Susan Sontag’s cultural critique of cancer stigmatization in *Illness as Metaphor* (1977) and her theoretical musings in *On Photography* (1977) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) offer rich insights through which to analyze photographic and literary representations of Sontag’s own experience with cancer by Annie Leibovitz (her lover) in *A Photographer’s Life, 1990–2005* and David Rieff (Sontag’s son) in his 2008 memoir, *Swimming in a Sea of Death*. My analysis in this chapter raises ethical as well as aesthetic issues important to postmillennial understandings of cancer as a sociopolitical construct and an individual disease, and of the ways that cancer patients and their ill, medicalized, suffering, and dying bodies have been and might justly be represented in literature and art. I hope ultimately to shed light on debates regarding appropriate versus appropriative depictions of people with cancer and to raise questions from a feminist perspective that might help readers consider what constitutes an ethics of commemoration.

In *Illness as Metaphor* Sontag examines the traumatic and transformational power of life-threatening diseases, which force the humans who contract them to face “the night side of life,” relinquishing their place in “the kingdom of the well” for “a more onerous citizenship in that other place” (1). Specifically, she compares the nineteenth-century quest to eliminate tuberculosis with twentieth-century efforts to eradicate cancer and discusses the ways in which both diseases are “spectacularly, and similarly, encumbered by the trappings of metaphor” (5). Tuberculosis and cancer have long evoked terror and dread, she explains; physicians have described these diseases as *consuming, corrupting, insidious*, while the culture at large has deemed them *unspeakable, monstrous*. For cancer patients, portrayed in life and in art as “humiliated by fear and agony,” such language may exacerbate suffering and self-blame; certainly “the people who have the real disease are hardly helped by hearing their disease’s name constantly being dropped as the epitome of evil” (80). If can-
Illness as Metaphor has served for more than thirty years as an incisive text for interrogating the dehumanization that cancer patients have experienced at the hands of some medical practitioners and in the cultural imagination. Although she did not acknowledge it until years later, Sontag wrote this book shortly after her own treatment, at forty-two, for stage-four metastatic breast cancer, which she survived for over twenty years through a combination of radical mastectomy, aggressive chemotherapy, and then-experimental immunotherapy pioneered by French physician Lucien Israël. She later spoke proudly of “confounding my doctors’ pessimism” (Rieff, 25). In 1998 Sontag was treated for a rare type of uterine cancer, for which she also underwent successful chemotherapy, and early in 2004 she was diagnosed with myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS), a malignant blood cancer probably caused by her previous chemotherapies. In December 2004, after an unsuccessful bone marrow transplant, Sontag died of MDS. Although she published no autobiographical accounts of her cancer experience, Leibovitz’s photographic narrative and Rieff’s “son’s memoir” have provoked controversy among viewers, readers, and reviewers over the tensions between humiliation and memorialization, between voyeurism and empathy: tensions that Sontag herself probed in *On Photography*, which explores the relationship of photographic representation to morality and knowledge, and in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, which examines the effects on viewers of horrific images of war, violence, and human suffering. Among the topics these texts invite readers to explore are patients’ rights issues of who has the authority to represent another person’s experience of cancer and what parameters should exist with regard to such representation, as well as theoretical issues of the reader-viewer’s position via a potentially exploitative gaze/look/stare. Sontag’s work, Leibovitz’s photographs, and Rieff’s memoir also evoke ongoing debates in photographic theory regarding documentary versus aesthetically driven art photography, cultural issues of death denial and representations of trauma in contemporary society, and feminist issues of female subjectivity, lesbian visibility, and reciprocal witness among writer or photographer, her or his subject, and audience.

Leibovitz’s *A Photographer’s Life*, both the 2006 book and the traveling exhibition housed from October 2008 to February 2009 at the National
Portrait Gallery in London and more recently shown in Berlin, Madrid, and Vienna, consists of large, airbrushed, highly stylized, lushly colored photos of celebrities that have earned her the designation “American master” and a series of mostly small, informal black-and-white photos of her parents, children, siblings, friends, and lover (Somerstein, np). Of the more than 300 images contained in the book, which Leibovitz calls “a memoir in photographs,” two-thirds are personal, and approximately a hundred of these depict Sontag (Guthmann, np). In many photos she appears as a traveler reflecting upon an exotic landscape, an artist at work either writing or directing theater, a woman engaged in conversation with friends or gazing at her lover’s newborn child, or a domestic partner relaxing in a shared and sometimes eroticized space, most often bath or bed. The remaining photos present Sontag hospitalized and hooked up to machines, receiving chemo at home, recovering from a bone marrow transplant, dying—and finally dead, elegantly dressed for burial. Leibovitz has acknowledged that these photos are “tough” and “contentious” but explains that “every single image that one would have a possible problem with or have concerns about, I had them too. . . . And I made the decision in the long run that the strength of the book needed these pictures, and the fact that it came out of a moment of grief gave the work dignity” (Scott, np).

