INTRODUCTION

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Figure 1: “Instructor teaching young men water lifesaving techniques” at North Carolina State 4-H Short Course, 1932

The image on the cover of Issue 26 features a scene of vulnerability and vitality (Figure 1). In black and white, the photograph documents a training session in which two lines of young men stand before their instructor in a gesture of rescue. Positioned on a sandy field spotted with crabgrass in pairings that repeat toward an unseen vanishing point, the foregrounded men stand in half-repose, with their weight pressed back upon the men behind them, whose forearms half-embrace their feigning victims. The wilting men’s eyes are shut, suggesting their performative helplessness, while those behind them act as anchors, stoic and determined, but also delicately bent to one side. Taken outside of the aquatic context, the
photograph’s composition denaturalizes the scene of rescue. Unable to go fully limp—that is, to enact their drowning—the foregrounded men hold a contradictory posture: they are turgid yet docile, upright yet in repose.

The rescue is, of course, staged to produce maximum visibility. Were the photo taken in water at the scene of real-time rescue, the bodies of the foregrounded subjects would be invisible, submerged. The pedagogical value of this depiction would thus be compromised. The image transmits an affective combination of tactile sensuality and clinical disinterest. The homoerotics of the embrace captured here, amplified by a string of pelvises cantered out in prominent display, is not presented as an instance of pleasure or desire, but rather the rehearsal of a life-or-death situation. Indeed the strategic blurring of these categories is a trope of Hollywood cinema, perhaps best exemplified in The Sandlot when the character Squints fakes his own drowning so that the lifeguard, Wendy Peffercorn, can perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on him.

The second rescuer from the right—a young man with dark wavy hair—makes direct eye contact with the gaze of the camera in a gesture of awareness that shatters the photograph’s clinical façade, introducing suspicion within the frame, directed toward the spectator beyond it. The young man’s look admonishes the viewer as if to ask, “Why are you looking at us?” It is in this look that the homoerotic composition of the photograph becomes most apparent—the slipperiness between a hypermasculine bravado the document aims to perform and the sensuality between men nonetheless signaled by their posture. They may as well be dancing. If the documentary function of this photograph is to declare, “here we learn to rescue the drowning victim,” the composition and position of the men in the frame complicate that archival mission, for the photograph also announces, “here we embrace one another.” In so doing, the image raises several questions—and highlights certain tensions—at the heart of this issue’s thematic focus: How do distinct visual technologies trigger oscillations between pleasure and suspicion? How do readers’ erotic investments color hermeneutic practice? How does embodiment participate in the intimacy of the pedagogical relation?

Several of the essays collected in this issue were presented at a conference on the same theme hosted by the Polygraph editorial collective at Duke University in February 2016. Preparation for the conference occurred more or less in tandem with the build up to Super Bowl 50,
another spectacle of homoerotic masculinity, this one featuring North Carolina’s own Carolina Panthers. In those months, controversy surrounding the Panthers’ star quarterback, Cam Newton, seemed strikingly resonant with the themes of the conference we were organizing. During his few seasons in the NFL, Newton—only the sixth African American quarterback to start in the Super Bowl—had earned a reputation for two things: excelling at a position traditionally reserved for white players and dancing on the field to celebrate his achievements. Specifically, Newton had become known for his Superman pose and, later, for dabbing—a dance move born in Atlanta, his hometown.

Newton’s detractors denounced his “showboating,” his “arrogance,” the outright obscenity of his body-in-celebration. A concerned mother who had taken her nine-year-old daughter to a Panthers game penned an open letter to Newton, published in the Charlotte Observer, decrying, in particular, his celebratory “pelvic thrusts.” Consulting Newton’s movements in instant replay, journalists were quick to point out that the quarterback had not, in fact, moved his pelvis at all. Sigmund Freud might have some thoughts on this visual misapprehension. In perceiving Newton’s bodily celebration as sexual aggression, the spectator, positioning herself as guardian of her daughter’s virtue, rehearses a familiar, tenacious fantasy of black male sexuality as at once threatening and desirable. It seems clear, as many journalists have pointed out, that the sexual panic surrounding Newton’s celebrating body is bound up with anxiety about black masculinity. As Chauncey Devega at Salon puts it, “White athletes are allowed to show joy and confidence without fear of condemnation. By comparison, the black body is always a threat in America. It has to be disciplined, controlled and regimented.”

