tastes. However, DIY artists are not searching for mass commercial success, something Stephen Duncombe asserts in his book on zines: “To say that zines are not-for-profit is an understatement. Most lost money. It’s not that they aim to be in the red: most try to break even, and if money is made, that’s fine, it is more money to spend putting out the next issue.”³⁴ What they are interested in is contributing to the creation of their own community, their own culture through making and distributing art. Soox, a zine-maker, articulates this desire when referencing a common debate she has with her mom over going corporate:

My mom is all like, “You should publish for real.” And I’m like, “Well, I don’t want to publish for real. I want to read other people’s stuff.” If I can get people to trade [zines] with me, that’s awesome. But even if I can’t, even if I just give [my zine] to somebody, for me it’s the creation process: the writing it and putting it together, then having a finished product in my hand saying, “I did this, all by myself.”³⁵

Fateman was interested in this punk sensibility and Riot Grrrl politics. Tired of the sexism she saw around her, as well as feelings of alienation she experienced in high school, Fateman and a close friend decided to make the zine *Snarla* to address these issues.³⁶ Unlike many of the zines of the Riot Grrrl movement, *Snarla* did not report on or contain photos from live shows. Exuding a “confessional” quality, Fateman revealed moments of personal difficulty in innovative ways. Hanna remembers being struck by a section of *Snarla* in which Fateman had “conversations with different parts of herself,” including her insomnia and migraine headaches. For

Fateman, it was important to create "adjacent material to the music" that bands like Bikini Kill were making, "that [wasn't specifically] about the music."³⁷

Fateman was not the only Riot Grrrl zine-maker to voice feelings of loneliness and vulnerability through this art form. Duncombe explains that "included in almost every Riot Grrrl zines is at least one—and usually more than one—poem, rant, experiential scream about having been sexually abused, often by a male friend or relative." He also notes that the issue of self-image is commonly raised by these zine-makers, as well as an acknowledgement of "the demands of the media and men about how a woman ought to look or how a woman ought to be."³⁸ Beyond a sense of the movement, these zines are united by the experiences of their makers, which have left them with the desire to speak about these topics. Although similar in theme, each Riot Grrrl zine is made unique by personalized content and politics—difference lies within each girl's experiences and her thoughts about such.³⁹

By the mid-nineties, the Riot Grrrl movement had faded in visibility, but many young women continued to make zines, including Fateman. Then entering art school in New York City, her next zines tackled subjects of punk feminism within a context of art theory. She made *The Opposite, Part I*, which she describes as "my first attempt to deal with disparate areas of culture (for example, modernist painting and feminist underground punk music) with the same language," and *ArtaudMania!!! The Diary of a Fan* in which she explores Antonin Artaud, the theatrical iconoclast and "a figure ... that punks and academics shared an interest [in]."⁴⁰ Throughout her undergraduate career, Fateman continued to explore the tension between her punk feminist beliefs and the institutionalized art world in which she studied. These intellectual pursuits culminated in a senior project entitled *My Need to Speak on the Subject of Jackson Pollock*—"a semi-facetious lecture" and two of her paintings that addressed what she saw as the academia's arbitrary system for evaluating art. According to Fateman, "[the lecture] was intended to ridicule the retrogressive

values of a couple of the teachers in the painting program I was in, and continued valorization of Abstract Expressionist art."⁴¹ To make her thoughts available to a group larger than her class, she published the transcript in zine form under the same title.

Sadie Benning

Before Fateman began making her zines, around the time Bikini Kill was forming, and before anyone had conceived of the Riot Grrrl movement, Benning was beginning an art career at sixteen years old. After receiving a video camera as a gift from her father (a filmmaker, himself), Benning started to make short videos in her bedroom. Unlike most teenagers' home videos, Benning's work won her international critical acclaim because of their progressive style and insight. In addition, since her first film *A New Year* (1989), Benning has allowed her politics to surface and often become the focus of her work, a tendency that has connected her with young feminist, queer artists, such as members of Riot Grrrl.

Benning's films started out as meditations on her overwhelming feelings of otherness, including *Living Inside* (1989), *If Every Girl Had a Diary* (1990), and *A Place Called Lovely* (1991). A queer teenager living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Benning found herself surrounded by homophobia in her school and her city. Choosing not to subject herself to such abuse, she dropped out of high school with the support of her parents, and concentrated on filmmaking. Benning explains that she dedicated her energy to making films in which she demanded to be treated with respect by people she encountered:

I started making videos when I was 16, living with my mom and wanting to move on, get out of the situation. In relation to identity and sexuality as well as class dynamics, making tapes was kind of celebratory or positive reinforcement, trying to make something that made me feel validated. There was a lot of desire to know that there are people out there, and that I wasn't isolated as a gay teenager.⁴²

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and-white TV with the antennae yanked out. ... [And] the in-camera edits produce a ripping short-circuit sound effect.⁴⁵

With both the equipment and aesthetic of a nonprofessional, it would be easy to read Benning's films as influenced by the punk movement. However, when making her early videos, Benning looked to more immediate figures for inspiration—her mother and her home:

I spent the majority of my childhood with my mom; she also was an incredibly visual person who was always creating. The first seven or whatever tapes that I made were as a teenager within a domestic space, with the things that were around me. The house that I grew up in is filled with props and things to look at, so that I'd leave my bedroom and go downstairs and get some kind of toy or object, [and use it in my video].⁴⁶

Although unintended, this DIY aesthetic, combined with self-reflective, queer content, attracted punk feminists to Benning's videos. Similar to the way members of Riot Grrrl used zines to network, Benning started to find a community through her films.

Coming Together to Make Art

Eventually, Benning moved out of Milwaukee, and went on to make other films, including *It Wasn't Love* (1992), *The Judy Spots* (1995), and *Flat is Beautiful* (1998). These films, too, were successful, but it was her bedroom videos that connected her with Fateman and Hanna. In fact, each of the three young women discovered the others through their artwork. After a Bikini Kill show, Fateman, then a member of the audience, approached Hanna with an issue of *Snarla*. Hearing about the sixteen-year-old who made movies in bedroom, Fateman and Hanna became intrigued with Benning's work. An interest and admiration they held both for each other and the act of creating art intended to express their own political beliefs along with heighten others' political consciousness, brought the original members of Le Tigre together, setting their sights on a new project.

- ¹ As Stephen Duncombe explains in his book on zines, the term "zine" is short for "fanzine," a small nonprofessional magazine that came into existence in the 1930s. It was then that fans of science-fiction started producing them "as a way of sharing science fiction stories and critical commentary, and of communicating with one another. Forty years later, in the mid-1970s, the other defining influence on modern-day zines began as fans of punk rock music, ignored by and critical of the mainstream music press started printing fanzines about their music and cultural scene." In *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*. (London: Verson, 1997), 6-7.
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- ⁵ Baumgardner & Richards. *Manifesta: young women, feminism and the future*, 90.
- ⁶ Klein. "Duality and Redefinition: Young Feminism and the Alternative Music Community," 213.
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- ¹⁰ Klein. "Duality and Redefinition: Young Feminism and the Alternative Music Community," 214.
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- ¹⁶ Hanna. "Kathleen Hanna."
- ¹⁷ Hanna. "Kathleen Hanna."
- ¹⁸ Hanna, & Steinem. "Fierce, Funny, Feminists," 52.
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- ²⁰ Heywood, Leslie & Jennifer Drake. "Introduction." *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. Ed. Leslie Heywood & Jennifer Drake. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 3.
- ²¹ Garrison, Ednie Kaeh. "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave." *Feminist Studies* 26 (Spring 2000): 141-170.
- ²² Heywood & Drake. "Introduction," 3.
- ²³ Garrison. "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," 141-170.
- ²⁴ Alfonso, Rita and Jo Trigillo. "Surfing the Third Wave: A Dialogue Between Two Third Wave Feminists." *Hypatia* 12 (Summer 1997): 7-16.
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- ²⁶ Zimmerman, Patricia. "The Female Bodywars: Rethinking Feminist Media Politics." *Socialist Review* 23 (1993): 35-56. Cited in Garrison, "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," 141-170.
- ²⁷ Garrison. "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," 141-170.
- ²⁸ Baumgardner & Richards. *Manifesta: young women, feminism and the future*, 282.
- ²⁹ Hanna. "Kathleen Hanna."
- ³⁰ This title appears on one Le Tigre fansite. 15 Jul. 2001. <http://www.envy.nu/letigre/>
- ³¹ Duncombe. *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*. (London: Verson, 1997), 6.
- ³² Nguyen, Mimi. "Tales of an Asiatic Geek Girl: *Slant* from Papers to Pixel." *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*. (New York: New York University Press, 2001): 178.
- ³³ A thorough definition of "DIY" is posted on *diysearch.com*, a search engine for DIY projects: "DIY stands for: Do It Yourself and it describes an ethic and a community. The ethic is one of not needing the assistance of a large company of producing a service or a product. The ethic is about being able to stand on your own two feet, its about developing your own ideas and carrying them out, without the backing of a corporation. The community is built up of those who believe in DIY. Those people who would rather produce their own "thing" without going and getting help from big business. The whole idea is, that once big business is involved, that the original creator of the "thing" is cut out of the creative process, and thus the "thing" is tarnished. The DIY community is composed of independent publishers, artists, musicians, writers, artisans and thinkers." *diysearch.com: FAQ*. 18 Jun. 2001. <http://www.diysearch.com/addurlfaq.cfm>
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³⁷ "Kathleen Hanna & Johanna Fateman." *Fresh Air*. Host Terry Gross, Natl. Public Radio. WHYY, Philadelphia. 5 Sep. 2000.

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³⁹ Duncombe. *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*. (London: Verson, 1997), 68.

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⁴⁴ Chang, Chris. "Up in Sadie's Room." *Film Comment* 29 (Mar. 1993): 7.

⁴⁵ Chang. "Up in Sadie's Room," 7.

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Chapter 2

Politics of Sound:

Le Tigre's Music

Since the beginning of her music career, Kathleen Hanna has created songs that contain a feminist message, all of which fall outside of the mainstream. Starting with the feminist punk music of Bikini Kill, Hanna and band members Billy Karren, Tobi Vail, and Kathi Wilcox were known for their loud guitars, hard-hitting drums, and confrontational lyrics, a style reflected in the song "White Boy." Over sounds of repetitive distorted melodies, Hanna sings:

Lay me spread eagle out on your hill, yeah
Then write a book bout how I wanted to die
It's hard to talk with your dick in my mouth
I will try to scream in pain a little nicer next time
WHITE BOY ... DON'T LAUGH ... DON'T CRY ... JUST DIE!¹

Although the music industry incorporated the energy and look of the Riot Grrrl movement into pop groups like the Spice Girls, corporate radio stations found the majority of punk feminist songs to be too abrasive, feminist, and/or queer for the mainstream, leaving bands like Bikini Kill off the play list.

