

SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd.	
Journal Code: CURI	Proofreader: Emily
Article No: 455	Delivery date: 11 June 2009
Page Extent: 16	

# Uncanny Exposures: A Study of Lee Miller's Wartime Photojournalism

PAULA M. SALVIO

*University of New Hampshire  
Durham, New Hampshire, USA*

## ABSTRACT

Taking the World War II photojournalism of Lee Miller as my point of departure, this essay has several purposes. First, it introduces the wartime photojournalism of Lee Miller to education. I situate Miller's use of surrealist photography within emerging curricular discourses that take as axiomatic the significance of the unconscious in education and thus the challenge of representing histories that are simultaneously present, but cannot be perceived or integrated into conventional historical narratives. Second, I provide a textual analysis of Lee Miller's wartime oeuvre with specific attention paid to how this work alters education's "field of vision" of trauma. While this analysis makes no claims to exhaust education's possibilities for framing the war photography of Lee Miller, it will show how Miller's use of surrealist rhetoric and framing devices offered her the expressive power to represent traumatic experiences that resist being integrated into larger social and cultural contexts. By thinking through Miller's war photography, this essay contributes to the scholarship in education that is dedicated to establishing a psychoanalytic history of learning and teaching that is capacious enough to address the "difficult knowledge" we too often cast beyond the pale of the curriculum and to expanding the rhetorical tactics possible for representing such difficult knowledge.

"For some reason, I always want to be someplace else. It's just my restlessness—my itchy bottom"

—Lee Miller to David E. Scherman, March 21, 1945

"Like the anthropologist whose mission to bear witness to threatened lives is inextricable from those lives, the documentary photographer is inevitably entangled with and adjusted the lives of those he photographed, however subtly and unconsciously."

—Jay Prosser (2005, pp. 94–95)

"I wanted to explore photography, not as a question, but as a wound."

—Roland Barthes (1979, p. 26)

## INTRODUCTION

September 1945. It had been almost 5 months since Lee Miller documented the U.S. Army's liberation of Dachau, and the suicides of high-

© 2009 by The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

Curriculum Inquiry 39:4 (2009)

Published by Wiley Periodicals, Inc., 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA, and 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

doi: 10.1111/j.1467-873X.2009.00455.x

1 ranking Nazi officers and their families. Unlike her colleagues, Margaret  
2 Bourke-White, Martha Gellhorn, and Janet Flanner, Miller seems emotion-  
3 ally unable to return home. Despite frequent pleas from her lover, Roland  
4 Penrose, and the urging of her former war correspondent collaborators to  
5 return to her home in England, Miller wandered around Europe, restless,  
6 angry, and living on a regime of Benzedrine(tm), alcohol, and coffee.  
7 Emotionally trapped within the grip of war and its aftermath, Lee Miller  
8 moved from place to place, unmoored, touched entirely by the anguish of  
9 those suffering around her. Shortly after Hitler's suicide, she wrote in an  
10 essay in *Vogue* magazine, "I'm extremely irritable quite often and especially  
11 when I don't understand people. I am inclined to scream . . . when  
12 . . . people try to tell me that the bombed out Hofbrau Haus won't make  
13 me an interesting picture because it is all destroyed, and that there is no use  
14 photographing the local monuments because they are ruined. . . . I'm busy  
15 making documents, not art . . ." (Penrose, 2005, p. 195). Rather than leave  
16 her post as a photojournalist, Miller insisted on documenting the mass  
17 destruction brought about by the German army. She wandered throughout  
18 Europe, documenting and spending time in France and Vienna. As she  
19 waited to get clearance to travel to Russia to photograph postwar efforts at  
20 stabilization, Miller spent time in Austria and visited the Children's Hospi-  
21 tal in Vienna, where in September 1945, she took one of her last photo-  
22 graphs as a war correspondent for *Vogue*.

23 In the Vienna University Children's Hospital, Miller photographed chil-  
24 dren, meticulously cared for, but paradoxically lacking the medicine nec-  
25 essary to keep them alive. "For an hour I watched a baby die," she wrote in  
26 a dispatch to her editor, Audrey Withers. "He was a skinny gladiator. He  
27 gasped and fought and struggled for life, and a doctor and a nun and I just  
28 stood there and watched. . . . This tiny baby fought for his only possession,  
29 life, as if it might be worth something" (Penrose, 1985, pp. 152–153). Miller  
30 noted that there were millions of such cases, and her notes echoed her  
31 dispatches from the concentration camps, months before. Her memories  
32 of the camp dead and the dying returned to her in Vienna, a city that she  
33 described as suffering from "the psychic depression of the conquered and  
34 starving. . . ." The dying baby was "dark blue when I first saw him," wrote  
35 Miller. "He was the dark dusty blue of these waltz-filled Vienna nights, the  
36 same color as the striped garb of the Dachau skeletons" (Penrose, 1985, pp.  
37 152–153).

38 The little girl in Miller's photograph wears a white dressing gown and a  
39 red bow in her hair. Lying in bed, white bed railings framing her and  
40 propped up on her elbows, she looks with restrained detachment directly  
41 into the camera. The photograph is all the more disturbing when one looks  
42 to the left. There, in the shadows, lies a doll, head facing the foot of the  
43 bed. It is half dressed. The doll's face is chubby. The dress is tattered. The  
44 body is exposed. The doll seems a miniature of a helpless, torn body,  
45 juxtaposed against a young female subject who has suffered the price of

1 fascism. The doll in the corner may very well be a citation of the frag-  
2 gmented, haunting dolls created and photographed by the German artist  
3 Hans Bellmer. Akin to the fragmented bodies Bellmer created to protest  
4 the Nazis' use of childhood and children, the child in Miller's photograph  
5 confronts the readers of *Vogue*, as if asking them to acknowledge the  
6 physical and psychical costs of fascism.

