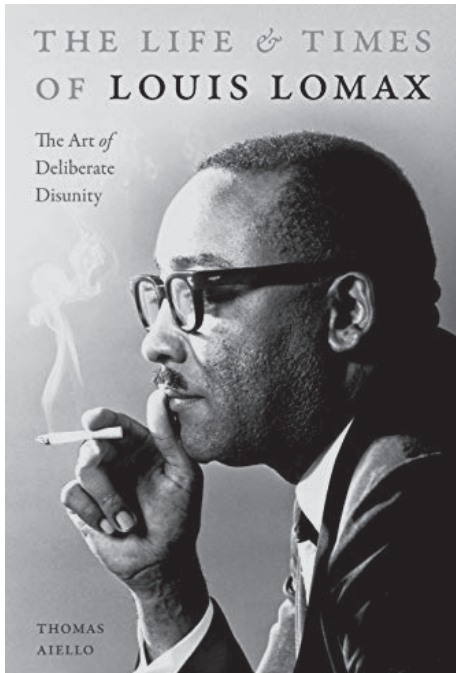


BOOK REVIEW



The Life and Times of Louis Lomax: The Art of Deliberate Disunity

By Thomas Aiello

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252 pp. \$99.95 cloth, \$26.95 paper.)

REVIEWED BY DAVID J. GARROW

On September 28, 1954, thirty-two-year-old Louis E. Lomax left Illinois's Joliet State Penitentiary after having served more than four-and-a-half years in prison on multiple fraud charges for selling automobiles he had rented under a false identity to unsuspecting buyers. Less than eight years later, on May

22, 1962, Lomax was an invited guest at President John F. Kennedy's White House state dinner for the president of Ivory Coast. Nine months after that, on February 12, 1963, Lomax was again a guest at the Kennedy White House, this time for a Lincoln's Birthday reception featuring what the journalist Simeon Booker called a "who's who" of Black America.

Born in Valdosta in August 1922, Lomax's mother died days after his birth, and he never met his father. Raised by his maternal grandmother, then by his uncle, Lomax nonetheless had a stable, disciplined childhood and graduated high school in 1938. Several brief stints in Georgia colleges were mediocre at best, and in early 1943 he left his native state for Washington, DC, where he attended American University for a year and did some part-time pastoring. By 1945 he had his first published byline

Left: Louis Lomax speaking at Oakland Community College in 1970. *From the Georgia Historical Society photograph collection.*

in the *Baltimore Afro-American* and was hosting a weekly radio program, *The Negro Speaks*, on WWDC, which Mutual Broadcasting syndicated nationally.

Lomax nonetheless left DC for Chicago, where he seemingly had a job at William Randolph Hearst's *Chicago Herald-American* before turning to his quickly unraveled attempts at auto fraud. Soon after his release from prison, Lomax returned to DC and got a job with the Associated Negro Press, and in 1957 he moved to New York City, writing articles for magazines, including *The Nation*. Partnering with a young television newsman named Mike Wallace, Lomax played a lead role in producing a five-part documentary series on the then little-known Nation of Islam. Televised starting in June 1959, *The Hate That Hate Produced* marked the national debut of another ex-con who was surmounting his criminal record, a man three years younger than Lomax who called himself Malcolm X.

Lomax's friendship with Malcolm, the Nation's fiery spokesman, would be the most important of his life; biographies of Malcolm attest to the breadth of their relationship. But Lomax's journalistic footprint was expanding rapidly, as a widely-read and later widely-cited article in the June 1960 issue of *Harpers* on the burgeoning civil rights movement, "The Negro Revolt Against 'The Negro Leaders,'" highlighted. Lomax would expand that piece into a 1962 book, *The Negro Revolt*, but even prior to that volume's publication, a three-month trip to Africa led to the appearance of Lomax's first book, *The Reluctant African*. It became a Book of the Month Club selection, won a notable book prize, and sold over ten thousand copies.

By spring 1961, Lomax was debating his friend Malcolm on top New York City radio station WINS and at tony Yale University. Malcolm's influence somewhat radicalized Lomax's own views, but as Thomas Aiello perceptively observes in this fascinating biography, "Lomax's radicalism seemed negotiable" (97) depending on his audience and venue. Debating Congress of Racial Equality director James Farmer and Justice Department civil rights attorney John Doar, Lomax could assert that "nonviolence is downright un-American" (97), but as Aiello accurately notes, "Lomax took up the radical mantle in Malcolm's absence but reverted to a more traditional counterargument in his presence" (102).