In her introduction to A Photographer’s Life Leibovitz claims that selecting the cancer photographs for inclusion was an important part of her grieving process, that she edited the book “with [Sontag] in mind, as if she were standing behind me, saying what she would like to see in it” and that, if alive, Sontag “would champion the work” (np). 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 such intimate, sometimes graphic photographs; the standard code of ethics in public photography requires photographers to acquire their subject’s consent for access but not necessarily for future use. In a 2006 interview Leibovitz equivocates with regard to publication rights: “I think Susan would be really proud of those pictures—but she’s dead. Now if she were alive, she would not want them published. It’s really a difference. It’s really strange.” Ultimately, however, Leibovitz concludes that she has “been through everything mentally and emotionally, and I’m very comfortable with them” (McGuigan, np). Her ethical gauges, therefore, become the presumed approval of the deceased photographic subject and her own good intentions as artist and mourner.
Complicating any scholarly analysis of Leibovitz’s photographic representation of Sontag’s cancers is the position that her son, David Rieff, assumes in his narrative of his mother’s final year, *Swimming in a Sea of Death*. There Rieff reveals in painful detail Sontag’s struggle with MDS in all its desperation, courage, banality, and poignancy; he chronicles as well as his uncertainty as to whether he should have supported her decision “to do everything she could to save her life,” his sense of “psychological intubation” during her various hospitalizations, and his survivors’ guilt (101, 118). Despite the fact that his mother and Leibovitz were lovers for fifteen years, Rieff makes only two references to the photographer in his memoir, the first of which describes her as Sontag’s “on-again, off-again companion of many years”—a description, as one British reviewer notes, that makes Leibovitz “sound like an unsatisfactory family retainer” (Rieff, 66; Mars-Jones, np). The second and more substantial reference raises the issue of ethical commemoration.

If there really were some benevolent god or world spirit inclined to meddle in the affairs of human beings, or at least to shelter them from what they most feared, my mother would not have died slowly and painfully from MDS but suddenly from a massive heart attack—the death that all of us who, like my mother (and like me), are crippled by the fear of extinction must yearn for. Sometimes I have actually visualized it. . . . She 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. (149–50)

This passage merits close examination not only because of Rieff’s rage and grief but also for the light it sheds on the complexities of envisioning appropriate forms of memorialization. The sentence “I have actually visualized it” establishes the son’s self-authorizing gesture to create counterimages different from those that Leibovitz’s book and exhibition, and for that matter his own memory, offer—an imaginative seizure of what Roland Barthes has termed a “*camera lucida*” to replace the shadowy “*camera obscura*” whose optic images distort (80). Rieff’s use of the subjunctive clause “She would not have had the time . . .” reinforces his recurring claims that his dying mother spent months despairing over her future, torn between hope that she could yet achieve her latest goals as
a writer and fear that this third cancer would prove fatal. The infinitive phrase “to mourn herself” provides a self-reflexive alternative to conventional idioms of lamenting one’s decline, illness, or incipient death (for what does it mean, finally, to mourn one’s self?). And the phrase “to become physically unrecognizable at the end even to herself” raises questions about who is looking—who has the right to look—at pictures of a dying cancer patient, what kind of introspective or external gaze is acceptable, and what physical and psychological damage to patient and loved ones is exacted by a disease that leaves a human being alienated from her own image in the mirror and renders a maternal body abject before her tormented son.

The final sentences of Rieff’s bitter passage raise issues that Sontag explores in *Illness as Metaphor* and *On Photography* regarding cancer as a disease too often seen as shameful, photography as both an elegiac art (“all photographs are *memento mori*”) and an intrusive one, and the nature and morality of spectatorship (Sontag, *On Photography*, 15). “In teaching us a new visual code,” Sontag claims, “photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing” (*On Photography*, 3). Rieff’s phrase “humiliated posthumously” references what his mother refers to as ethical seeing; at first glance his phrase seems oxymoronic, since surely one must be alive to experience humiliation, yet it lambastes Leibovitz for allegedly violating Sontag’s privacy by making a spectacle of her dying and dead body. Rieff’s attribution of humiliation to Sontag seems ironic, given her insistence in *Illness as Metaphor* that cancer should be viewed as a disease, not a stigma. Nonetheless, the son’s condemnation of what he considers his mother’s posthumous shaming further raises questions regarding the power of a camera to wound/distort or, conversely, to offer a cruelly indexical representation rather than a generously iconic one. Rieff’s phrase “‘mementorized’ that way,” with the verb placed in angrily dismissive quotation marks, again asks readers implicitly to consider what constitutes an acceptable memorial representation (“that way” referring back to the issue of recognition). And the phrase “those carnival images of celebrity death” recalls both Sylvia Plath’s horror and titillation at the “peanut crunching crowd” who mock a suicidal woman in “Lady Lazarus” and Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of the power of carnival to attract voyeuristic audiences more interested in jeering “flawed” embodiment and enjoying dehumanizing spectacle than in celebrating creative performance or
human difference (Plath, 14–17; Bakhtin, 154). In this final phrase Rieff condemns Leibovitz as a commercial photographer who exploits the vulnerable Sontag via the camera’s diminishing lens.