7 Miller's education as an apprentice to Man Ray and as a surrealist artist  
8 is evident here: This photograph uses visual distancing, fragmentation and  
9 a disengaged vision. Like the wartime photographs she is most remem-  
10 bered for, this photograph both invokes and blocks the vision of war, both  
11 protects and disarms her viewers. Miller was not a typical female surrealist  
12 artist. In fact, she was a surrealist dissident who worked both with and  
13 against the dominant conventions of surrealism and fashion photography.  
14 She used photojournalism to take issue with the use of photography as  
15 national propaganda to create a unified national subject, and to support  
16 military objectives and home-front sacrifices (see Gallagher, 2000, p. 69).

17 Several scholars have elaborated on the pedagogical import of Miller's  
18 wartime oeuvre. They underscore the ways in which Miller's unflinching  
19 documentation of the war's horrors, including her coverage of the last Nazi  
20 stronghold in Saint-Malo and her visits to Buchenwald and Dachau, reveals  
21 a willingness and a compulsion to press up against and record unspeakable  
22 trauma. Miller's images can be understood as radically escalating, as Jean  
23 Gallagher (2000, p. 62) argues, "the female civilian viewer's right of inspec-  
24 tion," provoking questions of what during war is worth documenting and  
25 what do we, as civilians, have a right to observe (see Sontag, 1970, p. 3; see 1  
26 also Zox-Weaver, 2003, p. 133). Finally, Miller's "first-person documenta-  
27 tion," as both a writer and photographer, codes the act of documentation  
28 itself with personal meaning that is strangely empathic, merciful, provoca-  
29 tive, and penetrating, thereby challenging war photography's idealization  
30 of objectivity, as well as the masculine discourse of surrealism at the time  
31 (see Gallagher, 2000).

32 In *The World Wars Through the Female Gaze*, Gallagher elaborates on  
33 Miller's influence in exploring surrealist aesthetics and its problematic  
34 relation to female subjectivity, particularly with respect to its fascination  
35 with fragmented female bodies, the loss of boundaries, and the uneasy  
36 union of opposites (2000, pp. 70–71). By the time Miller was working as a  
37 photojournalist for *Vogue*, she had retired as a fashion model, thereby  
38 shifting her position to the other side of the camera. Gallagher writes that  
39 "Miller's relation to photography was . . . that of both seer and seen, as she  
40 worked . . . within cultural moments and milieus that were concerned with  
41 representing the female body—either for a male or a female viewer . . ." (p.  
42 70). As her dispatch from Germany attests, Miller believed that her wartime  
43 photography, which combined photo-reportage, fashion photography and  
44 surrealist art, was more documentation than art, and through her docu-  
45 mentation she challenged what it meant to "see war" and to keep the

1 radical damage done by war in view, and within the reach of cultural  
2 memory.

3  
4 **“A SHEER HOPELESSNESS . . .”**

5 Yet, despite Miller’s courage and accomplishments as a war correspon-  
6 dent, she was plagued by what she described as “the jitters,” an inexplic-  
7 able sense of anxiety and nervous agitation that hit her hard, often  
8 sending her to bed for days on end. In a diary entry, dated 1921, Miller  
9 describes a “sheer hopelessness, activated by that swollen awkward feeling  
10 which ha[s] followed me from childhood” (Burke, 2005, p. 22). By the  
11 end of the war, Miller was worn, ill, depressed, and alcoholic. Rarely did  
12 Miller discuss the traumatic encounters she experienced during her  
13 childhood: her mother’s attempted suicide and long-term depression, her  
14 rape by a family acquaintance at the age of 7 which left her with gonor-  
15 rhea and the excruciating, invasive treatments she underwent afterward,  
16 and the experience of witnessing the death of a close teenage friend. Yet,  
17 these painful psychic and physical experiences appeared to press up  
18 against her at unsuspecting moments, circulating in the vicinity of the  
19 extreme trauma of war that Miller witnessed as she traveled from Saint-  
20 Malo to Nuremberg to Auschwitz. War photography offered Miller abun-  
21 dant opportunities to move in close to trauma. She took thousands of  
22 pictures, consistently put herself in danger, and lived happily, as we learn  
23 from her collaborator, David E. Scherman, on adrenalin, with large  
24 supplements of alcohol, cigarettes, sleeping pills, and Benzedrine. One  
25 assumption underlying psychoanalytic thought holds that the compulsion  
26 to repeat is a response to a psychic need to re-create past trauma, and by  
27 doing so, to master it. As a war photographer, Miller continually chal-  
28 lenged limits—she was known for getting to the scene of a battle faster  
29 and before anyone else, and as we learn from her reportage on the siege  
30 of Saint-Malo (the first napalm bombings), she was also the first woman  
31 to do front-line reporting. She pushed the boundaries of British *Vogue*  
32 from a ladies’ fashion magazine to one of sophisticated journalism, and  
33 in doing so, as noted by Mark Haworth-Booth, fulfilled a central mission  
34 made in 1941 by Condé Nast, the founder of three international editions  
35 of *Vogue*. Nast stated, “We must not allow people to think of *Vogue* as a  
36 really frivolous periodical, unaware of the serious challenges that have  
37 been going on in the life, interests and psychology of women” (Haworth-  
38 Booth, 2007, p. 199). 2

39 Within the frames of her war photographs, Miller offers her female  
40 figures positions of authority, and, no matter how dangerous, she never  
41 wavered when it came to moving in close to her subjects. The female genius  
42 embodied in the photojournalism of Lee Miller is exemplary of the  
43 strengths of surrealism as a mode for encountering and representing trau-

1 matic histories. Moreover, Miller's artistry offers educators a means  
2 through which to understand how personal histories exert what is often a  
3 highly charged but ineffable influence on the work of learning.