In addition to codifying these bodily regulations, the NFL’s expanding prohibitions on what it deems “excessive celebration” also root out its more explicitly theatrical elements, like the use of props, and the enactment of “premeditated” or “choreographed” celebratory acts. This rejection of canned spectacle in favor of either stoic athleticism or spontaneous expressions of feeling surfaces in the most scathing attack on Newton’s character, put forward by NFL draft analyst Nolan Nawrocki in 2011. Nawrocki calls Newton “disingenuous,” a “narcissistic con artist” and “fake rah rah leader” who plays to the cameras. For college reporter Matt D’Angelo, even Newton’s habit of celebrating touchdowns by
handing footballs to kids in the stands is insincere, a savvy PR stunt far less “classy” than the “discreet commitment” to charitable work displayed by other players.⁸

The NFL’s crackdown on theatricality is comical insofar as it disavows the corporate pageantry on display in every NFL game, pretending there could be athletic purity left in a sport so physically punishing that its players require saline drips to rehydrate during half time. Writing for *Counterpunch*, Lawrence Ware highlights the consumer logic built into an industry with such astronomically high financial stakes riding on the performance of racialized bodies: “If you’re a black athlete, White Americans will cheer for you; they will attend your games; they will even buy your jersey—just make sure you display endless amounts of humility, meekness, and gratitude.”⁹ Newton’s supporters have focused great attention on racial double standards, and for good reason—racial prejudice is blatantly operative in the way athletes’ behavior is perceived, evaluated, and policed by athletic associations, the press, and fans. But moving outside a framework that would compare Cam Newton’s media coverage to, for example, the reverential treatment of his Super Bowl opponent, white quarterback Payton Manning (who, incidentally, has a history of *actual* public pelvic thrusting in a University of Tennessee locker room), it is clear that Cam Newton’s embodied pleasure (the “exuberance” with which Charles Barkley credits him)¹⁰ raises suspicion on at least two fronts: on the one hand, critics question its respectability, sportsmanship, and permissibility according to the white, middle class cultural protocols of the athletic establishment. On the other, critics deny that it is sincere, authentic, genuine. Too much enjoyment, they suggest, must be a spectacle meant to belittle the opposing team, or to raise the player’s own capital value. Newton is both too excessive and too calculated in his celebration.

It is striking how much effort the NFL has put toward curbing bodily celebration over the last three decades, ruling out certain gestures and comportments with increasing specificity. By contrast, the League has been notoriously permissive of its players’ violence, both on and off the field, despite the widespread incidence of brain damage and domestic abuse. Why is violence tolerable while dancing is not? Why is black celebration considered particularly offensive to an industry that profits so spectacularly from the athletic performance of, and public enthrallment with, those same bodies?
To hazard an answer, we might turn to Beyoncé’s halftime performance of “Formation,” a visual homage to another group of Panthers. According to Syreeta McFadden’s assessment in The Guardian, “Beyoncé’s work shows that revolution can be beautiful; protest and celebration are not contradictions when imagining a black future that isn’t overrun by images of black pain and death.” It is precisely this ambiguity between protest and celebration, violence and exuberance, which Beyoncé and Newton both invoke, and which is at the heart of popular anxieties surrounding the quarterback’s controversial dance moves, his smile, even his defiant “sulking” in the wake of the Panther’s otherwise unremarkable Super Bowl loss.

This issue of Polygraph investigates the ways in which pleasure, exuberance, jouissance, and enjoyment exert such captive force over the critical imagination, and how suspicion can work to expose the political stakes of pleasure, broadly defined. Over the course of editorial production, dramatic political transformations in the United States, including the election and inauguration of Donald Trump, have drastically reshaped the political and critical landscape into which this issue is being released. While the outcry over Newton’s celebrations has waned, new controversy over the NFL’s Black Lives Matter protests—inspired by Colin Kaepernick’s decision to take a knee during the national anthem—has risen. Amidst the mounting forces of white supremacy and their most visible public demonstrations in decades, the NFL, alongside other national athletic associations, has come to mediate mainstream political debates over which bodies may speak and how and when, and which bodies may not. At the same time, the #metoo movement has gained prominence in the wake of sexual abuse scandals surrounding Harvey Weinstein, suggesting a growing public confidence in testimonies that have traditionally been met with disbelief. The shifting rapport between pleasure and suspicion, inflected by the rise of rightwing populism and the hypervisibility of social media commentary, continues to take unpredictable new forms. The essays included here, many of which address the relations of power made possible through modern techniques of visualization, represent diverse negotiations with the uncertain critical terrain on which we find ourselves today.

