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ANNE LEIBOVITZ’S QUEER CONSUMPTION OF MOTHERHOOD

Michele Pridmore-Brown

The photographer Annie Leibovitz, chronicler of American life for thirty-five years, has created many of the images that people our collective unconscious: countercultural images in the 1970s when she traveled with the Beatles for *Rolling Stone* to controversial covers for *Vanity Fair*. She has chronicled her generation’s passage through society and every other generation’s as well. In the process, she has pushed limits and broken taboos, and she has destabilized notions of the beautiful, the outré, and the poignant. The point here is that she has not only photographed American culture but also changed it—that is, shifted the line between what is considered acceptable and unacceptable. Her genius lies in capturing the images that in retrospect are viewed as iconic: of Allen Ginsburg smoking a joint, of a naked John Lennon wrapped in fetal fashion around Yoko Ono hours before his death, of the actress Demi Moore naked and cradling her pregnant belly. This last, a cover for *Vanity Fair* in 1991, was almost pulled by then–editor Tina Brown; and while some newsstands wrapped the issue in opaque cellophane to protect the public’s sensibilities, others refused to sell it. Eventually, the image won a prize from the American Society of Magazine Editors in 2005 for second-best cover from the past forty years (the first prize went to the Lennon image). This signature ability to shock and then change the public’s sensibilities has made Leibovitz a daring moral and aesthetic pioneer even while she continues to be controversial.¹

The subject matter of this essay is Leibovitz’s traveling exhibit and her book based on the exhibit, *Annie Leibovitz: A Photographer’s Life, 1990–2005* and, in particular, her representation of her own “belated” motherhood. The exhibit opened in Brooklyn; traveled to San Francisco, where I saw it in 2008 at the Legion of Honor and then moved on to London and Paris. Leibovitz has typically shocked the public using other people’s bodies; in this exhibit and book she also used her own ageing body to discomfit if not outright shock her viewers—in particular through dramatic images of her postmidlife (PM) cooption of motherhood. I use the acronym PM,
which is deliberately ambiguous; it can stand not only for “postmidlife” but also for “post(peri)menopausal.” It is meant to suggest the crossing over of a “natural” boundary.

The photos of the exhibit, Leibovitz notes in her introduction to the book, span the years of her relationship with the writer and critic Susan Sontag. Their relationship was mostly closeted—in the sense that Sontag and Leibovitz never referred to themselves as lovers, or as lesbians. Indeed, both refused labels other than the one of “friend.” In this book, Leibovitz again insists on the word “friend” and thus on ambiguity; yet some of the photos seem to depict their relationship as unambiguously intimate. The book, Leibovitz notes in her introduction, is “a beauty book” that gestated in conversation with Sontag. It does contain images of surreal beauty: of timeless landscapes in Jordan and Egypt, for instance, which, notably, she visited with Sontag. It also contains the famous images from Leibovitz’s professional portfolio: Hollywood actresses and bionic athletes captured in their moment of incandescent youth and indelible images of the seemingly larger-than-life moguls, entertainers, and politicians of our era. Interspersed with these iconic images—are small, ostensibly private, family photos: black-and-white images of Leibovitz’s large extended family of origin, as well as a great many of Sontag, in bed with a typewriter, on vacation, enduring chemotherapy, and dying; the photos of her dying are juxtaposed with images of the births of Leibovitz’s daughters, by which time Leibovitz was in her fifties.