Over a decade has passed since Bikini Kill began making music, and even though Hanna's musical style has changed, the sexism in the music industry has not. Feminists meet opposition in any line of work, but for female musicians, this is particularly true. Despite the many feminist achievements, misogyny is still rampant in the pop music industry. For industry outsiders, this is most evident in the songs commercial radio stations play. Within the number one hits of white male artists such as Limp Bizkit, Kid Rock, and Eminem², they sing and rap about their rage that is more often than not directed towards women.³ An example of such misogyny is

heard in Eminem's "I'm Back," a song played on both hip-hop and alternative music stations. About the Latina singer and actor Jennifer Lopez, he raps:

Cuz if I ever stuck it to any singer in showbiz
It'd be Jennifer Lopez and Puffy you know this!
I'm sorry Puff, but I don't give a fuck if this chick was my own mother
I'd still fuck her with no rubber and cum inside her
and have a son and a new brother at the same time
and just say that it ain't mine, what's my name?⁴

It is ironic that Eminem's lyrics which objectify and dehumanize women enjoys widespread popularity while Hanna's music which denounces misogyny and challenges white male authority in an aggressive manner is not played on mainstream radio. Although some musicians would find lack of airplay devastating, this is not the case for Hanna. Indeed, she has come to expect sexism in the corporate music industry,⁵ and fights this unsettling truth from outside of the mainstream. As she learned from her experiences during the Riot Grrrl movement, her political messages are somewhat censored when presented in the mainstream media. For Hanna, it is more important to exist in a space in which all aspects of her music remain intact. Instead of offering a voice of opposition that is palatable for the mainstream, Hanna has chosen to maintain one that is unapologetic and raging when it comes to patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism. To fully understand the development of this voice, it is important to explore the evolution of Hanna's music.

Hanna's Musical Development

During her eight years with Bikini Kill, Hanna worked on several projects, one being The Fakes, a collaboration that began in 1993. Hanna, along with Tim Green (Nation of Ulysess, the champs) and Rachel Carnes (The Need, kicking giant) produced an album, *Real Fiction* (1995) that showcases a variety of songs that address patriarchal gender roles and sexual abuse, including punk rock tunes, low-fi (low-fidelity) electronic music, recorded telephone conversations, and spoken word. In one striking

piece that features only Hanna and a drum she beats with her hand, she references a favorite tune of easy listening stations. Beginning with the lyrics of Charlie Rich's "The Most Beautiful Girl" (1973) and finishing with her own words that allude to sexual abuse, Hanna sings:

Hey, did you happen to see the most beautiful girl walked out on me,
And if you did, tell her Daddy's coming up the stairs, Daddy's coming up the stairs,
He has a heart of gold and he knows when you're sleeping,
He knows when you're awake.
... I try to get the newspaper boy to hear me,
But he just throws the paper on my face.
Screaming, you're out the bed.
Screaming in my blood. Screaming, all of your songs have been written from the toenails pulled on my foot.
Oh, let me sing you a pop song.⁶

By putting the famous line from Rich's hit into the mouth of a man who rapes his daughter, Hanna comments on the patriarchal voice common in most romantic pop songs, one that boasts heterosexual relationships, beautiful feminine women, and strong masculine men. Although to different degrees, the men in both "The Most Beautiful Girl" and "Pop Song" have taken advantage of their power in the song's narrative—in Rich's, he has cheated on his girlfriend, and in Hanna's, he rapes his daughter. Through the art of recontextualization, Hanna juxtaposes these two forms of patriarchy, thereby demonstrating they have more in common than people believe. Further, she questions the character of men that are sanctified in society ("He has a heart of gold"), positioning the singer of Rich's song as capable of the actions of the father in her song.

Although most young adults would not be able to name its title or singer, if they grew up listening to mainstream radio, they would recognize the opening line of "Pop Song." By referencing such a famous tune, Hanna establishes common ground with her listeners. After doing so, she encourages her listeners to call the meaning of this and other pop hits that address love into question, challenging their patriarchal

values that promote discrimination of queer individuals and women. From a space outside of the mainstream, Hanna battles its dominant message.

"Pop Song" is not an anomaly. Hanna frequently incorporates the lyrics of famous pop songs into her own to question mainstream values, a practice she brings to her self-titled, solo-album, *Julie Ruin* (1998)—the artistic name she assumes for the project. Once again, Hanna quotes a famous line from a romantic pop song, this time playing with the words from Foreigner's 1984 power ballad "I Wanna Know What Love Is," to question the meaning of "love." Addressing law enforcement's perceived complicity in acts of violence against women, Hanna effectively makes her case in the opening lyrics:

How many girls stay awake all night
 Too scared to sleep and too scared to fight back
 I know you know what I'm talking about
 Another woman killed and hardly a pout about it
 Green River killer my fucking ass
 The cops have gotta be deaf, dumb, and spastic
 To not catch the killer(s) of a hundred women
 I guess it'd be different if they thought we were human
 I wanna know what love is.⁷

Hanna says she feels "real, legitimate pain" about social and political injustices, and sees love as a solution. By comparing her concept of love to that of the music industry, Hanna attempts to expose the superficiality of most pop hits. She explains:

So the whole idea for the juxtaposition of a love song is that these phony love songs on top-40 radio are supposed to be about all these emotions, but I don't have the same kind of compartmentalized, heterosexual love as I do about this kind of stuff I'm talking about. That's where my emotion is. ... I want to know what love is. I want to know when are the cops actually going to be showing love?⁸

Notably, "I Wanna Know What Love Is" begins with a sample of a woman passionately saying, "Do you remember when we were young and impressionable and taught to believe everything the great white father told us?" Besides an introduction to the song's subject, the sample reflects the tools Hanna used to create *Julie Ruin*. Unlike the music of Bikini Kill and, for the most part, The Fakes, Hanna's

solo album is entirely electronic. In DIY fashion, to produce and record songs, she set up a four-track recorder (which she eventually replaced with an eight-track), a Casio keyboard, a sampler, and a \$40 drum machine in her closet that served as a recording studio. Since Hanna did not have much experience making electronic music, creating a song was a laborious process, involving a lot of time, as well as trial and error. For Hanna, the process of making *Julie Ruin* was one of "[compounding] mistakes until they [became] songs," an attitude represented in accidental noises that are incorporated into the final product, such as coughs, burps, and buzzing lightbulbs.⁹ Hanna also includes intentional, unique sounds, like tapping typewriter and radio channel surfing.¹⁰

From Julie Ruin to Le Tigre

With the *Julie Ruin* album, Hanna established her interest in electronic music, something she brought to her next project—Le Tigre. As critic Chris Nelson observes in his 1998 interview with Hanna: "The [*Julie Ruin*] album seems to qualify as an early entry in what may or may not be a burgeoning punk-techno meld of 'low-fi electronica.'"¹¹ As it so happens, Le Tigre's music is that which Nelson predicts. To create this low-fi sound, Le Tigre exercises a "rudimentary, minimal, and economic usage of electronic instruments."¹² Staying in touch with their punk roots, they oppose the race for sonic perfection found in mainstream electronic music, and challenge a consumerist hierarchy that distinguishes between producers and consumers. Their low-fi sound, which is deeply connected to a DIY philosophy, is intended to show listeners that they too can make music, to some degree a radical message in a capitalist society. As described by Philip Auslander, the accessibility of samplers and drum machines justify labeling these technologies democratic:

Although digital technologies are based on binary logic, they have had the ironic effect of dismantling cultural binaries, including distinctions between original and copy, producer and consumer, music and nonmusic (since the

digitization of music renders it exchangeable and interchangeable with any other digital information), human being and machine.¹³

This is not to say that such technology is without controversy. Since its beginning, there have been cultural critics who fear mechanizing art production, because it removes authenticity. Discussions of this kind peaked during the 1930s and 40s when scholars of the Frankfurt school, such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, responded to what they saw as the cultural results of industrialization. With the presence of a mass market existing as it never had before, they saw the assembly line as replacing artistic sensibility—no longer just for high society, mechanically produced art pandered to the tastes of the masses. Reflected in Benjamin's famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," it was understood that such a shift in artistic values took from art that which had always defined it:

that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and the renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements.¹⁴

Writing in 1935, Benjamin also realized that mechanically-made art potentially has a democratizing effect: "Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. ... At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer."¹⁵

Taking advantage of this radical quality of the technology, Le Tigre uses electronic tools to make music that inspires creativity in their listeners. Unlike mainstream radio musicians, Le Tigre's goal is not to become rich or famous. It is to create a dialectical relationship with their listeners. Hanna explains: "That's when the music or the writing works: when [listeners] feel inspired by something I did, or my band did, or a friend of mine did, and then they do something and I feel totally

inspired back. It's not just like I create this product and they consume it."¹⁶ More than a typical star-fan interaction, this dialectical relationship is a political statement about equality among all people, regardless of race, class, or professional label.

Indeed, Le Tigre is not alone in their pursuit to make political change through electronic music. As Africana Studies scholar Tricia Rose points out, rap artists have been commenting on social power for almost three decades through their use of turn tables, sampling and drum machines. In her book *Black Noise*, Rose "examines the complex and contradictory relationships between forces of racial and sexual domination, black cultural priorities, and popular resistance in contemporary rap music."¹⁷ She opens Chapter 3 with a story that reflects closed-minded attitudes about the genre, found in traditional scholarship:

At the end of [an ethnomusicology professor's summary of my work] the department head rose from his seat and announced casually, "Well, you must be writing on rap's social impact and political lyrics, because there is nothing to the music." My surprised expression and verbal hesitation gave him time to explain his position. He explained to me that although the music was quite simple and repetitive, the stories told in lyrics had social value.¹⁸

She goes on to explain the importance of repetition in African music, and places the department head's comments in a historical academic context, demonstrating how similar to arguments made by Adorno about now celebrated jazz music, they are based on Western musical values.¹⁹ Rose also details the important role the sampler plays in creating the political sounds of rap. For these artists, sampling is an art that requires them to reinvent the rules of the technology, something that is represented by the phrase "working in the red":

Using the machines in ways that have not been intended, by pushing on established boundaries of music engineering, rap producers have developed an art out of recording with the sound meters well into the distortion zone. When necessary, they deliberately *work in the red*. If recording in the red will produce the heavy dark growling sound desired, rap producers record in the red. If a sampler must be detuned in order to produce a sought-after low-frequency hum, then the sampler is detuned.²⁰

Although not intended by the inventors of such recording and production equipment, rap musicians fulfill their desire for repetition and intense noise by manipulating these tools of pop music.

Through discussions of song structure and equipment, Rose effectively demonstrates how the musicians of this marginalized community strategically use these song elements to make political statements, other than with lyrics. Similar to the rap artists Rose writes about, Le Tigre's use of electronic and digital equipment is directly related to issues of social power as well. In addition to breaking down the hierarchy of producers and fans that is prevalent in the pop music industry, members of Le Tigre feel that growing up they did not have access to electronic technology because of their sex. They explain on their website, the choice to make electronic music addresses this sexism that they experienced as children: "learning more about the technology that we have been intentionally alienated from our whole lives (as girls) is one of our goals."²¹ Extending far beyond the individual experiences of Le Tigre, Fateman sees an overall scarcity of women in the electronic music community, something she tries to address in her personal consumption habits: "I will totally buy records that I don't necessarily like or wouldn't buy if they were made by men, just to own that record and listen to it and know that a woman made it. Somehow that makes a difference to me or gives me some kind of strength."²² Beth Coleman, an electronic musician also known as DJ M. Singe, echoes this point when describing the early nineties DJ scene in New York City:

A lot of [experimental parties—events where you'd have four or five different DJs all playing at once] happened on the Lower East Side, everyone was welcomed, and the party line was, "It's open, it's flow." But it was always the men playing during the party and the women cleaning up at the end, as if these things were set in stone.²³

Since the work of women is limited, it is no surprise to only find a small amount of feminist content in the field of electronic music. Fateman believes this is because feminism has been established in other genres of music:

But I think at this point electronic music is not necessarily the area of music making that feminists lean towards, because there's more feminist traditions of music that are not electronic. Female singers have been more historically encouraged or acceptable, but within these newer genres of music there aren't a lot of women to look to and say, well she did it, I could do it too.²⁴

By making electronic music, Le Tigre helps to pave the way for a new feminist musical tradition.

