

**Glitch and  
Figure:  
representation and  
refusal in the videos  
of Buseje Bailey and  
ariella tai**  
By Yaniya Lee

V tape

**Parallel pasts**

In a crowded, airless, room at a downtown Toronto gallery, BIPOC participants of the 2019 Images Festival Research Forum—a group of emerging artists and researchers selected to engage in all the festival's events—[read out a list of collective critiques](#). "The breadth of critique and feedback that we—as precarious BIPOC workers— have prepared here is egregious," they noted, before outlining a lack of attention to accessibility, a lack of transparency about budget resources, and questionable programming. "Do not program works where the filmmaker does blackface. It is blatantly racist," they continued. "Hold filmmakers to ethical practices." They expressed a desire to have mentorship from Black, Indigenous and racialized filmmakers, curators and organizers, rather than artists who needed to be educated on racial politics. Filmmaker ariella tai, one of the participants, asked "Why non-Black, non-Indigenous, non-people-of-colour filmmakers and artists are not asked to grapple with ... the histories of settler colonialism [from] Transatlantic slavery to exploitation to capitalism with the same rigour, grace, and integrity that we see people who are immediately affected by these systems [deal] with it."



The frustration expressed in the critiques and individual testimonials was the result of what they saw as a serious misalignment between the festival's stated principles and its actual programming. "There needs to be more care and intention around how Images opens stories, bodies, and lives of [people of] color up to white consumption," the participants wrote.

This criticism of arts organizations' relationship to Black, Indigenous and racialized people is not new. In the late 80s and 90s, local artist-activists in Toronto regularly organized actions to end racism. In her essay "The Development of Black Canadian Cultural Activism of the 1980s/1990s," Andrea Fatona notes that, "the central issues driving the activist activities of Black artists and cultural producers were racism, self-determination, and access to state resources and institutions." One such group—which included Dionne Brand, Faith Nolan, Grace Channer and Angela Robertson—was the Black Women's Collective. The group emerged out of a large feminist forum in Toronto. (There was also a Montreal chapter.) The radical voices in the creation of the collective were cultural workers whose work was seated at the nexus of politics and social justice. Their community and labour activism were committed to a shift in social and working culture. [In their 1988 constitution](#) they committed "to work to

eradicate ideas and practices of sexism, sexual stereotyping, class exploitation, white supremacy, homophobia and imperialism." [The artist Buséje Bailey](#) (then Beatrice Bailey) was a friend of the organization from early on. Though she has since largely left the more prominent role she had as an organizer and artist, her work and the rigor of her political stance continue to influence artists and researchers like Sandra Brewster, Liz Ikiriko and Alice Wing Mai Jim.

Not long after the implementation of the 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act, identity politics in the form of self-representation was a common approach to art-making, and seen as an urgent aesthetic strategy for challenging all forms of racism, from the systemic kind down to interpersonal micro-aggressions. However, Fatona writes, "works of Black, Native and people of colour artists that took up issues of identity were not truly considered art because of their engagement with an aesthetic spectrum outside of white Canadian-ness. Identity-based works by artists of colour disrupted ideas of a universal aesthetic or the timelessness of what is viewed as culture and art." Among the Black Women's Collective organizing activities—which included actions and community events such as [hosting visiting scholars](#) like Angela Davis—was the publication of *Our Lives: Canada's First Black Women's Newspaper*. In [a column from 1987](#), Bailey



outlined a common relationship to predominantly white art institutions: "Black artists are denied access to information. It does not come into our community and when it does it is not in a language which we can understand. To have access to grants, shows, employment and other opportunities you have to understand bureaucratise and you have to have contacts and frankly you have to be white because Black art is not considered to be part of the national art."

In the text, she writes about being asked, as a Black woman, to participate in the "Working Odds - Race in the Art System" forum during a Black History Month event in Toronto. To her surprise, the audience wasn't white and middle class, but instead Black, Indigenous and POC—all already familiar with the kinds of experiences she was prepared to talk about. "I had forgotten that whites believe that this is our issue and not theirs so why would they come?" she wrote.