In truth, scholars of feminist and queer theory have long interrogated pleasure to demystify the structures of power that undergird, circumscribe, and interpellate the subject. A suspicion toward pleasure surfaces, for example, in Anne Koedt’s rejection of the “myth of the vaginal orgasm,” Laura Mulvey’s
analysis of visual pleasure in cinema,4 Catharine MacKinnon’s critique of pornography,5 Gayle Rubin’s conceptualization of a charmed circle of sexuality,6 Foucault’s turn from paradigms of desire to “bodies and pleasure,”7 and Linda Williams’s genre deconstruction of the pornographic “frenzy of the visible.”8 Pleasure threatens the psychic and political sovereignty of the individual subject, raising questions about the relationship between public and private forces in the construction and expression of subjectivity.

Pleasure’s constructedness, its violences, and its normativities have inflected heterogeneous critical approaches to questions of race, class, affect, and representation, especially at their points of intersection. But suspicion, too, has its pleasures; it is to this complicated *mise en abyme* (the pleasure of suspicion, the suspicion of pleasure) that Issue 26 turns its attention. In the last two decades, debates over critical reading practices have raised doubts about suspicious, or “paranoid,” reading as a sufficient method of producing knowledge from texts. The suspicion of suspicion has, it would seem, generated new ways of finding pleasure in the text through reparative reading, surface reading, data mining, and so on.9 Issue 26 investigates the extent to which the erotics of reading are bound to the pleasure/suspicion dyad, and the political implications therein.

In this issue, Rey Chow’s “‘There is a ‘there is’ of Light’: Notes on Foucault’s (In)visibilities” examines how the visual reading strategies Foucault applies to modern painting extend his analytic approach to architectural structure, institutional space, and epistemological systems: “As exercised through the medical clinic and a closely related institution such as the insane asylum, light and visibility provide a literalization of the ideality of progress and become the de facto ruling standard against which everything is judged.”20 Invisibility, Chow insists, is not a “naked truth” that awaits critical unveiling, but rather “a passing condition, a temporality whereby lines, shapes, gestures, and motions come into being only to constitute the makings of a situation in flux—a situation in which knowledge emerges only to become inextricably tangled with the promise of its dissolution.”21 The temporality of the work of art—the “flux” of knowledge made visible in the paintings with which Foucault and Chow engage—emerges again in relation to “the potentiality of utopia and anarchy,” thereby linking Foucault’s visual reading practices to his theories of social and political change.22

In view of Abraham Geil’s “Paranoid Critiques, Reparative Reductions: Leys, Sedgwick, and the Productive Opacity of Affect,” one wonders wheth-
er the hermeneutic flux Chow describes might be understood as a strategy akin to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “oscillation or ‘interdigitation’” between paranoid and reparative reading. Geil offers new critical purchase on contemporary debates over the deployment of brain science in the humanities, positing “re-description” as a mode of engagement with neuroscientific research that does not accept its biological “reductionism” as grounds for its humanistic dismissal. For critics of affect studies in the humanities, Geil explains, neuroscience and fMRI technology assume a “false transparency” between affects and their physiological expression in the brain or face. Geil’s aim is neither to reject nor to recuperate these studies’ findings (in fact, he insists, scientific researchers themselves are reluctant to affirm the transparency of their results because they understand the extreme contingency of the technological apparatuses upon which they rely). Rather, his essay examines the interpretive opportunities made available through re-descriptions of experimental design. For example, in one oft-cited study of basic emotions, the explicitly theatrical dimension of the experiment’s methodology reveals “an unexpected proximity between the biological and what we might call a fictional capacity.” Performing a reparative reading of the multidisciplinary study of affect, Geil illuminates a set of critical practices in transformation, eager to test the limits of ideology critique and to engage modes of knowledge production from across incommensurable fields of inquiry.

