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Cowboys, Porters, and the Mythic West

Satire and Frontier Masculinity in The Life and Adventures of Nat Love

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The grand mythology of the American West drew and repelled the imagination and efforts of African Americans in the post-emancipation, pre-Harlem Renaissance era. With its promises for land and home ownership, making a “fresh start,” and escaping strident and oppressive social conventions, the mythic American West seemed like a preferable alternative to enduring the hierarchical tensions of the South or the moral risks of the urban North. Prominent writers and race leaders like Ida B. Wells and Booker T. Washington included westward expansion and small farming, respectively, as part of their projects for racial uplift, encouraging African Americans to take advantage of relatively relaxed social rules, less stringent segregation, and a popular sense of the West as a crucible of opportunity. Easier transportation and the potential for large tracts of land available through the Homestead Act blended with race leaders’ exhortations to trade the entrenched problems of the North and South for a rugged, independent existence in the West. The promise of property ownership and pursuing equalizing opportunity left unfulfilled by the failures of Reconstruction encouraged African Americans to consider moving west. However, opportunities at the frontier were mediated.
by systematic institutional and economic barriers during what Rayford Logan termed the “nadir” of race relations in the United States, as the social and political gains blacks made during Reconstruction were rolled back. Additionally, the fear of a “closing” frontier, as articulated in Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 frontier thesis, encouraged those in control politically and socially to hold more tightly onto the suddenly scarce resources and opportunities of the West.

Though blacks are often left out of the romantic mythology of the frontier, many more African Americans moved west to work and homestead than popular representations and memories would indicate, and the most obvious blind spot occurs in the ethnic identities of the national icon of the cowboy. The figure of the cowboy was not an automatically beloved and heroic one in the 1800s, when a “cowboy” often presumed an uneducated and socially inept figure in middle- to high-brow literature. However, this tide turned in the early 1900s, as the cowboy genre transformed into a nostalgic synecdoche for the country in heroic fictional portrayals in film, dime novels, and other popular culture—all of which proved distant from much of the actual work of the cowboy. Black cowboys have largely been absent from these popular representations of the American West; instead, the cowboy narrative of the Western genre usually represents white masculinity. Like many racial and ethnic groups disadvantaged at the turn of the twentieth century and ignored in much of the popular culture products of the time, African Americans could find greater social and economic mobility in the West for a time. Between the closing of the frontier and rise of increasing industrialization, possibilities existed for economic needs to trump racist values and foster at least some type of equality in the American West—as exemplified in the career of Nat Love.

In Nat Love’s 1907 memoir *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, he claims to be the real-life inspiration for Deadwood Dick, a popular cowboy character in nearly one hundred dime novels published in the late nineteenth century. Love’s autobiography details his path from slavery to the highest-regarded ranch hand and brand reader in the West. As the West “closed” in the early 1890s, Love took a position as a porter with the Pullman Company. In leaving his life as a cowboy to work as a Pullman porter, Love simultaneously gained a wife, a family, financial success, and quite a degree of middle-class respectability, as visually displayed through the photographs he includes in his memoir. Critical reception of Love’s narrative varies greatly; some scholars of African American history include him in historical contexts as an “actual cowboy,”
while others have difficulty merging his dime-Western braggadocio into accepted canons of traditional African American writing. Whether one accepts Love’s autobiography as factual (if exaggerated) or as complete fiction, his rocky transition from the ranch to becoming a Pullman porter often is ignored, an omission that causes readers to miss Love’s larger purposes in writing. Reading Love’s autobiography as satirical social commentary rather than parsing its veracity illuminates racial attitudes surrounding the American West, black masculinity, and economic opportunity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Closing the Frontier, Creating Western Mythology**

