



# VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University  
VCU Scholars Compass

---

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

---

2018

## MY EYES DUE SEE

Johannes J. Barfield

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Audio Arts and Acoustics Commons](#), [Composition Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Sculpture Commons](#)

© The Author

---

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/5376>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact [libcompass@vcu.edu](mailto:libcompass@vcu.edu).

©Johannes James Barfield 2018  
All Rights Reserved

My Eyes Due See

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Johannes James Barfield

BFA, New Media and Design University of North Carolina Greensboro, 2014

MFA, Photography and Film Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017

Directors:

Amber Esseiva,

Assistant Curator, Institute for Contemporary Art Richmond

Justin James Reed,

Assistant Professor, Photography and Film

Paul B. Thulin,

Graduate Director and Assistant Professor, Photography and Film

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia May, 2018

## Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge artist Stephanie J. Woods for being my best friend, mentor, curator, and the love of my life.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgement.....	iii
Abstract.....	v
Preamble.....	vi
MY EYES DUE SEE: Introduction.....	1
MY EYES DUE SEE: Video.....	2
MY EYES DUE SEE: Materials.....	6
MY EYES DUE SEE: Harnessing the Amplification and Nullification of Blackness .....	7
MY EYES DUE SEE: Present Prison Labor Connectedness to Slave Labor.....	10
MY EYES DUE SEE: Site-Specific Joy and Pain (Maze).....	11
MY EYES DUE SEE: Sampled Based Composing Intermixed with Live Instrumentation.....	14
Bibliography.....	16

## Abstract

MY EYES DUE SEE

By Johannes James Barfield, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018

### Directors:

Amber Esseiva, Assistant Curator, Institute for Contemporary Art Richmond

Justin James Reed, Assistant Professor, Photography and Film

Paul B. Thulin, Graduate Director and Assistant Professor, Photography and Film

*My Eyes Due See* is a multidimensional examination of the “black experience” in America. The installation is composed of a single-channel video, a music composition that utilizes music samples and live instrumentation, and sculptures made up of car parts and broomsedge grass. Each of these elements arranged in space share a nuanced and complicated view of blackness through the lens of a black man decoding personal history and American history simultaneously. Autonomy is the overarching theme throughout the work as it pertains to race, identity, urban and rural environments, and the relationship between generational trauma and nostalgia.

## Preamble

When I say: “us, we, our, and you” I am addressing specifically black people who live, love and die in America.

## MY EYES DUE SEE

As an artist, my interests revolve around the black experience in America and how building materials used in institutions, the road, automobiles, and media correspond to the amplification and nullification of blackness. Over the past few years, the visibility of injustice has spiked due to the advancement and proliferation of technology. By placing a camera in the hands of nearly every citizen, we increasingly witness an old narrative that was underexposed over the past couple of decades in the media.

Due to this new-found sight, we have audio/visual documentation of us being killed by the police and physical documentation in the form of court acquittals and testimonies that amplify and nullify our blackness. When the judicial system fails to acknowledge wrongdoing, the gavel slams and injustice is echoed through our mind and body. The judicial system failing us is an example of the progeny of colonizers amplifying our blackness to justify our death and nullifying our importance by exempting our killers from prosecution of criminal acts. It has also been my mission to explore the psyche of those of us who are affected personally or vicariously by police violence, pervasive influence, generational trauma, and nostalgia through artistic expressions like video, sculpture, and music.



## MY EYES DUE SEE: Video

My Eyes Due See is about clear peripheral vision and looking backward on American history and personal history while simultaneously looking into a potential future. The layering of past, present, and future are intermixed with an overlapping of personal history, American history, and future history. The epicenter of the installation is the single-channel video which shows myself holding on to the top of a moving car in the first act, then black text flashes on the second act that says: “objective reasonableness” against a yellow background. The third act shows the hood of the car, and the road passing by and then the car comes to a complete stop and the video ends or continues to loop. The term “objective reasonableness” comes from a U.S. Supreme court case *Tennessee v. Garner* (1985) about which Dean and Foundation Professor at Eastern Kentucky University, College of Justice and Safety, Victor E. Kappeler Ph.D. states:

The case involved the shooting death of an unarmed 15-year old juvenile, Edward Garner, who had broken into an unoccupied home and stolen a ring and \$10. When police officers arrived on the scene, Garner ran. A Memphis police officer shot and killed Garner. The Court ruled that police officers could not use deadly force to prevent the escape of a felon unless the suspect posed a significant threat of death or serious physical injury to the officer or others.<sup>1</sup>

