

Leibovitz and Sontag: Picturing an Ethics of Queer Domesticity

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A Photographer's Life, Annie Leibovitz's large-format retrospective book of commercial celebrity portraiture and personal snapshots, met an unusually critical reception for a popular photo book upon its 2006 publication.^[1] Attracting the most critical attention and ethical criticism were photographs of Leibovitz's partner, the cultural critic Susan Sontag, whose death from cancer in 2004, chronicled in photographs within the book's narrative, made the work's subject matter all-the-more topical. The photographs of Sontag range widely in the moments they capture: the writer and public intellectual at work in her New York apartment, mounting a production of *Waiting for Godot* in conflict-era Sarajevo, playing with Leibovitz's infant daughter on the beach. But perhaps most out-of-the-ordinary are the photographs of Sontag dying in hospital, then dead, her body laid out in a funerary display (Fig. 1). These sombre photos of Sontag taken by her lover stand in stark contrast to the many obituaries published after Sontag's death, which struck same-sex relationships from her biography. Many were quick to condemn the photographs—and Leibovitz—as unethical; Sontag's adult son David Rieff^[2] has spoken against what he considers Leibovitz's disrespect for his mother's memory and wishes in choosing to publish the photographs. Criticising the ethics of Leibovitz's publication in his memoir, *Swimming in a Sea of Death* (2008), Rieff called the funeral photographs, "carnival images of celebrity death."^[3]

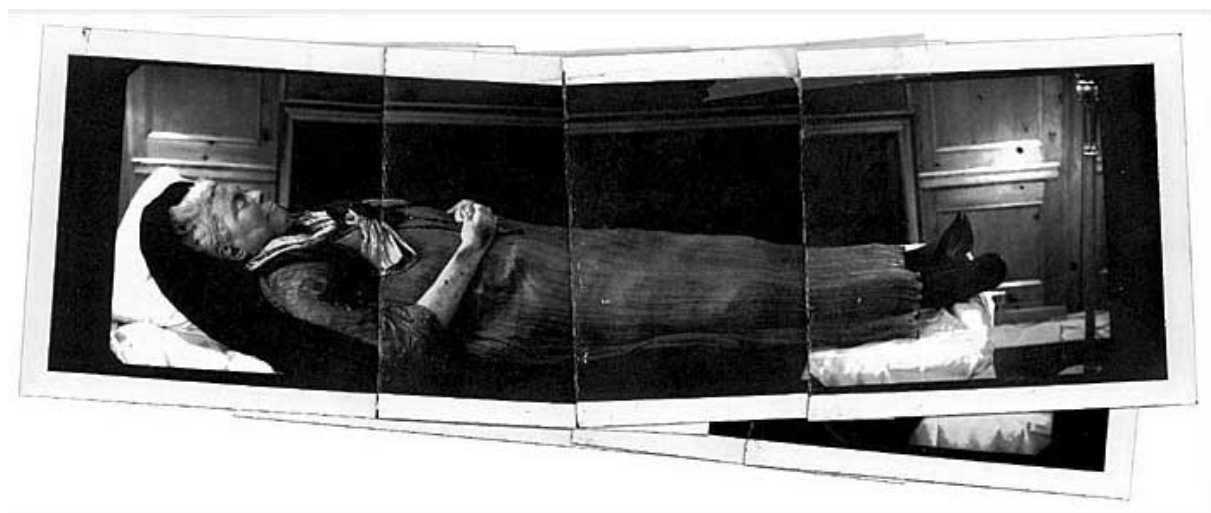


Fig. 1. Annie Leibovitz, Nov. 2004, *Untitled*, gelatin silver print, 35.9 x 52.2 x 3.2cm

This paper uses critical discourse analysis to consider a broad sample of scholarly and popular ethical criticism of Leibovitz's most controversial Sontag photographs from *A Photographer's Life*; those of Sontag nude, sick in hospital and dead. Analysing the ethical criticism of these photographs is a fraught process. The criticism is perhaps rightfully grounded in a discomfort with the impossibility of knowing whether Sontag consented to the publication of the photographs, or even to the taking of the death photographs in the first place, given their posthumous production and circulation. But the criticism is of interest beyond whether it is rightly or wrongly stated, because of what it leaves out in terms of considering Sontag's formerly private same-sex relationship finally spoken in public through the photographs. Analyzing the ways this criticism is articulated and framed reveals an anxiety about Sontag's sexuality made public in death. This anxiety is displaced onto the death photographs, which are narrowly critiqued for transgressing a private boundary by inappropriately representing death in publicly circulated pictures. Through this displacement, the criticism forecloses broader questions about how private queer knowledges that circulate in public through popular photographs might open up space for considering the precarious social mobilities afforded sexual minority women to represent, or image, their lives in non-normative ways.