In delivering his essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” at the 1893 American Historical Association, in conjunction with the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, Turner shaped a new and persistent way of thinking about America’s history. Though this thesis became synonymous with the idea of “the closing of the frontier,” the majority of his argument focused on the role of expansion and mobility in shaping American history. For Turner, “The West” represented the continually shifting borderland between civilization and savagery. Turner envisioned the spread of “civilization” (or Western/European models of society) as occurring in waves, with each wave (pioneers, settlers, capitalists, etc.) building on the preceding groups’ work to perfect the civilizing of the frontier. As civilization caught up with those fleeing it, the “frontier” moved west in another wave of conquest. Turner’s conceptualization of the frontier became an early argument for American exceptionalism. In situating the frontier as a wide-open, democratically available space, Turner suggests that discontented citizens who might otherwise become revolutionary have historically self-segregated by leaving and moving to the frontier rather than rebelling against constraining social order. Turner argues that surviving without the comforts—and implicitly, the constraints—of civilization created a distinctly different element in American society when compared to its European beginnings.

The difficult conditions of the frontier acted as a crucible that forged strong, self-reliant Americans out of overly civilized Europeans. In the midst of claiming that a chapter was closing in American history, Turner uses the very language of the mythic West to lament its passing: “[I]n spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past.”
His mythic rhetoric of escape and opportunity is similar to the rhetoric of abolition, emancipation, and early Reconstruction that contemporary race leaders like Ida B. Wells and Booker T. Washington incorporated into their writing encouraging African Americans to move west and pursue agricultural endeavors. However, Turner uses these phrases to claim that the frontier is full—there is no more room to continue this path of American expansion. Turner also revises the way that frontiersmen were seen. No longer scruffy miscreants unfit for civilized life, Turner makes the pioneers an all-important first step in conquest and expansion. He links Western pioneers to the revered white initial pilgrims, striking out to create new, specifically American ways of life. These rhetorical links imply that the pioneers were also white and also ideologically motivated to create a new Americanism in the course of taming the wild. By using the same rhetorical constructions of race leaders and arguing that this “period of American history” has closed, Turner’s thesis can be read as implicitly simultaneously “closing” the promises of Reconstruction and the frontier as a space of opportunity for blacks. Where Wells and Washington were encouraging blacks to apply for Homestead Act grants to get their own “fields of opportunity,” Turner was relegating those opportunities to the past as part of an increasingly mythic West that, in the eyes of his white audience at the World’s Fair, no longer existed.

**Economically Based Tolerance**

Contrary to romantic attributions in American rhetoric of a social climate of Westerners’ “natural” acceptance of other hardy and like-minded folks, C. Robert Haywood sees economic interdependence as a primary factor in creating the perception of the West as a land of opportunity. In his essay, “No less a man’: Blacks in Cow Town Dodge City, 1876–1886” (2001), C. Robert Haywood studies the newspaper records from notorious cow town Dodge City, Kansas, and concluded that the mythology of greater freedom, relaxed social rules, and less segregation in the West do in fact carry some historical weight. However, Haywood attributes these social qualities to a tight job market and an even more tightly woven economic system, not to some social utopian cause for the level of acceptance and tolerance of racial differences. To keep the economic system profitable in areas with few potential workers, employers and employees alike literally could not afford to apply rules of segregation and racialized division of labor with the same stringency as in areas with a larger
labor supply. The implication of Haywood’s argument is that social and economic mixing among American racial groups in the West was acceptable when capitalist ventures were at stake; this economic tolerance was a by-product of the need to work together to achieve common economic goals, rather than a situation created by an ideology of the frontier.

