One Nation Under Many Cowboy Hats

Western Hats and American Studies—A Cultural-Historical Conspectus

Stefan Rabitsch

Abstract

Commencing with the polemic that "everybody has always worn cowboy hats," this article (re)conceptualizes western hats as significant, signifying, wearable, and thus nomadic manifestations of Americanness. Their material complexity lends itself to thinking through the cultural fabric of Americanness, which, depending on the vantage point, oscillates between dominant and arguably homogeneous permutations of predominately white Americanness, and the checkered, multicultural "felt" that is the American experience at large, and that of the American West in particular.

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Stefan Rabitsch

> Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of things.
>
> Epictetus, *Enchiridion* (c.125 CE)

> The feel for the cowboy is everywhere; the symbol of the cowboy is just as pervasive.
>
> Joe B. Frantz, "Cowboy Philosophy" (1967)

> Every cowboy has to have a cowboy hat.
>
> Tulsa Hughes, *Cowboy & Indiana* (2018)

In an ad released on their Instagram channel, hat shaper Ryan McBride of The Best Hat Store in Fort Worth, Texas, proclaims that "the cowboy hat is the most recognizable piece of apparel on planet Earth."[1] The polemics and their attendant American exceptionalism aside, in singling out the western hat—an industry-specific term—and attributing such singular significance to it, he has pointed to something rather tangible that cannot easily be reduced to this headwear's particular shape, or as a hatter would say, its *silhouette*. Even though other pieces of iconic American clothing such as T-shirts, denim jeans, or pantyhose are success stories of American ingenuity, entrepreneurship, and soft cultural power, their global dissemination and mass market ubiquity have arguably diluted any immediate associations with American culture that consumers might have had in the past. Western hats, however, have retained a higher degree of recognizability as material products of the American experience. If the "feel" for the cowboy as a symbol is indeed everywhere, as Joe Frantz has diagnosed, then a cowboy's lid is the most conspicuous component in their repertoire of accoutrements. Consequently, like the lead character in *Cowboy & Indiana* (2018) puts it so succinctly, every cowboy *needs* a hat.

To be sure, western hats are inextricably entangled with the history of a quintessentially American space—the Trans-Mississippi West—and the livestock raising and horsemanship economies it has spawned. As a piece of apparel, they are intimately tied to the bodies that wear them in these contexts (and beyond). In the same vein, they have covered the heads of many a character that populate the mythos of the American West, which continues to carry considerable cultural capital within as well as outside the United States. In short, western hats are pieces of wearable Americanness that engender questions fundamental to American studies as a discipline—What and who do we mean by America? What do we mean by American studies? Deceivingly simple in their materiality, iconicity, and the associations attributed to them, western hats belie a complex cultural history that lends itself well to the practice of a holistic brand of American studies in the twenty-first century.

A small corpus of examples will gesture toward the outlines of western hats' cultural complexity and significance. Grandson of Jewish immigrants and senior advisor to former US President Trump, Stephen Miller posed for his Santa Monica High School yearbook entry in a big black felt cowboy hat. A line by "cowboy president" Theodore Roosevelt serves as the picture's caption—"There is room here for only 100 percent Americanism, only for those who are Americans and nothing else."[2] Of course, he was not the first aspiring politician to wear a cowboy hat as a jingoistic symbol for signifying who a real American is, and who isn't; Lyndon B. Johnson, Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush, to name but a few, all touted their western hats on purpose and with panache. Changing his mind at the last minute, President-elect Bush would have almost worn his cowboy hat at his first inauguration.[3] They all deployed a particular permutation of the American cowboy—a heteronormative, (hyper)masculine, white male who engages in and perpetuates a process of "regeneration through violence"[4]—which is one-dimensional, indeed simplistic. Even though it is partially rooted in historical realities, this type is largely the product of privileged imaginaries and excessive (re)mediation, which have left a latent impact on both historical and contemporary bodies. While these permutations of the cowboy are both entangled with and constituent of privileged, embodied performances of whiteness, they are hardly representative of the diversity found underneath the brims of western hats.

