"So I Decided to Quit It and Try Something Else for a While"

Reading Agency in Nat Love

SIMONE DRAKE

When scholars discuss literary and cultural representations of black masculinity they often turn to the usual suspects. In regard to literature, the great triumvirate, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin are called upon as representatives, with the occasional inclusion of Chester Himes. For cultural representations of black masculinity, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois are held up as narrative archetypes, while Malcolm X is a favorite, both visually and textually. Just as the literary and cultural representatives of black masculinity are predictable, popular culture representations are just as predictable, albeit generic. Popular film, music videos, and magazines are littered with images of the black male as thug, entertainer, athlete, and criminal. It is not surprising, then, that visual images of black masculinity in academic texts, particularly as cover art, also elect to present visceral images of black men and black bodies—nude and semi-nude images bearing sweat and brawn and generic close-ups of a black man's face. The exception to these images are found in texts dealing with Reconstruction, the Progressive Era, and the civil rights movement; these texts, instead, offer images in line with the middle-class decorum and respectability
that framed racial uplift discourse—refined black men in suits or men in shirts and ties, protesting and marching. While there are, of course, exceptions to these literary and cultural representations of black masculinity, the aforementioned representations appear consistently enough to be considered commonplace. Considering the predictable and often stagnant narrative and visual attention to black masculinity, then, an important question arises: what can be gained by looking at unusual suspects?

Visual images of Nat Love, as well as his autobiographical narrative, The Life and Adventures of Nat Love (1907), offer contemporary readers and scholars a construction of black masculinity with a critical difference when compared to his contemporaries, Douglass, Washington, and Du Bois. Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Bilson coined the term “cool pose” as a way of describing how contemporary African American men utilize self-presentation as a survival mechanism, a means of retaining masculine self-control, and that term can be projected usefully into the early twentieth century. Not only does Love offer an alternative model of racial uplift in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but the “self-making” in his narrative resonates with the “cool pose” of black masculinity that breaks from the modernist penchant for protest and lament for a masculinity that remains out of reach. Although the few scholars who have attended to Love’s narrative cannot resist arguments that delve into racial authenticity, arguing that the West provided Love the space to transcend or erase blackness by embracing the myth of the racial frontier, or less frequently, to present Love as a mimicker of Booker T. Washington’s accommodationist rhetoric, such analyses fail to consider critically Love’s agency. What scholars often fail to recognize is that Love made his choices of self-presentation based on his vision of himself and the black manhood that he sought to attain. From slavery and sharecropping in Tennessee to “the wild and wooly West” to the Pullman trains, Love was his own agent; he owned himself. Understanding Love as demonstrating a significant level of agency through his careers has the potential to offer scholars an alternative means of framing early-twentieth-century constructions of black masculinity.

An alternative reading of Love incorporates what Robert Reid-Pharr calls “the rhetoric of the freedom of choice”—in this case, the freedom to choose one’s own race and act as one’s own agent. Reid-Pharr asserts that “a much more expansive conception of freedom of choice” is needed when assessing African American cultural productions—a conception that recognizes, “One might not only choose one’s room, one’s books, one’s music, and one’s sexual partners, but also and importantly
one might choose one’s identity, indeed one’s race.” Such an assertion informs this analysis of Love’s rhetorical strategies in describing his “self-making” in a fashion that recognizes his agency and intellect without neutralizing or erasing his blackness.

We can interpret Love’s “cool pose” of racial uplift in two important ways: visually and spatially. Only cursory attention has been given to the eight photographs that are included in the narrative, and examining the visual rhetoric of these photographs suggests important matters about Love’s life outside of the autobiography, not the least of which is how his self-assertion offers an alternative account to the well-known progressive tradition of his contemporary Du Bois. Aside from his narrative, Love seems to have left no other remnants or artifacts attesting to his “life and adventures.” However, U.S. Census records and state directories do confirm that he owned a home after the publication of his narrative. An analysis of the photographs and the significance of home ownership provide an opportunity to read Love as an important exemplar of how African American men negotiated life on the color line.