In “Lotus Eaters: Pain and Pleasure in the Age of Opioid Analgesia,” Russ Horres draws on medical research, critical theory, and comparative clinical vignettes from his own experience as a resident anesthesiologist to offer a humane (and humanistic) approach to the complex discursive relations between doctor and patient when the same category of prescription drugs can relieve pain, induce pleasure, establish dependency, and even kill. Cutting through the din of popular media reporting on the contemporary opioid crisis, Horres highlights the ways in which dominant pain management protocols in the United States are mediated by literary protocols of narrative convention. For Horres, the degree of medical suspicion surrounding a patient’s pain claim often depends on the stories doctors tell about patients and the stories patients tell about themselves. On the one hand, pain is rendered suspect when it fails to meet the diagnostic expectations of medical symptomology; on the other, the uncanny resemblance between the pedagogical representation of pain and its human narration alerts physicians to potentially drug seeking behavior. The source of pain
must be made visible through the distortion and amplification of medical technology to pass the threshold of believability, reassuring clinicians that the patient’s complaint is located, and thus treatable, in the body, not in the mind. But Horres shows that believability is only the first of many hurdles to opioid prescription, all of which ultimately constitute moral assessments of patients’ drug worthiness. One might say, a propos of Sedgwick, that physicians’ paranoid reading practices, which include the interpretation of medical images, clinical symptoms, patient narratives, and identities, enable crucial determinations about whether the patient herself merits access to chemically induced pleasure.

Connie Scorrazo and Jeff Nagy’s essay, “Putting the ‘Home’ in ‘Homemade Porn’: Real Estate in Pornography after the Housing Crisis,” analyzes contemporary media representations of pleasure that hold a complicated relation to their settings. By way of a historical contextualization of online pornography, this essay makes visible the unique manner in which the demise of the real estate market in 2008 intervenes in and indeed finds its symbolic resolution in an erotic economy. Scorrazo and Nagy ground their analysis in Fredric Jameson’s notion of “cognitive mapping” as well as Laura Kipnis’s argument that pornography becomes a privileged cultural site for working through contemporary social anxieties. The authors argue that the sexual contract and erotic fantasy have always been intertwined with and inextricable from the property contract and the postwar economic fantasy of universal home ownership. The two fantasies dialectically inform one another in surprising ways, revealing deep suspicions in how scholars negotiate both. By pairing provocative close readings from the porn site PropertySex.com alongside a sweeping historical analysis of the subprime mortgage crisis, Scorrazo and Nagy deliver an interdisciplinary reading that both enriches the rapidly growing field of porn studies and proposes innovative avenues for pursuing economic historicization. If one legacy of the so-called feminist “sex wars” of the 1980s was to question the exploitation of sex workers in pornography, then Scorrazo and Nagy extend this question to ask how pornography eroticizes the exploitation of property relations and how the sexual fantasies it depicts attempt to (culturally) repair that structural inequality.

Michael Flatt’s essay, “Doing What You Love: The GIF and Tactical Pleasure in the Workplace,” examines the political economy of the GIF, noting its primary function as a modern disseminator of pleasure. Although the GIF, or Graphics Interchange Format, was one of the first novelties of the Internet,
and despite its simple form, the GIF continues to be popular today. In addressing what might account for its longstanding tenure as an online phenomenon, Flatt tracks how pornography and neoliberal work imperatives have together informed the GIF’s evolving uses and endurance. Tracing the history of the format, Flatt argues that we must understand the modern demands of capital to more fully account for the GIF. The GIF thus becomes a symptomatic expression of the connection between new technologies and new labor regimes, emerging as a kind of affective counter-practice. In its condensed temporal format and anti-narrative structure, Flatt argues that the pornographic GIF proves especially adept at providing fleeting moments of pleasure against the demands of capital, eluding any easy retribution. He goes on to situate GIF micro-pleasures (what he calls “sexual chuckles”) against the workplace imperative to productivity as well as the proliferation of surveillance, censorship, jobsite safety, and sexual harassment policies, including pornographic viewing at work. Perhaps most ambitiously, Flatt argues that the pornographic GIF, and the new interactions of labor and pleasure in the contemporary moment, help to cast doubt on Foucault’s insistence that the micro-management of pleasure is not tied exclusively to the imperative to work (i.e. Foucault does not buy the economic determinism of marxist theory, as we are so often told). Rather, the mechanisms of surveillance and control that Foucault analyzed in eighteenth and nineteenth century France are shown here to reappear in the contemporary moment in most exemplary fashion in the workplace.