Empathy and Accountability in Leibovitz’s Illness Photographs

How might viewers determine what constitutes an ethical photographic representation of another person’s suffering and death from cancer and an empathic rather than a voyeuristic response to such photographs, using Leibovitz’s images and Rieff’s critique as a case study? Let us turn now to eight images/image sequences of Sontag from A Photographer’s Life and apply Sontag’s photographic theory to consider this question. The first Leibovitz photograph, identified as Residencia Santo Spirito, Milan, 1991, is prominently located three pages after the book’s dedication page; it features Sontag lying on a bed that functions as a writer’s desk, notes and papers strewn about, a typewriter on a table to the left. The subject gazes directly at the photographer/camera with gentle, loving eyes and a slight aura of weariness, perhaps at the endless and formidable task of writing. Sontag’s elegant fingers and outstretched hands are featured, as is her body’s delicate curve and her famous long, dark hair with its dramatic white streak fanned out against the pillow. There is no sign of illness, and consent to photograph is evident in the reciprocal gaze of photographer and subject, with which the viewer can comfortably engage and from which draw aesthetic pleasure.

The second photograph, a series labeled My Apartment in London Terrace, West 23rd Street, New York, 1992, juxtaposes four frames of Sontag, nude, relaxing in her lover’s bathtub, her hand covering her post-surgical left breast. Sontag’s face is visible only in the upper left frame, which also reveals traces of her mastectomy scar, barely covered by her left arm. What Barthes calls the punctum of a moving photograph—that prick or shock of recognition that evokes identification or compassion or perhaps dread—occurs for me via the pouches under the subject’s arm that appear in the other three frames, an image that indicates as well the photograph’s studium—the cultural and historical context that helps one interpret it—by signifying the ravages of breast cancer surgery when the patient has lymph node involvement (27–28). Leibovitz’s representation of Sontag’s body, her mastectomy scar, her puckered underarm skin, and
(in three frames) her torso only (sans face) may unsettle the viewer, who feels she or he has stumbled onto a private scene. As Marianne Hirsch asks in *Family Frames*, “What happens when a [closed, familial] circle is enlarged to include other viewers and readers? . . . What are the ethics, what are the politics, of this ‘exposure,’ this public reading of images that generate their meanings in the private realm?” (107). Affiliation or alienation can result, Hirsch posits, or a vexed combination that leaves viewers feeling ambivalent or even complicit in an act of violation. In this case, however, because Sontag is fully conscious and presumably aware that the photos are being taken, neither violation nor permission is an issue, though consent to publish might be. Since Leibovitz has assured viewers, however, that taking intimate pictures is both a privilege and a responsibility to which she has tried to be accountable, and since the photos of Sontag’s scars are part of a culturally familiar body of U.S. mastectomy photographs displayed from the 1970s to the present, this photographic sequence of Sontag seems unlikely to strike most viewers as exploitative.

The next three photographic sequences, taken during and shortly after Sontag’s 1998 treatment for uterine cancer, depict what Leibovitz considers a documentary collaboration between the two women. In the first set of images, frames five through eight from a series captioned *Mt. Sinai Hospital, New York, July 1998*, Sontag is lying in a hospital bed, undressed perhaps for a bath, covered by a towel and clutching a pillow. In the top two frames her melancholy gaze is directed at neither camera nor photographer, but she seems calm; in the lower left frame, however, she looks anxious, hand clutching the bed frame as the nurse probes or cleans her partially exposed buttocks. The lower right frame restores the patient’s agency, since the nurse and she are conversing; Sontag is now clothed in a hospital gown and seems to lie in bed comfortably, left arm and legs outstretched. A related pair of images from August 1998, entitled *Susan Receiving Chemotherapy, and, above, with Ben Yeoman at 24th Street, August 1998*, emphasizes Sontag’s restoration. In the top frame she has returned home and is back at work, manuscript and assistant at hand. In the bottom frame viewers witness the aftereffects of her cancer in the form of ongoing chemotherapy via port, administered by a visiting nurse. Most riveting is Sontag’s range of expressions: intense engagement with her manuscript, an accepting half-smile for the nurse. A second dyad, entitled *Bertilda Garcia Cutting Susan’s Hair, West 24th Street, August 1998*, is juxtaposed with the chemotherapy photographs and portrays
Sontag receiving a radical haircut necessitated presumably by the hair loss expected to accompany chemo. In the top frame she gazes grimly at the camera as Garcia trims her white streak; the bottom frame offers a mirror reflection of Sontag’s sober confrontation with her new bobbed visage. To interpret these photographic sequences viewers can turn again to Barthes’s *studium*, for Sontag’s experience offers a cultural narrative familiar to most cancer patients, who after hospitalization must balance return to work with ongoing chemo and likely baldness—the latter causing a significant strain for women in general and perhaps for Sontag in particular, given that beautiful hair signifies hegemonic femininity and that Sontag’s celebrity rested on her striking looks as well as her writing.

