Perhaps no decision I have ever taken has been as influential on my academic practice as the choice made during my graduate work to focus on sub-Saharan African cinema. This laid the groundwork for a research philosophy I have always espoused because I quickly recognized that in order to explore these dynamic works, one must develop the open mind necessary to identify and respectfully investigate issues arising from a cultural experience outside of one’s own “world-sense,” to borrow a term from Nigerian theorist Oyeronke Oyewumi. Not only did this experience force me to seriously explore my own identity and position within world culture, it also enabled me to develop a great respect for beliefs and practices outside my own. The need to understand these cultures within African contexts of experience led me to develop a sensitivity that has set the tone for all of my research practices.

During my academic career, I have remained current in the area of sub-Saharan African cinema and have broadened my investigation to include television, cultural, narrative, and new media studies. My work’s special focus on issues of nation, identity, and narrative form has led to some interesting results. For example, when I was beginning my career in the late 1980s and early 1990s, my writing focused on representations of women in African film. I feel I was somewhat “slow” getting this work published, and one of the reasons was that my work would be rejected by editors who wanted me to apply Western feminist theory to the films I was analyzing. I felt this was being interventionist in a negative way toward another culture’s artistic production. I stood my ground, but published few papers. Two that I am particularly proud of are “Mapping the African ‘I’: Representations of Women in *La noire de...* and *Histoire d’Orokia*” (2000) and “Miseria: Towards an African Feminist Framework of Analysis” (1995). “Miseria” made an especially important contribution to television, African and women studies, having a major impact on the international debate surrounding the establishment of an African feminism based on African precepts.

More recently, I published the paper, “Pugnacité et pouvoir: la représentation des femmes dans les films d’Ousmane Sembène,” in *Présence Francophone*.
This essay considers a range of representations of women across the spectrum of film works by the renowned Senegalese filmmaker, Ousmane Sembène. By exploring Sembène’s representations of female characters through narrative and aesthetic analysis, I uncover how the characters reflect or depart from contemporary issues of the time. A paper I am preparing for a 2010 conference in Los Angeles is titled, “African, Woman or Both?: The Importance of Women Directors in African Cinema” and explores the films of four key female directors: Sarah Maldoror, Safi Faye, Fanta Régina Nacro, and Maria João Ganga, whose works span the breadth of African cinema.

Perhaps I will always keep coming back to this topic of women in African cinema, but I have also taken some interesting digressions along the way. My recent book, Contact Zones: Memory, Origin and Discourses in Black Diasporic Cinema (Petty, 2008a), explores the connections between African origin and the African diaspora as a transnational relationship. The original goal of this project was to write a book on cinema of the Black diaspora that combines a survey of theoretical positions with close narrative and aesthetic readings of selected films. The purpose of the book was to provide the reader with a broad exposure to key theorists and ideas that have informed Black diasporic work from France to the U.K. and U.S., the Caribbean and Canada. I wanted to look at films and writing that had been informed by slavery and the Middle Passage as well as economic, social and political exile. I wanted to provide readers with a sense of the challenges, celebrations and creativity that have arisen from the Black diaspora’s engagement with journey and arrival, often to hostile circumstances. When we think of African or African diasporic subjects, our imagination is often mediated by history: can one speak of Africa, for example, without referring to colonialism? Or speak of the Black diaspora without reference to slavery or other exiles that connect the present to the past? And what about African Canadian experiences, so often missing from volumes on the African diaspora? These are some of the questions and issues I wanted to unpack through this project, but I also wanted to foreground black Canadian identities and the varied histories of black cultures in Canada. Within this context, I drew on Clement Virgo’s film Rude (1995), which, I argue in the book, “arises from an ongoing tradition of black Canadian filmmaking that has always sought to give voice to cultural and historical concerns often marginalized or dismissed by white Canadian society” (p. 230).

Most recently, the rising importance of new media has led me to expand my research practice to include investigations into the interstices of race and representation in digital narratives. In 2007, I published the essay, “The Iterative Circle: Appropriation and Transformation of Web Narratives in Amika” in Fluid Screens: Expanded Cinema, edited by Susan Lord and Janine Marchessault (2008). I feel this essay is significant since it is one of the first works on the emergence of African new media aesthetics. This work merges somewhat with one of my recent curatorial projects. In 2004/2005, I curated, for Neutral Ground Artist Run Centre in Regina and Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery in Halifax, an exhibition that brought together performance, digital art, interactive cinema, and Web texts by artists questioning what it means to be black in the digital age, contributing to concepts of resistance and the tactics of challenge that have the
power to race the cultural interface. Of particular note in this exhibition were works by the two Canadian artists, Camille Turner and Wayne Dunkley. Turner wowed both Regina and Halifax with her site-specific performance artwork *Miss Canadiana (Red, White and Beautiful)*, which foregrounds blackness and the artist’s body as a site of social investigation. Drawing on the familiar convention of the beauty pageant, Turner assumed the fictional persona of Miss Canadiana and, complete with entourage and mock press coverage, blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction, transporting participants into an environment where African Canadian women are considered a natural standard of beauty and representative of the Canadian nation. Dunkley’s interactive installation, titled *the degradation and removal of the/a black male*, was equally successful in both cities and worked to immerse interactants in black experience, forcing them to confront social degradation of Black males and to participate in a wider debate on the nature of racism in Canada.

Finally, I think it is important to note that I consider curating exhibitions for public art galleries a pivotal part of the work I do because it is a way to partner and connect with communities. What better space to make academic research open and accessible to the general public, breaking down barriers and making art and convergence possible, thus allowing for productive debate amongst and between all constituents?

**Exhibitions**


**References**


