

Aria Dean

Kevin Jerome Everson

Dave McKenzie

Martine Syms

With historical works  
by The Black Panther  
Party, Sutton E. Griggs,  
and the National  
Institutes of Health/  
Getty Images

**Colored People Time**

MUNDANE FUTURES

QUOTIDIAN PASTS

BANAL PRESENTS

Chapter 1

February 1–March 31, 2019

Project Space



## I SAW EMMETT TILL THIS WEEK AT THE GROCERY STORE

looking over the plums, one by one  
lifting each to his eyes and  
turning it slowly, a little earth,  
checking the smooth skin for pockmarks  
and rot, or signs of unkind days or people,  
then sliding them gently into the plastic.  
whistling softly, reaching with a slim, woolen arm  
into the cart, he first balanced them  
    over the wire  
before realizing the danger of bruising  
and lifting them back out, cradling them  
in the crook of his elbow until  
something harder could take that bottom space.  
I knew him from his hat, one of those  
fine porkpie numbers they used to sell  
on Roosevelt Road. it had lost its feather but  
he had carefully folded a dollar bill  
and slid it between the ribbon and the felt  
and it stood at attention. he wore his money.  
upright and strong, he was already to the checkout  
by the time I caught up with him. I called  
    out his name  
and he spun like a dancer, candy bar in hand,  
looked at me quizzically for a moment before  
remembering my face. he smiled. well  
hello young lady  
    hello, so chilly today  
    should have worn my warm coat like you  
yes so cool for August in Chicago  
    how are things going for you  
oh he sighed and put the candy on the belt  
it goes, it goes.

—Eve L. Ewing

## MUNDANE FUTURES

“For me, the relationship of black communities, black feminism, and the temporality of futurity must be thought about through the concept of grammar. How do we conjugate our relationship of being to the future?”

–Tina M. Campt, Black Futurity in a Photographic Frame (2016)<sup>1</sup>

There is something about the act of envisioning a time that will be that feels innately black. Once constructed as a commodity, we have always projected towards a moment in which our objectivity would be perceived as subjectivity. It is through the coerced labor and violence against black bodies that an American future has been able to unfold. Mundane Futures is the first chapter in the exhibition series Colored People Time and presents a small selection of black American projects that center the everyday within imaginings of a time that has yet to come. This exhibition is not a road map towards “justice” and does not provide one linear thread of thinking. It’s not even optimistic. Instead, it volleys throughout time (1899–2019) and propositions—sometimes utilizing legal and political systems, while at other times insisting upon their destruction.

Language is a central tool in constructing identities and our understanding of time. I was struck by scholar Tina M. Campt’s notion of a future through the concept of grammar. To conjugate means to “give different forms as they vary according to voice, mood, tense, number, and person.”<sup>2</sup> Campt’s reconsideration of futurity through the structures of language is a radical gesture that allows one to place oneself in a time that is imminent, urgent, and full of possibility. The handful of possibilities presented within Mundane Futures trace projects of future building across a changing American landscape—shaped by Jim Crow legislation, black power movements, the election of the first black president, and the white supremacist backlash that we currently live in. The ideas and objects that make up Mundane Futures are reminders that the creation of blackness itself has always been a means of producing a time that has yet to arrive.

—Meg Onli, Assistant Curator

1—Tina Campt: *Black Futurity in a Photographic Frame* (Lecture October, 24, 2016) Accessed November 22, 2018. <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/tina-campt/>

2—“Conjugate.” Merriam-Webster. Accessed December 08, 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conjugate>.

## COLORED PEOPLE TIME

“The challenge continues to be how to reconcile an ‘in time’ philosophy with the ‘on time’ demands of mainstream America.”

–Geneva Smitherman, Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans (2006)

“The first object that engaged my attention was a watch which hung on the chimney, and was going. I was quite surprised at the noise it made, and was afraid it would tell the gentleman anything I might do amiss.”

–Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1789)

In his 1972 article “Some Notes on the Blues, Style and Space,” Ronald Walcott wrote “time is the very condition of Western civilization which oppresses so brutally.” Published under the Johnson Publishing Company’s imprint Black World, Walcott’s essay examined the works of three prominent black cultural producers—author Ralph Ellison, playwright Charles Gordone, and poet Melvin B. Tolson—through their shared depictions of “Colored People’s Time” (aka CPT or CP Time.) As Walcott observes, black people occupy and deploy CPT as a political performance to “evade, frustrate, and ridicule” the enforcement of punctuality and productivity, key disciplinary structures of capitalism.<sup>1</sup> For many, CPT is the time-space of the struggle.<sup>2</sup> It emerges from conditions of ongoing oppression that stretch back to the beginning of Transatlantic slavery. CPT challenges and disavows the predominant opinion that being “on time” is the only way of being “in time.”

I began thinking about CPT while developing an exhibition that examined how a group of artists, activists, and writers have considered how white supremacy and the legacy of chattel slavery have existed so insidiously in our current moment(s).

I was drawn to CPT as both a living and liberatory phrase. It has provided a linguistic tool for black people to navigate their own temporality, within and against the construct of Western time. Not surprisingly, white supremacist logics have attempted to distort and co-opt CPT, constructing a dual meaning through racial stereotype. In spite of this, CPT has remained part of the vernacular of racially marginalized groups, to think and act differently in time.

