

On mourning, making, circulating: Refusing the 'posthumous humiliation' of Susan Sontag

Like a car, a camera is sold as a predatory weapon — one that's as automated as possible, ready to spring — Susan Sontag *On photography* (1973)

The 'loquacious presence' of a loved one's death can demand a productive response. For artists working in literary and visual mediums, the affect of private grief is often channelled into a memorialisation project where a tangible artefact is constructed, and ultimately then made public. When noted intellectual Susan Sontag died from cancer, her 'close friend' Annie Leibovitz worked through her mourning process via the production, circulation (and commodification) of carefully selected images in A photographer's life: 1990-2005. The book's sweep of photographs — from an eclectic lens that documents and mediates the pathos of familial bonds, traversed geographies of global landmarks, and signature poses of the famous — dialogically, insistently and inevitably (re) arrange themselves around the haunting spectre of Sontag's illness and death. Leibovitz's imbricating desire is for a viewer to participate in a shared testimonial enterprise of mourning Sontag's palliative decline and abject body in extremis by gazing at her photographic record. This paper offers a personal meditation — an explanation (perhaps expiation) — on my respectful refusal to perform the ethically compromised role of Sontag's reciprocal witness.

Keywords: Annie Leibovitz, Susan Sontag, mourning, photography, reciprocal witness, ethical viewing

Missing the aperture (and possibly the boat)

A detail overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration. By the mark of something, the photograph is no longer 'anything whatever' — Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida* (1980: 49).

It was billed as the cultural event not to be missed. Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art was 'offering Australians a rare opportunity to see a world-renowned collection of images from famous public figures to intimate family portraits' (AAP 2010). Annie Leibovitz's touring exhibition (suitably titled *Annie Leibovitz: A photographer's life 1990-2005*), having already broken attendance records in the US and Europe, was wending its way to Antipodean shores.

On offer: the celebrity ... the fame ... hers 'and her photographic subjects'. The rare opportunity to see (up close and personal) a travelling retrospective 'of the most highly paid photographer in the world' (McDonald 2007). Unfortunately, the unmissable event was, well, missed.

I was not among the '1,146 viewers' per day who saw her work during 'the extended six-month stay' (Lesnie 2011). As if to underscore the irretrievable passing, museum director Elizabeth Ann Macgregor emphasised: 'During her visit to Sydney, Annie explained that this exhibition came together at a very particular moment in her life. She also said that she was unlikely to put such personal images on show again' (ibid).

The caravan, the carnival had moved on

Perhaps it is because I am delighted (or depressed) to know that the thing of the past, by its immediate radiations (its luminances), has really touched the surface which in its turn my gaze will touch, that I am not very fond of Color — Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida* (1980: 81).

So addressing (belatedly) 'the irretrievable passing' with one phone call, I rang the independent bookseller to see if *A photographer's life* could be purchased as a book: Yes, it could, but I would need to wait for it to be ordered from overseas and then mailed to me. Not having sighted a hard copy of the retrospective before ordering it, I am not sure what I was expecting from the now *New York Times* best seller ... perhaps a trace of a

remembered promise from the MCA exhibition? A quick refresher:

At the heart of the exhibition, Leibovitz's personal photography documents scenes from her life, including the birth and childhood of her three daughters, and vacations, reunions, and rites of passage with her parents, her extended family and close friends. The exhibition also features Leibovitz's portraits of well-known figures, including actors such as Jamie Foxx, Daniel Day-Lewis, Demi Moore, Scarlett Johansson, Al Pacino, Nicole Kidman and Brad Pitt as well as artists and architects such as Richard Avedon, Brice Marden, Philip Johnson, Chuck Close and Cindy Sherman (*ArtDaily* 2011).

This particular list circulated *sans* Sontag.

Eventually, the tome from overseas arrived. Its monstrous metrics exceeded any alignment with what a coffee table could comfortably accommodate; the cumulative effect of massed unnumbered pages proved almost too heavy to turn; and its freighted affect became something almost beyond bearing. What was I now to make of (and to do with) those photographs of Susan Sontag? Without warning, without sanction, I was gazing at her dying. I was gazing at her dead.