The House That Jim Crow Built

Nat Love was born into slavery in Davidson County, Tennessee, in 1854. He left his family home in 1869 for the Western plains, where, according to his autobiography, he became the roughest, toughest, and smartest cowboy on the frontier. The Life and Adventures is a multi-genre text that is divided into three distinct sections. The first section of five chapters describes Love’s life as a slave, his family’s hardships as sharecroppers, and his role as head of the house when his father died. The slave narrative section echoes the standard conventions of slave narratives, and more specifically parallels Washington’s Up from Slavery. The second and longest section of twelve chapters records Love’s life and experiences as a cowboy from 1869 to 1890. This section embodies the conventions of the dime novel, recounting superhuman feats—being shot fourteen times, for example—and encounters and friendships with famous cowboys and outlaws. The final section of five chapters chronicles Love’s experiences as a Pullman porter and ends with nostalgia for life in the West.

The autobiography emphasizes Love’s careers as strategies of economic improvement from life in slavery through individual heroics to middle-class success; nevertheless, a compelling symbol of Love’s embodiment of the self-made man, home ownership, is not apparent in the narrative, because he did not purchase his home until after 1907. His home
ownership is significant, as it not only represents an act of “self-making” that many African Americans did not have access to during the Progressive Era, but also places Love’s narrative within rather than outside of the African American literary tradition. The 1920 Census questionnaire for Los Angeles County records Nat and Alice Love owning a home at 1748 Twenty-Second Street in Santa Monica, California. Not only does he own his home, but according to the questionnaire, his ownership is “free,” meaning he does not have a mortgage. Only 22.3 percent or 542,654 of 2,430,828 American homeowners were African Americans in 1920. In California in 1920, African Americans owned 3,523 out of 376,173 homes, and the African American population in California was 38,763 or 1.9 percent. The exact address of the Love’s home in Santa Monica no longer exists, as I-10 runs through that neighborhood, and proximate addresses are industrial and office buildings. There is only one other black family listed on the schedule for Love’s street and the two others on the list. The residents of the neighborhood are identified as “white,” but almost all of them possess Spanish surnames, speak Spanish, and have parents who were born in Mexico. The racial demographics of these neighborhoods are, of course, complicated by the racial formations surrounding immigration during this time period.

Love’s negotiation of the color line in the closing frontier perhaps precipitated his self-construction as a “bad man,” and he also dueled with the expectations of jim crow on Pullman’s trains. Perhaps only at the limit of the frontier, literally at the Pacific Ocean, could Love establish a home and by extension the self-ownership he lacked at birth. Because property has historically served as a racial signifier—slaves were property and thus blackness was a marker of property, and conversely, property ownership was itself a marker of race, of whiteness—then Love’s home ownership in the jim crow era becomes a symbol of racial transgression. Both the physical space and the domestic iconography of the home are critical determinants in achieving manhood within the confines of patriarchal assumptions of family stewardship. Thus, for a black man at the turn of the twentieth century, the acquisition of property functions as a designator of gender trumping race.

The Tales Photographs Tell

Prior to owning his home, Love constructed what we can recognize as a “cool pose” of racial uplift in his narrative through its sketches and photographs, which granted him opportunities of self-portrayal in terms of
race and gender. In addition to the thirty-four pencil sketches, the autobiography includes eight other pictures: one family photograph in the frontispiece, two cowboy photographs, four Pullman porter photographs, and one photograph of Love in his courier uniform. Representing himself with the rugged individualism of a cowboy, as a polished professional porter, and as a successful family man, Love offers in these aggregate of images a compelling counter-argument to racist suppositions of black men as biologically inferior, undisciplined, and uncivilized—expectations that fueled white supremacy and lynching. The images strategically reinforce the conventional tenets of racial uplift at the same time that they disrupt those conventions by complicating assumptions of black middle-class decorum at the heart of such positivism.

The first page of the narrative is a frontispiece photograph of Love, his wife, Alice, who is identified only by name in the dedication, and, his daughter, who is never named. The caption under the photograph reads, “Nat Love, Better Known as Deadwood Dick, and His Family” (see figure 11). This photograph is reminiscent of those Du Bois collected for his Georgia Negro album, because the photographs in that collection capture images of black people that the white media had no interest in representing: black people who were not domestics, sharecroppers, poor, or criminals. Like Du Bois’s, Love’s images of black middle-class advancement provide what Shawn Michelle Smith describes in another context as “a place from which a counter-history can be imagined and narrated,” and they “underscore the ways in which both identity and history are founded, at least partially, through representation.”

