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“We Never Did Return”

Migration, Materiality and Time in Penny Siopis’ Post-Apartheid Art

Allison K. Young

Abstract

This article explores “migration” as both theme and operation in two works by the South African artist Penny Siopis, each created in the year 1997: the artist’s first film, *My Lovely Day*, and a related object installation entitled *Reconnaissance* (1900-1997).

In each work, Siopis traces the course of her grandmother’s emigration from Europe to Africa through a variety of found, collected, or inherited components that bore witness to the *longue durée* of imperialism and Apartheid. Mediating between national, cultural, and familial narratives, these works are inherently archaeological in nature, and allowed viewers at the time to reflect on the multiple entangled histories that comprised the post-Apartheid condition. The late nineties in South Africa were defined by the conclusion of Apartheid, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and two major biennale exhibitions of contemporary art. The decade thusly saw a stream of collective efforts to both unearth the past and envision the future, marking a time of great cultural, artistic, political, and discursive transition. Mapping questions of medium-specificity and affect over this larger context, I investigate Siopis’ use and manipulation of historical traces as well as notions of contemporaneity and temporality in her art.

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"We Never Did Return"

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So you see. I have my own story, and increasingly in my old age it weighs on me. Now that every turn in the weather whistles an ache through my bones, I stir in bed and the memories rise out of me like a buzz of flies from a carcass. I crave to be rid of them, but find myself being too careful, too, choosing which ones to let out into the light.

I want you to find me innocent.

Barbara Kingsolver

*The Poisonwood Bible*¹

When the Second Johannesburg Biennale was launched in 1997 under the artistic directorship of Okwui Enwezor, the young democracy was just three years into its new post-Apartheid government, and one year into a landmark Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The sprawling metropolis, which artist William Kentridge once described as a "rather desperate provincial city," was for the second time transformed into the site of a major international contemporary art event.² Naturally, many of the artworks that accompanied this transitional moment reflected on the nation's fraught recent past and interrogated the legacies of imperialism and global conquest with which its modern history was so entangled. Framing the Biennale around the thematic scope of its title, *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, Enwezor commissioned and selected works that spoke to various types of migrations: of people, commodities and ideas.³

The Biennale's flagship exhibition *Alternating Currents*, curated by both Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, was installed in The Electric Workshop, a renovated power station built in 1929 and later repurposed as a cultural hub; like the "Gold City" itself, the space was industrial and somewhat derelict. Within it, the Biennale constructed a mini cinema theater in which the South African artist Penny Siopis debuted her first moving-image work. The atmosphere was completed by four short rows of distressed red-cushioned seats and a small movie screen flanked by velvet curtains (Fig. 1).⁴

¹ Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 8.

² The 1st Johannesburg Biennale, titled *Africus*, took place from February 28 – April 30, 1995, under the artistic directorship of Lorna Ferguson. The Second Johannesburg Biennale was scheduled to be held from October 12, 1997 – January 18, 1998, but it closed one month early, on December 12, due to the city's financial problems. No Johannesburg Biennale has taken place since then.

³ See Rory Bester and Matthew DeBord, ed., *Trade Routes: History and Geography: 2nd Johannesburg Biennale*, exh. cat. (Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 1997).

⁴ These descriptions are based on installation shots as well as the author's informal in-person discussion with Okwui Enwezor in January, 2012, and an informal interview via Skype with Penny Siopis in January, 2012.



Figure 1

Penny Siopis, *My Lovely Day* (installation view), 3rd ed., 1997. Video installation of mini cinema and 8mm film transferred to video, 21 minutes. Museum of Modern Art, Stockholm; South African National Gallery, Cape Town; the artist (photo: courtesy Penny Siopis and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town).

The visitor would enter the dimly lit space of the installation to take his or her seat and wait, until finally, with the faint crackling of a 78-rpm record, the opening image faded in onto the screen: two African nannies gaze toward the lens, squinting in the sunlight beside their surrogate white daughter, whose head is whipped around towards the hedges behind her. The title, *My Lovely Day*, appears in large antique typeface over the photographic still, as a woman's singing emerges from the distorted soundtrack of a digitized gramophone record (Fig. 2). As the camera slowly pans across an ivy-covered verandah, an old woman gazes towards the camera from the safe shade of its enclosure, and the first subtitle then appears below her:

"After all my travels, that I should land up in this god-forsaken place!"



Figure 2

Penny Siopis, *My Lovely Day* (film still), 3rd ed., 1997. Video installation of mini cinema and 8mm film transferred to video, 21 minutes. Museum of Modern Art, Stockholm; South African National Gallery, Cape Town; the artist (photo: courtesy Penny Siopis and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town).

This article explores migration as both theme and operation in Siopis' art, as well as the archaeologies of space and time that characterize her work in the post-Apartheid period, with focus on two installations created in the year 1997. *My Lovely Day* and *Reconnaissance (1900-1997)* both narrate the stories of three generations of women in Siopis' family, displacing onto found images and objects the auratic resonances of memory and post-memory.⁵ *My Lovely Day*, for instance, is comprised of re-sequenced found home movies, shot in South Africa in the 1950s and '60s on 8mm film by the artist's mother, Anna Siopis (Fig. 3). Its narrator is Dorothy Frangetes, the artist's maternal grandmother, whose words are composed from writings found on old postcards, as well as from Siopis' memories of her speech. Dorothy was English, and this was "a great source of pride to her," as the artist

⁵ See Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29 (2008): 103-128. The literary theorist marshals the term "post-memory" to signify "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (103). This concept is typically invoked in literature pertaining to the Holocaust.

notes.⁶ As such, she felt stigmatized for marrying a Greek man, his Mediterranean blood exotic enough to mark the union as taboo in the early twentieth century. However, the assurgent Greco-Turkish conflict, which accompanied the partition of the Ottoman Empire, eventually forced Dorothy and her family to flee the region.



