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**From *The Magnificent Seven*
to *The Hateful Eight*:
Labels, lyrics and (group) identity construction
in Western movie songs¹**

Marina Dossena

University of Bergamo

ABSTRACT

This study, part of a larger project on the role of popular culture in language change and stabilization, takes a historical sociolinguistic approach to a small, specially-compiled corpus of (mostly mid-twentieth-century) songs featuring as theme tunes in Western films, in order to study what linguistic mechanisms are at work for the construction and reinforcement of (group) identities. Such identities pertain both to the protagonists of the films themselves and – albeit indirectly – to their viewers, whose empathy and emotive participation in the fictional events is elicited. Although the strategies on the basis of which these identities are created are historically situated, the patterns they establish may be shown to have had a lasting impact on later phenomena, such as those pertaining to the tourist industry. Typically, the memorability of the songs enables potentially obsolete views to maintain a certain degree of viability even among twenty-first-century audiences: as a result, identities acquire time depth and remain recognizable across decades spanning almost a century.

Keywords: historical sociolinguistics, identity, Western songs, film soundtracks, popular culture.

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1. Introduction

Language change and stabilization are arguably indebted to texts pertaining to popular culture, such as songs and advertisements; however, it is only in relatively recent times that scholars have begun to approach language history “from below” (see Elspaß et al. 2007), and the investigation of popular culture has begun even more recently, although the interest in other aspects of everyday language, such as dialect fiction, has a longer academic tradition (see Donaldson 1986). The comments offered in this study derive from a larger project on the language of popular culture and they expand on my previous analysis of semantically-charged lexical choices in identification through labelling (see Dossena 2019).

The analysis takes a historical sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic approach to a small, specially-compiled corpus of twentieth-century songs featuring as theme tunes in Western films and TV series, in order to study what linguistic mechanisms are at work in the construction and reinforcement of (group) identities. Such identities pertain both to the (main) characters in the films themselves and – albeit indirectly – to their viewers, whose empathy and emotive participation in the fictional events is elicited. The strategies on the basis of which these identities are constructed rely on several mechanisms aiming to achieve suspension of disbelief and – consequently – elicit the kind of identification that enables vicarious experience, such as that suggested in the tourist industry concerning ‘Western trails’² and museums, in which visitors are encouraged to walk ‘in the footsteps’ of the various figures as if they were actually witnessing the past through the lens of what has in fact been carefully (re)constructed.

In that respect, special attention is paid to the earliest instances of the songs taken into consideration, on account of the lasting impact that they may have had on later texts. Especially in the mid-twentieth century, among the strategies that can be shown to contribute most effectively to identity construction there are the linguistic choices that characterize both movie titles and the songs that typically accompany the movies themselves, whether as title songs or as pieces supporting the plot. Both titles and lyrics often define the protagonists as the heroes of the narration, sometimes actually having them speak in the first person:³ this is the case, for instance, with the lyrics in Dimitri Tiomkin’s *My Rifle, My Pony and Me*, featured in *Rio Bravo* (directed

² See Boardman (2015) and Groves (2018).

³ Interestingly, this contrasts with the proverbial taciturnity of the male protagonists of Western movies discussed by Tompkins (1992: 54-58) and others.

by Howard Hawks and released in 1959), and with *The Ballad of High Noon* (also known as *Do Not Forsake Me*), featured in *High Noon* (directed by Fred Zinnemann and released in 1952).⁴ In other cases, songs elicit audience participation through tunes which may seem distant from the narrative itself, but which are designed to be memorable per se and thus contribute to the success of the movie while becoming hits in their own right; such is the case, for example, with Burt Bacharach's *Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head* in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (directed by Sam Peckinpah and released in 1969) and with Bob Dylan's *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (also directed by Sam Peckinpah and released in 1973).⁵

While posters function as explicitly promotional material (Dossena 2017), thus creating expectations while inviting the viewers' participation, soundtracks accompany and support the artefact: not only do they guide the interpretation of scenes and thus provide suggestions for the emotive response of the audience, but they also convey messages that contribute to the definition of characters and events in the plot.⁶ Moreover, memorable songs and soundtracks extend their communicative force beyond the viewing experience, as their message is recapped every time they are performed, sung, or even hummed, regardless of how long since they first appeared in their original context. In fact, they may be familiar even to audiences who have never actually watched the movies in which they were first employed, though the emotional impact they may have is obviously different from the one they may have on recipients who saw the movies in the first place.

