

“MAN, WHO EVER HEARD OF HORSES IN THE ‘HOOD?, ALL I KNOW IS, REAL COWBOYS IS WHITE”: RE-MEMBERING BLACK COWBOYS INTO THE US HISTORY AND INTOMODERN-DAY PHILADELPHIA IN G. NERI’S *GHETTO COWBOY*

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Abstract

*Throughout history, black cowboys in the Wild West and present-day black cowboys in inner cities such as Philadelphia and New York as well as their achievements and struggles have gone unnoticed and underrepresented by the media, literature and historiography. My article discusses the ways in which G. Neri’s *Ghetto Cowboy* (2011) revises and rewrites histories of African American cowboys by providing counter-narratives to established mainstream and present day historical and political discourses about black urban teenagers, black urban cowboys and cowboys in general.*

Key words: cowboys, Black cowboys, Black urban cowboys, Philadelphia, the Cowboy Way, racial inclusion

The cowboy in the US history is a venerated and adored figure. Americans have always thrilled to the tales of the cowboy. Even today a host of novels, movies, and television shows insures the hold and influence the cowboy icon still has on the audience, the Americans and people beyond America. Notably, the cowboy figure has almost always been represented by or associated with sharp-shooting, trailblazing, fearless, self-sufficient Caucasian white males. While names such as Buffalo Bill, Daniel Boone, George A. Custer are well-known, names such as Bose Ikard, Bass Reeves, James Arthur Walker, Bronco Sam, Bill Pickett and Ned Huddleston are unknown. Few people know about black cowboys or about the history of Black cowboys because there are not many African American depiction of cowboys. In fact, black cowboys were active, prevalent and essential figures in the Wild West. The author of *Black people who made the Old West*, William Loren Katz states that “[f]rom the time of Columbus, and some authorities believe before, black men and women helped shape the frontier” (ix). Similarly, historian Jeffrey B. Fierst, in *African American Cowboys: True Heroes of the Old West* writes that African Americans used their skills to make important contributions to the development of the West (3) and played an essential role in the growth of Western ranching. Michael N. Searles, “In Search of the Black Cowboy in Texas” also points out that, in South Carolina, African expertise was likely essential to the building and

expansion of the cattle industry (87). In *African Americans in the West*, Douglas Flamming affirms that Black cowboys drove cattle up all of the major trails and were active members of the 19th-century Western cattle industry (62). Fuerts highlights the fact that about 5,000 of the 30,000 cowboys who rode the range in the 1870s and 1880s were African American (6). According to Philip Durham, the author of *The Negro Cowboys*, black cowboys “helped to open and hold the West:

[African American cowboys] explored the plains and mountains, fought Indians, dug gold and silver, and trapped wild horses and wolves. Some were outlaws and some were law officers. Thousands rode in the cavalry, and thousands more were cowboys. And for a while, at least, some performed in rodeos and others rode on many of the country’s major race tracks. (220)

However, as Durham states when the trails ended, great plains were tamed and the cattle fenced in, the African American cowboys were fenced out (2). They were literally erased and omitted from literature, music and film: “[African Americans] had ridden through the real West, but they found no place in the West of the fiction” (2), Durham writes. Yet the activities and accomplishments of black cowboys and their present struggles in cities cannot go unnoticed and are notably revived and reclaimed by Neri’s *Ghetto Cowboy*.

Inspired by the real-life inner-city horsemen of North Philadelphia and the Brooklyn-Queens area, *Ghetto Cowboy* is the coming of age story of how a troubled African American boy called Coltrane, “Cole,” is initiated into cowboying, cowboy justice and the Cowboy Way, after he is suspended from school in Detroit and is sent by his mother to live with his estranged father, Harper, “Harp,” in Philadelphia. When Cole arrives in the city, he discovers an unusual world of cowboys on horsebacks in the streets and a stable full of horses right in the middle of inner-city. Cole is confused and his initial reaction is: “I swing around and see a dude dressed- well, he looks like a cowboy. Got a big ol’ white cowboy hat, western shirt, big gold belt buckle, and cowboy boots. He looks like a cowboy except for the gray dreads coming down to his shoulders and the fact that he as black as me” (14). In total disbelief, he adds: “Look, you guys might think y’all is cowboys, but all I know is, real cowboys is white” (40). Rightly, he asks: “So how come I never seen any black cowboys on TV then?” (41) In addition, when he enters one of the stables, he says: “There’s maybe ten horses inside, all poking their heads outta their cubbyholes, looking at me like *I’m* the one who shouldn’t be in the city. Why they need horses out here, anyhow? I don’t get it” (33). “You guys is funny,” he scoffs, “We in the city, with cars and computer and stuff, and you think you back in the *Wild, Wild West!*” (42) Cole does not know much about cowboys, but what he knows for sure is that cowboys are not black, and they do not live in the inner city. Like the majority of people, he is totally unaware of the impact, scale, past and current existence of Black

cowboys in Philadelphia and beyond. He thinks they are just a joke or a bunch of crazy people. One of the old-timers, Tex, however, teaches Cole the origin of the word cowboy:

“Back in the slave days, the slave who worked in the house was called a *houseboy*. The slaves who worked with the cows was called *cowboys*. Get it?” ...[Tex] points to a picture of a black cowboy “That’s Bill Pickett, son of a slave and the most famous black cowboy of all. Back then, there was almost nine thousand black cowboys out West, working cattle and driving ‘em up the Chisholm Trail and such. And these cowboys was so good that eventually, the whites took the name *cowboy* for themselves. Stole it, really. Now we’re just trying to take it back, is all.” (41)

When Harp and other Chester Avenue riders gather around a fire, they swap stories of the century-long history of the Black riders in the West, and Cole learns more about the omitted histories of the black cowboys. Tex recounts:

“Back them days, they used to roam the open country, herding cattle on the Chisholm Trail... That was back when you could ride for days on end without seeing a city. Just open land as far as the eye could see—no fences, no roads. They slept under the stars, bathed in the river, and when they was hungry, they just shot a rabbit and ate it!” (118)

We can see that the urban black community tries to reclaim, uncover and pass down on the legacy of the black cowboys of the American West to the new generation.

As Cole has already found out black cowboys and horses are not extinct and do not only live in deserts or in the huge open countryside. This novel shows that there is a contemporary alternative the cowboy tradition which brings an urban perspective to the cowboys and horses. As Ivannah-Mercedes, a member of Philadelphia horsemanship community, explains: “This is the city. People think horses and they think country and they think Texas, lots of land. But with horses, if you can find a space, as long as you’ve got the time to dedicate to your horse, horses can live anywhere” (Smith). In other words, although the inner city streets of Philadelphia are world away from the classic movie image of a white cowboy such as Clint Eastwood riding across vast open plains, these are the very places where present day horses and cowboys exist.

Cole also discovers that the urban horse-riding community keeps boys like him off the streets; it nurtures and offers them an alternative lifestyle. Here, they learn the Cowboy Way, a set of values, which places standing up for what is right, honor, respect, and trust of the neighbor, the horses, and friends at the center. Everybody who joins the club, learns to have respect and responsibility for the horses, for their elders and for themselves. Harp explicates the Cowboy Way:

“The Cowboy Way started because, back in the day, you couldn’t trust the law... “Law was under the rule of the land barons. The sheriffs did what barons said and ignored the will of the people. So the cowboys had to take on their own brand of justice—cowboys justice. All that John Wayne stuff—you know, you can live outside the

law as long as you're honest and live by the code. Don't steal nobody's cattle or their women. Treat your horse like it was your best friend, because sometimes that's all you got. Most important, trust and believe in your guys and always have their back when they need you." (119)

In other words, the Black urban cowboy community has a tremendous positive impact on young black people who might otherwise go astray. Neri says:

There is a lot of gang activity and things like this going on in these neighborhoods. Their idea was if you give a kid on the street a horse, that can change your life because owning your own horse is a full-time job. You're there before school, you're there after school, you're there at weekends, you don't have time to get into trouble. (Smith)

Neri further states that being a member of the community inculcates in black teenagers a sense of duty, responsibility and eventually a sense of self-esteem which helps young people win respect: "in a tough neighborhood, you get instant respect because when people literally have to look up to you, nobody's going to mess with you when when you're on a horse" (Smith). He continues:

How these kids are judged is on how well they take care of their animals so if they feed them well and they groom them well and they ride them, that's good props on them and if they don't, it makes them look bad from the horse community. So it really instils them with a sense of self and pride and all these good things you want young people to be exposed to." (Smith)

Evidently, horseback riding broadens the horizon of urban youth; it not only teaches them horsemanship, but also helps them build character, improve their discipline, mental fortitude, and develop skills that could be applied to when facing the real world. Thus, *Ghetto Cowboy* not only extends the meaning of cowboys and horses as belonging to the urban setting, but also the meaning of black urban teenagers who are stereotypically marked with negative associations. Tropes used in the media to describe African American boys include: "the violent, drug-involved gangster," "the angry, withdrawn teen," "the crude, disrespectful provocateur," or "the unsmiling, unfeeling, untouchable thug" (Knight). Philadelphian local teenagers, however, combat the above-mentioned stereotypes through camaraderie, taking care of horses, discipline, and staying off the streets.

This change of heart, mindset and attitude can also be observed in Cole. At the beginning of the novel, he was a carefree school-skipper:

I don't know why I stopped going to school. I guess I didn't wanna waste no more time with teachers and homework and all a that, 'cause what difference do it make in the end? I'll never do nothing great in my life. Do they really think I'm gonna be like Obama? Not a chance. I just feel sorry for Mama for thinking that I could be somebody. (5)

Moreover, at the beginning of the novel, once he sets foot in the community stable, he also declares that he "ain't no ghetto cowboy" (30). Cole, at first, does not like the discipline of having to muck out the stables. But the more time he spends with the community, the more his enthusiasm and reverence for the riders and horses grow. He develops an intuitive relationship with a horse he names as Boo. As the story progresses, the name by which he is called also changes. From Cole, he becomes Train, who **"leads everyone else and propels them forward"** (Neri, "Cowboy Attitude"). Moreover, he finds his inner cowboy and fights for the rundown urban stables and horses and says "I used to think there was no point in trying before, but now I can see things can change if you put your mind to it" (206). Obviously, black cowboys create a safer community and combat the stereotype that African-Americans, especially, teenagers are losers. This also evince black people's ability to survive and construct alternative worlds in the face of neglect and discrimination.