The four-frame strategy used often by Leibovitz provides her photographic sequences with narrative depth and flow. As she explains in *A Photographer’s Life*, she stumbled upon this technique when selecting photos for the book after the deaths of both Sontag and Leibovitz’s father, who died six weeks later and whose decline she also chronicled. She grouped photos at first for convenience but soon realized that “the result was unexpectedly powerful. The pictures created portraits that were like little films. It wasn’t a single moment. It was a flow of images, which is more like life” (np). The photographs that make up this 1998 “film” of Sontag hospitalized, then back at home offer a poignant cancer narrative in images—a narrative in which cancer survivor, photographer, and viewer are reciprocally involved. All of the images of Sontag examined thus far seem ethically unambiguous in that access appears freely granted and the subject is an active participant. Moreover, these images reassure viewers in their “restitutive” movement (Arthur Frank’s term) from diagnosis to treatment to healing—the dominant cancer narrative endorsed by the American Cancer Society, whose discourse strives, as Sandra Gilbert has noted, to associate cancer not with death but with recovery (Frank, 135–37; Gilbert, 105–6).

The last three photographic sequences encode trauma and death; they have thus evoked protest, not only from Rieff but also from reviewers such as Sarah Karnasiewicz, who criticizes Liebovitz’s “reckless candor” and “unseemly striving,” and David Thomson, who calls them “voyeuristic shots of death’s moment, which is the most individualized, the most private, moment of all.” Indeed, Thomson further claims that “without consent, they seem to me unpublishable, and much more distressing than the photographer knows” (Karnasiewicz, np; Thomson, np). Leibovitz *does* know, however: she admits in *A Photographer’s Life*
that these photos are “harrowing” and that initially she did not want to “be there as a photographer” at Sontag’s bedside; rather, “I just wanted to be there.” Yet once she realized that Sontag was dying, she felt both a sense of urgency and a desire to pay homage to their earlier collaboration: “I forced myself to take pictures of Susan’s last days. Perhaps the pictures completed the work she and I had begun together when she was sick in 1998. I didn’t analyze it then. I just knew I had to do it” (np). Hence Leibovitz claims both artistic license and a history of intimacy to justify this project.

The three-frame sequence entitled *University of Washington Medical Center, Seattle, Washington, November 2004*, taken just after her bone marrow transplant, displays a hospitalized, unconscious woman no longer visually identifiable as Susan Sontag. Her sweeping streaked hair has been replaced by a wispy white cap, her face and body are swollen, her arms and legs are bruised, and she is connected to a maze of wires. In the top two frames she lies on her back, mouth open as if she might be having trouble breathing; in the lower frame she rests on her right side, a tube extending from her bandaged left leg. A related photograph, *Leaving Seattle, November 15, 2004*, shows Sontag unconscious and lying on a stretcher poised on the tarmac beside the private airplane that would convey her from Seattle home to New York to die a few weeks later. Two airline personnel work to adjust the stretcher, seemingly determining how best to load it for medical evacuation. A final photograph, *New York, December 29, 2004*, which presents Sontag’s embalmed corpse lying on a funeral home table, her face serene, recalls a nineteenth-century tableau of *memento mori*. This image jolts most twenty-first-century viewers, for as cultural critics from Julia Kristeva to Elisabeth Bronfen have noted, the modern fear of death is so pronounced that Western cultures have made the human corpse taboo, the ultimate signifier of abjection. The dead Sontag is dressed in clothing that Leibovitz meticulously selected as a means of commemorating a vibrant life of art and travel.

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 been sick on and off for several years, in the 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. (np)

In this passage Leibovitz agrees with Rieff that cancer humiliated Sontag by robbing her of agency and dignity, yet she clearly intends this depiction of her stilled lover, luminous and ritually dressed in beautiful clothing, as a photographic memorialization that works against humiliation by restoring Sontag’s elegance and their shared history. Sartorial restitution, however, does not necessarily restore Sontag’s privacy and dignity, or so Rieff has argued in decrying both the Washington Medical Center and the funeral home photographs as “carnival images of celebrity death.” Still, Rieff’s accusation may be countered by the fact that Leibovitz also chronicles her father’s decline and death from cancer in A Photographer’s Life, thereby blurring the boundary between private and public commemoration.