As already seen from their quest for a dialectical relationship with fans, as well as their breaking of music industry hierarchies through DIY practice in electronic music production, for Le Tigre, such a tradition prioritizes political interactions that are facilitated by music. In both of these instances, the band lives out a political philosophy of egalitarianism by way of their music and the act of its production, something that has been a part of Le Tigre from the very beginning. Indeed, one of Hanna's inspirations for co-founding the band was a desire to have feminist politics inform her music at every level. Although she approached this goal during the making of *Julie Ruin*, she admittedly did not fully succeed: "The one thing missing from the album is the feeling of people playing together and locking into each other."²⁵ Hanna's discomfort with the dynamics of a solo production reflected her feminist belief in autokoenoeny. An approach to political existence that is introduced in Sarah Lucia Hoagland's *Lesbian Ethics*, autokoenoeny simultaneously prioritizes both the needs of the self and the community. Greek for "self in community", autokoenoeny opposes what Hoagland sees as the patriarchal, heterosexual value of control, as represented in the term "autonomy." As Hoagland explains, an autokoenoenous political individual understands that:

The self in community involves each of us making choices; it involves each of us having a self-conscious sense of ourselves as moral agents in a community of other self-conscious moral agents. ... An autokoenoenous being is one who is aware of her self as one among others within a community that forms her ground of be-ing, one who makes her decisions in consideration of her limitations as well as in consideration of the agendas and perceptions of others.²⁶

Hanna decided to bring autokoeny into the art-making process. As Hoagland describes, "being autokoeny does not involve isolation, nor does it mean not being influenced by or not depending on others."²⁷ While holding a deep respect for the self, an autokoeny individual is constantly interacting with people in her community, something the production of *Julie Ruin* excluded. Interested in reestablishing collaborative relationships in a creative life that was now at the forefront of her political activism, Hanna co-founded Le Tigre.

Autokoeny also spoke to Hanna's desire to be both a committed community activist, as well as an artist. Getting more in touch with her artistic desires, Hanna started to feel distanced from traditional political actions. She describes this transition in an interview for *Punk Planet*:

There are certain rallies that I want to go to, but I don't necessarily think that it's the place where I want to be political. All I've ever wanted to be since I was little was some kind of artist. I want to be a part of political activism and I want to be a part of the community, but I have to figure out how best to do that.²⁸

Based on the principles of Hoagland's concept—the notion that to best serve one's community one must also respect personal needs—Hanna realized she wants to inspire political growth through making music and art. As she explains in an interview with Jennifer Baumgardner, "'I have to stay aware and go to rallies and marches,' she said, 'but I want to make art and know that that is a contribution to activism as well.'"²⁹ To fully appreciate how Hoagland's concept informs their music, it is useful to do a detailed exploration of Le Tigre's sound and lyrics.

Le Tigre's Music

When asked why she is attracted to Le Tigre's music, Cathy, a fan from Olympia, Washington, responds:

I think their music is so danceable and aesthetically pleasing. Le Tigre's lyrics are so powerful, politically determined, feminist motivated and grrrl revolutionary inspiring. And I love Kathleen's voice—her screams are beyond

words. Kathleen has a scream that evokes Poly Styrene (X-Ray Spex) and is so frightening and real, that it becomes beautiful and indestructible all at once. Her voice mixed in with Sadie and Johanna's almost monotone pitches creates this kind of neverending dialogue-based song structure that has a beat all to its own. Kathleen also has one of the most glorious singing voices I have ever heard. The choices of samples Le Tigre uses in their songs are amazing.³⁰

What is most interesting about Cathy's response is she touches on crucial aspects of Le Tigre's music. By mentioning elements of form (the singers' voices, samples, "danceable" rhythms) and content (political lyrics), Cathy demonstrates a deep understanding for one of the band's primary artistic intentions: creating music that contains a form and content that reflects each other in an effort to drive home the feminist notion of equality. Instead of prioritizing one over the other, Le Tigre's sound and lyrics are believed to be equally important which expressing political ideas, something Hanna defines this objective in relation to autokoenoxy:

People are always like, 'What's more important, the music or the message?' And, I don't understand why they have to be oppositional to each other. ... Autokoenoxy is about how your individuality can reinforce your sense of community and your sense of community can reinforce your sense of individuality. I think that's such a great concept. I was thinking about that in terms of content and technique, and music and lyrics. I try to have what I'm doing musically reinforce what I'm doing lyrically and vice versa—have them communicate with each other instead of locked in war to see which one is more important.³¹

At the same time, Le Tigre plays with the notion of "gendered structure." With the majority of pop songs possessing a linear Aristotelian structure—having a definitive beginning, middle, and end, as well as a point of climax typically experienced during the break-down—Hanna continually works to invent "an alternative," an idea inspired by the work of Hélène Cixous, the second wave French theorist who developed the notion of "écriture féminine" ("feminine writing"). Working from a place of the female body, Cixous sought out a form that reflected her perception of female sexuality. Instead of such masculine features as order and definition, she advocated for and practiced the feminine forms of flow and fluidity. Professor Verena Andermatt Conley explains: "Cixous wants her writing to be

overabundant and flowing. She refuses to bind or organize it and lets it flow. This may create a problem for the reader who is subjugated to what becomes an endless flow, since the text is inevitably written in the first person."³² Cixous encouraged female writers and artists to experiment with the structure of their work, suggesting it to be part of the larger issue of sexual equality.³³

By creating sounds and lyrics that "reinforce" both form and content, *Le Tigre* takes advantage of Cixous' gendered structure in the attempt to make music that speaks to them and their audience. In this way, the band makes conscious use of feminist theory in their music. Such is the case with the last song on their self-titled album, "Les and Ray," about a gay couple that lived next door to Hanna when she was young. A testimony of appreciation, Hanna sings:

Nine years old and climbing out the house
through a song played on piano by my neighbors Les and Ray.
I put my head up against the wall
to be closer to the music that they played.
You were my oxygen, the thing that made me think I could escape.
This is a thank you song for Les and Ray.
You were my batteries, the thing that made me think I could escape.
Here's a song for Les and Ray.³⁴

Before Hanna begins to sing the opening line in a childlike voice, a band member bangs out a simple tune on a toy piano in such a way that one could imagine her playing with only index fingers. The lyrics set the scene of a young girl pressing her ear against the wall in an effort to hear the music coming from her neighbors' apartment. Complementing the sweet, bouncy melody that conjures up feelings of innocence, the lyrics describe something that was new to Hanna at the time—an awareness music's power to transgress physical, mental, and emotional boundaries. "Through a song played on piano," a sound that traveled beyond the apartment walls, young Hanna felt like she escaped the abusive environment that characterized her home.

When Hanna passionately sings the line, "You were my oxygen," it is somewhat unclear if she refers to Les and Ray or their music, knowing the significance music has in her life. However, it is safe to assume that the performer addresses both with the emphatic "you", once aware of the gratitude she holds for the two men who treated her with kindness. In an interview, Hanna reminisces about the sense of safety she experienced around the couple, something she rarely experienced with the male figures around her:

a lot of times, there was, you know, violence around me. And I sometimes would, like, fantasize about Les and Ray ... hanging out with them or whatever because they seemed really in love. And one time Les took me to the mall to buy a present for my friend, and we had a really good time, and I didn't feel like he was going to put me down or be mean to me or, like, scare me, which my mother never did, but someone else in my life who shall remain nameless did. And I remember just thinking if anything really seriously messed up happened in my house that they would hear through the wall and that they would come get me. And so I wanted to write something for them.³⁵

At the end of the song, Hanna tells Les and Ray exactly what they meant to her. Serving as her "oxygen" and her "batteries", the couple's kindness and creativity kept Hanna going through a tough time in her life. Besides providing a lyrical metaphor, "oxygen" and "batteries" also reflect the organic and electronic energy that are fundamental elements of Le Tigre's music, which are illustrated in the final moments of the song. Ending with a line that could not be simpler in meaning, "Here's a song for Les and Ray," Le Tigre tells their listeners that their music is based on their life experiences. The song concludes with the electronic loop accompanied by a toy piano solo similar to the one found in the introduction.

Between the song's words, Hanna's tone of voice, and the music, Le Tigre sends both a personal and political message to their listeners. While expressing the innocent perspective of a young Hanna as she faced abuse and searched for a way out of her violent environment, they encourage others to assume the role of a caring

adult like Les or Ray in children's lives. For Hanna, simply acting as a positive person in a child's life is political:

A lot of people think, oh, [to be political] you have to be a part of an organization, which I think is really important and that we should be part of organizations. But there's other ways that people who don't have time or whatever to do that can be really helpful in the world, and one of them is to be that person for kids, you know, like, the person who believes them.³⁶

Although not necessarily a radical political message, in "Les and Ray" Le Tigre layers meaning within lyrics, vocals, rhythm and music, presenting their listeners with plenty of material to engage with—so much that fans like Cathy, who started listening to Le Tigre's first album in 1999, are "still [listening] to it and love it a lot."³⁷

In addition to the high degree of "political determinism" contained in the songs, as Cathy contends, fans of Le Tigre are also struck by the band's "fun" style. Lisa, from Chicago, remembers how this new sound made a strong impression the first time she heard Le Tigre's music: "One day my friend rushed over with the Le Tigre cd and we listened to the whole thing. We loved it! It was so different from other Riot Grrrl music. It had the same strong, unapologetic message, but it was fun and you could even dance to it!"³⁸ Interested in making music that their listeners will enjoy, Le Tigre includes what they consider to be "poppy, danceable" songs on their albums. For Emily, from Boston, this is something that makes Le Tigre different from many of the independent bands she listens to: "[The first album] is totally danceable and fun. ... I mean especially for like listening to a lot of indie rock. Not a lot of stuff sounds danceable, that makes you want to jump up and down, which [Le Tigre's music] totally does."³⁹

Although fans are excited to see Le Tigre experimenting with new forms of political music, critics question how fun music can contain a serious message. As Fateman explains, "There's been a few interviews which have implied Le Tigre is less political than Bikini Kill, and I feel like that displays a narrow view of what it is to be

political."⁴⁰ Hanna expands on this point by addressing a certain headline for an article about Le Tigre—"Riot Grrrl Grows Up":

there's a smell to a headline like that, that it's basically like, she's leaving feminism behind, thank god she finally grew up and got interested in real music and cares about pop melodies and structures whereas before it was just shitty music with screamy angry feminist vocals. So that part of it is really offensive to me because a) I don't think that anger only has one form that it ever takes and b) I don't like being told that I'm not a feminist anymore because I am, and just because the music doesn't sound exactly the same, 'fecker, drecker, drecker,' doesn't mean that my politics have radically changed or lessened or I'm less angry or I'm older.⁴¹

For Hanna, being pinned to one form of music is creatively and politically limiting. This is not to say Le Tigre has absolved itself of Hanna's screaming vocals, once a quintessential part of Bikini Kill's music. For example, in "The The Empty," an energetic song on the first album, Hanna's intense vocals act as the driving force. Speaking out against the absence of political content in the mainstream media, Hanna, keeping up with fast drumbeats and punk-like guitar melody, quickly cries out the lyrics, "I went to your movie and I didn't hear anything, I went to your concert and there was nothing going on."⁴² While Hanna still likes to scream, the band has also created music that does not sound necessarily punk, such as ballads ("Eau D' Bedroom Dancing"), rock ("Mediocrity Rules"), and experimental spoken word ("Dude Yr So Crazy"). Mixed with upbeat danceable pop are easy to learn lyrics—all of which becomes a tool for spreading political messages as fan Emily observes: "I mean I think it's important to have anthems. ... you can't summarize deep political thoughts in song, but you can kind of make people excited with it, which is an important part of politics."⁴³ Fans of Le Tigre sing along with the words "GET OFF THE INTERNET! I'll meet you in the street. GET OFF THE INTERNET! Destroy the right wing,"⁴⁴ and "OH FUCK, Giuliani, HE'S SUCH a fucking jerk. SHUT DOWN all the strip bars, WORKFARE does not work,"⁴⁵ containing messages of political activism and support for sex workers. Although not true for every listener,

after repeatedly singing along to the lyrics, some feel compelled to learn more about the meaning of Le Tigre's words. One fan, Cathy, calls this a "radical strategy":

