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Cowboy City: An Original Children's Book

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Cowboy City: An Original Children's Book

By

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Abstract

Cowboy City: An Original Children's Book

By Erica Lynch

Cowboy City is an original children's book written for eight to ten year olds that touches on themes of race and representation. Too often the stories of Black cowboys go untold. The book was created to provide children with an accurate portrayal of who the cowboys of the Wild West were, as well as who they are now, while also providing teachers with a tool to introduce the concepts of racial representation throughout history. Told through the voice of nine-year-old Jayden, an African American boy living in the city, *Cowboy City* follows Jayden's normal school day, interrupted by an extraordinary event. Throughout the book Jayden experiences the cognitive dissonance that accompanies a mismatch between the learning in the classroom and a students' racial and cultural identity. Jayden is taught about the rich history of black cowboys, present and past, from his grandfather, yet in his classroom his teacher omits it. After the momentous event, that Jayden witnesses, both he and his teacher are transformed.

This independent study includes a rationale that explains my inspiration for writing this particular children's book, a literature review which provides an overview of the children's books that I used to research the topics included in the book and as guidance for my own writing, an overview of the developmental milestones of the nine and ten year olds which are aligned with the themes, plot and vocabulary encountered in *Cowboy City*, the original text and three illustrations, an application section that explains the results of my reading the book with a small group of third graders and the practical applications of the book in a classroom setting and finally a bibliography that cites all of the books utilized in the writing of this thesis.

Keywords: race, representation, black cowboys, culturally conscious

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Rationale

One year after my drastic switch from teaching in a Brooklyn-based Title I charter school to an upper-class private, progressive institution on the Upper East Side, a bull got loose in Queens and it gave me the idea for a children's picture book, called *Cowboy City*. *The New York Times* headline, "When a Bull is Loose in the City, Why Not Call on Urban Cowboys?" caught my attention immediately (Nir, 2017). The *NYTs* interviewed the president of the Black Cowboy Association about the event and how they would have handled the loose bull situation better than the police department. I was surprised that I had not heard about the Black Cowboy Association before, given that I had taught a related subject to my students. The previous year, before starting at Bank Street College of Education in the Advanced Literacy Specialist program, I was teaching a class of predominantly Black second graders in a wonderful community that I loved. Mid-year we began a unit wherein we studied cowboys--most of whom, in the books we read, were white. At the time, I did not question the number of white cowboys I was introducing, nor did I research ways to diversify the content presented because my own teaching had instilled me that cowboys were predominantly white. The *NYTs* article was a trigger, jolting me back to my previous experience, presenting me with many questions about what I had taught and why. First, I wondered how I had not known of the Black Cowboys Association, but more so how I had not known much about the impact, scale and current existence of Black cowboys--in New York City and beyond! Frustrated with myself and with the school that mandated a curriculum which left out the stories of our students, I dug deeper.

After doing more research about Black cowboys I found multiple resources that could have aided my students learning about Westward Expansion and American history while being sensitive to their sociocultural context, but felt there were still resources missing. Where were the fictional children's books that could open a conversation about the history of Black people in the Wild West? Why were they not represented? While exploring I found the Harlem Studio Museum had curated a short-lived exhibit called "Black Cowboy" that aimed to dispel the notion that cowboys were only white rangers found in the Wild West. Through further exploration I found several children's picture books about specific Black cowboys, including *Black Cowboy*, *Wild Horses: A True Story* by Julius Lester and *Black Frontiers: A History of African American Heroes in the Old West*. Missing from the list of books was a fictional picture book about the existence of modern day Black cowboys, a way to open up a unit or conversation about the misrepresentation of the Wild West as being all white. The feeling that there was a story missing from the library of children's literature prompted me to fill that void with a picture book that I wished had been available to my students. Ultimately, what developed was *Cowboy City*, a story that allowed for my own catharsis while also providing mirrors for young Black readers.

Cowboy City is about the experience of a young Black boy in New York City who is interested in cowboys, but is only learning about white cowboys in his classroom. In the book, his school learning experience is contrasted with the education his grandfather provides him at home. The boy's grandfather tells him stories about the Wild West, which include the daring adventures of Black cowboys like Nat Love, Bill Pickett and Ned Huddleston. The grandfather says that there are

Black cowboys all around the city to this day, but the boy is skeptical. One day his teacher sets up an activity where cowboys are hung all around the room. The students are supposed to go and stand next to one with whom they identify, but the boy doesn't know where to go and stands looking around, until the teacher suggests a group to him. The boy feels conflicted about his teacher's choices and thinks about it versus his grandfather's stories as he walks the city. After school that day the boy follows his normal routine, going to a bodega for a snack and then walking to the school where his aunt works to wait for his mom. On his walk he sees unusual cowboy-like apparel and tools. He notices a Black man wearing what he thinks looks like a bolo tie, a lasso sticking out of the trunk of car that whizzes by and another Black man with spurs sticking out from the bottom of his jeans. Right before the boy gets to his aunt's school he sees it--the bull dashing down a city street, thrashing about in the distance. He freezes as a police officer rides up next to him. Just as the bull is getting close to where he is, a Black cowboy with a big leather hat and lasso in hand starts rushing toward the bull and in a valiant effort, is able to capture it right in front of him. The next day at school the boy's teacher begins the day with a story in the paper about the act of the local cowboy and now, the main character feels compelled to share his knowledge. The book tells the story of the day the bull got loose in Jamaica, Queens--only this time the heroes is a Black cowboy, which in turn teaches the boy that his grandfather's stories are true despite the fact that his teacher, school and his society had largely excluded them.