Figure 3

Penny Siopis, *My Lovely Day* (film still), 3rd ed., 1997. Video installation of mini cinema and 8mm film transferred to video, 21 minutes. Museum of Modern Art, Stockholm; South African National Gallery, Cape Town; the artist (photo: courtesy Penny Siopis and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town).

Given the Biennale's theme of "trade routes," the topic of migration is a viable point of entry to any discussion of *My Lovely Day*, which was commissioned specifically for that exhibition. This term may be applied sociologically, to connote diasporas or voluntary emigrations, or in terms of media-theory, given the chain of technological formats that the original material has moved through. It can even be harnessed in the vein of new materialist theories that have recently invigorated art history, visual culture studies and anthropology. In the South African anthology, *Shoe Shop*, for instance, W.J.T. Mitchell recently reproduced

⁶ Penny Siopis, "The Hooks of History: Three Films," in *Shoe Shop: Walking Through Africa, the Arts and Beyond*, ed. Marie-Hélène Gutberlet and Cara Snyman (Auckland Park, South Africa: Femela/Jacana Media, 2012), 47.

a text on "Migrating Images," which asks: "What would it mean to talk about images as migrants, as immigrants, as emigrants, as travelers, who arrive and depart, who circulate, pass through, thus appear and disappear...?"⁷ Do such images bear physical or auratic traces of these journeys? What might we learn from their sojourns through space and time? Siopis' work certainly reflects upon the *moving*, both in terms of the multiple meanings suggested by T.J. Demos, who writes of artworks that harness "new modelings of affect [and] creative modes of mobile images... with which to negotiate the increased movements of life across the globe"⁸ but also in the sense that her images, in this case, have literally moved out of another artwork: *Reconnaissance (1900-1997)*, an installation of found or collected objects that debuted at the Goodman Gallery just months before the opening of the Biennale. The supposition that fuels Mitchell's own project, "the notion of images as living organisms driven by desire, appetite, need, demand and lack,"⁹ encourages an inquiry into the histories and afterlives of such images and objects.

In order to nuance the ways in which concepts such as migration and materiality operate in the case of this specific pair of artworks, I adapt concepts in archaeology that help to articulate the relationships between certain 'actants': past histories (Apartheid, colonialism, the artist's genealogy), the *remains* of these histories (objects and images), the artist (as archaeologist) and the contemporary viewer (in 1997). In his seminal book, *Archaeology and Time*, for instance, Gavin Lucas provides a thorough historiography of his discipline with regards to questions of time and chronology.¹⁰ Lucas explains that archaeologists might view a site or record as a kind of *palimpsest*, "the cumulative remains of past processes"¹¹ that reflects multiple histories, rather one specific point in time. While this theory honors the complexity of a record's "systemic context"—meaning that it may contain traces of several cultural systems through time—he urges readers to also consider the "archaeological context" with equal importance. This means that an archaeologist who discovers or handles the record continues to affect it, and that the record's "social life" (to borrow loosely from Arjun Appadurai) is continuously being reformulated into the present.

Siopis has worked in a wide range of media that continuously recur and overlap, suggesting a meandering artistic process that Kiki Smith once described as "walking around in a garden."¹² As a result, many commentators tend to promote either medium-specific or thematic groupings that demonstrate how her works reverberate across different phases in her oeuvre.¹³ These studies are indisputably valuable and shed light on the development and

⁷ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Migrating Images: Totemism, Fetishism, Idolatry," in *Shoe Shop: Walking Through Africa, the Arts and Beyond*, ed. Marie-Hélène Gutberlet and Cara Snyman (Auckland Park, South Africa: Femela/Jacana Media, 2012), 125.

⁸ See T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), xiv.

⁹ Mitchell, "Migrating Images," 126. See also W.J.T. Mitchell's seminal book, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), which examines affective exchanges between images and beholders and explores the proposition that images might have individual agency and lives of their own.

¹⁰ See Gavin Lucas, *The Archaeology of Time* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹¹ Lucas, *The Archaeology of Time*, 34. Lucas paraphrases a debate between Michael Schiffer and Lewis Binford about the temporality of archaeological records.

¹² See Helaine Posner, "Approaching Grace" in Posner et al, *Kiki Smith* (New York, NY: Monacelli Press, 2005), 26.

¹³ See, for instance, medium-specific assessments such as T.J. Demos, "Penny Siopis' Film Fables," in *Penny Siopis: Time and Again* (Braamfontein: Wits University Press, 2015) or Griselda Pollock, "Painting, Difference and Desire in History: The

recurrence of the artist's key concerns. In the present article, however, I engage with works of different mediums that were created in a short but significant span of time. Relevant social and art historical context will shed light on the developments and changes that took place in her work specifically during the post-Apartheid years.

I begin with a brief introduction to Siopis' early work through the mid-1990s, after which I examine some of the debates and events that characterized South African art and political culture in the late nineties. This will set the stage for a closer examination of *My Lovely Day* and *Reconnaissance (1900-1997)*, which I hope will enable a fuller understanding of what these works can tell us about the transitions that they mark: in Siopis' oeuvre, in South African contemporary art more broadly, and in this moment of nation-building for the country at large.