If anything, in his path-breaking work on Native American histories and cultures, historian Peter Iverson has shown that indigenous people have been cowboys, too.[5] For example, his work on the Native American rodeo circuit is garnished with photographs (historical and contemporary) that show native peoples dressed in western wear, engaging in "stereotypical" cowboy activities.[6] Rooted in anthropology and ethnohistory, Iverson has meticulously charted how those who were Othered have appropriated and continue to participate in the practices of the settler colonial oppressor in an effort to reconfigure them into means for meeting the "dilemma

of survival."[7] Specifically, "over time some items brought in from the outside may become 'traditional,'" he has argued, "but it does not matter from whence they came. What matters is how the people perceive and define them."[8] For participants in livestock raising and horsemanship economies, this includes essential accoutrements such as western hats. Even though there are not many Native Americans in the Professional Bull Riders (PBR), one of the two top roughstock circuits in the country, six of the top thirty bull riders are of indigenous descent; for example, Keyshawn Whitehorse (Diné) was named PBR Rookie of the Year in 2018.[9] The goal here is not to supplant one embodied and performed image—regardless of how distorted, inadequate, and erroneous it is—with another, but rather to practice a multiscopic way of seeing, reading, and engaging with the multicultural realities that have been a throughline in the American experience, especially out west.[10]

A similar additive impetus informs the *Eight Seconds* art project of Portland-based photographer, designer, and documentarian Ivan B. McClellan. In 2015, he entered the world of African American rodeos by accident and he has been using his camera's lens to capture and document a little-known (by the mainstream) facet of the American West ever since. African American rodeos and trail riding have their roots in the early years of roughstock sports at the turn of the twentieth century with champion athletes such as Bill Pickett having left a vibrant legacy. Recalling his first all-black rodeo in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, McClellan has emphasized that "everybody there was black, you know, there were people doing the cupid shuffle in the dirt with their boots; there were old men with perfectly starched white shirts and crisp Stetsons and pinky rings."[11] The photographs coming out of that and other rodeos have since been featured by notable western wear brands such as Wrangler, Ariat, Boot Barn, and Stetson. About the latter, he has noted that "this sort of American icon really resonates with a lot of different folks . . . and saying like hey there's more to this story than what you think and this culture belongs to a lot of people, you know."[12] Each of these instances, where we see a person of color wearing a western hat, engaging in cultural practices that have been primarily associated with white Anglo ranching culture and horsemanship, adumbrates three simple albeit far-reaching observations regarding western hats that, in turn, make them a potent object of inquiry from the vantage point of American studies.

The tautology notwithstanding, western hats have always been *i)* worn by everybody regardless of ethnicity, gender, class, or age. Since they usually go where their wearers go, western hats are material objects whose embodied mobility *ii)* calls into question a wide range of boundaries (geographic, regional, national, social, etc.). In other words, western hats are at once tangible in their materiality and yet liminal in their spatio-temporal mobility, which is wedded to affective, body-based practices. Going beyond the fibred materiality of the objects themselves, their embod-

ied mobility also extends to representational forms. Western hats have gained their potent symbolism and transnational recognizability not only on account of their wearable materiality, but also their intermedial migrations from the printed page to the digital worlds of video games; indeed, they are intermedial monads (Illustration 1). Trying to ascertain the etymological origins of the expression—"a ten gallon hat"—Peter Tamony has offered the following pleonasm: "One of the apt and incontrovertible definitions of a human being is 'one who wears a hat.'"[13] In other words, a western hat is *iii)* a visible and obvious marker of identity. In the same vein, fashion historian Ann Saunders has observed that "when you meet people, you look them in the face and your first most immediate impressions about them are received from the head and from anything that your acquaintance, new or old, may have chosen, or needed, to put upon it."[14]

Illustration 1: Donning video game hats.
Screenshot from *Red Dead Redemption 2*. *Red Dead Redemption 2* © Rockstar Games, 2018.

With their material complexity serving as a conceptual fabric, western hats and the bodies that wear them become sites of interdisciplinary, indeed intersectional, inquiry that calls for a holistic practice of American studies. A broad church since its inception, American studies has welcomed a decidedly interdisciplinary congregation which is at least in part wedded to the idea of America as an "unfinished country"[15]—a seemingly never-ending "experiment."[16] Certain strands of the discipline have given us solid toolboxes to work with powerful cultural-historical narratives that continue to have significant currency.[17] While these discursive formations have sustained domi-

nant power hierarchies, and are thus complicit in their systemic inequities, they are also key sites for critical inquiry with a view to addressing what President Kennedy repeatedly called the nation's "unfinished business."[18] The collateral effects of what has since become known as the "culture wars" of the 1990s, which continue to fuel a socio-cultural-political pendulum that swings back and forth ferociously,[19] have also trickled down into the discipline. There, they arguably have led to an increasing rejection of the historical albeit still useful bedrock of American studies in favor of more popular paradigms such as affect studies, cognitive narratology, or vulnerability studies.[20] This is not to suggest that these newer methodologies are unimportant—indeed, far from it—but some of their proponents reject and denounce earlier paradigms as problematic, outdated, and no longer pertinent; such a position promotes hyper-specialization and compartmentalization, which runs the risk of isolating an otherwise receptive discipline. American studies would do well to remember that it can ill-afford a methodological tug-of-war where it is either the one or the other in times where a rise in ahistorical thinking and a general lack of historiographic as well as media literacy have produced what is often referred to as the post-truth turn. Consequently, seemingly ordinary material objects such as western hats call forth the full interdisciplinary gamut of American studies, as their material specificity as objects requires not only engagement with their material history and their narrativized symbolism but also their affectual entanglements with the bodies that wear them and the (re)mediated representations thereof.