“I don’t have two lives,” Leibovitz explains in her introduction. “This is one life, and the personal pictures and the assignment work are all part of it.” She adds that it is “the closest thing to who I am that I’ve ever done” (Leibovitz 2006). I focus here on the family photos, and especially on the context within which Leibovitz presents her PM motherhood. Part of that context is clearly her fifteen-year relationship with Sontag. Arguably, her book is a “coming out” narrative—though not in the sense of coming out as a lesbian (she never espouses a fixed identity), but rather in bringing her relationship with Sontag to the fore (it is “a love story,” she does concede) and suggesting that it is pivotally intertwined with the creation of beauty and of her daughters. The photos then document Sontag’s role in her life, and in her motherhood. They constitute the creation of a canonical, if hardly conventional, family album. At the same time, they work in Leibovitz’s signature fashion at another level: to shock, estrange, and then render complicit her viewer in her “belated” motherhood. As the lens of an era, she is, I argue, in the privileged
position of being able to publicly queer motherhood as an institution in the sense of consuming it against the grain of its normative consumption—and to render her consumption not aberrational but avant-garde. Refusing the limits of age, or indeed the taxonomies of age and gender normativity, she destabilizes and shifts all the kinds of boundaries and binaries associated with family making—and then, via the photos, queerly canonizes her creation and the relationships she wishes to sacralize. This said, while her PM motherhood queers motherhood in ways that are potentially liberatory for women in general (in part precisely because it so materially rewrites the terrain of age and gender), in this essay I also examine the very real tensions and elisions that Leibovitz’s photos conceal.

In one particularly riveting black-and-white photo in this collection snapped by Sontag but probably orchestrated by Leibovitz, or by both women, Leibovitz is shown in close up, naked and very pregnant. She is fifty-one and the year is 2001. The photo ostensibly captures a private moment between two ageing women, one soon to die, as is painfully obvious from plenty of other photos, and the other about to take on a new social identity: that of first-time mother. If it is a “private” moment, then it is one carefully staged for public consumption. Leibovitz’s glasses are made to seem as if they have been “carelessly” flung on the white plumped duvet of a double bed in the background of the image. The temporarily sightless Leibovitz, the focal point, seems to invite the viewer not only into her bedroom, but also to regard her as an object. Her hands are on her hips. Her face is visibly weathered, lined, asymmetrical, angular, androgynous, strong, inscrutable, defiant. While her face is turned to the viewer, her hugely swollen belly is in profile, thus fully revealed: birth is imminent. Her pale, distended, deeply veined breasts lie atop her belly. While her body looks like a well-maintained generic pregnant body, her face is the unairbrushed face of a woman unabashedly ageing and at the same time in control, daring the viewer to find her distasteful.

This photo in fact deliberately echoes the Demi Moore photo, also on display, although that iconic image was in color and blown up in the exhibit. The actress is similarly posed, albeit with her breasts concealed by her hands; her face is, in contrast to Leibovitz’s, flawless, conventionally beautiful and symmetrical, and entirely unmarked by time. It is of course a face used to being in front of the camera. While in 1991 that image was considered scandalous enough to sell a great many magazines (it sold out within an hour at Grand Central Station during the morning rush hour), in retrospect, it
marked the moment when pregnancy emerged as no longer something to be concealed or as a stage exit cure but as a potentially empowered, strategic, photographable publicly consumable act. It was held responsible, as Leibovitz herself points out, for the rise of body-hugging maternity fashions (Leibovitz 2008). Leibovitz’s photo of herself also appeared in *Vanity Fair* (in October 2006), though not on the cover; it was, however, explicitly advertised on the cover as “Leibovitz Does Demi Moore.” It then multiplied on the Internet. It did not sell magazines in the way Demi Moore’s image did, but was still controversial. Called “magnificent” by one female blogger, this image was derided by a highly trafficked male blogger as “terrifying”—and as, in a sentiment he coyly ascribed to Borat, “eh, not so nice.” Many other bloggers were considerably less circumspect, using words such as “grotesque.”

