

“Egomaniac Traitor”: Luc Sante’s *Low Life*  
Reviewed by Bill Brown

Egomaniac traitor  
You never did understand  
You fell in love with your ego  
It did not fit in the plan.

– Public Image Ltd. “Low Life” (1978)

In 2003, Luc Sante added an “Afterword” to his book, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1991). Written to mark the publication of the book’s first paperback edition, this “Afterword” makes a point that was already quite clear from his “Preface,” which had declared,

This book came about as a result of my having lived on the Lower East Side [of Manhattan] for more than a decade. I had gone there in pursuit of bohemia and youth culture, in addition to the fact that it was a cheap place to live. I slept and worked and caroused in tenements with sloping floors, crumbling plaster, corroded plumbing, erratic heating, looked out through barred windows at garbage-filled airshafts and decaying masonry (p. xv). I began to read and snoop around [...] [There were] buildings [that] are the same ones that were once chockablock with blind tigers and stuss houses and bagnios [...] I was instinctively drawn to such places, in fact and in imagination, just as I would have been had I been around in their heyday (xvii). In the early 1980s the economic mirage of the Reagan Administration changed everything [...] The empty apartments filled up seemingly overnight, and rents shot up correspondingly. Around the same time, I had had enough of youth culture and began asking myself what I was doing in my miserable neighborhood (xvi).

Born in Verviers, Belgium, in 1954 and brought to the New York metropolitan area by his parents in the early 1960s, Luc Sante came to the city, conquered it (he was a natural), and left. *Bing bang boom*.

In his “Afterword,” Sante writes at some length, not about the contents of his book or the way the hardcover edition was received, but yet again about his stay in New York City. He takes particular care to mention the squalor and his comfort with and in it. “This did not distress me, quite the contrary. I was enthralled by decay, eager to chart its inevitable further stages” (364). Even before he moved to Manhattan in the early 1970s, “I breathed the air, even if I was a child living in the suburbs and many of its aspects were outside my ken” (364). But times changed and Luc Sante left NYC. “I don’t live there anymore, and I have trouble going there and walking around because the streets are too haunted by the ghosts of my own personal history. That is the effect in middle age of a youth spent dancing around fire. I wasn’t born in New York and I may never live there again, and just thinking about it makes me melancholy, but I was changed forever by it, my imagination is manacled to it, and I wear its marks the way you wear a scar. Whatever happens, whether I like it or not, New York City is fated always to remain my home” (379-380).

I know what some of you are already thinking – you don’t want to read a book by this guy, simply because of the self-important way he talks about himself. And he sure likes to hear himself talk: “I was so certain of being alone and unobserved,” he says about one of his nocturnal strolls around the Manhattan, “that I felt as if I might break into song in order to hear the resonance of my [own] voice bouncing off cast iron or carved stone” (367).

But let us go on.

Luc Sante did not leave his beloved New York City peacefully. No, he did not. Concerning the changes to the city in the early 1980s, he says,

I was nevertheless angry. I was angry that I had lost the city in which I had belatedly grown up and found my feet and had good times and bad times, of course, and angry that poor people – especially those who were poor by circumstance – were losing their homes and the places where they shopped and socialized. I also bore an old-timer’s resentment towards the children of privilege who were moving into tastefully done up flats [*sic*] and were about to start calling themselves New Yorkers, even Lower East Siders, and who might continue to live without strife.

In case you are wondering – *no*, Belgian-born and once-upon-a-time resident of NYC Luc Sante has no idea how ridiculous he sounds when he calls himself an “old-timer.”

But it was for more personal reasons that [in my book] I wanted to summon up the ghosts of the Plug Uglies and mayhem artists and tong warriors and set them to invade renovated lofts and fine restaurants and the VIP rooms of the most exclusive clubs. I wanted the inhabitants of gut-rehabbed Georgia houses to hear the cries of murdered prostitutes when they settled in for an evening of plasma-screen television (379).