Locating and Defining a Distinctively American Cultural Object

Western hats have a long and varied history, ranging from their precursors in the colonial cattle economies of New Spain and their subsequent intercultural migration to US–Spanish/Mexican borderlands to them becoming practical items of everyday apparel in the livestock raising and horsemanship economies of the Trans-Mississippi West, and their global dissemination as a symbol of Americanness in the wake of American popular culture.

In order to tell the cultural history of one of the most iconic pieces of American clothing, the interdisciplinary capital of American studies becomes the handmaiden to the multidisciplinary fabric of fashion studies—dress history in particular—and vice-versa, while simultaneously leveraging the interventionist thrust of critical whiteness studies aimed at the West and recent scholarship in eco- as well as ethnohistory.[21] Emerging from the material(ity) turn, fashion studies have informed and augmented the cultural studies paradigm since the late 1990s. The study of fashion, or *dress*, which has become the more widely accepted term, straddles the dis-

courses of ethnicity, gender, age, and class as well as a Barthesian system of semiotics that conceptualizes dress as a system of historically mobile meanings.[22] Next to the object of dress itself, the study of any piece of apparel must take into consideration the bodies that wear them within contexts of culturally circumscribed practices and performances, which are situated in historically identifiable settings.[23] The versatile methodological toolbox of dress history is particularly well-suited from an American studies perspective "because of the multi-faceted 'levels' at which clothing functions within any society and any culture."[24] Starting with artifact-based approaches, which draw on museology, conservation, and curatorial expertise, dress history affords integrated methods for the study of clothing as social and economic products in literary sources, visual media, and oral histories, among others. Surprisingly, dress history has yet to fashion a comprehensive history of a piece of headwear that commands a high degree of cultural specificity and transnational recognizability such as western hats.