[Le Tigre introduces] to me issues that I was completely unaware of, that remind me of the liberal arts college bubble I so often find myself stuck in. I think it's very important for people to talk about politics and I think it's amazing for people to be creating art about politics. It's a really radical strategy—almost like saying, "okay, you don't want to take the time to read this essay I just wrote or hear what I have to say, why don't you take 3 minutes to listen to this new song of mine and then get it stuck in your head for a day or two see if any of it makes sense?"⁴⁶

Besides singing about current events, such as New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani's policies against workers in the sex industry and the New York Police Department's racially motivated killings of unarmed black men ("Bang! Bang!"), Le Tigre through its use of gendered structure continues to raise a timeless feminist discussion of how to interpret works of art that contain misogynist content. In "What Yr Take on Cassavetes," Le Tigre created a song that, assuming the form of a conversation, reveals their ambivalence towards the famous filmmaker John Cassavetes. The band members sing the question together, "what's your take on Cassavetes," and then individually call out possible answers one by one, "misogynist, genius, alcoholic, messiah." Hanna remembers the inspiration behind writing the song:

[Sadie and I] went to see [*Husbands* (1970)] and we just had, like, all these conversations about, you know, 'Is the misogyny in this movie calling attention to, sort of, like, white middle-class men's spiritual vacancy, and stuff like that? Or is it just being a part of it?' Because we both felt really gross after the movie, but we also loved it in this weird way. And when we started talking about how many different kinds of art and music we feel that way about, ... there's something really icky about it, but we still are attracted to it. And how can you constantly be negotiating that in your mind about everything as a feminist. And so we started writing that song.⁴⁷

Clearly diverging from the typical verse, chorus form of pop songs, through "What's Yr Take on Cassavetes," Le Tigre uses a gendered structure to address a feminist struggle for equality among the sexes. In this way, they put their own spin on Second Wave feminist theory, in order to speak to their present day audience,

allowing fundamental feminist ideas like equality to shine through while possessing a new form of electronic music. By using theory to shape their work, Le Tigre challenges audience's political and structural expectations for pop music, and brings ideas of sexual identity that were made popular by the Second Wave into Third Wave activist media.

¹ Bikini Kill. "White Boy." *Bikini Kill*. Kill Rock Stars, 1992.

² In 2001, Eminem won a Grammy for Best Rap Artist, and *The Marshall Mathers LP* was nominated for Best Album.

³ Anderman, Joan. "Shut Up." *The Boston Sunday Globe*. 3 Dec. 2000: K8.

⁴ Eminem. "I'm Back." *The Marshall Mathers LP*. Uni/Interscope. 2000.

⁵ Hanna, Kathleen. "Interview with Kathleen Hanna." *Ms.* Aug/Sep 2000: 86-88.

⁶ The Fakes. "Pop Song." *Real Fiction*. Chainsaw Records, 1995.

⁷ Ruin, Julie. "I Wanna Know What Love Is." *Julie Ruin*. Kill Rock Stars, 1998.

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Chapter 3

Playing with the Audience:

Le Tigre's Live Performance

Since the early days of Bikini Kill, Hanna has treated the space of live performance as political. Requiring that the space be safe for girls and women, Hanna established rules during each performance: female audience members were invited up front, whereas men had to stay in the back of the venue, and mosh pits were prohibited unless started and dominated by women. As one Bikini Kill fan describes, if the rules were not obeyed, then the band would not play: "I also saw several girls at the front, in the very small pit, being shoved by boys. Hanna stopped the show and refused to continue until the rest of the audience stopped these guys from misbehaving."¹ Hanna actively works to make her concerts a place of comfort for women because she acknowledges the influence a musician can have in these situations—yet, only to a point. Even with such efforts, violence against women is still a common occurrence at concerts, and Bikini Kill shows were no exception. Hanna recognizes that regardless of the musician or the event, women are in danger of being physically and sexually harassed:

Years ago, at a Rock for Choice benefit show that Bikini Kill played, some female fans were assaulted in the audience—one in particular by a guy who was rubbing his penis on her. You'd think at a Rock for Choice show you'd be safe, but no. And so a bunch of girls grabbed him and dragged him outside. They didn't beat him up or anything, but they were stopped by security and told that if they didn't want these things to happen, they should just stay home and rent videos. In the larger context of feminism and hatred against women, sex discrimination at rock shows is just another strategy meant to keep us at home, inside. It's meant to keep public space male, and to keep us feeling afraid.²

Fully aware of the patriarchal hierarchy that characterizes many rock concerts, Hanna attempted to establish equality at her shows by providing girls with

the choice to stand where they please and without fear. She also represented a confident, angry feminism by screaming her way through songs characterized by lyrics, punctuated by the "f-word" that graphically detail experiences of sexual abuse. These political acts were dependent on Hanna's control over the space for the duration of her show. Being the leader of the event, leveraging her performance against the sexist system, Hanna attempted to instate change by way of entertainment. At first glance, such a performance tends to evoke the tradition of carnival, a well-known form of medieval political performance, explored by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*. The Russian literary scholar frames his analysis of the French Renaissance writer Rabelais by presenting a detailed account of folk humor as it manifested in the space of the carnival during the Middle Ages in Europe. Being a ritual that is distinguished by "the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers," the carnival "is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom."³ With one of its purposes to invert the traditional hierarchy, during the carnival, members of the folk culture entered a liminal space and experienced a sense of social power that they typically did not possess. Bakhtin explains:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal.⁴

The way to achieve change was through comic skits, parodies, and edgy forms of speech.

Neil Nehring makes a case for similarities between the medieval carnival and a Bikini Kill show in the last chapter of his book, *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger is an Energy*. Nehring examines strategies used by Bikini Kill in their attempt to overturn the system of patriarchal authority through a case study of one song that is appropriately titled "Carnival." He describes how Bikini Kill flirts

with the themes of the medieval ritual by way of their aggressive presentation and "a few intelligible lyrics":

[Hanna] describes the "seedy underbelly" of the carnival, "the part that only the kids know about," where 16-year-old girls give "head to carnies for free rides and hits of pot." ... Hanna doesn't decry the scenario, as one might expect, but instead declares "I wanna go to the carnival," too, as if she wants in on the action.⁵

After going through interpretations of the song's ambiguous meaning, Nehring makes explicit the relation between the song and Bakhtin's carnival:

When an artist like Hanna dons the "mask" of the clown, and she's certainly clownish in "Carnival" in tempting us to think that she exults in abuse and vulgarity, she acquires the ability "to rip off [other] masks, ... to rage at others," and "to betray to the public a personal life." Bakhtin's work, in other words, contains very nearly the whole Riot Grrrl catalog: the expose (or *parody*) of the whole process of feminine representation, the cultivation of the energy of anger (or *billingsgate*), and the revelation of personal experience according to the feminist commonplace that the personal is the political.⁶

Through these carnivalesque acts, Bikini Kill took control of the time and space of their live performances, in an effort to establish political and social change.

However, while much of the social performance of Bikini Kill may be similar to the carnival—in both, members of the traditionally powerless groups in mainstream society determine the rules of the space according to their needs—they are not the same. The carnival offers a *liminal space* sanctioned by the authorities. According to Victor Turner, the liminal space is one in which "people 'play' with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them. Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements."⁷ Thus, acts in liminal space depend upon the familiar, something Marvin Carlson points to in his summary of Turner's work. In medieval rituals, Carlson explains, conventional order appears to be challenged, but "is ultimately reaffirmed. Liminal performance may invert the established order, but never subverts it. On the contrary, it normally suggests that a frightening chaos is the alternative to the established order."⁸

However, whereas the political rituals of agrarian societies actually reinstate traditional order, those of industrial society tend to challenge it. This difference, Turner suggests, lies within the concept of the *liminoid*. In making the distinction between liminal and modern society's liminoid, Turner introduces the concepts of work and play. The relationships and meanings of these terms shift from agrarian to modern society. As Turner explains, play is considered a part of the agrarian notion of work, united in the attempt to maintain order:

these play or ludic aspects of tribal agrarian ritual myth are ... intrinsically connected with the "work" of the collectivity in performing symbolic actions and manipulating symbolic objects so as to promote and increase fertility of men, crops, and animals, domestic and wild, to cure illness, to avert plague, ... and so forth.⁹

These liminal acts are riddled with rules and social expectations, making it difficult for them to be subversive. Conversely, in modern society play and work are seen as separate acts, and the *liminoid* is that space in which modern play exists. Distinct from the ordered society of business, play is "free from external constraints,"¹⁰ allowing individuals to get in touch with desires and fantasies. Carlson summarizes Turner's concept:

Liminoid, like liminal, activities mark sites where conventional structure is no longer honored, but being more playful, more open to chance, they are also much more likely to be subversive, consciously or by accident introducing or exploring different structures that may develop into real alternatives to the status quo.¹¹

Rather than creating a carnivalesque liminal space, in which the social hierarchy gets reinforced by inverting traditional order, Bikini Kill, by setting certain behavioral requirements and brandishing an abrasive style of performance, offered a liminoid space in which to present their critical commentary of patriarchy, and promoted equality among males and females within their audience and beyond. With the space of the concert not being one of work, but play, the band had freedom to establish an order independent of the mainstream. In other words, because the event is not intended to support the authoritative structure, alternative ones were

introduced and carried out, thus offering a liminoid space in an attempt to enact social and political transformation outside the performance space.

Like Bikini Kill, Le Tigre's political performances are set in the liminoid. However, the strategies used to inspire social change differ from those of Hanna's first band. Le Tigre incorporates children's toys and actions into their performances, recontextualizing such signs of innocence through play in order to make a political statement about gender roles and to expose aspects of sexist power. Their performance stage and audience space becomes a carnivalesque liminoid place in which to safely play with and against patriarchal desires and multiple shades of identity with the goal of evoking political transformation in their fans.

Play as Political Performance

As detailed within Turner's essay, play is an important ritual through which children develop and adults dramatize, a concept also explored within the work of Roger Caillois (1961), Clifford Geertz (1973), and Richard Schechner (1993) and at the root of play is performance—the act of presenting identities in front of others. Because Le Tigre incorporates a number of elements of play into their performance, it is important to examine the political significant of this act for them. What is it about play that brings the band closer to shifting the sex-determined power dynamics of a space, structure, or society? How is play used as an effective tool in the fight against patriarchy? To better understand Le Tigre's acts of play, it is useful to look at feminist scholar Gerry Bloustein's concepts of serious and parodic play, and apply them to their performances.

Concerned about the increasing timidity and low self-esteem she sensed in her teenage daughter (who in her younger years was outgoing and confident), Bloustein decided to study what happens to girls when they hit adolescence. To conduct her research, she gave ten teenage girls from diverse backgrounds video

cameras to shoot whatever they desired, including social events, family life, and personal moments alone. Bloustein believes that through their self-designed representations, in addition to the acts of play that appear in the video, she can better understand the girls' perspectives and experiences. She reveals:

I am fascinated with the creative power of representation and play, and particularly concerned with the place that self-conscious representation, reflexivity or posing played in the search for and portrayal of (self) identity for these young women; how that representation becomes "fact" for them.¹²

Besides a means of observation for Bloustein, the video allowed the teenagers to get more in touch with themselves—through the process of making the video, by acting for the camera, the girls were able to try on various identities, essentially experimenting with their sense of self through what she calls serious and parodic play. Bloustein distinguishes between types of play based on the function and outcome revealing how play takes on an important role in each girl's development. "Serious play" refers to dealings with subjects of fantasy that "could conceivably be 'real,'" whereas "parodic play" is mockery, exuding a quality of excess.

