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Swimming in a sea of hypocrisy?: the ethical ambiguity of David Rieff's memoir

Abstract:

Death, literary critics have not failed to point out, is good for narrative.

– Nancy K. Miller (*Bequest & Betrayal*, 1996a: iv).

When noted intellectual Susan Sontag died from myelodysplastic syndrome in 2004 aspects of her illness trajectory and death were captured and curated by photographer Annie Leibovitz. The harrowing photographs of Sontag's diseased body – and later her corpse laid out in a New York mortuary – were included in travelling global exhibitions and were further commodified in Leibovitz's book which she titled *A Photographer's Life*. The historical events of Sontag's illness and death were therefore (re)written and (re)presented in a way that involved commercial gain.

Sontag's son, the journalist David Rieff, registered his contempt for the perceived exploitation/unmaking of his mother in a number of media interviews, and most tellingly he recorded and referenced it in his own memoir *Swimming in a Sea of Death*.

However, some critics have questioned Rieff's own integrity, suggesting that rather than serving as a respectful 'tribute' or commemoration of his mother, aspects of his textual portrait may also be read as acts of 'posthumous humiliation'. This paper explores how Rieff, while rightly questioning Leibovitz's violation of his mother's privacy, could be said to have added to that humiliation by the further exploitation of Sontag's fame and by his revelation of aspects of her final illness that she may not have wanted to share.

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Keywords:

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– patient rights

The decency/indecentcy of life writing

When noted literary scholar and creative practitioner Richard Freadman considered writing a memoir after his father's death, the writerly process stalled and constellated around several ethical considerations articulated in a self-reflexive 'coda' entitled 'Decent and Indecent: Writing My Father's Life'. Here, Freadman pondered dilemmas he saw relating to writing about a parent because he felt he needed to 'decide whether the project was morally acceptable' (Freadman 2004: 121). His overarching consideration and question remains pertinent to autobiographical and biographical processes: 'Writers have a right to write. But how far into the privacy of others does that right extend?' (Freadman 2004: 123). While this concern expressly attends Freadman's own praxis, he generally concludes:

There is, I believe, no single or general answer to that question. There are some rough guidelines, and philosophical analysis can help to discern these, but each case has to be taken on its own merits, has to be considered in context and with respect to the rights, wishes, and feelings of those involved (Freadman 2004: 123-124).

At the heart of Freadman's personal exposition is a key acknowledgement that life writing is *relational*, and that an ethics of writing necessarily involves some kind of consideration of the other, and the ways in which (re)constructed narratives may finally (and perhaps unintentionally) work to diminish subjects. This is particularly applicable to situations where the dead are denied any right of reply, and – in the case of David Rieff narrating aspects of his mother's terminal illness – any informed consent to tell their story.

In his scholarly work in the field of life writing, ethics and human subjectivity, Paul John Eakin offers this cautionary question: 'Why do we so easily forget that the first person of autobiography is truly plural in its origins and subsequent formation?' (Eakin 1998a: 63). An individual, in Eakin's reckoning, cannot enact storied performances as a singularly isolated exercise because '...narrative is in its origins and in its practice fundamentally relational' (Eakin 1998a: 75).

As exemplified by Freadman's philosophical wrestling, life writing framed by ethical practice will necessarily raise questions about the writerly obligation to not simply truth tell, but also consider possible protections around the privacy and dignity of those whose stories may be incorporated into a text; particularly those who may be regarded as vulnerable subjects (Couser 2004). It is this notion of the way/s a text might transgress the subject's privacy and then publicly circulate as a form of ongoing degradation that summoned David Rieff's condemnation of Annie Leibovitz exhibiting and publishing photographs of his mother's ill and deceased body.

Leibovitz's privilege and responsibility

In reflecting on the selection of pictures from 1995-2005 which feature in her book entitled *A Photographer's Life* Annie Leibovitz writes: 'Taking intimate pictures of family members and people to whom you are close is a privilege, and it brings with it

responsibility' (Leibovitz 2006). However, her ethical regard for the subject has been called into question by her inclusion of several photos of a dying and deceased Susan Sontag. Angela McRobbie, among others, has questioned Leibovitz's motive for representing Sontag as an intimate other on whom she lays some kind of possessive claim:

Those which show Sontag suffering, and undergoing chemotherapy, especially the shot of her on a stretcher on a cold-looking open tarmac about to be carried onto a waiting plane, and also those of her corpse laid out, further extend this act of claiming (McRobbie 2006).