One reason my search for books about Black cowboys came up short, and why I wanted to write a story about Black cowboys, with a main character who is

Black is because of the overall lack of characters of color across the board in the vast land that is in children's literature (Donnella, 2017). In a study by the Cooperative Children's Books Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin, cited by NPR, researchers found that only 22% of the characters in children's books are people of color. The CCBC began researching this data point in an effort to connect teachers, like me, with books that reflect the identity of their students. The CCBC found that the inability to find quality books with characters of color was mostly likely the case because those books simply do not exist. While there has been an thirteen point increase in the percentage of characters of color since 1997, the representation in children's books is not yet comprehensive enough for teachers to readily provide students access to these stories. The picture book options are not enough for students of color to fully be able to find stories that offer what educator Rudine Sims Bishop terms "mirrors" for their lives and experiences (Harris, 2007). Sims Bishop uses the metaphor "mirrors" to refer to the reflection of one's own identity in literature and states that representation is crucial in children's books to build self-esteem (Harris, 2007). Sims Bishop also coined the metaphor of books as "windows" to see outside of one's self and develop different perspectives. Increasing characters of color in children's literature benefits all children (Derman-Sparks, Higa & Sparks, 2012). In *Children, Race and Racism: How Race Awareness Develops*, Derman-Sparks, Higa and Sparks (2012) found that cognitive harm is done when children are treated and taught as though they are "color-blind". My book is intended as a conversation starter in diverse classrooms as well as more homogenous settings, where teachers practice culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). Paris (2012) defines culturally

sustaining pedagogy as teaching that, "...seeks to perpetuate and foster--to sustain-- linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling." Moller (2016) explains that, "...it is not enough to simply have literature by and featuring people of color available. The books must be read in a way that promotes reflection on self, society and history, opportunity and possibilities." The intention behind *Cowboy City* is to promote reflection on those topics by posing the questions: "Whose story is being told? Whose are missing? Why?" From this, educators and students have a platform for the conversation in classrooms about how it feels for students when their culture, language or identity is neglected, or worse, is missing entirely and begin to make reparations for this injustice through practice.

Child Development

The developing child exists in what Bronfenbrenner's calls the ecological system. This system is made up of larger, more distant parts, such as society's macrosystems or dominant beliefs and of exosystems such as the decisions made by local government. Coming in closer proximity with the child are the mesosystems of the home, school, religious settings and neighborhood and finally the microsystems are the people who interact within each of those settings, such as family members and teachers. Bronfenbrenner's model depicts the interconnected nature of the many critical contexts in which the child develops (Rogoff, 2003). The dissonance which often exists between the mesosystems of the home and school are illustrated in *Cowboy City*. Eight to ten year-olds, for whom this book is appropriate, are beginning to move beyond the egocentric perspective of their early childhood to see the influence of the world around them. *Cowboy City* provides fun and excitement,

however it is also certainly a tool to help students grapple with questions about identity, culture, race and representation.

During a discussion about the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* with my third grade students debated about whether or not these rights were truly alive and well in our country. Upon hearing the phrase, "good reason" many times throughout the declaration, one of my nine year-old students remarked, "What is good reason? Isn't that a moral decision?" In *Yardsticks* (1997) Wood posits that the most exciting of the developments in nine year olds is their budding cognitive capabilities. This is the time period in which children begin to understand that there is a greater world surrounding them and they want to understand it and challenge it. Nine is an age of exploration, when children begin to seek answers to bigger world questions. *Cowboy City* provides a platform for children to discuss questions that are beginning to arise about racial bias and representation in our society. Concerns around being treated fairly and the world being fair become issues which concern students at this age. Due to their grappling with feeling singled out by teachers and other adults, nine year old readers will identify with the main character and easily infer his feelings of alienation during a main event in story, which occurs at school. Students at this age are now ready for thematic units centering on racial and ethnic diversity, and *Cowboy City* could be a resource for teachers to open up such a unit (Wood, 1997).

As they encounter people who differ from them at school and beyond, children at these ages are prone to questioning (Brafman, 2010). Too often these inquiries are met with defensive answers from caretakers. As five to ten year-olds are

very sensitive to what they think is expected of them, these negative reactions to their questions can result in the child shutting down or becoming shy. *Cowboy City* provides a safe space for students to explore questions or thoughts that may have arisen for them during moments in the classroom. Since children at this age may have already developed patterns with adults in which they come to believe that their ideas will not be valued, kids may be able to make connections to the main character feeling uncomfortable with raising a concern in the classroom. Eight to ten year-olds may also be able to connect with the experience of school not reflecting their personal or cultural identity.

In *Cowboy City* the main character does not tell his mom or grandfather about his discontent with the cowboy study. Perhaps this is because he feels powerless in the face of his teacher's decision, however child development researchers also point to the fact that children from the ages of five to ten often like to create the facade of contentment about their school (Brafman, 2010). If asked, "Why doesn't the main character say anything to his teacher about not including the Black cowboys?" eight to ten year-old children will be able to relate to the potential reasons a kid would not want to stir the metaphorical pot at school or at home.

Academically, *Cowboy City* fits well with the curriculum and thematic units that are of interest to the eight to ten year-old. Classrooms with eight year olds might be studying their community, in which *Cowboy City* would be appropriate for the kids growing up in New York City, as well as other cities (Wood, 1997). This book would also be appropriate for use with nine year-olds who are now ready for studies of our country and of stories and information from "long ago". In addition, ten year olds are

becoming increasingly interested in trade books and are ready for research. *Cowboy City* provides some historical accuracy that students can use as a starting point to dive into further information-collecting about Black cowboys in the Wild West or other studies about racial representation and perspective on whose story is being told.

Students at this age have a blossoming vocabulary and dictionary skills are being taught so students will be equipped with the tools to approach the cowboy terminology that is introduced (Wood, 1997). Using vocabulary pulled from fictional stories like *Black Cowboy: Wild Horses* by Julius Lester and Mark Teague's *How I Spent My Summer* as well as expository texts such as *Black Frontiers: A History of African American Heroes in the Old West* by Lillian Schlissel, I was able to create a Wild West out of New York City. Readers will need to understand the content-specific vocabulary in order to understand the parallels between the stereotypical cowboy setting and the cityscape created in the book. Giorgis and Glazer (2009) explain that when words are encountered through context students are better able to determine their meaning independently and commit them to memory. Some examples of the language that children will encounter, and could learn through the context of the text and illustrations, include corral, tumbleweed, lassos and spurs (Wood, 1997). After reading the book teachers should return to the pages where cowboy terminology is used, re-read the paragraph or page and utilize the illustrations to help students determine the meaning of the words (Giorgis and Glazer, 2009). When students are able to access the language used they will be able to experience the city gradually transforming into the Wild West.