Bloustein notes that more often than not, space determines the type of play the girls engage in, a point reflected in a dressing room scenario. While trying on clothes, what at first appears to be serious play turns into parody. After receiving permission from store managers to take their camera into a dressing room and try on outfits in front of it, the girls go wild mimicking figures and attitudes found in the fashion industry. Bloustein explains that imitations of femininity (often inspired by trying on clothes) are accepted as serious when the girls are alone in the private space of the bedroom; however, once in the public sphere, they are no longer comfortable experimenting with these identities in a sincere manner. To elaborate, she discusses a moment when the girls reject tight fitting clothes on their friends as well as their own bodies:

Yet that rejection was turned into parody at the exhortation of the girl's friends, "Act like a model!" It was an invitation to turn what might usually

take place in total privacy, as "serious fantasy," "serious play" into a public carnivalesque play, an excess of mimesis, if you like. With the camera in a semi-official capacity the young women had license to experiment and play with the clothes and accessories in a public arena, do what can usually only be done in private spaces of bedrooms or similarly sanctioned areas. However, because this took place in a public space, and because they were not alone and were with other members of their group, the seriousness of the experimentation was transposed into parody, marked out much more clearly as "exaggerated play."¹³

Bloustein's research demonstrates that there are "blurred boundaries" between serious and parodic play, but even with such ambiguity, teenage girls remain highly aware of how environment affects their attitude toward identity. To negotiate social pressures, they utilize parodic play to present a cynical attitude aimed at a subject that they also fantasize about. While criticizing an industry that imposes standards of beauty on young women, they also embody this media-touted notion of femininity, expressing their intrigue and attraction to it. In this way, parodic play is a political strategy—a means of remaining critical while indulging their consumerist desires. It is a safe way to explore a place of contradiction that third wave feminists typically find themselves in. Empowerment derives from acknowledging and accepting both truths.

Bloustein demonstrates that actions of parodic play have dual significance—mockery and enticement—and tend to be contradictory. No strangers to contradiction, *Le Tigre* takes advantage of this political strategy by way of costumes, props, and actions, including matching neon one-piece suits of the early eighties, jump ropes, and intentionally silly synchronized dances. Such objects conjure up associations like children and fun and add flavor to the performance, serving as accoutrements to the poppy music, witty lyrics, and slideshow. For example, in between songs at a show in New York City, Hanna pretends to answer a pink toy telephone, and then discusses with an imaginary caller the artwork that is exhibited on the slide behind her, offering details about the artist and the feminist content. A carefully chosen prop in her performance (there is no doubt Hanna gets a kick out of

being on stage with a toy phone), the toy becomes a playful vehicle for spreading important political information. In addition to bringing smiles to audience members' faces, the toy stands apart from the tiny cellular phones found in their pockets and bags. Hanna separates the feminist art from the consumerist, high-tech society that surrounds her and her listeners by introducing the feminist art with the toy telephone, reclaiming the space for Le Tigre's politics.

In a contradictory fashion, Hanna chooses a child's toy to send a political message. She takes this use of toys a step further when several songs later, she picks up a jump rope. Seemingly inspired by the energy of "Deceptacon," she spontaneously starts jumping to keep up with the song's fast rhythm, referencing the iconic American image of a little girl skipping rope on the sidewalk. By recontextualizing this image, Le Tigre encourages the audience members to take a second look at this scene. Re-placing the image in the space of a political performance instead of a suburban neighborhood, Le Tigre questions its origins and meaning. Why are little girls expected to like jumping rope? What does this image say about little girls? Who created this gendered expectation? How does this scene benefit patriarchy?

Recontextualizing the normalized image of oneself with the aim of calling it into question is a strategy that resembles what Rebecca Schneider calls "counter-mimicry." A term she derives from Homi Bhabha's notion of the Other's mimicking of colonialism, Schneider explains the power of mimesis. Beliefs about the colonial subject were formed by way of mimesis—the colonial powers mimicking what *they* understood to be the Other, which at the time were considered fair representations. Invariably, colonial subjects came to simultaneously identify with and deny this constructed definition of their identity, leaving them with a "split self." Schneider explains that one way for colonial subjects to subvert an imposed identity, and

reclaim the whole self is to re-present it to its inventor, what she refers to as counter-mimicry. Such an act forces its contrived nature to surface:

In this displacing gaze, the tables are turned on the "appropriate", showing the mimicry inherent in its construction. Under that stress of double vision, "the body" appropriate becomes a scrim. Making that body explicit as scrim can throw into relief the concealment or erasure of other bodies—specific, detailed, and multiple.¹⁴

Similar to the colonialist subject who self-consciously presents the constructed self, when Hanna jump ropes, *Le Tigre* challenges the voice of patriarchy. By jumping rope on stage to her band's political music, Hanna exposes this image for what it is—an idealized notion of cute little girls who are quiet and passive. This image of "perfection" is constructed by a patriarchal society, one that expects little girls to jump rope instead of play football, to clap to rhymes at recess instead of run around and scream. In this context, the act of jumping rope calls into question the gendered expectations placed on children.

This is not to say Hanna does not find pleasure in jumping rope. On the contrary, while on stage she appears to truly enjoy this game from her childhood. Like the parodic play of Bloustein's teenagers in the dressing rooms, Hanna both publicly criticizes and happily participates in the fun. Although a contradiction that is difficult to make sense of, the sight of such ambivalence represents the conflict that many women living in a patriarchal culture experience, thereby serving as a point of connection between Hanna and her female fans.

Besides functioning as a bridge to the audience, the act of jumping rope serves another important function in this political performance as a form of destabilization. The conflict intrinsic to Hanna's contradiction makes an impact on the entire performance by disrupting any sense of continuity in content and tone. Typical within many political performances, such techniques of destabilization serve as wake-up calls for members of the audience, challenging them to think about the content the performer presents.

Political artists of all media have theorized about strategies of destabilization, including filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, and musician Paul Miller (DJ Spooky). While the intention to bring consciousness to the audience is shared, each theory of destabilization has its own political agenda and terminology. For this reason, some performance and theatrical artists look to Bertolt Brecht and his process of "alienation" when beginning their exploration of political strategies. In his book *Interacting with Babylon 5*, Kurt Lancaster provides a concise summary of Brecht's theory:

Ultimately, as his theory evolved, Brecht felt that the Aristotelian form [of narrative] "cast a spell" over the audience, transporting them from "normality to 'higher realms.'" He wanted, instead, stage productions which, after sucking people into the reality of the stage illusion, distanced the spectators from the reality in order to perceive how the *content* spoke to the contemporaneous political, social, and cultural milieu of the audience.¹⁵

By way of structure and style, Brecht sought to force his audience into a state of critical thought, in hopes of stimulating a desire for political action.

Indeed, counter-mimicry is a form of destabilization, an important aspect of both liminal and liminoid space. Schneider expands on its destabilizing qualities in a summary of a crucial scene in the performance *Sun, Moon, Feather*, a part of Spiderwoman Theater. In the fashion of counter-mimicry, Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel, and Muriel Miguel (three Native American sisters) examine the image of the Indian woman in Hollywood westerns by reenacting a scene that originally stars Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy in which an Indian woman and white man reveal their love for each other. According to Schneider, giving the authority a taste of their own medicine is only one part of counter-mimicry:

On the one hand, it is a repetition of the technique of mimesis upon the dominant culture that has mimicked them (as if to say, you've doubled me, now I'll double you back). But, on the other hand, it is a significant historical counter-analysis, a doubling back as in a retracing of steps to expose something secreted, erased, silenced along the way.¹⁶

Following a scene of humor such as the take-off on a Hollywood Western, the sisters present one of despair, depicting their father's alcoholism or their mother's struggle with Christianity. As Schneider describes, "In one moment the 'authentic' is distanced, exposed as corrupted by colonialist nostalgia, but in the next it (painfully) 'alters,' becomes a detail, a vital memory, a *literal* reality ... very much alive in literal reverberations across their daily experience."¹⁷

Such extreme shifts in mood and content from scene to scene leave the audience on edge, unsure of what to expect next. Since this jarring effect of discontinuity leaves them unable to mentally escape into the production's narrative, it becomes a tool for inspiring critical thought. Like Brecht and the three sisters of Spiderwoman Theater, Le Tigre integrates destabilization techniques into their performance to arouse political consciousness within their fans. In addition to Hanna jump roping, at times the band proceeds a fun, poppy song with a celebratory, feminist message like "Hot Topic" with a raging song like "Bang! Bang!" that is characterized by its grave commentary on police brutality. Transitions of this nature are shocking reminders that while there is much to be excited about, there is still much political work that needs to be done in order for equality to be achieved.

When Play Becomes Real

It is important to remember that without serious play, there would be no parodic—that by being a political commentary, parody must grow out of the real or possibly real. Like Bloustein's teenage girls who participate in both forms of play, Le Tigre includes the serious in their performance as well. Also like the teenagers whose serious play aids in forming their sense of self, it functions as a means of identity construction for Hanna.

Besides ones of entertainment, an important act of definition takes place during live performances. During a show, a band sends a message about who they

there were people out there, and I'd be like, "Away in the manger, no crib for a bed." It's really scary now. I had like all different versions ... rock version. But now it's really ... to like write your own songs in your bedroom and then come here and see people mouthing the words. It's so fucking cool.

Hanna's story is striking for several reasons. To begin, a childhood scene, such as a little girl singing "Away in the Manger," tends to be known only by family members or close friends. When Hanna shares this story with her fans, it is as if she invites them to be part of the group of people that *know* her, something popular musicians rarely do. Not to mention, exposing a private moment of childhood (which for many people signifies vulnerability) to a large group of people is a daring move. While both of these points should be looked at in detail because they speak to Hanna's attitude towards being on stage, this analysis will be presented in Chapter 4. Instead, for the purposes of this chapter, the focus is placed on Hanna's interesting use of "play" in her story.

Being that Hanna frequently approaches the subject of childhood, whether it is through the pitch of her vocals in a song or the toys she incorporates into her performance, it is no surprise that she talks about "playing stage" when she was young. Similar to Hanna's other references to children or childhood, her story holds political significance. It falls within the realm of Bloustein's serious play, since Hanna would transform a safely performed fantasy of being a singer into a public and political reality.

As Bloustein indicates, serious play represents fantasies that may someday become real. As a means of coming to terms with certain identities, specifically aspects of femininity, girls participate in acts of serious play such as dancing, dressing up, and hanging posters on their bedroom walls in private spaces that are "usually situated in the home," providing teenagers with an opportunity to be alone and in a familiar place, resulting in a sense of safety that initiates a "freedom to play."¹⁸ The dependence of serious play on the girls' perception of private space is

reflected in a story Bloustein tells about Grace, who wanted to dance without a physically present audience:

Grace suddenly told me she wanted to dance—she had been filming and talking about her bedroom in my presence—and asked me to leave the room. Once alone, she played her favorite tapes and danced by herself in front of the video for about ten minutes. Then I was allowed back into the room and she continued her more mundane filming.¹⁹

Grace's bedroom dancing bears striking resemblance to Hanna's playing stage. Except for the ages at which they played (it sounds like Hanna was not yet a teenager when playing stage), the girls' games have several things in common: both represent moments of intimate pleasure, and for this reason, required privacy to play with identity construction for each girl. Being in what Bloustein calls "a space for experimentation, a hiatus, as it were," girls feel comfortable experimenting with notions of who they are or could be. Although Bloustein can only speculate about how serious play influences the development of Grace's identity, Hanna's story demonstrates the importance of such play. The fantasy of being a performer, the very act of playing stage, in some way brought Hanna closer to her goal of making political art that challenges a patriarchal system and presenting it to the public.