Yes, you read that correctly. To punish *the ears* of the bourgeoisie, Luc Sante wants to have prostitutes murdered in the streets. But he doesn't want to murder them himself, nor does he want to be one of the marauding Plug Uglies. He just wants to listen to and watch the mayhem from a distance.

"I hadn't paid much attention to the goings-on," he says of the shooting of the movie *Ragtime* in the Lower East Side in 1980, which drew protests from some (377). Regarding the gentrification of Twelfth Street, he says, "I told myself it was inevitable" (378). And so, though "landlord-tenant disputes and rent strikes became much more common and even more bitter than before" (xvi), he doesn't seem to have participated in any of it.

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In a caption to one of the many illustrations in his book, Luc Sante says that an image shows a "tenement cutaway from James McCabe's *Lights and Shadows of New York Life*, 1872." He goes on to advise his readers to "note cellars, saloon, roof garden, catwalk, as well as the rich variety of domestic dramas." But the image is too small to see such details, and so the reader must simply take the author at his word. But by doing this, the reader might miss the facts that the tenement in the image has *nine* stories, and that, in the pages surrounding this image and its caption, the author has asserted quite plainly that tenements were "four to six stories" (23), contained "six floors per building" and were "boxes up to seven stories in height" (26), and were never "more than seven or eight stories high" (32).

On the basis of this discrepancy, a skeptical reader, someone who likes facts and facts that have been checked, is certainly going to question the historical accuracy and the usefulness of both the image from McCabe's *Lights and Shadows of New York Life* and Luc Sante's claims about it, in particular, the claim that it depicts a "rich variety of domestic dramas." Those "dramas" and their allegedly "rich variety" might well be just as unsubstantiated as the existence of a nine-story tenement building.

A more charitable reader might say that regrettable incongruities such as this one are simply the result of the awkward way in which the book has been laid out: the illustrations are distributed throughout the book but not really integrated into it; the pages on which they appear are not paginated (the one in question here appears between pages 30 and 31); and the main body of the text doesn't contain any references to them to all.

There are, in fact, several captions that pose problems for the attentive reader. One reads, "A song from the teens, its popularity at the time unknown" (242-243), but gives no explanation for the reason for this lack of basic information. Another caption says, "A dime-store museum performer, photographed by Byron, 1897. One can only surmise the nature of her act" (76-77). But why must the reader be left to do such a thing? Why couldn't the author himself "surmise" the nature of the performer's act? Or is he winking at his readers, as if to say, "*You know* what her act is; I don't have to tell you"? Yet another caption identifies "Park-bench sleepers (slightly retouched for a rotogravure section). Photograph by Brown Brothers" (316-317), but doesn't explain why this photo was retouched, who did the retouching, or what changes in the original the retouching made.

The skeptical reader might well see a connection – a shared carelessness – between these oversights and gaps in the captions and the manner in which the book as a whole was researched and written. "This is by no means a work of academic history," Luc Sante says in his "Preface."

In researching it, I was guided more by chance and intuition than by method. I was more interested in legends than in statistics, in rumors than in official reports. I was purposely interested in the stories that circulated rather than their correction or emendation, and while I brought all of my skeptical and critical faculties to bear on whatever seemed discrepant or improbable, I did not set out to nail down any definitive account. This book can be seen as an attempt at a mythology of New York, a pool of tales and cautions and ornaments and shibboleths that potentially contain the source of current superstitions and apparently baseless rituals (xviii-xix).

In his "A Note on Sources," Sante says,

When researching this book, what I was looking for was flavor and incident, anecdote and eyewitness. This grocery list naturally made my search subject to chance, rather more so, in fact, than I had expected. I did not at first suspect, for example, that nineteenth-

century journalism could be so wanting in concrete details of time, place, circumstance and visual appearance – the vagueness of much newspaper writing, especially in the police-blotter category, make the gazette of the last century read like a succession of blind items (381).