For this reason, songs are a very useful object of study in a sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic perspective, as they fulfill various functions. Through

⁴ The latter is listed at no. 10 among the 25 "greatest film scores of all time" as ranked by the American Film Institute (www.afi.com/afis-100-years-of-film-scores/). The list also includes *The Magnificent Seven* at no. 8 and *How the West Was Won* at no. 25. All the websites mentioned in this paper were accessed in January 2022, unless other indications are given.

⁵ As a matter of fact, it is not unusual for film songs to achieve success outside the artefact: other instances among many more are *Moon River* (authored by Johnny Mercer and Henry Mancini), from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (directed by Blake Edwards and released in 1961), and *We Have All the Time in the World* (authored by Hal David and John Barry, and sung by Louis Armstrong), which is a secondary musical theme in the Bond movie *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (directed by Peter Hunt and released in 1969). Indeed, the phenomenon seems to be particularly widespread in children's film culture: see for instance all Walt Disney films, songs from which maintain their popularity among their young audiences into adulthood – further analysis of this, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

⁶ See for instance Moschini (2011) on the interaction of music, lyrics and on-screen events in TV series.

them, audiences are offered a profile of the protagonists (and often of the relationships existing among them), a summary of the plot, a representation of the environment, or a combination of all these elements. As a result, they contribute to the creation of identities for both film characters and (indirectly) for viewers. In addition, they may contain phrases that become idiomatized, such as “high noon” or “the magnificent ...”. In my study I will also attempt to assess whether these mechanisms of (group) identity construction are distinctive or are in fact consistent with the strategies deployed in other popular title tunes of the latter half of the twentieth century, such as those in James Bond movies.⁷

The essay is structured as follows. In Section 2 below I present my materials and the methodological approach I chose to employ, before discussing the role of labels in the construction of identity within popular-culture domains in Section 3; then, in Section 4, I focus on movie songs, their typical traits and their relationship with other genres. In Section 5 I present a brief outline of how (stereotypical, constructed) images of the West are powerful tools of promotional communication in the tourist industry thanks to the popularity they achieved through films and their respective songs. Finally, some concluding remarks are offered in Section 6.

2. Methods and materials

This study is based on a specially-compiled collection of lyrics from twenty films and three TV series. Where applicable, data on the films was derived from the information made available by the American Film Institute (AFI); this was occasionally supplemented with details from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb, at www.imdb.com), from which information on the TV series was sourced. The lyrics discussed here represent a selection of texts included in a much larger corpus which is still in preparation and they were deemed to be representative of the most salient topics that appear to occur in all the texts. These twenty-three tunes were selected, first and foremost, on account of their popularity, as it is their widespread circulation

⁷ Although Ian Fleming (1908-1964) authored 12 novels and two collections of short stories with this protagonist, all published between 1953 and 1966, as many as 19 films appeared between 1962 and 1999, in addition to six in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, thus stressing the popularity of both stories and characters across time, in spite of the inevitable debates associated with changes in the starring actors and plot variation (or lack thereof).

that contributed to the idiomatization of phrases and tokens of stereotypical identity. However, tunes from less well-known films were also included, in addition to award-winning ones, so as to have a fairly diversified sample of texts and assess the validity of the interpretative hypotheses across a broader range of documents.

The time span taken into consideration here goes from 1935 to 1973 – four decades that roughly coincide with the so-called ‘golden age of Western movies’, i.e. the time when their popularity was extremely high. According to data in the AFI online catalogue,⁸ as many as 5,278 Western movies were released between 1900 and 2008, with a peak of 358 in 1910 and often many more than 100 per year until 1950. The popularity of the genre began to decline in the late 1960s, although in 1976 sixteen titles appeared; since then, however, there were never more than six new films a year. As for the popularity of Western TV shows, Cawelti states that in 1959 eight of the top ten shows on television (“as measured by Nielsen ratings”) were Westerns (1999: 1), which illustrates how powerful they might be in the creation of both enduring images and identities.⁹ Although the materials under discussion have a maximum time depth of nearly a century, and may therefore seem relatively recent, it is undeniable that they have become key elements in popular culture.

