

In

An

Attempt

To...

Elliot  
Reed

Upon arriving to New York from Los Angeles, I swiftly dove into the recent L.A. murder cases of Ed Buck, speculative fiction including N.K. Jemisin, Samuel Delaney, and Octavia Butler's *Patternist* series, and reading *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within US Slave Culture* by Vincent Woodard. The exhibition draws a somatic connection between Ed Buck's victims, the historical consumption of Black flesh within slavery, and world building as a method for transcendence.

Ed Buck is a Democratic Party donor residing in the affluent city of West Hollywood, California, since 1993. A prominent figure in local politics, Buck donated personal funds to all but one of the current City Council members prior to his arrest in September 2019, in addition to \$500,000 of party donations since the early 2000s.<sup>1</sup>

In July 2017, Gemmel Moore, 26, was found dead inside Ed Buck's Laurel Avenue apartment complex. Investigators recovered drug paraphernalia inside a tool box in the living room, including "24 syringes with brown residue, five glass pipes with white residue and burn marks, a plastic straw with possible white residue, clear plastic bags with white powdery residue and a clear plastic bag with a 'piece of crystal-like substance.'"—crystal meth. Face down on a mattress with injection wounds and stripped completely naked, The LA county Coroner's office ruled Moore's death an accidental methamphetamine overdose.

Around the time of his death Gemmel's mother LaTisha Nixon learned he was working as an escort, and spoke with one of Gemmel's friends, with whom they shared clients. The friend (self-identifying as "Cameron") explained that Ed would hire sex workers, then take them down to Santa Monica Boulevard to bait other young Black gay men, inject them with chemicals and stage fantasy scenes in his apartment. LaTisha recalls "[Buck] would supply heroin, meth, and other drugs to him to smoke or use with a needle. Buck would pleasure himself at the sight of my son using drugs..."<sup>3</sup> According to Cameron, Buck would

pay a premium for “bigger cloud[s] of smoke” and excitedly encourage men to increase their dosage, offering hundreds of dollars more for the thrill.

Gemmel, originally from Houston, moved to Los Angeles in his early twenties. After encountering personal troubles, Gemmel chose to return to Texas and reconnect with family. While back in Houston, Buck contacted Gemmel and arranged for a meeting. Police records note that Moore had flown from Texas to California the day of his death, and his mother adds that Buck had paid for the ticket. Less than 24 hours passed between Gemmel leaving the airport in July 2017, and a tragic overdose with Ed Buck as the sole witness.

Political activist and journalist Jasmyne Cannick was one of the first to report Gemmel’s death. She noted the racial and socio-economic layer of the case, pointing to Buck’s status granting him immunity in the eyes of local law enforcement. In a self-published article, Jasmyne refers to Buck as a “sick, sadistic man” who loves Black men as much as he wants to kill them.<sup>4</sup>

Here’s where the story first grabbed my attention. As a Black queer man, I see my body and experience reflected in Moore’s image. Our personal histories are uniquely our own, but within the white public imagination our bodies are interchangeable. The documented behavior of Ed Buck proves this. Not just a sex worker, but a Black gay sex worker. Not just intercourse, but forcing men to perform sexually while high beyond their limits. For a deranged white man of means, it’s the perfect double taboo.

Ed finds sexual gratification by transforming Black men into avatars, injecting his prey with the stereotypes projected upon our bodies. Within the safety of his home, Buck is able to act out the desire for Black flesh while illuminating his fear of that very desire. Within seconds, the conscious and capable body turns to clay within Ed Buck’s fingers.



Forcibly tranquilized, Buck's victims are rendered abstract within his mind—becoming breathing sex objects for as long as their hearts allow.

In the months following Gemmel's death, his mother and others pressed for a proper investigation. The Los Angeles district attorney's office refused to press charges citing a lack of evidence. Even though drugs were recovered at the residence, a formal criminal charge never appeared. In January 2019, Timothy Dean, 55, was found dead in Ed Buck's apartment. Face down in the same room having suffered from an overdose.

Miraculously, on September 19, 2019, Ed Buck was federally charged with distribution of methamphetamine resulting in death.<sup>5</sup> A witness known to the public as Joe Doe managed to escape Buck's apartment in the midst of an overdose one week prior, successfully calling 911 and leading officers to the scene. By October 2019, Buck was indicted for two overdose deaths, and three counts of distributing methamphetamine.<sup>6</sup> In the 2017 to 2019 span following Gemmel's death, eleven more victims of Buck's abuse went on record describing Buck exchanging drugs for money and sexual favors. Criminal charges came 8 months after the death of Timothy Dean, and 26 months after Gemmel Moore's body was recovered by police.