In addition to the family’s clothing marking their class status, the very fact that they could afford to sit for a photograph was a significant marker as well, because photography at this time was an expensive art inaccessible to many. This photograph, then, seems designed to establish for the reader the Love family’s middle-class status and respectability. As Kevin K. Gaines explains, in the wake of emancipation and on into the twentieth century, racial uplift was a pervasive ideology in black politics and culture that was compelling because it allowed African Americans to foreground the home and family, two images that bolstered “race building” by “making conformity to patriarchal family ideals the criterion of respectability.”

Love’s conformity to uplift ideology merits scrutiny. In spite of the “image of the home and the patriarchal family” that stares back at the reader from the first page of the narrative, there remains something odd about this photograph, as census data on Love and his wife reveal information that calls into question the veracity of the family portrait, especially
Figure 11 “Nat Love, Better Known as Deadwood Dick, and His Family.” This studio portrait illustrates the transformation of the lone cowboy of the Wild West to the established paterfamilias. Used with Permission of Documenting the American South, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.
the likelihood of the standing woman being his daughter. The photograph is not dated, so the only certainty is that it was taken prior to the publication of the text. The assumption can be made that the frontispiece and all but one of the Pullman photographs are taken at the same studio during the same time period.\textsuperscript{10} The first photograph of Love in his Pullman uniform is a younger-looking man—no gray hair, a thinner face, and a sparser mustache—than the Love in the subsequent Pullman photographs and in the frontispiece. The first Pullman photograph also appears to have been taken in front of a different backdrop than the other Pullman photographs and the frontispiece. Considering these differences, the frontispiece photograph is perhaps the most likely to have been taken near the publication date. If, however, it was taken earlier in Love’s Pullman career, then an even stronger case can be made that the younger woman in the photograph could not possibly be Love’s daughter, who would have been only a toddler at the start of Love’s Pullman career.

In the portrait, Love, who would have been about fifty-three in 1907, looks his age. According to census records, Love’s wife, Alice, was also born in 1854 or 1855.\textsuperscript{11} However, the two women in the photograph, presumably mother and daughter, appear to be closer in age, and neither of the two women appears to be in her early fifties. The seated woman’s flat hat and attire mark her as a middle-class matron, and the standing woman’s fashionable coordinated ensemble, with its cinched waist and elaborate hat, mark her as a younger woman. The argument could be made that the seated woman is Love’s wife and has aged well, but this assertion does not address a variety of other discrepancies that this photograph, as well as the other photographs, present.

The 1900 Census schedule indicates that a Nat and Alice Love lived in Salt Lake City, Utah, and had been married for twelve years, and that Alice had given birth four times, with two children still living.\textsuperscript{12} The peculiar aspect of this record is that there are no actual children listed as living in the Love household, as the only names recorded are Nat’s and Alice’s. Typically all of the children living in the home and their ages would be recorded below their parents’ data. The older of the two living children should be approximately ten—so where are the living children? The 1910 Census schedule lists that Alice Love has given birth five times and there are no remaining children.\textsuperscript{13} It is important to note the math here: Alice was thirty-four or thirty-five when she got married, which would make her in her mid-forties when the 1900 Census was recorded and in her mid-50s when the 1910 Census was recorded.
Not only would Alice have begun having children at a late age, according to the 1910 Census, but she would have continued having children well into her forties, and possibly her fifties. That is not to say this could not indeed be the case, but it is unusual and worth noting. Furthermore, Love never mentions having any children in his narrative. Based on this absence in his narrative and the census data that never identifies children living in Love’s home, there remains the possibility that none of Love’s children survived or remained with him at the time the photographs were taken. Lacking children would compromise his ability to fit the patriarchal model of racial uplift, so Love may have done for the photographs what he likely did throughout the autobiography—he fabricates, making a self that matches the expectations of the situation.

The frontispiece family photograph is not the only odd photograph in Love’s collection. The next photograph is of a cowboy with a lariat, followed by one of a cowboy with a rifle. The caption below the first (see figure 12) reads, “The Roping Contest at Deadwood, S.D.” Love presumably would have posed for most of the photographs on the same day in the same studio, changing from costume to costume so that there would be visual evidence of his various identities to support his narrative. Recognizing the highly staged aspect of these photographs is paramount to an alternative reading of Love’s narrative, as such a recognition invites an expansion of Love’s creative agency performing a black masculinity that frontier myths’ racial erasure could not provide.