I decided to briefly cut away from the shot of me holding on to the roof of a car with the text “objective reasonableness” because I was informed by the musical composition at that juncture where I sampled blues musician Lead Belly’s song “Pick A Bale of Cotton,” which was

---

<sup>1</sup>Kappeler, Victor E. *How Objective Is the “Objective Reasonableness” Standard in Police Brutality Cases?* School of Justice Studies Eastern Kentucky University, 2013, <http://plsonline.eku.edu/insidelook/how-objective-%E2%80%9CObjective-reasonableness%E2%80%9D-standard-police-brutality-cases>.

slowed down and manipulated. Also at that moment, I transmit the text “objective reasonableness” against Lead Belly’s song “Pick A Bale of Cotton” which creates a meeting place for the past and present to interlock and create conflated meanings of victimhood, victory, and vindication. When I say “present” I mean that the *Tennessee v. Garner* (1985) is relevant because of today's ongoing police brutality cases. The sound and the visuals place us in a cotton field working for little to no pay while simultaneously placing us in the U.S. Supreme Court where a small victory is had that protects us from being shot in the back of the head without “objective reasonableness,” unlike Edward Garner from the *Tennessee v. Garner* case, who was an involuntary martyr. The text in the video work also beckons the question “so if police officers have parameters such as ‘objective reasonableness’ why are we still being killed in a similar fashion?” When I place “objective reasonableness” in the video, it is meant to be a brief constriction of oxygen to the brain, it ends and then we can take a robust breath of air back into our bodies.



# OBJECTIVE REASONABLENESS

Figure 1 *MY EYES DUE SEE*, still image from single-channel video

The result of these audio/visual components meeting is about breaking a cycle of depravity, because it is only a short commercial in the flight of a black person's journey. The camera position in the video is a low angle shot, looking towards myself and the sky as I look around in wonder or stoically forward. The windshield reflecting me and the environment amplifies the viewership and aligns the viewer to experience the joy and power of simulated flight. The danger of being on top of a moving car is apparent but it shifts into the background by the gracefulness of the car movement, the sun, the sky, the trees, the wind, and the steadiness of the camera.

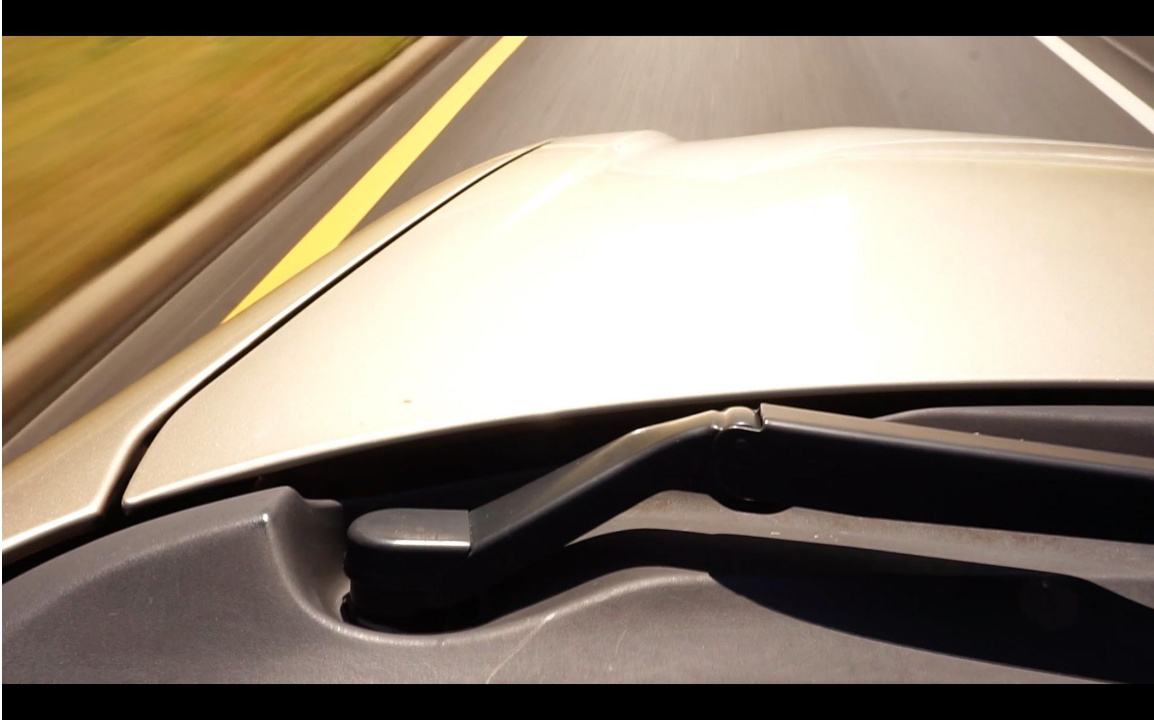


Figure 2 *MY EYES DUE SEE*, still image from single-channel video

To traverse the razor's edge without getting cut too badly while smiling at the experience is the jest of the video.