On the simplest level, Leibovitz's controversial images of Sontag shock because they make public a carefully guarded secret: that Sontag had a serious romantic, sexual and domestic relationship with a woman despite decades of public denial. Sontag and Leibovitz chose to reveal little about their relationship in public prior to Sontag's death. In interviews, Sontag spoke only of her early marriage to Phillip Rieff, though she is known to have had several lengthy relationships with women after this marriage ended; the longest and last with Leibovitz, her partner of fifteen years. As explanation for this silence, Sontag once said "I don't talk about my erotic life any more than I do my spiritual life. It is too complex and always ends up sounding banal."^[4] She did, however, announce her bisexuality in a 1995 *New Yorker* profile.^[5] In a 2000 interview with the *Guardian* she disassociated her relationships with women from desire by explaining that these relationships were about convenience and access, the result of her aging and becoming "less attractive to men."^[6] She also called the rumours about her relationship with Leibovitz false, stating they were just "close friends."^[7]

Most of Sontag's obituaries avoid her relationship with Leibovitz and other women altogether. In the *New York Times* she is "...survived by her son, David Rieff" and "her

younger sister, Judith Cohen of Maui.”^[8] According to Christopher Hitchens she “...resolutely declined to say anything about her private life or indulge those who wanted to speculate,” though Hitchens *himself* resolves to mention her marriage to Rieff.^[9] In the Associated Press obituary, published over the wire by dozens of newspapers, she has no family or personal relations to speak of at all.^[10] In the *Washington Times*, her relationship with Leibovitz is an “open secret” described immediately after a description of a psychologically damaging childhood marked by her parents’ divorce.^[11] Even the gay and lesbian press is vague, perhaps fearing legal action by Sontag’s estate. The *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* cites the 1995 *New Yorker* profile before concluding with “...she’s reported to have had several relationships with women.”^[12] Leibovitz is not mentioned.

Leibovitz also equivocates on Sontag’s sexuality in her introduction to *A Photographer’s Life*. She describes her life with Sontag, the homes they owned together, the places they travelled, and Sontag’s illness and death. But as for a definition of their relationship, all that is offered is “Susan Sontag, who was with me during the years the book encompasses, used to complain that I didn’t take enough pictures.”^[13] After the publication of the book, Leibovitz offered a few statements to journalists which gestured towards the romantic nature of her relationship with Sontag, most notably calling the photographs “...a love story.”^[14] But this particular—until now private—version of the story is left to play out in images within the pages of the book—images which, rather unequivocally, depict a lengthy romantic, sexual and domestic relationship.

With some exceptions, the arrangement of photographs in *A Photographer’s Life* is chronological, documenting roughly the time period of Leibovitz and Sontag’s relationship, with photographs taken from 1988 to 2005. Photographs in the book can be separated into five categories which often overlap: snapshots and some formal portraits of Leibovitz’s family; architectural and landscape travel shots, mostly from Europe and the Middle East; the celebrity portraits commissioned by *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* for which Leibovitz is best known; casual self-portraits of the photographer; photographs of Susan Sontag. The Sontag photographs range broadly in their subject matter, picturing moments and themes that reach far beyond the controversial images that are the topic of this paper. A tremendous respect for Sontag-as-intellectual is evident in several photos of her notes for books in progress laid out on a table or scattered across a made bed. The breadth of vacation photographs from Paris, Venice, Sarajevo, Mexico, the Bahamas (the list goes on) tells a story of two people who

enjoyed travelling together. The work documents Sontag's two experiences with cancer during this period: uterine cancer in 1998, then the leukemia which ended in her death in 2004.^[15] The photos of Sontag at work, travelling with Leibovitz or sick in hospital could be understood as snapshots shared between "close friends," as Sontag called them; however, placed in the context of the nude portraits of Sontag early in the book's pages, the other images, from banal vacation shots to sublime photographs of death, take on new meanings because they figure the relationship as undeniably sexual, romantic and above all, within the purview of what is conventionally thought of as private life.

In her review of *A Photographer's Life*, communications studies professor Angela McRobbie argues that many of the photographers of Sontag in the book, including the death images, transcend "the boundaries of domestic intimacy."^[16] McRobbie's critique looks beyond the death photographs as penultimate ethical missteps to the ways quieter images in the book similarly make private moments public. I will turn to her review in greater detail later in this paper, but for now I would like to explore what it means to transcend a domestic boundary through the circulation of photographs. To whom does this domestic boundary belong, for whom is its transcendence a problem, and what about photographs is germane in this equation?

Domesticity has seen much consideration in queer studies over the last decade. Building on scholarship such as Lauren Berlant's intimate public sphere—the neoliberal turn where political life is reconceived through private modes of experience such as the family—this work considers the relationship between contemporary Western gay and lesbian subjecthood and the representation of domestic intimacy.^[17] The limited acceptance and equality some gay or lesbian subjects have found in places such as the United States and Canada aligns with the normalization and domestication of gay and lesbian intelligibility in the public sphere. Same-sex marriage or domestic partnership benefits have found a centrality in LGBTQ activist and lobbyist circles that is illustrative of the role that kinship and domesticity have played in the rights-based search for equality. Lisa Duggan's concept of homonormativity connects this turn to private, rights-based advocacy with the emergence of a socially celebrated, middle-class, white, married, monogamous gay or lesbian subject that any conservative can love, or at least abide.^[18] Like Duggan, David Eng is critical of the narrow terms of acceptance through which domesticity is leveraged by gay and lesbian advocacy.^[19] Adopting the term "queer liberalism" to describe the current social horizon for