The roping contest at Deadwood that Love references in the caption of the lariat photograph occurred, tellingly, on July 4, 1876. Love proclaims, “The name of Deadwood Dick was given to me by the people of Deadwood, South Dakota, July 4, 1876, after I had proven myself worthy of it, and after I had defeated all comers in riding, roping, and shooting, and I have always carried the name with honor since that time.”

Scholars fail to acknowledge Love’s intellect when analyzing his narrative, because he does not present his story as invested in self-assertions of intelligence crucial to narratives of racial uplift; instead, he seems to have written an entertaining autobiography in the dime novel tradition. However, Love is no fool. In lieu of either Du Bois’s intellectualism advocacy or Washington’s accommodation, Love opts for the African American signifying-trickster folk tradition. The full title of Love’s narrative, with subtitle is *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in the Cattle Country as “Deadwood Dick,” by Himself; a True History of Slavery Days, Life on the Great Cattle Ranges and on the Plains of the “Wild and Woolly” West, Based on Facts, and Personal Experiences of the Author.* Love
Figure 12. "The Roping Contest at Deadwood, S.D." Used with Permission of Documenting the American South, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.
uses the pseudonym “Deadwood Dick” on the front cover, the title page, and throughout the narrative. The persona of Deadwood Dick is not Love’s creation, as the fictional outlaw dressed all in black appeared in many dime novels from 1877 to 1903. As Susan Scheckel observes, Love does not present his name as derivative of Wheeler’s character; instead, he “encourages readers to see him as the original” because he earns his name in 1876, the year before Edward L. Wheeler’s series began.16

Love does more than simply appropriate Wheeler’s Deadwood Dick in an effort to establish the bona fides of his accomplishments. Love also signifies on this character’s history and on his name. The first dime novel of the Deadwood Dick series “introduces the hero as an orphan victimized by politically powerful enemies; because the law will not protect him, he must become an outlaw to protect himself and his sister.”17 If Love’s appropriation is considered in terms of race, nation, and masculinity, then his appropriation signifies on the instability of white masculinity. The frontier functioned as a critical space for warding off what Gail Bederman refers to as “racial decadence.” Bederman points out how Theodore Roosevelt masked his “belligerent grab for a radically new type of nationalistic power” with racial decadence rhetoric that insisted, “A race which grew decadent, then, was a race which had lost the masculine strength necessary to prevail in this Darwinistic racial struggle.”18 When Love appropriates the name of Deadwood Dick, Love implies an awareness of the relationship between the denial of full citizenship to black people, meaning black men, and the nation’s fear of black men gaining true freedom. Such recognition would have been informed by the controversy surrounding the Fourteenth Amendment that ultimately culminated in the “separate but equal” ruling of Plessy v. Ferguson. Love’s appropriation, then, can be understood as a pun on the impotence of white masculinity—a dick that is like deadwood—a masculinity during the Progressive Era anxiously preoccupied with defining, performing, and defending a masculinity that was entirely “white” and “male.”

Wheeler’s character is an outlaw, because he was orphaned and unprotected from “politically powerful enemies.” As a black man in the post-Reconstruction United States, Love is “victimized by politically powerful enemies,” the nation and its fickle democratic ideals. Love has no protection, so he becomes a trickster in order to gain access to signifiers of whiteness: middle-class values, economic capital, and real estate. Love assumes the white Deadwood Dick’s privilege and agency retroactively, on the centennial celebration of the nation, July 4, 1876. In other words, the liberated Love is born-again on the nation’s birth date,
a celebration that consistently fails to acknowledge that the Declaration of Independence does not grant freedom, rights, and protection to African Americans. In doing so, Love adopts a black masculinity disavowing both Washington’s accommodation and Du Bois’s lament of double-consciousness—instead, Love acts as his own agent, claiming the property of person he believes to be rightfully his.