Sontag’s theories from Regarding the Pain of Others offer insight into trauma photographs that can help us evaluate the ethical dimensions of these photos of her own death from cancer, although it is important to note that she developed these theories in response to modern representations of war and genocide, from the Holocaust to Bosnia to Abu Ghraib, not to representations of death from disease. Nonetheless, she accurately notes that “the iconography of suffering has a long pedigree. The sufferings most often deemed worthy of representation are those understood to be the product of wrath, divine or human. (Suffering from natural causes, such as illness or childbirth, is scantily represented in the history of art . . .).” (40). The dangers of trauma photographs, once rare, but ubiquitous and thus potentially anesthetizing in twenty-first-century U.S. society, include both the exploitation of subjects captured without their knowledge at times of violence and the “exploitation of [viewer] sentiment (pity, compassion, indignation)” (80). Sontag raises questions about trauma photos applicable to any consideration of Leibovitz’s photos of her: “What is the point of exhibiting these pictures? To awaken indignation? To make us feel ‘bad’; that is, to appall and sadden? To help us mourn? . . . Are we the better for seeing these images?” (91–92). Leibovitz has explained why she took illness photos of Sontag and what they meant to her but has addressed only obliquely the question of why private images should be made public. “People have said that it’s important to publish them because so much is masked for us about what the end really is” (McGuigan, np). This argument has merit: in a culture obsessed
with death denial, where corpses are hidden away in funeral homes until embalming or cremation rather than washed, dressed, and displayed at home for family and friends to mourn, as was done in earlier centuries in America and is still done in many parts of the world, it seems important that the veil be removed. Unlike our culture’s familiar and horrific photos of the human casualties of war and atrocities, photos of ill people suffering are relatively rare, yet they too deserve representation.

Mourning and Melancholia in Rieff’s Son’s Memoir

While photographic representations of the dying strike some viewers as ethically suspect, especially when the subjects have not granted explicit permission, written texts in which sons reckon with their mothers’ deaths generally receive a positive cultural reception, as witnessed by critical praise for such diverse works as Barthes’s Camera Lucida, cartoonist Brian Fies’s graphic memoir Mom’s Cancer, and Rieff’s memoir of Sontag’s final months. Intriguingly, ethical considerations of access, consent, taste, and decency do not emerge in most reviews of Rieff’s book, perhaps because U.S. readers and reviewers take for granted a journalist-son’s right to chronicle his famous mother’s demise—indeed, it is seen as a sign of filial love—whereas, due perhaps to homophobia and/or misogyny, some condemn a lesbian photographer’s documentation of her well-known lover’s decline. Yet Rieff’s memoir is as grimly revelatory as Leibovitz’s photographs, as will become clear when we analyze the ways in which his text exposes raw and private aspects of Sontag’s cancer experience. His memoir thus serves as a second case study for determining what constitutes an ethical narrative commemoration.

Early on Rieff explores his mother’s declining ability to use words, a hallmark of her professional identity, when coping with her diagnosis of MDS, and her subsequent despair. When Sontag and Rieff visit her oncologist’s office in January 2004 to learn the results of tests taken to investigate suspicious lesions, he explains, they receive the curt verdict that Sontag has a virulent, virtually untreatable blood cancer. After a long silence and a shocked question to the physician—“So what you’re telling me . . . is that in fact there is nothing to be done. . . . Nothing I can do.”—Sontag left the office with Rieff, remained silent during their drive home, and finally responded only, “Wow” (10–11). In the following weeks she summoned language only intermittently, “through the choking haze
of her own panic”: “Disoriented and despairing, she oscillated between a hyper-manic wakefulness and intensity and a bedraggled somnolence. When I would come to her apartment, I felt as if I could feel the ghosts of stillborn screams” (46). A writer famed for her brilliant use of words is thus “outed” by her son as having been rendered inarticulate by her cancer diagnosis.