sexual minorities, Eng extends the discussion into the realm of visual representation. He offers a close reading of a 2000 television commercial from American financial services institution, John Hancock, in which a middle-class, white lesbian couple returns to the United States with the newest addition to their family—an adopted Chinese infant.^[20] By “completing” their family “...these (white) lesbians with capital are positioned as the idealized inhabitants of an increasingly acceptable and assimilated same-sex version of the heteronormative nuclear family, one in which ‘financial protection’ is inextricably bound together with political citizenship and (a racialized) social belonging as the prerequisites for queer family and kinship.”^[21] Eng does not explicitly address the experience of watching the commercial for audiences, lesbian, heterosexual, or otherwise, but his reading can be productively extended in this direction: there are certain kinds of sexual minority subjects whose images have become comfortable for viewers. Representations of “normal” states of family, relationships, sexuality and the home are significant means for winning social acceptance and there are certain kinds of same-sex kinship that fit within acceptable representative contours.^[22]



Fig. 2. Catherine Opie, 2004, *Oliver in a Tutu*. [Image Source](#)

While work like Duggan’s and Eng’s considers the problematic of hyper *normalized* same-sex kinship, other scholars have turned to those images of same-sex domesticity that unsettle rather than normalize. A *queer* domesticity does not quite line up with conventional notions of the private sphere of the family. Queer domesticity’s central paradox is that it may affirm hetero(or homo)normative ideas of domesticity or kinship at times, or in certain ways, but it also produces queer moments of excess, impropriety, slippage, or missteps against the idealized norm.^[23] Social and discursive anxieties produced by these queer instances of the domestic can present a challenge to reified notions of the family as social institution.^[24] American photographer Catherine Opie provides this sort of challenge through many of her photographs.^[25] Opie’s *Domestic* series (1995) pictures lesbian families in their homes in modes that sometimes transcend traditional nuclear notions of family, among them the inclusion of a collective, as opposed to monogamously coupled, family. More recently, *Oliver*

in a Tutu (2004) lovingly pictures Opie's son Oliver wearing a pink tutu and tiara, a moment of gendered play that might be discouraged in the average American domestic space (Fig. 2).

Limited public knowledge of Sontag and Leibovitz's relationship presents a rather opaque picture of their domestic situation, but much of the information that is available points to a mode of same-sex kinship that transgresses conventional, socially sanctioned understandings of same-sex relationships between women. Though Sontag and Leibovitz shared several vacation properties, they kept separate apartments in the same building in the Chelsea neighbourhood of Manhattan.^[26] Leibovitz gave birth to her first daughter, "Susan" (named for Sontag) while Sontag was alive, and became pregnant with twins while Sontag was dying, but Sontag did not seem to have any traditional parental relationship to these children. The photographs themselves picture conventionally private domestic moments made public, including moments which are not typically photographed, such as Sontag's corpse at her funeral. I resist using the term "queer" to describe Sontag or Leibovitz, preferring instead less wrought and less identificatory terms like sexual minority or same-sex relationship/desire. However, to return to McRobbie's terms, the crossing of domestic boundaries performed by the controversial Sontag images is a *queer* sort of crossing, made possible by the ways these particular images do not line up with reified notions of private-public boundaries and the conventional domestic space of the family. Moreover, my considerations of the ethical anxieties articulated in response to the photographs is framed by an understanding of the ways a queer domesticity circulated through photographs might unsettle.



Fig. 3. Theresa Frare, 1990, *Final Moments*

[Image Source](#)

The controversial Sontag photographs, particularly those of Sontag sick and dying, also invite comparison to well known photographs of gay men dying from AIDS in the United States during the 1980s and 90s. Theresa Frare's portrait of AIDS activist David Kirby dying in hospital, surrounded by his family, is perhaps the best known of these images (Fig. 3). Originally published in *LIFE* magazine, the photograph is better known for its use in

a United Colours of Benetton advertisement in 1992. This image, and other like it, sought to challenge the social abjection and stigmatization of gay men during the AIDS crisis by representing the very human, relatable experiences of dying, death and grief.^[27] The Sontag images similarly document and display the intimate nature of death, but they picture a death from cancer, a disease without a clear social group of victims it abjects. While the images have in common a picturing of the intimate register of sexuality and death, the Sontag photographs' "politics," as it were, are not quite clear.

Richard Meyer's work on a similar set of AIDS-related photographs offers further theoretical connections to the controversial Sontag images.^[28] Meyer deconstructs the popular reception of photo essays depicting Rock Hudson in 1985, which juxtaposed his muscular old-Hollywood screen persona with photographs of his gaunt body marked by AIDS. For Meyer, Hudson's private homosexuality is read through photographs of his body—the photographs become sites of public knowledge about private life. The reception of the AIDS photographs as revealing of a homosexual Hudson depend on a belief in an earlier myth of the public Hudson. Writes Meyer, "Hudson's illness... must be produced as the very picture of his 'fall' from ideal masculinity. The tone of betrayal which underwrote many of the commentaries on Hudson's AIDS—though not on Liberace's—reflects an intensely fantasmatic investment in Hudson's particular image of hetero-masculinity."^[29] The AIDS photographs' transcendence of Hudson's private sphere depend on the photographs coming into conflict with his mythic public identity. In Sontag's case, Leibovitz's photos present a private Sontag revealed in ways that stand in opposition to the heterosexual public record of her celebrity. This conflict is a source of ethical anxiety less because the private transcendence is a problem in and of itself, and more because it necessitates a difficult rewriting of public knowledge of a celebrity life. In Sontag's case, this rewriting means acknowledging a woman's sexual minority experience, often afforded even less social intelligibility and visibility than sexual minority men in the United States today.