How can my work as an artist engage with this real-life horror story? Running in parallel with case investigations, I looked toward literature as a way to devise my own narrative. Identity directly links my body to the case, but I've decided to present a different story.

The installation is located in a single room. The walls are the first artwork, *Hue* (2020). *Hue* is a digital color scan of my skin, specifically my right, or "dominant" hand. I took a digital color scan of the skin on the back of my right palm and have the color coating the space. The five monitors of *Supernumerary* (2020) share one wall, cracking through the painted surface of *Hue*, arranged at different heights.

The video was filmed and performed in collaboration with JACK Quartet. I direct the string quartet as they perform a live interpretation of guttural noises I make with my body. These sounds punctuate my reading of this text, explaining the story of Ed Buck. On two opposing walls hang *Placeholder Series #1 (Nudity)* and *Placeholder Series #2 (Blood)* (both 2020), two glossy, metallic signs with reflective text. On the floor in the back corner is the sculpture *End To End Encrypted (Lot's Wife)* (2020), a sculpture composed of a pile of salt my exact body weight, a love song performed in private via video messenger to a long-distance partner, and the clothes I wore during that call placed on top of the salt.

The works perform in concert together, each pointing to a different interpretation of the digitally reproduced body in pain. Before the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, my research into Ed Buck's case aligned with a long history of Black persons in peril reproduced as an amusement. My existence in North America is a direct result of looking. My African ancestors were first seen by colonists, shackled, packaged, then shipped across the Atlantic. Bodies were chosen and priced in relation to their perceived usefulness. Inspected, groped, weighed, and sold off like cuts of meat. As the institution of chattel slavery began to melt, continued segregation, lynchings, and state-sanctioned police violence remain.

In his essay about the speculative fiction genre, Marek Ożiewicz states “[...] all literature constructs models of reality rather than transcriptions of actuality. The mimetic and the non-mimetic have thus been redefined as twin responses to reality. Speculative fiction draws its creative sap from the non-mimetic impulse.”<sup>7</sup> Taking speculative license, I've cast my body as a placeholder within the work. Rather than repeat a death spectacle, I animate the feelings through artmaking. *Hue* is a metaphorical application of my prepared flesh. Much like leather, I turn my skin color into a material stretching around the container of the gallery like a designer handbag, or leather-bound book. *End To End Encrypted (Lot's Wife)* is



inspired by the Book of Genesis story about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. After two angels warned Lot's family of their plan to destroy the cities, Lot was directed to pack his family and leave with the single instruction to never look back. Lot's wife was unable to resist the temptation of seeing her home destroyed, and as punishment is instantly transformed into a pillar of salt. My take on the story is about keeping relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to New York's shutdown, I was traveling between cities maintaining a romantic partnership. Being confronted by the reality of limited travel, I had a decision to make. Do I continue to move forward alone pursuing the unknown future, or do I look back at what I've always known, risking self-destruction in the process? The video call of me singing a love song through WhatsApp is the only part of the work inaccessible to the viewer. I've chosen to display the aftermath.

However, I'm speaking about loss from the privileged position of still being alive. Gemmel Moore, Timothy Dean, and countless others were forced to leave much more behind. Their stories, images, and families become part of an endless digital loop. The pain of loss is scooped from its original container, and spread thin across countless cellphones, television screens, and computers. Does the flavor and impact of experience lose its power after passing through so many hands? How can you synthesize decades of stolen life into a hashtag? The liquid is drained then boiled to a concentrate, acrid and thick. Gone is any lightness and subtlety, leaving behind a charred caramel. Rock candy. The two *Placeholder* signs stand in for "content," digital material that is instantly namable but perpetually out of context.

Speculative fiction writer Octavia Butler elegantly illustrates this bind, through her character "Doro" from the *Patternist* series.<sup>8</sup> Doro is a body snatcher. Born in ancient Egypt amongst the pharaohs and kings, Doro can live forever by stepping into the body of another. After abandoning his teenage skin by mistakenly entering his mother, Doro begins a centuries-long eugenics project seeking out other mutants around the world and forcing them to breed.

As an entity, Doro is pure malice and seizure. Owning no body of his own he appraises the form of those around him and instantly slips inside their bodies. Doro erases the soul of a person once he enters them, and leaves behind a lifeless husk upon finding a new victim. In this way, he emulates our consumptive culture. He sees and he takes, but is always limited to appearances. The insatiable urge to have one better, and sample a different form. This is the hunger projected on Black cultural exports, and in the case of Ed Buck, Black flesh itself.