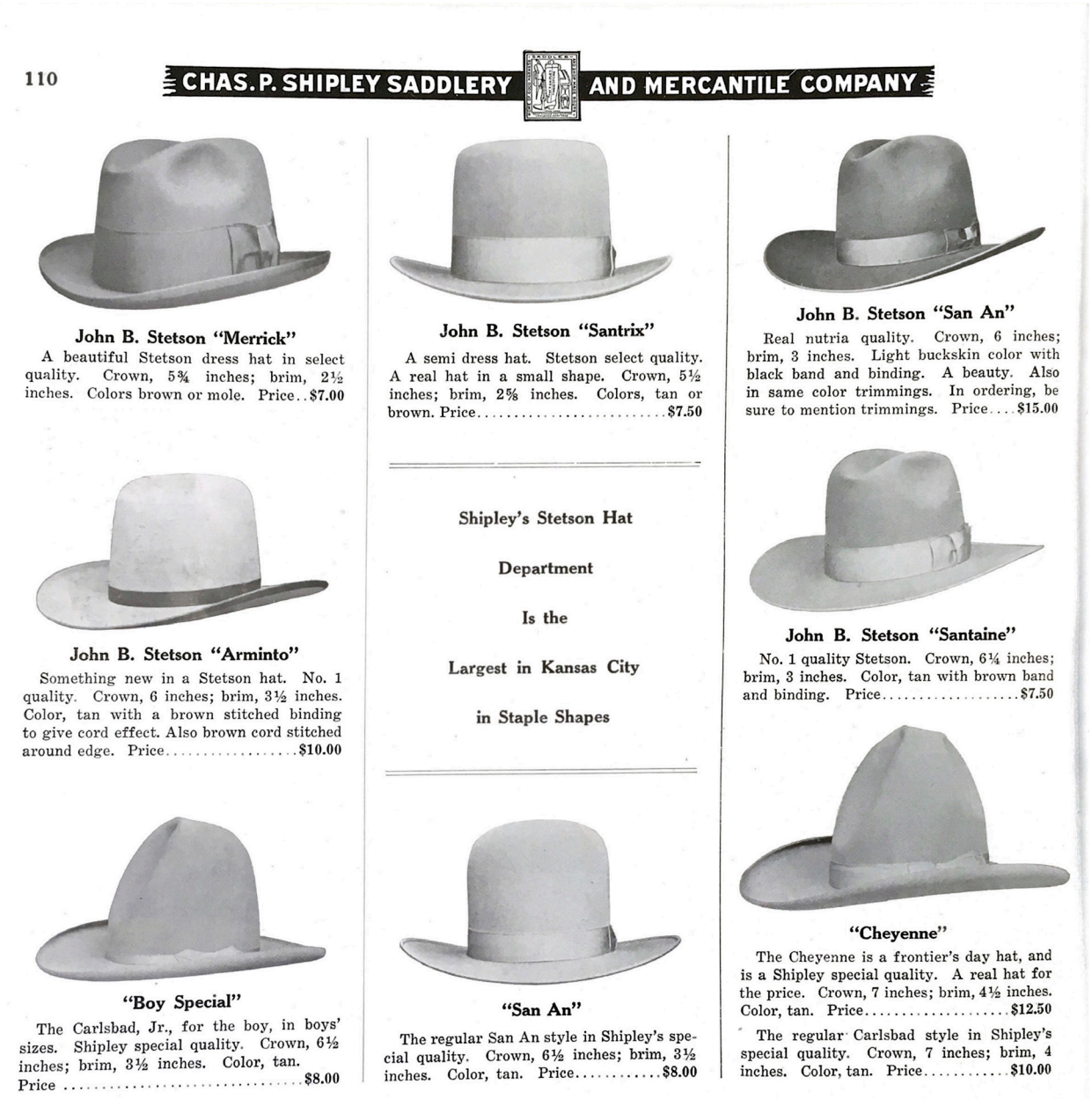
If encountered in scholarship at all, western hats have been identified as a paradigmatic item in the western genre's iconography.[25] What is more surprising is that even in comprehensive reference works dedicated to American fashion history, such as the multi-volume Greenwood *Clothing Through American History* (2008–2013) series, and in the leading journals in the field, *Dress* and *Fashion Theory*, western hats are afforded only cursory glances.[26] Their origins as practical everyday fashion items are often reductively mapped as a part of the pioneering experience. This eschews, for example, their economic significance as part of a large industry whose traditional centers were located in the Mid-Atlantic states in the late nineteenth century before moving to the Midwest, and later the Southwest in the mid-twentieth century (to say nothing of the potent ideological work they have been doing as wearable signifiers of Americanness). Such an oversight is partially rooted in a number of intersecting factors that have undergirded dress history such as the study of dress having "taken place outside the boundaries of 'academic respectability,'" a long-standing focus on women's *haute couture*, and a latent gendered imbalance that undercuts the study of menswear which, as Lou Taylor has asserted, is "all too obviously true."[27] Other pertinent publications fall into one of two categories: *i)* coffee table books dedicated to western dress and paraphernalia,[28] and *ii)* opulently illustrated catalogs such as Byron Price's authoritative *Fine Art of the West* (2004), which tackles hats only as an afterthought since leather artifacts (saddles, boots, etc.) and metalwork (bits, spurs, etc.) receive the bulk of his attention.[29] Consequently, American studies is ideally positioned to define and tell the story of a quintessentially American specimen of a cranial cover—*petasus americanus*.[30]

Colloquially often referred to as "cowboy hats," western hats are significant, signifying, wearable, and thus nomadic cultural silhouettes. Entangled with human bod-

ies, they are carriers of multilayered cultural meanings that engender instant recognition not only in the United States, but also in transnational, global contexts. Their cultural history calls for a synoptic framework whose scaffold acknowledges how we encounter their materiality.

Western hats engage most human senses. While "sight dominates many aspects of dress," dress and body studies pioneer Joanne B. Eicher has asserted, "the other four senses may also come into play …[,] making up the dressed person and presenting a sensory *gestalt*."[31] First and foremost, they are readily recognized, identified, and *seen* as a distinctive shape. Usually, they have a wide(r) brim, a relatively high crown, and they are decorated with hatbands and various small accessories (e.g., feathers, pins, and conchos). A host of creases and dents, each bearing one or more distinctive names (e.g., Cattleman, Ranch, Brick, Gus, and Horseshoe), add individual character to the crown of the hat. The same applies to the flange of the brim which may be pointed, round, or square in the front, and flat, low, or tacoed-up on the sides.[32] Taken together, these features serve in part to identify the wearer with a particular community (e.g., professional, local, or regional). Historically, particular hat styles made it possible to identify their wearers according to the ranch outfit they were riding for, or to discern whether someone came from a particular county. For example, Andy Wilkinson, artist-in-residence at Texas Tech University's Southwest Collection, recalled that until approximately the 1980s, someone who traveled the southwest wearing a steeply tacoed-up black felt hat was most likely hailing from northern New Mexico.[33] In a trade where industry norms have been largely absent, visual sources are of paramount importance for mapping the broader developments and changes in hat styles over the decades. For example, trade literature and mail order catalogues of national retailers (e.g., Sears and Roebuck and Montgomery Ward) and especially those of smaller, regional retailers who catered specifically to ranching and farming communities (e.g., Hamley & Co., Shipley Saddlery and Mercantile, and the Denver Drygoods Company) make visible the evolution of western hats (Illustration 2).