Photographs, unlike obituaries, memoirs or diaries, seem to have a unique ability to transgress private boundaries, as evidenced by the disparities between written and photographic records of Sontag's life. Some of Sontag's obituaries note her private same-sex relationship, though often in unspecific terms, and recently published diaries, edited by her son David, detail her early relationships with women.^[30] Yet neither of these written publications have garnered any kind of significant criticism for the ethics behind their

publication. Photographs depicting private moments, when made public, present unique ethical problems for viewers because their easy circulation exceeds social control by the popular media, by Sontag's estate, and even by the photographer herself. Writing on Sally Mann, another contemporary photographer often criticized for publishing difficult, conventionally private images of her family, Sarah Parsons argues that photographs have an ability to elide social control that is unlike any other medium.^[31] This is because photographs can detach with ease from their original contexts, and circulate differently, or even in opposition to, the photographer's original intentions. Writes Parsons, "No matter how hard we might try to circumscribe images by identifying them as art, pornography or as rightly private, photographs cannot be pinned down."^[32] Parsons points to the possibility of Mann's provocative photographs of her naked children being detached from their intended art context and circulated as child pornography. By choosing to publish *A Photographer's Life* as a sizeable book project, which Leibovitz laboriously assembled as narrative, the photographer vests significant importance in the project as a book.^[33] Indeed, as a story, the book portrays a lengthy relationship in its entirety, and the hospital and death photographs become a small, melancholy closing chapter. However, Leibovitz is unable to control how the Sontag images circulate beyond the scope of the book. Online, for example, the image of Sontag's corpse circulates with frequency on its own, without information about the photographer, her relationship to the subject, or the hundreds of images which precede the death portrait in the book.

Without this context, the death portrait does seem to lose some of its ability to represent loss and heartbreak, taking on a macabre, spectacular quality. Ethical critiques of the Sontag photographs, for all the problems they present in terms of circumventing a discussion of Sontag's secret sexuality made public, do raise the issue of photographs as socially potent cultural products that can and do speak beyond their original contexts, with potentially abjecting consequences.

The most comprehensive, popular ethical consideration of Leibovitz's Sontag photographs was made by Janny Scott for the *New York Times*.^[34] The review includes an interview with Leibovitz about the project, one of only a handful she gave to promote the book. Scott frames her criticism of the Sontag photos in terms of a lack of clear consent to their publication by Sontag. She does so by foregrounding the objections of Leibovitz's friends and family. Scott writes, "But it is the photographs of Ms. Sontag, taken in a hospital

room at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle a month earlier, barely recognizable but unmistakably dying, that Ms. Leibovitz says proved the most contentious in conversations with friends and family about making the pictures public.”^[35] Leibovitz’s response to Scott reaffirms her own right to agency in choosing whether or not to publish the photographs by establishing her proximity to Sontag in life. Says Leibovitz:

Let me be very, very clear about this...every single image that one would have a possible problem with or have concerns about, I had them too. This wasn’t like a flippant thing. I had the very same problems, and I needed to go through it. And I made the decision in the long run that the strength of the book needed those pictures, and that the fact that it came out of a moment of grief gave the work dignity.^[36]

To the question, “Yet Ms. Sontag was a private person?” Leibovitz responds, “If she was alive, of course this work wouldn’t be published. It’s such a totally different story that she is dead. I mean, she would champion this work.”^[37]

Scott attempts to centre her ethical critique on the impossibility of a rightfully produced and publically circulated portrait of dying, particularly one of such a private subject. She does so by affirming the objections of “friends and family.” Leibovitz’s defense is two-pronged and aimed at un-silencing the romantic nature of their relationship. First, Leibovitz articulates her proximity to Sontag in life, her ability to speak on Sontag’s behalf about what she would have wanted, and the reality of her own bereavement. Second, she underlines the death and dying photographs as crucial moments in a much larger project. When Leibovitz says, later in the interview, “With Susan it was a love story,” she points to the difficult photographs as necessary moments in a longer narrative.^[38] Leibovitz seems to insist that her ethical critics consider the entirety of a same-sex relationship, rarely spoken in public, if they are to question the ethics of the death photographs at all.

Though Leibovitz resists attempts to silence the nature of her relationship with Sontag, her argument turns, problematically, on an insistence that the project be taken as a book, which Leibovitz assembled with care. The photographer seems unable, or unwilling, to account for the potential of her work circulating outside of its intended context. Leibovitz does not consider whether, for example, the death portrait of Sontag, circulated on its own, still tells a “love story,” or whether its detachment from a broader context might construct another kind of story altogether.^[39] Indeed, the controversial images that are the subject of this

paper are likely to continue circulating without the context of the full book project simply because of their sensational subject matter.