Children at this developmental age are motivated to learn new vocabulary and readily engage in language play, readers will enjoy the figurative language and cowboy dialect used in *Cowboy City*. Students can have fun figuring out how the crowd is forming a so-called corral around the city cowboy and seeing how a plastic bag is the city's version of a tumbleweed. While reading students will also need to interpret the sarcasm and dry humor used by the main character, Jayden. Throughout the story Jayden offers quips such as, "Stranger danger!" or "The police officer next to me looks like she is about as ready to handle this as I am."

Many exciting cognitive changes occur in the period of time between eight to ten years of age, making this the perfect time for children to read *Cowboy City*. At these ages children are ready to tackle issues of the world around them, are able to read to learn and are eager to understand facts and information around topics of interest (Wood, 1997). In addition to the story providing students with a platform to discuss issues of identity, representation and the cognitive dissonance created by the separation between home and school, the book will also reinforce academic skills, such as making connections and predictions, inferring and figuring out the meaning of unknown words.

Literature for Children's Review

My book represents the categories and themes of Black cowboys/African American history, African American culture and feelings at school. A large part of my research centered on real Black cowboys and heroic Black figures in the Old West. The books in one section are either informational narratives or fictional accounts of real, Black cowboys in the Wild West. These books provided excellent

examples of vocabulary that I could draw on to create a Wild West landscape out of a city. For example, *Black Cowboy: Wild Horses* by Julius Lester transforms historical information into a beautifully told story about Bob Lemmons search for acceptance with a herd of wild mustangs in the plains. It was also necessary to find inspiration from authors whose beautiful styles of writing fit with my own and with the plot of *Cowboy City*. This section included authors like Jacqueline Woodson who wrote *Each Kindness* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*. Woodson's style of writing has a heartfelt simplicity. She does not complicate the words or thoughts of her young characters. In *Cowboy City*, I borrowed Woodson's seamless incorporation of dialogue and internal dialogue through the use of italics. Other inspiring books were those which provided a similar story arc, like that of *Sam and Dave Dig a Hole* by. In this story the characters end in the same place that they begin, but everything is different.

In *Cowboy City* the character feels lost at school in the middle and then feels included in the narrative being taught in the end. I looked to books where the character is in school to get an idea of culture at school and characters' experiences there. Lastly, I looked for books that celebrate the lives and culture of young Black characters in their neighborhoods and schools, both in their words and illustrations. *Hey Black Child* by Useni Perkins and illustrated by the Coretta Scott King Award winner, Bryan Collier was one such source. *Hey Black Child* is a celebration of Black children approaching their dreams without hesitation, armed with the knowledge that nothing can stop them and Collier signals celebration through his use of bright, vibrant colors. Collier uses his signature collage mixed with watercolors technique in this book that juxtaposes Black children of the past, shown in black and white, with

young Black children of the present. Collectively, these authors and illustrators provided great inspiration and information that guided my creation of *Cowboy City*.

Annotated Bibliography for Children's Review

Black Cowboys and Heroic Figures in the Wild West

Schlissel, L. (1995). *Black Frontiers: A History of African American Heroes in the Old West*. New York, NY: Alladin Paperbacks.

A nonfiction trade book that chronicles the lives of many real-life African Americans who helped to settle the wild West from 1865 to the early 1900s. Utilizing rare vintage black and white photographs, the book illuminates the stories of the black people who are often overlooked in the history of the America's western frontiers. Included are the brave and heroic accounts of black mountain men, cowboys and homesteaders, many of whom had left the south after the end of the Civil War in search of a good life.

-Ages: 8-12

Bowman, D.J. (2016). *Step Right Up: How Doc and Jim Key Taught the World about Kindness*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books, Inc.

A true story about an inspirational man and his extraordinary horse traveling the country during the late 1800s. Bowman describes the incredible journey of William "Doc" Key, a self-taught veterinarian and formerly enslaved man who taught his horse, Jim Key, to read, write spell and do math. As the two travel from town to town, they make believers out of the many fascinated audience members. While entertaining masses of white people with Jim Key's abilities, "Doc" was able to speak out against animal cruelty while fighting against racism. Acclaimed artist and

illustrator, Daniel Minter's beautiful acrylic-painted linoleum block print illustrations add depth to the story, helping take the reader back in time.

-Ages: 8-10

Lester, J. (1998). *Black Cowboy: Wild Horses*. New York, NY: Dial Books.

A historical fiction children's picture book that tells the story of the previously enslaved black cowboy Bob Lemmons. This story follows Lemmons, and his mustang, Warrior, as they navigate the bluffs and plains of the Wild West, carefully and meticulously tracking a herd of wild horses in order to become one with them. Beautiful watercolor illustrations help the reader become immersed in the Wild West scene, which is almost dreamlike in nature. The illustrations capture the patience of the Bob Lemmons as he waits for just the right moment and the beauty of becoming one with nature.

-Ages: 7-10

Teague, M. (1995). *How I Spent My Summer*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers

A young boy shares his creative writing about the events of his summer vacation with his class through the use of poetic verse. The boy's story details how his parents sent him "out West" to live with his aunt for the summer, but that on his way he was captured by a band of cowboys. According to his tale, the cowboys turned him into one too and he spent the summer learning cowboy tricks like roping, riding and making fires. The story ends with his gripping retell of how he heroically averted a stampede of cattle from ruining his aunt's summer barbeque party. The vibrant and cartoon-like illustrations show the events of his exciting adventures, taking the reader on his journey through the Wild West, as the boy tells his class.

-Ages: 4-8

School

Boelts, M. (2007). *Those Shoes*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.

Boelts tells the story of Jeremy, a young African American boy, who desperately wants the newest, most popular style of sneakers. Despite Jeremy's grandmother telling him that they cannot afford what he needs, winter boots, and what he wants, Jeremy cannot stop thinking about the shoes. Illustrator Noah Jones depicts Jeremy's desperation by subtly ensuring that many pages includes a reminder of the shoes: a black and white billboard in the background showing the shoes, the shoe in graffiti on the side of a building, everyone in the lunch line wearing the shoes and people wearing black and white. In the end, after buying a pair of the coveted black and white sneakers in a size or two too small from a thrift store, Jeremy realizes that another child needs his new shoes more than he does. He gives his shoes to a boy whose shoes were falling apart, and although he is sad that his shoes are embarrassing, he is happy that someone else could have them.