"The audience's participation was minimal... they were probably hoping the panelists would be white and willing to share the secrets of solving the problem 'how to succeed in the art system.' A Black member of the audience said that she was sick of seeing Black people being used to deal with race issues or to educate white people". While these arts organizations sometimes professed intentions toward inclusion, their understanding of what inclusion actually meant

was quite narrow. Not only outreach, but also an internal accountability process was required for changing structures that had long been exclusive. Bailey's anecdote shows a common occurrence for racialized people, then and now: they are invited to provide "identity content" but in the end are mainly used to help fulfill the prerogative of the white-led organization that invited them. Their mere presence is sufficient to create the optics of diversity that supports the assumption of a progressive mandate.

### **Identity and representation**

In the 1980s and 90s, Bailey used photography, sculpture, painting and installation to develop different explorations of history, belonging and family lineage. The nuance and variety of her visual language are a testament to the depth of her investigation into each project, and her politics were always reflected in her artistic practice. [In one essay](#) about a series of self-portrait photographs, Bailey responds to demands that she make specific aspects of herself legible in her work. She declared that the fact of her existence was enough: "By exploring my body I am exploring racism, colonialism, sexism, and ultimately I am exploring my lesbianism." Bailey was frustrated at being expected to fit neatly into a single identity, and so she outlined how



these limiting categories were reductive and ineffectual. A paradox existed between the desire to image her experiences, and her resistance to the demands that she represent a specific identity. Although representation felt imperative to BIPOC artists at the time, it tended to end up flattened or simplified. "I hold many differences," Bailey insisted. "My sexual oppression is not isolated from other oppressions." She was confident that she existed across discreet identity categories, and could not be neatly recuperated by any single one.

"My work is not a plea for inclusion," Bailey said. "I've grown beyond the need to be included in a problematic system. It is an honest attempt to get to know, and accept myself." Two videos from 1992 show Bailey's range and style of video making. [Women of Strength, Women of Beauty](#) (1992, 16:30), looks at how mainstream white beauty standards affect racialized women. The 16-minute color video includes spoken word poetry and several women's testimonials. The subjects discuss how they navigate normative patriarchal gender relations, and the pervasive conditions of European beauty standards. They also talk about a shifting sense of identity as immigrants and racialized people in the diaspora. As Bailey explained [in an interview from 1990](#): "I'm looking to address all disenfranchised people who wish to listen to what I have to say or who're looking



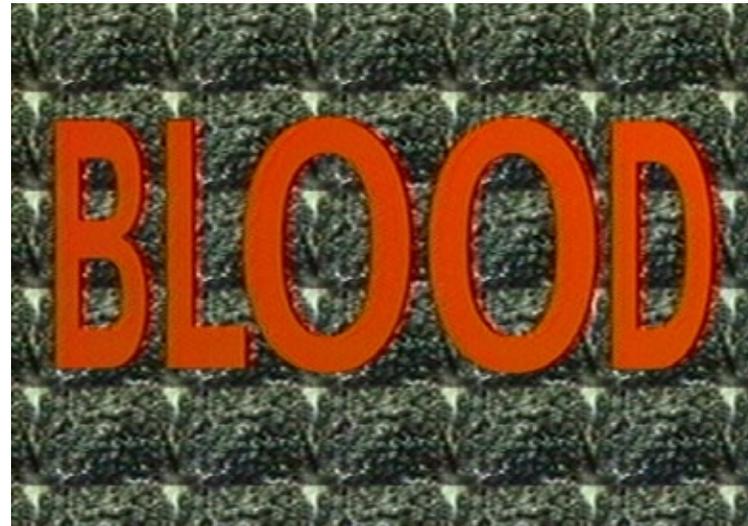
for a voice or for a medium to express their lack of representation in this society." The video privileges the perspectives of femmes, and Black, Indigenous and racialized people.

