It’s been thirty years since the emergence of Riot Grrrl. In the early 1990s, this cultural movement, led by young women, created a new wave of feminist punk politics in the United States and beyond. As early as 1997, Mary Celeste Kearney pointed to erased connections between Riot Grrrl and several other movements, including queercore, in mainstream media’s reporting on this phenomenon.1 Queercore emerged a few years earlier and in fact inspired the zines and music of Riot Grrrl groups. This close relationship to Riot Grrrl makes it all the more peculiar that scholarship on queercore has been so spotty to date. Various authors have published essays on aspects of queer punk culture.2 In 2015, Maria Katharina Wiedlack was the first author to systematically examine the history of North American queer-feminist punk scenes since the 1980s.3 Yet a comprehensive scholarly account of queercore itself has remained pending.

In *Queercore: Queer Punk Media Subculture*, Curran Nault resolves this problem. The author examines key queercore texts produced during the subculture’s peak phase between 1985 and 2006. Approaching them from a media studies perspective makes this especially exciting. Queercore productions, as Nault reminds readers, come in many shapes: “zines, music, films, live events, writings, visual and performance art.” This is also true for punk culture in general. Yet research on punk media has tended to overemphasize the role of music and zines. Nault, in contrast, puts a strong emphasis on visual culture and includes the often overlooked realm of film in his study, thereby expanding the way we think about punk culture. His treatment of queercore as a transmedia movement is the first systematic engagement with its complexly structured aesthetics.

The impact of queer subcultures on not only Riot Grrrl but also punk movements in general has been remarkable. Yet in many official accounts of punk history, queer contributions are still hard to find. In his book’s first chapter, Nault rewrites punk genealogies, bringing the long history of queer artists within punk culture to the fore and illuminating the important foundations they laid for queercore’s emergence. The author takes readers back to 1970s punk hubs New York, London, and Los Angeles and to selected queer artists in each locale. He focuses on trans punk legend Jayne County and her role in the scene around Andy Warhol’s Factory; butch musician Phranc, whose experimental bands Nervous Gender and Catholic Discipline were among the most interesting in the early LA punk scene; as well as London filmmaker Derek Jarman, creator of the queer punk classic *Jubilee* (1978). Although it certainly was not an epicenter for the emergence of punk culture, Nault includes Baltimore, too, and with it, the important impact of local filmmaker John Waters, and Waters’s icon, Divine, on queer and punk aesthetics. Nault is interested in these artists as connectors between the worlds of queer and punk culture and treats them as “switch points” with many different people revolving around them. By doing so, he lays out the many overlaps between gay liberation movements and queer and punk subcultures and their interwoven histories.

The author also situates queercore’s development in the historical context of the 1980s and 1990s in North America. In the 1980s, parts of gay and lesbian movements embarked on an assimilationist course. The HIV/AIDS crisis, the Reagan regime, the immense cultural, political, and sexual backlash to the feminist and gay rights movements of the 1970s, and also the angry new queer politics that developed in response, all frame Nault’s understanding of the queercore movement’s emergent cultural strategies. Through the first chapter’s historical framing, Nault deepens his account of the recurring tropes he identifies as queercore’s defining features. The three following chapters are organized conceptually. In each of them, the author concentrates on one aspect that he considers central: explicit sexual representations, confrontational tactics, and shockingly subversive body politics.
In chapter 2, launching the conceptual section, Nault investigates (soft) pornographic representations by Canadian filmmakers and multimedia artists G. B. Jones and Bruce LaBruce. Through close readings of *J.D.s* (1985–1991), their influential zine, Jones’s and LaBruce’s films, and Jones’s *Tom Girls* drawings, Nault discusses how these punk artists used their sexually explicit art as strategic interventions against both the homophobic mainstream and assimilation efforts by parts of the conservative gay movement at the time. Such efforts depended, he reminds us, largely on representations of respectable, desexualized subjects. Nault reads “bad object choice” as a recurring strategy in *J.D.s* and LaBruce’s films. He also engages with the fetishization of macho punk skinheads and other toxic masculinities in queercore projects such as LaBruce’s cult flick *No Skin Off My Ass* (1991). He reads such overt sexualizations of apparently unsafe partners as provocative ways of troubling conventional, safe representations of queer desire, arguing that they force audiences “to grapple with difficult, disturbing desires that some, in the interest of respectability, wish to keep silent.” Nault attributes important potential to those strategies to undermine the presumed straightness of hypermasculine figures. Yet he also admits that it can be difficult to disentangle affirmation and disruption of toxic masculinities in those works.