But Sante had no interest in correcting the errors or filling in the gaps and thus producing a real and true history of New York City. No; he wished to locate and put back into circulation a stale batch of old legends, rumors, uncorrected first reports, myths, tales, cautions, ornaments and shibboleths, and thus create something that could serve his personal agenda.

As a result, *Low Life* – a 432-page-long tome officially categorized as “History / Sociology” – is full of the type of dubious assertions that (one hopes) could never appear in a real work of history or sociology. “This assessment once again presses the moral point,” Luc Sante says of a description of the clientele of the city’s flophouses, “and *in fact* the range of unfortunates was *probably* a good deal wider” (33, emphasis added), as if factuality and probability are the same thing. Elsewhere he says, “Talmadge’s sermons were, indeed, *said to be* rather lurid” (281, emphasis added), which of course completely evades the issue of whether or not Talmadge’s sermons were indeed lurid.

Sante repeatedly fails to provide some sort of proof, some sort of factual support, for claims that clearly require it. “It has since been established that nearly all these tales [concerning murder committed for pleasure] are wild exaggerations having their origin in church propaganda,” he writes in a footnote (392) that should have provided citations instead of making claims that require them. In another passage, he says, “one unverifiable – and spectacularly unlikely – estimate of the time counted 90,000 opium smokers and eaters in the city” (143), but neither provides a reason why such a figure is “spectacularly unlikely” nor provides a better estimate. Elsewhere he declares, “Despite the hysterical language and rather antique imagery, the picture present in this account [of crime in the city] is not far from the truth” (247), but doesn’t indicate what “the truth” is, where he managed to locate it or how he managed to extract it from the “hysterical language and rather antique imagery” in which it was enclosed. “According to contemporary accounts that have quickly become legendary,” Sante says of a riot that took place in 1834, a rioter “seized the painting and cried, ‘For God’s sake, don’t burn Washington!’ and the cry was taken up by the entire mob” (343), as if a “legendary” account could not also be apocryphal or manufactured to serve a particular interest.

According to Sante, who provides no citations to substantiate what he is saying, “Mrs. [Frances] Trollope, in her *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), particularly deplored the habit of those in the front ranks of the galleries of

angling their boots over the edge; when word of her disapproval got back to the Bowery, the men in the pit seats went on the alert, and would loudly shout ‘Trollope!’ or ‘Boots!’ at offending people upstairs” (75). This is highly unlikely, given the intensity of many Americans’ rejection of *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, which is a fact that Sante both acknowledges and minimizes when he says, “Mrs. Trollope’s observations drew some of their vinegar, of course” and “her views of the Bowery Republic added fat to the fire of anti-English sentiment in the Irish slums” (290-291). When he says of Trollope (once again without any citation) that, when it came to “the rest of America, she is remarkably unsnobbish, and her book something of an advertisement for the young country [as a whole],” because “she set apart only lower Manhattan,” he is obviously and demonstrably wrong. All the reader has to do is consult Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* (1851), which says,

It was for this sort of photography that poor candid Mrs. Trollope was so handsomely cursed and reviled by this nation. Yet she was merely telling the truth, and this indignant nation knew it. She was painting a state of things which did not disappear at once. It lasted to well into my youth, and I remember it [...] She found a ‘civilization’ here which you, reader, could not have endured; and which you would not have regarded as a civilization at all. [...] She was holily hated for her ‘prejudices’; but they seem to have been simply the prejudices of a humane spirit against inhumanities, of an honest nature against unright speech and deed. [...] She deserved gratitude – but it is a mistake to suppose she got it.<sup>1</sup>