Nevertheless, Leibovitz works to ethically justify her choice of including these haunting photos alongside the more the professional assignments this way:

... Susan Sontag, who was with me during the years the book encompasses used to complain that I didn't take enough pictures... I considered doing a book made up completely of personal work. I thought about that for a while and concluded that the personal work on its own wasn't a true view of the last fifteen years. I don't live two lives. This is one life, and the personal pictures and the assignment work are all part of it (Leibovitz 2006: n.p.).

This rationale though has not completely assuaged the discomfort many viewers register when confronted with invasive images of Sontag's physical decline, and the fact that 'we', as Nancy Miller points out, 'are suddenly confronted with a body surprising in all of its corporeal detail, and a biographical vulnerability of the flesh rarely alluded to by Sontag herself' (Miller 2009c: 208). The images of Sontag swollen and not easily recognisable, and later laid out in a funeral home (albeit dressed up for the photograph by Leibovitz), are confronting and contentious.

In an interview with journalist Cathleen McGuigan for *Newsweek*, Leibovitz is keenly aware that these are 'very tough pictures', but defends the choice to circulate them by stating:

People have said it's important to publish them because so much is masked from us about what the end really is ... I think Susan would be very proud of those pictures — but she's dead. Now if she were alive, she would not want them published (McGuigan 2006).

While Sontag, the noted academic of letters, devoted significant attention to writing about the importance of destigmatising such illnesses as cancer and AIDS, she did not reveal graphic personal details about her own encounters with cancer. Though she prefaces her foundational text *Illness as Metaphor* with the confessional statement 'I want to describe, not what it is really like to emigrate to the kingdom of the ill and live there, but the punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about the situation' (Sontag 1997, 3), she does not rely on intimate disclosures to do so. Instead, her voice ostensibly draws on cultural critique informed by extensive research, rather than offering an up close and personal testimony of *her own* illness experience.

Sontag's humiliation and Rieff's riposte

Nancy K. Miller voicing her own ethical concerns about the photographs contends: 'I find it hard to imagine Sontag wanting the revelation of the biographical information about her love life and her terrible death conveyed by the Leibovitz show and book and widely circulated through the media' (Miller 2009: 210). But Leibovitz reads her own actions to move the private into the public sphere quite differently, and in an interview with Janny Scott for *The New York Times* offers this further justification:

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 the fact that it came out of a moment of grief gave the work dignity (Scott 2006).

While Leibovitz may have hoped her work of mourning conferred dignity on the confronting photographs of Sontag, problematically there is no evidence establishing Sontag's consent or artistic collaboration in the project. Leibovitz suggests that capturing and circulating candid photos of Sontag's final days and her death represent some kind of strategic resistance to taboo topics. She sees her photography as validating Sontag's own efforts in this regard. However, this questionable justification does not adequately acknowledge the ethical obligations associated with commemoration, and Mary K DeShazer helps contextualise this deeper issue: 'Part of the ethical ambiguity of these images rests in Leibovitz's silence as to whether she had Sontag's permission to take and to publish intimate, sometimes graphic photographs...' (DeShazer 2009: 217). DeShazer invites the viewer of the photographs to consider whether 'Leibovitz's "I'm comfortable with them"' is a reliable 'ethical gauge' when 'the presumed approval of the deceased photographic subject [is] her own good intentions as artist and mourner' (DeShazer 2009: 217).

One of the enduring objections to Leibovitz's claim is that she can no longer determine who consumes these photographs, how they will be appropriated in a digital age and for what ultimate purposes. The photographs of Sontag's corpse are now trafficked in cyberspace; unchecked and unprotected. Caitlyn McKinney comments on the ethical issue of uncontained circulation and unanchored images of Sontag's abjection more fully:

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. ... This is because photographs can detach with ease from their original context, and circulate differently, or even in opposition to, the photographer's original intention (McKinney 2010: 8).

