

## Dress

The Journal of the Costume Society of America

ISSN: 0361-2112 (Print) 2042-1729 (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/ydre20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/ydre20)

# Black and Creole Louisiana Trailriders

Negotiating Appearance, Gender, and Representation through Trailride Dress

L. Danielle Honeycutt, Casey Stannard & Michael E. Mamp

To cite this article: L. Danielle Honeycutt, Casey Stannard & Michael E. Mamp (02 Sep 2025): Black and Creole Louisiana Trailriders, Dress, DOI: [10.1080/03612112.2025.2509455](https://doi.org/10.1080/03612112.2025.2509455)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03612112.2025.2509455>



Published online: 02 Sep 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# Stella Blum Grant Research Report

## Black and Creole Louisiana Trailriders

### Negotiating Appearance, Gender, and Representation through Trailride Dress

L. DANIELLE HONEYCUTT, CASEY STANNARD  AND MICHAEL E. MAMP

L. Danielle Honeycutt holds a PhD in textiles, apparel design, and merchandising and an MS in French linguistics. Her research centers around the social, psychological, and anthropological aspects of dress and indigenous cultures. Danielle is an instructor at Louisiana State University, teaching courses in Fashion Forecasting, Fashion and Society, and Apparel Quality Analysis.

Casey Stannard is an associate professor of design in the Department of Textiles, Apparel Design, and Merchandising at Louisiana State University. She earned her PhD at Oregon State University in apparel design. Her research interests include craft in postmodern society, design theory, locally grown fiber, social psychology of dress, and wearable art.

Michael E. Mamp, PhD, is director and curator of the Textile & Costume Museum and Associate Professor of Textiles, Apparel Design, & Merchandising at Louisiana State

I am forever grateful to the vibrant and rich Louisiana trailride culture for welcoming me and allowing me access to the community for this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Casey Stannard for her continued support and encouragement and Dr. Michael Mamp for introducing me to CSA and informing me of the Stella Blum Grant opportunity. In addition, I am thankful to the many reviewers and editors for their patience and feedback in seeing this article from concept to publication.



- 1 See David Dary, *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries* (University Press of Kansas, 1989).
- 2 See Lee Clark Mitchell, "Whose West Is It Anyway? Or, What's Myth Got to Do with It? The Role of 'America' in the Creation of the Myth of the West," *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 33, no. 4 (2003): 487–96.
- 3 See Peter Boag, *Re-dressing America's Frontier Past* (University of California Press, 2011) and Frederick J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893, Miscellaneous Document No. 104, 53rd Cong. 2nd sess., 1894 (Government Printing Office, 1894), 199.
- 4 Numerous studies have researched this aesthetic: Tyler Beard and Jim Arndt, *One Hundred Years of Western Wear* (Gibbs-Smith Publisher, 1993); Mary Dale Buckner, "Ranch Diction of the Texas Panhandle," *American Speech* 8, no. 1 (February 1, 1933): 25–32; David Dary, *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries* (Knopf, 1981); Robert Sturgis, "The Real Cowboy," *Prairie Schooner* 6, no. 1 (1932): 30–38; Laurel Wilson, "The Cowboy: Real and Imagined," *Dress* 23 (1996): 3–15; Laurel Wilson, "American Cowboy Dress: Function to Fashion," *Dress* 28 (2001): 40–52.
- 5 See Jonathan Haebler, "Vaqueros: The First Cowboys of the Open Range," *National Geographic News* 8 (2003): 15; S. Kay Gandy, "Legacy of the American West: Indian Cowboys, Black Cowboys, and Vaqueros," *Social Education* 72, no. 4 (2008): 189–94; William W. Savage, *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History & Culture* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1979); Albert S. Broussard, *Black Cowboys in the American West: On the Range, on the Stage, behind the Badge* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2016).
- 6 See Katie Nodjimbadem, "The Lesser-Known History of African-American Cowboys," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 13, 2017, <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lesser-known-history-african-american-cowboys-180962144/>>.
- 7 The term Creole is often used to describe the Louisiana ethnic group descended from various Native American, African, French, and Spanish ancestors. See Michael R. Cope and Mark J. Schafer, "Creole: A Contested, Polysemous Term," *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 40, no. 15 (December 2017): 2653–71; Jonathan Gosnell, "Unmasking the Creole Cowboy: Cosmopolitan Cultures in the Gulf South," *The French Review* 85, no. 5 (April 1, 2012): 916–28.

University. His research explores American fashion and textile history of the twentieth century focusing on women designers, queer fashion, and Acadian textiles.

*When the American cowboy is discussed in historical dress accounts, Black and Creole cowboys are often absent. This research took an ethnographic approach to analyzing and interpreting the dress practices of Black and Creole Louisiana cowboys. Data was collected over a period of two years through ethnographic field observations, in-depth interviews, audio and video recordings, and promotional event flyers. The investigation yielded a set of unique and evolving dress practices of the Louisiana Black and Creole cowboys. As this article shows, indigenous Zydeco music, hip-hop and popular culture, partner dancing, cowboy traditions, urban and streetwear trends, and southern climate conditions influence these dress practices. Moreover, this article demonstrates how this community is distinct from other cowboy communities. For the Black and Creole Louisiana trailriders, traditional aesthetic expressions connect them to their cultural heritage while modern aesthetic expressions seek to blend external popular culture with internal indigenous culture.*

**KEYWORDS** cowboy, Black cowboy, Louisiana cowboy, cowboy clothing, cowboy dress, trailride

## Introduction

COWBOYS are a key figure in American history and myth, often depicted as the archetypical image of a rugged man riding horseback, clad in a Stetson hat, plaid shirt, bandana, and worn blue jeans. The term "cowboy" was coined from *vaquero*, a direct translation from Spanish, which was the native language of the first cattle ranchers and herders in Mexico. When these practices expanded north during the nineteenth century, American cowboys modified the tools, techniques, and customs of the *vaqueros*.<sup>1</sup> The new frontier warranted a new aesthetic. This farmer, now coined cowboy—fueled by white Europeans moving westward—espoused a more independent American sensibility which modified his appearance to account for the rugged, open land topography.<sup>2</sup> The romanticized image that history has perpetuated was that of a heterosexual cowboy.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, although American cowboy culture has always been composed of individuals from various ethnic and geographical backgrounds, the predominant image in the United States was that of the white, male, heterosexual, wild Westerner.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, this singular vision of the cowboy does not fully represent the breadth of

individuals who identify with cowboy culture. Black, Creole, and Latinx cowboys are indigenous cowboy cultures that have been historically relegated to the background. Historic accounts confirm that Black, Latinx, and Native American cowboys were just as much a part of cattle herding and cross-country work on horseback as their white counterparts by the mid-nineteenth century (Figures 1 and 2).<sup>5</sup> In the 1870s, after the Civil War, one out of every three cowboys in the US were Mexican *vaqueros*, and one out of every four cowboys was of African descent.<sup>6</sup>

Images of these diverse cowboys remain largely unknown in mainstream and academic accounts. This article documents, distinguishes, and details the dress aspects of one contemporary, marginalized cowboy culture: the Black and Creole<sup>7</sup> Louisiana trailriders. The terms cowboy and trailrider are distinct. For this research, and adapted from prior trailride research conducted in Texas, a cowboy is defined as someone who performs specific jobs, tasks, or types of work related to horses, cattle, farming, or ranching. A trailrider may also participate in cowboy work but is distinguished as someone who also seeks the social aspects of a larger cowboy community. Trailriders come together to