Much is at stake in this photo. At one level, Leibovitz appears to insist on full exposure and therefore on provocation. The image can be interpreted as marking in the boldest way possible the older (and nonheteronormative) PM woman’s appropriation of gestation and birth, and as such, it is fraught. It is fraught because it is a startling visual, biological, social, and cultural departure from the so-called natural order of things. In the 1990s, PM mothers—in particular those who used reproductive technologies to have babies in their fifties and even sixties—emerged on the public scene to become the subject matter of cartoons and ribald late night shows. The women were derided for living life out of order, for selfishly creating babies for therapeutic ends; in one notable 1997 *New Yorker* front-cover cartoon, a pregnant doddering geriatric “granny” figure was featured combining the paraphernalia of old age (a cane, orthopedic shoes) with the paraphernalia of new life (a crib, a black-and-white mobile). Leibovitz is of course far from geriatric or cartoonlike. But she exploits PM motherhood’s still iconoclastic status. Because she is Leibovitz—that is, a photographer with a particular kind of history: a particular attitude toward boundaries and bodies—she is not just violating community standards of age and gender-normative behavior, or at least the male Borat-imitating blogger’s version of those standards, but she is in effect changing them. She is in fact making age a boundary to be photographed, exposed, exploited, and destabilized—and even, depending on one’s perspective, rendered magnificent in a Promethean mind-over-matter fashion. Her fecund, ripe body is arguably ugly, but it is also arguably beautiful, depending on the viewer’s willingness to buy into her cooptation of a condition that is usually the province of youth, or so-called nature. She orchestrates her viewers’ complicity in a couple of ways.
I will show later how she does so visually. But one of the ways is in fact through the caption for this photograph (which in the book is included in the introduction), which is not particularly provocative. It thus works at a different level from the image, in effect to rationalize her motherhood in logical late-capitalist terms. It reads: “I had wanted children for a long time, but I had a big consuming career and I was hardly ever at home. Having children changes your life dramatically” (Leibovitz 2006). Her words are on the surface simple (“want,” “big,” “change”); she uses words that almost in a “Dick and Jane” primer fashion suggest her rationale is trivially self-evident. At the same time, though, her words assume that motherhood is of course a calculated act of agency: at some point, and in her case it presumably was at age fifty because of her protracted professional success, she stopped being “consumed” by her career; and thus consuming motherhood, and the dramatically changed life motherhood implied, went from being a liability to an asset. Being “at home” acquired a certain allure it did not have when she was in her in youth, when her life was in its upward trajectory. The implication is that new motherhood at fifty-plus was in fact an act of existential responsibility: toward herself, her career, and the child she would bring into being.

Even if her logic appears irrefutable, the fact is that it airbrushes away the extremely complex choices and procedures involved—and the risks of later motherhood. Left unsaid are the untidy realities of in vitro fertilization and donor gamete acquisition. And the lengthy planning involved in transforming “want” or desire into an actual baby: the negotiations with egg and sperm donors (whether acquired from younger family members—hers or Sontag’s, or from friends or anonymous individuals), the umpteen visits to fertility specialists, possibly hormone injections, the expenses that for her are obviously trivial but that for less privileged others would be considerable. The point is that women at fifty, even those having sex with a male partner, do not just get pregnant on command. Even at forty-five, the chances of getting pregnant with one’s own eggs are extremely small. This means that, while Leibovitz is the gestational and social mother, she is not necessarily the biological mother. It is these untidy realities, which take place outside the frame of her pictures, that render Leibovitz’s supposedly “ordinary” family pictures, as they have been called by numerous commentators, anything but ordinary. Interestingly, whereas some commentators have speculated about the provenance of the donor sperm, surmising, for instance, that it may have come from Sontag’s only son, the journalist David Rieff, which would ren-
der the child Sontag’s biological grandchild, no such speculation has surrounded the provenance of the egg used by Leibovitz.6

In the book, a set of four stills follows the image of the pregnant Leibovitz and captures the gore and the machinery of C-section birth. In other words, though Leibovitz elides the machinery of origins—of embryo creation in the lab—she overtly exposes the instrumentation of birth (the stitching-up of the womb, the fleshy umbilical cord not yet clamped, the weighing and suctioning of the blood- and vernix-covered baby). In this operating room scene, three women—two friends and Sontag—are taking photos at Leibovitz’s behest. In the last of the set of four stills, Sontag stands on Leibovitz’s side of the drape, perhaps the first to hold the newborn, her fingers bearing traces of blood, her expression veiled by a surgical mask; she appears to hand the baby to Leibovitz. The baby, incidentally, is named Sarah Cameron Leibovitz, after the pioneering Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron.7 In a subsequent searingly poignant photo, Sontag gazes at the pristine sleeping baby: the much older woman meditatively pondering the just born. That the almost seventy-year-old Sontag is, as Leibovitz’s partner, intimately involved is at this point indisputable. She is resolutely “in the frame”—part of this new baby’s family of origin. Leibovitz describes her somewhat paradoxically as a muse and as an initially reluctant but then fully engaged co-conspirator in her motherhood project.