Love’s narrative and the accompanying photographs offer a counter-narrative to the relationship between constructions of white masculinity and its relationship to the nation. Read this way, these photographs tell a provocative tale. The veracity of Love’s narrative remains a place of contention; equally suspicious are the cowboy photographs, in which Love appears strikingly different from the other photographs included in the narrative. The incongruities in Love’s narrative might lead the most suspicious reader to believe that he had not been a cowboy or lived in the West. An 1890 Denver directory confirms that Nat Love lived there then and that his occupation was a teamster, though there are no extant records of Love prior to that year. Another oddity lies in the picture of Nat with his gun, his hand is over its sight, a placement unlikely for a trained gun handler.

There are more significant oddities about the cowboy photographs. When the cowboy photographs are juxtaposed with the other images of Love, the only consistency is a black man in the photographs. Although there are some similarities in the eyes, the man in the cowboy photographs is slimmer than the man in all of the others, and he has higher cheekbones and a more angular jawline, suggestive of Native American features (see figure 13). None of the Pullman photographs exhibit these traits, and the facial and bodily differences cannot be attributed to time if all of the portraits were staged on the same day in the same studio. Census data confirms that Love resided in Denver in 1890, lived in Salt Lake City in 1900, and rented a home in the Los Angeles area in 1910. It is unlikely that Love posed for his cowboy pictures in 1890 in Denver at the end of his career as was common for cowboys and then returned to Denver from Los Angeles later in his life to take the other photographs for the book. So, then, why wouldn’t Love have posed in his own cowboy photograph? Analyzing the photograph could provide some insight on the presence of the “double” and insight about the freedom of choice Love exercises in the staging of the photographs, and more generally in his self-construction.

This cowboy photograph, “In My Fighting Clothes,” is nearly identical to another one in which the figure holds a lariat rather than a rifle.
Figure 13  “In My Fighting Clothes.”  Used with Permission of Documenting the American South, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.
Like Edward Wheeler’s Deadwood Dick, Love wears a shoulder-length wig with loose curls and bangs across his forehead, the only difference being that his wig is not blond. He is in full cowboy gear, with his saddle at his feet. This double with his black wig, high cheekbones, and angular jawline suggests a racial hybridity, a man who cannot be defined solely by blackness. He is brown, but his hair in particular creates a racial hybridity that disrupts the whiteness of Wheeler’s character at the same time that it troubles how we define blackness. It is in the cowboy section of his autobiography that we learn not only that Love is engaged to a Mexican woman, but that he also speaks Spanish, further accentuating Love’s interest in transcending rigid racial categorization in the West. Love ultimately embraced the “make your own self” ideologies that prevailed in the Dakota territories in 1876 when he claims to have won the roping contest, signified by the lariat lying on the floor in the photograph.

As with every element of his narrative, Love was strategic with his selection and costuming of what may have been his double. Twelve chapters of The Life and Adventures are dedicated to Love’s life on the range, a life that suggests decreased circumscription from racism and Jim Crow law. Although Love never acknowledges that the frontier myth was indeed a myth, his inclusion of the cowboy photographs suggests that Love was all too aware of the failures of the frontier as a space of racial equality. Instead, he offers an idyllic image of the West: wherein blackness is not erased, the whiteness of Wheeler’s Deadwood Dick disappears, and readers are confronted with the image of what may be a racially hybrid imposter who not only imposes on Love’s narrative but inserts himself into the racial politics of the nation at the turn of the twentieth century.

The cowboy photographs deviate from the middle-class respectability illustrated in the frontispiece family photograph, the auspices of success the “race men” faithfully advanced. Love represents his life as a cowboy as wild, unruly, and lawless. He admits, “It was not an uncommon occurrence for us to have shooting trouble over our different brands. In such disputes the boys would kill each other if others did not interfere in time to prevent it, because in those days on the great cattle ranges there was no law but the law of might, and all disputes were settled with a forty-five Colt pistol.” The cowboy chapters are circumscribed by similar “wild and wooly” exploits, laced with heavy hyperbole, including “the marks of fourteen bullet wounds on different parts of my body, most any one of which would be sufficient to kill an ordinary man, but I am not even crippled.”

