

## Lost City Found: an interview with Luc Sante

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Luc Sante's books *Low life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (1991) and *Evidence* (1992) both helped produce and partook of a much broader awakening of interest in hitherto neglected cultural histories of cities of the New World. In lucid, imaginative but unforced prose, *Low life* maps the simultaneously familiar and wildly exotic undercultures of late nineteenth century New York - the grifters, drifters, dopers, prostitutes, orphans, con men, gangsters, sexual adventurers, bohemians and eccentrics, and the tenements, alleys, saloons, clubs, brothels and tea pads they inhabited. *Evidence* revisits that physical territory via a series of NYPD homicide photographs from the early twentieth century. Rigorously considered, yet expressed in clear poetic prose, *Evidence* offers subtle textual meditations on the photograph at large and the forensic photograph in particular. These two works, with their keen attention to the fabric of the everyday, and their broader sympathies for fringe and outsider cultures have significantly contributed to an awakening of interest in cultural histories of New York and of cities in general. Sante's *Factory of Facts* (1998) weaves personal memoir, family memoir and broad 'ethno-history' into a meditation on language, cultural ancestry and selfhood. Sante has written regularly for *The New York Review of Books* since the 1980s, in which appeared his important essay '[My Lost City](#)' (That essay has been more recently anthologised in *Best American Essays 2004*). This interview was conducted via email in the aftermath of Sante's visit to Sydney in late 2004, during which he delivered a keynote address at Macquarie University Media Department's *Ghost Town Seminar*.

**SCAN:** *You were hired as historical consultant for Martin Scorsese's Gangs of New York. How was that?*

LS: It was great fun, best gig I've ever had. It essentially consisted of having long conversations with Scorsese and Joe Reidy, the assistant director. They would describe a scene to me, for example, and ask me to supply the peripheral details: What are the supernumeraries doing? Are they selling things? Are they eating? Are they singing? What do the posters on the walls say? That sort of thing. And of course it was total delirium. The sets in Rome were the size of a town. My first day, not quite believing it was all real, I got a splinter in my palm from the railing in front of the barbershop--that convinced me. The first time I was present for a nighttime shoot I missed the call to dinner, and didn't know where the tent was, so I followed voices to an immense covered tennis court. I stepped in, they handed me a box of chicken, and I found myself surrounded by the entire population of New York City in 1863, all appropriately garbed, all speaking Italian. For one hallucinatory moment I thought I'd entered Purgatory. (It was, of course, the extras' mess hall.)

**SCAN:** *How was Scorsese on the set?*

LS: Scorsese is truly remarkable. He has seen every movie ever made and can remember them all in shot order. It was tremendously enjoyable and educational talking to him. His enthusiasm never lets up. In the middle of the set-up for one very complicated shot--it featured an army regiment marching down the street, fireworks overhead, a fight on the sidelines, and began with a steadicam movement that was taken up by a crane--he burst out of the tent to ask me whether I'd seen a film called *Bright Leaf* (1948, I think, starring Susan Hayward, a romance of the tobacco industry), and proceeded to describe it in detail. Scorsese is definitely not a cynical industry figure. I've never met anyone more passionate about movies. His sense of wonder is intact after 35 years of dealing with sharks. And I was impressed by his composure and humor in the middle of directing very difficult business. Film directors have to be like generals in a war, and *Gangs* was like the entire European theater in World War II.

**SCAN:** *How effective were your particular interventions?*

LS: Two things I relished: The script called for a gang called the Pilgrim Fathers, anti-Irish jingoists dressed in the manner of seventeenth-century Puritans. I thought this was a bad idea, but my protests were unavailing until I evoked the sight of Laurel and Hardy in such gear (in *A Chump at Oxford*, I think). The effect on Scorsese was instantaneous. The Pilgrim Fathers vanished. The other thing was the problem of how to identify Satan's Circus, the headquarters of the Nativist gang. You couldn't very well hang out a shingle reading "Satan's Circus" in big letters, could you? And yet it had to be readily identifiable. I thought of using a puppet, a commedia dell'arte figure of a devil. And that's what they did, getting the remarkable craftsmen at Cinecittà to make up a wooden devil's head.