Providing both insulation and shade in diverse environments, the materials used to manufacture western hats can also be *felt*. While felt hats are mostly made out of the downy underfur of rabbits, hares, and beavers,[34] different types of straws (e.g., sisal, toquilla, and shantung) are used for their straw counterparts. Hats' embodied mobility is prefigured in the material streams that govern their raw materials. Historically, hat-making has been a transatlantic, indeed global trade since the early colonial era. Today, beaver is still harvested in North America while the lion's share of rabbit and hare fur is imported from Belgium, Portugal, and Spain, where it is a by-product of the pet food industry. Central and South America—with Ecuador being the central node—remains the primary source for straw hat bodies. John Milano, who founded Milano hats in 1982 after having worked with Harry Rolnick, founder of Resistol, has



110 CHAS. P. SHIPLEY SADDLERY AND MERCANTILE COMPANY

John B. Stetson "Merrick"
A beautiful Stetson dress hat in select quality. Crown, 5¾ inches; brim, 2½ inches. Colors brown or mole. Price..$7.00

John B. Stetson "Santrix"
A semi dress hat. Stetson select quality. A real hat in a small shape. Crown, 5½ inches; brim, 2⅝ inches. Colors, tan or brown. Price.....$7.50

John B. Stetson "San An"
Real nutria quality. Crown, 6 inches; brim, 3 inches. Light buckskin color with black band and binding. A beauty. Also in same color trimmings. In ordering, be sure to mention trimmings. Price....$15.00

John B. Stetson "Arminto"
Something new in a Stetson hat. No. 1 quality. Crown, 6 inches; brim, 3½ inches. Color, tan with a brown stitched binding to give cord effect. Also brown cord stitched around edge. Price.....$10.00

Shipley's Stetson Hat
Department
Is the
Largest in Kansas City
in Staple Shapes

John B. Stetson "Santaine"
No. 1 quality Stetson. Crown, 6¼ inches; brim, 3 inches. Color, tan with brown band and binding. Price.....$7.50

"Boy Special"
The Carlsbad, Jr., for the boy, in boys' sizes. Shipley special quality. Crown, 6½ inches; brim, 3½ inches. Color, tan. Price $8.00

"San An"
The regular San An style in Shipley's special quality. Crown, 6½ inches; brim, 3½ inches. Color, tan. Price.....$8.00

"Cheyenne"
The Cheyenne is a frontier's day hat, and is a Shipley special quality. A real hat for the price. Crown, 7 inches; brim, 4½ inches. Color, tan. Price.....$12.50

The regular Carlsbad style in Shipley's special quality. Crown, 7 inches; brim, 4 inches. Color, tan. Price.....$10.00

Illustration 2: Perusing historical hat styles.
Scan from *Shipley Catalog No. 19* (Kansas City: Chas P. Shipley Saddlery and Mercantile Co., 1923), 10.

said that "making a hat is a black-magic business,"[35] which is echoed by contemporary western hat makers who view their trade as equal parts science and art. The production of both straw and felt hats is a time capsule; since the collapse of the men's hat market in the 1960s, which all but halted the development and manufacture of hat-making equipment on an industrial scale, the machinery used in hat-making is anywhere between sixty and one hundred years old.