20
These acts of participating in and surviving violent aggression do not necessarily present a contradiction to Love’s middle-class image of the frontispiece. It makes sense that Love did not meet middle-class decorum while a cowboy. Life on the frontier provided Love the opportunity to be part of what Marlon B. Ross identifies as a New Negro promoter who wrote “highly personalized narratives [. . .] to reshape the collective identity of the race.” The frontier, then, provided Love and others the space “to boast their individual hand-to-hand duels in overcoming the enemy known as Jim Crow.”21 The myth of the West, however, may have proven a myth in Love’s case, and he surrendered the cowboy identity for the most respectable occupation available, that of the Pullman porter. Love concedes, “It was with genuine regret that I left the long horn Texas cattle and the wild mustangs of the range, but the life had in a great measure lost its attractions and so I decided to quit it and try something else for a while.”22 Love’s decision exemplifies my argument about agency—“I decided to quit”—demonstrates a claim to ownership of his personhood and speaks to his freedom of choice. Love owns himself and he sees himself as an agent of change, adapting and moving on.

### Pullman Porters: Mobility and Servility

Love traded the West, a geography of autonomous physical, “natural” masculinity, for viewing the national landscape through the windows of George M. Pullman’s train cars. Despite Love’s commitment, on the one hand, to the highest and most loyal servitude to his white passengers, he is unable to cover up the fact that the Pullman Company ultimately developed a new form of servitude with its low wages and the demeaning and patronizing nature of the porters’ work. On the other hand, based on his autobiographical account, Love manipulated the system to the best of his ability in order to make it fill his needs.

His photographs as a Pullman porter and his final photograph as a courier grant him middle-class status and respectability and, apparently very importantly for Love, being a porter grants him a valuable freedom of mobility. Love recounts, “During my service with the Pullman company I have traveled from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Gulf of Mexico to the borders of Canada, over nearly all the many different lines of railroad.” He continues, “I have visited all the principal cities and towns where the sound of the bell and the whistle is heard, and I have in a great measure satisfied my desire to see the country.”23 However
problematically, the costume of porter provided Love with very real protection as he traveled through regions of a nation where lynching might vary in frequency, but always presented a threat. That Love declared that he felt at home and would ultimately make a home in the United States is noteworthy for a black man at the turn of the twentieth century.

While many readers and scholars read Love as a cowboy who wanted to escape race, or at best as a black man who embraced Washington’s assimilationist and accommodationist rhetoric, a significant part of history would be lost in doing so. Love’s approach to constructing a livable black masculinity has much to offer our understanding, particularly in his Pullman porter and courier photographs. Gaines asserts that it was the lot of Pullman porters “to pass their knowledge, ideals, and ambitions on to their children.” Based upon their absence in census records, Love’s children may have been imaginative constructions, so he passes on his knowledge, ideals, and ambition to the reader, black or white, instead. The first Pullman photograph presents Love in his uniform, holding a pose reflecting a dignified pride with the caption, “My First Experience as a Pullman Porter” (see figure 14). In the next photograph, Love is once again exhibiting an air of pride, but this time with the added air of prestige and accomplishment. He is holding a fan in one hand and the coat sleeve of his opposite arm bears three stripes, marking his longevity as a porter, as well as his superb performance. The caption reinforces the image: “This is Where I Shine. Now I am Out for the Money” (see figure 15). The third Pullman photograph (see figure 16) has the caption “The Close of My Railroad Career.” In this photograph we see Love in uniform with his hat tilted to the side, his arms crossed across his chest, and a look of satisfaction and refinement on his face. We see a similar aura in Love’s pose in his courier uniform with the caption that simply reads, “With the General Securities Company.” These poses can be interpreted through Gaines’s more nominal definition of the goal and purpose of racial uplift ideology: “Generally, black elites claimed class distinctions, indeed, the very existence of a ‘better class’ of blacks, as evidence of what they called race progress. Believing that the improvement of African Americans’ material and moral condition through self-help would diminish white racism, they sought to rehabilitate the race’s image by embodying respectability, enacted through an ethos of service to the masses.” Love seemed to be convinced that his service to the white patrons on the train was indeed service to the racial collectivity. He uplifts the race by embodying respectability.
Figure 14 “My First Experience as a Pullman Porter.” Given the cost of staging photographs in the early twentieth century, Love likely would have had the studio photographs for the book, including this one, taken together. However, the men in the photos implied to be the same man do not resemble one another closely. Used with Permission of Documenting the American South, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.
Figure 15  "This is Where I Shine. Now I am Out for the Money." Love trades the buckskin jacket of a cowboy for the buttoned coat of a porter. Used with Permission of Documenting the American South, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.
Figure 16  *The Close of My Railroad Career.* A self-satisfied, self-made man enjoys the fruits of his labors. Used with Permission of Documenting the American South. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.
Love mirrors Booker T. Washington’s racial uplift in the many ways that scholars have noted, but there are several pertinent ways in which he also reflects Du Bois’s racial uplift strategies, particularly in his self-presentation. Shawn Michelle Smith’s *Photography on the Color Line* and Hazel Carby’s *Race Men* offer compelling analyses of Du Bois’s visual rhetoric that can be applied productively to Love’s rhetorical appeals to his white audience. Analyzing the Georgia Negro albums that Du Bois exhibited at the 1900 Paris Exposition, Smith argues that Du Bois compiles a photographic collection that “anchors his antiracist critique in a patriarchal model of an African American elite, envisioning a restrained and disciplined manhood figured in the discourses enabling lynching at the turn of the century.”  