**SCAN:** *In your essay 'My lost city' you describe a moment of near epiphany in 1980 when director Milos Forman commandeered a block near where you lived in New York, to use a backdrop for his film of Ragtime. You write of how little needed to be done to return the Lower East Side street to a fair simulation of 1910, and of how eerily the deserted set late at night did indeed evoke its own past. Do you still have experiences like that, in which the ghostly past 'leaks out' and momentarily dissolves the present?*

LS: It doesn't happen to me in New York City anymore--it's too filled with my own ghosts, for one thing, and for another there are no dark streets anymore, and virtually no streets without posh restaurants and boutiques. Near where I live now, though, is the city of Kingston, New York, a once-prosperous river port that has been in continuous decline since the 1920s. Its harbor district, called the Rondout, has been carried over from the nineteenth century virtually intact, featuring that setting of heavy industry amid rustic surroundings -- *rus in urbs*, you might say--that is so emblematic of the industrial revolution. Passing through the Rondout at night, past ancient drydocks and disused brick warehouses and a high trestle bridge overhead that only survives because of the cost of pulling it down, on a twisty and imperfectly paved road with few lights--you only have to squint a bit to find yourself in 1883.

**SCAN:** *Did working on Gangs of New York, with its imaginative recuperation of nineteenth century New York in some way close a loop for you?*

LS: It was a few years too late. The loop was already closed; I reopened it for the occasion.

**SCAN:** *Considering the range of your written work -- your books Low Life, Evidence and The factory of facts, reviews of and commentaries on pulp classics, your liner notes to various reissues of early blues and old timey music, forewords to new editions of classic works such as David Maurer's The big con and Walker Evan's Many are called -- you might be placed with a generation of writers fascinated with eccentric, semi-forgotten and "little-guy" cultures, with the masses of sedimented stuff lying a few degrees below the mainstream commodified mass cultures you grew up with. Do you see this kind of 'jackleg cultural curatorship' project going on indefinitely?*

LS: It might have something to do with age, with growing up in the '60s, when the excitement of cultural consumership just would not let up--every day a great new record, movie, underground magazine, whatever, with that era's optimism and its illusion that the arrow couldn't help pointing up, and all of that in concert with a similar bill of goods promoted by Modernism. Then, when youth stopped and the arrow swung down, we were nevertheless addicted to that need for the new, and there was no place to look for it but the past. Modernism helped there, because in its headlong rush into the future it had bypassed so many things--not only many writers and artists and musicians but whole styles and themes, whole neighborhoods of stuff--that a great many things were still lying around, overlooked for decades. At the same time, there's a bit of class identification in it for me. When I was in school I gravitated toward the semi-popular aspects of culture at the same time that I was fascinated with fringe ultra-avant-gardisms, in part because of rock & roll and in part because high culture was guarded by an invisible velvet cordon. I never forgot that I was the first person in my family to attend school past the age of 16, and that I was only the third literate generation, this in a family (my father's side, anyway) with a strong autodidactic tradition. So I could identify with Jim Thompson and Dock Boggs and Chester Himes and Charley Patton much more than with, say, Henry James. But I'm not answering your question, am I? Do I see this jackleg curatorship going on indefinitely? Perhaps not, but for a good bit of time to come. Just take photography, which only became assimilable by the cultural establishment--by museums and academics--about 25 years ago. Everyone had to go off and have new

spectacles made to be able to really see it on its own terms. Now it's possible to see all kinds of non-art photography in a new way, but this project is in its infancy still. Then, of course, there will also come a time when it will be necessary to make everyone remember high art. This is already the case among the young, who can get the Alabama Sacred Harp Singers without too much trouble, but have to learn how to hear Byrd and Tallis and Purcell, for example, music from the deep past for which they have no ready paradigm.

**SCAN:** *That kind of indie cultural anthropology carried out by you and others – such as say Robert Polito, Nick Tosches, Peter Guralnick and Geoffrey O'Brien – has a characteristic anti-institutional cast to it. As you've come – collectively – to occupy a more central place in contemporary American letters, do you find it difficult to retain that déclassé independence?*

LS: No. The United States is so vast, and literary culture is so peripheral to it, that whatever we do will always be marginal. We're not the academy, and we're not Hollywood. But even the greatest and most prominent American writers are marginal here in a way that would be incomprehensible elsewhere.

**SCAN:** *In 'My lost city' you also wrote about living in New York in the 1970s – of the low rents, the shared apartments, the luxury you and your friends had of being able to subsist on part time work while pursuing eccentric personal and collective cultural interests – without pressure to establish a career. Do you lament the passing of that sort of creative time-wasting? Or does it still go on?*

LS: I do lament it. I see my students graduate and go off to New York to be artists or writers, and they spend all their time earning enough to pay their rent, either by entering the corporate world or by working three jobs at a time. And while NYC may be an extreme, it's not much better elsewhere. I think that to succeed--not financially but according to your own standards--it's necessary to be able to fail. And today, if you fail, you break your bones.