Though later romanticized as the epitome of individual masculinity, the job that the cowboy performed was dictated primarily by the economic needs and to the advantage of cattle ranchers. Unlike government-registered homesteaders, whose grant of 160 acres would provide but a paltry start in the livestock industry, cattle ranchers required enormous plots of grazing land, sometimes utilizing unclaimed, publicly owned, or disputed land to feed their cattle. Until the close of the nineteenth century, when barbed wire technology finally became a cost-efficient fencing option, the cost of fencing in these large plots of land was astronomical. Instead, ranchers relied on cowboys to act as a sort of human fence, keeping cattle in designated places, preventing herds from mixing, and protecting the cattle (and the rancher) from cattle rustlers and the massive economic losses they caused. This role as a mobile human fence shifted to one of a cowboy-enclosed mobile pasture when it came time to drive the cattle to railroad hubs. The thousands of head of cattle owned by large-scale ranchers required quite a number of cowboy fence posts; ranchers were economically dependent on hiring a large number of ranch hands, and hired blacks, whites, and Mexicans to perform these jobs. “Whites in the ranching business realized the importance of the contributions of all cowboys—black, white, or Mexican—and adjusted their prejudices accordingly.” As long as the economic fortunes of the ranchers and large landowners depended on retaining a large number of cowboy fence posts, discriminatory hiring practices were not an economically viable option.

However, invoking Turner, Haywood claims the spread of “civilization” and technology to Dodge City brought with it stricter rules for interracial interaction. The railroad’s expansion lessened the need for long cattle drives to hubs hundreds of miles away, and the development of inexpensive fencing technology such as barbed wire decreased the need for a large number of ranch hands. As Haywood observes, “Once the economic impact of the trail herds was removed, these [racial and social] ambivalences were replaced by the standards and attitudes prevalent in the rest of the United States.” No longer economically dependent on black labor, the ranchers and the “townsfolk” of Dodge City traded their reputation for freer social interactions for more Victorian sensibilities.
Regardless of his actual duties and experiences as a human fence, the “cowboy” figure quickly became a stock character constantly romanticized in dime novels, early film, and other popular entertainment venues. Rather than focus on the mundane actions of working as a human fence, those who popularized the genre presented a solitary white cowboy as a combination of skilled gunman, brave unofficial soldier, and rugged masculine loner who avoids the stifling confines of over-civilization by women and their cult of domesticity. As the twentieth century progressed, the cowboy genre took on new importance as an iconic American figure in the ideologically charged climate of the Cold War, where the cowboy’s character was often pictured as one of moral certainty in the face of terrible odds. Though the image of the cowboy has evolved somewhat, especially in the sense of a growing moral ambiguity in post-Vietnam Westerns, these qualities persist throughout the Western genre in its many incarnations.

Nat Love: From “Deadwood Dick” to “Daddy Joe”

On October 15, 1877, the publishing house Beadle and Adams published the first of what would become a long series of “Deadwood Dick” dime novels: Edward L. Wheeler’s “Deadwood Dick, The Prince of the Road; or, The Black Rider of the Black Hills.” Wheeler’s first description of his title character sets an ominous tone but still foreshadows Deadwood Dick’s later displays of princely gallantry:

His form was clothed in a tight-fitting habit of buck-skin, which was colored a jetty black, and presented a striking contrast to anything one sees as a garment in the wild far West. And this was not all, either. A broad black hat was slouched down over his eyes; he wore a thick black vail [sic] over the upper portion of his face, through the eye-holes of which there gleamed a pair of orbs of piercing intensity, and his hands, large and knotted, were hidden in a pair of kid gloves of a light color.

The “Black Rider” he might have been justly termed, for his thoroughbred steed was as black as coal, but we have not seen fit to call him such—his name is Deadwood Dick, and let that suffice for the present.

Though he never actually traveled to the American West, Wheeler wrote thirty-three Deadwood Dick novels until his death in 1885, and Beadle and Adams continued the franchise through ghostwriters until 1897,
producing a total of ninety-seven Deadwood Dick dime novels. Thirty years after the publication of the initial novel in the series, in 1907, Nat Love published his autobiography, whose full title and subtitle set the stage and style for the rest of the work: *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.* In detailing his ascent from slave status to Western hero to Pullman savant, Love draws on multiple narrative styles, incorporating generic conventions of slave-to-greatness narratives, dime novels, captivity narratives, and travelogue.