Bailey's experiments with a range of visual effects, innovative at the time, are difficult to appreciate in the current context of media practice. For today's 'digital natives,' who take having technology and editing capabilities at their fingertips for granted, the reality of early 90s video making is difficult to understand. At the time, artists working had to have access to cameras and tape players and editing machines before they could even begin to experiment with visuals.

*Women of Strength, Women of Beauty* has a single scene that stands out from the rest of Bailey's catalogue for its difference in tone and style.

The video is a head-and-shoulders slow motion shot of the artist in the shower, lathering her face and hair with soap. Bailey also uses this same scene in the 6 minute video, [Blood](#) (1992, 6:00). The scene makes up the entirety of the shorter video, and is accompanied by staticky white noise. The two videos approach representation in entirely different ways.

*Women of Strength, Women of Beauty* is explicit, nearly didactic in its depiction of its subjects and their experiences of being gendered and racialized. Their narratives illustrate their



lived experiences. In stark contrast, *Blood* has no narrative; Bailey's body takes up the frame but doesn't reveal any intention or emotion. What is to be made of this opaque image, created at a time when all representations of racialized people were over-determined by identity politics? The slowness of the pace of the single, drawn-out gesture sets in motion a swell of expectation that never peaks. In this way, Bailey seems to simultaneously fulfill and refuse the imperative call to representation.

#### Glitch Aesthetics and Queer Roots

As with Bailey, Images forum participant [ariella tai](#)'s practice reflects the aims of their activism. There is a great disparity in the aesthetic strategies used by Bailey in the 90s (representation and identity politics) and by tai in the late 2010s (glitch and fragmented narrative). Queens, NY-born and Portland-based, tai organizes workshops and screenings with kiki nicole as [the first and the last](#). Their belief is that "supporting the work of Black femme artists is vital to the health and strength of all artistic communities." In their new media artwork tai is "interested in the materiality of Black bodies and Black performance as vernaculars which subvert, interrupt or defy the diegetic cohesiveness of narrative." They will watch



the entire movie or tv catalogue of a specific Black femme actor to find those “moments that you return to emotionally,” which tai refers to as queer roots, or root moments. [Their gifs](#), include such root moments—scenes of queer love, happiness, flirtation and freedom. *bessie and lucille*, from *Bessie*, for instance, or *cleo and ursula*, from *Set It Off*. In gifs as in most of their other video work, [tai describes](#) using glitch effects and processes from “existing media in attempts to rupture and reconstruct some of the messier emotional realities of Black femme existence.” By repossessing and distorting images of Black femmes and queerness, the glitch enacts a visual fragmentation of the codes of on-screen behaviour, making them difficult to recuperate.

[According to Taina Bucher](#), “Glitch aesthetics is the visualization or making visible of errors, it is a way of organizing perception that emphasizes the artificiality of representation. The aesthetics of glitch makes the functionality and dysfunctionality of software appear. It interrupts the event and breaks down the expected.” In the 2-minute glitch video, [your sorry ass](#) (2017, 2:11), Angela Bassett pours fuel over her ex’s car, lights a match, and then walks away as it is engulfed in flames. The doubled images and altered colors are overdubbed with dialogue from the movie’s moments of great emotional intensity. These scenes, from Forest



Whitaker's 1995 *Waiting to Exhale*, are root moments tai glitches and distorts to produce a new dimension to the narrative. tai's investment does not seem to be in representation, exactly, but rather an exploration of interior selves and emotional states. By recuperating and distorting images of black femmes and queerness, the glitch enacts a visual fragmentation of the codes of on-screen behaviour, making them difficult to recuperate. The glitch allows the medium to swallow the image, to fade and distort and refuse easy legibility. The glitch becomes a tool for tai's process of imaging psychic and affective experience. In this effort to relay affect rather than likeness or figure, tai becomes anti-representational.