**SCAN:** *Again, on your own apprenticeship as a writer, is it the case that you graduated, eventually, from a humble gig in the mail room at the New York Review to being a staff writer?*

LS: After university I worked in a secondhand bookstore for three years, then briefly for a photographer who specialized in authors' book-jacket photos--you can see the literary theme was already established. Then I got the mailroom job at the Review. It was ideal; I did nothing all day except steal books and mail packages to my friends. After a year I was invited to become an editorial assistant, and I said yes not without misgivings, knowing that this would represent actual work. After a few months I decided to write a piece on spec and submit it. They published it, and I've continued to write for them for 23 years. (They don't have staff writers, by the way.) And all my other early jobs came from colleagues from the Review scullery who went off to be editors at other magazines.

**SCAN:** *Did you always assume back then, in the mail room, that one day you would be a professional writer? Can we cast that transition as a classic, rags to riches "five bucks and a dream" story?*

LS: I decided I wanted to be a writer at the age of ten. When I started at the Review I had only been published in little magazines--I had a line in avant-gardish variations on crime fiction--but I had never made any money off my work barring a couple of school prizes. I hated the idea of being a critic, which seemed parasitic, and in some ways I still do. My career, in any case, has been guided purely by luck, since I don't have a practical bone in my body.

**SCAN:** *In 'My lost city' you wrote "Many businesses seemed to remain solely to give their owners shelter from the elements. How often did a dollar cross the counter of the plastic-lettering concern, or the prosthetic-limb showroom, or the place that ostensibly traded in office furniture but displayed in its window a Chinese typewriter and a stuffed two-headed calf" That passage seems reminiscent of the work of comic strip writer/artist Ben Katchor, and the musings of his protagonist "Julius Knipl, real estate photographer". Are you a Katchor fan?*

LS: Very much. When I first saw his work I couldn't believe it--it was like a transcription of my dreams.

**SCAN:** *Iain Sinclair strikes me as performing a kind of British counterpart to what you do. Not that I'd say his writing particularly recalls yours in style, but his way of intensively working into the minutiae of the streetscapes, people and objects he encounters, his treating the city as found object perhaps does. Are you in touch with him?*

LS: I've never met him, and I became aware of his work less than ten years ago, but I'm a fan. There's also a Parisian counterpart, a whole generation older, named Louis Chevalier.

**SCAN:** *I know you're something of a 'power-flaneur'. Do you find anything in the recapitalized, renovated city to love? Or has that openness and 'unscriptedness' – a happy by-product of neglect and decay perhaps – gone from western cities?*

LS: There just isn't very much that hasn't been subjected to the corporate treatment. Take places to eat: In the Western world you generally have two choices: fancy, or fast/chain/industrial. The halfway decent cheap places have mostly vanished, with the sole exception--and it won't be that way for long--of certain Asian storefronts. This steamroller has been coming down the road for a long time--Louis Chevalier and Richard Cobb both write of Paris having been "assassinated" in the 1950s and '60s, although I spent much of the year 1974 there and in retrospect feel as though I got a substantial glimpse of the old city then. Age has much to do with one's perspective, of course--I tend to date the wrecking of everything from the early '80s, and while it's true that it was the beginning of the Reagan and Thatcher years, that cities worldwide can be objectively shown to have undergone a transformation at that time, is it more than coincidental that the dates coincide with the end of my 20s, of my youth? But then every once in a while I've come upon a city that hasn't (yet) been subjected to a corporate makeover, and the difference is unmistakable--that was the case with Lisbon, at least in 1989 (I haven't been there since and fear the worst). Lisbon was filled with truly strange businesses, signs, rituals. You'd walk down a nineteenth-century street and turn a corner onto a seventeenth-century street, complete with communal water pump. Or you'd walk down slummy streets to find a marble temple at the end--this kept happening, and the marble temples were always pastry shops. There were shops in the center that sold nothing but sheepskins, and I don't mean they had been processed or trimmed, or that the shops had anything but a medieval ambiance. The secondhand bookshops featured books of every description jammed willy-nilly onto shelves, phone directories next to prayer books next to Latin texts in crumbling leather bindings next to pornography. One movie theater proudly displayed a row of portraits in its lobby: the MGM stars of 1949! Signs in the funicular sternly warned passengers that they should not ride if they were afflicted with facial sores or other disfigurements that might nauseate fellow passengers. Everywhere you'd see peasants in from the country, staring in wonder at window displays that might feature, say, surgical instruments. I felt like I'd slipped through some kind of wrinkle in the time-space continuum. The only thing missing was Kublai Khan, riding down the street on a hippogriff.