-Ages: 7-10

Hoffman, M. (2012). *Amazing Grace*. New York, NY: Dial Books.

Grace, a young African American girl who loves to act, learns the importance of staying true to who you are despite what others may think in this story about racial bias and gender stereotypes. In the story, Grace wants to play the role of Peter Pan in the class play. Grace is surprised and hurt by the reaction she receives from her classmates who say that she can't play Peter Pan because she is a girl or because she

is black. Through talking with her mom and grandma Grace is empowered to give her performance despite what the others think and she does phenomenally.

-Ages: 6-9

Woodson, J. (2012). *Each Kindness*. New York, NY: Nancy Paulsen Books

When a new girl, Maya begins attending Chloe's school, Chloe doesn't know exactly why she doesn't befriend her. Maya's clothes appear dirty and old, however she is always cheerful and friendly, asking others to play games. When the other kids do not want to play with her she goes and plays by herself. One day Maya does not show up for school. Chloe's teacher delivers a lesson about kindness and how one small act can change a person's day or life. Chloe wants the opportunity to change how she interacted with Maya and show her kindness, but Maya never returns to school and Chloe must face that she may never have the opportunity.

-Ages: 7-10

Culture

Barnes, B. (2017). *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut*. Chicago, IL: Bolden Books

A 2018 Caldecott winner that illustrates the unique and special experience of getting a new haircut for a young African American boy. Barnes writes in poetic verses about the experience and how the "fresh cut" helps with self-esteem and confidence when facing the world. When the boy steps in the barber shop and they place the robe around his shoulders he beams with pride. After the haircut the boy looks at himself in the mirror, feeling happy with his own reflection. The bright and vibrant colors in the illustration conveys the same sense of joy and excitement that the character is experiencing. The book is an ode to the cultural tradition of going to the

barbershop, a place that instills a strong sense of self and community in black men and boys.

Ages: 4-10

Ringgold, F. (1991). *Tar Beach*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers.

Creative and thoughtful eight year old Cassie Louise Lightfoot claims all of Harlem and the George Washington Bridge for herself and her family as she flies over top her city and the tar roof where her family and neighbors are having an evening of card playing, eating and drinking. As she flies over the city she is able to right the wrongs of racism for her father and mother in order to make everyone in her family happy. Based on the author's series of quilts "Woman on a Bridge", Ringgold uses beautiful mixed media illustrations to tell a story that is part autobiography, part fictional narrative, part painting and part quilt.

-Ages: 8-12

Perkins, U.E. (2017). *Hey Black Child*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company

Hey Black Child is a poem, originally intended as the closing song in the author's children's musical entitled *Black Fairy and Other Plays*. The poem poses an apt ending to the play which is about a young, black boy with low self-esteem who comes to realize that Black people have achieved so many accomplishments and that he is capable of being successful at whatever he chooses. The poem is a celebration of Black people and spreads an inspiring message, which children across America have recited for a variety of purposes and in different settings. In the book, the talented artist and illustrator, Bryan Collier, shows the importance of all of the Black people,

past and present, who have inspired and paved the way for Black children to reach their potential through the use of a technique using watercolor and collage.

-Ages: 4-10

Beatty, D. (2013). *Knock, Knock: My Dad's Dream for Me*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.

Knock, Knock tells about the intimate relationship between a young, Black boy and his father who becomes incarcerated when the boy is young. The relationship between the boy and his father is shown through a game of knock knock that they play each morning before the boy's dad walks him to school. One heartbreaking morning the boy does not hear the knock on his door and soon finds out that his father has been taken. Through letters to and from his father the boy is able to learn and grow into a successful man who has a family. The artist and illustrator Bryan Collier beautifully illustrates the book with collaged white elephants appearing in the background of every page to represent the taboo topic of an incarcerated family member.

-Ages: 8-10

Woodson, J. (2014). *Brown Girl Dreaming*.

National Book Award and Newbery Honor winner, Jacqueline Woodson tells the story of growing up as an African American girl in the 1960s and 1970s in this adolescent novel. Through poems, Woodson reveals the emotional experience of trying to find her place in the world while navigating the post Jim Crow South and the new and confusing place that is New York City. Told through the voice of her childhood and teenage self, Woodson also reveals her journey as a reader and writer.

-Ages: 12-Adult

Raven, M. (2005). *Let them play*. Ann Arbor, MI: Sleeping Bear Press.

Set in segregated South Carolina in 1955, this work of historical fiction tells the story of a young group of African American boys dream of joining with the other little leagues to play in the state's annual Little League Tournament. Raven details the lives of the African American boys during this time, experiencing "separate but equal." After the adults in the African American neighborhood decide to build an All-Star team for the boys, the game becomes riddled with fights over racism and segregation. In the end, amidst crowds of people yelling, "LET THEM PLAY!" the team is not allowed on the field during the Little League World Series. Chris Ellison adds depth to the story with his full spread, dreamy looking paintings that take us back in time and show the rise and fall of emotions throughout this painful telling of history.

-Ages: 8-12

Johnson, A. and Soman, D. (1992). *The Leaving Morning*. Orchard Books: New York, NY

Told from the perspective of a young girl, *The Leaving Morning* is a beautifully told story about the experience of moving. Johnson uses language that creates such strong emotion about what it is like to pack up all of your favorite things, say goodbye to everyone you know and leave on place behind for another. Soman uses watercolors to help readers see the "soupy, misty morning" setting that Johnson has created through words. One one page of *The Leaving Morning* Soman uses a

palette of all brown to create the feeling of what it is like to pack up all of your things.

Repetition of “the leaving morning”

Ages: 8-12

Step toe, J. (2005). Radiant Child. Little, Brown and Company: New York and Boston.