Luc Sante more than occasionally mislabels, misdirects or misreads the material that he is re-presenting. For example, after quoting a vicious passage in which a police instructor advises his cadets to *use their clubs to beat criminals on their heads* (and thus deliberately cause brain injuries) because they (the criminals) are “enemies of society and our common foe,” he mocks these remarks as “pious sentiments,” refuses to condemn them or even to explain why and how such brutality could be come into existence and become institutionalized, and skips ahead to describe the ways “the victims of these tactics retaliated in various ways” (243). To introduce a passage that clearly lays out the role of “the real estate speculators” in the effort “to increase taxes, rentals and profits,” Sante insists instead on discussing “the wish to enter the slums and actually settle there” on the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, edited with an introduction and notes by James M. Cox (Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 219 and 220.

part of “middle-class newcomers” who allegedly want “to submit themselves to a way of life foreign to their backgrounds” (296-297). And then, after quoting a description of the bohemian Henry Clapp that ends with the claim that Clapp’s “writings are as original as original sin,” Sante says “the description is archetypal, instantly fitting any hundred bohoes of any subsequent generation” (how’s *that* for a generalization?) and that “Clapp’s writings have not, however, stood the test of time” (322), which is an observation that certainly undermines the reader’s confidence in the accuracy of the appraisal of Clapp’s originality and thus also undermines his/her faith in Sante’s ideas that “the description is archetypal,” and not a load of rubbish, and that Sante himself was right to claim that it “instantly fit[s] any hundred bohoes of any subsequent generation.”

The reader begins to get the feeling that Sante has no idea of what makes America unique or different from countries in Western Europe. This is especially the case when he discusses the riots that broke out in New York City during the 19th century, which he tries to compare to the political revolutions that were launched in Europe during the same period.

The popular insurrections in Europe of the same era possess a clarity of purpose – at least in retrospect – that makes them appear as historical stages, spasmodic passages in a gradual social evolution. The riots of New York City that chronologically paralleled the revolutions of 1830, or the widespread uprisings of 1848, or the Commune of 1871, can claim no such distinction. They simply appear as rampages, headless and tailless and flailing about. (340).

Sante blames the city’s residents for their “unevolved” state, for their own lack of progress.

While Europe possessed theorists and an exchange of ideas, and an informed and often enlightened proletariat who had a very good idea of how they were being abused and what to do about it, New York’s lumpen-proletariat was prey to a variety of opportunists and demagogues who could sway them over any trivial issue of territory or obscure vendetta with the sole aim of increasing their own personal power. (340)

But it is precisely Sante’s own ignorance of New York’s radical history – or, to be more precise, it was Sante’s editor’s failure to point out to him that, only 14 pages later, he proclaims,

New York [...] was an intellectual center of radicalism. The city was full of exiled revolutionists, the German Forty-eighters having lately been joined by French Communards. It was at Justus Schwab's saloon on First Street [that] such types gathered (354),

and to insist that his manuscript be changed accordingly before it was published – that has caused this absence of “theorists” in New York City in the first place. The idea that Europe's proletariat wasn't also “prey to a variety of opportunists and demagogues who could sway them over any trivial issue of territory or obscure vendetta with the sole aim of increasing their own personal power” is laughable.

The problem here is Sante's inability to understand that it is stupid to try to compare events that took place on a national scale in entire countries (France and Germany and Austria) with events that took place on a local scale in a single city. The problem is also the fact that almost every riot that took place in New York City in the 19th century was a race riot (a series of attacks by whites against blacks).

This is a fact that Sante himself proves when he notes that the riot of 1833 was motivated by hatred of “a prominent local Abolitionist” (342), that the riots of 1834 were perpetrated by “a group of whites” and “a crowd of whites” (342) and that the rioters targeted “property held by blacks” (343) and “a black church” (344). Speaking of the infamous Draft Riots of 1863, Sante says, “that the mob was racist is unquestionable” (351).

And yet – perhaps in order to make his ill-advised juxtaposition of race riots in New York City and political revolutions in Europe stick, or perhaps because he just doesn't know any better – Sante insists on calling the riots “outbreaks of class violence” (354).