4 One of the signatures of trauma, most especially domestic trauma, is that  
5 it is marked by forgetting and disassociation; trauma often appears to leave  
6 behind no empirical record, and certainly, in the case of Miller's childhood  
7 rape, there is little material evidence available.<sup>1</sup> Trauma can impact lives  
8 overtly as well as more insidiously, as psychotherapist Laura Brown observes  
9 in her analysis of what she terms insidious trauma. Brown uses this term to  
10 address the ways in which events such as rape, incest, and sexual abuse are  
11 associated with more pervasive and everyday experiences of sexism (Brown,  
12 1995, p. 100). She emphasizes that definitions of trauma that fail to reach  
13 beyond the normative range of everyday "human experiences," the official  
14 diagnostic lexicon of trauma, can never do justice to the traumatic effects  
15 of a sexism that does its work precisely by being constructed as "normal"  
16 (see also Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 163). For Brown, insidious traumas take place  
17 daily, in the workplace, hospitals, courts of law, and classrooms, and memo-  
18 ries of these traumatic experiences are embedded not just in narrative, but  
19 in material artifacts, dreams, and physical symptoms expressed by the life of  
20 the body.

21 My intention in this article is not to establish a causal link or instrumen-  
22 tal relationship between Miller's childhood traumas and her turn to pho-  
23 tograph the trauma of war later in life, although the biographical details of  
24 Miller's life suggest that loss and trauma are at the heart of many of her  
25 artistic enterprises. Rather, I explore the ways in which Miller's surrealist  
26 aesthetic reached beyond the limits of documentary realism (despite the  
27 fact that she refers to her photojournalism as "documentary"), to portray  
28 the trauma of war and the idiosyncrasies of emotional life. Her photojour-  
29 nalism is particularly important because here she uses surrealist conven-  
30 tions to challenge the propaganda and rhetoric of nationalism deployed by  
31 the United States to present a unified picture of war. This article works  
32 toward more fully understanding the surrealist emblems in Miller's pho-  
33 tojournalism as representing a particular form of rhetorical authority. Her  
34 use of fragmented and abandoned objects and classical allusions speak to  
35 the losses exacted by war and the challenges posed, via the work of sym-  
36 bolization, to seek out substitutes for original objects, and the emotional  
37 experience of locating and using those substitutes (see Milner, 1993; Pitt &  
38 Britzman, 2003; Salvio, 2007; Sumara, 2002). Miller's surrealist feel for  
39 ephemeral, discarded debris and recently outmoded things generates a  
40 revolutionary energy that alters perception by fragmenting notions of a  
41 unified subjectivity. Moreover, Miller's wartime photojournalism provokes  
42 a mode of investigation into the photograph and the history it represents by  
43 underscoring how trauma, most specifically the trauma of war, fragments  
44 and derails an identification with any one subject position (see Baer, 2005,  
45 p. 82).

1 Throughout this article, I implicitly raise questions about the extent to  
2 which the trauma of dislocation, sexual violence, poverty, and war can be  
3 worked through using pedagogical practices that rely on a documentary  
4 realism that establishes its truth by evoking the authority of so-called facts,  
5 narrative cohesion, and completion, and the mastery of pain that can  
6 accompany loss and exile. While some educators argue that providing  
7 students and marginalized adults with cameras and other digital devices to  
8 compose stories about their lives offers a means through which to work  
9 through difficult and traumatic knowledge, I am concerned that the nar-  
10 rative practices associated with documentary realism, while exciting for  
11 students and communities on many levels, can unwittingly reduce what are  
12 often traumatic experiences to consoling narratives that fit neatly into the  
13 structure of normalizing and stigmatizing discourses (see also Boldt &  
14 Salvio, 2006; Brushwood-Rose, 2006). Moreover, documentary realism too  
15 often obscures the particularity of difficult or traumatic experiences and in  
16 turn forecloses on discussions that may in fact challenge understandings of  
17 nationhood, citizenship, and norms of social belonging.

18 In *Words of Light*, Eduardo Cadava (1992) elaborates on both knowledge  
19 and photography's association with the trope of light in an effort to bring  
20 forth a conception of knowledge that recognizes experiences which resist  
21 being integrated into larger social and cultural contexts. "Photography,"  
22 notes Cadava (1992), "becomes a figure of knowledge . . . a solar language  
23 of cognition that gives the mind and the senses access to the invisible" (p.  
24 3). In the following passage, Cadava (1992) draws on the work of Walter  
25 Benjamin to explore the "secret rapport" between philosophy and  
26 photography:  
27

28 What comes to light in the history of photography, in the history that is photogra-  
29 phy, is therefore the secret rapport between photography and philosophy. Both  
30 take their life from light, from a light which coincides with the conditions of  
31 possibility for clarity, reflection, speculation, and lucidity—that is, for knowledge in  
32 general. For Benjamin, the history of knowledge is a history of the vicissitudes of  
33 light. For him, there can be no philosophy without photography. As he writes in his  
34 *Passagen-Werk*, "knowledge comes only in flashes" ["N"1], in a moment of simulta-  
35 neous illumination and blindness. . . . It is in fact no accident that Benjamin's 1931  
36 essay "A Short History of Photography" begins not with a sudden clarity that grants  
37 knowledge security, but rather with an evocation of the "fog" which he claims  
38 surrounds the beginnings of photography—a fog which . . . serves as an obstacle to  
39 both knowledge and vision. . . . [I]t disturbs the possibility of a linear historical  
40 account of photography's origins . . . (pp. 3–4)  
41

42 Cadava's reading of Benjamin's work is relevant to curriculum studies on  
43 several levels. First of all, Cadava draws our attention to Benjamin's insis-  
44 tence that photography be used as a means through which to reconsider  
45 the assumption that history proceeds on a linear and sequential path, that  
46 history can be represented solely through literal facts and empirical details,  
47 and that knowledge can secure a clarity of vision. Tracing Benjamin's

1 aesthetics, Cadava argues that the most “faithful” photograph is in fact, the  
2 least “faithful,” the least mimetic one, “the photograph that remains faith-  
3 ful to its own infidelity,” for this photograph captures what lies beyond the  
4 pale of the frame and calls forth that which is experienced but resists  
5 representation (see Cadava, 1997, p. 93; Salvio, 2007).