## MY EYES DUE SEE: Materials

As I continue to create more work, I have developed a library and visual language composed of items that are found in institutions, the street, and our homes. My material choices are based upon the overall articulation of the message in which I wish to convey. There is no shortage of preexisting worldly objects and materials to pull from such as car parts and items associated with domestic living. The saturation of the automotive industry's prolific production of vehicles is testament to this abundance I speak of. The car parts in the exhibition all came from a salvage yard in Mechanicsville, VA. The salvage yard is highly organized, so I was able to find easily car parts from a 1992 Honda Accord, which was the first car I owned. The transmission that I utilized in the exhibition is from that particular car model. There are many reasons why I choose that particular part of the car, including my memory of when my transmission giving out while on the road. The transmission of a car enables the driver to shift gears to speedup or slow down the momentum of the car. When my transmission gave out I was at the mercy of the speed in which I was going before it gave out. I lost control and was stranded. The loss of control and intuitive thinking are ways in which I work and relish. Not knowing how and why is but a part of my process, and I will not hesitate to throw ideas and completed works into the recycling bin for further analysis.

## MY EYES DUE SEE: Harnessing the Amplification and Nullification of Blackness

It is my belief that many ontological studies on blackness are divisive and create an erasure of who we have been and who we will be. I feel strongly about this argument, so much in fact that I refuse to mention the titles and authors of these books that swim in intellectual circles of what blackness is. I particularly denounce the school of thought that believes in the “objecthood” of black people and or blackness. It is a new day and freedom is not subjective. It is a new day and black people were never objects. It is a new day!

My definition of blackness in America is rooted in bloodline, phenotypical distinction, pride, self-identification, and dedication to the preservation of black expression: spirituals, blues, jazz, soul music, hip-hop, electronic music, black ingenuity, cheat codes, and workarounds like *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. Without restoration, preservation, acknowledgment, and innovation, our culture can die. Kevin Young writes about a metaphorical unwritten book or unread book due to debilitating conditions that can stifle our expressions, Young states:

In some crucial ways, the lost shadow book is the book that blackness writes every day. The book that memory, time, accident, and the more active forms of oppression prevent from being read. It is the symbolic book that slavery really banned—a book of belief. It is this book we lose daily, when the storm sweeps it all away, whenever someone is silenced, or an elder dies or it is otherwise lost to us, quilts gone out the door, actual books left on the stoop for dead. Not to mention the secret recipes—and I don't just mean for food—that our ancestors managed to keep secret. It is the scrap of paper I found my father's barbecue sauce recipe on, which I'm tempted to frame but instead attempted to re-create.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Young, Kevin. *The Grey Album: on the Blackness of Blackness*. Graywolf Press, 2012. 14.



Figure 3 *MY EYES DUE SEE*, Wheatpaste installation view

Blackness does not exist without whiteness, they are slaves to one another, chained by the tooth. White terror amplifies blackness by creating portals for black and white folk to pass through intermittently. When we pass through this portal of amplification in reference to white terror, we arm ourselves and our hair grows long and tightly curled, loc'd and braided. Our hair remains a signifier of our allegiance to blackness, our allegiance to whiteness, and our allegiance to self. Although I wish it was that simple to distinguish which of us are for the progression of our culture, it is not so clear, but allegiance to celebrating your physical appearance without the beauty standards of other cultures is step one. Also, I am aware there is not one way to be a black

person in America, but certain decisions are clearly in response to how others view you. We were taught to hate our natural hair since the beginning of our time in America and we have yet to fully recover from generations of our blackness being nullified. We are not our hair but our hair is and will remain.