What to do when 'death is loose' in the world

... impossible for me to believe in 'witnesses'; impossible, at least, to be one ...
– Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida* (1980: 65).

I needed to look elsewhere. I thought Mary K. DeShazer would offer a considered perspective on how I could (more) ethically (re) engage with the (re) produced bodies of the terminally ill; and with the dead. And, with Susan Sontag especially. Having already traversed DeShazer's impressive interdisciplinary scholarship in *Fractured bodies: Reading women's cancer narratives* (2005) for a previous project I knew of her empathic commitment to promoting testimony and advocacy. I was sure she might offer an epiphany to assist with working through my deep feelings of trespass.

Indeed, at first DeShazer provided confirmation of (and a justification for) my sense of betraying the Other. In her article entitled 'Cancer narrative and an ethics of commemoration: Susan Sontag, Annie Leibovitz, and David Rieff', DeShazer had already begun the dutiful work of researching and teasing out the *aporia* of what to do with '... the tensions between

humiliation and memorialization, between voyeurism and empathy...' (2009: 216). And then I struck more gold with her concretely wording the particular aspects that were most haunting me:

... the patient's 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 (2009: 216).

This was followed by her timely arrival at what I considered to be the penultimate crux of the matter: 'Part of the ethical ambiguity of these images rests in Leibovitz's silence as to whether she had Sontag's permission to take and publish such intimate, sometimes graphic photographs' (2009: 217). It seemed incontrovertible that the photographs presenting Sontag 'hospitalized and hooked up to machines, receiving chemo at home, recovering from bone marrow transplant, dying – and finally, dead, elegantly dressed for burial' (2009: 217) should rightly raise my concerns around what constitutes 'an ethics of commemoration' (2009: 215).

But as I neared the end of what I imagined to be a thesis holding to account the revelatory photographic and literary artefacts (and motivations) of Sontag's one-time photographer companion, and Sontag's noted-author son, there was a palpable, ontological shift as DeShazer's critique gave way to a new – even more pressing – ethical claim on *me*. I had to confront her (unexpected) conclusion:

From my own scholarly perspective both narratives provide tender, eloquent, and ethical commemoration; they evoke a *transformational mode of spectatorship characterized not by voyeurism but by reciprocal witness* (2009: 232, emphasis added).

Given my academic esteem for DeShazer, it was briefly tempting to seek quick absolution from my status as Sontag's 'starrer' by rarefying it as a performance of 'reciprocal witnessing', but in the end DeShazer's invitation was one that I had to – with all respect – refuse.

When first encountering the arresting photographs of Sontag's illness-marked and barely recognisable body lying on a bio-medically traced hospital bed at the University

of Washington Medical Centre hospital, then strapped to the layered hospital gurney in sterile transit on a tarmac in Seattle to be transported (somewhere) by air ambulance, and finally, her abject (albeit aestheticised) corpse inhabiting a New York funeral home – I wanted nothing more than to witness Sontag with a generous reciprocity. I wanted in some deeply human way to ‘rescue the dead’ (Kilby and Rowland 2014: 8). But I couldn’t. I wanted to find a way to view these images of Sontag’s illness and death with the eyes of the ideal witness who would ethically ‘respond to trauma’s unavoidable demands’ (Caruth 2014: xiv).

But because of the intractable issues that I see complicating and constellating around the production of – and public uses for – these specific photographs, that is, because of the photographer’s processes and justifications around mourning, making and circulating them, I find any retrospective (or prospective) claim that I might make to serve as Sontag’s reciprocal witness when viewing them to be ethically compromised.

On mourning

Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe – Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida* (1980: 118).

I understand and respect Annie Leibovitz’s need to make something of – and from – her grief. Grief can place urgent and insistent demands on an artist to produce *something* from the traumatic experience of a severed physical relationship, particularly when death inscribes the loss as a permanent one. So I read Annie Leibovitz’s initial grief reaction in the general way that Darian Leader describes in *The new black: Mourning, melancholia and depression*, where he also provides a useful insight into Freud’s original theorising about loss:

Mourning involves the long and painful work of detaching ourselves from the loved one we have lost. ‘Its function,’ writes Freud, ‘is to detach the survivors’ memories and hopes from the dead.’ Mourning, then is different from grief. Grief is our reaction to a loss, but mourning is how we process it (2009: 25–26, emphasis added).