Rieff further reveals that years earlier Sontag had responded with fear and depression to her breast cancer diagnosis, her Halsted mastectomy, and her subsequent chemotherapy—and responded in ways contrary to her anti-stigmatizing argument in *Illness as Metaphor*. Explaining that her unpublished journal entries from that period are “punctuated with the repeated notation: ‘Cancer = death,’” he also documents her private use of military metaphors, to which she vehemently objects in her public writing. “One [doctor] pushes and pulls and pokes, admiring his handiwork, my vast scar,” writes Sontag. “The other pumps me full of poison, to kill my disease but not me. . . . I feel like the Vietnam War. . . . My body is invasive, colonizing. They’re using chemical weapons on me. I have to cheer” (Rieff, 28, 35). Rieff notes that Sontag laments repeatedly in her 1975 journals about “how diminished she feels”: ‘‘People speak of illness as deepening,’ she writes. ‘I don’t feel deepened. I feel flattened. I’ve become opaque to myself.’ But at the same time, she keeps asking herself how she can transform this feeling. Is there some way, she demands, that she can ‘turn it into a liberation?’” (Rieff, 35). Despite Sontag’s attempts to wrest meaning from her initial cancer experience, Rieff concludes, “Reading her diaries after her death, I am overwhelmed not by the force of her will . . . but rather on the depth of her despair,” which takes the form of a traditional mind-body split. “While I was busy zapping the world with my mind, my body fell down,” wrote Sontag. “I’ve become afraid of my own imagination” (Rieff, 41). Rieff further claims that despite his mother’s intellectual refutation of psychologist Wilhelm Reich’s assertion that “sexual repression” caused cancer, she believed it on an emotional level: “I feel my body has let me down, ‘ she wrote. ‘And my mind, too. For, somewhere, I believe the Reichian verdict. I’m responsible for my cancer. I lived as a coward, repressing my desire, my rage”’ (Rieff, 36). For generations of Sontag readers, many of them cancer patients inspired by her incisive critical insights in *Illness as Metaphor*, Rieff’s exposure of Sontag’s private assimilation of patient-blaming discourses that she publicly refuted reveals more than she—or we—might have wished.
Rieff goes on to assert his mother’s belief in her own exceptionalism and to present her as self-aggrandizing. “My mother came to being ill imbued with a profound sense of being the exception to every rule,” he explains . . . “If she no longer could believe herself exempt from the humiliations of the flesh, there was a way in which she came to believe that she would indeed be the exception” (144, 146). After all, she had survived stage-four breast cancer by exerting her own fierce determination; as Rieff notes, “she believed in her own will, and, grandiose though it may seem, in her own star. Such belief is easy to mock. But everything my mother accomplished, and she accomplished a lot, was undergirded by that belief” (29). When MDS struck, Sontag told her son, “This time, for the first time in my life, I don’t feel special.” Musing later on this statement, Rieff suggests, “It was that sense of being special . . . that had allowed her to both get through her two previous cancers and, retrospectively at least, to view the fact of having survived the disease as somehow more than a statistical accident or the luck of the biological draw . . . She did believe that she was ‘special’ in exactly the way so many artists do” (85–86). Rieff’s narrative thus invests his mother with a narcissism that readers may accept or may object to as an oedipally driven form of judgment.

Rieff also reveals how much Sontag suffered from her final cancer, how adamantly she refused to discuss death, and how desperately she insisted that he reassure her with any “over-hyped stories” he could find online about miraculous instances of MDS survival. Amazed that his mother remained “unreconciled to mortality” even “after suffering so much pain—and God, what pain she suffered!” Rieff asserts that her final illness and invasive medical treatment “had stripped her both of physical dignity and mental acuity” (13, 103). Although he longed to talk with her about dying, “I was not going to raise the subject unless she did. It was her death, not mine. And she did not raise it. To do so would have been to concede that she might die and what she wanted was survival, not extinction—survival on any terms” (17). Since Sontag employed a strategy that Rieff describes as “positive denial,” her son felt obligated to fabricate good news: “What she wanted from me was an adamant refusal to accept that it was even possible that she might not survive. . . . In the morning, I might be visiting my mother in her hospital room and, though she might be covered in sores, incontinent, and half delirious, tell her at great and cheerful length about how much better she seemed to look/seem/be compared to the day before” (128–30). While Rieff under-
standably focuses his narrative on the toll this vexed strategy took on his own psyche, his graphic account provides as well a disturbing portrait of Sontag’s wounded embodiment and psychological distress.10

Finally, Rieff probes his mother’s response to her futile last surgery and the words she muttered in her final delirium. Discussing Sontag’s treatment of last resort, her bone marrow transplant of November 2004, he provides a harrowing description of her physical transformation that might well accompany the Leibovitz photographs taken at University of Washington Medical Center to which Rieff vehemently objected.

Bedridden in the aftermath of her bone marrow transplant, her muscles soon so flaccid and wasted that she was unable even to roll over unaided, her flesh increasingly ulcerated, and her mouth so cankered that she was often unable to swallow and sometimes unable even to speak, she dreamt (and spoke, when she could speak, that is) of what she could do when she got out of the hospital and once more took up the reins of her life. The future was everything. Living was everything. Getting back to work was everything. (104–5)

Despite her ongoing hope of recovery, which Rieff considered “irrational,” Sontag declined over the next month and on the day before her death again wrestled with words, in and out of consciousness. “By then, she was not speaking to any of those around her except to ask to be turned in her bed, or given water, or to ask for the nurse. But she had been speaking a lot, in a low tone, and seemingly to herself, about her mother and about a great love of a much earlier period of her life, Joseph Brodsky” (162). Rieff’s arguably sensationalizing revelation of his mother’s delirious musings evokes readers’ empathy at a dying woman’s life review even as it risks awakening voyeuristic curiosity about Sontag’s relationship with the dissident writer Brodsky, himself recently deceased. Her last words to her son, Rieff notes, were fragmented: “But after a pause, she said, ‘I want to tell you . . . ’ That was all she said. She gestured vaguely with one emaciated hand and then let it drop onto the coverlet” (162–3).