FIGURE 1 Black cowboy Isom Dart ca. 1890s. Unidentified photographer, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



practice their cowboy identity in the context of a larger network of supporters and to connect with those who share the common interest of horse culture.<sup>8</sup>

Because the Louisiana trailriding community does not fit the white cowboy archetype perpetuated in popular culture, the group has experienced what researchers Valerie Purdie-Vaughns and Richard P. Eibach term “intersectional invisibility”: where subordinate groups are rendered invisible compared to their dominate group counterparts.<sup>9</sup> This invisibility has led Black and Creole cowboy culture to be absent from history books, popular media, and retail marketing.<sup>10</sup>

Dress practices are a primary way for the community to communicate their unique cowboy identities. Clothing choice is cited by members as a primary consideration when preparing to attend trailride events. Dress items that are personally negotiated and considered on their symbolic merit include shirt styles, denim silhouettes, brand names, boot shapes, accessory choices, and hat types. Traditional and conservative dress styles

FIGURE 2 Black cowboy in embellished vest and exaggerated fur chaps ca. early 1900s. Unknown photographer. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.



are worn by members who seek to keep familial patterns and cultural traditions alive and going. Modern and more radical dress styles are worn by members whose aim is to assert a new interpretation of what it means to look, be, or do cowboy today.

These dress distinctions are important because they diverge from the historic norm. The archetypal image, as aforementioned, was of the white cowboy whose image perpetuated stereotypes of heteronormativity, racial hierarchies, and settler colonialism.<sup>11</sup> The archetypal white American cowboy is commonly associated with ideas of freedom, individuality, and self-reliance, as typified in the image of the Lone Ranger.<sup>12</sup> But among the Louisiana Black and Creole trailride community, cowboy expression is characterized by vastly different practices. For this community, group dressing symbolizes

8 See Myeshia Chanel Babers, “A Way of Life Knowledge Production Among Black Cowboys” (PhD diss., Texas A&M University, 2017), <[https://www.academia.edu/112997912/A\\_Way\\_of\\_Life\\_Knowledge\\_Production\\_Among\\_Black\\_Cowboys/](https://www.academia.edu/112997912/A_Way_of_Life_Knowledge_Production_Among_Black_Cowboys/)>; and Alexandra Giancarlo, “Democracy and Public Space in Louisiana’s Creole Trail Rides,” *Southeastern Geographer* 56, no. 2 (2016): 223–44.

9 Findings reveal that individuals who do not fit prototypes of certain identity groups will experience intersectional invisibility. See Valerie Purdie-Vaughns and Richard P. Eibach, “Intersectional Invisibility: The Distinctive Advantages and Disadvantages of Multiple Subordinate-group Identities,” *Sex Roles* 59 (2008): 377–91.

10 Retail underrepresentation was found during this study. Analysis was conducted on ethnic representation within Western retailer websites and online retail imagery. See Broussard, *Black Cowboys in the American West*; David Goldstein-Shirley, “Black Cowboys In the American West: A Historiographical Review,” *Ethnic Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (1997): 79–89; Myeshia Chanel Babers, “Black Cowboys and Black Masculinity African American Ranchers, Rodeo Cowboys and Trailriders” (PhD diss., Texas A&M University, 2014); Tricia Martineau Wagner, *Black Cowboys of the Old West: True, Sensational, and Little-Known Stories from History* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

11 See Michael Yellow Bird, “Cowboys and Indians: Toys of Genocide, Icons of American Colonialism,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 19, no. 2 (2004): 33–48; Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); Andrea Smith, “Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy,” *Global Dialogue* 12, no. 2 (2010); Andrea Smith, “Not an Indian Tradition: The Sexual Colonization of Native Women,” *Hypatia* 18, no. 2 (2003): 70–85; Andrea Smith, “Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism,” *GLQ* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 41–68; Chris Packard, *Queer Cowboys: And Other Erotic Male Friendships in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005); Scott Morgensen, “Settler Homonationalism: Theorizing Settler Colonialism within Queer Modernities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 105–13; J. Gray Sweeney, “Racism, Nationalism, and Nostalgia in Cowboy Art,” *Oxford Art Journal* 15, no. 1 (1992): 67–80; Marshall W. Fishwick, “The Cowboy: America’s Contribution to the World’s Mythology,” *Western Folklore* 11, no. 2 (1952): 77–92; Megan Williams, “Nowhere Man and the Twentieth-Century Cowboy: Images of identity and

- American History in Sam Shepard's *True West*," *Modern Drama* 40, no. 1 (1997): 57–73.
- 12 See C. T. Kirk, *How the West Was White-Washed* (AuthorHouse, 2020).
  - 13 This was confirmed through participant interviews. Members interviewed from the Black and Creole trailride community explained how they allow women to participate in all trailrides, ride horses, and organize events. Members interviewed from the Black and Creole trailride community distinguished themselves from the white community of trailriders on this basis, as they explained that there are white trailride groups remaining that do not allow women to participate.
  - 14 All participants interviewed self-identified as either ethnically Black or Creole. The gender makeup for those formally interviewed included six women and fourteen men. The sexual orientation of those formally interviewed was reported as seventeen heterosexual participants, one gay participant, one lesbian participant, and one participant who did not disclose their orientation.
  - 15 Susan B. Kaiser, *The Social Psychology of Clothing: Symbolic Appearances in Context*, 2nd ed. (Fairchild Publications, 1997); Christopher Breward, "Cultures, Identities, Histories: Fashioning a Cultural Approach to Dress," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body, and Culture* 2, no. 4 (December 1998): 301–13; Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, "Fashioning Cultural Identity: Body and Dress," *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan* (Wiley, 2005), 153–66.
  - 16 See Kaiser, *The Social Psychology of Clothing*.
  - 17 In its original iterations, symbolic interactionism was proposed as a way of interpreting the meanings that humans apply to the world around them and share through social interactions. The examination of practices of communities to better understand the lived human experience is a primary tenet of symbolic interactionism. Human life is conducted within a community and these communities are essential contexts for developing and cultivating shared symbols. See Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (University of California Press, 1986); Woodrow W. Clark II and Michael Fast, "Mead and Blumer: Social Theory and Symbolic Interactionism," *Qualitative Economics: The Science of Economics* (2019): 141–82; G. H. Mead, "A Behavioristic Account of the Significant Symbol," *The Journal of Philosophy* 19, no. 6 (1922): 157–63; and R. C. Prus, *Symbolic Interaction and Ethnographic Research: Intersubjectivity and the Study of Human Lived Experience* (State University of New York Press, 1996).
  - 18 In the Aesthetics of Blackness theory, bell hooks posits that

familial traditions and togetherness, either by adopting similar brands that symbolizes collective identity, or incorporating popular culture clothing trends that symbolizes a desire to keep the culture relevant to younger generations.

In addition, the Black and Creole trailride community are more accepting to non-cis gender expressions than its white counterparts. Many of the horse-focused activities within the white trailride community in Louisiana still restrict women from participating and riding.<sup>13</sup> This is not the case in among the Black and Creole community. Moreover, Black and Creole men on trailrides often challenge traditional notions of masculinity through their dress practices. Many straight men adopt embellished denim styles and freely wear rhinestone accessories and oversized jewelry, thus subverting gender norms through dress. This research gives their excluded stories a platform. Black and Creole trailride dress practices meaningfully contribute to the growing vision of what cowboy culture looks like, how it has evolved, and where it is going. The aim of this research is to offer visual and verbal accounts of long-practicing local cowboys in their own words, on their own terms.