I think it is essential that I acknowledge here the importance of Leibovitz finding a way to reconcile and assimilate the trauma of observing and participating in Sontag’s death from such

close proximity. Here, highly regarded trauma scholar Victoria Burrows helpfully articulates the process a traumatised person necessarily undergoes when moving towards a form of productive mourning:

In order to move beyond psychic survival into a form of recovery, the traumatised memory must be moved from its recurring pattern of unconscious repetitions into the conscious mind where it can be integrated. Only then can grief be mourned. Only then can withheld grief be mourned (Burrows 2014: 152–153).

And importantly Leibovitz herself offers an insight into her grieving process:

After Susan died, on December 28, 2004, I began searching for photos of her to put in a little book that was intended to be given to the people who came to her memorial service. The project was important to me, because it made me feel close to her and helped me to say good-bye (2006).

However, Leibovitz’s memorial project becomes ethically complicated for me when it moves from the domain of private grief, and expands beyond an initial purpose of remembering and honouring the dead. In her exploration of ‘The posthumous life of Susan Sontag’, Nancy K. Miller identifies one of the chief concerns I have with what the photographer’s grief finally (re) produces in book form: ‘Some of Leibovitz’s photos are touching, a few are endearing, but most are hard to look at.’ And here, is the problematic crux: ‘How does the photographer justify exposing Sontag’s physical suffering, as well as images of her private, bodily life?’ (2009: 205).

Perhaps, some might justify this kind of exposure by arguing that legitimate works of mourning can sometimes involve both private and public rituals as ways to farewell the dead. One might contend (or, perhaps, expect) that a professional photographer such as Leibovitz would use her photographic practice as a means to document, record and console her own grief, and that she then has a right to share that grief/artefact with other sympathetic mourners. In one sense, the use of a camera lens might be seen as a strategy to (re) produce evidence of her way of coping with and detaching from relational loss. The taking (and sharing) of private photographs recording Sontag’s dying and death might be read as the only way in which Leibovitz felt she could most

competently, completely – and finally – testify to the significance of her one-time companion.

In a moving catalogue entitled *Reveries: Photography and mortality and reveries*, art curator and academic Helen Ennis writes: '... when it comes to death, photography isn't necessarily a separate activity carried out in isolation from everything else – it can be part of a whole range of practices, of ritual' (2007: 5).

Putting Miller's earlier question temporarily to one side, and pausing to reflect for one moment on Leibovitz's relationship with the dead, I can see that there is a ritual being enacted by her visit to Frank Campbell's funeral home where she chooses the clothes Sontag's corpse will be dressed in for burial. Some might even argue that the act of Leibovitz photographing Sontag in extremis is a kind of 'embalming' where she seeks 'to counteract death by providing the corpse with a visible life-like presence' somehow allowing 'it to unthreateningly inhabit the space of the living for a prolonged span of time' (Fernandez 2011: 346).

However, I need to come back to Miller's persistent question, and try to answer it in relation to my own viewing. For me, Leibovitz's memorial project becomes an unjustifiable/unethical enterprise when she moves it from the domain of private grief, and expands it beyond the initial purpose/context of remembering and honouring the dead.

The private ritual of viewing, preparing and potentially photographing/memorialising a corpse is typically governed by protocols that symbolically protect the dead from the visit and intrusive gaze of an undesignated mourner. Such boundaries are determined by relational proximity, and in the real world where Sontag was formally embodied I would not have been permitted access to her hospital room, and certainly would not have been beckoned by her, or her immediate kin, to participate in any kind of ritual at the funeral home. In the everyday world of our own lives where we view first-hand the corporeal disintegration, and eventual death of someone we love from cancer, the demarcated spaces around public and private witnessing necessarily narrow as a way of protecting, preserving, and privileging their dignity.