Winner of the Caldecott Medal, Steptoe tells the story of the famous black artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat growing up in Brooklyn. Steptoe describes Basquiat’s childhood home using beautiful descriptions such as, “Somewhere in Brooklyn, between hearts that thump, double Dutch, and hopscotch and salty mouths that slurp sweet ice.” Steptoe uses a collage of paint, paper, wood, to create iconic images of Brooklyn during the time, like milk trucks and butcher shops, cars and buildings. Step describes Basquiat’s childhood listening to jazz, drawing with his mom, visiting museums, and studio apartments graffitied with his own work and posters. Steptoe wrote the book in hopes of connecting young people with Basquiat in the same way that he felt connected with his art in his early adulthood.

-Ages: 8-10

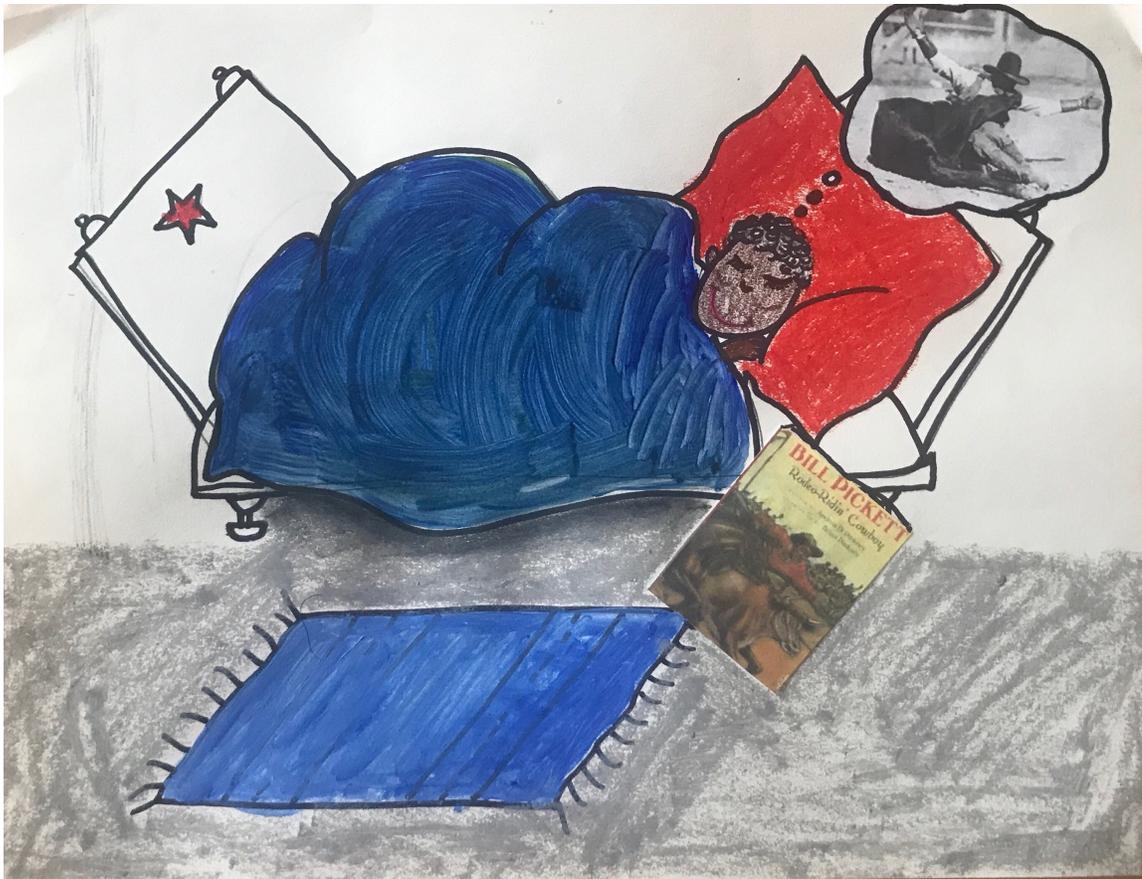
Original Material: Cowboy City

At bedtime I can hear grandpa’s voice in my head. *They’re all around us* he says. He’s talking about buckaroos. You know--cowhands, cowpokes, wranglers, or just plain ol’ cowboys. He tries to convince me. *There’s cowboys right here in New York City, Jayden!* When Grandpa describes the cowboys they all have brown skin, like mine. But when my teacher, Ms. Cramer showed us cowboys they looked mostly like weathered, old, white guys. *You better be asleep!* Momma calls from the living room down the hall. Flashlight tucked under the covers, I turn the pages of the new book grandpa dropped off for me.

(Full page: In Jayden’s room, black page with a yellow light coming from under a mound of blankets.)

A couple of days ago I told grandpa about the cowboys we learned about at school. He started raving! *Boy, do I have some stories for you. Let me tell you about Bill Pickett! Oooo, you'd never believe it, Jayden! Pickett was the best rodeo performer anyone had ever seen. His horse sped alongside the wildest of steers and when the time was right he would leap across onto it's back! Everyone went wild for his tricks. I'll bring a book from the library about him next time I come.*

While reading I drifted into sleep and in my dreams I became Bill Pickett, galloping alongside a raging steer. As my horse rode closer, just fast enough to stay steady next to it, I knew exactly what to do. 3-2-1! I leapt onto its back and the crowd exploded with cheers as I tightened my legs around its body.



As the first morning light comes creeping into my window, disrupting my cowboy dreams, I fight to stay in the arena. I can hear someone in the crowd calling my name. I awake to, *Jayden, are you up?* just as I'm about to perform my trick. *Jayden, your butt better be up. Come and eat!* I hear my mom's voice cascading down the hallway

and I wipe the crust from the corners of my eyes. It's Monday and it's *time* for school.

(Whole page black and white photo with illustration of the boy on the bull)

As we head westbound toward school, momma grumbles, *looks like a storms' a brewin'* in her best impression of grandpa. We both laugh because that's exactly what he always says on days like this. On the walk to school my eyes stare at the clouds hanging low in the sky and I start thinking about the last cowboy grandpa told me about. Bob Lemmons, a man who escaped slavery and could camouflage himself in the midst of wild horses. What might he be thinking on a day like this, riding right into the storm.