As reflected in their song "Eau D' Bedroom Dancing," Le Tigre details the joy of dancing alone in one's room. In a soft, high-pitched voice, Hanna sings:

I'm in the sky when I'm on the floor
 The world's a mess and you're my only cure
 Is it time for me to act mature
 The only words I know are "more, more" and "more"
 No one to criticize me then
 There's no fear when I'm in my room
 It's so clear and I know just what I want to do
 All day bedroom dancing, to you I wanna say you're my thing
 You teach me²⁰

In addition to a much needed moment of personal indulgence, Le Tigre believes that bedroom dancing helps girls find peace with themselves in a space protected from gender roles and vulnerabilities ("No one criticize me then"), allowing them to get in touch with who they really are ("You teach me").

In light of Bloustein's work, songs like "Eau D' Bedroom Dancing" and Hanna's story of playing stage demonstrate the crucial role that acts of play have in girls' lives. As a safe way of forming a sense of self, games of fantasy assume political significance. Whereas the outside world offers them little control over their lives—evident in the rules of parents and school, and peer pressures—play is an independent act that is shaped and defined by the girls, something that is completely based on their needs. Play is a mediated way for girls to take in and digest identities presented by society, allowing them to slow down the process in order to mindfully construct what is right for them. When Hanna and Le Tigre speak about this act on stage, either through a speech or a song, they refer to it as an important part of their creative development. Through play, they were able to entertain the thought of themselves as performers, preparation for the feminist art they currently make. In this way, Le Tigre is evidence of the positive results of serious play, which indirectly encourages fans to play as well.

There is no doubt that serious play is worth publicly addressing based on political value alone. However, it is a private act for most children, and remains one throughout adulthood. In this way, Hanna's openness about playing stage and bedroom dancing, as well as a number of personal experiences, differs from other people. It is important for her to share pieces of her history with her audience. Similar to the way play allows the player to compose her sense of self, by exposing personal moments with her audience, Hanna presents fans with the opportunity to participate in constructing their own understanding of her identity in the liminoid space of a concert venue. Such behavior is linked to a higher political purpose of achieving *communitas*.

Communitas in Liminoid Space

By sharing as many personal stories as she does, Hanna invites her audience to discover more about her life. At the same time, Hanna tries to learn about her fans by talking to them after shows, responding to their letters, and showing interest in their projects.²¹ Similar to the statement Le Tigre makes by "low-fi" music, Hanna breaks down any pre-existing boundaries between the performer and audience by encouraging an open dialogue between her and her fans, achieving what Turner calls *communitas*—a fundamental part of the liminoid space. A sense of unity among the participants, *communitas* inspires political consciousness by breaking down boundaries that typically exist among people. As Turner explains, "In people's social structural relationships they are by various abstract processes generalized and segmentalized into roles, statuses, classes, cultural sexes, conventional age divisions, ethnic affiliations, etc."²² Such categorizations are so powerful that often people find it difficult to identify with those who are not like them. However, within a space that does not adhere to social hierarchies such as the liminoid, people are free of these "generalizations and segmentations" and are in a better position to identify with individuals that they usually do not. When individuals feel equal to other inhabitants of the space, *communitas*—"this way by which persons see, understand, and act towards one another ([what Turner describes] in *The Ritual Process*) as essentially 'an unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals'"²³—is manifesting. In these moments, Le Tigre's overarching political goal to inspire a sense of equality among its listeners regardless of race, class, sex, gender, and sexual orientation is achieved.

This is not to suggest that all audience members identify with Hanna, and in the same way. While many enjoy hearing Hanna speak about her life experiences and politics, there are some fans like Chris from Boston, that just want to hear music

at a Le Tigre show. Chris explains that for him, Hanna's speeches are considerably less interesting than her music:

I think it comes down to pop stars generally don't make good mouthpieces for things. And it's interesting that someone like [Hanna] could be you know, very witty and intelligent and clever in her lyrics, but, I think this is probably true for a lot of people, but just trying to talk about anything serious, just comes off sounding either not very on the ball or pretentious. ... I think that for whatever reason, maybe it's like a multiple intelligence issue, you know, she is very smart when it comes to song writing, but not as smart when it comes to just being a speaker.²⁴

However, while *communitas* does not always bring about like minds or experiences within participants of this liminoid space, it makes a political statement about Hanna's egalitarian attitude towards her audience. By sharing stories and showing interest in her fans, she sets a democratic tone for Le Tigre's performance, indirectly challenging the pedestal that celebrities are put on in American culture. In this way, the performer evokes the essence of *communitas*—"inclusivity" which "makes for proselytization. One wants to make the Others, We."²⁵

¹ Fuchs, Cynthia. "If I Had a Dick: Queers, Punks, and Alternative Acts." *Mapping the Beat: Popular Music and Contemporary Culture*. Ed. Thomas Swiss, John Sloop & Andrew Herman. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998): 113.

² Hanna, Kathleen. "Interview with Kathleen Hanna." *Ms.* Aug. - Sep. 2000: 86-88.

³ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968): 5-7.

⁴ Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*, 10.

⁵ Nehring, Neil. "The Riot Grrrls and Carnival." *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger is an Energy*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997): 166-7.

⁶ Nehring. "The Riot Grrrls and Carnival," 175.

⁷ Turner, Victor. "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology." *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982): 27.

⁸ Carlson, Marvin. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. (London: Routledge, 1996): 23.

⁹ Turner. "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual," 32.

¹⁰ Turner. "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual," 34.

¹¹ Carlson. *Performance*, 24.

¹² Bloustein, Gerry. "'Ceci N'est Pas Une Jeune Fille': Videocams, Representation and 'Othering' in the Worlds of Teenage Girls." *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*. Ed. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson & Jane Shattuc. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

¹³ Bloustein. "'Ceci N'est Pas Une Jeune Fille.'"

¹⁴ Schneider, Rebecca. "Seeing the Big Show." *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*. Ed. Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay. (London: Routledge, 2000): 266.

¹⁵ Lancaster, Kurt. *Interacting with Babylon 5*. He quotes Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. & Trans. John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992.

¹⁶ Schneider. "Seeing the Big Show," 267.

¹⁷ Schneider. "Seeing the Big Show," 268.

¹⁸ Bloustein. "'Ceci N'est Pas Une Jeune Fille.'"

¹⁹ Bloustein. "'Ceci N'est Pas Une Jeune Fille.'"

²⁰ Le Tigre. "Eau D' Bedroom Dancing." *Le Tigre*. Mr. Lady: 1999.

²¹ Several fans spoke to me about personal interactions that have had with Hanna. For example, Cathy told me about that she was "pen-pals with Kathleen from junior high all throughout high school," [Cathy (fan). Personal interview conducted via email. 15 Mar. 2001 – 11 May 2001.] and Lisa described the time she met Hanna after a Le Tigre show: "Kathleen talked to each group of fans for 10 minutes, she didn't push everyone along she actually talked to us and we talked to her about our own band that we were starting. She wished us luck and signed our cd's and flyers and told us to send her a copy of our first tape. It was a great experience" [Lisa (fan). Personal interview conducted via email. 19 Mar. 2001 – 20 Apr. 2001.]

²² Turner. "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual," 47.

²³ Turner. "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual," 45.

²⁴ Chris (fan). Personal interview conducted via email. 8 Mar. 2001.

²⁵ Turner. "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual," 51.

Chapter 4

Negotiating Feminism and Consumerism:

Interacting with Fans

In the opening verse to Le Tigre's "The The Empty," Kathleen Hanna describes a scene of celebrity figures traveling from party to party, using their cultural power to acquire wealth instead of social justice:

The stars are getting in and out of automobiles,
and we keep wondering when we're gonna feel something real.
Keep waiting for a Santa that'll never come,
a real party, not just people who're faking fun,
but everything gets erased before it's even said,
and all that glitters isn't gold when inside it's dead.¹

For Le Tigre, true wealth is not found in money and fame, but in works of political substance, something Hanna says is hard to come by in the mainstream media: "It just seems like the media (and other corporate interests) really want us to confuse feminist action with pictures of scantily clad women, who have weapons in their hands or are doing karate kicks or whatever."² Although she recognizes that political meaning is sometimes found in the entertainment industry, such as the band Spice Girls and television show *Xena, Warrior Princess*, she believes these cultural texts contain little political content. By neglecting to show everyday feminists in action, the performer maintains, mainstream media tends to distance political acts from common people. According to Hanna, they replace "neighbors" or "friends" with the celebrity, effectively telling people to be passive, and find meaning in "impossible images, instead of looking at ourselves."³ Conversely, the performer wants to inspire action within her audience by establishing an egalitarian relationship with them, one similar to the desired *communitas* in Victor Turner's liminoid space discussed in Chapter 3. With the perception that consumerism and celebrities are antithetical to

her social and political goals, it is not surprising that Hanna does not want to be considered a star.

Responding to Consumerism

By refusing to sign with a corporate label, members of Le Tigre remain independent artists, retaining a fair amount of control over their music and performance. Unlike the corporate created group, Spice Girls, for example, Le Tigre decides their message, sound, style, and presentation. As explored in the previous chapters, they implement political strategies through their art, including choosing and remaining with an independent feminist label, basing the structure of their music on feminist theory, and creating moments of destabilization while on stage.

When it comes to fan interactions, the subject of this chapter, Le Tigre's strategies are more like compromises between theirs' and the fans' needs. To arrive at such negotiations, Le Tigre must respond to a variety of cultural expectations placed on popular music bands, many of which derive from practices of consumption.

Although not everybody would agree with Hanna's argument about celebrities in "The The Empty," she is correct to locate them in a consumerist system. Like the consumerism of goods that scholar Grant McCracken refers to in *Culture and Consumption*, celebrities are used by individuals to construct a sense of their identity, something that P. David Marshall addresses in *Celebrity and Power*. Marshall sees celebrities as people who publicly represent "individuality in contemporary culture."⁴ As a person that makes a career out of publicly brandishing an identity (one that is typically quite fluid), a star ends up standing for public collectives. Marshall associates such acts of representation with ones of containment. That is to say, by possessing the "agency" to define a group or an institution, celebrities hold the power to influence the masses. It is in this way that a consumerist system appears on two levels. First, by a fan purchasing items related to a star—going to

watch a performance that she is in, buying a magazine or watching a program that contains an interview with her—she engages in consumption with the intention of defining her own identity through that of the star's. Second, as corporations know, the popularity of celebrities is powerful enough to sell various types of products to the public. As Marshall explains, the significance of the celebrity is transferred to the endorsed product through advertising:

Celebrities function in consumer culture as a connecting fiber between the materiality of production and culturally contextualized meaning of consumption and its relation to collective identity. The celebrity, then, is a commodity that possesses in its humanness and familiarity an affective link in consumer culture to the meaning that is bestowed on consumer objects by groups.⁵

Recognizing the commercial power of stars and their place within a consumerist system that she is skeptical about, Hanna enacts certain strategies to prevent celebrityism from becoming a part of *Le Tigre*. For one, she does not refer to any of her listeners as fans, something she tells interviewer Douglas Wolk: "I don't think I have fans. I think there's some smart, cool people who sometimes like what I do and sometimes hate what I do, but I don't think I have fans."⁶ The traditional dynamic between fans and stars is considered antithetical to punk philosophy according to Aliza, a member of the movement. As someone who became interested in punk music and DIY ethics when she was thirteen, Aliza never considered herself a fan of any band regardless of how much she admired the members. She explains:

that whole punk rock thing where you're not supposed to be a fan, and the performers are no more or less than you, and you could be doing the same thing, you know, it's like this whole ethic that tore down the division between performer and audience. So growing up in that, I never really felt like, oh I can't approach this person or talk to them or find out what they're about. So that kind of breaks down this fan thing.⁷