Like Scott, Sontag's son David Rieff singles out the death photographs as unethical in his critique of *A Photographer's Life*. Rieff's assertion in his memoir that these photographs constitute "carnival images of celebrity death" qualifies these particular images as exploitive spectacle.^[40] He does not make reference to any of the dozens of banal portraits of Sontag in the collection, or to his own appearance in one of the hospital photographs. Rieff's critique of the death and dying photographs is interesting in light of his own written account of his mother's death in the pages of this memoir, perhaps more graphic than Leibovitz, but told in text, rather than through images. The conflicted nature of Rieff's ethics around Sontag's public memory points to an anxiety about photography and private knowledge. Rieff betrays a fear that photographs seem to speak, somehow louder than words, and outside the range of control to which writing is easily held. Context and circulation are significant here. Because photographs circulate more easily and more ubiquitously outside their original contexts than does text, Rieff is perhaps entitled to feel concern that the death portraits seem spectacular outside the context of the book project. It is also important to consider that Leibovitz's popularity has made her book into a bestseller while Rieff's sales have been more modest, and so the photographs circulate in a much wider context than the written account. However, it is also worth asking whether Rieff's insistence that he has more claim to the control of Sontag's memory than her partner of fifteen years can be more accurately qualified as an erasure of a queer family dynamic represented in public. There is a claim of proximity, of entitlement to a process of mourning that is being made here, and it is taking place through a critique of images. There is, perhaps, an implicit homophobic erasure positioning Leibovitz's insistence that Sontag "would champion this work" as less valid than Rieff's critique.^[41]

Angela McRobbie, who has published what is, to date, the most significant scholarly inquiry into the photographs, argues that Leibovitz's book project as a whole is a sort of act of claiming. The banal photographs of Leibovitz and Sontag at the beach, or on vacation, make a claim of having been there, and of having been significant to Sontag. For McRobbie, the death photographs simply extend this claim. She writes, "And so the pictures are as much about possession and about being dispossessed in loss, as they are about any social commentary on dying. These pictures suggest that the taker is temporarily 'out of her mind' with grief."^[42] Echoing Leibovitz's justification to Scott, McRobbie argues that the death

portraits must be considered in terms of Leibovitz's loss and her need to publically acknowledge her relationship as a stage of mourning. Writes McRobbie:

The unseemliness of Annie Leibovitz, one of the world's best-known photographers, publishing intimate portraits of her lover Susan Sontag in the months before she died in December 2004 and then in the immediate aftermath of her death as she was laid out in the mortuary gurney, is perhaps only explicable in terms of her mourning, anger and outrage at being abandoned.^[43]

McRobbie's hypothesis mirrors Leibovitz's own explanation of why she took the death photographs in the first place. Says Leibovitz, "You know, one doesn't stop seeing...one doesn't stop framing. It doesn't turn off and turn on. It's on all the time.... You find yourself reverting to what you know... It's almost like a protection of some kind. You go back into yourself. You don't really know quite what you're doing. I didn't really analyze it. I felt driven to it."^[44] Both McRobbie and Leibovitz feel a need to foreground Leibovitz's loss, as if her entitlement to a public process of mourning is being questioned by criticism like Rieff's and Scott's. McRobbie and Leibovitz make a claim for an ethics which includes consideration for this process of grieving, and the private queer domestic relationship from which this grief emerges.



Fig. 4. Annie Leibovitz, 1994, *Hedges Lane, Wainscott, Long Island*, gelatin silver print, 30.8 x 33 x 3.2 cm. [Image Source](#)

Critical insistence upon viewing the death photographs in isolation raises the question of what makes death photography so inappropriate, in terms of the transgression of public/private spheres. Certainly death portraiture is taboo today, though its 19th century popularity points to the tenuous social construction of this impropriety.^[45] A closer analysis of some of the other photographs in *A Photographer's Life* suggests that beyond this social taboo about representing death in images, the death portraits raise fewer specific concerns about privacy than do photos of Sontag while she was alive, reproduced elsewhere in the book. *Hedges Lane, Wainscott, Long Island* depicts Sontag reclined in bed naked, partially

covered by tousled bed sheets, at the vacation home she shared with Leibovitz (Fig. 4). Either sleeping or feigning sleep, Sontag appears passive and vulnerable, ostensibly unaware she is being photographed by Leibovitz; however, the erotic register of her pose and the ways the alignment of her body evokes traditional painting and portraiture of nudes suggests to the viewer that Sontag may have posed for the photograph. Her face is partially obscured and cast in shadow by her arms, raised above her head, and the viewer's focus turns to her torso as the photograph's focal point. This image is utterly unlike Leibovitz's glossy celebrity photographs which are explicitly staged and manipulated in post-production to hide imperfections. At sixty-one years of age, Sontag is unapologetically laid out, varicose veins, cellulite, a scar to the right of her naval. A pillow covers the left side of her chest, where her left breast used to be before a mastectomy in response to her first illness with cancer. Her right breast is exposed. This image is the first of Sontag to appear in the book's chronology, and indeed in any public venue, which explicitly figures her relationship to the photographer as sexual. Its circulation runs counter to popular understandings of Sontag as "intensely private" and it is nothing like any sanctioned portraits Sontag chose to circulate in life.