Again, Leibovitz seems to be quite clear about what her original intention was in dressing up Sontag's corpse and photographing her offering this insight into her motivation:

After she died, I chose the clothes she would be buried in and took them to Frank Campbell's funeral home myself. The dress is one we found in Milan. It's an homage

to Fortuny, made the way he made them, with pleated material. Susan had a gold one and a green-blue one. She had been sick on and off for several years, in hospital for months. It's *humiliating*. You lose yourself. And she loved to dress up. I brought scarves we had bought in Venice and a black velvet Yeohlee coat that she wore to the theater. I was in a trance when I took the pictures of her lying there (Leibovitz 2006: np emphasis added).

Here Leibovitz seeks to explain the locus of her grief and why she sought to redeem Sontag's body from what she perceives as the injury and humiliation resulting from terminal illness. Ironically though, as DeShazer suggests, 'Sartorial restitution, however, does not necessarily restore Sontag's privacy or her dignity' (DeShazer 2009: 223). Confirming the photographs taken in the funeral home do nothing to restore the privacy and dignity of the subject, Rieff writing of the photographs in his memoir advances this retort:

She [Sontag] would not have had the time to mourn herself and to become physically unrecognizable at the end even to herself, let alone humiliated posthumously by being "memorialized" that way in those carnival images of celebrity death taken by Annie Leibovitz (Rieff 2008: 150).

Rieff's heightened use of ironised inverted commas around the word 'memorialized' questions Leibovitz's claim that she wanted to re-make Sontag into an aesthetic subject, and by so doing confer some dignity on her death. Interestingly, as Miller points out 'Rieff gave permission to take the photographs of Sontag after her death in the funeral home, reasoning that "well, people who have an artistic bent, who cope with death through their art – she's a person who does this all the time"' (Miller 2009c: 214). However, and perhaps naively, Rieff did not anticipate the commodification and commercialisation of these images. In an interview with UK journalist Cathy Galvin he highlights his consternation: 'it just never occurred to me she would publish them. She knows perfectly well my mother would not have wanted her to publish them, but she felt she had to do it' (Galvin: 2008).

In another interview with Australian journalist Susan Wyndam for the Sydney Writer's Festival, Rieff reiterates his sense of betrayal:

She only got to take the pictures in the morgue because I allowed it. I did not assume she was going to publish them. She said in an interview that my mother would not have wanted them published but she was going to do it anyway (Wyndam 2008).

Leibovitz's position that Sontag '... would champion this work' (Scott 2006) is perhaps a morally fraught one, acutely intensified by the fact that Sontag's son is deeply troubled by it.

David Herman's article 'Schwarzenegger in the snow, Sontag *in extremis*' poses the following ethical concerns regarding *A Photographer's Life* and pays deference to Rieff's feelings:

This very human story of death and birth, so movingly chronicled, raises a number of issues. First, the right of the photographer to show someone in extremis. Already in the book we have seen photos of Sontag naked. However, the photos of her later in hospital, seriously ill, and later dead, touch on larger questions about privacy and

dignity. Did Sontag know these photos would be published so soon after her death? What kind of consent did she give, if any? What did her son, the writer David Rieff, think of these photographs? (Herman 2006/2007).

It appears that consideration of Rieff's perspective had no bearing on Leibovitz's decision to exhibit and publish her subject *in extremis*. Rieff's reaction to this was further probed in an interview for ABC Radio National's *The Book Show* when Ramona Koval discussing his mother's 'posthumous humiliation' and asks him: 'Did Susan Sontag approve of the taking of these pictures?' to which Rieff replies: 'Well, Susan Sontag was dead for most of the pictures that are published in that book, so obviously...' (Koval 2008). Koval further interrogates: 'But she could have approved beforehand', and here Rieff offers a more detailed response:

She didn't think she was going to die, as I've said several times, so the idea that she would have not made provision for how her own work and everything else of which she was intensely proud would have been published but permitted these pictures of herself looking absolutely monstrous and then looking dead is not likely. In any case, listen, I don't talk about Annie Leibovitz apart from the sentences I've used in the book which are, I think, two. But I will say this, that Annie Leibovitz gave an interview in *The Guardian* in London in which she said, "I know Susan would not have wanted me to publish these pictures but I had to do it." I think that's the answer to that question (2008).