Upon very close encounter, it becomes apparent that hats are also odorous; their *smell* intimately ties them to the body of the wearer and thus the different "practi-

cal" contexts in which they are worn along with socially circumscribed rules that constitute hat etiquette. What Ann Buck has termed "dress in action,"[36] Lou Taylor has contended is key for arriving at a "cultural understanding of the past [and present] through its coded signaling of gender, culture, politics and social stratum."[37] Even a casual internet search will yield a host of different (sometimes contradictory) pointers and explanations as to when and where it is acceptable to wear a hat, and when it is not. Whether an essential protective item in actual ranch life, a largely ornamental item in cultural traditions growing out of livestock raising and horsemanship economies (e.g., rodeos and horse reining), or an ideologically charged symbol for political practices, western hats can be encountered in diverse places and contexts. In a vein similar to those US presidents who are known for their "cowboy diplomacy" (e.g., Lyndon B. Johnson and Ronald Reagan), cultural diplomacy events such as the Olympics have featured western hats as part of the official attire of Team USA more than once both during and after the Cold War.[38]

The embodied mobility of western hats goes to show that their cultural history and thus their meaning(s) are as complex as the country they are usually conflated with. Drawing on actor-network theory, John Storey has posited—without denying objects their ontological materiality—that objects are by definition "mute."[39] In other words, material objects do not emanate any meaning in their own right, but rather meaning is ascribed to them. Storey has called this process the "entanglement of signification and materiality enabled by a social practice."[40] However, the way how a material object is made meaningful may be either enabled and/or constrained by its materiality. "The physicality of clothes," Lou Taylor has emphasized, translates into "central considerations within the process of design, manufacture and consumption."[41] Consequently, the materiality of western hats lends itself to thinking through paradigmatic tenets for understanding American culture at large.

Felting Fibrous Entanglements between American Studies and Dress Studies

The onus for this lamentable lack of a synoptic telling of western hats' rich history might be on fashion studies since they are, as Naomi Tarrant has opined, "contorted to fit some theory without a basic understanding of the properties of cloth and the structure of clothes."[42] Therein lies the potential for interweaving, or rather interfelting, a holistic practice of American studies with the integrated methods of dress history in order to fill not only glaring gaps in western studies and fashion studies, respectively, but also to enhance what might be considered a "local(ized)" subject area with transnational appreciation and understanding. In other words, rather than fitting a piece of clothing (in)to one or more theoretical straitjackets, it makes more

sense to fit a particular framework to the piece of clothing in question by employing its materiality as a "custom-tailored" analogical starting point.

Both western hats as a silhouette and the raw materials they are made of become a fulcrum for how we define American culture at large—and the multicultural fabric of the American West in particular—and consequently articulate those questions through the hats' materiality. This boils down to looking at concepts that we find in American studies 101 and thinking them through—at different levels of magnification—the materiality of western hats. Western hats cast a deceivingly simple and instantly recognizable silhouette. Most people are able to conjure up a mental image of their general characteristics. They usually have a wide(r), flanged brim and a relatively high, creased crown; they mostly come in colors like black, brown, white, and what hatters call "silver belly" (a mix of gray and cream). These characteristics translate into a generic approximation of a seemingly singular materiality; that is, an archetype (for the lack of a more appropriate term). It is a rather homogenized image that obscures the great variety concealed by the generic image of western hats. Of course, they have always come in many different shapes and sizes; and while the color palette was limited at the turn of the twentieth century, they come in virtually every color by now. There is a correlative to these two levels of magnification in the properties of the raw materials that these hats are made of and their production processes. In the interest of scope, fur felt will serve as the primary example.

Among the oldest fabrics known to humanity, felt is a fascinating material; it is the smoothest, strongest, and lightest non-woven fabric. Harvested from the downy underfur of certain animals, fur fibers are equipped with microscopically small barbs on their tips that start interlocking with other barbs in every direction as soon as they are mixed together; this is a result of both the "*directional fiber effect*" and the fibers' "*crimp*."[43] In successive stages, they are then repeatedly put into hot water and pounded, which causes the fibers to interconnect ever tighter as the hat body shrinks. This is how the fur cone, which forms the basis for every hat body, shrinks to approximately one third of its initial size. In more than thirty steps, the hat body is then blocked and flanged; a combination of steam, heat, and pressure is used in the process. The body is also repeatedly sanded—or "pounced," as hatters would say—until its surface is consistently smooth.[44] However, if one were to place the finished hat under a microscope, the individual fur fibers would become visible again.

The fibred materiality of western hats lends itself to reappraising claims to American exceptionalism and imagined homogeneity as well as American multiculturalism and cultural relativism through a fresh, object-specific lens. In the terms found in American studies textbooks, the generic shape of western hats—and the smoothness and uniformity of the finished felt—is compatible with the image of America

as a melting pot and its attendant assimilationist discourses. Conversely, the wide variety of western hats and the fibered materiality of felt correlates with the concept of America as a multicultural, polyvocal mosaic.[45] Two narratives, each of which has served as origin story of cowboy hats—one more popular than the other—illustrate the interfelted approach to American studies. They demonstrate that as soon as the privileged and/or dominant meanings of objects, which are often narrativized, are no longer taken for granted, the legitimacy of their power becomes vulnerable and then usually also contested.