6 Traumatic histories require memories, rhetorical tactics, and theoret-  
7 ical strategies that extend beyond the authority of medical discourses that  
8 victimize and pathologize traumatic experience as a posttraumatic stress  
9 disorder (see Cvetkovich, 2003). Following studies of the teaching life of  
10 Anne Sexton as well as the work of Alice Pitt, Deborah Britzman, and  
11 Ann Cvetkovich, I argue that traumatic experience exerts a powerful  
12 influence on conventional forms of representation, and potentially opens  
13 up counterpublic spaces. Trauma circulates and impacts memory and  
14 social life specifically because there are few public forms that allow for  
15 expression of one’s idiosyncratic experience of trauma. Public forms tend  
16 to be insensitive to the psychic subtleties of the experience of trauma—  
17 either pathologizing the experience or absorbing it into stereotypic cat-  
18 egories. My intention is to consider the strengths of surrealist  
19 photography as a mode of encountering and representing traumatic  
20 histories—both personal and historical. The case of Miller’s wartime  
21 oeuvre amplifies our understanding of how surrealism can offer a means  
22 through which to represent difficult, traumatic experience and how the  
23 temporal qualities of trauma, represented through Miller’s surrealist aes-  
24 thetic, can work to interrupt our habitual diachronic readings of personal  
25 and social history.

## 26 27 **REPRESENTING ENIGMATIC EXPERIENCE**

28 The traumatic events of war that Lee Miller experienced as a war corre-  
29 spondent and represented in her photojournalism can be understood as  
30 constituting an engagement with a particular form of “difficult knowledge”  
31 that takes place beyond the confines of the classroom in the uncanny time  
32 of learning where fragments of events and memories converge at moments  
33 and in places when least expected. This “difficult knowledge”—traumatic  
34 in structure—is astutely described by Deborah Britzman (1998) as signify-  
35 ing the problem of learning from social breakdowns and assumes a kernel  
36 of trauma in the very capacity to know (pp. 755–756; Pitt & Britzman,  
37 2003). Given the ineffable structure of trauma and its resistance to integra-  
38 tion, such a haunting is felt as enigmatic, as bearing a residue that poses a  
39 question that cannot fully be addressed through the logic of causality,  
40 learning outcomes, rhetoric of social justice, or performance objectives.  
41 What expressive possibilities are made available to persons who make  
42 contact with incoherent experiences, particularly when the constraints of  
43 both narrative form and jurisprudence hinder rather than elicit the telling

1 of a traumatic experience? How can a person represent a history when that  
2 history is nonrepresentable, made abject, eludes language, or is unimagin-  
3 able to others? Understanding, notes Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman  
4 (2003), is not a feature of experience, but a problem of symbolization. In  
5 their discussion of the challenges of narrating difficult knowledge, they  
6 underscore that the project of representing experience constitutes a com-  
7 promise that is rarely acknowledged. This compromise is an attempt “to  
8 ward off a crisis, because constructions are made from an argument  
9 between the wish for coherence and the anxiety over what coherence  
10 excludes” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 759). Drawing on the studies of cre-  
11 ative expression conducted by Marion Milner, Pitt and Britzman emphasize  
12 the central role that affect plays in the process of symbolization. Naming an  
13 experience is not enough; rather, representation must also be imbued with  
14 emotional significance. But there is also the danger that emotional life  
15 might emerge as too present, that an excess of affect might undermine  
16 representation. “Here too,” writes Pitt and Britzman (2003), “between the  
17 agony of losing beloved (though also often feared) objects and the ecstasy  
18 of finding beautiful substitutes, questions of knowledge are made and  
19 broken” (p. 761). Thus, symbolizing traumatic experiences poses chal-  
20 lenges to conventional narrative structures as well as to our definitions of  
21 what constitutes normal human experience. As Brown (1995, p. 101)  
22 observes, the work of symbolizing traumatic experiences impacts social  
23 discourses about ‘normal’ life that assigns a psychopathological status to  
24 the everyday lives of those who cannot protect themselves from subtle,  
25 normalized everyday trauma and who respond to these events with evi-  
26 dence of psychic pain.

#### 27 28 **“AS DIFFICULT AS TEARS WRUNG FROM STONE”**

29 The traumatic traces captured in the photographic images developed by  
30 Lee Miller for *Vogue* present her primarily female readership with access to  
31 the “European theatre of operations,” the extreme effects of Nazi ideology  
32 and images of the concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald. From  
33 summer 1944, Miller wrote just about every essay and report that accom-  
34 panied her photographs and in each work, she insisted on keeping the  
35 radical damage done to bodies in full view. Her correspondences with her  
36 editor, Audrey Withers, reveal Miller’s anguish, at times painful feelings of  
37 abandonment and fear, yet she persevered. “Every word I write,” wrote  
38 Miller in a dispatch to Withers dated December 7, 1944, “is as difficult as  
39 ‘tears wrung from stone.’”