(Mom and Jayden on the sidewalk. Jayden has backpack. Dark, grey stormy sky)

Right in front of Star Academy momma does something no cowboy would stand for. She wraps her arms around me like a lasso around the horns of a bull and plants a kiss on my forehead right as my friend Tyler passes by. Tyler smirks at me. Whatever, man.

(Mom and Jayden in front of school building embracing. Tyler looks at him, smirking.)

During social studies no one mentions Bill Pickett when we talk about the famous cowboys. My teacher tapes pictures of Billy the Kid and Monte Montana and the others we've studied around the room. I hear her directions. *Stand by the cowboy that you would want to be if you were in the Wild West.* I look around. I wouldn't want to be any of these men. I stand still and look up at the clock. Thirty minutes until dismissal. *Not sure, Jayden? How about Monte?* I'm not asking my teacher where Bill Pickett is so I go and stand by my friends Maggie, Aniya and Jeremiah who are already discussing.



(additional pictures of white cowboys taped around the room to this illustration)

The front doors of the school open up and I'm outta there. After school on Mondays I walk to my Aunt Brea's school. Aunt Brea teaches middle school and she doesn't play around. If I'm not there by 4:30 she's already calling my mom, so I follow pretty much the same routine every time so that I'm not late. First stop, the deli for snacks. (Open school doors, with sidewalk and outdoors revealed)

Hey! Cavs fan! My deli guy says the same thing to me every time I see him, and I like that. He's already making my cheese sandwich on a roll. I approach the counter with a lemonade soft drink in one hand and chips in the other. *Hey guys! What's going on?* I've known the deli guy since I started kindergarten. Ever since I wore my LeBron jersey in here when I was five they've been calling me Cavs fan.

(photo of a deli counter with Jayden's illustration standing in front of the counter. The men smile at him.)

Ding! The sound of the door announces another patron. I pay and get my change. As I walk toward the door I turn around to wave goodbye and a see a 6 foot something dude is at the counter now. A silver glimmer around his neck catches my eye.

Whaaat? A bolo tie? No way!

(Jayden is at the door of the Deli waving to the men. We see a tall, black man standing at the counter. There is a shiny piece of metal sticking out from the man's shirt.)

Sipping my lemonade I keep walking toward my aunt's school. I look down at the watch my dad got me for my 8th birthday. *Ten minutes to get to the school, I've got this.* I pop a squat on the park bench so that I can bust open my bag of cheddar chips. *Oh yeah.* I watch the cars whizzing down Broadway Street like a herd of wild mustangs. *Which cowboy would I want to be?* Bob Lemmons wasn't just a cowboy. He was one with the horses. That sounds pretty cool.

(Jayden sits on a park bench eating his snacks. We see the dark sky. Thought bubble with an old photograph of Bob Lemmons.)

The thud of a trunk takes me back to the wild west that is New York City. A stocky old man gets in the driver's seat of an blue sedan and the engine rumbles. As the car starts to move I notice something hanging out of the back. *A rope?*
(*We see the short black man at the side of the car, about to get in. The rope dangles from the trunk.*)

A plastic shopping bag blows alongside me like tumbleweed in the desert. I looked down at my watch again. 4:23. Gotta get going. I close up my chips, cram them in the side pocket of my backpack and go. The wind is picking up and the sky is growing darker by the minute. I zip up my jacket like mom would want me to.

(Jayden walks on the sidewalk. We see the plastic bag by his feet.)

The first raindrop lands on my forehead. I pull my hood on, eyes to the ground, and start to pick up the pace. *Howdy!* A low, friendly voice grumbles. I look up as he tips his hat and strides by. Is that a...? What the heck is happening today? Who says howdy? People here rarely even say hello. Stranger danger. Better keep my head up, today.

(Jayden and the cowboy are passing each other, going opposite directions. The man smiles big and tips his cowboy hat at Jayden Jayden looks confused.)

Looking forward I see that the traffic seems to slow down. Where did all the cars go? A horn sounds and the sound of screeching tires rings in my ears. A funny little knot forms in my stomach and I freeze dead in my tracks. That's when I see him. Hooves stomping, head and horns thrashing wildly in the distance. A bulging eye, lunatic of a bull is running right down the middle of street toward me.

(Full spread. We see Jayden from behind, we see the road with buildings in the background and the bull running toward Jayden from the distance.)

Just then I feel a s t r e a m of hot breath on my neck and a snort in my ear. I whip my head around and my eyes begin to recognize the shape of the tall creature standing next to me. *Oh boy!* The officer on board bellows. *Chhh. She pulls out her walkie talkie. We've got a situation here.*

(A horse's nose sticks just into the side of the page right by Jayden. We can see the boot and the black pant leg of the officer's uniform who is mounted on the horse. The bull is still in the distance.)

My thoughts are racing and the bull is galloping closer. The police officer next to me looks like she is about as ready to handle this as I am. *Requesting backup at Broadway and 112th street.* We're about to be run down by this monster.

(Maybe there is a speech bubble or the words: Requesting backup at Broadway and 112th float on the page in big bold letters. Coming from a walkie?)

Howdy! A familiar voice chimes. There he is, the man wearing the cowboy hat from earlier, only now I can see his leather boots with spiky spurs sticking out and the pearl buttons on his shirt. With a lasso dangling between his sturdy hands, he approaches us. I look at the police officer. She looks at me. We both turn to look at the city cowboy. *I'll take over from here, folks.*

What happened next was WILD. It reminded me of one of grandpa's stories, but better because this was happening NOW. In my city. The city cowboy strode confidently toward the raging bull. His chaps moved deliberately with each step. Rain started dropping in buckets as his lasso began swinging wildly in the air. It looked as if the bull would dodge the rope, but that city cowboy knew what he was doing.

One moment it looked like the cowboy and the bull were having a real staring contest and the next thing I knew, that rope was around the bull's horns. When the bull was finally wrangled I finally looked around. There were flashing lights, news vans and crowds of people forming a corral around the man until all I could see was the tip of his brown, leather hat. I stole one last look and rant to Aunt Brea's. Would she even believe this?