Also a believer in punk ethics, Hanna rejects a fan-star hierarchy that is perpetuated by the corporate media industry, one that tells audience members they are not to create, just consume.⁸ For Hanna, success is measured "not in terms of how many

units anything sells, but when something I do affects other people to do their own thing."⁹

For Hanna, consumerism does not allow people to do their own thing because it is generally believed that consumerist products shape the buyer into its company's image. However much this may be true, it can also be seen how some people turn these products into ways of self-expression, a point that McCracken develops in *Culture and Consumption*. According to McCracken, consumerism was first introduced in England during the Elizabethan period and evolved during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

Each of these episodes consists in a consumer boom in which consumption took a decisive step forward, assuming new scale and a changed character. Each of these episodes served as a reflection of new patterns of production, exchange, and demand, and each served as an incitement of new such patterns.¹⁰

Each period contributed to the relocation of cultural value from spaces of elitist tradition to the public marketplace. For this reason, practices of consumption revolutionized notions of social relations. While separating the high and low classes in attitudes and lifestyles—thereby, further marginalizing those belonging to the lower—consumerism has also empowered people regardless of status, by providing them with a “means of cultural invention” and “symbolic expression.” McCracken continues: “Now all social groups engaged in this creative enterprise in an effort to both build and accommodate to a perilous and liquid world.”¹¹

What McCracken demonstrates is around the end of the nineteenth century, the practice of consumerism brought English society both farther away from and closer to achieving social equality. While intensifying stratification between classes by functioning as a means of class distinction, at the same time consumerist products presented all people, despite their class, with new, creative ways to express their identity. In this way, McCracken characterizes consumerism as having a dual political nature—serving as both a politically oppressive and progressive practice.

Media scholar Henry Jenkins also recognizes this political duality of consumerism in his book *Textual Poachers*, from a contemporary perspective. In an effort to explore the ways people make meaning of media, Jenkins conducted ethnographic research of television fans and their strategies of interpretation. What he observed was "poaching"—a term conceived of by Michel de Certeau (1984) that refers to practices of "active reading," "an impertinent raid on the literary preserve that takes away only those things that are useful or pleasurable to the reader."¹² Jenkins points out that fans of television programs ultimately determine their meanings through actively reading them, despite any intentions of media producers. Instead of passively consuming the narrative and images presented to them by the television industry—which in their original form are expected to speak to the identities of the audience—fans recreate the process of consumption by allowing their own interests and fantasies guide their interpretations. Such forms of consumerism are illustrated through fans' letters to producers that express dissatisfaction with the direction of the program, as well as works of fan fiction and art. Although produced in a system that is intent on inspiring profit rather than critical thought, television programs serve as a means of creative and, at times, political expression for audience members. Indeed, Jenkins demonstrates that consumerism can be an oppressive or liberating practice (or even both at times).

Despite Jenkins' proposition, it is difficult for Hanna to see the positive side of consumerism and attempts to challenge the consumerist mentality. Similar to a dynamic that Le Tigre establishes with fans through their music as discussed in Chapter 2, Hanna tries to create a space that inspires a dialectical relationship between her and her audience—something she perceives as anti-consumerist and anti-hierarchical. She tries to foster meaningful connections through personal interactions with fans.¹³ While on stage, Hanna begins to establish this relationship by revealing intimate details about her life. Such is the case with "Les and Ray," a song about a gay couple that lived next door to Hanna as a child, and who she believed would save her from the abuse she experienced in her home, described in more detail in Chapter 2.

When performing it live, Hanna often discusses the childhood fear that served as the inspiration for the song. The fact that the performer shares her experience, by talking about it directly before the song and then through its metaphoric language, means a lot to fans like Soox. For someone who has seen Le Tigre play five times, Soox always looks forward to hearing "Les and Ray" because Hanna shares so much through it:

[Music] gives me more of a reason to be happy and accepting of where I am, and just to hear somebody else say, "[Music] was what saved me." And also to be able to listen to it and think, "[Les and Ray's song] was something like what saved me." So ["Les and Ray"] was really powerful for me. Then I, of course, heard Kathleen's story about it, and that was like, I mean, me just listening to the music is one way that it's important, but like little Kathleen knowing that there were two guys that would help her if she was ever in that kind of serious trouble is, you know that's really odd to think that someone would like actually write that song, and then sing it, and then out in the public space. You know, "I was in this position where I was very frightened and these two guys let me know that I would be ok." I don't think a lot of people will dredge that kind of thing up, and then put it out where other people can hear it.¹⁴

Touched and perplexed by Hanna's ability to articulate a childhood fear, and in a style that adults can understand, according to Soox, Hanna's honesty separates her from other artists and musicians. "Les and Ray" provides fans with information about Hanna's life as a child, including events and feelings that have shaped who she is today.

In addition, she challenges consumerism by engaging in personal encounters with her fans offstage. One way is through letter writing. Even though she receives a lot of mail, the performer tries to respond to each letter. She says: "Thirteen-year-old girls don't write me letters that end up in the trashcan—I fucking read 'em, you know what I mean? I don't give it to friends, because a lot of the stuff that they write to me is really personal, and they share really intimate things sometimes."¹⁵ A testament of her dedication, Cathy, a fan of Hanna since the days of Bikini Kill, says that she was "pen-pals with Kathleen from junior high all throughout high school."¹⁶ Such mutual interest in communication between musician and listener is rare, to say

the least, and speaks to Hanna's commitment to respecting the needs of her audience. Another way she expresses this respect is through the many discussions she has with audience members. Something she is known for, Hanna takes the time to talk to fans after *Le Tigre* shows. As Lisa, a fan from Chicago describes:

Kathleen talked to each group of fans for 10 minutes, she didn't push everyone along she actually talked to us and we talked to her about our own band that we were starting. She wished us luck and signed our cds and flyers and told us to send her a copy of our first tape. It was a great experience.¹⁷

Indeed, by spending time getting to know her fans, Hanna treats them like friends. As Lisa details, such interactions enhance the experience of the show, evidence that Hanna's behavior has a significant impact on some of her fans. Given *Le Tigre's* political intentions, the question becomes what is this impact with regards to consumerism? Do the performer's attempts to establish personal connections with fans actually preempt any consumerist tendencies? Or, on the other hand, does consumerism actually dictate fans' responses to Hanna?

Hanna as Celebrity

Regardless of Hanna's intentions behind personal interactions with fans, many still treat her like a pop star. The performer is made aware of this celebrity status during moments when fans react awestruck by her presence. Such responses are detailed in a story Aliza tells about the time she walked the Dyke March¹⁸ in New York City with Hanna. She says:

there were girls running up to her being like, "Oh my god, your [sic] Kathleen Hanna," and she was a little freaked out by it. But [she always said to them,] "Come join us." Kathleen would like kind of not expect these girls to run away. ... She was just talking to them, and expecting them to keep walking, and they'd like giggle and then run off.¹⁹

At the Dyke March, Hanna's fans were unable to contain their excitement about her, treating her like a celebrity, and inadvertently confronting the performer with her place in a consumerist system. Despite her attempts to circumvent being thought of

as a celebrity, many listeners use the hierarchical fan-star model to define their relationship to her.

Fans' consumerist tendencies surface out of Hanna's sight as well, specifically following interactions between the performer and audience member. Soox, an author of the fanzine *PoemFishGrrrl*, filled one of her issues with writings on Le Tigre, which were inspired by the band's show she attended in Boston. While the performance itself was "great," Soox experienced some of the most exciting moments of the evening after the band finished the show. She explains:

I was really shy to go up to Kathleen, because she's like Kathleen Hanna and she's like (makes a motion with her hands mimicking the act of putting something above her in the air, and looks up to where her hands are), anyway. But there was a moment that there was nobody at the merch table, and she was at the merch table. ... And I went up to her and I said, "I wanted you to sign my cd. And thank you so much for playing. It was a great show." And she said, "Thank you for being in the front row and being excited." She noticed me and just had been really excited to see other people excited about the show. And was thanking people. So I mean, that was my first ever positive rock star experience.²⁰

Hanna acknowledges the importance of the audience's energy to her performance, essentially saying that she is unable to put on a good show without her fans. In this respect, she spells out the equality between her and her audience, especially during shows. Even when told this, Soox still describes the performer as being "above her" through the gesture she makes with her hands, and by calling her a "rock star." Her perception of Hanna does not change, even when she is personally invited by the performer to attend Le Tigre's next show:

I also told her that I was gonna go to the show at Dumba in two nights. And she was concerned because she figured Dumba was a small place, and she was concerned that people weren't going to be able to get in. And she was like, "Oh, do you live in New York? Or are you driving from Boston?" I was like, "We're driving from Boston. We're going to leave really early, and expect to get there really early in the evening." And she was like, "Well, if you get there really early, why don't you just tell the people that you're friends of ours, and you can come in and sit through the sound check." So I was like, "You mean, I can tell someone that I am a friend of Kathleen Hanna's? Okay!" (She laughs.)²¹

Once again, Hanna extends herself, demonstrating appreciation for a listener, and attempting to redefine the dynamic between performer and audience. And once again, Soox is struck by the fact that one of her favorite musicians would treat her as an equal, seeing it as an unusual and memorable experience. Such a situation reiterates the cultural power of consumerism, in that despite the attempts Hanna makes to diminish her role as celebrity, the fan continues to locate the performer's actions in a fan-star hierarchy. No matter how many times she tells the fan that she sees her as a friend, Soox remains aware of Hanna's celebrity status, something that she describes when asked if she considers herself to be a "fan":

I don't generally pick up the phone and call Kathleen Hanna. ... it's not somebody I could hang out with in a general day to day basis. It's not somebody that would probably answer my emails or letters or whatever on a personal basis. And I mean, I call that being a fan. You can't really know these people. You're not really their friend. You would be if you could, but you still, I mean, I still look up to them. Maybe not "worship," but look up to, use as a goal. Maybe I'll never be Kathleen Hanna, but I could be as cool as Kathleen Hanna.²²

While appreciating Hanna's friendly treatment, Soox expresses her comfort with the role of fan by recognizing the boundaries that exist between her and the performer. Additionally, she defines Hanna as someone to "look up to," and to "be as cool as," essentially placing the performer on a pedestal, which Marshall demonstrates is a common perception in a consumerist society.

To some degree, the cultural power of consumerism, and its notion of the celebrity, overrides Hanna's attempts to reconstruct performer and audience dynamics. Yet, as Jenkins shows in *Textual Poachers*, consumerism and political action are not mutually exclusive. Just because some of Hanna's fans see her as a star does not mean they are not politically active. As in the case of Soox, while she consistently puts Hanna on a pedestal, she also considers herself to be a political individual, which is something, like Le Tigre, that she expresses through making art—her zine *PoemFishGrrrl*. In this way, Soox and the band similarly approach

political activism. Further, she credits the band with her new interest in creating electronic music:

And since Le Tigre, I've wanted to get a sampler. ... A friend of mine is going to loan me her keyboard, which has a drum machine built in so I'll have a chance to actually play around a little bit. I don't know if I'll actually make anything out of it, but I don't know, it's going to be fun to try.²³

Soox's actions reveal two important points. First, despite their different attitudes toward the fan-star hierarchy, Hanna and Soox hold a comparable interest in politics and activism. Second, Soox combines the practices of consumerism and activism by allowing her attraction to Le Tigre to fuel an interest in making electronic music. Such media-savvy, consumerist behavior is also seen in Jenkins' "poachers" who critically interpret television programs and invent narratives based on the shows' characters to suit their political and emotional needs. Additionally, by putting an activist spin on the practice of consumerism and using the band's work as a creative launching pad for her own, Soox speaks to the larger goal of Le Tigre—to successfully create a dialectical relationship with their audience, one in which both parties are producing and taking in art. Even with consumerism present in Soox's perception of Hanna, the band's political message still gets through to her, and inspires her to be active. What this suggests is it is possible for Le Tigre to negotiate between political and consumerist needs, which, as demonstrated by Soox, are both very much a part of Third Wave feminists.