According to the memoir, Love’s father died soon after emancipation; although he was only fifteen and the youngest member of the family, Love took over as head of the family because he “was the most courageous, always leading in mischief, play and work.” He found odd jobs to support the family, one of which was “breaking” horses, or transforming them from wild to domesticated, at ten cents per horse. After ensuring financial security for his mother and nieces by selling a horse he won in a raffle, and securing an uncle to act as their male protector, Love decided to leave his family in February 1869 to see the world. As he becomes a prominent cowboy, Love’s narrative style climbs to the heights of “unassuming” Western braggadocio. His first foray into this new Western life is in Dodge City, Kansas, where he applies for a job as a cowboy by successfully riding a bucking horse named “Old Good Eye” and impressing the camp boss and the men. His new colleagues fit him out with a horse, saddle, and a gun rig, and bestow him with the name Red River Dick as a sign of his new beginning in the West. Love’s dime-novel-style cowboy adventures begin immediately, as his group becomes embroiled in the first of many gunfights with hostile Indians as they journey back to the ranch.

When I saw them coming after us and heard their blood curdling yell, I lost all courage and thought my time had come to die. I was too badly scared to run, some of the boys told me to use my gun and shoot for all I was worth. Now I had just got my outfit and had never shot off a gun in my life, but their words brought me back to earth and seeing they were all using their guns in a way that showed they were used to it, I unlimbered my artillery and after the first shot I lost all fear and fought like a veteran.
After overcoming his initially paralyzing fear, Love becomes an immediate crack shot and quickly proves an indispensable member of the ranching community, as he claims to have become one of the top brand readers in the West. With the lack of fencing and clear land rights, cattle were branded with the sign of their owner. Because of the uneven nature of healing from the branding process, the ability to “read” the brands and place each cow in the correct herd—and money thereby in the coffers of the owner—was a more important job qualification for a cowboy than conventional literacy, at least from the rancher’s standpoint. Love’s claim of being a top brand reader indicates his awareness of the high value of the skill and the senior ranking accorded to those who held it, and his claims to excellence in that regard situate him as a key player in the economic interdependence of ranchers and cowboys.

Love claims to have earned the name “Deadwood Dick” as the result of winning a roping and shooting contest in Deadwood, South Dakota, on July 3, 1876, in which Love claims that he “roped, threw tied, bridled, saddled and mounted my mustang in exactly nine minutes,” a horse that proved “wild and vicious.” According to Love’s account, “The time of the next nearest competitor was twelve minutes and thirty seconds. This gave me the record and championship of the West, which I held up to the time I quit the business in 1890, and my record has never been beaten [ . . . ] Right there the assembled crowd named me Deadwood Dick and proclaimed me champion roper of the western cattle country.” Though he regularly declares the name his own, Love makes no claims about meeting Wheeler or any of the later dime novelists who wrote about “Deadwood Dick”; he addresses the character’s fame only obliquely, as if his legend and renown apparently had surpassed the need for personal acquaintance with mere writers.

By the end of his time as a cowboy, Love’s fantastic adventures included, among many others: numerous gunfights with Indians, but never any trouble with other cowboys; capture and threatened marriage to an Indian princess; daring escapes, one of which involved riding a horse bareback 100 miles in twelve hours; almost freezing to death in a snowstorm; and having at least fourteen horses shot from under him in gunfights. By 1890, however, Love claims that the open range had become “dotted with cities and towns” and the ranchers “had to give way to the industry of the farm and the mill.” He laments, “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.” That “something else” included a move to Denver, Colorado, marrying his wife Alice, who is referenced in the dedication and approximately three sentences in the entire memoir, and a brief yet significant search for meaningful employment.