The lyrics analyzed are listed in Table 1 below – see Appendix. It should be pointed out that this study does not aim to include comments on soundtracks in which music accompanies the storyline without repeating the lyrics or is indeed present without lyrics at all, such as in the case of Ennio Morricone’s pieces,¹⁰ as musicological observations are beyond the purview of this treatment. Also, it would seem a moot point to focus merely on quantitative aspects, given both the uniqueness of the pieces and their often deliberate repetitiveness within the same text, not least on account of the use of choruses. Although this issue does not seem to have been considered relevant in recent corpus-based studies of popular song lyrics – e.g., Werner (2012), Bértoli-Dutra (2014) and Brett and Pinna (2019) – any comment on the frequency of lexical items is bound to be biased by redundancy in the

⁸ See <https://catalog.afi.com/Search?searchField=Genre&searchText=western&sort-Type=sortBytitle>.

⁹ Although radio shows could also be very popular and therefore influential, at the moment they fall outside the scope of this investigation because their multimodal quality is not comparable with that of artefacts which also comprise visual elements, as those greatly enhance memorability.

¹⁰ In this respect Morricone appears to have changed both the type and function of soundtracks, in films that have actually changed the genre itself.

lyrics. Besides, for the purposes of my analysis, it is more appropriate to take a qualitative perspective, within a Critical Discourse-historical approach (see van Dijk 1995 and Wodak & Meyer 2001). Wordlists and collocations, however, have been investigated by means of AntConc (Anthony 2019), so as to identify semantic patterns and prosodies in a preliminary stage of the study. Comparisons have also been made with materials in *The Movie Corpus* and *The TV Corpus*;¹¹ however, in such corpora song lyrics are not listed separately from scripted dialogue, so again deliberate redundancy may skew data. Besides, data do not necessarily coincide also in relation to the fact that the *Movie Corpus* is based on the IMDb, and not on the catalogue of the AFI, so – for example – for 1935 *The Movie Corpus* comprises the scripts of three Western films, while the AFI indicates that no fewer than 126 Western films were released in that year. It is inevitable that different (and equally randomly selected) samples will yield different results, while still placing themselves in what appears to be the same framework.

3. How identities are constructed: Socio-onomastics in the language of entertainment

As I discussed in a recent study (Dossena 2019), labels in general, and pseudonyms and nicknames in particular, are very powerful tools in the construction of individual and group identities, and this applies to such apparently distant domains as the arts, sports, politics and history, signaling an intriguing contiguity between academic subjects and popular culture (see Ainiala & Östman 2017). For this reason, labels are often culture-bound, not least in the language of entertainment. More specifically, the film industry has contributed greatly to the memorability of labels like *The Sundance Kid* (i.e., Harry Longabaugh, 1867-1908), *Billy the Kid* (i.e., Henry McCarty, 1859-1881) or *'Buffalo' Bill Cody* (i.e., William F. Cody, 1846-1917). In addition, book and film titles can be shown to rely on the apparently paradoxical move of avoiding the use of actual names, or even pseudonyms, to indicate their protagonists. In literature, titles like *The Bride of Lammermoor* (authored by Walter Scott in 1819), *The Master of Ballantrae* (authored by Robert Louis Stevenson in 1889), *The Man Who Would Be King* (authored by Rudyard Kipling in 1888), or *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (authored by David Herbert Lawrence and first published privately in 1928) refer to a protagonist that is identified by means of a phrase meant to

¹¹ See www.english-corpora.org/movies/ and www.english-corpora.org/tv/ respectively.

elicit curiosity through its simultaneous specificity and vagueness: although no proper name is given, the identification is unambiguous.¹² Indeed, the replacement of names with generally qualifying labels seems to have been a recurrent strategy throughout the history of Western movies, from early 'classical Westerns' to recent 'post-Westerns': see *The Virginian* (versions of which circulated in 1914, 1923, 1929 and 1946, based on a novel published with the same title in 1902), *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (directed by Sergio Leone in 1966), *The Magnificent Seven* (directed by John Sturges in 1960), *The Hateful Eight* (directed by Quentin Tarantino in 2015) and *The Revenant* (directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu also in 2015).¹³ However, plots and protagonists can be defined through various other means in the artefact – not least in how they are (re)presented in songs that punctuate the plot or even summarize it.