New York, December 29 is the death-related photograph most often cited in ethical criticism of *A Photographer's Life*. The portrait features Sontag's body, clothed and laid out at her funeral (Fig. 1). The finished portrait is composed of contact sheet images from the preceding page, and shows a sort of panorama of Sontag's body. Leibovitz has torn apart the contact sheet, using pieces to construct the full portrait with scotch tape (visible on the top edge of the image). The resulting cut-and-paste portrait is photographed again for reproduction in the book, the page's frame extending beyond the edges of the portrait. The prolific number of images from the original contact sheets suggests a scene consistent with McRobbie's "out of her mind with grief" assertion; one imagines Leibovitz snapping away at Sontag's funeral, against Western taboos about the sanctity of death. Later, rolls of film are quietly re-assembled into something intelligible as a portrait.

The subject matter of *Hedges Lane* seems more private than *New York, December 29*. The latter image gives a sense of Sontag's funeral, a public event attended by friends, family and colleagues. Formally, there is nothing unseemly about the image, except that its subject is dead. *Hedges Lane* is, in many ways, far more "carnival" (to borrow Rieff's qualifier) than the funeral portrait because it shows Sontag naked, possibly asleep, her body marked by age and illness, her relationship to the photographer unambiguously queer.

Though the rationale for calling the funeral portrait carnivalesque while ignoring the nude is questionable, the photographs of Sontag in hospital are more demanding of ethical investigation, particularly regarding privacy and the photographer-subject relationship. *University of Washington Medical Center, Seattle, Washington* is a series of three photographs which depict Sontag lying in a Seattle hospital bed asleep, shortly before her death. She is evidently very ill in these images, bloated, looking much older than her seventy-one years. A viewer who saw these images out of context would have difficulty identifying their subject as Susan Sontag. Like photographing someone dead at their funeral, photographing one's lover dying in hospital is a decidedly odd thing to do. Any viewer who has watched a relative die from terminal illness must wonder, looking at the image, whether Sontag was coherent enough to provide Leibovitz with consent to take up her camera at that moment. And yet, this spread is not the first of Sontag in hospital, with cancer, to appear in the book. *Mount Sinai Hospital, New York* is a series of eight photographs which chronicle her illness in 1998. Sontag lies in a similar hospital bed, looking ill but younger and decidedly less worn down by her disease. In several of these images, Sontag looks directly at the camera. Sontag allowed Leibovitz to keep these photographs from 1998. Her gaze at Leibovitz's lens in some of the photographs suggests Sontag's knowing participation in the images' creation. The inclusion of both the 1998 and 2004 hospital images suggests that even for the hospital photographs, Sontag posed.

None of Leibovitz's critics question what it meant for Sontag to pose for the photographs in *A Photographer's Life*. Admittedly this is a difficult question to frame in terms of the death photographs. It is also a question often overshadowed by Sontag's inability to explicitly consent to her inclusion in the book project as a whole, because the decision to publish was made after her death, and because Leibovitz owns the rights to the images. But in photographs like *Hedges Lane* or *Mount Sinai*, which are staged or explicitly posed for, the issue of establishing consent requires more nuanced analysis, less insistent upon the logistics or legalese of the problem. There is a sort of implied consent in the act of posing for a photograph regardless of one's relationship to the photographer. Photographs are always taken with an intention to circulate them in some context. Granted, photographs taken between lovers, particularly in intimate moments, might be taken exclusively for personal consumption, or even just for the erotic act of posing for and snapping the pictures, without any intention of ever looking at or disseminating the finished product.^[46] And yet, Sontag's own views on photography late in her life suggest an understanding of photographs as always

containing the possibility of their own dissemination. Hal Foster reads Sontag's final major essay, "Regarding the Torture of Others" (2004), as an argument for considering the ethics of photographs in terms of how their eventual circulation is always already popularly understood.^[47] Writes Foster, "In recognizing that the most troubling truth of the Abu Ghraib videos and photographs lay—self evidently—in their having been made in the first place, Sontag emphasized their public function: Such photographs, she maintained, were always intended to be viewed by others, as was the case with twentieth-century photographs of lynchings".^[48] Foster refers to the section of "Regarding the Torture of Others," where Sontag argues that: "To live is to be photographed, to have a record of one's life, and therefore to go on with one's life oblivious, or claiming to be oblivious, to the camera's non-stop attentions. But to live is also to pose. To act is to share in the community of actions recorded as images."^[49]

The way Sontag lived her life with Leibovitz is then of relevance in considering the ethics of posing and consent. Sontag posed for all but the handful of photographs taken after her death. She posed knowing that the photographer, her partner of fifteen years, was a professional with a history of publishing her family photographs.^[50] Her decision to pose for Leibovitz, ostensibly over and over again, knowing her profession, is a sort of consent in and of itself. Ethical criticism like Scott's and McRobbie's must negotiate what this relationship means in terms of Leibovitz's ability to reasonably represent her partner in photographs, a negotiation which reveals anxiety about conventional family roles and the nature of the domestic sphere. As Parsons points out in her analysis of Sally Mann, family photographs by professional photographers who show their work in public often confuse the public or private natures of seemingly uncontested, idyllically private domestic spaces. Writes Parsons, "...the photographs and their circulation are heretical to the most sacred fantasies about innocent, happy childhoods, singularly protective mothers, and the privacy of the middle class nuclear family."^[51] Extending Parson's discussion of motherhood to a broader consideration of family dynamics and the right to photograph, critiques of Leibovitz which question the photographer-subject relation suggest an anxiety about the evolving nature of family in contemporary America, and in particular, queer modes of kinship and the domestic. There is an implicit homophobia in Rieff's willingness to publish his mother's journals, or a graphic written account of her death, while condemning Leibovitz's project. It is, after all, Leibovitz and Sontag's domestic space to create and represent as they see fit. The political question that emerges from a discussion of the reception of Leibovitz's controversial Sontag photographs is