## Methodology

A sociocultural and ethnographic approach was employed in this research. The first author spent two years conducting in-person fieldwork, making field observations, connecting with community members, taking fieldnotes during trailride and dance events, completing twenty in-depth formal interviews, and holding informal conversations with trailride participants.<sup>14</sup> The sample consisted of twenty participants, ranging in age from 23 to 70 years old. Two participants identified as belonging to the "Baby Boomer" generation, eight participants as "Generation X" cohort, three participants identified as "Millennials," and seven community members identified

as part of "Generation Z." Of the twenty interviewees, six identified as women and fourteen identified as men. Participants belonged to different trailride clubs, no more than two interviewees were affiliated with the same club. In addition, six participants reported they do not belong to a trailride club at all.

Scholars Susan Kaiser, Christopher Breward, and Olfa Goldstein-Gidoni, along with others, have considered social and cultural aspects of dress as central to the construction of individual identity, group membership, perpetuation and evolution of dress traditions, and cultural heritage.<sup>15</sup> More specifically, theoretical models which speak to smaller, subcultural communities and their dress practices were employed in this research, one such being Kaiser's work on ethnic dress, showing that communities that have distinct dress practices are not subject to the same interpretations of mainstream or popular fashion.<sup>16</sup> These unique communities, one such being the Black and Creole Louisiana trailriders, use dress to establish themselves as visually separate groups, to communicate identity both within and outside of the group, to confirm their membership within a specific trailride group, and to communicate their aesthetic identity.

Additionally, this article analyzes these groups' dress practices through the lens of symbolic interactionism<sup>17</sup> and the aesthetics of Blackness theories.<sup>18</sup> Symbolic interactionism has been employed in ethnographic studies to draw conclusions about the clothed appearance and its connection to identity, socialization, community, and culture.<sup>19</sup> For this research, symbolic interactionism provided a framework for how the Black and Creole Louisiana trailride community interacts with cowboy symbolism, reinterprets the Western aesthetic, combines urban and rural dress genres, and negotiates these symbols through social interactions within the community.

This study's findings were also analyzed using bell hooks' theories on the

aesthetics of Blackness and outlaw culture.<sup>20</sup> According to hooks, aesthetics is about how materiality produces culture and acts as an outlet for artistic expression. The Black and Louisiana Creole trailrider aesthetic is its own original genre of cowboy dress, not a reinterpretation of white, Western tradition. As hooks states, “It is really important to dispel the notion that white, Western culture is ‘the’ location where discussion of aesthetics emerged” when it is really “only one location.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, to further the discourse on Louisiana Black and Creole aesthetics, this article considers traditional, white, cowboy tropes only for establishing historical context and not as a lens through which the research is interpreted.

Hooks also argues against fixed identities, describing them as limiting, confining, and problematic. Having space to move beyond the confines imposed by the mainstream culture allows for multiple identities to emerge. For hooks, this is defined as outlaw culture.<sup>22</sup> Under outlaw culture, dress is a useful way to play with identity and power. Clothing, then, can serve as a vehicle for transgressing boundaries of powerlessness and repression. For the Black and Creole Louisiana trailride community, dress is used as way to push against the fixed identity of mainstream white cowboy clothing traditions, and functions as a safe space to freely perform their own aesthetic interpretation of how a cowboy can look.

### History of Cowboy Dress

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, cowboy dress stressed functionality. Early documents indicate these traditional styles remained largely unchanged, filling a practical need or a utilitarian role.<sup>23</sup> An academic article on cowboy dress published in 1933 posited

**The dress of the cowboy was picturesque, but it was not worn to secure this effect. Every article of his apparel had its own**

**especial use, and because it was designed for service rather than for appearance its style has never changed.**<sup>24</sup>

Functional elements of early cowboy dress included the broad-brimmed cowboy hat, designed for protecting the face and neck from sun; the neckerchief or bandana, which served as a makeshift mask and a solution to harsh elements the cowboys encountered; pocketed vests which were a convenient place for carrying items; and boots with a raised heel, designed to keep a horse rider stable in stirrups, while the high shaft protected the legs when navigating thick brush.<sup>25</sup>

While many of these cowboy clothing items are still seen today, the silhouettes, materials, and styles evolved from functional to fashionable. In the early days, dress items possessed the specific purpose of protecting the wearer and supporting his associated cowboy tasks, and were an amalgamation of items borrowed from Native American, English, French, and Spanish-Mexican ranchers, herders, and explorers.<sup>26</sup> For example, leather jackets with fringe are a French and Native American creation; chaps and bandanas are of Mexican origin; the Spanish sombrero was the precursor to the cowboy hat; and early shirt styles took their inspiration from Victorian England.<sup>27</sup>

The post-Civil War years were responsible for significant aesthetic changes within cowboy culture. During this period, a transition from the cowboy as an unglamorous profession to an eclectically attired Western symbol took place. People began to travel north and west to settle in new states. This migration encouraged the adoption of different styles in different locations.<sup>28</sup> Also around this time commercial retailers began marketing Western products to cowboys and cowboy wannabes alike. Supply wagons traveled around to Western settlements and cattle round-ups offering fabric yardage, ready-to-wear clothing, belts, leather accessories, and horse-tack.<sup>29</sup> With the introduction of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West touring shows in the 1880s, cowboy clothing

aesthetics is not limited to the face value of appearance but a larger concept of inhabiting geography. Aesthetics in this view is a way of taking up physical space to add to the landscape, surroundings, and backdrop of daily life. For marginalized communities, such as the Black and Creole populations of Louisiana, histories are often plagued with material lack, so aesthetics becomes a means of possessing. Materiality, in this way, serves the purpose of producing culture and acts as an outlet for artistic expression. See bell hooks, “An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional,” *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 1 (1995): 65–72.

- 19 See D. N. Green, “Stella Blum Grant Report: Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations’ Huulthin (Shawls): Historical and Contemporary Practices,” *Dress* 39, no. 2 (2013): 153–201; Kathy Charmaz, Scott R. Harris, and Leslie Irvine, *The Social Self and Everyday Life: Understanding the World through Symbolic Interactionism* (John Wiley & Sons, 2019); and Yuniya Kawamura, *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress* (Bloomsbury, 2020), 1–176.
- 20 bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (Routledge, 1994); bell hooks, “An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional,” *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 1 (1995): 65–72.
- 21 hooks, “An Aesthetic of Blackness,” 69.
- 22 hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 208.
- 23 R. Sturgis, “The Real Cowboy,” *Prairie Schooner* 6, no. 1 (1932): 30–38; C. Enss, *How the West was Worn: Bustles and Buckskins on the Wild Frontier* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); M. D. Buckner, “Ranch Diction of the Texas Panhandle,” *American Speech* 8, no. 1 (1933): 25–32; C. Gibson, “How Clothing Design and Cultural Industries Refashioned Frontier Masculinities: A Historical Geography of Western Wear,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 23, no. 5 (2016): 733–52.
- 24 Sturgis, “The Real Cowboy,” 30–38.
- 25 Sturgis, “The Real Cowboy,” 30–38.
- 26 Gibson, “Clothing Design,” 733–52.
- 27 Gibson, “Clothing Design,” 733–52.
- 28 See Sonya Abrego, *Westernwear: Postwar American Fashion and Culture* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).
- 29 Abrego, *Westernwear*.