Love describes his job search as including a brief tenure of a single run as a porter for the Pullman Company, one of the few middle-class jobs available to black men at the time, but his first run left him “thoroughly disgusted.” He wrote, “I wanted no more of it, so I turned in my keys, got my uniform and walked out.” Instead, he began selling produce and chickens from a wagon in Denver, a “profitable” enterprise that he worked for a year; however, claiming he was “yearn[ing] for more excitement and something a little faster” than the fruit cart, Love again secured a job as a Pullman porter. From this point on, Love’s memoir becomes a fawning showcase for the wonders of the Pullman sleeping cars, Pullman’s system of ownership, and handy tips for the reader about pleasing a train car full of customers all at once. At times, this section of Love’s travelogue-style narrative reads like early-twentieth-century advertising copy, especially when Love expounds on the way that sightseeing through the West by railroad will “[l]et your chest swell with pride that you are an American.”

Love’s time with the Pullman service is full of nearly the same level of fantastic “insider” stories as his time as a cowboy. Much like his dime-novel style stories of meeting Billy the Kid and Frank and Jesse James, Love includes a section called “Tips and the people who give them,” which includes encounters with the Rothschilds, the Knights Templar, and his personal interactions with George Pullman. Like his claims to the popularized title of “Deadwood Dick,” Love’s unlikely claims of Pullman greatness and celebrity encounters continue his Western bragadocio. His experiences and stories echo the tall tales told about “Daddy Joe,” the name given to the unknown first Pullman porter, whose legendary ability to please customers constantly grew among Pullman porters searching for information about their antecedents.

**Autobiography and Social Satire**

Those critics who have approached *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* generally accept Love’s categorization of his book as an autobiography; consequently, his memoirs are generally examined either for their histor-
ical validity or for their literary worth to the canon of African American literature. In *The Negro Cowboys*, Philip Durham and Everett Jones argue that the Love’s story is probably false, as he is one of many to lay claim to being the “real” Deadwood Dick. While Durham and Jones concede that Love’s story is an entertaining piece of fiction, they have compared the names Love uses for his employers against records of Western ranchers and cattle brands and have been unable to match the names, thus demonstrating its fictionality. In contrast, historian William Loren Katz, one of the more prolific documentarians of African American experiences in the West, includes Love and his exploits as fact in his chapter on black cowboys in *The Black West*. Not only does Love’s book provide evidence for Katz’s numerous claims of African Americans’ contributions to the building of the West, but Katz also uses Love and other black cowboys to argue that historical thinking about the American West cannot be complete without recognizing the roles that African Americans in paving the way for progress and civilization and the Western frontier.

On the literary side, much of the criticism of Love focuses on how his Western-genre braggadocio prevents Love’s work from being associated with more traditional “African American” writing and themes. This interference is accentuated by what Michael K. Johnson terms Love’s “racial erasure.” In his first encounter with his ranching outfit in Dodge City, Love remarks, “There were several colored cow boys among them, and good ones too.” Johnson points out that, after this point in the narrative, Love virtually ceases referring explicitly to his own or others’ black and white racial status or characteristics among the cowboys. In fact, Johnson argues that Love becomes “one of the boys” so quickly and thoroughly that the only references he makes to racial or ethnic difference are pointed denigrations of Native Americans.

In exploring this idea of racial erasure, Johnson also reads *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* in connection to another black Westerner’s semi-autobiography, Oscar Micheaux’s *The Conquest*. Through his many books and films, Micheaux tells and retells the story of his time as a homesteader in the American West. Johnson juxtaposes Love’s complete lack of referencing his racial identity with Micheaux’s tendency to downplay the hardships caused by his race. To make sense of this, Johnson asserts Richard Slotkin’s theory of recuperative violence as the framework that makes Love’s racial erasure possible. Using ideas of recuperation through violence, Johnson theorizes that Love’s concentration on the savagery and “othered” status of Native Americans allows him to picture himself as part of the dominant racial order. In this way, the
interdependence of the cowboys when pitted against Native Americans allowed Love to ignore racial boundaries that would otherwise separate him from associating with whites. This racial interdependence is similar to Haywood’s sense of the importance of economic interdependence. As long as the divide was between ranchers and Native Americans, the color of those fighting on the side of the ranchers was less important than banding together to win the battle.