whether critics would be just as vocal, in the same ways, if Leibovitz was a male photographer whose heterosexual romantic relationship to his subject was public knowledge. Does the silencing of the act of posing as implicit consent represent a broader silencing of a queer family dynamic, finally represented in public?

Though this paper certainly takes a side, as it were, in the ethics debate, my interest overall is not in establishing whether Leibovitz's photographs of Sontag are rightfully circulated in public. However, as a viewer without a personal stake in the book's publication, I am at loss for any kind of personal reaction to the photographs that is critical of their ethical position. To me, they are private words, spoken in public, but done so with obvious care by the photographer. We see this care, for example, when Leibovitz painstakingly stitches together her final portrait of Sontag using scotch tape. Far more interesting than passing judgment on Leibovitz's practice is what the ethical debate about her work says regarding the public circulation of photographs that depict intimate, conventionally private moments and spaces, in particular those queer domestic modes of living and photographing that don't quite line up with normative modes of living or photographing. Listening closely to the ethical criticism of *A Photographer's Life* is an entry to thinking about the kinds of social mobilities afforded sexual minority women in terms of representing their lives, in public, through photographs. With the Sontag images, this issue is even more acute because the photographs of her go beyond representing a life simply outside the range of heteronormative domesticity; the images tell a story that conflicts with Sontag's purposefully produced, interpreted and circulated celebrity image. This conflict illuminates the ways public-facing sexual minority identities are formulated in opposition to dominant ideologies, often bringing seemingly disparate private and public narratives of a subject's life into conflict. At the root of this problem is the specificity of the photographic medium in terms of the circulation of private knowledge in public. The photographs of Sontag, unlike her admissions in life, her obituaries, or her posthumous diaries, insist on a presence in the world beyond individual control. Inevitably, the Sontag photographs will continue to circulate publically in various ways, despite whatever attempts that Random House, Rieff, or even Leibovitz herself, might make to control them.

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[1] To complement the book, Leibovitz mounted a travelling exhibition culled from this body of work which premiered at the Brooklyn Museum the same year. This paper is only concerned with the book portion of the project for two reasons. First, the book's bestseller status points to its circulation outside a contemporary art context, as a pop-cultural object.

Second, the criticism which is the focus of this paper tends to deal, most explicitly, with the book.

[2] David Rieff is Sontag's son from her first marriage, at 17, to Philip Rieff.

[3] David Rieff, *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2008), 150.

[4] Lisa Levy, "Critical Intimacy: Comparing the Paradoxical Obituaries of Susan Sontag." *The Believer* (April 2006). http://www.believermag.com/issues/200604/?read=article_levy (1/23/2009).

[5] Patrick Moore, "Susan Sontag and a Case of Curious Silence," *Los Angeles Times* (Jan 4 2005), <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/jan/04/opinion/oe-moore4> (1/24/2009).

[6] "Finding Fact from Fiction," *The Guardian* (May 27 2000), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4022425,00.html> (1/23/2009).

[7] Ibid

[8] Margalit Fox, "Susan Sontag, Social Critic With Verve, Dies at 71," *New York Times* (Dec 28 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/28/books/28cnd-sont.html> (1/23/2009).

[9] Christopher Hitchens, "Susan Sontag: Remembering an Intellectual Heroine," *Slate* (Dec 29 2004), <http://www.slate.com/id/2111506/> (1/23/2009).

[10] Hillel Italie, "Susan Sontag, 71: Author, liberal lioness," *Toronto Star* (Dec 30 2004), <http://www.thestar.com/Obituary/NtoS/article/107974> (1/23/2009).

[11] "Novelist, radical Susan Sontag, 71, dies in New York," *Washington Times* (Dec 29 2004), <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2004/dec/29/20041229-122439-9356r/> (1/23/2009).

[12] Martha E. Stone, *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, 13, no. 1 (2006): 11.

[13] Annie Leibovitz, *A Photographer's Life: 1990-2005* (New York: Random House: 2006), 8.

[14] Janny Scott, "From Annie Leibovitz: Life, and Death, Examined," *New York Times* (Oct 6 2006), <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/06/arts/design/06leib.html> (1/23/2009).