Indeed, whatever her initial feelings about Leibovitz’s project, Sontag appears as a constant presence.8 Toward the end of the album, as the baby grows toward toddlerhood and beyond, Sontag is dying at the Cancer Research Center in Seattle. And then she dies some more in New York and then is dead on a mortuary table: an absent presence. The photos are painfully real and, in their unremitting confrontation with the dissolutions of the flesh, have an almost Shakespearean flavor, even if Leibovitz is no Hamlet. The images of Sontag have been condemned by many as tasteless, even, by Sontag’s son, as gruesomely carnivalesque (Rieff 2008), only to become an indelible part of how we remember Sontag. This death, impending and then final, seems an intrinsic part of the story Leibovitz tells about her motherhood: it is the context, the backdrop against which she engages in motherhood. Many years earlier, Sontag herself famously wrote that “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed” (Sontag 1973, 4). Leibovitz’s photos can be read as acts of appropriation. She appropriates Sontag’s dying and death, just as she appropriates birth—and insists on the traffic between the two. Her genius thus lies not just in what she captures, but, as I have sug-
gested, also in her acts of juxtaposition: between death and birth, machinery and flesh, youth and age, and between the desire for life and one’s eventual resignation to its extinction. If this is a “beauty book,” then it is so in the sense that beauty can be fully appreciated only in the context of its eventual extinction.

In the end, the most startling beauty is not that of the blown-up stars and athletes but the beauty of Leibovitz’s daughter. This beauty is startling precisely because it is so explicitly placed in the context of gore, decay, and death. The birth of Leibovitz’s twins via a surrogate, when Leibovitz was almost fifty-five, in fact occurs shortly after Sontag’s death in late December 2004. In other words, the twins were being gestated as Sontag was dying. This second, twin birth mirrors in reverse not just the death of Sontag but also that of Leibovitz’s ninety-year old father, Samuel, in a kind of fearful yet clearly life-enabling symmetry. Earlier photos had shown him in bathing attire, vital, smiling, and surrounded by the Leibovitz clan. Leibovitz captures her father’s dying at home cocooned among family members and eventually reduced to fetal helplessness. In a sense, the twins’ births constitute posthumous births. If Leibovitz chose to gesture to an intellectual-spiritual forbear (photographer Julia Margaret Cameron) in naming her first daughter, then this time she chose to name her twin offspring after her intimates (Susan after Sontag and Samuelle after her father Samuel); they are born within a few months of the two pivotal deaths. Even for the viewer, Leibovitz’s daughters function in a sense as a relief: a way to keep seeing, to brave the next photo suffused with the realities of mortality, to brave life, in effect.

But, as I have suggested, self-concealment in Leibovitz’s family photos coexist with exposure, including self-exposure and is part of the complexity of Leibovitz’s photography and indeed of her own image; she exploits the values both of transparency and of mystery that Sontag (1973) attributed to photography. Self-concealment takes an especially tangible form in the birth of the twins. Whereas Leibovitz documented the first pregnancy (her own) for both private and public consumption, and undoubtedly to call attention to her own act of gestation, her camera says nothing at all about the second pregnancy, or about the surrogate who carried her twins. In her introduction, Leibovitz enigmatically writes, “I gave birth to Sarah” (her first)—but of her twins she writes simply: “Three and half years later, my twins, Samuelle and Susan, were born” (2006). She elides the subject of the sentence: the giver of birth. In the images of the book and exhibit, however, she again actively appropriates with her camera their birth: one vernix-covered bloody mass
jects from an anonymous birth canal under the eye of her camera; the other twin’s body is shown with its umbilical cord clamped in huge steel pincers. Again, what is striking is how one kind of machinery and its traffic with flesh is overexposed, while another is blatantly absent. The surrogate whose womb was used to gestate the twins for nine months is invisible even as she gives life. Her face is outside the frame. She remains unappropriated, yet haunts this part of the book. Her elision is disturbing—a concealment of another’s labor that, in the American context, reenacts disturbing class and race histories. If it is a haunted erasure, born of privilege, it can also, for this very reason, be read as strategic. Leibovitz is concertedly, aggressively, positioning herself as sole author of her new family, with the dying and then dead Sontag as muse, and her father along with her family of origin as backdrop.