In *The Delectable Negro*, Vincent Woodard outlines the history of cannibalism and consumption on the plantation. Back men and women were physically mutilated and in the case of Nat Turner, force-fed to slaves as a threat. He talks about the homoerotic dimensions of the slave trade, pointing towards castrations at lynchings as common practice in addition to more explicit forms of sexual abuse. From the second a slave is stripped naked and positioned on the auction block, muscles, genitals, and general build are appraised as part of the purchase. The master's gaze performs a sexually charged hunger, favoring aesthetics in an attempt to benefit his investment.

Using afro-pessimism as a framing device, I quote Frank B. Wilderson III “[...] slavery did not end in 1865. Slavery is a relation. Not an event, not a set of experiences, [or] place in space—like the south. Just as colonialism is a relation, that relational dynamic can continue to exist once the settler has left, or ceded nominal power.”<sup>9</sup> While not physically present, I exist by proxy through video, weight, and in color. The gallery becomes the site of a minor haunting. A relation where I locate mechanisms of the digitally reproduced body in pain.



## In An Attempt To...

1. "Ed Buck Was Known for His Abrasive Behavior. But Politicians Still Took His Money." *Los Angeles Times*, 17 Oct. 2019, [www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-17/ed-buck-west-hollywood-money-donations](http://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-17/ed-buck-west-hollywood-money-donations).
- 2 "Democratic Donor's Home Was Littered with Drug Paraphernalia after Man Died, Coroner Says." *Los Angeles Times*, 18 Nov. 2017, [www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-gemmel-moore-autopsy-20171118-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-gemmel-moore-autopsy-20171118-story.html).
3. Gierach, Ryan "Sex, Politics, Meth and Death in West Hollywood." *WeHo Times*, 18 Aug. 2017, [wehotimes.com/sex-politics-meth-death-west-hollywood/](http://wehotimes.com/sex-politics-meth-death-west-hollywood/).
4. "Man Who Escaped Ed Buck Says Buck's Attorney Told Buck To Leave State Before Rumored Arrest." *I Am Jasmyne*, 6 Oct. 2019, [iamjasmyne.com/man-who-escaped-ed-buck-says-bucks-attorney-told-buck-to-leave-state-before-rumored-arrest/](http://iamjasmyne.com/man-who-escaped-ed-buck-says-bucks-attorney-told-buck-to-leave-state-before-rumored-arrest/).
5. John, Arit, and Laura. "Ed Buck Faces Federal Drug Charge in Death of Man in His Home." *The New York Times*, 19 Sept. 2019, [www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/us/ed-buck-charged-gemmel-moore.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/us/ed-buck-charged-gemmel-moore.html).
6. "Ed Buck Indicted in Death of Second Gay Man, Timothy Dean." *Los Angeles Blade: LGBT News, Rights, Politics, Entertainment*, 3 Oct. 2019, [www.losangelesblade.com/2019/10/02/breaking-ed-buck-indicted-in-death-of-second-gay-man/](http://www.losangelesblade.com/2019/10/02/breaking-ed-buck-indicted-in-death-of-second-gay-man/).
7. Oziewicz, Marek. *Speculative Fiction*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature, 16 Apr. 2019, [oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-78#ref\\_acrefore-9780190201098-e-78-note-30](http://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-78#ref_acrefore-9780190201098-e-78-note-30).
8. Butler, Octavia E. *Seed to Harvest: Wild Seed; Mind of My Mind; Clays Ark; Patternmaster*. Warner Books, 2007.
9. Wilderson, Frank. "Frank Wilderson, III at Omni Commons." Frank B. Wilderson III at Omni Commons. 30 Jan. 2020, Oakland, CA, <https://vimeo.com/129677829>.



## IN AN ATTEMPT TO...

It happens in the same room it is filmed in  
it will be as soon as it is  
visitors bear witness  
share breath  
my ghost leaves a stain on the carpet

In remembrance of  
that which hasn't quite yet  
but just as quickly as it did  
it was  
a slight increase in humidity implies others were here  
before you

Flash of potential  
visible  
the microphone and the speaker kiss on the event horizon  
the camera is extremely polite and hyper visible  
blown out  
distortions pouring like acid rain

I'm in drag  
so are you  
the second we record we become actors  
physical impediment illustrates a psychic bind  
10 inches on a wooden platform  
taller than furniture, too short for reverie