Cole also finds out that the community, importantly, does not only rescue kids from the streets but also unwanted and used racehorses which normally end up as being victims of abuse, malnourishment, other forms of trauma or dog food. Tex explains to Cole that "[t]hey're old racehorses that normally get sold off for meat. We pool our money to buy what we can at auction before the slaughterhouse gets 'em. Then we bring 'em here so they can live out their days'"(45).

The community which is beneficial both for horses and the urban youth, however, is under threat. Their resources are scarce; they barely have the money to keep the stables intact. They are also in danger of being shut down as even though much of the property around them is abandoned and boarded up, the City wants to confiscate the property for destruction in order to build a shopping mall. That is, gentrification threatens the community's existence. Tex laments:

"Yeah, that was from back when we must've had four hundred horsemen around here. But most of the stables been closed down by the City over the last few years. We one of the last ones in Philly to survive. There's probably less than eighty urban riders around here now, and most of them is struggling to find a place to put their horses. There might not be any of us left soon, if things keep going the way they are." (79)

Harp asserts that behind the plan of the City's removal of them lies racial and class-based bias. "I been trying to figure out why this life is so hard," he says. "Why they out to get us? Is it because we're cowboys? Or is it just because we're black?" (171) He continues:

"Now, most people on the outside may not understand our ways. They see these neighborhoods and think it's no place for animals. They think it's okay for us to live here, but poor folks can't have horses! They're used to horse owners with money, living the country life. But horses is like people: some come from money; some come

from nothing. For these horses, the only thing between them and a can of dog food was us. They're the unwanted, just like us." (179)

Cole empathizes with Harp: "I know what he's saying. I feel like we the Pistons from way back when. They was always the underdogs, always counted out. No one liked 'em because they didn't play by the rules. But they kept fighting, no matter what, until they became champs." And he says: "Maybe it's 'cause they don't like any one that's different. Anyone they can't understand or control is bad news to them" (171).

Eventually, the City raids Chester Avenue stables after a rainy storm, claiming that the stables are mis-managed and dangerous for the horses. Officials order the immediate removal of 40 horses and seize at least two they believed to be sick. Saving the Black cowboy culture and community from extinction is Harp's and his friends' life work- and they manage to renovate the stables to keep the horses safe and the stables open. In the meantime, the horses that were confiscated are quietly returned days later after veterinarians determined they were healthy. No matter what obstacles come their way, black cowboys of Philadelphia have made it their life's mission to keep the community alive. "The Cowboy Way is, no matter what, never ever give up fighting when the chips are down. Real cowboys never give up," (119) Harp reminds Cole. "Ain't nothing changed," utters Jamaica Bob. "Cowboys still fighting to protect their ways in land wars where the bosses are tryin' to run 'em out. Only difference now is, the Chisolm Trail is a freeway today. We got to stick to our ways so that the young people have a safe place in this world, a place where the old values still count" (120-121). All of this commotion is rather stunning and also exciting to Cole. This conflict between the City and the horse community brings father and son closer than anything else could. Cole bonds with his father, mother, his horse Boo, and the cowboys of North Philadelphia. He also finds a new sense of pride and purpose. He wants to help this lifestyle and tradition live and wants Philadelphia to be a place of heritage and memory of black cowboys.

In conclusion, *Ghetto Cowboy* takes on the challenging task of demythologizing one of the most mythologized figure in the United States as it counters Hollywood's white-washed Western narrative by opening a conversation about the history of Black people in the Wild West and by intertwining modern day true stories of the Philadelphian cowboys into its fictional tale. Thus, it offers a glimpse into a part of history seldom told. He writes black cowboys back into the nation's heritage and aims to dispel the notion that cowboys were only white rangers found only in the Wild West. At the same time, Neri increases black horse riders' visibility of the present-day Philadelphia. Eventually, Neri's novel achieves to deconstruct a simplistic and uni-cultural view of cowboys by re-membering present and past African American cowboys into its discourse. Neri explains:

One of the things I hope the book...does is change the perception not only among people but from the city itself and how the media talks about it – the whole idea of changing the narrative. Now it feels like we want to encourage that this is something

to be celebrated and treasured as opposed to trying to erase it. So turn it into a positive for the city as a whole. (Smith)

This book can be used as a starting point to dive into further information-collecting about real Black cowboys and heroic Black figures in the Old West or other studies about identity, racial representation and perspective on whose story is being told.

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