That night I dreamt of a cowboy city where everyone walked around in boots with spurs, lassos in hand. Each of the five boroughs held competitions and rodeos. In my dream Ms. Cramer and the kids in my class are in the audience cheering me on as I ride a wild bull.

At school the next day I walk into the classroom and notice a newspaper article hanging on the board. **City Cowboy Saves the Day.** As I look around the room I notice some new photos of cowboys have been added. Ms. Cramer calls us to the carpet. *Class, we've been learning a lot about cowboys in the Wild West. Yesterday a real New York City cowboy wrangled a bull that was loose in the middle of the city. That cowboy is part of the Black Cowboys Association. I had never heard of them, so I did some research. It turns out that I failed to mention many of the heroic Black cowboys who were also a part of the time period. Does anyone know of any black cowboys who were in the Wild West?* Woah! My hand shoots up! Ms. Cramer calls on

me and I let it all out. I start telling a story about Bill Pickett like I'm grandpa or something. I don't say that I was there yesterday. It doesn't matter. At least Ms. Cramer and the rest of us know that *he* was there and that black cowboys have *always* been in the Wild West, and right here in our own cowboy city.

Applications

Reading *Cowboy City* with a racially diverse group of five third grade boys and girls was both enlightening and fun. Nell Dukes (2008) explains that readers need real and compelling reasons to read, beyond practicing specific comprehension strategies. Gathered in my classroom, I explained that I needed their honest reactions to the book that I am writing as part of my graduate studies. The kids seemed eager to engage in both the task of listening to the book and providing feedback. Equipped with these tasks they quickly began popcorning out reactions, ideas and questions. Throughout the process of sharing *Cowboy City* with a group of children I reflected on how the book can be utilized in different classroom settings and within specific curriculum, as well as the revisions that I might make to the story.

One way to help children construct meaning and build interest in a book is to preview information and ask questions prior to reading (Giorgis & Glazer, 2009). In line with these best practices, I began the lesson by previewing some of the book's content by stating, "My book is called *Cowboy City*. It's about a boy who is learning about cowboys at home from his grandfather and at school from his teacher. What do you already know about cowboys?" After only saying the title the students laughed and began unanimously stating that they loved the title. After having debated between longer titles and different options before landing on *Cowboy City*, I was pleased that it was engaging enough for students to want to choose independently if browsing for a book to read. One student commented that he liked the title for its irony, explaining

that people do not think of cowboys when they think of cities. When I was done previewing the book one student asked if the main character's grandfather used to be a cowboy. I thought that was an interesting idea and one that I had not explored. I wondered if I should consider adding depth to the grandfather character in order to provide rationale for his interest and knowledge of cowboys. Since the children were invested in the grandfather character, and responded that one of their favorite parts was when the city cowboy "took down the bull" I thought that perhaps the grandfather should be the city cowboy. What was most interesting in reading the book with a group of children who are avid readers is seeing the ways in which they looked for cohesiveness throughout the story--they wanted the grandfather to reemerge in the storyline. Through their predictions and desire to hear more about the grandfather I was able to see the possibility of bringing him into the centerfold, therefore creating the cohesiveness that they sought.

One effective comprehension practice is for teachers to allow students to activate their schema before reading. Dukes (2008) states that, "Any text comprehension depends on some relevant prior knowledge." Before we dove into the actual reading of the book the students shared what they already know about cowboys. The first comment that arose from their schema, and which received unanimous nods was, "They don't live in the city!" After that the students replied by sharing ideas that related to the images they see when they hear the word cowboy: lassos, big hats, a gun slung over their shoulder, tumbleweeds, drinking somewhere and some stealing. Upon reflection I realized how important it is for educators to be aware that when students hear the word "cowboy" and many other occupations or

roles of characters, an image flashes in the student's mind and we have power in helping to create that image so that it includes our students of color. In *Creating Culturally Considerate Schools: Educating Without Bias* Anderson and Davis (2012) explain that teachers who display visuals of role models from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds is one way to create a culturally considerate school setting.

When I began reading one student interrupted to say that she liked how I began the story right in the moment and skipped telling about the character's whole life. This was an aspect of my storytelling that I had not considered and was relevant to my understanding of the level of engagement that the beginning of the book provides. Several of the students laughed when the main character Jayden's mom called out about him needing to be asleep, or awake or to eat. These parts were intended to be funny and it was great to hear the kids finding humor in those moments.

For this sharing I illustrated three pages of the book using a collage of drawings, printed photographs and other printed illustrations. One part that I chose to illustrate was the page when Jayden is standing in the middle of his classroom, unable to decide which cowboy he would want to be. After reading that part and looking at the illustration I asked the students, "How do you think Jayden is feeling?" One boy responded stating that, "He probably feels pretty bad because his teacher chose all white cowboys but he knows there are great black cowboys too." When the book was finished and students were responding in written form I circled back with this particular student and asked if he thought Jayden changed in the story. He said, "Yes, Jayden changed because now he is all excited to share because his teacher put black

cowboys up in the classroom too. His teacher didn't really like the black cowboys before." I probed by asking, "Do you think she didn't like black cowboys or she didn't know about them?" He replied, "I think she didn't really know about them and now she does from the article being in the newspaper." This conversation was important because it helped me to see how a conversation earlier in the book about why the teacher does not include the black cowboys who Jayden is learning about with his grandpa would help students to infer her motivation and how she changes. Giorgis and Glazer (2009) explain that, "Books provide a rich source of data from which children can begin to gain information, make inferences, and check the validity of inference they make" (p.210). Educators using this book will need to anticipate the places in the story to stop and talk with students about their hypotheses about the teacher. The illustration that accompanies the text's explanation of what is happening during the cowboy lesson in the middle of the book is a good stopping point because it provides a snapshot in time for students to study. Teachers should guide students to explore what the illustration of Jayden standing alone in the middle of the classroom depicts about his feeling (Giorgis & Glazer, 2009).