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In *Low Life*, Luc Sante plays fast and loose with dubious historical materials. He grants in one instance that, “Not only have these assertions not been borne out by time, they were only glancing half-truths even then” (21). So what is the value of putting them back into circulation today under the rubric of “history” and “sociology”? What ends are served by doing so?

Sante wants his readers to believe that the New York City of the 1970s and 80s and the New York City of 1840-1919 (the period covered by his book) are one and the same thing, and that Sante himself, by virtue of having lived through and possessed the very essence of the former, has also managed somehow to gain access to and possess the very essence of the latter. In this past-present combination,

the cinematic [Bowery] Boys style which featured such details as pronounced New York (originally Bowery) accents and a choice of head gear ranging from porkpie hats to baseball caps, with the bills worn sideways, echoed the style of turn-of-century gangs and in turn exerted an influence on later punk mannerisms, coming full circle with the aesthetic that developed in the mid-1970s around CBGB's, the now venerable club actually located on the Bowery (xiii).

This is quite obviously wrong. The punk musicians in New York City in the mid-1970s saw themselves as self-conscious artists, not as self-absorbed *fashionistas*, and they were deliberately trying to make music that had never been heard before, to make history, not to repeat it (think of the Ramones' unprecedented speed and brevity, not to mention their anti-chic clothes).

And yet Sante insists that,

the city was like this a century ago, and it remains so in the present. There are in fact only two really significant differences between that world and ours: now there is a lot more technology and everything is much more expensive, even proportionately (xviii).

But those are both *quantitative* measures (the amount of technology and the prices of things, especially rent), and so they cannot express the profound changes that the conditions and quality of life in New York City have undergone since the 1910s and 20s, especially as a result of the widespread adoption of the automobile and the construction of "parkways" and highways just for their use in the 1950s.

It requires substantial effort (or illogic and bad faith) on Sante's part to get his illusion – his collapse of historical time into a single mythic space – to work. For example, after noting that various gangsters "divided up the pie of gangland profiteering in the city in the 1920s," he asserts that "thus there appears a genealogy to New York crime, a more or less distinct line of succession, that leads from the corner groceries of the 1920s to the present day" (234), even though the intervening decades (the period from the 1930s to the 1970s) go completely undocumented in his book and do not in fact contain events that support his bizarre assertion.

"The night," Sante wants his readers to believe, is "the bridge to the past, the past that shares the same night as the present, even if it inhabits a different day."

In New York City [the night] is an acculturated wilderness that contains all the accumulated crime of past nights stretching back at

least as far as the hangings after the Slaves' Plot of 1741. Every night in New York possesses history in this way, as a Walpurgis Night of all nights, and *it is not an illusion* [...] On any given night, any window can be in 1840 [...] Any corner can be in 1860 [...] Any passage can be in 1880 [...] Any street where the lights have gone out can be in 1900 [...] Any unfamiliar bar can be in 1920 (358-359, emphasis added).

So says – not Luc Sante the social historian, for such a creature does not exist – but Luc Sante the “poetic” and engaging tour-guide. *It's not an illusion!* says the bombastic carnival barker and the shady sidewalk huckster. *It's the real deal, if only you'll let your imagination run free.*

An eternal present such as this can only exist if both the historical past and the present are reduced to something that Sante calls “archetypes,” but which are actually stereotypes and caricatures. “They are the constituents of New York’s vocabulary of symbols, the objects and creatures of its zodiac,” he writes. “The island, the tenement, the sign, the show, the bar, the drug, the game, the whore, the crook, the cop, the politician, the sky pilot, the tourist, the orphan, the nomad, the beatnik, the riot, the night” (xviii).

The incredible thing is that, even now, 14 years after *Low Life* was reprinted and 26 years after its original publication – even now, despite all the changes that have taken place since then – New York City remains one of the few places I know where a large number of people are not “types,” not even “archetypes,” but unique individuals trying to create something totally new.

Bill Brown  
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NB: The author of this review was born in New York City, has lived there for most of his life and lives there now.