**SCAN:** *You wrote in the mid eighties about the gentrification of crime fiction – championing the work of such pulpsters as David Goodis and Donald Westlake's Richard Stark nom de plume. But you sounded a note of regret at Elmore Leonard's move from being an admirably modest genre writer to cult figure. That process had barely started when you wrote that, but has of course rolled on hugely since – with Leonard's successes and with his influence on Tarantino, Martin Amis, and a whole bunch of fiction writers. Any further thoughts about Elmore Leonard's work since then, and indeed the continuing gentrification of crime?*

LS: I rather regret having written that, but it was 19 years ago, I was young, I had only recently come upon Leonard, and I had some half-cooked Marxist analysis in mind. The fact is, Leonard's characters and settings can be more or less fancy, but the work is always irreducibly Leonard's, with his Detroit-Miami axis of reality and his golden ear. I have maximum respect for him. I'm not really in a position to comment intelligently on current crime fiction. I read every book by James Ellroy when it comes out, but I'm sadly ignorant of almost everything else. These days I'm too busy working my way through all of Simenon (my homie). I will say, though, that *noir* is a category badly in need of a twenty- or thirty-year moratorium, at least in films.

**SCAN:** *How about the gentrification of blues and country music, of rock'n'roll, and of hitherto trash culture in general?*

LS: Yes, there's a lot of that. Contemporary blues is a particularly sad case, but everything is subject to the coffee-table treatment. On the other hand, you can have an experience like the one I enjoyed last month, at the Saugerties Garlic Festival, one of the many semi-agricultural annual fairs around where I live. On a small raised stage stood four guys in their early 20s--banjo, fiddle, guitar, bass. I knew immediately it was going to be bluegrass, that most rigid and unswinging of American vernacular music forms, and I cringed, mildly. But then I got a surprise. They attacked the stuff as if they were a punk band, with decent skills but no concern for virtuosity. They just tore into the material, and it became *alive*. It was the most exhilarating music I'd heard all year, and it consisted entirely of fifty- and sixty-year-old chestnuts. Passion really can bring dead matter back from the grave.

**SCAN:** *Thoughts on Ken Burns' brand of historical recreations? Any other filmic/documentary explorations of the mass-culture past that have really won you over?*

LS: I can't stand Ken Burns or his brother Ric (although, to be fair, Ric's films on the Donner Party and on Coney Island weren't half bad). Ken views everything through an oily haze of deadening nostalgia, and Ric's triumphalist view of New York City's history as an upward trajectory toward the paradise of capitalism was just infuriating. I'd like to think that there are documentary filmmakers out there exploring the past in a way that illuminates and defamiliarizes it, but I sure haven't seen many such films. The one great example I can think of isn't strictly historical: Jem Cohen's *Lost Book Found*, a complex, subjective, Benjaminian evocation of the layers of New York City.

**SCAN:** *Do you have much to do with academy-based 'urban studies' and 'urban history' people/university departments/conferences etc?*

LS: Not really. I did go to such a conference a few years ago, put on by the University of Ghent in Belgium. I felt ignorant. There is advanced scientific study of urban patterns going on in places like Los Angeles, but I haven't really kept up.

**SCAN:** *You're involved in teaching writing – how do you find that?*

LS: Mostly frustrating, sometimes rewarding. I've had extremely talented students, but mostly I try with fluctuating success to convey the need to treat language as a physical substance, with each word having a weight and a shape and a color and an odor. For most people of all ages, language is merely a means to an end. As a result they can convey ideas, but do it lifelessly.

**SCAN:** *If I remember this correctly, Mike Davis said somewhere that in writing City of Quartz he had tried to combine the historical sweep of a Fernand Braudel, the eye of Frederick Engels and the imagination of Walter Benjamin...or something like that. Can you make your own list of venerable (or not so venerable) influences?*

LS: Most important to me, I think, is that great succession of French guys, from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Jarry, Apollinaire, Breton, Aragon (before he became a Stalinist), Desnos, Peret, Bataille, Leiris. Surrealism colonized my subconscious when I was fourteen, and it looks by now as though it's there to stay. And of course Walter Benjamin--no mean Surrealist himself, for all his other qualifications. I'm also indebted to the tradition of American prose stylists: Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and a couple of mid-twentieth-century writers who are only beginning to receive their due: Joseph Mitchell and A. J. Liebling. And many movies, records, photographs, street scenes, newspaper clippings, etc.