One can only assume that Rieff believes his written portrait of his mother in his memoir as standing in direct ethical contrast the Annie Leibovitz's 'monstrous' photographs. He may well agree with the valorised assessments of his writerly position and practice on the book's back cover as 'a brave, passionate and unsparing witness' of the last nine months of Sontag's life. There is a plethora of reviews that choose to deconstruct his memoir, and the ethics of his narrative, in this light. For example, Elizabeth Benedict heralds the memoir's cultural contribution as an advance in the way death is represented:

As she did in life, during her final struggle with death, and now that she has been laid to rest, this dazzling woman -- writer, provocateur, celebrity, single mother -- will engage us for a long time to come. Ironically, through her son's bold, unflinching account of her refusal to accept her "extinction," she may even help us begin public and private conversations about dying that are long overdue (Benedict 2011).

Other reviewers have reproduced the kind of reading offered in Penelope Lively's review for *The Financial Times*: 'In this fiercely honest and beautifully written memoir, her son David Rieff chronicles the last months of Sontag's life... . He writes with elegance and high intelligence; this book is a fine epitaph to his mother' (Lively, 2008). The original publishers, like Benedict's and Lively's reviews, are keen that readers should comprehend the wider applicability of Rieff's memoir:

Drawing on his mother's heroic struggle, paying tribute to her doctors' ingenuity and faithfulness and determined to tell what happened to them all, *Swimming in a Sea of Death* subtly draws wider lessons that will be of value to others when they find themselves in the same situation (Simon & Schuster 2008).

However, while the majority of reviews frame Rieff's disclosure of intimate revelations about his mother illness as a tribute to her 'heroic struggle', some have raised questions about whether there is a public usefulness (and appropriateness) in circulating such private information that Sontag did not consent to sharing. As Mars Jones contends in his valuation of the memoir: 'Something graver than disillusionment emerges from these pages, though – the sense of a large figure being cut down to size by someone who resents his dependence and a competition that he can't win, even after her death' (Mars-Jones 2008).

More 'posthumous humiliation'

The debate concerning representation of Sontag's death has focussed to a large extent on Leibovitz's presumed ethical trespass and Rieff's disapproving response to the photographic images she has exhibited and published. However, his memoir also renders a disturbing picture of what happened to his mother before her death. It could be argued that far from offering 'subtly wider lessons that will be of value to others', autobiographical vignettes from his text provide a soul-crushing account of how not to die, how not to be the adult child of a dying person, and how to provide some of the worst imaginable medical care.

Rieff sets the scene at the very beginning of his memoir when he accompanies his mother to an appointment with a specialist who had been recommended to her, after routine blood tests had returned abnormal results. After they hear the news that she has developed myelodysplastic syndrome, Rieff says:

I realized that I was looking away from her, away from Dr. A., at the birthday greetings celebrating his recent fiftieth birthday, at his books, at his family photographs – anywhere, in fact, except at my mother... But how I would have liked to have been able somehow to console her, after that meeting with Dr. A. and through the months of her illness until her death. But instead, almost until the moment she died, we talked of her survival. Of her struggle with cancer, never about her dying (Rieff 2008: 10, 17).

Rieff arguably has no formal responsibility to protect his mother's medical history or the privacy of her medical records in the way that healthcare workers have. In fact some scholars contend writing pathography has its ethical virtues (Frank 2013), explaining to lay readers and doctors alike what it actually feels like to experience a particular illness or to observe the suffering of a loved one. But in this narrative, Rieff focuses more on deceit and its emotional consequences:

The day before she died, she asked "Is David here?" Her eyes were clenched shut ... "Yes, I'm here," I remember hearing myself say. My mother did not open her eyes, or move her head. For a moment, I thought that she had fallen back to sleep. But after a pause, she said, "I want to tell you..." That was all she said. (Rieff 2008: 162-3).