Conversely, Leibovitz's mourning process ultimately produces a socially transgressive trajectory where the vital protections around private inter-subjective viewing spaces and encounters are collapsed and opened to wider

and potentially more indiscriminate gaze. In having the normally inaccessible realm of Sontag's last days as a dying patient and then corpse circulated (deliberately) by Leibovitz's images, I struggle to find any legitimate entitlement in viewing them. The photographs may have begun their life as individual works of mourning, but they now exist as referents of Leibovitz's cultural capital more than they do functioning as signifiers of Sontag's sanctity.

When I re-read the funeral home ritual it somehow becomes more than a temporal and individuated performance of grief alone; it is as if Leibovitz's artistry was not only preparing Sontag for contemporaneous burial, but also future public display. The photographs might be re-read not only as a ritual involving a claiming of corpse from its abjection, but also as a work of possession. In writing about this (double) act of claiming in her essay 'While Susan lay dying', cultural theorist Angela McRobbie writes: 'And, so the death pictures are as much about possession and about being dispossessed in loss, as they are about any social commentary on dying', concluding: 'These pictures suggest that the taker is temporarily "out of her mind" with grief' (McRobbie 2006).

In a revealing interview with *New York Times* journalist Janny Scott, Leibovitz herself reveals the compulsive and immersive grief at the locus of production in some of the more confronting photographs of Sontag:

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 really didn't analyze it. I felt driven to it (Scott 2006).

When I first sat with the series of images taken of Sontag in the funeral home, a sequence of disembodied thumbnail prints lingering over selected parts of her recently dressed and coiffured (but bruised) body, I did not encounter her name as a linguistic presence on the page; only the place and date caption, the clinical ordering of jpg numbers which anchored Sontag to the viewing platform. In earlier photographs that preceded this sequence, Leibovitz is able to record with precision at the bottom of the page the details of the people, place and time filling her frame; one such example: 'Susan with me and Paolo Dilonardo, Paris, New Year's Eve, 2001' (Leibovitz 2006).

Yet in re-rendering Sontag's death for a later textual viewing public, Leibovitz's double spread of backlit negatives work to convey (and betray) her subject's ultimate abandonment on the following page: Sontag's corpse is constituted by a colourless double spread of layered, pieced together photographic fragments set against a backdrop of white oblivion. There is no caption on the page which, for me, reflects the distressing representation of Sontag's ultimate vulnerability: to be centred alone, pictured without time, without place, without company, and most significantly without her own name – the signature trace of Susan Sontag. I find it is impossible to witness reciprocally Sontag via these photographs because Leibovitz's representation elides and excludes any true sense of the Other. Ultimately through her construction and public circulation of the images of Sontag's unanchored corpse she consigns her friend's body to the liminality of public (cyber) spaces without any safety or containment line.

In my viewing experience, what *A photographer's life* ultimately privileges (as the title suggests) is the consuming singularity of Leibovitz's mourning process – not Sontag's, or mine in relation to her. She writes:

That summer, I moved the material for this book to Rhinebeck and set up a workshop in the barn. Rosanne Cash had given me an advance copy of her new CD, *Black cadillac*, which she wrote after both her parents and her stepmother died. I would go into the barn every morning and put it on very loud and cry for ten minutes or so and then start working, editing the pictures. I didn't realize until later how far the work on the book had taken me through the grieving process (Leibovitz 2006, emphasis added).

On making

The other means of taming the photograph is to generalize, to gregarize, banalize it until it no longer confronted by any relation to which it can mark itself, assert its special character, its scandal, its madness – Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida* (1980: 96).

I want to return briefly to the way in which Leibovitz's making of these images taken at the funeral home work to 'dress up' Sontag for public consumption, rather than simply for the occasion of her private burial. Leibovitz reveals:

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 the one we found in Milan. It's a homage to Fortuny, made the way he made them, with pleated material. Susan had a gold one and a green-blue one. She has 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 ... (2006).