Like Leibovitz, Rieff remains silent as to whether he sought or attained Sontag’s permission to publish details of her death. Neither does he speculate as to how his mother would respond were she alive to read his words. Like Leibovitz, who claims that she did not want to sit at Son-
tag's bedside as a photographer but wanted only to be there, Rieff explains in his memoir and in interviews that he took no notes during his mother's final illness because he wished to avoid the detached writer's "sliver of ice in the heart" and instead to be there only as a son (106). And like Leibovitz, Rieff has acknowledged that his choice to represent publicly Sontag's cancer experience and his role in it emerged gradually as part of his grief work and his desire to pay homage to her.

“Encountering the Ethical as the Gaze of Retrospect”

Both Rieff’s memoir and Leibovitz’s photographs unmask Sontag’s struggle with cancer in ways that the subject might find objectionable were she alive. But can their intimate, vivid depictions be construed as unethical? Does Rieff invite readers to judge his mother harshly for her death denial, or is he simply amazed at its perseverance? Is he too graphic in his representation of her suffering? Or do his revelations that his mother called out to him in her final hours and invested in him sole authority to choose her burial site implicitly bestow her blessing upon his literary representation of her cancer experience? Likewise, might Leibovitz’s painful photographs of Sontag’s illness and death entice viewers across a line between empathy and voyeurism? Does she produce “carnival images” that objectify Sontag, as Rieff alleges, or exploit Sontag in an attempt to establish herself as artist rather than commercial photographer, as some reviewers contend? (150). Or do the years of intimacy the women shared and Leibovitz’s revelation that she and Sontag collaborated on earlier cancer photographs imply the subject’s consent to have later traumatic images taken, published, and exhibited? If reader-viewers grant that consent is not an issue, because it can be assumed or is either unknowable or irrelevant, what about audience complicity: how “should” we respond to Rieff’s account of Sontag’s death throes, to Leibovitz’s images of her swollen corpse, especially given Sontag’s caveat that “no ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain”? (Regarding the Pain of Others, 7).

One ethical task of writer, photographer, and reader-viewers of cancer narratives is to act as witnesses whose empathic engagement serves, in Hirsch’s words, to “enlarge the postmemorial circle” (251). I am inclined to view both Leibovitz’s photographs and Rieff’s memoir as commemorating Sontag in an ethical manner because their representations
bear unflinching, loving witness to her struggle with cancer—and because their representations move readers and viewers; help us mourn Sontag, our own beloved dead, our mortal selves; and make us stronger for having confronted the specter of loss. As Sontag notes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, however, it is not necessarily desirable to be moved if we respond sentimentally or self-servingly to “proclaim our own innocence as well as our impotence” in the face of horror; the question is what we do with the knowledge traumatic photographs bring, an issue of spectatorial accountability that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson raises in *Staring* by proposing an ethics of looking: “If starers can identify with starees [sic] enough to jumpstart a sympathetic response that is then ‘translated into action,’ staring turns the corner toward the ethical” (Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 102; Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 185–86). Politically engaged beholding of images of women dying from cancer bears particular significance in contemporary U.S. culture, given the prevalence of the breast cancer marketplace with its infantilizing gifts of teddy bears and toys and its “ultrafeminine themes” (to use Barbara Ehrenreich’s phrase)—all emphasizing sentimentality over radical activism (44). “Let me die of anything but suffocation by the pink sticky sentiment embodied in that teddy bear,” Ehrenreich begs the gods and her rampaging cells (45). While there are ten million cancer survivors in the United States today whom we all can celebrate, more than two hundred forty thousand women are diagnosed annually with breast cancer, and forty thousand per year die of it; many thousands more die annually of lung, ovarian, and uterine cancers, as well as blood cancers caused by chemotherapies necessitated by earlier cancers, as Sontag did. Those dying of breast cancer deserve our visual and political activism; those dead from cancer deserve not to be forgotten. Leibovitz’s photographs and Rieff’s memoir can thus be construed as ethical because they invite viewers and readers to behold Sontag and to remember her as both a healthy, vibrant woman and an ill and dying one, for as she argued in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “remembering is an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself. Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead. So the belief that remembering is an ethical act is deep in our natures as humans, who know we are going to die, and who mourn those who in the normal course of things die before us” (115). While she goes on to note that “too much remembering (of ancient grievances: Serbs, Irish) embitters,” Sontag urges that commemorating the dead be accompanied by penetrating cultural reflection on why and how visual
and verbal depictions of them matter, for while there is no such thing as collective memory, “there is collective instruction,” and “there’s nothing wrong with standing back and thinking” (85, 115, 118).