On this point, the October 2, 2006 cover of Newsweek is relevant. It appeared in the wake of Leibovitz’s book and concomitantly with her exhibit, and is significant because it at once exposes the artfulness of, and yet elides the artifice or artificial nature of, PM family making. Again, the surrogate is effaced, though that is no longer so surprising, given the time lapse since the twins’ births. The now fifty-seven-year-old Leibovitz wears an enigmatic Mona Lisa smile. She is dressed in black, surrounded by her newly created family: three cherubic little girls dressed in white.
The photo is almost Raphaelite. At the same time, however, this photo turns Leibovitz herself into a postmodern icon: the visible, self-exposed, resolutely alternative face of older motherhood. She may not name herself as such, but, as a lesbian single PM mother, she is three degrees, as it were, removed from the heteronormative model of the so-called natural mother. In many ways, hers is the new American family as the product of a postmodern remix aesthetic strategy applied to kinship but without explicit reference to any of the crucial originating ingredients. The biological and social elements of kinship (eggs, sperm, wombs, sexualities, friendships, dead and live originators) are remixed behind the scenes to create something that imitates a master family tableau. Significantly, in this tableau, a camera takes center stage. Standing in the middle of this family, a tripod-mounted camera in fact operates like a one-eyed phallic symbol. Given Sontag’s presence in her life, Leibovitz would have been well aware of the Freudian symbolism (Sontag 1973). The camera suggests that Leibovitz is the generator of this scene in more ways than one. One of Leibovitz’s hands cradles one of her twin girls and, tellingly, the finger of the other hand is on the control button of the camera. Leibovitz may not have snapped the actual photo, but we are to understand that she is in charge—and as such, she insists on irony. And, more subtly, we are to understand that the silenced male (the invisible sperm donor)—the paterfamilias of previous eras, has retreated to the vanishing point of this frame. The visibly unabashedly ageing woman/artist/mother with her finger on the control button of the camera is dead center. The photo is compelling, at once traditional and avant-garde, sentimental and ironic. It dares the viewer to find fault.

Leibovitz (2006) mentions Virginia Woolf as one of Sontag’s favorite writers—and as a recurring motif in their conversations. If the childless Woolf was troped in countless cartoons and in playwright Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? as a killer of men and middle-class illusions, then in many ways Leibovitz amplifies the threat of the ageing woman refusing to play by conventional rules. She reaches into the most sacrosanct of middle-class institutions to make it her own—and to sell it to her public. She reaches for the most normative of desires (child bearing, family formation) and co-opts them from a position of difference but not of rebellion. Her appropriative acts are neither good nor bad—if anything, they are morally ambiguous, a “queering” of an institution, and part of a paradigm shift in how we see female ageing and the making of families. Significantly, because of
her privileged position, she renders female age literally and figuratively po-
tent even while the actresses she photographed in their incandescent youth
have been marginalized by the passage of time. Her subversive desire for
motherhood at an age when women have, in patriarchal narratives, been
represented as background figures or, as anthropologist Margaret Lock has
argued, as biologically superfluous, as weathered crones or as entering the
gloaming of postmenopausal life (Lock 1995; Leibovitz and Sontag 1999)
—queers motherhood in the sense of making it “strange,” non-normative,
even creative (Halperin 1995). What culture critics such as Donna Haraway
(1992) and Trinh T. Min-ha (1992) have in a different postcolonial context
called the in/appropriat/ed other—in this context the spinster/lesbian/-
postmidlife “other”—colonizes the grounding feature of life: birth, but for
her own existential purposes, as insurance against the twilight or as a strate-
gic grasping of power.