One impetus for lynching and stripping black men of masculinity, and thus citizenship, was the nation’s anxiety about a loss of national (white) manhood during the Progressive Era. Racial uplift ideals were therefore directed at whites with just as much, if not more, fervor as they were directed at blacks. Instead of directing their appeals to sympathetic Northern whites comprising the slave narrators’ audience, post-Reconstruction uplift rhetoric targeted unsympathetic whites. By targeting this group, Gaines argues, “Elite blacks believed they were replacing the racist notion of fixed biological racial differences with an evolutionary view of cultural assimilation, measured primarily by the status of the family and civilization.” Love recognized the importance of these manly and refined poses, as well as the family photograph that meets the reader’s eye on the first page of the narrative. Through his appropriation of the middle-class values reserved for white Americans, Love—like Du Bois—“reject[s] the whitewash of normative middle-class archives, claiming a space for African Americans within the middle classes.” Du Bois’s albums and Love’s photographs share the understanding of how the public gaze can be redirected, how the object of the gaze has some agency in determining how a person and perhaps a race are seen, as illustrated in figure 16. Love’s intended audience was not just white Americans, as he demonstrated a high investment in his black audience as well. For blacks, Love’s photographs represent the possibility of a complex racial citizenship beyond the performance of career inherent in Love’s occupations and photographs. This investment is evident in all of the photographs. Just as Hazel Carby argues that Du Bois “quite deliberately uses his own body as the site for an exposition of the qualities of black manhood,” Love also asks his audience to recognize his body as evidence of defeating jim
crow. The machismo of the cowboy photographs and the middle-class respectability of the family photograph, the Pullman photographs, and the courier photograph represent this effort.

Another photograph of Love’s autobiography implies both machismo and middle-class respectability, combining two tropes of masculinity that are often incongruent. The penultimate photograph in the narrative is presumably of Love—it is hard to distinguish any detailed features—standing in front of a train with four white friends (see figure 17). The caption reads, “With Wm. Blood, My Old Cowboy Friend, and Other Friends at the Close of My Railroad Career.” Arguably, this photograph conjures images of Washington’s collusion with and efforts to appease whites, though not all interracial activity necessarily meant appeasement. More importantly, the image inserts Love’s black body into a significant masculine space and history. In *Dixie Limited: Railroads, Culture, and the Southern Renaissance*, Joseph R. Millichamp points out that on the one hand, for white writers of William Faulkner’s generation, “The newly important rail network represented the reconciliation, prosperity, and sophistication necessary for a Southern literary flowering.” On the other hand, however, “African American writers from the days of the Underground Railroad through the great migration of the twentieth century saw the trains of the South as ambivalently situated symbols of both escape and entrapment.”31 The railroad tracks often were laid with the contract labor of largely black convicts, sometimes resulting in their deaths, and the trains were generally segregated, but trains also symbolized virility, entitlement, and progress. The five men standing in front of the train are dwarfed by its size. By appropriating the strength, technology, and mobility the railroad represents, Love establishes his own black masculinity, and it secures his citizenship by giving him wide access to the national landscape.