The popular version of the cowboy hat's origin goes as follows: prior to the American Civil War, there was no cowboy hat per se; along comes John Batterson Stetson and invents it in 1865. The rest is (popular) history.[46] A native of New Jersey, Stetson had learned the hat-making trade from his father. In pursuit of frontier rejuvenation, he traveled out West to recuperate from tuberculosis in 1860. While mining for gold in Colorado, he turned a need for warm, water-repellant clothing into a business idea for making and selling blankets and wide-brimmed hats. Returning to the East a prospector-turned-entrepreneur, he took out a modest loan and began building hats with two employees.[47] He then went beyond the regional business models of his local competitors. Operating out of Philadelphia, he tapped into the great technological marvels of the age—the rail road and the telegraph—and began to sell his products and build his brand nation-wide. In 1889, the Stetson won "best hat" at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, bringing what was considered a uniquely American style to the attention of the world. For advertisements, the brand relied on celebrities who promoted the Western mythos, such as Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley, Calamity Jane, and Will Rogers. By 1900, Stetson owned the largest hat factory in the world. In the vein of other philanthropic industrialists of the Gilded Age, Stetson founded a school, a hospital, and a building and loan society for his employees; his company also offered language and Americanization classes.[48] According to the company's own corporate history, "What began in Colorado one hundred and fifty years ago as a way for a young man to stay warm and dry, blossomed into an iconic industrial giant, a true American tale of innovation, perseverance, and adaptation."[49] The brand name is still often used synonymously with the material object, even though there are other brands and manufacturers (Stetson is like Xerox and Kleenex in this regard). More significantly though, the Stetson story is enmeshed in powerful American narratives such as the Horatio Alger mythos and the Turnerian frontier paradigm. What is more, they continue to be employed by RHE Hatco, Inc., the company that holds the license for Stetson hats. This is not to say that the Stetson story is insignificant—far from it; however, it is but one chapter in the cultural history of western hats (Illustration 3).

The origin of western hats is, however, fuzzier and more complex in that this quintessentially American piece of clothing is the product of intercultural and mate-