40  
41 I lose my friends and complexion in my devotion to the rites of flagellating a  
42 typewriter—and although the use of everything I send is madly satisfactory in the  
43 end, I’ve had time to be depressed to unproductivity, near suicide, or a change of

1 career. You probably noticed I was having “morale” troubles about writing you a  
2 lead on Liberation, lyrical and ecstatic. So I wrote four stories. I could see no other  
3 way to write the page you wanted which wouldn’t commit us to being rosy minded  
4 Polly-Annas in the face of Greece and Belgium. There is also Alsace. . . . I want more  
5 than anything, to be able to follow the war to the finish over here, and more  
6 important, to watch the reconstruction or whatever of Europe. Is this in accordance  
7 with your plans? Let me know. (Penrose, 1992, pp. 92–93) 3

8  
9 This dispatch was eventually edited by Withers, as Miller’s son, Antony  
10 Penrose, notes, to form the beginning of an essay entitled “Pattern of  
11 Liberation,” which focused on refugees and was published in British and  
12 American *Vogue* in January 1945 (p. 26 and p. 57, respectively). Withers  
13 enlisted Miller to contribute to altering the consciousness of a readership  
14 by presenting them with words and images of war that implored them to  
15 “believe” the anguish before them as the headline “Believe It” demanded in  
16 a telegram to *Vogue* depicting the aftermath of the gas chambers and the  
17 reprisals of the freed prisoners against their guards. Penrose (1992) notes  
18 that “*Vogue’s* printing of Lee’s material represented an achievement in  
19 fashion publishing which has never been repeated” (p. 205). Miller pro-  
20 vided her audience with images of war trauma that summons and makes  
21 present what trauma and photography share—a profound gap between  
22 experience and comprehension, in turn offering educators a challenge to  
23 understanding how conventions of reference work and how a traumatic  
24 event that cannot register as experience can impress itself and register so  
25 deeply on a person’s mind and body.

26 Just as events from Lee Miller’s traumatic past may have intruded on her  
27 in unsuspecting and incomprehensible ways—taking form in a flash as  
28 “jitters,” framed as it were within the stunningly small moment of the  
29 click—the photograph never achieves a full presence, for it presents traces  
30 of loss from a past (recall the portrait of the little girl in the hospital bed),  
31 and announces a future that is yet to come—a viewing and preservation of  
32 and by others as yet unknown, thus confounding (perhaps protesting) the  
33 possibility for straightforward, public communication of its subject and  
34 leaving room, not only for excesses of emotion and discourses that refuse to  
35 be contained with respect to the photographic subject, but also with respect  
36 to the life of the photographer.

37 In *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss*, Jay Prosser (2005) astutely  
38 reminds us that while all photographs tell a story, they may often tell us  
39 more about the life of the photographer and less of her subject (p. 92).  
40 “The photographer controls the subject as image,” argues Prosser (2005),  
41 “and the purported real in the photograph may consist in the photogra-  
42 pher’s autobiography” (p. 92). One of the central points Prosser (2005, p.  
43 92) makes early in his essay, “Gordon Parks’s Taking Life,” is that docu-  
44 mentary photography dramatizes a set of problems, among them being that  
45 the camera conceals the presence of the photographer. I doubt that Lee  
46 Miller would deny that as a documentary photographer, she was entangled

1 with and adjusted the lives and events that she photographed, however  
2 nuanced or unconscious her adjustments may have been. And while the  
3 photograph is shot to capture or record or preserve images for the future,  
4 the traumatic traces that very well may have been a part of Miller's auto-  
5 biography operate quite differently from the logic of the photograph.

6 Traumatic memory moves in a different direction than photography  
7 for it is constituted by a psychic disruption that takes place in the present  
8 but points ceaselessly and without warning to an unreconciled, incompre-  
9 hensible past. Traumatic memory returns to us as a swell of emotion, what  
10 Pitt (2003), working with the concept of *nachtraglichkeit*, describes as an  
11 "interminable undulating force" that brings us into closer proximity to  
12 "how we find and lose sight of our capacity to apprehend what matters  
13 most to us: the surprise of intersection between our movements onward  
14 and our detours back" (p. 96). Pitt underscores the temporal structure of  
15 trauma and the challenges it poses to an education wedded to a logic  
16 associated with the idea that experience can be easily or "reasonably"  
17 translated into a clarity of vision that grants knowledge security (see also  
18 Caruth, 1994).

19 Following the line of questions Pitt poses about the play of the personal,  
20 and what place the personal plays in pedagogy, we might ask how Miller  
21 might have put her traumatic experiences to work in her wartime photo-  
22 journalism. In my estimation, it is limiting to confine our understanding of  
23 Miller's wartime oeuvre as exemplary of photography's capacity to fill in the  
24 gap in memory that trauma leaves. Nor should her female genius be  
25 confined to introducing traumatic images to a world or to a readership that  
26 might have preferred to overlook or forget them. Rather, and here I draw  
27 on the scholarship of Ulrich Baer, Miller's wartime photojournalism and  
28 personal history of trauma make evident for our consideration the struc-  
29 tural similarities and distinctions between photography and trauma,  
30 thereby placing in relief a crucial difficulty for representing difficult knowl-  
31 edge. Let me explain.

32 In his collection of essays, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*,  
33 Baer (2005) argues that the challenges surrounding traumatic memories  
34 are not limited to their resistance to interpretation and representation.  
35 There is more. Baer begins by elaborating on the shared structural rela-  
36 tionship between traumatic memory and the photograph. "Very much like  
37 a photograph," writes Baer,

38 traumatic memory can be characterized by the excessive retention of details that  
39 cannot be integrated into a non-traumatic memory or comprehension of the past.  
40 The recovery of traumatic memory—and the process of healing—consists often in  
41 making the event seem less unreal by draining it of its vividness, its persistence, its  
42 haunting details, its color. (p. 80)

43 In ways akin to the findings of Milner, Pitt, and Britzman, Baer directs our  
44 attention to the excess of details embedded in both memories and photo-

1 graphs of trauma that cannot be assimilated into coherent, linear narratives  
2 of history. He suggests what I understand as an innovative approach to  
3 interpretation through which connections and associations are not only  
4 unmasked but also created and constituted by subsequent reinterpretations.  
5 According to Baer, the photograph can be conceptualized as a  
6 potential act of reparation that constitutes an interpretive project that  
7 holds promise and looks to the future (here Baer stands apart from Ben-  
8 jamin's melancholic treatment of the photograph). Baer understands this  
9 interpretive process as one of eliminating surplus details, or the excessive  
10 qualities of a memory/scene through a project of composing that does not  
11 reduce the scene to a constellation of facts and that negotiates the psychic  
12 and physical properties of proximity and distance. Miller's photographic  
13 strategies constitute a repertoire of methods through which to create  
14 images of trauma that are "less unreal" and that drain the excess of details  
15 that are embedded in traumatic memory and in traumatic events. The  
16 principles of composition implicit in Baer's discussion of traumatic images  
17 resonate to the principles noted by scholars of trauma such as Leigh  
18 Gilmore (2001) and Dominick LaCapra (2004), especially in their discus-  
19 sions about the dynamic interaction between excess and limits that is at play  
20 when rendering a composition that refers to trauma and that engages  
21 questions of meaning that exceed our understanding. In what ways did  
22 Miller's use of portraiture and fashion photography provoke a traumatic  
23 instruction for her readers?