For me, what emerges from her description of the artistic decisions made here is something reminiscent of the artifice associated with one of Leibovitz's *Vanity Fair* shoots; the dress, the fabric, create and reference 'a homage to Fortuny', a Spanish fashion designer, rather than gesturing any substantial or abiding elevation of Sontag. While Leibovitz provides specific clothing items for Sontag to be dressed in as part of her strategy for reversing the 'humiliation' associated with Sontag's illness – a de-glamourised body subjected to biomedical indignity – these photographs, in the end, reveal more about the photographer as creative practitioner, than someone really redeeming a suffering body. Other viewers though provide an oppositional reading to the one I have just offered, suggesting that:

The filtered light of these photographs, the formality of Sontag's pose, and the grandeur of her dress, recall the nineteenth-century daguerreotype images of the dead. Sontag's death is solemnised, rendered ethereal, elegiac, in this act of recall (Wilson 2012: 1).

I would like to be able to read these photographs of Sontag in the reverential way that Wilson does, but I cannot ignore Nancy Miller's intransigent question, and now the insistent ones (re) posed by David Herman's article 'Schwarzenegger in the snow, Sontag in extremis'. In responding to these particular photographs (and the ones of Sontag 'in hospital, seriously ill'), Herman's questions: '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?' return me gravely to the unresolved issue of the subject's 'privacy and dignity' (2006, 2007: 53).

Given that Sontag's son is largely ghosted from *A photographer's life*, and completely omitted from Leibovitz's narration (and artistic possession) of Sontag's preparatory ritual for burial, the obvious answer to Herman's question of what Sontag's son thinks of these photographs does not really matter to the photographer. But in situations such as this

one, the feelings of Sontag's next of kin should, at least, now, deeply matter to me as a viewer who has participated in the consumption of these photographs.

In his own work of mourning *Swimming in a sea of death: A son's memoir*, Rieff tells us of his mother's resistance to dying, and how he sees the after-death photographs of Sontag via their public circulation demeaning his mother's image:

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 (2008: 150).

His use of ironised inverted commas around the word 'memorialized' calls to account the way in which the photographer has justified and attributed a particular purpose to a series of photographs that does not accord with the kind of memorialisation that would work to enshrine respect around the way his mother's corpse is now exhibited and viewed. For Rieff, and for me: 'Sartorial restitution, however, does not necessarily restore Sontag's privacy or her dignity' (DeShazer 2009: 223).

On circulating

Each photograph is read as the private appearance of its referent: the age of photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public... – Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida* (1980: 98).

In a timely journal article Bernadette Brennan asks: 'Should authors remain silent in the face of grief? Should private sorrow remain always private?' (2012). These are questions that can be usefully re-applied to Leibovitz's exhibiting and publishing confronting images of Susan Sontag that formed part of the photographer's mourning process. And in this scenario, I believe that the taking/making of these images may have legitimately constituted part of the therapeutic work of healing if they had only remained private. In the endnotes from her chapter on 'The posthumous life of Susan Sontag', Nancy K. Miller's writes: '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"' (2009: 214). The fundamental 'crossing the line' occurs at

the point where Leibovitz publicly distributes them as Rieff testifies again in an interview with UK journalist Cathy Galvin: '...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' (2008). This sentiment was similarly echoed to Australian journalist Susan Wyndham when interviewing Rieff in 2008 for the Sydney Writers' Festival:

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 (2008).

Wyndham asks whether or not his own memoir (publicly) charting Sontag's death might be likened to the photographs? Rieff's reply (and a position I agree with in his case): '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).

The recurring trace of Leibovitz's spurious proposition that a person's death equals a form of consent for exposure – 'If she was alive, of course this work wouldn't be published' – is ethically chilling. The magical thinking that follows on from such a comment, to me, represents Leibovitz's final betrayal of Sontag: 'I mean she would champion this work' (Scott 2006).

I find it hard to imagine that Sontag – who dedicated so much of her public life to the writerly pursuit of de-stigmatising cultural representations of illness; who questioned photography's role in the exploitation and fetishisation of suffering; who regarded with great care the pain of others; and who had at the foreground of her own work the very practical question of what our social responsibilities to this pain might require from us by way of lived action – would 'champion' the pictorial commodification and commercial circulation of her own deceased body for Leibovitz's ultimate financial gain.

In the *Ways of seeing*, a text dialoguing with Sontag's *On photography*, John Berger adumbrates what it means for photographs to circulate in the public sphere (and I add here specifically ones isolated from a context that may have originally intended them as a work of mourning/'memorialisation'): '... photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They

offer appearances – with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances – prised away from their meaning’ (Berger 1972: 52).