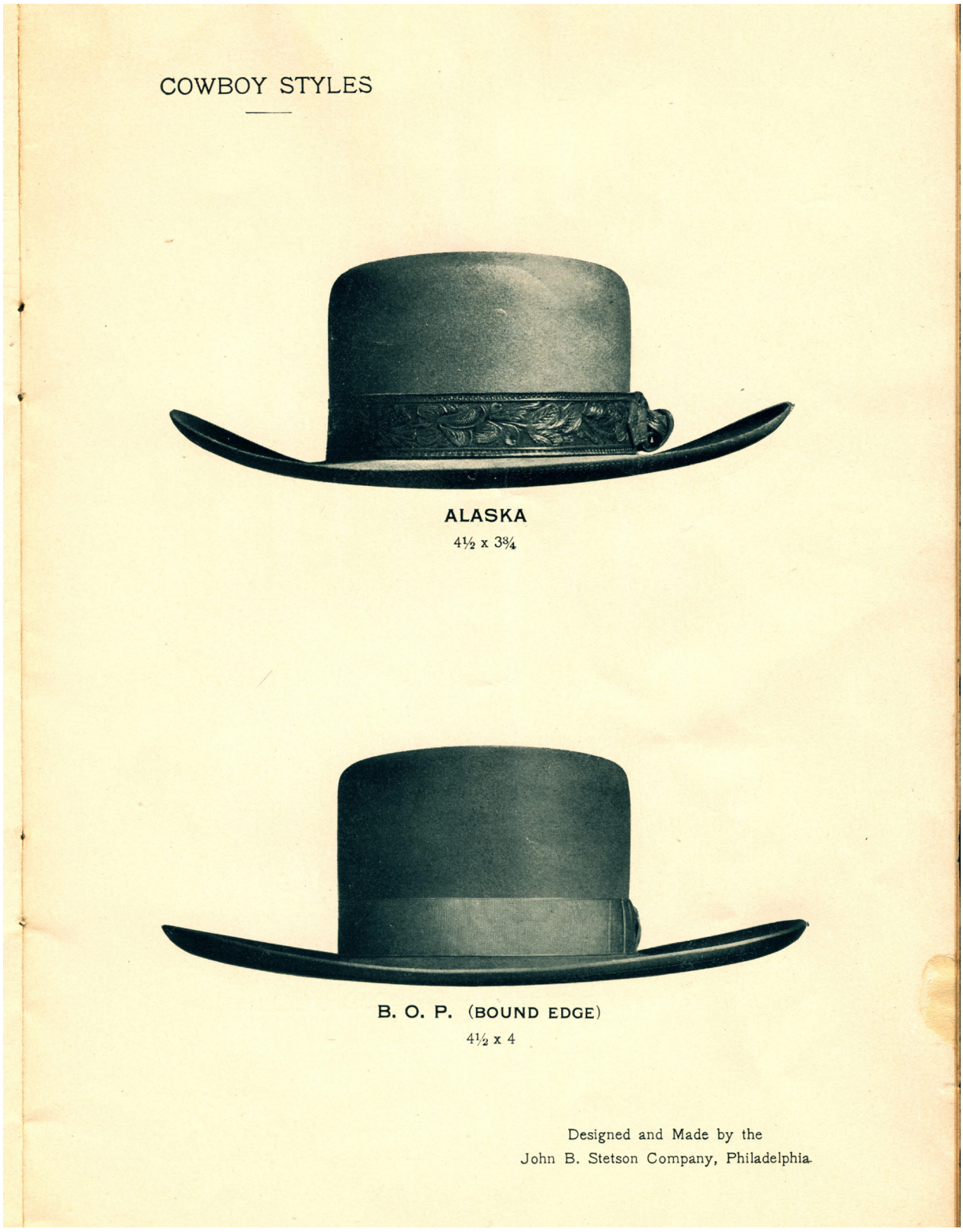


Illustration 3: One (brand) name for many hats.
Scan from *Stetson's Monthly* 1, no. 4 (1899): 11. *Stetson's Monthly* was published by the John B. Stetson Company.

rial exchanges in overlapping zones of contact and its subsequent dispersal across the western US, where it then underwent regional adaptations. Rather than being the felted offspring of John B. Stetson's ingenuity and business acumen, western hats are the product of decades of Anglo-Latino and French cultural practices rubbing against each other in what is now central and southwest Texas. It is well-documented that the lion's share of Anglo-American ranching and horsemanship culture descended from Hispanic vaquero know-how and heritage in what Fred Kniffen has identified as the "Western Cattle Complex."[50] Translated into cranial covers, the origin of the "cowboy hat" was a coming-together and mixing of different hat styles derived from different cultural communities, material flows, and economic agendas.[51] It was in that border region where the Spanish/Mexican poblanos and sombreros met with planter's hats, riverboat gambler's hats, and slouch hats that migrating Southerners brought with them. Since these styles made for practical and often necessary protective headgear, those men who worked cattle ranges in the border regions and then on the cattle drives carried those hats with them. Over time, regionally specific general hat styles developed. Within the context of livestock raising and horsemanship economies, the Trans-Mississippi West is divided into three main regions: the northern plains, the southern plains, and the intermountain region. Hats tended to have wider brims and higher crowns on the southern as opposed to the northern plains.[52] The buckaroos of the California Sierras and the Great Basin developed a very distinct style, sporting a mid-sized, flat-top (or, telescope) crown and a sizable, flat brim. In short, while western hats share basic series of characteristics and qualities, they belie a multicultural heritage and broad regional as well as, of course, individual variety.

What this small corpus of hatological examples and their attendant contexts show—if anything—then it is that western hats matter. Their cultural history is not only as complex as the materials they are usually made of, but also as complex as the country they are conflated with. A specimen of quintessentially American dress, western hats are first and foremost wedded to (hyper)masculine, white male bodies and the position they occupy in the pantheon of the nation's mythos of westward expansion. Teddy Roosevelt, the Lone Ranger, John Wayne's and Clint Eastwood's numerous movie characters, rodeo champion Lane Frost, television sheriff Walt Longmire, Kevin Costner's ranching patriarch John Dutton, and video game outlaws Arthur Morgan and John Marston readily come to mind. However, it does not take too much critical effort to lift the brim that shades these commonly held associations, which undoubtedly still exert significant power, and see that other bodies wear such hats, too—always have. For every Wyatt Earp, there is a Bass Reeves; for every rugged, cattle-driving cowboy on the silver screen, there's an Annie Oakley and an Elizabeth Collins. The world of rodeo does not begin and end with the Professional Rodeo

Cowboys Association (PCRA), since it also includes the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA), La Federación Mexicana de Rodeo (FMR), the Bill Picketts Invitational, the Cowgirls of Color, and the International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA), to name but a few. While they may appear to be merely a simple piece of practical clothing, imbued with a set of unambiguous and privileged American meanings, western hats are entangled with material, historical, and cultural complexities that make the American West and, I contend, America at large more difficult.

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