24 Miller often relied on the convention of portraiture to represent the  
25 trauma of war as "less unreal," to convey its existence to a *Vogue* audience  
26 whose material and political privilege obscured their vision of war. As a  
27 surrealist artist, however, Miller broke convention with how the photo-  
28 graphic portrait was used at the time. This break with convention also  
29 worked to challenge the U.S. war propaganda program by putting to use  
30 surrealist methods of framing her subjects, experimenting with distance  
31 and proximity, the use of negative space, identification, and the relation-  
32 ship between figure and ground. While U.S. propaganda deployed a dis-  
33 course of the subject having access to a whole and unified picture of war,  
34 Miller's photographic work represents the female wartime observer and  
35 participants as neither unified subjects of propaganda nor as diminished,  
36 disappearing figures who lacked subjectivity (see Gallagher, 2000). For  
37 Miller, any representation of the war that passed through government  
38 control could never be taken at "face value."

39 Jean Gallagher's (2000) influential analysis of Miller's photography  
40 describes Miller as portraying subjects in her photographs that are "open to  
41 rifts, schisms and difference—and one who thus keeps in view the central  
42 fact of the wounded body. It is in this questioning of the unified subject of  
43 vision," notes Gallagher, "that Miller's work registers a certain ambivalence  
44 about her own photographic authority, one that resonates with the early  
45 lessons of surrealism" (p. 81). In her war photographs, Miller makes use of

1 surrealistic techniques such as double-exposure, varied qualities of light,  
2 shadow, and framing devices to expose her presence as a subject, without  
3 suggesting that such self-awareness or ‘presence’ can lead to understanding  
4 such horrors (see Bauer, 2005, 84–85). She typically fragments and disperses  
5 her viewers’ position, in part by pointing to different locations for  
6 the seeing subject, distributing a viewer among multiple positions of  
7 “seeing,” and provoking the viewer to struggle with the pull to identify with  
8 and to distance themselves from the subjects within the frame. Miller’s  
9 signature techniques for blocking the viewers’ inclination toward empathic  
10 identification and empathic projection provokes a very different mode of  
11 investigation into the photograph and the history it represents, underscor-  
12 ing how trauma fragments and derails identification with any subject-  
13 position (see Bauer, 2005, p. 82).

14 The rhetorical impact of Miller’s photographic techniques is made  
15 evident in a 1940 photograph that she took for *Vogue* (but was in fact denied  
16 publication) and to which I will now turn. This photograph offers a  
17 close-up of the “composing practices” that constitute Miller’s documentary  
18 idiom, particularly when shooting fashion photography and portraits  
19 during the early years of the war.



20  
21 FIGURE 1. Women With Fire Masks.

1 **SURREAL PORTRAITS: DISTANCING, FRAGMENTING, AND**  
2 **BLOCKING AS A MEANS OF TRAUMATIC INSTRUCTION**  
3

4 Downshire Hill, London, 1941

5 Lee Miller photographs two women sitting perched on the edge of a  
6 Hampstead bomb shelter looking back directly at the photographer and  
7 viewers.<sup>2</sup> The women, dressed in black sweaters and skirts, sit on the top  
8 stoop of a stairway that descends underground. Here, they are poised to  
9 demonstrate masks and eye shields that are worn as protection from incendiary  
10 bombs. While at first this head gear looks like two elaborate theatrical  
11 masks, they are in fact complex sets of eye and head protection that provoke  
12 the viewer to consider how in fact women “see war.” What masks their  
13 vision? How does the female body refuse to be consumed by war propa-  
14 ganda? The technological contrivances that both block and make vision  
15 possible are but one example of Miller’s play with “blocking devices” in her  
16 portraits and this image resonates to others in her oeuvre.<sup>3</sup> This photograph  
17 in particular exemplifies Miller’s play with double vision and works to  
18 interrupt the pathos-inducing conventions of fashion photography and U.S.  
19 war propaganda by using the mask as a distancing technique to disrupt an  
20 easy line of vision between the framed female subjects and the viewer. The  
21 masks coupled with the gesture of looking out beyond the frame also brings  
22 into focus a crisis that results, as I noted earlier, between seeing and knowing.  
23 What is exposed to view here? What access to a past that remains unresolved  
24 is made available given the compromised visual access?

25 While the photograph, “Women With Fire Masks,” can be read as pos-  
26 sessed direct lines of reference—the eye protection gear, the bomb shel-  
27 ters, and the female figure(s)—they also create what Benjamin termed an  
28 optical unconscious, a term he used to refer to the photograph’s capacity to  
29 provoke the viewer to attend to a dimension of reality that is there, but at  
30 the same time cannot be visually perceived, articulated or directly traced to  
31 a referent (see Bauer, 2005, pp. 87–88). This dimension of reality, however,  
32 is no less present, no less real, and it strongly defies the equation between  
33 seeing and knowing that education is so fond of.<sup>4</sup> In this photograph of  
34 women wearing eye protection and sitting on the stoop of a bomb shelter,  
35 viewers are provided with limited visual access—both the subjects of study  
36 and the setting itself are not fully penetrable. Not only are viewers unable  
37 to see deep into the shelter, but they also cannot see into the eyes of the  
38 women before them, therefore they are prevented from meeting the  
39 contract of conventional portraiture—looking into the eyes of the face  
40 depicted. This surrealist trope can be awkwardly phrased as “looking-at-the-  
41 viewer-but-not-being-able-to-see-him-see-me” (Kuhio Walters, personal  
42 communication, February 2009) and cites other photographs by Miller,  
43 including her photograph of a burn victim (“Bad Burns Case, 44th Evac  
44 Hospital”) and of David E. Scherman (“David E. Scherman Dressed for  
45 War”).