While Johnson’s arguments about Love’s text are convincing, Love’s “racial erasure” within the text may actually accentuate his feats for readers who consume the visual rhetoric of Love’s memoir along with his textual rhetoric. In the absence of Love making specific textual references to his or others’ race, there are constant visual reminders that Love is African American; the chapters are scattered with pencil drawings that illustrate the cowboy action in Love’s stories (see figure 18). The central focus in these drawings is a character whose face is so shaded and blackened that his features are obscured almost completely. In addition to the line drawings depicting action scenes, there are also photographs of Love in various posed situations, including those taken with his family, in his cowboy outfit, and during his career as a Pullman porter (see chapter 7). Analyzing only the text will support Johnson’s argument for racial erasure, but when the visual aspects of the book are included in the analysis, readers are given constant visual reminders of Love’s race. Even while he visually enhances his role as an African American man, the absence of textual reference to his racial status could serve instead as an argument for the absurdity of using racial categories to measure a man’s worth. Instead of reading *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* as a bragging claim to greatness based on falsehood or an anomaly in the annals of African American literature, when the style of writing, visual aspects, and time period are considered equally, it is possible to see Love’s work as a social satire.

Readers often expect “truth” from something claiming to be autobiography, but reading beyond the basic claims that Love writes and incorporating the visual aspects of the text and the historical context of the text provide a much deeper understanding of the cultural work that his memoir might be performing. If, as is commonly held, history is composed of the stories we tell about the past to make meaning of the present, then autobiography can be seen as the stories that one tells about oneself to make meaning of one’s place in that larger story of history. Instead of questioning the historical validity or literary quality of Love’s work, when read in this light, the questions become “Why would Love’s stories about himself take this particular shape? What purpose could these
Figure 18 “The Roping Contests at Deadwood, S.D.” Used with Permission of Documenting the American South, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.
stories serve?” By satirizing conventions of slave-to-greatness, dime-novel Western, and railroad narratives, Love uses the genre of autobiography to comment on the social constraints regarding African American men in the postbellum, pre-Harlem era.

The first clue that *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* might be a social satire rests in the way that the author’s writing style, in its extreme exaggerations, seems to mock the very conventions on which his genres are based. His opening paragraph echoes stylistic choices made in prominent slave-to-greatness narratives. Love’s story begins:

In an old log cabin, on my Master’s plantation in Davidson County in Tennessee in June, 1854, I first saw the light of day. The exact date of my birth I never knew, because in those days no count was kept of such trivial matters as the birth of a slave baby. They were born and died and the account was balanced in the gains and losses of the Master’s chattels, and one more or less did not matter much one way or another. My father and mother were owned by Robert Love, an extensive planter and the owner of many slaves. He was in his way and in comparison with many other slave owners of those days a kind and indulgent Master. In comparison, the opening paragraph of Booker T. Washington’s memoir *Up from Slavery* reads:

I WAS born a slave on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia. I am not quite sure of the exact place or exact date of my birth, but at any rate I suspect I must have been born somewhere and at some time. As nearly as I have been able to learn, I was born near a cross-roads post-office called Hale’s Ford, and the year was 1858 or 1859. I do not know the month or the day. The earliest impressions I can now recall are of the plantation and the slave quarters—the latter being the part of the plantation where the slaves had their cabins.

My life had its beginning in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings. This was so, however, not because my owners were especially cruel, for they were not, as compared with many others.

Love’s opening paragraphs clearly match the introductory paragraphs of Washington’s autobiography, which in turn also mirrored the construction of Frederick Douglass’s opening paragraphs in his autobiographies. When Love shifts from his post-slavery narrative to his Western exploits,
his deadpan delivery downplays the unusual nature of his adventures even while his dime-novel style exaggerates his personal importance and danger. The sheer number and generic similarity of Love’s stories about the West and his days as a Pullman porter support interpreting his autobiography as a collection of tall tales.