This question of how artists think about self-representation is often tied to identity politics, and our relationship to mainstream images of ourselves. On the [who all gon be there? podcast](#), tai talks about growing up during the heyday, or golden age, of Black American television, when big networks carried many Black shows. Having those images and stories on television meant a lot to the generation that came of age then. Though the golden age is over (all of those shows began to disappear in the 2000s), those shows became a crucial part of the major developmental stages of youth, and formative to our grown identities online and IRL. We are so entwined with popular representation,

with pop culture, and the possibilities of both creating and consuming in the current media landscape. What tai's work demonstrates, in the re-cycling of representations and narratives, and the applied distortion and re-composition, is the reliance on the assumption of inclusion. In the early 90s, the prerogative was self-definition and visibility. For tai's generation, the importance of identity politics has shifted: "I don't think that us seeing ourselves on tv or on screen is going to get us free," tai says. In her essay "[Closing the Loop](#)," artist and writer Aria Dean writes, "we must devise a new politic of looking and being looked at." This crux is what Buseje Bailey manages to do in the video *Blood*. And it seems like, in many ways, tai's practice answers this call.

### what now - a complete overhaul

Dean writes, "I don't intend to advocate for a politic of anti-representation or a fundamental refusal of the image. However, being of the mind that to be Black in particular is to be at once surveilled and in the shadows, hyper-visible and invisible, an either/or theory of representation seems unhelpful." Bailey and tai have parallel organizing and artistic practices that celebrate Black queer femme energy and strength. tai's approach and perspective, though similar in ethic to that of Bailey and the Black Women's Collective, reflects the present time.



In the lapse of years between when Bailey was making video and tai is experimenting with the glitch, the urgency and effectiveness of identity politics has shifted. The indictment offered by the Images forum participants points to the need for institutions to provide extra attention and support to BIPOC artists, beyond a simple diversity and inclusion mandate. As the critique outlines, "There was effort made to increase the number of Forum participants of color, particularly Black participants. ... However, it should be known that our presence here is not for your optics or quota-reaching. We are living breathing humans, who expect our histories and lived experiences to be acknowledged, and our interests in mentorship and development to be respected. Despite efforts made to get us here, the Forum programming failed to translate this interest into intention."

In the 90s, during an energetic period of arts activism that coincided with the white art world's efforts of inclusion and diversity, Bailey's work and presence was a force. Like others she worked with, identity politics was an important strategy toward equity and representation. In the nearly 3 decades since that time, the limits of diversity and inclusion, and identity politics as an oppositional strategy, have become clear. Black, Indigenous and people of colour artists and activists have seen many of the significant issues they fought

against, like systemic racism and institutional hypocrisy and exploitation, persist. Many artists today share the aims of that earlier generation, yet some, like tai, have come to refuse identity politics. They have no trust in the inclusion process and instead make artwork that takes a lateral approach to representation. Rather than straightforward visual figuration and narrative, they are using their work to explore alternative means of expressing collective subjective experiences in the new visual languages of digital technology.

Taking carefully into account the Images Forum critique, it seems that reform has not been enough. As a collaborative, co-operative strategy, inclusion and diversity did not create open and equitable dialogue and practices. In what ways, then, can the intention for change be actualized? If reform has not been enough, then these structures need to be broken down and remade in a different way. A look at the very foundations of our working together is necessary. In other words, a complete epistemological overhaul. Luckily, Black creative practice contains experiments and strategies that outline how we might arrive at alternative structures and aesthetics to refigure a different present. ■



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In November 2019, Lee and curator Denise Ryner co-convened the *Bodies, Borders, Fields* Symposium in Toronto. The 3 day series of workshops, performances and talks revisited a 1967 roundtable conversation from *artscanada* magazine on the theme of "black."

Lee and Ryner guest-edited *Chroma*, the fall 2020 issue of *Canadian Art* magazine. Lee was previously on the editorial advisory committees for *Fuse* and *C Magazine*, and she now sits on the board of directors of Mercer Union. She works as features editor at *Canadian Art* magazine and teaches Art Criticism at the University of Toronto.



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