Lomax's "constant overspending . . . was a perennial problem" (65), Aiello reports, and so "money was often Lomax's principal motivation" (75) in his many journalistic endeavors. His third book, *When the Word Is Given: A Report on Elijah*

Muhammad, Malcolm X, and the Black Muslim World, was published in October 1963—with Malcolm’s picture, not Elijah’s, on the front cover. Subsequent historians have praised the volume while also concluding that its publication contributed to the growing rift between Malcolm and Elijah, which culminated in Malcolm’s departure from the Nation a few months later.

In late 1964, Lomax moved to Los Angeles, where KTTV paid him \$25,000 a year—the equivalent of over \$213,000 today—to host a ninety-minute Sunday night talk show. Nationally syndicated, *The Louis Lomax Show* was the first such program hosted by a Black man; its debut on February 21, 1965, took place just hours after Nation of Islam gunmen had assassinated his friend Malcolm X in Harlem. A week later, Martin Luther King Jr. (whom Lomax would implausibly claim to have known since childhood, despite their seven-year age difference) appeared on Lomax’s second telecast.

In January 1966, Lomax’s TV show expanded to two nights a week, and he launched a two-hour, six-days-a-week radio program, *The World of Louis Lomax*, on Los Angeles’s KDAY, bringing his annual income to over \$100,000—\$450,000 nowadays. Aiello writes that it was Lomax’s “willingness to provoke, whether right or left, Black or white, that made his” shows “both successful and controversial,” (125) a style he copied from his former partner Mike Wallace.

Lomax married his fourth wife in April 1965, but in October 1966 she went to a hospital with visible injuries suffered at Lomax’s hands. No criminal charges followed, but Lomax’s radio show was swiftly cancelled. An attempt to make a reporting trip to North Vietnam left Lomax marooned in Bangkok, so in inimitable fashion the indefatigable journalist used his time there to author a quickie book—*Thailand: The War That Is, The War That Will Be*—that was far from his best work but was nonetheless published by Vintage Books. Following a fourth divorce, Lomax married for the fifth time in March 1968; two days later his television show was cancelled. On the heels of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, Lomax threw himself into a new book project, jointly assaying the lives of both King and Malcolm. The resulting volume, *To Kill A Black Man*, appeared before the year was out and, like his two previous domestic titles, would remain worthy of scholars’ attention even decades later.

In early 1969, Lomax parlayed a previous speaking appearance at Hofstra University into an appointment as a visiting professor (with future extensions promised) and moved to Long Island. Weeks later Lomax was arrested and pled guilty for drunken driving, but he thrived productively throughout his first year at Hofstra. Aiello highlights how “in April 1970, Lomax made his most important contribution to Black history and literature when he discovered a document in the Long Island Historical Society Library that proved that Jupiter Hammon,” who in 1761 became the United States’ first published Black poet, “was born a Long Island slave” in 1711 (163). Yet Lomax could not escape his shortcomings, for the following month he was indicted on four counts of federal income tax evasion for failing to file 1964 and 1965 returns and then subsequently submitting fraudulent ones. Hardly two months later, on July 31, 1970, Lomax died in a one-car accident on a New Mexico interstate in which drinking was an apparent factor. He was forty-seven.

Thomas Aiello’s wonderful, compelling biography of Lomax is one no reader will quickly—if ever—forget. As Aiello observes, “graft, womanizing, and domestic abuse”—plus Lomax’s recurring proclivity to lie about his lack of a college degree—“existed alongside inspired work for civil rights and journalism that sought to translate a changing world to a series of changing audiences” (133). A 1969 FBI Domestic Intelligence Division memo (quoted in the late Manning Marable’s *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*) dismissed Lomax as “an unscrupulous charlatan who has been extremely critical of the FBI,” but in truth, as Aiello writes, Lomax’s “consistent and effective advocacy for Black rights” (5) made him “an effective mainstream advocate for Black issues” (4) throughout the 1960s, notwithstanding his personal frailties. Aiello correctly calls Lomax “a publicity-seeking provocateur who did what he could both to report the news and to keep himself in it” (2), but—just like his friend Malcolm—Lomax overcame his criminal record to reinvent himself as a significant figure in 1960s Black America, one whose writings continue to hold value a half-century after his premature death. *The Life and Times of Louis Lomax* unearths the previously unknown complexities of Lomax’s life while restoring his journalistic achievements to the public eye. Aiello’s critical empathy for his talented yet troubled subject is an exemplar of how scholars should weigh even notable human beings’ serious flaws and failings.

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