I. Transitions and Debates in Politics and Art

Siopis did not forge her career as a moving-image artist. In the 1970s and 1980s, she worked primarily in the mediums of painting, drawing, and pastel, and her art was characterized by a figurative style that made heavy use of iconography and allegory. Inspired by her early studies in feminist and psychoanalytic theory, her *Cake Paintings* of the early and mid-1980s treated paint as flesh, invoking the consumption of the female body through a series of lusciously suggestive renderings of cakes and pastries (Fig. 4).¹⁴

The artist later merged her interest in feminism with the more pressing subjects of Apartheid and colonialism that were now at the fore of South African art; she linked these topics by exposing the patriarchal ideology that underlies both the oppression of women and that of Third World subjects. One of her first major works, *Dora and the Other Woman* (1988) (Fig. 5), for instance, brought together the stories of two oft-cited historical cases: the Xhonian Saartjie Baartman, commonly referred to as the "Hottentot Venus," who was placed on exhibition in London and Paris at the turn of the nineteenth century, and Ida Bauer, Sigmund Freud's young patient known as "Dora," whose story attests to the pathologizing of female sexuality at the turn of the twentieth century. The central figure is an altered self-portrait;¹⁵ Siopis depicts herself standing against a blood-red ground, concealing her nude body with a white cloth that gathers "in shapes reminiscent of female genitalia."¹⁶ This shroud is adorned with archival caricatures of Baartman's body. Both concealment and

work of Penny Siopis 1985-1994," in *Penny Siopis*, ed. Kathryn Smith (Johannesburg: Goodman Gallery, 2005), or thematic assessments such as Brendon Maart, ed., *Red: The Iconography of Color in the Work of Penny Siopis* (Durban, South Africa: KZNSA Gallery, 2009).

¹⁴ For more on Siopis' *Cake Paintings*, see Brenda Schmahmann, "Representing Regulation – Rendering Resistance: Female Bodies in the Art in Penny Siopis" in *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994*, ed. Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann (London: Ashgate, 2005). Also see Colin Richards, "Prima Facie: Surface as Depth in the Work of Penny Siopis," in *Penny Siopis*, ed. Kathryn Smith (Johannesburg: Goodman Gallery, 2005).

¹⁵ Siopis renders the figure racially ambiguous by choosing a slightly darker hue for her skin tone.

¹⁶ Penny Siopis, "Dissenting Detail: Another Story of Art and Politics in South Africa" in *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art*, ed. Brenda Atkinson and Candice Breitz (Johannesburg: Chalkham Hill Press, 1999), 248.

exposure feature prominently in the work's composition, throughout which we find iconographic signs relating to each woman's story.¹⁷



Figure 4

Penny Siopis, *Plum Cream*, 1982. Oil on canvas, 159.5 x 201.5 cm. Location unknown (photo: courtesy Penny Siopis and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town).

Systems of truth production also emerged as a major theme throughout Siopis' early oeuvre. Her series of *History Paintings* produced in 1988 and 1989 reflect not only on the past but also on the act of looking towards it. In *Patience on a Monument: A History Painting* (1988) (Fig. 6), an African woman sits atop a heaping pile of painted and collaged images culled from textbooks, newspapers and scientific archives. The beholder is granted the scopic view of history implied in Walter Benjamin's famous reading of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, who "sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet."¹⁸ Layers of collaged debris surround the female figure in an all-over composition that stretches to the perimeters of the canvas, creating a sense of "infinite regression" that offers no glimpse of a horizon. Images pulled from seemingly objective

¹⁷ For more on this work, see Marion Arnold, "Proclaiming Womanhood," in *Women and Art in South Africa* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996) and Pollock, "Painting, Difference and Desire in History," 46-67.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (New York: Schocken, 2007), 257-258.

sources are used to subvert the notion of truth and to challenge the hegemonic writing of history.¹⁹



Figure 5

Penny Siopis, *Dora and the Other Woman*, 1988. Pastel on paper, 153x 120 cm. Private collection, Johannesburg (photo: courtesy Penny Siopis and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town).

¹⁹ For more on Siopis' *History Paintings* and related works, see Richards, "Prima Facie," 6-45.

In 1996, Siopis was one of several artists targeted by Enwezor in a controversial essay entitled "Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation," which sparked heated debates about identity, appropriation and visual culture in South Africa.²⁰ Enwezor insisted that white artists should stop reproducing narratives and images related to the oppression of Africans in their work, and instead might take on their own experiences and histories as subject matter. His censure relies on an acknowledgment of the lasting power of such representations; as noted by Andrés Mario Zervigón, "images remain haunted by their previous use even while charged with their new task of renegotiating identity."²¹ Indeed, Enwezor argues that the utter *familiarity* of racist tropes, such as those found in ethnographic postcards, is evidence of their lasting currency, and enlists the words of postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Franz Fanon in decrying the depictions of "near-naked African women in a state of colonial arrest"²² reproduced in works by Siopis and Candice Breitz, among others. In so doing, he denounces the artist's use of such images, even critically, likening these to "over-aestheticised vessels for pleasurable consumption, untroubled and available."²³ Debates surrounding the reproduction of stereotypes were not uncommon during this decade most famous for its identity politics—Kara Walker, whose controversial racial caricatures and Antebellum references incited calls for censorship of her work in 1994, comes to mind—but Enwezor is concerned here with the question of white artists who assign themselves the role of "historicising black desire."²⁴

Enwezor's text was received with a degree of hostility within the tightknit South African art world, even prompting an anthology of essays to be published in response to it in 1999.²⁵ In her Introduction to the publication, entitled *Grey Areas*, Brenda Atkinson recalls the emergence of an "e-mail debate" and mentions other texts and events that stoked tensions, including Olu Oguibe's "Beyond Visual Pleasures: A Brief Recollection on the Work of Contemporary African Women Artists"; Oguibe was more sympathetic to Siopis and artist Sue Williamson, but echoed Enwezor's rebuke of Breitz's *Rainbow Series*, which appropriates ethnographic motifs. These debates also resurfaced during the Biennale's academic conference; in a 1998 article, artist and critic Carol Becker details how the panel in which she

²⁰ Okwui Enwezor, "Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation," *Third Text* 40 (1997): 21-40. Originally published in the catalogue for an exhibition entitled *Contemporary Art in South Africa* that was curated by Marith Hope and toured throughout Norway in 1997. This text also has since been reproduced in Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, ed., *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1999), 376-339.

²¹ Andrés Mario Zervigón, "The Weave of Memory: Siemon Allen's Screen in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Art Journal*, 61 (2002): 77.

²² Enwezor, "Reframing the Black Subject," 28.