- 30 Wilson, "The Cowboy: Real and Imagined," 3–15.
- 31 Laurel Wilson, "Western Wear," *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion/The United States and Canada* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2010).
- 32 Emmie Malone, "Rhinestone Cowboys: The Problem of Country Music Costuming," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 82, no. 4, (2024): 376–86.

FIGURE 3 Performers in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show wearing exaggerated Western dress. "Cowboys" in this image are seen wearing oversized bandanas and flamboyant woolie chaps. ca. 1900. Public domain via Illinois State University.



became more performative in nature, mainly to increase the entertainment value of these shows. To attract audience attention and garner interest, cowboy dress in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show was often exaggerated with extra-wide brim hats and wooly chaps and was partly responsible for creating the market for fashionable cowboy clothing (Figure 3).<sup>30</sup>

By the mid-twentieth century, film and television had become popular forms of entertainment. During this period, the demand for Western dramas and Wild West movies exploded. Cowboy actors of the time were costumed in fringed gloves, oversized bandanas, exaggerated wooly chaps, embellished leather vests, highly decorated boots, and ten-gallon hats.<sup>31</sup> When television was introduced into American homes in the 1950s, viewers

were exposed to larger-than-life cowboy figures like Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and Buckskin Bill.<sup>32</sup> It was on television, on a broad scale, that viewers could observe cowboy dress up-close and zoomed in. Consumer demand sought to emulate the more detailed and embellished styles which included intricate embroidery, more vibrant colors, and the addition of studs and sparkles.

The influence of traveling shows, film, and television effectively turned the cowboy aesthetic from function to fashion (Figure 4). As live Western shows, TV dramas, and cowboy-centric films entered the public sphere and private homes, producers needed to grab the attention of their viewers. This was accomplished, in part, through more flamboyant cowboy dress styles. Actors and performers donned brighter colors,

FIGURE 4 Roy Rogers in Nudie Cohn suit. With the introduction and adoption of television, viewers could get closer to cowboy dress styles. On-camera styles had more detail and embellishment. Nudie Cohn is often credited with creating this more flamboyant style, often including fringe, rhinestones, and vibrant colors, as seen here on Roy Rogers. Public domain via Orange County Archives.



more extravagant embroidery, and more exaggerated styles.<sup>33</sup> Country musicians evolved the look, creating a unique genre of cowboy dress known as the “rhinestone cowboy.” This new aesthetic created demand for bolder, showier, and more campy styles, regardless of function.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, cowboy style waxed and waned as a mainstream aesthetic. In the 1980s, the overnight popularity of the film *Urban Cowboy* (1980) created a fashion frenzy for Western wear, even among those living in large cities.<sup>35</sup> More recently in 2018, rapper Lil Nas X and his viral hit “Old Town Road” featured head-to-toe cowboy dress in its accompanying music video. *Barbie*, the highest grossing film of 2023, interpreted the cowboy look for the title character in her signature hot pink with a fitted vest, wide-brimmed hat, neckerchief, lace up bellbottoms,

and boots.<sup>36</sup> Beyoncé designed her Adidas Ivy Park Rodeo collection around Western style, and wore a disco cowboy hat atop an ethereal silver horse as the primary promotional image for her *Renaissance* (2022) album. On the heels of *Renaissance*, in 2024, Beyoncé released *Cowboy Carter*, an album featuring rewritten country songs and an All-American red, white, and blue color scheme (Figure 5). Louis Vuitton creative director Pharrell Williams entitled his Fall 2024 menswear collection “Wild West” and sent down the runway high fashion models wearing bolos worn over hoodies, appliquéd blazers peppered with Western imagery, and flared trousers over custom Louis Vuitton cowboy boots.<sup>37</sup>

### Louisiana Black and Creole Cowboys

The Louisiana Black and Creole trailride community encompasses a large geographical area across the southern portion of the state. Louisiana rural trailrides are recurring events which bring together the Black and Creole community to engage in and perform their cowboy culture. These events typically take place over weekends or on holidays. The trailrides include members of the Louisiana cowboy community riding horseback through rural trails in their area. These events also involve partner dancing, group dressing, costume contests, and traditional Zydeco music (which is a syncretic form of music that belongs to an ethnic community within Louisiana).<sup>38</sup> The Zydeco sound heard today originated in the early 1950s when Creole musicians brought together their traditional music with rhythm and blues instruments. But even before then the Creole community was engaged in *juré* music, a call-and-response style which featured syncopated clapping.<sup>39</sup>

Zydeco dance is a series of steps that typically accompanies Zydeco music. The steps have evolved through the years, resulting in a hybrid of traditional

33 Malone, “Rhinestone Cowboys.”

34 Malone, “Rhinestone Cowboys,” 376–86.

35 Gibson, “Clothing Design,” 733–52; R. Scofield, “Chaps and Scowls: Play, Violence, and the Post-1970s Urban Cowboy,” *The Journal of American Culture* 40, no. 4 (2017): 325–40.

36 Rebecca Rubin, “‘Barbie’ is Officially the Highest-Grossing Release of the Year with \$1.36 Billion Globally,” *Variety*, September 2, 2023, <<https://variety.com/2023/film/box-office/barbie-highest-grossing-worldwide-movie-year-1235705510/>>.

37 Phoenix Simpson, “Louis Vuitton goes Wild West with Men’s FW24 Collection,” *V Magazine*, January 21, 2024, <<https://vmagazine.com/article/louis-vuitton-goes-wild-west-with-mens-fw24-collection/>>.

38 Lorenzo Thomas, “From Gumbo to Grammys: The Development of Zydeco Music in Houston,” *Juneteenth Texas: Essays in African-American Folklore* 54 (1996): 139.

39 Scott Billington, “A Short History of Zydeco,” *Zydeco Crossroads*, January 7, 2015, <<http://zydecocrossroads.org/2015/01/short-history-zydeco/>>; Michael Tisserand, *The Kingdom of Zydeco* (Arcade Publishing, 1998).

- 40 Mark F. DeWitt, *Cajun and Zydeco Dance Music in Northern California: Modern Pleasures in a Postmodern World* (University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 189.

FIGURE 5 Advertising image for Beyoncé's recently released *Cowboy Carter* album. Promotional message reads "Always Been Country" and features Beyoncé in an all-American red, white, and blue Western ensemble.



Zydeco steps, modern hip-hop influences, and infusions from Louisiana's other indigenous dance, the Cajun two-step. The Zydeco dance is performed with a partner, and partners typically change for each song. Even among participants who are in romantic relationships, Zydeco dance partners rotate throughout a dance event. The dance itself consists of eight counts and features periods of close partner dancing followed by freestyle counts when the lead drops their left hand, the dance partner follows suit, and the two dancers freestyle footwork and spin movements. The steps follow the syncopation of the music with longer and faster holds to a rhythm of "slow-quick-quick-slow."<sup>40</sup>

Social media flyers are the primary method for promoting trailride and Zydeco events online. The flyers are typically vibrant, eye-catching, and feature many linguistic and visual markers about trailride culture. Often, technologically savvy group members or freelance graphic designers are hired by trailride organizers and Zydeco musicians to create social media flyers. The

flyers typically include rural imagery, headshots of the musicians who would be playing for the events, dress items, and details on where and when the event would take place (Figures 6 and 7). Trailride participants take visual cues from the event flyers to plan their dress and understand the dress expectations. If the event flyers show baseball caps, short-sleeve T-shirts, and Nike sneakers, participants will expect the event to be more casual and the music to include more modern Zydeco dancing attire. When the event flyers include linguistic markers such as "old school," "traditional," "boots and hats," the understanding is that more formal cowboy dress is expected.