Readers and viewers might further evaluate the ethics of Rieff’s memoir and Leibovitz’s photographs through the lens of Sontag’s commentary regarding the effects that encountering images of the Holocaust had upon her as a child and subsequently as a philosopher. In On Photography Sontag analyzes her experience of a “negative epiphany” at age twelve when she found in a bookstore photographic images of concentration camp survivors.

What good was served by seeing them? They were only photographs—of an event I had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to affect, of suffering I could hardly imagine and could do nothing to relieve. When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying. (20)

The process described here—breakage, wounds, limit-setting, numbness, and perpetual howling—depicts the conflict that Sontag considers inevitable for viewers of traumatic images, which compel even as they risk anesthetizing. In the words of Griselda Pollock, the young Sontag responded in a manner “typical as a defence against the threat of the traumatic image,” as “a certain withdrawal or an overaffectivity floods the viewing subject” (“Dying, Seeing, Feeling,” 224). Yet these numbing images moved her over many years: “something is still crying” (Sontag, On Photography, 20).

Pollock’s theory explains further the haunting power and ethical contexts of images of trauma. The ethical involves our relation to an other, and images of humans at their moment of most extreme vulnerability demand that viewers consider not only what such images might do to us but also what they might “do for both us and the other across time and space,” as part of the work of cultural mourning and remembering (Pollock, “Dying, Seeing, Feeling,” 235). To explore these issues Pollock employs the discourse of Israeli artist Bracha L. Ettinger, whose parents were Holocaust survivors and whose commemorative montage paintings invite viewers to “encounter the ethical as the gaze of retrospect” (Pollock, “Dying, Seeing, Feeling,” 214). This “matrixial gaze,” as Ettinger...
terms it, resembles neither the appropriative, fetishizing male gaze that Laura Mulvey critiques in her classic essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” nor the Orphic gaze of mastery that Ettinger refutes in her acclaimed Eurydice paintings (Ettinger, 116–17; Mulvey, 6). Rather, Ettinger’s work encourages “a different kind of scopic encounter with the trauma of the other,” a space of intersubjectivity that foregrounds the viewer’s responsibility to the image and the other-in-trauma (Pollock, “Dying, Seeing, Feeling,” 227). Through a profound act of reciprocal witness—what Pollock terms “an ethical move of co- and trans-subjectivity”—spectatorship can be transformed: “The sharing of the humanity of others or the dehumanizing pain of others can be invoked in us by the creation of a threshold, a border-space that never collapses, never closes” (232–35). Although Rieff’s and Leibovitz’s disturbing images of Sontag’s death from cancer are not comparable to representations of genocide, they do depict the trauma of an other and thus invite an ethical form of homage, a memorializing gesture that Ettinger terms “wit(h)nessing,” a space of affiliation that affirms the “impossibility of not sharing” (147–48).

Leibovitz’s photographic sequences and Rieff’s memoir perform significant cultural work that fosters interconnection. These narratives challenge the victim-blaming ideologies that Sontag critiqued in Illness as Metaphor and instead offer empowering representations of an ill woman’s exceptional life and a dying woman’s struggle, grounded in the authority of lived experience. In addition, Leibovitz’s and Rieff’s narratives facilitate individual, familial, and cultural mourning for one woman who died of cancer—Susan Sontag—and by extension for the hundreds of thousands of others who succumbed similarly, for intersubjective cancer narratives commemorate the ill, the dying, and the dead even as they help the living cope. Such narratives also invite reader-viewers to engage in what S. Lochlann Jain has termed an “elegiac politics”: a communal, activist response to the corporate-driven, exploitative elements of breast cancer culture, a “retrieval of affect and death and illness in the context of profit” (“Cancer Butch,” 506). Moreover, Leibovitz’s photographs of Sontag and Rieff’s memoir present graphically the anger, fear, and grief with which a dying subject and her loved ones must contend, thus posing a needed corrective to death denial or to facile idealizations of the cancer experience. These narratives should therefore be subject to comparable ethical scrutiny: I see no legitimate reason for Rieff’s autobiographical depiction of Sontag’s death to be widely praised by reviewers
as “intelligent,” “movingly written . . . elegant and pained,” “power[ful] beyond mere eulogy, elegy, or complaint” while Leibovitz’s photographic depiction is widely castigated as “an unconscious exercise in ego gratification,” “shocking in [its] intimacy,” “morally vulnerable,” and devoid of “considerations of taste and decency.”19 Instead, readers and viewers who travel alongside either Leibovitz or Rieff should be viewed as privileged to experience intersubjective encounters with another suffering human “in which trauma is carried, processed, and remembered” (Pollock, “Dying, Seeing, Feeling,” 234). From my scholarly perspective both narratives provide tender, eloquent, and ethical commemoration; they evoke a transformational mode of spectatorship characterized not by voyeurism but by compassionate witness.