²³ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁵ The history of the article's reception is outlined in Brenda Atkinson's introduction to the *Grey Areas* volume. Atkinson explains, "Enwezor's article... was brought to the attention of the South African art community by art critic Kendell Geers, in an article that appeared in *The Star* newspaper's cultural supplement, *Tonight*. Geers' article—'Dangers inherent in foreign curating'—criticised the fact that 'so many of the battles, debates and developments [in contemporary South African art] are being played out on foreign soil' and warned of 'the dangers of foreign curators who come to this country with their old colonial prejudices intact and who use our artists for their racist imaginations.'" (17) As Atkinson later points out, "Both Geers' and Enwezor's pieces became important catalysts and focal points for a particular debate around issues that had, until then, been largely repressed within the art community, at least in the public domain." (19)

was meant to participate had dissolved into a heated argument wherein many intellectuals and artists were subject to bitter accusations. Becker writes: "The tensions in the South African art world, politely contained all week, had finally exploded."²⁶



Figure 6

Penny Siopis, *Patience on a Monument: A History Painting*, 1988. Oil and collage on board, 180 x 200 cm. William Humphreys Museum, Kimberly, South Africa (photo: courtesy Penny Siopis and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town).

²⁶ Carol Becker, "The Second Johannesburg Biennale," *Art Journal* 57 (1998): 97.

In hindsight, it seems that a rare degree of honesty, criticality and sheer willingness to engage is found throughout this conversation, which is indicative of an uncommon commitment to political expression, especially when it entails laying bare the uncomfortable contradictions and grievances of a fragmented national community.²⁷ In her own contribution to the anthology, Siopis warns her readers: "I do not believe art to be the domain of 'correctness', of non-violence, of polite relations, as is sometimes implied.... [Its] potency perhaps lies more fully in the place it offers for explorations of things which are emphatically tentative, painful, fragile, violent, even angry. Art is not a sanitised, entirely civil activity...."²⁸ She reproduces selections from past writings and notes spanning from the 1970s to the 1990s, and emphasizes the messy entanglement of racial and sexual politics in South Africa's history. Her text subtly betrays the ambivalence of the white female perspective, wherein her impassioned engagement with feminist theory was also met with the realities of her alignment with the European as 'oppressor.' During a sojourn in England and France as an art student, for instance, she was engrossed in an insurgent rise in feminist scholarship on the history of psychoanalysis and theories of hysteria; yet, her "working through" of this material was inevitably scored through with memories of her upbringing in South Africa. In the case of Saartje Baartman, for example, the sexist methodologies of nineteenth-century European scientists and the dehumanizing reality of colonialism were, perhaps, two sides of the same coin.

Also implicit in Enwezor's critique was a challenge to the assumption that whiteness is synonymous with citizenship and belonging, a belief that he felt appeared exempt from political inflection in South African art and visual culture. It was considered imperative that artists and writers challenge the "narratives of the past" that normalized South Africa's European presence. Such a shift is discernible in Siopis' work and in that of her peers during and beyond the late nineties, but it should be acknowledged that this dialogue had already begun to open; thus, this transition is not solely responsive to his critique, but rather is indicative of a growing collective awareness. Siopis had already started using family photographs in works such as *Tula Tula* (1993-4), which focused on the complex and traumatic relationships between black domestic workers and the white children whom they looked after (in the piece, her own brother is pictured as an infant in his nanny's arms).²⁹ Also in 1997, artist Brett Murray exhibited a photo-installation entitled *Guilt and Innocence 1960-1990* (1997) in the newly instated Robben Island Museum (Figs. 7 and 8). The piece contains over one hundred family photographs depicting the artist's childhood in the years during which Nelson Mandela was incarcerated at Robben Island. These works joined a growing number of artist's reflections on the psychology of whiteness in South Africa.³⁰ *My Lovely Day* was, nevertheless, commissioned by Enwezor, and thus her shift towards a more rigorous investigation of personal subjectivity might also be linked to this collaboration. Fragmenting and layering the stories of three generations in her family, Siopis' film contains, as Annie Coombes suggests, "the conflicts and compromises of 'whiteness,' the

²⁷ This point is made especially clear in the intention of the editors of *Grey Areas* to launch during the Second Johannesburg Biennale (although it ended up being published much later), and in Enwezor's simultaneous collaboration with and support of several of the artists mentioned in his article.

²⁸ Siopis, "Dissenting Detail," 245.

²⁹ For more on the *Tula Tula* series, see Siopis, "Dissenting Detail."

³⁰ See Annie Coombes, "What's in a Name? The Place of 'Ethnicity' in the 'New' South Africa" in *History After Apartheid* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003) 206-242.

uncomfortable prejudices but also the legitimate desires of an immigrant middle class scored through with the traces of migratory histories and dreams of belonging."³¹

Just a stone's throw away from The Electric Workshop, a much larger conversation about the country's past and future was taking place on a public level.³² In Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Randburg, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was raising questions about complicity and culpability, witnessing and remembering, and this context must also be revisited in considering artistic practice after Apartheid.

The TRC began in 1996 and lasted for approximately three years.³³ It existed as a public forum through which human rights violations committed between 1960 and 1994 were investigated. The testimonies of both victims and perpetrators were broadcast daily, and in some cases, individuals who had committed politically-motivated acts of violence applied for amnesty. Importantly, the TRC's purpose was not entirely judicial; it also comprised a Reparation and Rehabilitation committee that sought to restore dignity to victims and to encourage collective healing. As the chairman, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, famously envisioned, the institution hoped to "unearth the truth about our dark past, to lay the ghosts of that past so that they will not return to haunt us."³⁴

Tutu formulated a rubric naming four distinct types of "truth" that would be honored during the commission's hearings: 1) factual or forensic; 2) personal or narrative; 3) social or dialogic; and 4) healing or restorative.³⁵ By suggesting that the concept of truth might be adaptable, the TRC acknowledged that more is needed for healing to take place than the exposure of hard evidence, and that contradictory views of history needed to be aired before closure may be reached. The TRC's emphasis on the importance of personal memory—however incomplete or fragmented—echoes some of the abovementioned strategies and debates in artistic discourse.