Figure 4 *MY EYES DUE SEE*, still image from single-channel video



## MY EYES DUE SEE: Present Prison Labor Connectedness to Slave Labor

Unfortunately, our bodies are highly surveyed and scrutinized in public spaces. This is a product of our history as the needed but unwanted free laborers. Our humanity was detached to justify the inhuman treatment of colonizers and their progeny. Since the inception of film, we have been hotly embraced by the fiery lashes of slander as seen in *Birth of A Nation* (1915).<sup>3</sup> In this film, we see depictions of white terror and how white male violence shaped the American landscape since the formation of America. The cattle prod, the whip, the nightstick, the Taser, the noose, the handgun. The police are used to service the needs of the ruling class. Since we were once deemed property, police were instructed to ensure we did not escape or band together for insurrection. Fear of insurrection of the working class is still very present today. Since the abolishment of slavery, there are new avenues to ensure we are still providing free labor. As legal scholar and civil rights advocate Michelle Alexander states:

The Court's blind eye to race discrimination in the criminal justice system has been especially problematic in policing. Racial bias is most acute at the point of entry into the system for two reasons: discretion and authorization. Although prosecutors, as a group have the greatest power in the criminal justice system, police have the greatest discretion-discretion that amplified in drug-law enforcement. And unbeknownst to the general public, the Supreme Court has actually authorized race discrimination in policing, rather than adopting legal rules banning it.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Griffith, D. W., director. *Birth of a Nation (Motion Picture)*. Griffith Feature Films, 1915.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, Michelle. *New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New Press, 2016. 123.

## MY EYES DUE SEE: Site-Specific Joy and Pain (Maze)

The extent of my experiences throughout my young life have been bifurcated. For example, I recall being at a family cookout and playing on the swings in complete joy, and in another instance hearing about my one of my family members robbing my grandmother's house when she was away. Taking the good with the bad has been integral to my childhood, as I am sure a lot of us can relate to this particular circumstance. In Winston-Salem, North Carolina, I lived across the street from a working class white family with two little boys, the older of whom I befriended. He and I would play together and talk about dreams and aspirations. I would never have thought that in this safe, sacred space between two friends would the world rest so firmly in my chest as it did. While in the basement playing, he and I decided to go upstairs to his room when his younger brother blocked the stairway and said "we don't allow niggers upstairs." Even in my ten-year-old body, I was snatched from a safe space and thrust back into the oblivion of soul-crushing discriminatory practices. The older brother and I remained friends but we knew then things could never be as they were.