Numerous dress practices can be seen on the trail and at dances, most notably group dressing, traditional dressing, and modern interpretations of cowboy dress. Over the years, the larger Black and Creole Louisiana trailride community has branched out into individual trailride groups and trailride clubs. Some trailride clubs are small, consisting of only four to five members, while other clubs are much larger with twenty to

FIGURE 6 Louisiana Trailride flyer highlighting traditional Zydeco music and sneaker suggestion for the event. Image from Instagram @officialchrisardoin, posted August 21, 2022.



thirty members. Membership in a trailride club is mainly attained through mutual agreement. Families, close friends, and those connected geographically frequently form groups together. The clubs will create a group name and often accompanying logos, graphics, taglines, and mottos to illustrate their identity. Group dressing among these trailride clubs is common. This entails the coordination of matching ensembles purchased from Western retailers or the design and wearing of embroidered or screen-printed T-shirts in matching colors with group logos.<sup>41</sup> Being a member of a trailride club, however, is not required to participate in the weekend trailride events. Three of the interviewees, for example, chose to remain as individual trailriders and not be affiliated with any one trailride group.

A broad range of ages are seen at Black and Creole Louisiana trailrides. Members of the trailride community bring their children and teach them how to ride horses and participate in the cultural practices at a young age. On trailrides, infants as young as eighteen months are carried by their guardians on horseback. Children between three to

FIGURE 7 Louisiana Trailride flyer highlighting weekend events and Western images. Image from Instagram @semienstables2k25.



- 41 This data was procured from field-notes and researcher observations performed over a two-year period.
- 42 John Turner, "Towards a Cognitive Redefinition of the Social Group," *Cahiers de Psychologie Cognitive/Current Psychology of Cognition* 1, no. 2 (1981): 93-118.
- 43 Turner, "Towards a Cognitive Redefinition of the Social Group," 93-118.

five years old ride smaller colts connected in tandem with a guiding adult. By five or six years of age, children are riding solo on the trailrides.

### Group Dressing

Black and Creole Louisiana trailriders' dress practices convey a strong desire for group identity. When members of a community align themselves with an identity, they mentally associate themselves with the norms and attributes of the group.<sup>42</sup> They also measure their concept of individual self or their individual self-worth according to their perceived affiliation with the group.<sup>43</sup>

Among all groups, members communicate group identity through wearing coordinating colors, matching Western wear ensembles, and showing up in large numbers in cohesive dress to trailride events and Zydeco dances. However, different groups adopt different uniform practices. Some groups match their

- 44 John W. Schouten and James H. McAlexander, "Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers," *Journal of Consumer Research* 22, no. 1 (1995): 43–61.
- 45 Monica Sklar, Jessica Strübel, Katharine Freiberg, and Sara Elhabbassi, "Beyond Subculture the Meaning of Style: Chronicling Directions of Scholarship on Dress since Hebdige and Muggleton," *Fashion Theory* 26, no. 6 (2022): 715–35.
- 46 "Chere," in this sense, is a play on words with a double meaning. In southern Louisiana, where various French and Creole dialects are spoken, *chère* is a French term that means "dear." However, the word is also an onomatopoeia of a common pronunciation for "here"—the result of a liaison between out + here, conflating the two and forming the sound "ch".

FIGURE 8 Example of trailride group dress. Members of a Louisiana trailride group wear identical velvet button-up shirts, matching wild rags, coordinating hats, and jeans. Their clothed look was awarded best group dress at a trailride costume contest. Photograph courtesy of participant's Instagram @trailride\_scene.

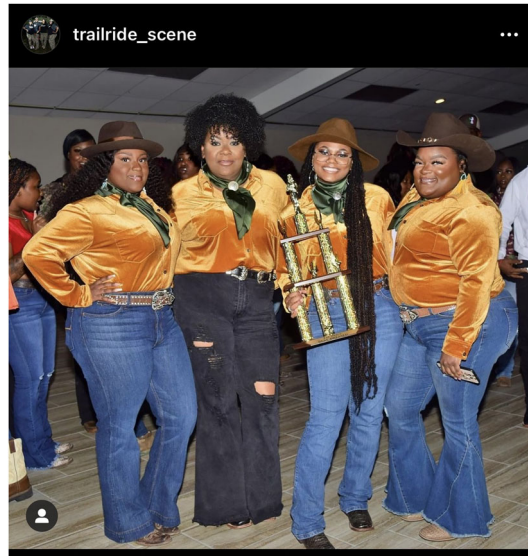


FIGURE 9 Example of trailride group dress. Members of a Louisiana trailride group wear identical black button-up Ariat brand shirts, identical Ariat baseball caps, similar brown leather belts with oversized buckles, coordinating bootcut jeans, and brown leather boots. Photograph courtesy of participant's Instagram @semienstables2k24.



dress from head-to-toe, donning the exact same button-up shirts, cowboy hats, belts, and bandanas (Figures 8 and 9), while other groups wear matching T-shirts with their club logo but are free to accessorize the rest of the look. Some trailride clubs are only identified within the community by wearing similar colors but are not required to match exactly. For the actual trailride events as well as nighttime dances, trailride clubs assign specific dress directives and an expected level of matching is required from group participants. For daytime tailgates or more informal events, participants are allowed more creative liberty, needing only to match a certain clothing item or a certain color.

Many subcultures have used dress to communicate their group identity, social status, and community values.<sup>44</sup> A 2022 study explored dress symbolism and found that subcultures dress in similar styles to express their cultural ethos, views on modern life, and as a way to show resistance to mainstream culture.<sup>45</sup>

In the case of the Black and Creole Louisiana trailriders, their group dress practices resist the notion of rugged individualism typically associated with white cowboys and instead express an ethos of community and togetherness by their matching colors, identical clothing items, and similar silhouettes. The group mottos are linguistic cues that often focused on family values and their commitment to cowboy culture. For instance, the motto of one trailride club, "I-49 Riders. A Family Aiming for Pleasure and Success without the Mess," expresses that family values include having a good time without drama or fuss. Commitment to cowboy culture is illustrated in another trailride club's motto: "Keep 'N It Real Riders. Rain or shine, we out chere" (Figure 10).<sup>46</sup> Other trailride club mottos like "Tru 2 da game. We're not new 2 dis, we're tru 2 dis" and "Solo Slab Riders. It's not a Swagg, it's a Lifestyle," take a lighter approach that has little to do with horse riding or Western traditions, but instead mixing

FIGURE 10 The trailrider on left belongs to the “I-49 Riders” club. Their logo features a silhouette of the state of Louisiana with an image of a galloping horse and the I-49 interstate symbol. Their group motto, written in small print at the bottom of the shirt, reads “A Family Aiming for Pleasure and Success without the Mess.” The trailrider at right belongs to the “Keep ‘N It Real Riders” club. Their logo features a Christian cross at center with horses and praying cowboys flanking each side. Their group motto in small print at the bottom of the shirt reads, “Rain or shine, we out there.” Photograph by Danielle Honeycutt.



references to popular slang or mainstream song lyrics.