- [15] Sontag's first, breast cancer in 1976, became the impetus for her book *Illness as Metaphor* (1978).
- [16] Angel McRobbie, "While Susan Sontag lay dying," *Open Democracy*, (October 10 2006), http://www.opendemocracy.net/people-photography/sontag_3987.jsp (4/19/2009).
- [17] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of American Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997).
- [18] Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, cultural politics, and the attack of democracy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003)
- [19] David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).
- [20] Ibid, 101
- [21] Ibid, 101
- [22] Though a full discussion of it is beyond the scope of this paper, Eng is primarily concerned with exploring the ways in which the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian subjects under queer liberalism explicitly and implicitly functions by further abjecting Asian-American diasporic or transnational subjects.
- [23] Andrew Gorman-Murray, "Queering home or domesticating deviance?: Interrogating gay domesticity through lifestyle television," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 9 (2006), 233
- [24] Sue Kentlyn, "The Radically Subversive Space of the Queer Home: 'Safety House' and 'Neighbourhood Watch,'" *Australian Geographer*, 39:3 (2008), 327-337.
- [25] Larry Glawson's photographs of his family and home taken over the last thirty years provide a Canadian example of a similar mode of representing the queer domestic.
- [26] One of the most difficult representations of mourning in *A Photographer's Life* appears in its final pages. *Looking out from my apartment to Susan's, London Terrace, New York* shows the view of Sontag's apartment from Leibovitz's window (they lived on opposite sides of the building). Taken on what appears to be a cold, winter day, the chronology of the

photograph indicates that Leibovitz took it soon after Sontag's death, upon returning to their apartment building and finding Sontag's unit empty of its owner for the first time.

[27] Though Frare's is the best known of this genre of photography in a popular context, there are also well-known portraits of friends dying or dead from AIDS-related illness taken by contemporary art photographers, among them, several photographs by Nan Goldin (who photographed friends and her Paris photo dealer) and A.A. Bronson (who photographed his General Idea collaborators, Jorge Zontal and Felix Partz).

[28] Richard Meyer, "Rock Hudson's Body," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991): 258-287.

[29] Ibid, 278

[30] Sontag's diaries, published in late 2008, were edited by her son David Rieff (Sontag, Reborn). As justification for his involvement in their publication, Rieff has explained that Sontag had already donated the diaries to UCLA when she died, placing their circulation outside the family's control. He explains his rationale in detail in the introduction to the diaries. See David Rieff, Introduction, in Sontag, Susan, *Reborn: Journals & Notebooks 1947-1963*, ed. David Rieff. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

[31] Sarah Parsons, "Public/Private Tensions in the Photography of Sally Mann," *History of Photography*, 32:2 (2008), 123-136.

[32] Ibid, 132

[33] For a detailed representation of Leibovitz's process of assembling of the project see *Life Through a Lens*. Leibovitz, Barbara Dir.. Adirondack Pictures. 2006. Also see the introduction to *A Photographer's Life*.

[34] Scott

[35] Ibid

[36] Ibid

[37] Ibid

[38] Ibid

[39] In early 2009, Leibovitz's used the rights to all her photographs, including those featured in *A Photographer's Life*, as collateral for a multi-million dollar loan. Should she default on the loan, the lender will have the ability to circulate the Sontag photographs at their discretion. For details of the arrangement see Salkin, Allen, "Agreement Reached on a Reprieve for Leibovitz Loan Repayment," *New York Times* (Sept 11 2009), <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/09/11/agreement-reached-on-annie-leibovitz-loan/> (07/27/2010).

[40] Rieff, 150

[41] quoted in Scott

[42] McRobbie

[43] Ibid

[44] quoted in Scott

[45] While we are accustomed to seeing photographs of non-Western and especially non-white subjects on the brink of death in journalistic photographs of famine, disease, war or natural disaster, photographs of Western subjects in similar intimate scenarios carry an ability to shock that relates to their rarity. The aforementioned images of Kirby and Hudson are two examples of this phenomenon.

[46] A question that might begin an interesting conceptual exploration of this issue is whether the erotic register of this photographic fantasy scenario would be diminished if the camera were not loaded with film (or more likely today, a memory card). Put another way, does the reliance of the fantasy on the actual production of images suggest that the possibility of circulation plays a role in the pleasure of posing in and photographing intimate moments between lovers?

[47] Hal Foster, "A Life in Pictures," *Artforum International* 43:7 (2005): 188-199, 4

[48] Ibid, 4. Here Foster refers specifically to Sontag's reaction to the photographs of soldiers smiling and looking at the camera while standing next to macabre scenes of torture at Abu Ghraib, not to the photographs which feature prisoners alone. In this sense, Sontag's reading of the pose depends on the subject's acknowledgement of the camera.

[49] Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," in *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches*, eds. Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) 128-142, 134. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is interesting to consider what Sontag might have thought about *A Photographer's Life* given her staunch opinions on photography and ethics as outlined in (among other less significant works) *On Photography* (1973), *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), and *Regarding the Torture of Others* (2004). If, as Judith Butler has suggested, Sontag became less condemning of photography late in her career, then perhaps the photographs are consistent with a loosening ethics of the photographer-subject relationship in Sontag's criticism (Butler 825). Also, though the criticism of Leibovitz's Sontag photographs with which I am concerned does not directly address Sontag on photography, it is possible that the critical interest in the book relates to the apparent inconsistency between the project and Sontag's views on photography.

[50] *Women* (1999), a large-format book of Leibovitz's photographs for which Sontag wrote an introduction, includes a portrait of Leibovitz's mother which also appears in *A Photographer's Life*.

[51] Parsons, 124