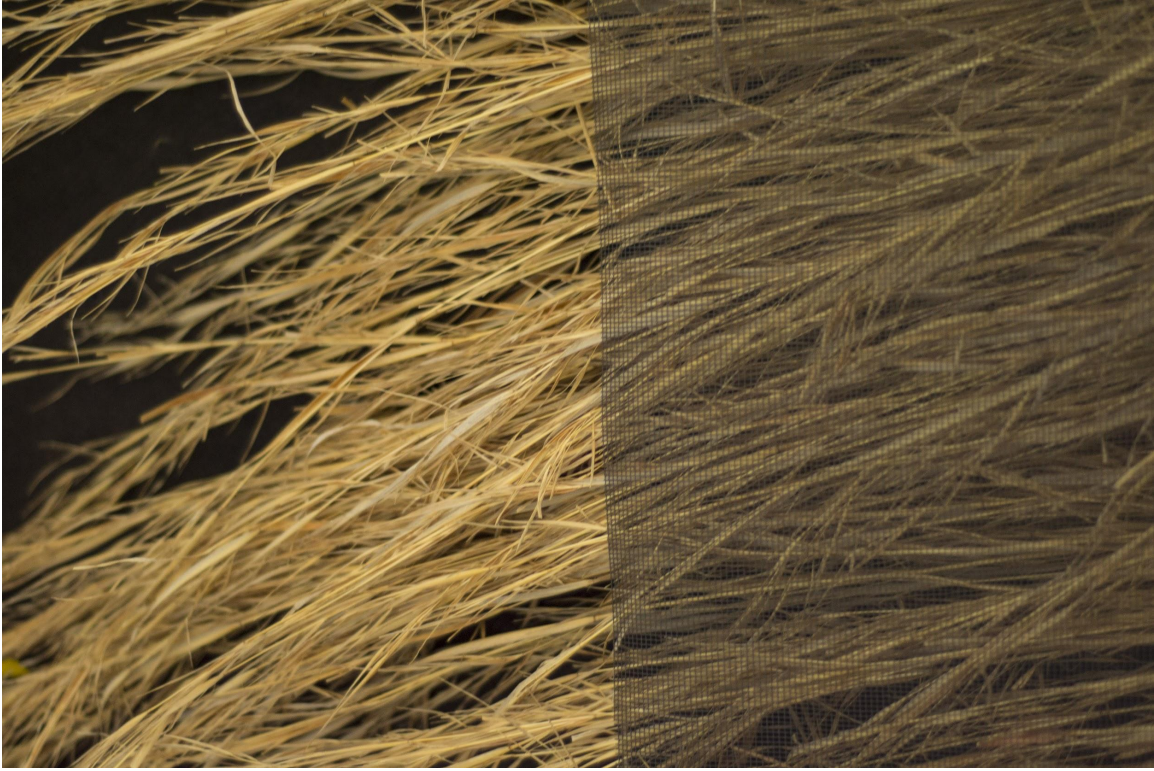


Figure 5 *MY EYES DUE SEE*, detail of screen door mesh and broomsedge

My grandmother, the late Bertie Becoat, symbolizes joy in my memory, as do the spaces she inhabited, like her home, especially while hanging out on the screen porch with her, friends, and family. Her presence was nourishing and jovial. If she wasn't tending to her garden she was making us laugh. I vividly remember her picking me up from school and how fast she would drive, there was an urgency and wildness to her personality. The open road symbolizes joy, but in combination with a car I feel pain too. The joy of the freedom to go anywhere and the pain of my freedom to do so could be my demise. Being stopped by the police and all the politics that follow when it happens to you. Don't make erratic movements, don't appear upset, don't look

suspicious and most importantly don't be you. The lineage of being able to buy a car is also interesting because when democratic access to vehicles became available to Americans we were denied access to purchase. When we were able to afford a vehicle, there had to be a cheat code or a workaround for us to purchase a car, such as a "front-man," which was most likely a white man who would purchase a car on our behalf.



Figure 6 *MY EYES DUE SEE*, detail image of transmission

## MY EYES DUE SEE: Sampled Based Composing Intermixed with Live Instrumentation

My introduction to music was in the backseat of my father's red 1979 Volkswagen Beetle, where he would play soul music like Al Green, Maze, and Earth Wind & Fire. Later in life I became fascinated with Hip Hop culture, particularly the DJ, Graffiti, and Rap elements. I bought some Gemini belt-drive turntables and used my father's record collection to practice DJing. I then started my own record collection that included soul, jazz, rock, and Rap. I became obsessed with learning how the instrumentals behind Rap was made and started to make my own beats. For MY EYES DUE SEE, I combed through a library of music by artists that held pockets of nostalgia in my memory such as:

Maze "Joy and Pain"

"Happy Feelin's"

Esther Phillips "That's All Right with Me"

Joe Williams "Little Birdie"

Tessie Hill "Never Let A Day Go By"

Patti LaBelle "If You Only Knew"

The Blackbyrds "Mysterious Vibes"

Pete Rock & CL Smooth "T.R.O.Y."

Al Green "Let's Stay Together"

"Im Still In Love With You"

"Simply Beautiful"

Minnie Riperton "Inside My Love"

“Take A Little Trip”

Earth Wind & Fire “Let’s Groove”

“Fantasy”

“Love’s Holiday”

Bill Withers “Lovely Day”

“Ain't No Sunshine”

“Use Me”

“Grandma’s Hands”

Stevie Wonder “These Three Words”

“Knocks Me Off My Feet”

“As”

“Superwoman”

Evelyn “Champagne” King “Love Come Down”

Faze-O “Riding High”

Curtis Mayfield “(Don’t Worry) If There Is A Hell Below, We're All Gonna Go”

“The Makings of You”

“Move On Up”

“Little Child Runnin’ Wild”

“Pusherman”

“Eddie You Should Know Better”

“Superfly”

## Bibliography

Alexander, Michelle. *New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New Press, 2016. 123.

Green, Victor H. *The Negro Travelers' Green Book: the Guide to Travel and Vacations*. 1940.

Griffith, D. W., director. *Birth of a Nation (Motion Picture)*. Griffith Feature Films, 1915.

Kappeler, Victor E. *How Objective Is the "Objective Reasonableness" Standard in Police Brutality Cases?* School of Justice Studies Eastern Kentucky University, 2013, <http://plsonline.eku.edu/insidelook/how-objective-%E2%80%9CObjective-reasonableness%E2%80%9D-standard-police-brutality-cases>.

Young, Kevin. *The Grey Album: on the Blackness of Blackness*. Graywolf Press, 2012. 14.