After reading students reflected on the following questions: *What did you think about the book? Do you have any suggestions to make it better? If so, what are they? What was your favorite part? How might you describe this book to another student? And Is there anything else you would like to share?* The answers to these questions provided insight into the parts of the book that were memorable to them and the themes that emerged that were planned and unplanned. One student reflected on the story's length stating that, "...it wasn't short but not too long so you can actually

picture it in your mind.” At times I thought that the book was dragging in the middle, however upon reading it I noticed that the students were continuously laughing, making connections to Jayden’s actions as well as raising their hands to make predictions. The student’s unsolicited reaction to its length solidified it as being the right amount of text.

Several of the kids wanted to know more about the grandpa character. When I created the character I saw him as a vessel by which Jayden learns about cowboys at home. This was a way of illustrating the dynamic socio cultural context in which individuals operate and understand the world. Also, I wanted to illustrate the cognitive dissonance and internal turmoil that students experience when their identity is not reflected at school. My thinking was that students would be able to connect with the idea of a home life conflicting with school life at times. I did not anticipate that the students would be curious about the character and desire more information. Going forward this will be an idea to consider incorporating into the story or may be as simple as adding one or two more clues into the pictures that would allow students to infer this information.

Cowboy City fits nicely into a strictly social justice curriculum, but could also easily be weaved into a particular social studies unit on the end of the Civil War and Westward expansion where the teacher is being mindful about representation. Teachers who want to begin a unit with a discussion of the role of power in the narratives told about American history might open the unit with this book as a whole-group read-aloud. Teachers can begin to guide students in dissecting the long history of the perspectives of those who wielded power being shared and dispersed more

widely than the stories of the people without power, thus creating dominant ideas and creating bias and misinformation. While there is not a lot of background knowledge needed for children to access this story, educators should elicit information that children have about cowboys as a way to activate their schema and figure out any preconceived notions they may have about the predominance of white cowboys. The book should be followed up with non-fiction texts that provide more facts about Black cowboys in the Wild West such as *Black Frontiers: A History of African American Heroes in the Old West*.

There are two major themes in *Cowboy City* that students should emerge from reading having comprehended. The first theme is racial inclusion and the second is predominant stories told because of power and privilege . While students may choose the book to read independently, the larger theme of racial inclusion may be missed by some children, without guidance. When asked if the character Jayden changed throughout the book kids easily said yes. When asked how they knew each student commented in line with the idea that at the beginning he did not want to share about the Black cowboys in class but at the end he did. Then I asked if the teacher had changed. The students at first said, “no.” The small group of children who I read my book to understood that the teacher in *Cowboy City* did something wrong by leaving out the stories of Black cowboys, however they predominantly thought that she did so because she was not nice at best or racist at worst. One student said, “She didn’t put up the black cowboys because she doesn’t like black cowboys.” This interpretation is not detrimental, but students will need further instruction about the intersection of

race, racism, power and perspective to understand that the larger issue presented in the story is more widespread than the one character's feelings or mindset.

Reflection

Writing *Cowboy City* was truly a culminating experience that brought to life all of my learning at Bank Street College of Education. In *A Progressive Approach to the Education of Teachers: Some Principles from Bank Street College of Education*, Nager and Shapiro (2007) state that, "The teacher needs to be knowledgeable about the children she is teaching and the communities in which they live, and to have convictions about what the world we live in could become." The process of crafting an original children's book transformed me as an educator in several capacities: the process reinforced my seeing education as a vessel for teaching social justice and the impact of teachers confronting their identities first, it strengthened my belief in the importance of a strong understanding of child development, and finally, it helped me to understand how to closely examine and choose quality literature for teaching. *City Cowboy* is the manifestation of my philosophy of teaching.

My decision to write about a boy who is Black as my main character stems from my relationships with my former students and their families, as well as the research which indicates that children's literature is not yet fully inclusive of characters of color. However, while reflecting on this process I began to wonder about the ethics of a white person, like myself, telling a story from the perspective of a young, black boy. More so than I questioned the issue of writing from the perspective of a different gender as my main character, I worried about realistically representing the experience of a character of color in a book with themes of racial

representation and racial inclusion. Scholars like Rudine Sims Bishop have also posed the question: Can White people write about people of color? (Harris, 2007).

Sims Bishop's framework for analyzing children's literature written about African Americans states that there are three categories: social conscience, melting pot and culturally conscious (Harris, 2007). The first two categories represent the portion of books written mostly for white children, without inclusion of the culture or identity of the character who is at the center of the writing. One example of such a book is Ezra Jack Keats' book, *Peter's Chair*. While *Peter's Chair* features a black family and a main character who is black, the actual story depicts a generic house that does not help readers to see culture or identity in its illustrations or use of language. My aim was to create a book that represents Sims Bishop's third category, those that are culturally conscious. In aiming to do so it was crucial that I remain aware that, as a white author, it is critical that I continually analyze my unconscious biases. I relied on information gleaned from working with students of color for seven years and also decided that I needed to frequently share the book with people of color. Throughout the process I sought feedback from friends and colleagues, both within and out of the field of education, who are people of color in order continually recognize the impact of my whiteness in the creation of the characters and setting. Second, I relied on conversations about race, racism and bias with my present and past students and the themes that emerged through those conversations and learning experiences. Lastly, I enlisted the guidance of the award-winning books, as discussed in the Literature for Children Review section above, by and for African Americans to guide my writing.

After writing about the child development of eight through ten year olds the importance of teachers having knowledge of the development stages was further solidified. I found that, through this process, I was better able to make developmentally appropriate decisions for my current group of third graders. Next year I will be the literacy specialist at a school, working with first through third graders throughout the year. The experience of writing the book, as well as the Child Development section, has shown me the importance of researching where each group of children are developmentally before the year begins. In this way I will be able to purposefully plan learning activities so that they meet the needs of the children.

Another aspect of making developmentally appropriate decisions for the curriculum is in choosing great literature that meets students where they are socially, emotionally and cognitively. I look forward to using the guidance of the researchers I have cited throughout this work, like Rudine Sims Bishop, Nell Dukes, Giorgis and Glazer in combination with that of Chip Wood and others to create a reading curriculum that moves my teaching toward providing education that is culturally conscious and racially inclusive while meeting their academic needs.

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