Additionally, Love offers all of these life stories in written form, in spite of the fact that he claims within his text to be largely illiterate. Unlike Washington’s detailed description of his quest for education, Love describes the extent of his “formal” education as happening between the end of the Civil War and his father’s death: “Father could read a little, and he helped us all with our A B C’s, but it is hard work learning to read and write without a teacher, and there was no school a black child could attend at that time. However, we managed to make some headway, then spring came and with it the routine of farm work.” At the end of his memoir, when describing his decision to leave the range for Pullman, Love states, “During my life so far I had no chance to secure an education, except the education of the plains and the cattle business”; in his stories of his work as a Pullman porter, Love’s schedule leaves no time in his life to attain the education or advanced writing skills be necessary to produce his memoir. This contradiction between his claims of illiteracy and his production of a written and published work is never explained, adding another cue for readers to approach the memoir as a social satire. Rather than take this as evidence that invalidates Love’s claims of fact over fiction, this kind of contradiction in logic suggests the same sort of kernel of truth concealed within satire.

Love’s transformation from a wild cowboy to a Pullman porter renowned for his abilities is another source of constant contradiction. Love’s first experience with Pullman ended with his disgust in the passengers, in the job, and with the social position required of him as a porter. However, in his later effort at the occupation, the white Superintendent Smith gives him the key to success as a porter, declaring that “the whole secret of success was in pleasing all my passengers.” While the job, the social situation, and the passengers did not change since Love’s first trip, his economic situation had in fact changed. After his profitable yet apparently boring turn as a produce salesman, Love states that finding a different job “was about as hard to find as the proverbial needle in the straw stack, at that particular time.” So, in the absence of any other options, Love promises Superintendent Smith he will “do better” than he did on his previous trip as a porter, and is rewarded with “increased responsibilities as well as increased profits and favors enjoyed.”
The implicit source of Love’s improvement in his ability to please all of his passengers is the near-clairvoyant and omnipresent nature of Superintendent Smith. Love recounts how he would begin to report positive or negative incidents, and the superintendent would already have a full grasp of the situation, causing a confusing mystery for Love. Instead of “pleasing all of his passengers” out of some intrinsic part of his nature, then, Love was continually reminded that his actions and reactions potentially were under constant surveillance by his white boss. By extension, every white passenger could then be seen as a potential special agent, which accentuates the extreme constrictions on African American mobility and action even in this more middle-class employment.40 Explicitly recognizing this sense of omniscient white surveillance alters the way that readers approach Love’s stories; the sense that Love is constantly performing for a white audience surfaces and invites the question of whether all of his stories of slavery, cowboys, and porters are merely an exaggerated, performative way of addressing his readership.

Within his text, Love discusses these constrictions on African Americans and institutional levels of control in clear but subtle ways, usually through asides not related to what plot there is to his story. In his first aside, Love relays that his family’s master, upon returning from the Civil War, refused to tell the slaves that they were free, so they continued working for him for “quite a while” until hearing the news for themselves.41 This aside takes up a very short paragraph but acts as a very unpleasant personal reminder that the Emancipation Proclamation did not mean instant freedom and equality for African Americans. However, Love’s clearest social-commentary asides are much more powerful. On at least two occasions, he shifts unexpectedly from his matter-of-fact brag-gadocio to a bitter and forceful tirade: one against the institution of slavery and the torture of blacks, and one against trusts and corporations.42 In the first, Love details brutal whippings of men, women, and children because of the social status accorded them by the chance of their birth. Though ostensibly discussing the institutions of slavery, his description of lynching, whipping, destroyed families, and prohibiting education for blacks also can apply to the dangers facing blacks in the post-Reconstruction era. After this discussion, Love recommends that readers see the play *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to “see the black man’s life as I saw when a child.”43
well as textual representation. If we read between the lines of his text, then, we should also read between the lines of his pictures. Love’s photograph from his “cowboy days” stages a particular robust masculinity championed by no less than President Theodore Roosevelt at the turn of the twentieth century as a way of recapturing strong manhood at a time when the perceived weakness of urban work softened American men. However, while Love poses in stereotypical “Western” gear, he remains clearly in a photography studio (see figures 12 and 13 in chapter 7). The impressionistic painted background and props of saddle and rope serve to remove the ruggedness of an outdoor, Western context, while emphasizing the romantic nature of the life of a cowboy. Still, while middle-class white men’s masculinity might be challenged by the lack of physicality in urbane work, its economic security presented an attractive aspiration for many black men. Success in such occupations did not necessarily erode black men’s manhood but consolidated it in providing for a family guarded against want. Opposite the title page for *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* is a picture of Love and his family, apparently consisting of his wife and daughter (see figure 11 in chapter 7). While working as a Pullman porter is considered by scholars and historians to have been a job providing entrance into a black middle class, in this photo Love and his family can be read as visually and physically representing themselves as upper-middle to upper class. The women’s style of dress, especially the hats, gloves, and fur wrap, indicates their respectability and wealth. Additionally, Love’s three-piece suit and tie also indicate more than middle-class status.