The Black and Creole Louisiana trailride community seeks to distinguish and differentiate themselves from other cowboy aesthetics, typically those associated with white cowboy culture. Their dress practices can be viewed as aesthetic responses to racism, classism, and cultural exploitation. For example, hoodies, which are popular on the trailrides among the younger generation participants, are commonly worn to symbolize resistance against racism since the 2012 Trayvon Martin killing.<sup>47</sup> The Black and Creole Louisiana trailride community also challenges notions of classism by wearing white undershirts or no shirt at all while riding their horses.

Horse riding history, horse shows, and horse races are often associated with conservatively clad wealthy and affluent populations.<sup>48</sup> White, ribbed undershirts are associated with poor populations and a working-class aesthetic.<sup>49</sup> Nike tennis shoes are seen in stirrups on trailrides, symbolically disputing what constitutes authentic cowboy culture.<sup>50</sup>

The Black and Creole Louisiana trailriders turn the notion of mainstream cowboy dress on its head. Wearing styles and brands not commonly associated with Western dress disrupts the long-standing narrative. This community seeks to create and carve out its own image of what it looks like to participate in cowboy culture. The Compton Cowboys, a Black horse-raising and horse-riding group from California, have played with this inversion of clothing imagery on a more visible scale. Through collaborations with popular Western wear brand Ariat and fast-fashion retailer Forever 21, the Compton Cowboys have brought “Street Country” style to the larger clothed cowboy conversation.<sup>51</sup>

### Traditional Dress

In the Black and Creole Louisiana trailrider community, traditional dress consists of the archetypal elements commonly conjured when describing a Western cowboy and features both functional and fashionable clothing items. These include button-up shirts (often with snaps), boot-legged blue jeans, belts (sometimes with large buckles), boots with spurs, wide-brim hats, and bandanas. Long sleeves and long pants, according to traditionally dressed participants, are necessary to ride horses and navigate the trails. Being fully clothed also shields participants from sunburns, scrapes, and chafing. Commonly cited brands during fieldwork and interviews among traditional trailriders included Wrangler, Ariat, Levi’s, Carhartt, and Justin Boots.

One participant, a trailride veteran who rode horses on rural trails for more

47 See K. A. Hungerford, “The Hoodie and Other Protest Strategies Following the Death of Trayvon Martin: Conflicting Discourses of Social Change and White Privilege,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5 no. 3/4 (2015): 99–110.

48 See R. Sanchez, “Black, Hispanic Riding Clubs Keep Cowboy Identity Alive after Centuries of ‘whitewashing,’” *ABC News* (August 29, 2020), <<https://abcnews.go.com/US/black-hispanicriding-clubs-cowboy-identity-aliveafter-centuries/story?id=72518268/>>.

49 See A. Klein, “Using the ‘wife-beater’ Shirt to Teach about Hegemony and Counterhegemony,” *Communication Teacher* 30, no. 2 (2016): 100–105 and E. Hayt, “NOTICED: An Undershirt Named ... What?,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2001.

50 See M. Babers, “Reclaiming Space and Memory: Black Cowboys and the Right to the City,” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 34, no. 3 (2024): e2802.

51 See Walter Thompson-Hernández, *The Compton Cowboys: The New Generation of Cowboys in America’s Urban Heartland* (William Morrow Publishing, 2020) and “Forever 21 x Compton Cowboys Collaborate on ‘Street Country’ Collection Honoring Black History Month,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, January 31, 2025.

- 52 Interview with Louisiana trailride participant, May 9, 2024.
- 53 Interview with Louisiana trailride participant, June 15, 2024.
- 54 Prior research by dress scholars and anthropologists confirmed that knowledge, culture, and dress proclivities are learned behaviors transmitted between generations. See Joanne B. Eicher, "The Anthropology of Dress," *Dress* 27, no. 1 (2000): 59–70; Jie G. Fowler, Timothy H. Reisenwitz, and Aubrey R. Fowler, "Fashion Globally: A Cross-Cultural and Generational Examination," *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 17, no. 3 (2014): 172–91; Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account* (Harvard University Press, 2000); Lilian Manwa, Gamuchirai Tsitsi Ndamba, and Nyaradzo Jinga, "Attitudes of Women and the Transmission of a Gendered Dress Code to the Offspring: A Case for Harare, Zimbabwe," *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 178.
- 55 Interview with Louisiana trailride participant, June 15, 2024.
- 56 Interview with Louisiana trailride participant, February 11, 2024.
- 57 Mary Alice Casto, Jennifer Paff Ogle, Maricela DeMirjyn, Amanda Morales, and Sarah Silvas-Bernstein, "Striving Towards Authenticity in the Self through Dress and Appearance: Stories of Latina Adolescent Immigrants," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 42, no. 4 (2022): 278–93; Beth A. Conklin, "Body Paint, Feathers, and VCRs: Aesthetics and Authenticity in Amazonian Activism," *American Ethnologist* 24, no. 4 (1997): 711–37; E. J. Power, David J. Tyler, and P. L. P. Disele, "Conserving and Sustaining Culture through Traditional Dress," *Journal of Social Development in Africa* 26, no. 1 (2011); Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

than fifty years, made an important observation about why this particular aesthetic and style of dress might have been adopted by this cohort early on:

**Back then, the trail ride culture was very conservative. It was a bunch of older men because horses to some guys weren't cool, especially in the Black population. And the trailrides back then were very conservative because the elderly Blacks wanted to prove to the whites—which was predominantly their sport of trailriding—that we could do it, that they could do it, we could do it and do it just as well as they could in very authentic Western wear. Back then everybody wore shirts. You had a cowboy hat on, long pants, mainly jeans, boots, which were pointed. Not square toe, not square toed like today. Yeah. And so, we were very conservative, and we wanted to prove that we could do it in a very orderly fashion.**<sup>52</sup>

Aesthetically, traditional dress is styled to mimic the way parents and grandparents wore the clothing items. This is supported by specific care requirements for the clothing and how participants should present themselves at the rides. Heavy starched jeans with center front creasing and upholding a respectful, conservative appearance are recurring themes for those who dressed in the more traditional style. Many of those dressed traditionally belonged to the Baby Boomer and Generation X age groups. However, some participants among the younger trailride cohort have also adopted this approach to dressing. A younger participant explained that this style of dress is a way to keep the traditions of his family alive and continuing.<sup>53</sup>

The adoption of a more traditional cowboy look by the Black and Creole Louisiana trailride community can be attributed to intergenerational transmission.<sup>54</sup> The importance of passing down culture was confirmed by interviewees who display a traditional aesthetic. Many members referenced older family members or ancestral influences when asked why they chose to adopt a more classic cowboy style. One participant

explained: "So, my father's 75, so he comes from a different era. My uncle is 65 and looking a certain way. A cowboy means something to me. I grew up looking at cowboys dressed a certain way."<sup>55</sup> An interview conducted simultaneously with a father and a son captured a similar sentiment. The son commented in reference to his father, "Yeah, you always catch him in a long sleeve. Every day. Yeah. Like you see him right here. Oh yeah. Every day . . . Cowboy hat too. Can't believe he don't have his bent-up hat on." Concurring with this observation, the father replied, "Yeah. That's how my grandpa was."<sup>56</sup>

Traditional trailride dress is learned from the elders in the Louisiana Black and Creole cowboy community. Those who adopt traditional dress wear long sleeves, even to summer trailrides where temperatures reach over 100 °F, citing it is what their elders wore. Part of traditional dress also includes long denim or khaki pants for trailride events. Those dressed traditionally are fully covered in long-sleeve button-up styles paired with full-length pants. Many of the participants interviewed confirm that their traditional styles are also heavily starched and feature visible center creases down the sleeves and the front of the pants. Those wearing traditional dress accessorize it with wide-brim straw or wool cowboy hats and pointed toe or almond toe cowboy boots.