In the following section, I return to Siopis' artworks. I hope to hold in suspension the metaphor of Tutu's call to "unearth" the past as I discuss the contents of *My Lovely Day* and *Reconnaissance (1900-1997)* and shift to an analysis that concerns the affect and agency of found images and objects, as well as their resonance within the post-Apartheid contexts outlined above.

II. Materiality and Time in Two Works by Penny Siopis

My Lovely Day is assembled from clips of home movies that had been shot by the artist's mother, Anna, in the 1950s and 1960s. Siopis writes its subtitled script from the perspective of her grandmother Dorothy who, in the 1920s, fled with her husband and children from the violent Greco-Turkish conflicts that followed the First World War and accompanied the

³¹ Coombes, *History After Apartheid*, 278.

³² In her article, "The Second Johannesburg Biennale," Carol Becker writes: "During the Biennale's opening days, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was meeting only blocks from the Electric Workshop. In a medium-size room in the Sanlam Center, filled predominantly with journalists but open to the public, South Africa's apartheid past was on trial." (89).

³³ The Commission was not disbanded, however, until the publication of its conclusive reports in the early 2000s.

³⁴ Desmond Tutu, "Bones of Memory," *South African Broadcasting Corporation* website, accessed January 31, 2015, <http://www.sabc.co.za/SABC/SABCtruth/bones.htm>.

³⁵ See Deborah Posel, "The TRC Report: What Kind of History? What Kind of Truth?" in *Commissioning the Past: Understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, ed. Deborah Pose and Graeme Simpson (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University, 2002): 147-172.

partition and fall of the Ottoman Empire. In the opening segment alone, Dorothy mentions her 'travels' in nearly every subtitle. *My Lovely Day* is one of the first contemporary works of art in South Africa to actively probe the history and psychology of imperial diasporas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁶



Figure 7

Brett Murray, *Guilt and Innocence*, 1997. Site-specific installation (photo: courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, Cape Town).

Bits of this history come through in Siopis' film, from which we learn about losses of property and clandestine migrations across rocky terrain. The light in which the artist portrays her grandmother is not entirely sympathetic; Dorothy often reinforces the rhetoric of a 'divide and rule' mentality, thus betraying her colonial upbringing; she compares Venetians to the so-called "Infidel Turks," for instance, and attributes her husband's temper to the "Macedonian in him," all the while reminding us of her own "superior" English genealogy.

Yet, *My Lovely Day* is not only a film about the artist's grandmother. Her narration annotates footage that actually documents the following two generations, visually marking one future outcome of the story of migration that she tells. As Siopis explains, "The place from which she speaks is a small desert town in South Africa called Vryburg.... The historical moment of her telling is apartheid South Africa, but her references to social turmoil and

³⁶ The term "imperial diaspora" loosely describes the migration of Europeans to colonial territories during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and I have borrowed this usage from Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

catastrophe are to those of earlier times."³⁷ Together, text and image straddle the temporal lapses that separate the speaker's memories of the 1920s and '30s, her intended 'audience'—her daughter and grandchildren in the 1950s—and viewers of Siopis' work in 1997.



Figure 8

Brett Murray, *Guilt and Innocence* (detail), 1997. Site-specific installation (photo: courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, Cape Town).

At times, Dorothy re-enters the space of the footage, for example, when accusing the children of leading charmed lives. Scenes of leisure and games of dress-up in the garden appear above her admonishments: "You play as if nothing is happening around you" (Fig. 9). A teenage girl faces the camera and strolls through the grass in her sundress, while a younger child clutching a parasol smiles eagerly nearby. "Look how you cavort in the garden. One would think you were imbeciles!" As Dorothy's words make clear, the reality of Apartheid is only palpable in the absence of its signification; Penny and her siblings appear completely sheltered from the political events unfolding around them. Here, text and image are synchronous, as her words directly address the figures flickering across the screen.

³⁷ Quoted in Colin Richards, "The Wake of Words: A Response to *My Lovely Day*," in *Penny Siopis: My Lovely Day*, (Johannesburg: Goodman Gallery, 1999) [ephemera].

However, this relationship is inconsistent and changes with every jump cut or narrative shift. Siopis explains that at times, "connections are entirely tenuous, even false."³⁸ Moments of incongruity are just as common, and often reflect a sense of irony; when Dorothy insists, for instance, that South Africa is "so uncouth," Siopis sets her words against a scene of white Europeans dancing wildly at a party (Fig. 10).

The moral ambiguity of Dorothy's character—a theme that has defined all of Siopis' filmic works—reflects the wide reach of colonialism. She has been subject to incredible hardship in the midst of shifting national and imperial borders, and she *does* demonstrate an awareness of the horrors of Apartheid. However, her family is privileged in their new home, and the mere existence of a leisure class within an otherwise dehumanizing society is thus brought sharply into focus. In a maneuver that recalls the testimonies being broadcast by the TRC, Siopis lays bare an ambivalent collection of memories—both lived and inherited—that defined her upbringing in South Africa. At the film's close, the phrase "A True Story" flashes onto the screen, further dissolving the boundaries that mark truth, fiction, and memory.

This ambiguity serves the artist's purpose. The work extends beyond Siopis' own lifetime, and thus is not purely autobiography or memoir, no less due to the clear lack of authorship one senses in its fractured narrative. "Events not experienced in my time shall shape my experience as a subject in process," she has written. "This is difficult terrain, and not easy to deal with directly."³⁹ If artworks may aid the psychological process of reparation, this may not always be achieved at an intellectual level, an approach more analogous, perhaps, to the "factual" or "forensic" kind of truth defined by Archbishop Tutu. While allegorically complex, Siopis' early paintings addressed systemic forms of violence in ways that make the work accessible to active, viewers. In *Dora and the Other Woman*, for example, iconographic references to Dora's story appear in the form of men's dress shoes and an opened jewel box; these are symbols that may be decoded through an academic edification of psychoanalytic history.