1 While Miller blocks vision in her photograph of the women wearing fire  
2 masks, she simultaneously pulls in the gaze of her viewers. This portrait  
3 invites us to explore the evident and hidden meaning—what is secret and  
4 harbored beneath the ground of this portrait and what lies within the  
5 frame of the head gear itself—under the starlike crosses that mark the eyes  
6 of these female figures.

7 If the personal history of Lee Miller, read alongside her war photo-  
8 graphs, leaves us with insight into how one might represent the events of  
9 trauma that will neither recede into forgetting nor fit neatly into the  
10 rhetorical conventions made available by culture and society, where do they  
11 take us? Scholarship that addresses the place of trauma in curriculum  
12 studies struggles with establishing a relationship to the past that can  
13 respond to charged histories which feel both excessively present and  
14 unavailable for total recall or representation. Such work raises questions  
15 about how we can relate to a past that resists representation, that is only  
16 partially available to consciousness or screened from literal remembrance.  
17 The wartime photography of Lee Miller offers education a repertoire of  
18 interpretive methods for composing such histories. The excess of visual  
19 experience that surrounds war interferes with vision and confounds docu-  
20 mentary reporting in myriad ways. What should the photographer frame  
21 and shoot? What do citizens have the right to see? Does Miller's wartime  
22 photography hold an autobiography that cannot be contained as much as  
23 it holds an unspeakable social history?<sup>5</sup> We cannot know for sure, for there  
24 is much that remains radically unknown about Lee Miller. We can specu-  
25 late, however, that her turn to surrealism, to the war and to the difficult  
26 work of documentation, offered her a means, if only for brief moments, to  
27 repair the anguish of personal and social trauma. Surrealist photography  
28 offered Miller a tradition and an art form through which to compose  
29 meaning, to parse out excess and restore and revive the broken objects and  
30 anguished bodies surrounding her and build up, for a time, the good  
31 within herself so that she could feel, in the words of her collaborator, David  
32 E. Scherman, that she was making a genuine contribution.

### 34 NOTES

35 I wish to thank Peter Maas Taubman, Deborah Britzman, Kuhio Walters, and the  
36 anonymous reviewers for *Curriculum Inquiry* for reading earlier drafts of this essay.  
37 Their incisive conceptual comments helped me to rethink a number of key issues  
38 and to strengthen the arguments presented here. For material support to repro-  
39 duce the photographs from the Lee Miller Archive, I thank Dean Ken Fuld, Ted  
40 Kirkpatrick, and the College of Liberal Arts at the University of New Hampshire.  
41 Kind permission to reproduce the photographs from the Lee Miller Archive was  
42 granted to me by the director of the archive, Antony Penrose.

- 43 1. Miller's biographer, Carolyn Burke, notes that the details of what happened to  
44 Miller are unclear and that Miller's father's diary is uncharacteristically silent

- 1 about his daughter's rape and the subsequent treatments for gonorrhoea that  
2 Miller's mother, Florence, a nurse, routinely administered to her. For an exten-  
3 sive analysis of Miller's childhood traumas and the ways in which they are  
4 understood to have impacted her art, see Burke (2005) as well as Davis (1997).
- 5 2. I wish to acknowledge that this photograph appears on the cover of Gallagher's  
6 (2000) book, *The World Wars Through the Female Gaze*.
- 7 3. For further examples of Miller's use of blocking devices in her portraits, see  
8 photographs collected in Penrose (1992), especially "David E. Scherman  
9 Dressed for War" and "Bad Burns Case, 44<sup>th</sup> Evac Hospital."
- 10 4. The logical extension of education's preoccupation with equating knowledge  
11 with what can be seen and hence measured is made evident in the emphasis on  
12 "evidence-based research" and performance-based planning. For astute analyses  
13 of such projects, see Glenn (2004) and Slavin (2002).
- 14 5. For an important analysis of Lee Miller's wartime photography that challenges  
15 the iconic power of her work, see Zemel (2003). Zemel astutely argues that in  
16 concentration camp liberation photographs, "The transcendent force of the  
17 Sublime combines with familiar forms of Christian iconography (i.e. Christian  
18 martyrdom) to provide moral rescue of the images' horrors and fascinations" (p.  
19 217). For Zemel, the numbing, distancing effect of the photographs is not the  
20 most problematic issue, however, nor is the fascination that viewers experience.  
21 What is most deeply disturbing is the transformation of the Jews into Christian  
22 martyrs, remaking the Holocaust victims into something they were not.

23

24

## REFERENCES

- 25 Baer, U. (2005). *Spectral evidence: The photography of trauma*. Cambridge, MA: MIT  
26 Press.
- 27 Barthes, R. (1979). *A lover's discourse: Fragments*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- 28 Benjamin, W. (1996). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In 5  
29 *Illuminations* (H. Zohn, Trans.) (pp. 217–253). New York: Schocken Books.  
30 (Original work published 1936).
- 31 Boldt, G., & Salvio, P. (2006). *Love's return: Psychoanalytic essays on childhood, teaching  
32 and learning*. New York: Routledge.
- 33 Britzman, D. (1998). *Lost subjects, contested objects: Toward a psychoanalytic inquiry of  
34 learning*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- 35 Britzman, D., & Pitt, A. (2004). Pedagogy and clinical knowledge: Some psychoana- 6  
36 lytic observations on losing and refinding significance. *Journal of Advanced Com-  
37 position: Rhetoric, Writing, Culture, Politics*, 24(1), 353–374.
- 38 Brown, L. S. (1995). Not outside the range: One feminist perspective on psychic  
39 trauma. In C. Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in memory* (pp. 100–112). Bal-  
40 timore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 41 Brushwood-Rose, C. (2006). Virtual curriculum: Digital games as technologies of  
42 aesthetic experience and potential spaces. *Journal of Canadian Association for  
43 Curriculum Studies*, 4(1), 97–110.
- 44 Burke, C. (2005). *Lee Miller: A life*. New York: Knopf.
- 45 Cadava, E. (1992). Words of light: Thesis on the photography of history. *Diacritics*,  
46 22(3/4), 85–114.