Eugenie Brinkema’s “Irrumation, the Interrogative: Extreme Porn and the Crisis of Reading” completes a triad of essays investigating the complexity and variety of pornographic discourse. Brinkema’s essay performs a polemic against the hermeneutics of surface reading, advocating instead for the richness of radical formalism through a formal engagement with the genre of extreme gonzo pornography. In her opening salvo, Brinkema unexpectedly returns to the classic epigrams of Martial and Catullus, where she examines fellatio’s differential “other” known as irrumation—or, put bluntly, the active face-fucking of another’s mouth—which, she shows, operates as both an insult and a denier of speech. Irrumation functions in complex ways to enact silence, deny language, and punish willfulness. Brinkema invites us to ask what such a particularizing analysis of this distinct form of oral sex tell us about the capacity for sex “to speak,” and how we can conceive of our critical heuristics. Brinkema’s essay goes on to posit an essential link between form and how we understand “the things mouths do.” Citing pornography’s
assumed self-obviousness, or what she calls the desire of “textual apparenty” (or, “I know it when I see it”), Brinkema’s essay works as a critical rebuke of surface reading and the presumption that any knowledge can be retrieved without form. To disabuse us of the notion, Brinkema turns to gonzo pornography as a limit case to examine the critical value of “stubborn formalism” as a method for reading the rhythmic violence of irrumation.

Kelly Coyne’s essay, “‘Visual Pleasure’ and Lena Dunham’s Female Subjects,” argues for the continued relevance of Laura Mulvey’s work on scopophilia today. Coyne restages Mulvey’s seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” through a close reading of Dunham’s debut film, *Tiny Furniture*, to ask how the independent filmmaker engages the male gaze and attempts to destabilize it. Coyne’s analysis suggests that Dunham’s arsenal of formal and narrative solvents both challenge and reinscribe the objectification of the film’s central characters; female subjectivity emerges as a complex resistance to and recuperation from these objectifications, which nevertheless recur. Indeed, Coyne finds, *Tiny Furniture* exaggerates the ways in which female characters shift between being represented as objects and as subjects. Coyne argues that such formal movements between objectification and subjecthood dramatize the persistent struggle against the hegemonic male gaze beyond the bounds of the film. Language, composition, irony, and—crucially—the status of female characters as makers of art, Coyne contends, coalesce to produce fissures in scopophilia. Not only does Coyne speculate on the possibility for an independent and female-centered filmmaking practice to supersede the male gaze: she reveals the complexity of a properly “female gaze” to reclaim and transform its own distinctive pleasures.

Finally, Jennifer Doyle’s “Em and Them” is an autobiographical reflection on pedagogy, loss, and queer community building as interconnected mechanisms of academic life. For Doyle, the peculiar intimacy forged through the act of reading together makes the classroom an experimental laboratory for refashioning language, gender, and social bonds. Engagements with literature and criticism, whether approached in a paranoid or reparative mode, are worldmaking endeavors. Underscoring the ways in which the textual pleasure of academic scholarship is threatened by the material brutality of racism, sexism, homophobia, and institutional negligence, Doyle investigates the situatedness and transformative potential of the pedagogical relation.
Taken together, these articles represent *Polygraph*’s first issue entirely dedicated to feminist and queer scholarship. “Pleasure and Suspicion” is also *Polygraph*’s first sustained attempt to think culture and politics in terms of gender and sexuality. A surprising and welcome development has been the methodological innovation and dialectic discursiveness of these essays. Indeed, they reveal the complexity and expansiveness of queer and feminist scholarship today, as well as the urgency of questioning the pleasures we encounter in these uncertain times. We are grateful for the tremendous contributions of the editorial collective, authors, reviewers, conference presenters, and the Duke University faculty and staff who made this forum possible.

**NOTES**


11. Beyoncé’s performance featured dancers wearing black leather and black berets in the aesthetic style of the Black Panther Party (BPP). The dancers also posed with raised fists. The 2016 Super Bowl took place in San Francisco, near the birthplace of the BPP in Oakland 50 years earlier.
12 Syreeta McFadden, “Beyonce’s Formation reclaims black America’s narrative from the margins,” theguardian.com, February 8, 2016.


20 Chow, 17.

21 Ibid., 19.

22 Ibid., 31.

23 Geil, 39.

24 Ibid., 57.


27 The beginning of the so-called “sex wars” has been attributed to the contentious debates between anti-pornography and anti-censorship feminists at the Barnard Conference on Sexuality in 1982. The divisions that brought about such debates, however, had been long brewing among feminist groups in the decades preceding it. For more, see Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Brinkema, 136.