4. Songs in a multimedia approach to film discourse

Undoubtedly, film scores have played a crucial part in the success of films on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁴ Even when films were silent, i.e. until the late 1920s, the musical accompaniment that underscored scenes and gestures contributed to the elicitation of the audience's emotive response. With the advent of sound, the phenomenon became even more remarkable, with composers whose popularity is mostly due to film scores and actors-singers who became household names thanks also to their records. Among such figures there are Bob Nolan (1908-1980), who featured in as many as 90 films between 1935 and 1948, contributing more than 500 tunes either as a soloist or together with his group, the 'Sons of the Pioneers',¹⁵ and Gene Autry

¹² The details provided here about literary works and their dates of publication are of course available in all standard histories of English literature and in good encyclopaedias.

¹³ Among Westerns, an award-winning film in which a proper name is used in the title (thus in a way similar to what is found in the abbreviated titles of literary works like *Moll Flanders* and *David Copperfield*, authored respectively by Daniel Defoe in 1722 and Charles Dickens in 1849-50) appears to be *Dances with Wolves*, starring and directed by Kevin Costner, and released in 1990. As the name is the English translation of a Lakota one, this points to the protagonist's adoptive cultural affiliation.

¹⁴ For recent discussions of film music more in general see Neumeyer (2013).

¹⁵ The site with most information and lyrics was at www.bobnolan-sop.net/index.htm (available until December 2019); however, biographical information is available in various other 'hall of fame' sites, e.g. those of the Manitoba, Nashville, and Canadian Songwriters: see www.manitobacma.com/viewpage.php?page_id=40&artist=71, nashvillesongwritersfoundation.com/Site/inductee?entry_id=2207, and www.cshf.ca/songwriter/bob-nolan/ respectively.

(1907-1998), who is labelled “America’s Favorite Singing Cowboy” in the official website dedicated to his figure.¹⁶

Nolan’s songs are very close to traditional country music, but they are also significant for their representation of the cowboy, a character that has become emblematic of a persistent image of the American West. A sample of Nolan’s songs shows that his representations are often idyllic and indeed seem to evoke a certain mysticism (Bindas 1986); however, they are also humorous, sometimes even to the point of caricature – compare the lyrics of *The Happy Cowboy* (1935, in the film *The Old Homestead*, directed by William Nigh and listed as ‘musical’ by AFI) and *A No-Good Son-of-a-Gun* (1938, in the film *The Call of the Rockies*, directed by Alan James); in the former, the cowboy enjoys the life of an impecunious, single man who is nonetheless entirely satisfied with his days as a singing rover; the protagonist of the latter, instead, appears to take pride in his laziness and actually admits that marriage is only for him to obtain wealth, while the chorus describes him with a good-natured euphemism:

(1)

<i>The Happy Cowboy</i>	<i>A No-Good Son-of-a-Gun</i>
Nowhere to go an’ nothin’ to do, I’m just a happy rovin’ cowboy. Let me ride that long trail down to the end Where the skies are always blue. [...]	I don’t like work and I never will – He’s a no-good son-of-a-gun I’d rather sleep and eat my fill – He’s a no-good son-of-a-gun
I ain’t got a wife to bother my life I’m a just happy rovin’ cowboy. Let me make my bed where the varmints prowl Beneath a sky of blue. [...]	So I got me a job with the cattle crew And the boss said Son I’m gonna fire you So I guess that’s just what he’ll have to do – He’s a no-good son-of-a-gun. [...]
I ain’t got a dime, I’m jes’ spendin’ my time I’m just a happy rovin’ cowboy Let me sing my song till they call me home To the land beyond the blue.	Now I’ve been tired since life begun – He’s a no-good son-of-a-gun I don’t recall any work I’ve done – He’s a no-good son-of-a-gun

¹⁶ See www.geneautry.com/home.php.

also love themes, as they address the female protagonist and ask for her continuing support of the male hero:

(2)