**SCAN:** *I know you wore out some shoe leather tramping around Sydney. Would you care to offer one of those high-concept city descriptors about the burg, of the "it's like downtown Reykjavik in the early eighties crossed with modern Buenos Aires" sort?*

LS: The downtown business district reminded me a lot of Toronto--that mix of great Victorian stone piles with steel-&-glass. Woolloomooloo made me instantly say, "a hybrid of South London and New Orleans." Walking around here and there around town I'd find myself suddenly in San Francisco--the hills had a lot to do with it, also the number of alleys and mews streets. And Newtown and Redfern made me think of--and I know this is why you're asking me this question--Honolulu, the old part of Honolulu which is now primarily Chinatown. The architecture is very similar, and it also has those continuous running metal awnings down the business streets.

**SCAN:** *Can we finish with one of those celebrity-profile type questions? What are you currently reading? Listening to? Working on?*

LS: Reading much dictated by projects of various sizes recently, so not that much for the hell of it, although I recently downed a biography of Aleister Crowley and Stendhal's *Life of Henry Brulard* and a book I purchased at Gould's (is that the name?) in Sydney, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. After spending six months immersing myself in the music of today, mostly via the mp3 blogs (I dug dancehall, Brazilian favela funk, some grime, some hip-hop, considerable crunk--David Banner's *Mississippi* is the greatest thing I've heard in the last year or two--and very little guitar-based stuff), I'm back at one of my default settings, namely blues and country, 1925 to 1965 or so. I've been working for some time on a book which has to do with the Lower East Side of New York City about twenty or twenty-five years ago--it's having a bit of difficulty locating the yellow line between fiction and non-fiction. I'm also writing a piece for *Granta* about working in factories, and for the *New York Review* a long essay, which I'm attempting to rein in, about Bob Dylan. I'm also continuing to scout titles for the Library of Larceny, a collection of reprints of property-crime classics of which I am general editor--we have five titles out now, most recently A. J. Liebling's *The Telephone Booth Indian* and *Con Man* by Yellow Kid Weil, and we expect three to five in 2005.

**Editors' note:** In late 2005, as this issue of Scan was about to go online, Luc Sante was invited to update his answer to the last question (originally written in late 2004). His response was as follows.

LS: The Library of Larceny was put to death by Doubleday/Random House several months back. I hope to have two books out next year, a collection of short pieces to be called *Kill All Your Darlings*, and a translation/edition of Felix Feneon's *Novellas in Three Lines*, the latter from *New York Review Books*. I'm working on a book about Paris, which has been contracted although I'm some way from knowing just what it will be. I'm listening to a lot of African music these days--Cheikh Lo's latest a particular favorite--and Brazilians of all sorts, and Jamaicans and South Asians, and much rai. Reading French lit in quantity. I'll put in a plug for the crime novels of Jean-Patrick Manchette, two of whose titles exist in translation.

## Bibliography

Luc Sante (1991) *Low life: Lures and Snares of Old New York*, New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux

--(1992) *Evidence*, New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux

--(1998) *The Factory of Facts*, New York: Random

--(2005) 'My Lost City' in Louis Menand (ed) *Best American Essays, 2004*, New York: Houghton Mifflin

## Links

Sante's essay "My Lost City" is available at:

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/16737>.

Essays published in the *Village Voice* and *Granta* are available at:

<http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0420,essay,53560,1.html>

<http://www.granta.com/extracts/2255>

Some of Sante's fictional writing can be found at:

<http://www.npr.org/programs/death/readings/stories/sante.html>

A list of Sante's reviews and essays published in the *New York Review of Books* is at:

<http://www.nybooks.com/authors/79>

Profiles of Sante are at:

<http://www.chronogram.com/issue/2005/04/bookshelf/>

<http://www.granta.com/authors/39>

Interviews are available at:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/newyork/series/interview/sante.html>

[http://www.believmag.com/exclusives/?read=interview\\_sante](http://www.believmag.com/exclusives/?read=interview_sante)

Information about his work at Bard is reachable at:

<http://inside.bard.edu/photo/faculty/sante.shtml>

See also:

[http://www.granta.com/shop/product?usca\\_p=t&product\\_id=41](http://www.granta.com/shop/product?usca_p=t&product_id=41)

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