Continuing the dress practices of the trailriders who came before is a form of respect and honor to the elders within the community and the ancestors who have passed on. Traditional styles are worn by members who seek to keep familial patterns and cultural traditions alive and to ensure cultural authenticity as the community evolves. Traditional dress is a well-researched channel for communicating cultural authenticity. Past studies reveal that dress is a primary avenue for expressing authentic self and connecting cultural origins to the authentic self.<sup>57</sup> Traditional attire for the Black and Creole cowboys serve as a sartorial signifier among community participants. As seen in [Figures 11](#) and

FIGURE 11 Trailride participant and his son dressed in traditional Louisiana cowboy style. Both father and son wear felt wide-brim cowboy hats, long-sleeve button-up shirts, starched jeans with center-front crease, and similar zip-up vests. This exemplifies a desire among the Louisiana trailride cohort to continue cowboy tradition from the older generation to the younger generation. Clothing is a primary means to communicate this traditional transference. Photograph courtesy of participant's Facebook @Brice Declouet.



12, when younger trailriders choose to adopt the traditional clothing styles of the older generations, it communicates they are committed to also carrying on the traditions, customs, and cultural practices of the community.

Louisiana Black and Creole trailriders who wear traditional dress also equate the style with living an authentic cowboy lifestyle. Members who adopt this more traditional aesthetic express their opposition to those who wear modern clothing on the trails. For those in traditional dress, modern styles at weekend trailride events signal a participant is merely playing or performing as a cowboy only on designated days. One interviewee expressed his frustration, saying, “These are city folks that want to be country. They need to stick to what they know.

FIGURE 12 Trailride participant is dressed traditionally with his infant grandson dressed in a similar manner. Both trailride members don classic white button-up shirts, dark denim blue jeans, brown Western boots, and wide-brim cowboy hats. Passing down the Louisiana cowboy traditions, including clothed traditions, was cited as a very important aspect of the culture by this participant. Photograph courtesy of participant's Facebook @Bowzersridingclub.



They messing up the culture.”<sup>58</sup> For these participants, trailriders who choose more modern dress were putting the community’s culture at risk. To them, if a participant was not interested in retaining elements of the traditional dress style, they would not be committed to protecting and preserving the cultural elements of the community.

### Modern Dress

Modern dress for Louisiana trailriders includes short-sleeve T-shirt styles over traditional, long-sleeve button-ups. For

58 Interview with Louisiana trailride participant, June 16, 2024.

59 Cultural decolonization, as defined by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, is the theoretical and political process of contesting and reframing narratives about Indigenous histories and the effects of colonial expansion. See Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 2nd ed. (Zed Books, 1999). See also S. Covington, "Decentering and Decolonizing Fashion and Dress" in *Meanings of Dress*, ed. Kimberly A. Miller-Spillman, Andrew Reilly, and Jose F. Blanco (Fairchild Publishing, 2024), 73–85.

60 See Covington, "Decentering and Decolonizing Fashion and Dress," 73.

**FIGURE 13** Trailride participant wearing low-slung, tight-leg blue jeans, cowboy boots with spurs, brown leather belt, exposed Yellowstone branded boxer briefs, and no shirt. This is an example of modern dress on the trail. Numerous trailride members were spotted in licensed Yellowstone gear at the weekend events. Photograph by Danielle Honeycutt.



some trailride participants, especially during hot summer months, no shirts are worn at all (Figure 13). The traditional wide-brim cowboy hat is often replaced with a baseball cap, sometimes turned to the side when worn on the head. In cooler months, the look incorporates hoodies with coveralls into the aesthetic. For men, skinny-leg jeans sitting low on the waist with boxer briefs exposed is a common look. Women wear short shorts, cut-offs, crop tops, and even bikini tops to trailride events (Figure 14). This modern trailrider cohort trades traditional cowboy boots for more casual styles such as Crocs, slippers, rubber boots with spurs, or wear cowboy boots with athletic shorts or casual athleisure wear.

Modern Louisiana trailriders are not interested in preserving dress traditions in the same way as their conservatively dressed counterparts. Unlike traditional trailriders, they seek to distinguish and differentiate themselves as their own type of distinct cowboy. Black and

**FIGURE 14** Trailride participant on left is shirtless with grey, skinny jeans. Females on right are in bikini tops and cut-off blue jean shorts while riding the horse on the trail. These are examples of modern trailride dress. Photograph by Danielle Honeycutt.



Creole Louisiana trailrides became safe havens for constructing a new type of cowboy identity. In a practice of cultural decolonization,<sup>59</sup> the modern trailrider chooses clothing items and clothing practices not historically associated with cowboy culture. Black culture is its own independent, self-procuring culture. In the context of the Black and Creole Louisiana community, choosing clothing traditionally associated with streetwear and urban style within the rural settings of a trailride is a way of righting the historically colonial narrative. In the past, fashion histories have "centralized culture" through the lens of white, Western, colonial standards. The practice of cultural decolonization attempts to reclaim hidden or marginalized cultural practices that have existed but are not widely known or accepted.<sup>60</sup> The modern Louisiana Black and Creole cowboy might wear Nike tennis shoes on horses. They might opt for pants slung low with boxer briefs exposed. The modern woman rider might be seen wearing

cut-off shorts, oversized jewelry, crop tops, and long nails at trailride events. By choosing streetwear styles for the saddle, the Louisiana trailrider is subverting the narrative about what constitutes cowboy clothing. Thus, these clothing choices are an act of cultural decolonization, challenging the notion that a cowboy should look one certain way and reframing how cowboy dress can be defined.

The modern style of trailride dressing attracts participants who prefer to maintain their independence from trailride clubs or groups. This modern appearance communicates more individuality. One participant explained why she opted not to join a trailride group:

**I like wearing whatever I desire, whether it's denim with a belt and a nice, classy top, or I like to wear chaps. I have denim chaps. I have leather chaps with matching tops. When I'm going to a trailride, I'm thinking I don't want to be dressed like everybody else. I am not in a group. For me, it's like independent. I'm free. I'm free. When you're free. I don't care about who's doing, what they're doing. It makes me no difference. I pay my own bills, I buy my own clothes, and if I like it, I'm wearing it. But to me, style is everything.**<sup>61</sup>

Adopting a modern aesthetic on the trails allows participants to perform their Black and Creole cowboy culture, while maintaining their individuality and their independence. Although not one participant explicitly expressed a conscious choice to appear very different from the white cowboy of folklore, ethnographic observations conducted during this research point to that possibility. If the early Black and Creole cowboys sought to adopt similar dress to prove to whites that they were capable and competent cowboys, the current dress practices seem to tell a different story. They are now either confident in their cowboy practice or no longer seek the approval of other races. Fitting into or being accepted by another culture is also not of concern. Wearing Crocs in the stirrups or cut-offs in the saddle is an expression of

the modern trailrider and their desire to claim a both/and approach. Cowboys can be *both* skilled horseman *and* wear clothing not traditionally associated with the culture.