Colored People Time, structured as an experimental exhibition in three chapters—Mundane Futures, Quotidian Pasts, and Banal Presents—unfolds over the course of 2019. Within the exhibition, I want to explore the plural and malleable nature of the term. CPT connects to the tradition of black expressions grounded in counter-language, ones performed as part of “resistance discourse, created as a communication system unintelligible to speakers of the dominant master class.”<sup>3</sup> Like the constructs of race and gender, time is an experience and subject that escapes the limitations of language.

The artists represented within this exhibition include: Aria Dean, Kevin Jerome Everson, Matthew Angelo Harrison, Carolyn Lazard, Dave McKenzie, Camerson Rowland, Sable Elyse Smith, and Martine Syms; accompanied by historical objects from the Black Panther Party, Sutton E. Griggs, the National Institutes of Health/Getty Images, and the African Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. It is through these works that we are invited to reconsider the singularity of Western time and bear witness to the everyday disruptions that restructure and reorganize black being in the past, present, and future.

—Meg Onli, Assistant Curator

1—Walcott, Ronald, “Ellison, Gordone and Tolson: Some Notes on the Blues, Style and Space.” Black World, December 1972, pp. 4–29.

2—John Streamas, “Closure And ‘Colored Peoples Time’” in Time: Limits and Constraints, ed. Jo Alyson Packer, et al. (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2010).

3—Geneva, Smitherman, Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans (New York: Routledge, 2006), 5.



EXHIBITION WORKS

- Martine Syms  
The Mundane  
Afrofuturist Manifesto 2013  
Acrylic paint  
Courtesy of the artist,  
Bridget Donahue,  
NYC, and Sadie Coles  
HQ, London
- Sutton E. Griggs  
Imperium in Imperio 1899, 2018  
Paperback books  
designed by ELLA  
with a new forward  
by Meg Onli  
Courtesy of Project  
Gutenberg  
www.gutenberg.org
- Kevin Jerome Everson  
IFO 2017  
16mm film, color, sound  
10 minutes  
© Kevin Jerome Everson  
Courtesy the artist;  
Trilobite-Arts DAC;  
Picture Palace Pictures
- Dave McKenzie  
Futuro 2013  
Inkjet print mounted  
on aluminum  
Edition 1 of 5 + 1 AP  
Collection of Ben  
and Aileen Krohn
- Aria Dean  
Notes on  
Blaccelerationism 2017  
Digital video, color,  
sound, 75 minutes  
Courtesy of the artist  
and Chateau Shatto
- Black Panther Party  
The Black Panther  
April 1 and May 13 1972  
Newspapers  
Courtesy of the Kislak  
Center at the University  
of Pennsylvania
- National Institutes  
of Health/Getty Images,  
Scanning electron  
micrograph of just-  
divided HeLa cells  
Purchased 2018  
Stock image



## SUGGESTED READING

- Campt, Tina M. Listening to Images. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Griggs, Sutton E. Imperium in Imperio. Cincinnati, OH: Editor Publishing Company, 1899.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Jameson, Fredric. "The End of Temporality." Critical Inquiry 29, no. 4 (Summer 2003), The University of Chicago Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2009.
- Pardlo, Gregory. "Colored People's Time." Callaloo 39, no. 2 (2016): pp. 361-71.
- Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. In the Wake: On Blackness and Being. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Skloot, Rebecca. Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks. New York, NY: Crown Publishing Group, 2010.
- Streamas, John. "Closure And "Colored Peoples Time"." Time: Limits and Constraints, The Study of Time, 13 (July 14, 2010): pp. 219-40.
- Syms, Martine. "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto." Rhizome. December 17, 2013. <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/17/mundane-afrofuturist-manifesto/>
- Thompson-Spires, Nafissa. Heads of the Colored People. Simon and Schuster, 2018.
- Walcott, Ronald. "Ellison, Gordone and Tolson: Some Notes on the Blues, Style and Space." Black World, December 1972, pp. 4-29.
- Warren, Kenneth W. Jim Crow, Literature, and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs. Edited by Tess Chakkalakal. Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2013.
- Wright, Michelle M. Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

## Related Programs

Friday, February 1, 5:00 PM  
Members Preview

Friday, February 1, 6:30 PM  
Public Opening Celebration

Friday, February 22, 6:30 PM  
Reading and conversation  
with Columbia University  
professor Saidiya Hartman and  
ICA curator Meg Onli  
Penn Book Center, 130 S. 34th St  
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Friday, March 1, 6:30 PM  
Screening and conversation with  
artist Kevin Jerome Everson and  
curator Maori Karmael Holmes

Wednesday, March 13, 6:00 PM  
Curator-led tour

Wednesday, March 20, 6:30 PM  
Performative lecture with artist  
Dave McKenzie

## Credits

Colored People Time: Mundane Futures is organized by Meg Onli, Assistant Curator. A fully illustrated catalog will be published in early 2020.

I saw Emmett Till this week at the grocery store appears with permission from the author and Tin House.

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