Instead, *My Lovely Day* appeals empathically, not just conceptually, to the lived experiences of its beholders, which are not always easy to reach. The holes or losses in memory, whether corroded by trauma or by feelings of guilt, might be addressed using what film theorist Laura Marks describes as a *haptic* visuality. "Haptic images," Marks asserts, "invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well."⁴⁰ Seizing the term's applicability towards tactile, material encounters, Colin Richards has invoked Marks' study in reference to the sensuous surfaces of Siopis' paintings.⁴¹ Thus, not only may the "haptic" provide a useful framework for characterizing her work in film, as will be discussed below, but it may also reveal a common thread across her works in diverse mediums.

³⁸ Penny Siopis, "My Lovely Day" in *Penny Siopis*, ed. Kathryn Smith (Johannesburg: Goodman Gallery, 2005), 96-7.

³⁹ Siopis, "My Lovely Day," 95.

⁴⁰ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 2nd ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 2.

⁴¹ See Richards, "Prima Facie," 14-15.



Figure 9

Penny Siopis, *My Lovely Day* (film still), 3rd ed., 1997. Video installation of mini cinema and 8mm film transferred to video, 21 minutes. Museum of Modern Art, Stockholm; South African National Gallery, Cape Town; the artist (photo: courtesy Penny Siopis and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town).

Haptic visuality is marked by its appeal to fractured memories; it invites the viewer to reconstruct a sense of narrative from his or her individual reservoir of experiences. When *My Lovely Day* was debuted, many (primarily white) commentators wrote of the work's sense of familiarity; Richards found that the footage invoked "the very picture of a white South African childhood,"⁴² and Jennifer Law remarked that "we feel as though we have entered into another mind remembering."⁴³ Scenes of domestic comfort, coupled with Dorothy's accusations towards her grandchildren, may have complicated the strong allegiance felt by many white artists to the anti-Apartheid cause. While the result is no less provocative, the familiarity of images that defined whiteness resonated in very different ways than the familiarity of ethnographic tropes that had disturbed Enwezor.

⁴² Richards, "The Wake of Words."

⁴³ Jennifer Law, "My Lovely Day," 1997. Ephemeral exhibition material provided to the author by the artist in 2011.



Figure 10

Penny Siopis, *My Lovely Day* (film still), 3rd ed., 1997. Video installation of mini cinema and 8mm film transferred to video, 21 minutes. Museum of Modern Art, Stockholm; South African National Gallery, Cape Town; the artist (photo: courtesy Penny Siopis and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town).

While domestic life appears blissful in the film, the footage is contemporaneous with events such as the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, one of the first truly violent clashes between anti-Apartheid protestors and the police, or the Rivonia Trials that imprisoned Nelson Mandela and other Freedom Fighters in the early 1960s. As Siopis has explained, many families were growing anxious about the inevitable unrest ahead of them.⁴⁴ These tensions are rarely discernible in the film, but are occasionally present in the textual narration. Near the end of the film, for instance, as the camera peers through a chain-linked fence towards "The Big Hole," the site where diamonds were first found in South Africa in 1871, Dorothy admits: "This is a dangerous place, a place of ruin. Know it in my bones." When discussing the potential slippages between what is depicted and what is experienced, Siopis described her first encounter with this footage, noting the contradictions that arise between what you are told about yourself or your past, what you see in old photographs and

⁴⁴ Penny Siopis, informal interview with the author via Skype, January 9, 2012.

documents, and what you can truly remember. The idyllic footage had still triggered her recollection of a sense of fear or anxiety that pervaded this time.⁴⁵

Siopis' experience of "looking back" aptly illustrates Gilles Deleuze's theorization of the *actual* and the *virtual*, which articulate the dual temporalities inherent to filmic images, a concept that is especially pertinent in the case of home movies, as Marks points out. The actual and the virtual correspond to the splitting in time that differentiates the "passing of the present" and the "preservation of the past."⁴⁶ The former is generally difficult to pin down (it denotes personal or sensory memories), whereas the latter, the remaining document, "becomes the institutionalized representation of the moment."⁴⁷ In Siopis' case, the footage sparked a reintegration of these two very different types of memory. The forensic value of the photographic document merged with the narrative of Dorothy's storytelling, thus cutting across several of Tutu's definitions of truth. For the viewer, the resulting work is confusing in its oscillation between image and text, narrator and protagonist, monologue and direct address. We cannot know which words were written or spoken by the "real" Dorothy, and which were invented by Penny Siopis; in the end, the confusions between the two are far more telling.

The artist also deliberately chose to include sequences that stressed the materiality of her medium, favoring artifacts such as sprocket marks, spots of dust, scratches and water damage, or "the effects of amateur camerawork: wrong exposure, camera shake, light flares, and oddly angled points of view."⁴⁸ Both she and T.J. Demos have written at length about this effect.⁴⁹ These are all qualities that Marks defines as "prohaptic," which, as imperfections or disruptions, "raise ontological questions about the truth of photographic representation."⁵⁰ The resulting aesthetic encourages instead Marks' embodied form of spectatorship, which focuses less on what is represented in each image than on the raw tactility of the images themselves.

Siopis followed *My Lovely Day* with several more moving-image works, and much of the recent literature on the piece addresses it in the context of these, as a series.⁵¹ It is logical to group her works in this way, as the introduction of a new medium is a noteworthy shift in any artist's practice, but it should be mentioned that her later films made use of strangers' home movies, which are often sourced in thrift shops.⁵² During the time of my own writing, a groundbreaking new monograph has been produced to accompany the artist's 2015 retrospective, *Penny Siopis: Time and Again*, organized by the South African National Gallery in Cape Town. Demos' contribution, entitled "Penny Siopis' Film Fables" primarily concerns her 2010 film, *Obscure White Messenger*, which chronicles the story of a man who, in 1966,

⁴⁵ Siopis, *ibid.*

⁴⁶ See Gilles Deleuze, "The Actual and the Virtual," in *Dialogues II*, trans. Eliot Ross Albert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 151.