<i>The Ballad of High Noon</i>	<i>Gunfight at the OK Corral</i>
Do not forsake me, oh my darlin' On this, our weddin' day Do not forsake me, oh my darlin' Wait, wait along	Ok corral ok corral There the outlaw band Make their final stand Ok corral
The noon train will bring Frank Miller If I'm a man I must be brave And I must face that deadly killer Or lie a coward, a craven coward Or lie a coward in my grave	Oh my dearest one must die Lay down my gun or take the chance of losing you forever Duty calls My back's against the wall Have you no kind word to say Before I ride away away
Oh, to be torn twixt love and duty S'posin', I lose my fair-haired beauty Look at that big hand move along Nearin' high noon	Your love your love I need your love Keep the flame let it burn Until I return From the gunfight at ok corral If the lord is my friend We'll meet at the end Of the gunfight at ok corral Gunfight at ok corral
He made a vow while in state prison Vowed it would be my life or his'n I'm not afraid of death but, oh What will I do if you leave me?	All kill all kill So cold so still There they lay side by side The killers that died In the gunfight at ok corral
Do not forsake me, oh my darlin' You made that promise when we wed Do not forsake me, oh my darlin' Although you're grievin', I can't be leavin' Until I shoot Frank Miller dead	
Wait along, wait along...	

As a matter of fact, theme songs are also a characteristic of TV series and of movies that are somehow a series themselves, such as the James Bond ones. Among the latter, as many as 16 out of the 24 'official' James Bond films released between 1962 and 2015 featured songs with the same title as

the movie, which were generally sung by internationally-famous artists. Although the lyrics do not always summarize the plot, they do at least evoke some traits of the protagonists, such as *Goldfinger* (1964) or *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974), or imply references to key moments in the film, such as *Skyfall* (2012).

On the other hand, the title songs of two very popular mid-twentieth-century TV series (*Rawhide*, which ran for 8 seasons between 1959 and 1965, for a total of 217 episodes, and *Bonanza*, which ran for 14 seasons between 1959 and 1973, for a total of 431 episodes) presented their protagonists and their life, creating specific and recognizably trademark (male) identities – see the lyrics below:¹⁸

(3)

<i>Rawhide</i>	<i>Bonanza</i>
Rollin', rollin', rollin' Rawhide! Rollin', rollin', rollin' Though the streams are swollen Keep them doggies rollin' Rawhide!	We chased lady luck, 'til we finally struck Bonanza. With a gun and a rope and a hat full of hope, we planted a family tree. We got hold of a pot of gold, Bonanza.
Rain and wind and weather Hell-bent for leather Wishin' my gal was by my side.	With a horse and a saddle, and a range full of cattle, How rich can a fellow be?

¹⁸ Indeed, title songs in which the protagonist is presented can be so iconic that they are cited in other soundtracks: this is what happened with Franco Micalizzi's *Trinity*, which features in the closing credits of *Django Unchained* (directed by Quentin Tarantino and released in 2012), but is in fact the title song of the Italian B Western *Lo chiamavano Trinità*, directed by E. B. Clucher and released in 1970. In the lyrics of *Trinity*, the protagonist is never identified with a name or a nickname; instead, his identity is solely defined by his use of a Colt 45; in fact, "You may think he's a sleepy tired guy", but "he's the guy who's the talk of the town with the restless gun". Also, a typically hyperbolic definition says that "He's the top of the West, always cool, he's the best". Moreover, the main theme of *Django Unchained* is in fact the same as that of another Italian B Western, *Django*, directed by Sergio Corbucci and released in 1966; this time, however, the song, authored by Robert Mellin, Franco Migliacci (lyrics) and Luis Bacalov (music), does not define the protagonist directly, but addresses him in his perpetual loneliness. Tarantino also stresses the intertextual connection between the two films by having a scene in which the protagonists (unaware of each other's identity) discuss the name's spelling and pronunciation for a few seconds, and viewers are allowed the pleasure of recognizing the original Django, played by Franco Nero, without any further hints.

All the things I'm missin',
 Good vittles, love, and kissin',
 Are waiting at the end of my ride

Move 'em on, head 'em up
 Head 'em up, move 'em on
 Move 'em on, head 'em up
 Rawhide [...]

Keep movin', movin', movin'
 Though they're disapprovin'
 Keep them dogies movin'
 Rawhide!

Don't try to understand 'em
 Just rope, throw, and brand 'em
 Soon we'll be living high and wide.
 My hearts calculatin'
 My true love will be waitin',
 Be waitin' at the end of my ride.
 Rawhide!

On this land we put our brand,
 Cartwright is the name,
 Fortune smiled, the day we filed
 the Ponderosa claim.
 Here in the West, we're livin' the
 best Bonanza,
 If anyone fights any one of us, he's
 got to fight with me.