- 1 Cadava, E. (1997). *Words of light: Theses on the photography of history*. Princeton, NJ:  
2 Princeton University Press.
- 3 Caruth, C. (1994). An interview with Jean Laplanche. *Postmodern Culture*, 22, 222–  
4 243.
- 5 Caruth, C. (Ed.). (1995). *Trauma: Explorations in memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins [7]  
6 University Press.
- 7 Cvetkovich, A. (2003). *An archive of feelings: Trauma, sexuality, and lesbian public*  
8 *cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- 9 Davis, M. (1997). Lee Miller: Bathing with the enemy. *History of Photography*, 21(4),  
10 315–316.
- 11 Gallagher, J. (2000). *The World Wars through the female gaze*. Carbondale: Southern  
12 Illinois University Press.
- 13 Gilmore, L. (2001). *The limits of autobiography: Trauma, testimony and theory*. Ithaca,  
14 NY: Cornell University Press.
- 15 Glenn, D. (2004, May 28). No classroom left unstudied. *The Chronicle of Higher*  
16 *Education*, p. A12.
- 17 LaCapra, D. (2004). *History in transit: Experience, identity, critical theory*. Ithaca, NY:  
18 Cornell University Press.
- 19 Laplanche, J. (1998). The unfinished Copernican revolution. In *Essays on Otherness:* [8]  
20 *(Warwick Studies in European Philosophy)*. London: Routledge.
- 21 Milner, M. (1993). The role of illusion in symbol formation. In P. Rudnytsky (Ed.),  
22 *Transitional objects and potential spaces: Literary uses of D. W. Winnicott* (pp. 13–39).  
23 New York: Columbia University Press.
- 24 Oliver, K. (2004). *The colonization of psychic space: A psychoanalytic social theory of* [9]  
25 *oppression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 26 Penrose, A. (1985). *The lives of Lee Miller*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- 27 Penrose, A. (Ed.). (2005). *Lee Miller's war: Photographer and correspondent with the allies*  
28 *in Europe, 1944–1945*. Boston: Bulfinch.
- 29 Pitt, A. (2003). *The play of the personal: Psychoanalytic narratives of feminist education*.  
30 New York: Peter Lang.
- 31 Pitt, A., & Britzman, D. (2003). Speculations on qualities of difficult knowledge in  
32 teaching and learning: An experiment in psychoanalytic research. *International*  
33 *Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(6), 755–776.
- 34 Prosser, J. (2005). *Light in the dark room: Photography and loss*. Minneapolis. University  
35 of Minnesota Press.
- 36 Salvio, P. M. (2007). *Anne Sexton: Teacher of weird abundance*. Albany: State University  
37 of New York Press.
- 38 Scherman, D. (2005). Introduction. In A. Penrose (Ed.), *Lee Miller's war: Photogra-*  
39 *pher and correspondent with the allies in Europe, 1944–1945* (p. 12). Boston: Bulfinch.
- 40 Slavin, R. E. (2002). Evidence-based education policies: Transforming educational  
41 practice and research. *Educational Researcher*, 31(7), 15–21.
- 42 Sontag, S. (1977). *On photography*. New York: Penguin.
- 43 Sumara, D. (2002). *Why reading literature in school still matters: Imagination, interpreta-*  
44 *tion, insight*. New York: Erlbaum.
- 45 Zemel, C. (2003). Emblems of atrocity: Holocaust liberation photographs. In S.  
46 Horstein & F. Jacobowitz (Eds.), *Image and remembrance: Representation and the*  
47 *Holocaust* (pp. 201–219). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 48 Zox-Weaver, A. (2003). When the war was in *Vogue*: Lee Miller's war reports. *Women's*  
49 *Studies: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal*, 32(2), 131–163.

## AUTHOR QUERY FORM

Dear Author,

During the preparation of your manuscript for publication, the questions listed below have arisen. Please attend to these matters and return this form with your proof.

Many thanks for your assistance.

Query References	Query	Remark
q1	AUTHOR: To match the reference list, should Sontag, 1970 be changed to Sontag, 1977? Please advise.	
q2	AUTHOR: Haworth-Booth, 2007 has not been included in the Reference List, please supply full publication details.	
q3	AUTHOR: Penrose, 1992 has not been included in the Reference List, please supply full publication details.	
q4	AUTHOR: Bauer, 2005 has not been included in the Reference List, please supply full publication details.	
q5	AUTHOR: Benjamin 1996 has not been cited in the text. Please indicate where it should be cited; or delete from the Reference List.	
q6	AUTHOR: Britzman and Pitt, 2004 has not been cited in the text. Please indicate where it should be cited; or delete from the Reference List.	
q7	AUTHOR: Caruth, 1995 has not been cited in the text. Please indicate where it should be cited; or delete from the Reference List.	

q8	AUTHOR: Laplanche, 1998 has not been cited in the text. Please indicate where it should be cited; or delete from the Reference List.	
q9	AUTHOR: Oliver, 2004 has not been cited in the text. Please indicate where it should be cited; or delete from the Reference List.	
q10	AUTHOR: Figure 1 has not been mentioned in the text. Please cite the figure in the relevant place in the text.	