Less ambivalent in this regard is Jones’s *Tom Girls* series. In these drawings, the artist critically appropriates the fetish art of Tom of Finland. In his analysis, Nault focuses on a work that appeared in the first issue of *J.D.s* in 1985. Finland’s homoerotic drawings feature muscle-bound hunks, yet he’s also been accused of fetishizing fascist symbols. Jones closely adopts Finland’s drawing style but draws dykes instead to celebrate sexually active, rebellious women. In this particular work, she bricolages two of his picture stories. This drastically alters the meaning of Finland’s original drawings. Nault explains how Jones, in her revisions to them, satirizes Finland’s toying with fascism.

In the book’s next chapter, Nault focuses on queercore’s “bash back” attitude. The case studies in this chapter are a highlight of the book. The author draws connections from queercore aesthetics to Queer Nation’s 1990s verbal-militant activism, arguing that queercore activists adapted the group’s confrontational strategies and combined them with punk’s shock tactics. To strengthen this argument, he refers to Jack Halberstam’s concept of “imagined violence” as a rhetorical strategy of resistance for minoritarian subjects. Imagined violence blurs the line between fake and real violence, thus “opening up a politicized space of counter-possibilities,” as Nault writes, where empowerment and pleasure can be regained by staging revenge on oppressive structures.

Nault explores such counter-spaces in *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992). The 16 mm feature expresses rage and fury over the HIV/AIDS crisis.

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7 Nault, 82.
8 Nault, 84.
9 Nault, 92.
Two HIV-positive gay men embark on a road trip to avenge their imminent deaths and punish an uncaring society. In a key scene, one of the main characters, Luke (Mike Dytri), kills three homophobic attackers in self-defense. Nault discusses how Araki’s film stages this cathartic moment as “an empowering reversal of then-dominant narratives of queer victimhood.” He also traces back strategies in works by the band Tribe 8 and in Margarita Alcantara’s zine Bamboo Girl (1995–2005). Nault reads Tribe 8’s confrontations as ways of “working through” lived realities as women (of color) and trans people in a society that systematically abuses them. He further discusses the experimental short film Shut Up White Boy (Vũ T. Thu Há, 2002), in which Tribe 8 guitarist Leslie Mah stars as an employee of an all-Asian American punk dyke diner. In the film, the employees take creative revenge on a customer with an Asian fetish. Here, as in Bamboo Girl, Nault understands imagined violence as queer empowerment but also as a disruption of the notion of the quiet and submissive Asian American “model minority.” These case studies illuminate how the tactic of imagined violence in queercore primarily works to problematize actual violence.

In the final chapter, the author outlines queercore’s subversive body politics, focusing on two performers: singer Beth Ditto of the band Gossip and multimedia artist Nomy Lamm. He analyzes Ditto’s live performances and her appearance, naked, on the cover of NME magazine’s August 2007 issue. Through acts of resignification, he argues, Ditto reclaims “fat as a term of positive self-identification” and strength. Nault then discusses Lamm’s work as part of disability justice performance organization Sins Invalid. He describes how Sins Invalid often specifically directs the audience’s gaze toward the disabled body, inviting them to look. He further elaborates on this strategy in a close examination of Lamm’s multimedia performance piece “Bird Song.” Fat positivity and disability activism—the two topics that move into focus in this chapter—have rarely been explored in connection with queer punk. Nault demonstrates how both queercore artists “counteract oppressive norms of beauty, gender, sexuality and able-bodiedness,” thereby expanding the boundaries of acceptable female behavior.

In his tracing of the aesthetic and thematic contours of the subculture, Nault reconstructs the ways in which queercore’s protagonists appropriated punk style and media to create oppositional identities, meanings, and culture. These enabled challenges to both dominant culture as well as the increased liberal culture and assimilationist tendencies in lesbian and gay politics. Queercore itself might now be mostly a thing of the past. All the more important then that Nault’s book works to preserve and revive these often marginalized and little-known alternative queer histories and identities.

12 Nault, 118.
13 Nault, 120.
14 Nault, 148.
15 Nault, 158.
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