

Illuminated Memory: When Moving Forward Means Going Back



Photo courtesy of Elena Gross

**By
Marcus Masaki**

"From transcribing Black history to public sex, Elena Gross presents her thesis that tracks the queer genos, raises attention to the relational and erotic, and speaks to the power of ambivalence when entangled with resurfacing hidden histories."

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I. INTRODUCTION(s)

Monday 5:30 PM, Double Ground

The promise of evening begins to settle the *excessive* heat warning on my phone. Despite the sweltering heat this week, the night still maintains its daily negotiations. Walking into Double Ground for the second time, I am greeted with the intimate arrangement of chairs and sofas in the Humanities & Sciences Homeroom. It's still light out, and from the 4th floor you can see the stretch of cars weaving in and out of the penumbra of clustered buildings in Potrero Hill like ants on a landslide.

I have often thought about the return of the artist.

Elena Gross sits down and fidgets with the TV's HDMI cable, sporting an all-black outfit. Gross is here as a CCA Visual & Critical Studies alum, a representative from the waking world returning to share insights from the professional sphere and how the inception of their practice began as a grad student. Gross is Berkeley Art Center's co-executive director and also works independently as a critic and writer in Oakland.

Since graduating in 2016, Gross has additively built an intensive theoretical and conceptual framework by following several threads of inspiration. Following these threads, or "scrap material" as they affectionately describe them, becomes the initiation to a greater coalescence. From transcribing Black history to public sex, Elena Gross presents her thesis that tracks the queer genos, raises attention to the relational and erotic, and speaks to the power of ambivalence when entangled with resurfacing hidden histories.

SKIN HEAD SEX THING RACIAL DIFFERENCE AND THE HOMOEROTIC IMAGINARY

Kobena Mercer

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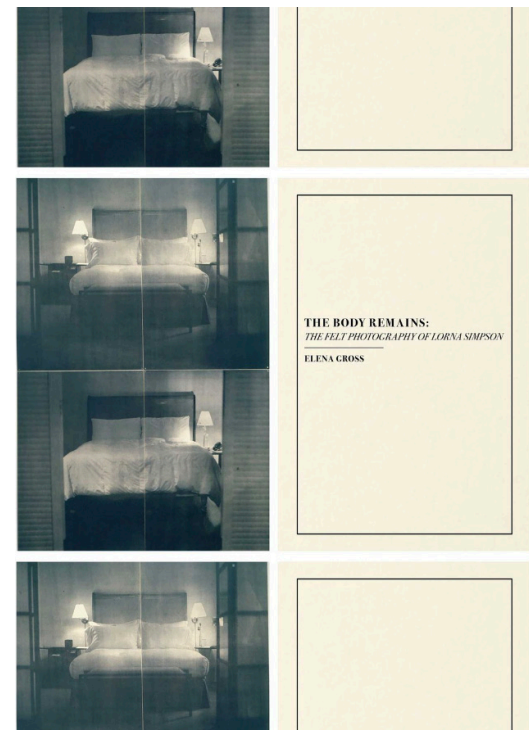
In this article I want to explore the experience of aesthetic ambivalence in visual representations of the black male nude. The photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe provide a salient point of entry into this complex 'structure of feeling' as this is one place where such ambivalence is experienced at its most intense.¹

Opening of Kobena Mercer's "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," (1991)

II. REVISING

Students trickle in and sit cross-legged on the remaining premiere sofa spots, slouch back in green slingbacks like lowriders, and pull out black folding chairs. This is the ritual of school-to sit. The TV screen, large and flat, springs to life.

Gross opens: "Visual & Critical Studies is the investigation of visual culture and regimes." It is the urgent, deliberate attunement of contemporary issues surrounding political, social, and cultural issues. In viewing these issues, she proposes, our perspective is informed by our progenitors. Gross attributes their exploration to one of their first readings in the VCS program, Kobena Mercer's "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary." It was here where Gross was introduced to the term aesthetic ambivalence.