Finding a Compromise

In order to respond to the political and consumerist desires of her fans, Hanna must find a way to appeal to both. At times this is done inadvertently, as in the case of Soox, when fans interpret Hanna's egalitarian treatment as a rare moment to interact with a star, and consequently, their feelings of respect for the performer and her message are heightened. Additionally, despite the position on consumerism that

she presents in interviews, Hanna actively responds to both consumer and political needs through the culturally valuable sign of celebrities—the autograph.

When she comes out from backstage at shows, Hanna is usually inundated with fans, many with pen and album cover in hand hoping for an autograph. For performers like Hanna who try to challenge the consumerist system, the request for an autograph poses a difficult dilemma. If she responds positively to her fans, she demonstrates her appreciation for them in a conventional consumerist manner that they are sure to understand. On the other hand, if she refuses, she expresses the respect she holds for fans in an alternative way, one that they might not recognize, thus running a high risk of being perceived as rude. In this situation, the solution evolves from a compromise between consumerism and feminism, something articulated by feminist leader Gloria Steinem:

when somebody asked me for an autograph I used to say no, because I thought that institution was such a hierarchy in itself, but that was seen as unfriendly, so I began to ask people to trade autographs with me. And I think, small though that is, it conveyed a different message.²⁴

In order to satisfy the cultural expectation for autographs, Steinem gives hers to people, while asking for theirs in return as a way to send a political message of egalitarianism.

Like Steinem, Hanna uses requests for autographs to simultaneously satisfy consumerist and political desires, something she does by redesigning the autograph to better suit political goals. Instead of just signing her name, she includes the titles of feminist movies and books in her autographs, such as *Born in Flames* by Lizzie Borden, *The Dialectics of Sex* by Shulamith Firestone, and *Letters to a Young Feminist* by Phyllis Chesler.²⁵ By doing so, she uses her autograph “as a way to advertise” feminist texts—a useful tool for spreading the word about individuals and ideas that are important to the Third Wave movement. In this way, she negotiates

consumerist and feminist interests, finding what appears to be a carefree way to present political information.

Further, the decision to sign autographs in this particular way speaks to the performer's commitment to promoting a sense of equality between her and her fans. While for her, the autograph represents consumerist practice that she prefers not to have in her life, Hanna respects its significance for some of her audience members. By doing so, she supports the different beliefs and lifestyles that make up the Third Wave feminist movement.

¹ Le Tigre. "The The Empty." *Le Tigre*. Mr. Lady: 1999

² Hanna, Kathleen. "Rebel Girl: Interview with Kathleen Hanna," *Bust* 9. Spring 1999.

³ Hanna. "Rebel Girl: Interview with Kathleen Hanna."

⁴ Marshall, P. David. *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997): 242.

⁵ Marshall. *Celebrity and Power*, 245.

⁶ Wolk, Douglas. "Grrrl talk: Kathleen Hanna resurfaces as Julie Ruin." *The Boston Phoenix*. 24 Sep. - 1 Oct. 1998. 25 Jan. 2001. http://www.bostonphoenix.com/music/98/09/24/KATHLEEN_HANNA.html

⁷ Aliza (fan). Personal interview conducted face-to-face. 25 Mar. 2001.

⁸ In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins presents several examples of entertainment companies that have interfered with fans' desire to create, including Lucasfilm that "initially sought to control *Star Wars* publications, seeing them as rivals to their officially sponsored and corporately run fan organization" (Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. [New York: Routledge, 1992]: 30.). Most recently, many authors of unofficial fansites receive cease and desist letters from companies that do not grant fans permission to present images or create stories about copyrighted characters or narratives.

⁹ Wolk. "Grrrl talk: Kathleen Hanna resurfaces as Julie Ruin."

¹⁰ McCracken, Grant. *Culture & Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988): 10-1.

¹¹ McCracken. *Culture & Consumption*, 29.

¹² Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1992): 24.

¹³ Although Le Tigre may have problems with the term "fan," I have and continue to use it to mean an individual who listens to the band's music, buys their albums, attends their shows, and follows their progression. Unfortunately, the term has a flattening affect by not reflecting the varying degrees of interest within each one of Le Tigre's listeners. However, while recognizing this drawback, I find "fan" to be a useful word in describing the individuals that I interviewed. Additionally, I asked each subject if s/he would assume the label fan in regards to Le Tigre, and all except one answered affirmatively.

¹⁴ Soox (fan). Personal interview conducted face-to-face. 9 May 2001

¹⁵ Wolk. "Grrrl talk: Kathleen Hanna resurfaces as Julie Ruin."

¹⁶ Cathy (fan). Personal interview conducted via email. 15 Mar. 2001 - 11 May 2001.

¹⁷ Lisa (fan). Personal interview conducted via email. 19 Mar. 2001 - 20 Apr. 2001.

¹⁸ Dyke Marches are annual events that celebrate the existence of queer women, and take place during Gay Pride week in cities all over the world.

¹⁹ Aliza (fan). Personal interview conducted face-to-face. 25 Mar. 2001.

²⁰ Soox (fan). Personal interview conducted face-to-face. 9 May 2001

²¹ Soox (fan). Personal interview conducted face-to-face. 9 May 2001

²² Soox (fan). Personal interview conducted face-to-face. 9 May 2001

²³ Soox (fan). Personal interview conducted face-to-face. 9 May 2001

²⁴ Steinem, Gloria and Kathleen Hanna. "Fierce, Funny, Feminists." *Bust* 16. Winter 2000: 55.

²⁵ Hanna. "Fierce, Funny, Feminists," 55.

Conclusion

Throughout the thesis, I have shown how Le Tigre attempts to heighten the political consciousness of their audience through music and performance. While this thesis has not proven that Le Tigre's art is not impacting policy change, as I state in the introduction, this has not been my intention. Rather, this thesis has explored the creative strategies that the band uses to send a message to their listeners about treating themselves and each other as equals.

Although this thesis has not focused on evidence of political changes, this is not to say my research did not reveal any hints of such effects. The proof that Le Tigre is making a difference in the political lives of their audience is in the fans of Le Tigre that I interviewed, twelve of which assume the label "politically active" to some degree. While they do not credit Le Tigre for their activism, most agree that the band has been and continues to be an important source of information, educating them about political issues that they want to know about, something Cathy explains:

[Le Tigre] knows so much, they need to give lectures! ... [They] have taught me about the case of Amadou Dialo (the black man murdered by NYPD) and about things like oppression in your own community—the oppressed oppressing each other. ... All of the artists in "Hot Topic"—they have made me want to look up all the people listed there and get their books, music, art, etc.¹

Lisa echoes Cathy when she says:

Going to shows and Riot Girl meetings broadened my horizons. I found out about zines, books, and other material that contained political and social commentary and that had a political message. I found out about protests and government candidates and voting and stuff. ... I found out so much about women in government and what politicians were doing or more often not doing for women and women's issues.²

In addition to spreading the word about feminist issues and individuals, Mendi says that Le Tigre reminds her that political activism is found in art: "Le Tigre has influenced me toward being more political by reinforcing the idea that art is a way to question or critique status quo and the powers that be."³ Anita continues Mendi's point by saying the band shows her that "I can make viable art even through the medium of something that seems politically void like pop music."⁴

Based on the testimonials of these fans, Le Tigre is heightening their audience's political consciousness—through their music and performance, they raise awareness concerning contemporary acts of injustice, individuals who are contributing to the Third Wave feminist movement, and the various ways to implement action. While the impact of their work cannot be evaluated in numbers of instated policies or audience's political actions, the band makes their mark by sending a feminist message that is often unheard in the mainstream media. Similar to what Baumgardner and Richards advocate, Le Tigre's political activism takes place daily, when a fan plays their album, goes to see their show, or reads an interview with them. By mixing politics with common forms of entertainment, the band serves an important political role, making feminist subjects and theories accessible to their audience, thereby turning more people onto feminist ideas. In this way, Le Tigre's music and performance contributes to the Third Wave movement by using art to make a statement about the world, and inspire political consciousness.

Some Further Issues to Think About

Clearly, this project could have gone in a number of directions. Before ending, I believe it is useful to point out some work that has yet to be done on this topic by myself or anyone else who is interested in art as Third Wave feminist activism.

Fan Ethnography – By closely studying the fans of any cultural event, whether it is a television program like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or a singer like Madonna or Cher, a scholar learns a lot about a community of people and their object of interest. Quite often, fan ethnographies help us to determine specific points of connection between a fan and a show or performer, revealing what is most valued by a culture or subculture at a particular time. While I speculated about the values of Le Tigre fans at moments throughout the thesis, I do not have the qualitative or quantitative research to back up these claims. Such information would bring us a step closer to understanding Third Wave feminism and people who consider themselves to be Third Wave feminists.

Second and Third Wave Feminism – Although I touched on it in Chapter 1, there is still much work to be done on the relationship between Second Wave and Third Wave feminists, something Le Tigre's politics, music, and performance can help in exploring being a manifestation of Third Wave feminism. By asking questions like, how are Third Wave feminists like Le Tigre building on the work of Second Wave feminists? Within the work of Le Tigre, where are the similarities between the two waves? Where does tension lie? By finding answers to these questions, feminists of different generations can work towards understanding each other and becoming united in their fight against patriarchy.

History of Feminist Music – In Chapter 2, I discussed how Le Tigre is sending a political message through their music, not only by way of lyrics and sound, but also by the electronic tools they use to make a particular style of low-fi punk electronica. This could easily be the beginning of an exploration of political music by women since the birth of feminism. By researching such a history, one would be in a place to answer, what has led to this new style of feminist sound? And how low-fi punk

electronic music fits into a feminist musical continuum? Such information would provide more insights into the importance of Le Tigre's work within the feminist movement, as well as signal to feminists the direction of future works of activist art.

Le Tigre – As a group, Kathleen Hanna, Johanna Fateman, and JD Samson are constantly developing, slightly changing their musical style and politics to address personal and cultural growth. As they continue to create activist art and become known among more and more feminists, it is important to follow their progression and their fans' response to them. By doing so this project will continue to evolve as well, which is one way of remaining aware of issues that are challenging feminists today, and their creative strategies for activism.

¹ Cathy (fan). Personal interview conducted via email. 15 Mar. 2001 – 11 May 2001.

² Lisa (fan). Personal interview conducted via email. 19 Mar. 2001 – 20 Apr. 2001.

³ Mendi (fan). Personal interview conducted via email. 19 Apr. 2001 – 21 Jul. 2001.

⁴ Anita (fan). Personal interview conducted via email. 19 Mar. 2001 – 1 May 2001.

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Eric. Personal interview conducted face-to-face. 29 Mar. 2001.

Heather. Personal interview conducted via email. 3 Mar.–1 May 2001.

Lisa. Personal interview conducted via email. 19 Mar. 2001 – 20 Apr. 2001

Mendi. Personal interview conducted via email. 19 Apr. 2001 – 21 Jul. 2001.

Soox. Personal interview conducted face-to-face. 9 May 2001.

Fan Websites

Le Tigre: Unofficial Fan Site. <http://www.envy.nu/letigre/>

Wanna See Me Disco? <http://busygrrrl.homestead.com/letigre.html>

All That Glitters Is Not Gold. <http://chickpages.com/girlbands/letigre/>