## Hybridization

Some members of the Black and Creole Louisiana trailride community take a hybrid approach to their appearance. For more formal occasions, such as the actual trail ride or nighttime dances, these members dress more traditionally, wearing a button-up ironed shirt (often long sleeve), starched denim pants, wide brimmed cowboy hat, and heeled cowboy boots. In hot summer months or during daytime events, when members are not riding on horses or in wagons, they show up in a modern interpretation of the cowboy aesthetic, which might include shorts instead of jeans, baseball caps in lieu of cowboy hats, and slip-on shoes versus cowboy boots. The cowboy hat is a negotiated item that signals which aesthetic is being adopted for a given event. When a cowboy hat is worn, it signifies a classic or traditional cowboy look, but when a more modern aesthetic is employed, the cowboy hat is replaced with a baseball cap. One participant, a popular Zydeco musician who plays at many trailrides, explains this choice:

**If I go to a new festival, say French Quarter Fest, where they're not here to just see me, and they might not know who Rusty Metoyer is, if I step on stage and I'm in the middle of the stage with a cowboy hat, they know I'm Rusty Metoyer. It's [an event] just got that vibe when you pull up, I'm like oh yeah, I'm wearing my *chapeau*<sup>62</sup> tonight, my hat [Figures 15 and 16].**<sup>63</sup>

Thus, depending on the setting or the attitude he wants to elicit, Rusty Metoyer changes his clothing accordingly. Casual atmospheres are conducive to laidback dress. Planned events, with a large number of attendees and higher entry fees, warrant the participants' best cowboy clothing.

61 Interview with Louisiana trailride participant, June 23, 2024.

62 *Chapeau* is French for "hat."

63 Interview with Louisiana trailride participant, April 2, 2022.

- 64 Arapi, "Traditional Dress in the Age of Globalization," 91–106.
- 65 Interview with Louisiana trailride participant, May 1, 2024.
- 66 See P. Simpson, "Louis Vuitton Goes Wild West with Mens FW24 Collection," *vmagazine.com*, January 21, 2024; J. Montgomery, "Why Pharrell's Souped-Up Cowboy Look Is All I Want to Wear for Spring 2024," *Vogue World Paris*, January 26, 2024; K. Fraser, "Cowboy Core Fashion is Trending: Beyoncé, Harry Styles & More Create Buzz around Western-Inspired Looks," *Women's Wear Daily*, February 13, 2023; E. Goldberg, "We're Having a Cowboy Moment," *The New York Times*, August 24, 2023, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/24/style/were-having-a-cowboy-moment.html>>.

FIGURES 15 AND 16 Examples of cowboy hat as negotiated symbol. Popular Zydeco musician, Rusty Metoyer, wears both his cowboy hat (*chapeau*) at trailride events and a baseball cap to other events depending on the context. On the left, the musician has adopted a more traditional trailride appearance. On the right, he has opted for a modern interpretation of trailride dress. Photograph on left by @nolaboiallday. Photograph on right by @markenyah.michyelle. Both images courtesy of participant's Instagram @rustymetoyer\_zydeco.



Pulling in elements from street wear and hip-hop style allows members to achieve the duality of the hybrid look. For example, baseball caps and short-sleeve jerseys are often paired with well-known Western brands Wrangler and Ariat. A gold chain or some type of neck jewelry or medallion is another dress item that is often added to achieve a hybrid aesthetic. In addition, cowboy boots worn over skinny, ripped jeans, or tennis shoes with button-up shirts and cowboy hats, also mark a hybrid style (Figure 17).

Clothing items that are new, novel, or untraditional to a culture take on new meanings.<sup>64</sup> Before the rise of the internet and social media, these communities remained insular. Now, external influences such as hip-hop, popular culture, and indigenous cultures are more prevalent. One participant explains:

**The Zydeco music [was influenced by] so much of the R&B and the hip-hop and the rap culture that those people that**

**would never get caught at a trailride started coming to the trailrides because they're like, Boosie might come perform because he's on this song. You know what I mean? So that culture started mixing a lot. And then I think people realized that you can have the best of both worlds. And so, I think maybe in a second or third hand way is how it affected the dress code of the trailride scene.**<sup>65</sup>

These outside cultures influence the dress on the trailrides and at dances. When Zydeco musicians began to collaborate with popular rap and R&B artists, the music at the trailrides changed and the dress practices followed suit. Likewise, cowboy culture is influencing the broader culture. Western dress has overflowed beyond its subcultural roots. Mainstream musicians, high fashion designers, and popular media are all being simultaneously influenced by cowboy culture.<sup>66</sup>

For those who did not grow up participating in trailride culture, adopting a

FIGURE 17 Louisiana cowboy dressed in a hybrid style on a trailride. Casual T-shirt and loose Nike logo gym shorts are paired with square toe cowboy boots with spurs. Photograph by Danielle Honeycutt.



mixture of traditional and modern aesthetics allows them to be part of the cowboy community on the weekends while maintaining portions of their everyday appearance. The more traditional items, such as long-sleeve button-up shirts and starched jeans, grant hybrid participants access and acceptance into the cowboy community they call home on weekends. But the modern elements of their dress keep them connected to popular external influences they engage with in their everyday lives.

## Conclusions

The Black and Creole trailride community of Louisiana possess their own unique cowboy identity and practice their own set of cowboy traditions. In this community, those members who adopt a more traditional aesthetic connect strongly with their cultural heritage and keep dress traditions static. Participants who adopt a more modern aesthetic value blending both external

culture with cowboy culture to be representative of their authentic self.

The physical locations and landscape of trailride events are significant sites for exchanging dress messages and negotiating dress practices. On the trails, dress items serve the functional purpose of protecting participants from the elements. Dance floors are safe spaces for playing with dress performance and challenging cowboy dress norms.

This research presents a timely addition to conversations about design representation and cultural authenticity within the larger fashion system. In January 2024, Louis Vuitton creative director Pharrell Williams released his third collection with the brand in a show entitled “Paris, Virginia.”<sup>67</sup> The dominating aesthetic of this collection was American Western wear which included cowboy hats, flared denim, fringed leather, turquoise jewelry, and many other fabrics and patterns synonymous with cowboy dress.<sup>68</sup> Commenting on the inspiration to the collection, Williams said:

**I felt like when you see cowboys portrayed, you see only a few versions. You never really get to see what some of the original cowboys really look like. They look like us, they look like me. They look Black, they look Native American.**<sup>69</sup>

This collection was an effort to reclaim omitted stories of cowboy dress culture. Pharrell Williams did this on a global platform. The Black and Creole Louisiana trailriders do this every weekend in their small corner of the world. Whether on the catwalk of high fashion runway or on the dusty trails of rural southwest Louisiana, clothing does make the cowboy.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

67 Laure Guilbault, “Pharrell Williams Pays Tribute to the American Western in Third Show for Louis Vuitton,” *Vogue Business*, January 17, 2024, <<https://www.voguebusiness.com/story/fashion/pharrell-williams-pays-tribute-to-the-american-western-in-third-show-for-louis-vuitton/>>.

68 Guilbault, “Pharrell Williams Pays Tribute.”

69 Guilbault, “Pharrell Williams Pays Tribute.”