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Aiello, Thomas. *The Life & Times of Louis Lomax*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, 264 pp., \$26.95 (paperback). Reviewed by Pete Smith, Mississippi State University, gds32@msstate.edu.

With *The Life & Times of Louis Lomax: The Art of Deliberate Disunity*, historian Thomas Aiello makes no apparent assumptions about journalist Louis Lomax, but instead uses the rich, contextual details of Lomax's troubled life and times to reveal the psychological and personal demons of a man defined by the hypocrisies of the American experiment. The result is a compelling biography that strays from the typical cradle-to-grave biography that too often attempts to frame the subject as a near-flawless hero. There are no heroes here, just an interesting and complicated narrative that is not afraid to expose Lomax's "lies and crimes" (5) (as Aiello calls Lomax's own inconsistent words and deeds) and his influence on Black journalism and the politics of race.

Aiello presents a straightforward timeline of Lomax's career, from his first byline in 1952 in the *Baltimore Afro-American* and ending with the publication of *To Kill a Black Man*, Lomax's recounting of the similar lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. and his relationships with both men. Aiello cleanly lays out the uneven trajectory of Lomax's career, including his work with Mike Wallace on 1959's *The Hate That You Give*, a five-part CBS documentary that introduced America to the Nation of Islam. Despite its negative portrayals of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and the Muslim community, Aiello argues that Lomax helped provide a national platform for the Nation of Islam. More importantly, his work on the program would demonstrate his talent for self-promotion, a hallmark of his journalism career. As described in the second and third chapters, Lomax's follow-up *Harper's* magazine article, "The Negro Revolt Against the Negro Leaders," a critique of the NAACP, and his 1960 book, *The Reluctant African*, which detailed his travels to eastern Africa, were not so much the result of political beliefs, or his desire to follow in the footsteps of George Washington Williams or W.E.B.

Du Bois, but more to do with Lomax's desire to stir the pot to advance his career.

The remainder of the book carries a similar theme, as Aiello continues his argument that Lomax's books (like the 1962 best seller *The Negro Revolt*), his longform journalism, and his television work (specifically his mid-1960s weekly discussion program, *The Louis Lomax Show*) served no other purpose than Lomax's own attempts at self-promotion. Indeed, the only consistent thing about Lomax, according to Aiello, was the fact that he was inconsistent; everything from his foreign policy ideas to his professional and personal relationships were subject to changing moods and circumstances. To be sure, it is those inconsistencies that make for such a great read, even if they left Lomax to the historical margins. The book's final chapters expose the last years of Lomax's life, including the conspiracy theories and paranoia that consumed Lomax before his sudden death in July 1970, the victim of a car crash. Ironically, his death was not without its own conspiracy theories, as his family and friends contemplated the circumstances of his death.

As interesting a read as *The Life & Times of Louis Lomax* is, it is the book's first chapter that serves as its most important; here Aiello sets the circumstances for Lomax's mastery of the so-called "art of deliberate disunity" (4): born during the Great Depression in Valdosta, Georgia, to a father who abandoned him and a mother who died too young, to be raised by his grandparents in a place best described by Aiello as having "a national reputation for white nationalist violence" (8). It is here that Lomax learned the art of the con—how to adapt to survive, by any means necessary, in a cruel and unjust world. Aiello presents a telling quote from Lomax in the first few pages that summarizes both Lomax's worldview and the tone of the book: "I am convinced that, for the most part, Negroes were not really afraid. Rather, we

were clever; canny, actually, for that was the way to stay alive and get ahead” (15).

The Life & Times of Louis Lomax is more than an engaging read—it is a necessary one, especially for students and scholars of southern history and Jim Crow-era politics, journalism history, and African American studies. Instructors of graduate level or upper-level undergraduate courses in any or all of the aforementioned areas should consider adopting the book, as it presents a most disturbing and honest

account of the life of the Black man in America. Aiello explains, but never excuses, the difficult circumstances that led to Lomax’s inconsistent choices—and the complicated literary portfolio that he created from those decisions. As such, the book deserves a place on the shelf next to James H. Cone’s *Malcolm & Martin & America*, and, most recently, Eddie S. Glaude Jr.’s *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*.