After her death, Rieff reflected on what he had been denied by his mother's refusal to accept that she was dying. In colluding in the pretence that Sontag was going to survive, both denied themselves the possibility of forming what Atul Gawande calls 'a coherent view of how people might live successfully all the way to their very end' (Gawande 2014: 9).

Throughout Rieff's memoir, the reader encounters physicians who subjected Sontag to a cruel and almost completely hopeless treatment, and denied her the opportunity to prepare for death. He refers briefly to a conversation he had with Dr Diana Meier, Director of the Centre to Advance Palliative Care at the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, after his mother died. She astutely assesses the Sontag-Rieff relationship with her description of their folly within a folly:

...as doctors we end up... becoming unwitting participants in a folie à deux with patients and family of caving in to the desire to live, because it is respectful of the patient and who she or he is and their perception of the right way to live, while realizing, in the other part of your brain, that there's essentially no chance that this is going to help, that it's definitely going to cause harm and side effects, that it's hugely expensive out of the public trough, and it is a very wearing kind of cognitive dissonance (Rieff 2008: 113-4).

In processing the impact of medical treatment and her corporeal violation, Rieff recalls the following horror in an interview with Steve Paulson: 'Once she died, I asked the other people in the room to leave. And I really looked. To be blunt, I took off her shirt. And she was just a sore. Her body was just a sore from the inside of her mouth to her toes (Paulson 2008).

However, such intimate medical revelations in *Swimming in a Sea of Death* and interviews, invite questions about Rieff's own writerly integrity suggesting that rather than serving as a respectful 'tribute' or commemoration of his mother, his textual portrait of her terminal illness may also be read as another act of 'posthumous humiliation.' Certainly, his final observation accentuates their tortuous relationship to which he alludes only slightly elsewhere: 'If, as I believe, she had imagined herself special, my mother's last illness cruelly exposed the frailty of that conceit' (Rieff 2008: 163).

The act of writing about a parent, to use Miller's terms, may produce a sense of 'bequest' or 'betrayal' (Miller 1996a). Typically a narrative yoked to relational underpinnings will involve some kind of judgment of the parent figure, and, as John Barbour highlights, '... One of the most significant ethical dimensions of life writing is the writer's evaluation of their parents' (Barbour 2004: 73). In Rieff 'evaluating' facets of Sontag's illness journey, there remains an ethical ambiguity about his motivation for revealing personal details relating to his mother's disease and death.

Aspects of his memoir work only to diminish Sontag rather than enlarge her literary legacy. As Adam Mars-Jones highlights in a book review for *The Guardian*, 'Mr. Rieff has now guaranteed her a second immortality. He and his mother will undoubtedly survive for a long time to come in medical school courses on death and dying – as a case study in how not to do it' (2008). In particular, Mars-Jones is troubled by the reductive aspect of Rieff's text arguing that: '...he places emphasis on his mother's loss of dignity in her last illness, and there is much about modern medicine which can dehumanise the patient, but he chips away at what is left' (2008).

Such critiques of his work invite the reader to contemplate the ethical ambiguity of Rieff's life writing project. There is a ghosted question from Miller that continues to haunt the reading of this text: 'When we expose the narratives of our lives to others through the forms of life writing, do we not all become vulnerable subjects?' (Miller

2004b: 159). One is acutely aware of Sontag's vulnerability of being both exposed and potentially exploited in a narrative that freely shares intimate knowledge about her confidential medical information.

While Rieff justifies the confessional work as a response to him not 'being able to have his say' (Wyndham 2008) during the time his mother was seeking treatment and dying, such a rationalisation allows him to expose not only Sontag's lack of courage to confront death, but also his own. And although he may regret his decision to collude with her demands for treatment, he implicitly blames Sontag for conflating her commitment to her work with a narcissistic belief that she and the work were one.

A true picture of my mother and a freak show?