Taken together, these visual representations not only accentuate Love’s racial identity in contrast to his textual erasure of race; they also accentuate the layers of performativity that visual representations can provide to textual representations, the degree to which images can confront viewers with contradictions and differences elided in text. Reading between the lines of Love’s visual and textual rhetorics illuminates ways that his stories address social constrictions that assign ability, facticity, and class and physical mobility based on racial categories. With the inclusion of his visual texts as the main racial identifiers, Love implicitly argues through his claims to Deadwood Dick fame that a black man can perform all of the physical feats that a white man can—and can even perform them in a superior way. Even as he accommodates himself to the subordinate social position of Pullman porter in the written text, Love’s visual representations of himself and his family argue for the economic abilities and representations of blacks, even within the strictures of socially assigned, race-based constrictions.
Love’s satirized tall tales capture an essence of early-twentieth-century idealized masculinity; regardless of his race, his cowboy and porter tales create a man of mythic proportions. However, his reader, if reading astutely, is constantly reminded of the precarious positions that a black man often occupied in this time period. No matter how well liked he had been on the range or on the rails, Love had to continue to be of economic advantage to his employers in order to retain economic and social stability. On the range, lax and open racial rules were dependent on economic interdependence and banding together against the threat of battle with Native Americans. On the rails with Pullman, Love’s acceptance and continued employment depended on pleasing all of his passengers all of the time, under constant and oppressive surveillance from his white supervisor. In The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Love’s primary message is that he constantly needed to prove his worth and indispensability within a multitude of complex economic and social systems, sacrificing his own principles and job preferences, in order to rise out of poverty, attain some form of personal freedom, and create and maintain a family that qualified as middle class.

Notes

2. Both sides of this “cowboy figure” can be seen in the main character Robert Clay, a “cowboy” who is actually a surprisingly well-educated civil engineer. Richard Harding Davis, Soldiers of Fortune (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1897), accessed 21 November 2010, http://www.archive.org/details/soldiersfortune06davigoog.
4. Ibid., 19–22.
5. Ibid., 3–4.
6. Ibid., 38.
9. Haywood, “‘No less a man,’” 235.
10. Ibid., 236.
15. Ibid., 21.
16. Ibid., 41.
17. Ibid., 42.
18. Ibid., 93.
19. Ibid., 130.
20. Ibid., 132.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 142. Variations of this phrase repeat regularly throughout chapter 20.
23. Ibid., chapters 18 and 21.
24. For more information about Daddy Joe, see Larry Tye, Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class (New York: Henry Holt, 2004). Tye’s research, based on numerous interviews and oral histories with former Pullman porters, uncovered legends about this first Pullman porter, whose name was ostensibly lost in a fire, that ranks Daddy Joe at a mythological level nearly equal to that of Paul Bunyan or Hercules.
36. Ibid., 130.
37. Ibid., 133.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 134.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 16–17.
42. Ibid., 11–13, 156.
43. Ibid., 13.