⁴⁷ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 46.

⁴⁸ Siopis, "The Hooks of History," 46.

⁴⁹ Demos, "Penny Siopis' Film Fables" and Gerrit Oliver, ed., "Video Stories" (Penny Siopis in Conversation with Gerrit Olivier) in *Penny Siopis: Time and Again* (Braamfontein: Wits University Press, 2015), published on the occasion of the exhibition *Penny Siopis: Time and Again*, South African National Gallery, Cape Town, 2015. Also see Siopis, "The Hooks of History."

⁵⁰ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 172.

⁵¹ These include: *Pray*, 2007; *Obscure White Messenger*, 2010; *Communion*, 2011; *The Master is Drowning*, 2012.

⁵² See Siopis, "The Hooks of History."

assassinated South African Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd. Demos seeks to articulate the artist's "signature mode" as a filmmaker, describing how she combines "clips of found footage" with "narratives derived from historical documents."⁵³ It is important, however, to distinguish *My Lovely Day* as the only case in which the footage itself is an ordinary document with a known source (along with the postcards, notes, and memories), while also standing alone in unearthing the artist's own familial history, rather than that of a public figure.

Thus, rather than framing *My Lovely Day* in the context of her later films, I want to connect it to another artwork also produced in 1997, with which it perhaps resonates more strongly at a thematic and material level. This allows us to sustain focus on the social or art historical context in which the film was created and to think between the boundaries of the diverse mediums in which she works.

In February, 1997, some eight months before the opening of the Biennale, Siopis exhibited a piece entitled *Reconnaissance (1900-1997)* at the Johannesburg-based Goodman Gallery's inaugural group show, *Lift Off*. *Reconnaissance* was a temporary installation comprising what Brenda Atkinson calls "memorial piles of objects":⁵⁴ inherited, found and collected pieces laid out on a dais like Desmond Tutu's "ghosts of the past" before the viewer (Fig. 11). Many of the objects had come into Siopis' possession just one year earlier in 1996, when she left for Australia where her mother, who was severely ill, had recently emigrated. The artist "found herself attempting to arrange her mother's things in the advent of her death,"⁵⁵ and she observed at the time:

Looking at all these things in piles on the floor I thought, 'This is another version of seeing a life flash before your eyes.' I was aware that my mother's life included her mother's life, and our lives—her children. The date in the title [1900-1997] stems from the idea that a person's memory covers something like one hundred years, because you inherit the memories of people who have come before you.⁵⁶

Most of the objects had passed through Anna and Dorothy's hands, while others were Penny's more recent acquisitions in South Africa. Performing an act of surveillance, as suggested in the work's title, the viewer studies the spread from above, scanning an assemblage of mismatched things: piles of bones, shells, military paraphernalia, knives, textiles, and shoes. Relics of Dorothy's Victorian upbringing share space with Nelson Mandela campaign memorabilia and Springbok rugby souvenirs. Each object carries traces of touch and wear; silk gloves and ballet slippers index the hands and feet that once slipped into them. Like *My Lovely Day*, *Reconnaissance (1900-1997)* represents an accumulation of intergenerational experiences. As Marks explains, "personal objects remember and attest to events that people have forgotten.... To touch something one's mother, one's grandmother, or an unknown person touched is to be in physical contact with them."⁵⁷ While this was not Siopis' first or only installation comprised of object-assemblages, *Reconnaissance* is unique among these works in that its subject is explicitly familial.

⁵³ Demos, "Penny Siopis' Film Fables," 210.

⁵⁴ Brenda Atkinson, "The Ocean in a Bottle: Penny Siopis and the Slippage of History," in *Penny Siopis*, ed. Kathryn Smith (Johannesburg: Goodman Gallery, 2005) 72.

⁵⁵ Atkinson, "The Ocean in a Bottle," 72.

⁵⁶ Penny Siopis, quoted in Atkinson, "The Ocean in a Bottle," 72.

⁵⁷ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 107-112.



Figure 11

Penny Siopis, *Reconnaissance (1900-1997)*, 1997. Installation of found objects, dimensions variable (photo: courtesy Penny Siopis and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town).

There are two objects in particular included in *Reconnaissance (1900-1997)* that foreshadow *My Lovely Day*. The first is an enlarged black-and-white photograph that was positioned like a screen behind the entire installation, bent and tilted forward so that its concave surface cradled the platform and faced the viewer just below eye level (Fig. 12). At the bottom of the image, scribbled in white ink, are the handwritten words: "METRO THEATRE. UMTATA." It depicts a cinema house owned by Siopis' grandfather in the 1930s in South Africa's Eastern Cape, and Dorothy returns here during her reminiscences in *My Lovely Day* to mention that he also went on the road, once even showing the notoriously racist film "The Birth of a Nation" in Paris. Her words, "I sewed the curtain for the Metro. Cost me sweat and blood," invoke her intimate relationship to the depicted space. The photograph served as a model for the film's viewing room, which bears the sensory imprint of the 1930s: red velvet curtains, gramophone soundtrack, and vintage seats that had been lent from Johannesburg's Market Theatre.⁵⁸ The result was uncanny; as Jennifer Law wrote, at the time, "this space and the images which are projected remain somehow distantly familiar."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Penny Siopis, informal interview. The Market Theatre was one of the only spaces to permit racial integration during Apartheid; this fact elicits an ironic juxtaposition to the less progressive Metro Theatre owned by Siopis' grandfather.

⁵⁹ Jennifer Law, "My Lovely Day."



Figure 12

Metro Theatre, Umtata, South Africa, c. 1930. Archival photograph (photo: courtesy Penny Siopis and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town).