In the context of Western privilege, the exhibit and album, then, fron-
tally address the question of what children are for now in the early twenty-
first century—and what motherhood is for. Leibovitz’s images suggest that
children are not only a source of affective capital but also a bulwark against
too much mortality—and especially so at midlife or just after. Leibovitz
writes: “With Susan, it was a love story. With my parents, it was the rela-
tionships of a lifetime. And with my children, it’s the future” (2006). They
function in Leibovitz’s album as a poignant beacon against too much death,
as a stake in a rapidly moving tide, as a re-creation of intimate ties that bind
her to the present and future. For Leibovitz as an artist, they are perhaps also
about refusing to retire. Children at twenty or thirty might have been career
damaging. At fifty-plus, they are perhaps career enhancing—lending her the
appearance of still playing with social taboos, of still having the power to
discomfit at the same time as she rearranges our collective sensibilities, not
to mention our social landscape. Her motherhood, then, works on multiple
levels. Her ageing androgynous face destabilizes traditional mores and yet is
also “hip” because of who Leibovitz is; indeed, if anything, as an iconoclastic
sixties person willing to exploit reproductive technologies, she has rendered
motherhood something that no longer occurs by fiat of nature but that is a
“queerly” authorial act. And she has rescripted the terrain of age and gender
and their relationship to the making of children.

When I visited the San Francisco exhibit, I was struck by how muse-
umgoers lingered over the photo of the naked pregnant Leibovitz, reading
the caption, rereading it, and looking again at the photo, and then saying
nothing. To comment might perhaps have risked being unhip or retrograde. When they moved on to the photos of Leibovitz’s first child, attired in fairy garb and with enormous blue eyes, gamboling in a pastoral setting, the images suffused with the allure of childhood innocence, they exclaimed profusely over the child’s beauty, even though her beauty in other contexts would not have been startling. The obvious health and beauty of Leibovitz’s first child and then of her twins in fact operates throughout the exhibit as a kind of visual ratification of Leibovitz’s authorial postmodern motherhood. Who could be curmudgeonly enough to wish these children not to exist, the photos seem to ask. Photos of Leibovitz’s numerous and apparently ever affectionate family members operate as a different kind of ratification. All families are dysfunctional, Leibovitz has noted in an interview, and her girls, she concedes in her sole reference to their origins, may well rage against her in adolescence for their unconventional coming-into-being (Brockes 2006), but at least they will have each other—and numerous aunts and uncles and cousins (Leibovitz is one of six siblings). And, as Leibovitz is undoubtedly well aware, visually, her extended family of origin appears less dysfunctional, more happily boisterous and connected, than most. More specifically, her family portraits—of herself and daughters flanked by twenty-plus relatives, smiling at the camera—suggest that, should she become sick or die (she will be seventy when her girls come of age), plenty of alloparents are available. Her children will never be orphans. Her camera helps in all these ways to enlist the public’s consent to her creation. Or, put differently, she does not ask for tolerance but manufactures it.

Leibovitz’s ability to control the frame of course has enabled her to bypass peskier questions of access to power and to youthful gametes: in effect to direct the viewer’s gaze to the product and not the means. Clearly, though, her motherhood is predicated on being privileged: on having the resources to hire nannies and to concoct an idyllic-looking family and an idyllic setting for childhood (two hundred acres in upstate New York), and then to elide and expose elements at will—and so to orchestrate the public’s reactions. To invoke Haraway’s (1992) language again, she is the formerly “inappropriate/d” but now active appropriator of reproductive possibilities. Her privilege is the privilege to transgress. She actively changes the landscape of power, of motherhood as an institution, and of social and cultural sensibilities on the subject of what is appropriate.