In registering his concerns around ethical life writing practices, Thomas Couser reflects on writing as a potentially contested space; 'Publishing one's life renders it public property, and those who do so cannot (or should not) expect that their representation of themselves, and especially of others, will meet with universal approval' (Couser 2004: 199).

The possible hypocrisy of Rieff publishing aspects of his life in relation to this mother's death – given his view of Leibovitz's photographic exploitation of his mother – was not lost on Susan Wyndham when she interviewed him. She asked whether 'his unsentimental book' could 'be likened to the photos', to which he replied: 'I was trying to create a true picture of my mother, which is different from what was fundamentally a freak show of a person who is unrecognisable and then dead' (Wyndham 2008). Rieff seems to believe that his own 'truthful' revelations about his mother's illness and death have not diminished her in any way, and the book would be met with 'approval'. However, Diane Leach's book review demonstrates an evident hypocrisy as she observes,

... one cannot help but notice Rieff's own set of posthumous carnival images that, if anything, expose his mother even more than her lover's photographs. It is Rieff who tells us what Sontag thought and felt during her last days and in quotes from earlier diaries. He describes her decline – this once brightest of intellectual lights, equally celebrated for her cerebral beauty – suffering from "chemo brain", too weak to roll over in bed, "covered in sores, incontinent, and half delirious..." carrying on to her final moments of life... (Leach 2008).

His grief appears inextricably linked with anger and remorse, which might be reasonably expected. But what seems more striking about his grief is that the points of connection between mother and son are so limited; their intellectual connection emerges as lacking in physical and emotional warmth, and he describes her ravaged body with a detached curiosity that is uncannily similar to Leibovitz's. Both exhibit a lack of compassion that may be as unnerving to the reader of the memoir as it is to the viewer of the Leibovitz photographs.

The final humiliation

Important to Rieff is the notion of literary lineage, and he highlights this when commenting on influences shaping his writing career:

It's complicated to talk about the influence on one's work. In my family it's a bit like in the *Godfather*; I was born into a family that was involved in a certain business, the business of writing, and I also always wanted to be a writer. My mother was a famous writer, my father was also a writer – at the time he wrote some important books in his field – and when you come from a family like that and you want to be a writer, you know that you need to write about things which they don't write about; so I suppose there's a kind of negative effect, in the sense that I became a war correspondent because that was something they didn't write about. I'm sure that my mother influenced me, in the same way that I hope that I might also have influenced her (Alba 2009).

Rieff's public profile largely comes from his work as a journalist, but one might argue there is one final indignity that Sontag suffers as a result of the memoir, and that is the quality of the writing itself. As Mars-Jones contends: 'Being a mediocre writer isn't a crime, but it's certainly a crying shame on a project like this.' Paradoxically, as the reviewer concludes, '...Rieff may have thought of writing as being the equivalent of a 'family olive oil business', but his pressing produces an off flavour' (Mars-Jones 2008).

Some may conclude the 'off flavor' of this memoir is largely produced by the ongoing ethical questions relating to the principles of doing no harm and respecting patient privacy. Unlike Freadman's assiduous reflection on his narrative duty of care to his father, there does not seem to be the same consideration of his mother at work in Rieff's memoir. When he publicly reveals features of his her illness trajectory the reader does not always find a careful 'Deliberation on the ethics of life writing [that] entails weighing competing values: the desire to tell one's story and the need to protect others, the obligation to tell truth and the obligations of trust' (Couser 2004: 198). And it is hard to imagine the 'moral consequences' and questions that Eakin frames as central to biographical and autobiographical writing closely informing Rieff's rendering of Sontag's vulnerable state: 'What is right and fair for me to write about someone else? What is right and fair for someone else to write about me?' (Eakin 1999b: 160). Without her express consent to tell, some might conclude that Rieff's account of his mother's illness and death is not 'fair'. And that his narrative accounts of her abjection have worked to permanently diminish her reputation – something Rieff seeks to stridently decry in Leibovitz's work, but ironically compounds in his own.

The reader is left to ethically contemplate whether Sontag's final dignity may have been better served if Rieff's recorded memories – and Leibovitz's exhibited photos – had remained private artefacts of grief.

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