*ALAS, THE TALES* photographs tell are not always true. The pride of service that Love exhibits through his poses and narrative were surely at conflict with the demeaning nature of porters’ work as servants to white clientele. In spite of presenting his experience otherwise, Love was not exempt from the inequities of Pullman’s service. Many of the discharge records reveal that porters were employed for relatively short periods, and anywhere from less than one year to two or three years was the average, with occasional records showing six or seven years of service. Love was one of the earliest and longest serving porters, with fifteen years of
Among Friends. Nat Love stands before a train with friends and coworkers from his life in the West and his career as a porter. Used with Permission of Documenting the American South, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.

With Wm. Blood, My Old Cowboy Friend, and Other Friends at the Close of My Railroad Career.
service. Love’s discharge record reveals that he resigned October 17, 1906, with the notation that he “resigned not to be re-employed.” The commentary under “cause” states, “The manner in which he absented himself from duty at Los Angeles on several occasions.” Absenteeism might be viewed as a reasonable cause to note that an employee ought not to be rehired; however, upon a review of the larger Porters’ Discharge Records, as well as Employee Service Records for (“colored”) porters and Chinese employees, a clear pattern emerges. African American and Chinese employees receive consistent negative notations in their records that are largely disproportionate to any negative notations in the records of their white coworkers. Similarly, his service record reveals that his salary was garnished several times and he was suspended for five- and ten-day periods on seven different occasions from September 15, 1902, to June 18, 1906, for “poor service,” “not reporting for run,” and a complaint in relationship to the buffet and lost property.

These infractions all occurred in the last four years of Love’s service, and they easily could be attributed to Love losing interest in the job or his tiring of the demeaning servitude, but such an explanation would overlook the fact that a review of the Newberry Library’s archive of Pullman Porters’ Discharge Records reveal that porters’ were routinely discharged for minor and arbitrary infractions. Love’s long record of infractions and far longer record of service actually affirm his presentation of himself as a hardworking and conscientious employee, because he must have been to have worked for Pullman for fifteen years, more than twice as long as some of the longest employed porters. His citizenship and access to the national landscape, then, is indebted to Washington’s urge that black men and women labor under the circumstances in which they found themselves. However, as Love’s careers as cowboy and porter indicate, black men could determine the circumstances under which they chose to stop laboring. He could accommodate as long as necessary, and when that no longer works, he “decided to quit it and try something else for a while.”

Notes


4. The 1910 Census lists Love as renting a home in Malibu, California.

5. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920—Population*. Census Place: Precinct 23, Santa Monica, CA. Although Love did not own a home at the time of publication, he did exhibit an investment in raising the funds to purchase the land for what he called “The Porters’ Home,” a “Home and Hospital, with adjoining farming land, for the benefit of old and disabled porters who were not able to perform their duties as Pullman car porters.” According to Love, he actually proposed this idea to George Pullman in 1893, and Pullman signed a statement promising that if the porters succeeded at buying one thousand acres of land, he would erect the building on it. Presuming such a conversation took place, it seems likely that Pullman knew that the funds would never be raised for such a venture. The persistence with which Love pursued this endeavor, however, is significant, not only because it reflects the Washingtonian principle of property ownership, but also because it positions Love in the same field of activism as A. Philip Randolph, who would organize the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.


10. Speirs also makes this assertion, but he does not make a distinction between the first Pullman photograph and the others, and he does not consider any of the photographs suspicious (“Writing Self (Effacingly)),” 301–20).


12. *Twelfth Census of the United States*. Year: 1900; Census Place: Salt Lake City, UT. Nat and Alice got married August 22, 1889, in Denver, Colorado, and they lived there until at least 1895, according to a Denver telephone directory.


14. Speirs offers an analysis of Love’s staging of the photographs in which he argues that the pictorial images challenge readers to “move beyond assumptions that the story of his life is unraced” (“Writing Self (Effacingly)),” 316). Speirs does not, however, offer a nuanced analysis of the photographs.
17. Ibid.
19. There is an eight-year gap in Love’s narrative between the date of the last cowboy event in 1881 and when he leaves the range in 1890. The 1885 Kansas Census for Edwards County lists a Mahala Love, who may have been Love’s mother, living with an N.A. Love, three other adults, and five children in Edwardsville County in 1885. “N.A.” Love is the same age as Love.
23. Ibid., 138.
25. Ibid., xiv.
32. In the Discharge Record volume that I examined, I did not come across anyone else employed for as long as Love was, though some of the entries are difficult to read.
34. Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 130; emphasis added.