Once releasing, prising (prizing?) and then selling Sontag as a product in a digital economy, Leibovitz (who actually knows how this kind of economy works) has, I suggest, comprehensively failed to uphold her relational duty of care because as Caitlyn McKinney points out she is now:

...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 (McKinney 2010: 8-9).

McKinney writes: ‘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’ (ibid). I note here both an emblematic problem and irony: that McKinney herself, whether this is an act of self-referencing irony to prove her point, has nonetheless detached the photo of Sontag’s corpse from its original context and embedded it in her online article referencing it simply as ‘Figure.1’ with the image source listed as <http://www.bagnewsnotes.com/files/misc/liebowitz-sontag-deceased.jpg>, a website which operates ‘beyond the scope of the book’. I am haunted by the question: Who (now) has the responsibility of caring for Susan Sontag’s digital remains?

Because I don’t have two lives (and because Sontag should)

And here the essential question first appeared: did I *recognize* her? – Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida* (1980: 65).

In justifying the choice to include such intimate photos of Susan Sontag in her retrospective, Leibovitz prefaces the work with an overarching rationale:

... 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).

What *A photographer’s life* invites me to view through the presaging use of the title’s indefinite article is just that: a photographer’s life and not *the* subject’s. Because Leibovitz resists the demarcation of domains operating in her own world, she denies the right of Sontag to have her distinctions as a private and public self maintained after her death. With her camera lens Leibovitz conflates the two separate lives of both the photographer and the writer and assumes they can be circulated as one and the same. From this standpoint, it is impossible to offer Sontag any form of witnessing as she can’t really be seen. As Frances Guerin and Roger Hallis write: ‘The encounter with an other is central to any conception of bearing witness’ (2007: 10).

Apology: A large summa

I would have to make my recantation, my palinode – Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida* (1980: 60).

In the same introduction to her book Leibovitz writes: ‘Taking intimate pictures of family members and people to whom you are close is a privilege, and it brings with it a certain responsibility’ (2006). By circulating intimate photographs without Sontag’s informed consent, Leibovitz abdicates her final and most important ‘responsibility’ to create, care for and preserve someone’s legacy after their death.

So wanting/needing to apologise to Susan Sontag in some meaningful way, it falls to me to make some kind of reparation; to attempt some kind of rediscovery of the ‘ethics of seeing’ she first articulates in *On photography*; and to (re) view her again in the place that she is most comfortable, as a ‘passionate member of the republic of letters’ (Dilonardo and Jump 2007: x). As part of this restorative act I want to call on the assistance of Ann Jurecic, who in her important work on illness narratives, reminds us of the prior claim Sontag placed on me as her reader:

In exposing what photography fails to, Sontag suggests what she would like her writing to accomplish. Sontag clearly wants her writing to give access to what is real, transmit knowledge, and create conditions for compassionate understanding and ethical action (Jurecic 2012: 72).

In (re) uniting with Sontag's enduring textual body, I was delighted to find that in her expansive way she had already refused any ultimate posthumous humiliation (and 'final photograph') by proleptically reciprocating with ethical questions of her own: '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 any better for seeing these images?' (Sontag 2003: 91-92).

Notes

¹ In his moving work *Living up to death*, Paul Ricoeur eloquently describes 'The life of death ... making itself heard. The agony of death, its shining and mournfully loquacious presence' (2009: 20)

² In 2007, the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra, Australia, hosted an exhibition called *Reveries: Photography and mortality* with the aim of bringing together Australian and New Zealand photographers whose work deals 'with the last phase of people's lives'. Delivering a moving meditation on mortality and dying, Dr Frank Brennan, an Australian palliative care physician, launched the exhibition. His address can be accessed on line at http://www.portrait.gov.au/site/exhibition_subsite_reveries8.php

³ *At the same: Essays and speeches* is a collection of essays and speeches composed during Sontag's final years. Included amongst the sixteen pieces is an essay entitled 'Photography: A little summa'. It is a short essay comprising 14 thesis statements, the last one being Sontag's assertion: 'There is no final photograph' (Sontag 2007: 128)

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