Included as well among the things that Siopis brought home after her visit to Australia were some old canisters of 8mm film, contents unknown, which were displayed as found objects in *Reconnaissance (1900-1997)* (Fig. 13). Siopis eventually had these converted to video, and after the gallery exhibition had closed she watched the old footage of her childhood for the first time in several decades. This film eventually became the material for *My Lovely Day*. It is here that we find a literal example of migratory images, as well as a chance to explore an analogy to "archaeological context" as introduced at the start of this article. Beginning as celluloid strips kept in dusty cases (thus, as object) the film would have experienced its first migration when projected through light to be accessed as moving images, and then again, the film was migrated to video, to be edited, spliced, and re-sequenced. These images were now dislocated and re-translated in a new time, through new eyes—the artist's as well as the beholder's—and the transformation of celluloid strips from the 'remains' of the past into a contemporary artwork constitutes a new formulation of its identity.

As Mitchell reminds us, of course, "The true found object never quite forgets where it came from."⁶⁰ It is no surprise that *My Lovely Day* should have been borne from this earlier installation, as both works index two important moments in South Africa's history: the beginning of Apartheid in the 1950s, and an earlier wave of colonial settlement around the 1920s and 1930s. They also addressed a specific, local audience in 1997, at a moment in which discourses on history and memory resonated in ways that may not have been

⁶⁰ Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want*, 115.

applicable to viewers of Siopis' later films. The debates about race and representation, which were partly sparked by Enwezor's essay, were fresh in the minds of the South African art world. As Ivor Powell suggested in the Biennale's catalogue, "at some point South African artists need to take a deep breath, peg their noses, and dive out into the deep-end of experience, the unknown and uncharted depths of reality in the making."⁶¹ Siopis' work offered a chance to do just this.



Figure 13

Penny Siopis, *Reconnaissance* (1900-1997) (detail), 1997. Installation of found objects, dimensions variable (photo: courtesy Penny Siopis and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town).

⁶¹ Ivor Powell, "The Pale and Beyond: Rethinking Art in a Reconstructed Society," in *Trade Routes: History and Geography: 2nd Johannesburg Biennale*, exh. cat. (Johannesburg: Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, 1997), 53-54.

In response to the rhetoric of unearthing past narratives, both in artistic and political discourse, the chronological layers that comprise both *My Lovely Day* and *Reconnaissance (1900-1997)* shed light on the "multi-temporality" of the present (post-Apartheid) moment. This notion of "multi-temporality" has been harnessed by Gavin Lucas in reference to the problem of chronology in the field of archaeology to address the issues of how to assign a date to a historical site. It might be similarly adapted to our understanding of artworks that include found objects.⁶² Lucas explains how objects contained within an archaeological site may be of different times, and cites Laurent Olivier's poignant description of his house, a twentieth century structure that sits "in the courtyard of an ancient farm."⁶³ A house may be filled with décor collected from past eras and faraway places, and we may not see these objects as "contemporaries," at least not in origin. But they *do* all still exist in the present, together. Similarly, the objects contained in *Reconnaissance* or the flickering scenes and transcribed recollections in *My Lovely Day* may have originated in different decades, on different continents and in opposing social contexts, but as such, the collection provides a metaphor for the multi-temporality of contemporary South Africa.

To speak of these works as accumulations of intergenerational memories, as "ghosts of the past," or "memorial objects," might encourage us, finally, to also reconsider the image of Benjamin's "Angel of History," who is caught at the chaotic junction of past, present and future. As previously stated, that passage from his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* is alluded to in Siopis' earlier paintings, which depict heaps of collaged and painted ruins culled from official sources and historical documents. One of her paintings from 1989 bears the title *Piling Wreckage Upon Wreckage* in direct quotation of Benjamin's prose. While I have attempted to show that *Reconnaissance* and *My Lovely Day* mark a departure in Siopis' work from public to private themes, from a political to an intimate aesthetic, she has also sustained an investment in alternative historical forms, which is evident across each phase of her work. Benjamin's writing reached its maturity during and after the First World War, also following a period of upheaval, migration, and political trauma; this led him to become skeptical of historical progress and to be drawn, instead, to fragments, constellations, and networks of association. Siopis' rich allusion to and application of his work in the post-Apartheid context testify to the lasting relevance of his eclectic project in an increasingly unstable political landscape. Her output in the late nineties thus adheres to the archaeological metaphor of "unearthing" the past, faces inward in response to debates on subjectivity, and reflects the question of migration from a nuanced, critical perspective.

In line with the topic of "trade routes," the final sequences of footage in *My Lovely Day* allude to transportation, but we somehow keep missing the chance to depart. Perhaps we are forced to inhabit the present, itself swollen with layers of time. Boats are anchored at port; a man walks along railroad tracks as a train barrels past him; a small girl watches another train rush by. We, behind the camera, stand firmly in our place. The voice of Siopis' mother singing, which opened the film, gently rocks us back into waking life. The song is one of the most beloved tracks from Vivian Ellis' 1947 musical *Bless the Bride*, set in Victorian

⁶² See Gavin Lucas, "Time and the Archaeological Record," in *The Archaeology of Time* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), particularly the discussion through pages 32-43.

⁶³ As quoted on by Lucas in "Time and the Archaeological Record": "The house where I am writing this paper was built towards the beginning of this century, in the courtyard of an ancient farm whose structure is still visible. From my open window, I see an interweaving of houses and constructions, most of them dating back to the 19th century, sometimes including parts of earlier constructions from the 18th or 17th century.... Right now, the present here is made up of a series of past durations that makes the present multi-temporal." (37) See Laurent Olivier, "The Hochdorf 'Princely' Grave and the Question of the Nature of Archaeological Funerary Assemblages," in *Time and Archaeology*, ed. Tim Murray (London: Routledge, 1999).


England: "I'll remember, I'll remember / When the time has come for happiness to pay / Sad and sighing, old and dying / I'll remember how we loved our lovely day."

We awaken at last from the theatre of the artist's memories as the film closes with a subtitle that seems to introduce all of the footage we have just seen, and also foreshadows the artist's relationship to the events that followed it:

"You know, of course, we never did. We never did return."

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