And while her motherhood is predicated in part on the inequalities between classes of women (for instance, between women who “author” fami-
lies and women who serve as surrogates, or even simply between women who strategically plan children and those who have children by fiat of nature, man, or gods, it also levels others: between premenopausal and postmenopausal women, between paired and single women, between lesbian and straight women, between natural and artifactual mothers, and between women and men. Indeed, it destabilizes the lines that separate these pairs. She engages in family making rather as a form of “ontological choreography” (Thompson 2005). Notably, whereas old men have, as a matter of course, been begetting children, often carelessly and profligately, Leibovitz’s parenthood is by definition (by virtue of overwriting “nature”) anything but careless or unplanned. It is necessarily exquisitely choreographed—not just at the level of gametes and timing, but also at the level of what is concealed and what is exposed, what is “outed” in the family album and what remains “in the closet.” And finally, however privileged someone like Leibovitz may be—however much she may be able to author a new kind of script for living life and for making life, and engage in new chronologies, she is not as such insulated: motherhood is after all also about being made vulnerable. In 2006 she wrote that mostly she “love[d] just looking at [her girls]” at the expense of active interaction. Pleasure (admixed presumably with remembrance and suffering) lay in the act of looking: in the realization of desire. By late 2008, Leibovitz noted that, having gone from an observer to a participant-observer in life, she no longer has her finger on the control button: she is less able to see life though a lens (Galvin 2008). She is consumed by her creation, a mother and no longer an artist; a “framer framed” (Minh-ha, 1992).

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1. In the 2008 Miley Cyrus controversy, for instance, Leibovitz again outraged the public—temporarily. She placed the tween idol in Lolita-like poses that were at odds with the adolescent’s G-rated image—but that, in a sense, gestured to a reality that was always already there, if concealed.

2. In his piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, Patrick Moore noted that, in 1995, Sontag outed herself as “bisexual,” which is code, he contends, for “gay”; yet she remained quasi-closeted, often mentioning her ex-husband but never her liaisons with a string of American female artists that culminated in her more than fifteen-year relationship with Leibovitz. Leibovitz was equally secretive, and even reportedly hostile, when questioned about her relationship with Sontag. In most obituaries of Sontag, Leibovitz is not mentioned. The 2006 *Vanity Fair* issue featuring Leibovitz pregnant and nude is the first time Leibovitz publicly mentioned in that magazine (or any other) that she and Sontag were “partners” and had been since the 1980s.

3. The term “queer” is, by definition, as it were, slippery. Eve Sedgwick’s analysis in 1990 was among the first to enable “queer” to encompass many other possibilities besides “lesbian” and “gay.” Those terms are about fixing identity, whereas “queer” is more about the play or mobility of gender. The philosopher Judith Butler (1990) is equally important in having delineated in her early work the role of performance in maintaining an identity, again highlighting its malleability or ludic nature. David Halperin (1995) describes “queer” as a failure of definition that acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to a norm; it is at odds with the so-called normal, legitimate, and dominant. The ambiguity on which Sontag and Leibovitz seem to have insisted thus can be read as *queer* ambiguity. And Leibovitz’s motherhood is clearly appropriated against the grain of its cultural, social, and biological norms. As for politics, Leibovitz is not requesting tolerance for gay rights, she is creating that tolerance by in a sense making relationships outside the heteronormative fold “cool.” Her possession of motherhood comes with a long history, through her photographs, of subtly introducing into mainstream culture new ways of looking at bodies—as new kinds of “things”; at first this new seeing is called borderline pornographic and dismissed as pop art taken to extremes; but eventually, retrospectively, it can be viewed as quasi-avant-garde: it changes public sensibilities. Relevant here is David Halperin’s comment that queer “describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot be delimited in advance” (1995, 62). This is very much the case for Leibovitz’s iconic photos, as it is for her queer possession of motherhood.