Cover of Gross's 2016 VCS Master's Thesis
Image courtesy of CCA

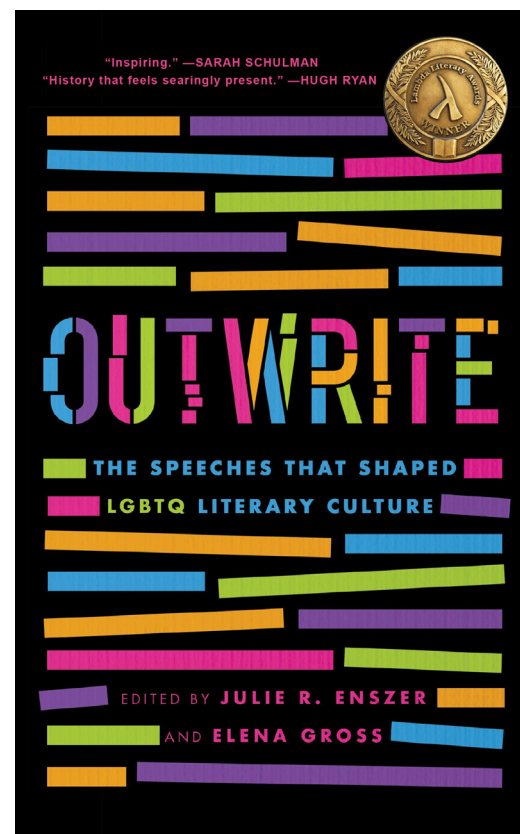
In the essay, Mercer suggests the use of ambivalence to take a critical perspective to the work of late photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Ambivalence is used to position the reader not necessarily in opposition to, but in acknowledgement of the conflict between racial fetishization of Black bodies and the confused appreciation for the emotional, aesthetic, and cultural

impact of Mapplethorpe and his subjects. He divides the essay under different reflections, including “Revising” and “Rereading,” which I have adopted here. Mercer argues that our contemporary understanding of the context of viewing his work is indispensable and that it is responsible practice to revisit and revise works with these new historical, social, and political contexts, of which we gain deeper and richer insight. And so, the artist returns once more.

Gross continues to summon this notion of ambivalence and revision throughout their talk. They share a constituent of their graduate thesis, citing the work of photographer Lorna Simpson in her project *Public Sex Series* (1995-1998), where Simpson printed photographs of human-less public and private spaces on panels of felt to implicitly invoke bodily eroticism. These photographs were “not generating possibility but still challenging spaces,” Gross explains. In her inquiry of Black women and their sexuality, Gross looks back to her foremothers.

Gross’ Black retrospective evokes reminders to seek reference from my own extended Latin American diaspora. I’m reminded of Jorge Luis Borges’ “Kafka and His Precursors,” written in 1951. Borges situates the reader in a hypothetical space, removed from physical time. He argues that the work of writer Franz Kafka provides a new context to revisit four other heterogeneous entities. In this article, Borges argues that each maker can create their own precursor by retroactively building a family tree. It’s because of the work of Kafka, he proposes, that we can go back and find new connections with contemporary context. As Gross herself says, “Everything builds upon itself [...] Time offers new perspective.”

Returning to the archive to build this kind of family tree essentially functions as a testimony. If we can identify a through line in themes, figures, and movements throughout history, we can keep building upon a larger theoretical framework to better understand how to effectively address contemporary issues. This is especially important in the context of addressing issues marginalized communities face, as much of the canon of history is still Eurocentric and heteronormative. As one of my Professors puts it, “because we are euphemistic, we don’t call things by their name—so we can’t consult history, so we can’t have a paper trail.” This is why one of Gross’



Cover of *The Speeches that Shaped LGBTQ Literary Culture* (2022)

Co-edited by Elena Gross and Julie R. Enszer and published by Rutgers University Press

projects was to transcribe queer voices in the award-winning book, *OutWrite: The Speeches that Shaped LGBTQ Literary Culture*, alongside co-editor Julie R. Enszer.

“History is a living document,” urges Gross. There is very much still a critical, momentous need to document, add, and correct our understanding of history. With each scholar comes the earnest responsibility to return and dispel the shadows on the wall.

III. REREADING

A faint blush of warm light washes over the room through the large windows, leaving just as fast as it arrives. I note that the last burst of ephemeral light, a sheer blanket, appropriately recognizes our speaker. The daylight resolves and signals people to shift in their seats, anticipating dinner.

Gross consummates their talk with advice. “Let your most modest, meager, ridiculous, fascinations be a guide,” she encourages. “Embrace ambivalence. Revisit, revise, and reconsider often.” Gross recommends a flexible attitude when working and to let curiosity and play be the piloting force that propels ideas into possible research. Though of course, they add, sometimes those ideas never attain a certain outcome.

The protean doctrine dictates that time effectively collapses when we look back. We contribute to the contributions. Gross says our work is always in conversation with what has happened before: “Listen to the archive.”

Gross cites community as inseparable from their practice. The sense of camaraderie they’ve shared with other Black queer creators, collaborators, and friends has reinforced their quest in anthologizing symbolic lineage. It is the real shared joy, pain, and ambivalence of human relationships that seems to keep Elena Gross yearning for more, forever revisiting, rewiring, and remaking. For the artist’s exaltation comes in returning to the source, whereas in the studio—a den—we may remain unilluminated.

Marcus Masaki (BFA Painting/Drawing and Critical Studies 2025) is a twenty-something year old art student somewhere in San Francisco. Budding curator, farmers market goer, and a painter who doesn’t paint. Reach him at MasakiRodriguez@gmail.com. Please don’t make him download Instagram.