4. Examples can be found on Internet sites such as David Hauslaib’s (2006) Jossip.

5. The *New Yorker* cartoon in question is from the May 12, 1997, issue. An elderly granny-figure with gray hair in a knotted bun looks at herself in a full-length mirror—seemingly befuddled by her huge belly, even though it is presumably the product of her will (in other words, of the reproductive possibilities made possible by donor eggs and in vitro fertilization). Theoretically, a woman of any age can become pregnant, since the womb is no longer an impediment to fertility, only ageing eggs are—and obviously, since this geriatric woman is long past menopause, she would have had to use donor eggs culled from a much younger woman. That her nose is phallicized in the cartoon is probably no accident. Arguably, the cartoon depicts her as a ludic threat to social norms; she is wrecking havoc with the so-called natural order.
6. Interestingly, Bohemian poet Edward Field, who viewed Sontag “from near and far,” cites extensive speculation (in Greenwich and elsewhere) about the identity of the “father” of Leibovitz’ child, concluding that it remains “undisclosed,” but that the rumor mill suggests it is indeed Sontag’s son (Field 2005, 273). It is interesting that Field would use the word “father” when “sperm donor” would be more in keeping with postmodern realities. Also, to speculate about “fathers” suggests that one ought to speculate about “mothers”—that is, is Leibovitz the biological mother or is someone else the undisclosed biological “mother,” aka egg donor? Field, however, appears to take it for granted that Leibovitz is the biological mother.

7. Julia Margaret Cameron was the great-aunt of Virginia Woolf. Her career as a pioneering photographer began at age forty-eight, after decades of being a mother, which reverses in a sense the ordering of the life led by Leibovitz, whose pioneering motherhood happened at fifty, after a decades-long career as a photographer. Cameron notably wrote in an unfinished autobiography (1874): “I long to arrest all the beauty that comes before me and at length the longing has been satisfied” (Cameron and Hamilton 1997). Cameron’s portraits of the famous figures of her era were often called “unconventional” in their intimacy; she, too, was pushing boundaries. Her favorite sitter was Woolf’s mother, Julia Jackson. Interestingly, she was called by Virginia Woolf “the unbeautiful sister” who had “Talent” (Setina 2007). Of course, Leibovitz’s photos also bring to mind Sally Mann’s series Immediate Family, which featured her three young children, often in states of undress or in something other than supposedly childlike poses. These images, too, initially, scandalized audiences. Leibovitz does not mention Mann, however. The person she does acknowledge profusely is photographer Richard Avedon, whose influence is suggested especially in her portraits of the dying Sontag and of her dying father (they recall Avedon’s photos of his own father).

8. According to Field (2005), Leibovitz had a falling-out with Sontag some time after the birth, notably for the most banal of reasons: Leibovitz’s attention was focused on the baby rather than on Sontag. Certainly there is no sign of it in the photos. Field avidly reports the gossip in art circles relating to the Sontag-Leibovitz liaison, but actually he is more interested in “the man who wanted to marry Susan Sontag” (the title of his book); this was Alfred Chester, who rose to fame and then fell into madness and obscurity.

9. Why Leibovitz chose to undergo pregnancy at age fifty-one but not at fifty-four is never mentioned, but presumably her advancing age made another pregnancy, especially since it involved twins, ill advised, and probably very dangerous. The two embryos implanted into the surrogate’s womb may have been newly created in the lab, or were perhaps created years earlier at the time when the embryo leading to the first child (Sarah) was created; if the latter is correct, then the extra embryos would have been held in frozen suspension—until two or more of them were implanted in 2004 into the surrogate. Thus, Sarah and the twins may or may not have the same biological parentage.

10. On the one hand, it may seem odd to compare the effete highbrow Woolf to Leibovitz. Interestingly, though, the childless Woolf was often featured in cartoons of the postwar era as a vampire-like killer of men. If anything, she embodied a threat (to fixed notions of identity, for instance) that was enabled precisely by a queer sensibility. That her own sexuality was ambiguous was perhaps no accident. That she, too, refused to speak about the subject was also no accident.
WORKS CITED