Hoss and Joe and Adam know every
 rock and pine,
 No one works, fights, or eats, like
 those boys of mine.
 Here we stand in the middle of
 a grand Bonanza.

With a gun and a rope and a hatful
 of hope, we planted our family tree,
 We got hold of a potful of gold,
 Bonanza.

With a houseful of friends where
 the rainbow ends,
 How rich can a fellow be? [...]

With the friendliest, fightingest,
 loving band,
 That ever set foot in the promised
 land, and we're happier than them
 all.

That's why we call it Bonanza...
 Bonanza... Bonanza...

Predictably, the emphatic and self-glorifying tone of both TV series and songs, with their idyllic representation of a heroic world, whether in military environments or in homesteading ones, brought about parodic reinterpretations. Already in 1965-67 there were two seasons (for a total of 65 episodes) of the TV series *F Troop*, whose title song, sung by a male choir in suitably baritone voices, opens with what sounds like a traditional

heroic incipit, “The end of the Civil War was near”, then summarizes the background story of the anti-hero and the kind of context in which the protagonists hardly reflect the Native – Euro-American antithesis so often found in films, comic books, dime novels and even literature (see, among others, Rosso 2016):

- (4) The end of the Civil War was near
 When quite accidentally,
 A hero who sneezed abruptly seized
 Retreat and reversed it to victory.

His medal of honor pleased and thrilled
 his proud little family group.
 While pinning it on some blood was spilled
 And so it was planned he’d command F Troop.

Where Indian fights are colorful sights
 and nobody takes a lickin’
 Where pale face and redskin
 Both turn chicken.

When drilling and fighting get them down,
 They know their morale can’t droop.
 As long as they all relax in town
 Before they resume with a bang and a boom F Troop.

In the second half of the twentieth century, also in films parodies began to appear, from *West and Soda* (1965, an Italian animation movie directed by Bruno Bozzetto) to *Blazing Saddles* (directed by Mel Brooks and released in 1974), down to the recent *A Million Ways to Die in the West* (directed by Seth MacFarlane and released in 2014). More importantly, films in which Native Americans were represented more sympathetically became more numerous as well as more militant – see for instance two films both released in 1970: *Soldier Blue*, directed by Ralph Nelson, and *Little Big Man*, directed by Arthur Penn. Even so, certain images continued to be clichés well into the twenty-first century, to the point that rugged cowboys are shown herding cats in a well-known commercial that was first presented in 2000, and the same linguistic features that are presented in the script were found in Bob Nolan’s lyrics several decades before:

- (5) I wouldn't do nothin' else.
It ain't an easy job but when you bring a herd into town and you ain't
lost one of them, ain't a feeling like it in the world.

(EDS ad, script at <http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2005/cat-herders-herding-cats/>)

4.2 Songs as echoes of other genres and discourse types

When Western movie songs are investigated in relation to other genres pertaining to popular culture, such as ballads, folk tales and even Gothic stories, fascinating patterns begin to emerge. Indeed, many songs are called "The Ballad of ...", thus stressing the contiguity between them and a specific genre which is supposed to evoke an old-timey atmosphere. In such cases, the singer draws the attention of his listeners by introducing the main character of his story, as in Bob Nolan's song *Cody of the Pony Express*, featured in the 1939 film *The Thundering West* directed by Sam Nelson; after the incipit, the protagonist appears almost by magic and then hyperbolic anecdotes are recounted of his deeds, just like itinerant storytellers had done for centuries in Europe:

- (6) In every corner of this world they boast of men so bold.
From Captain Blood and Mister Mud to England's kings of old.
Why, every place I've ever been, they think their man's the best.
But listen while I introduce a bold man from the West.

A thunderbolt bust and then a big cloud of dust
And out rides Cody of the Pony Express.
Totin' the mail beside him, he knows the trail to guide him,
Cody of the Pony Express.

Now, the Injuns wait by the canyon's gate to take Bill by surprise
But they'll never beat the mustang feet of the fastest horse alive.

So, over the rim he's running,
Racing the wind, he's coming,
Cody of the Pony Express!

Now I once saw Cody fight his way through a thousand Indian braves
Riding on a two-ton buffalo's back, he jumped on an Indian's grave
Then he took a half hitch on the buffalo's tail and swung him 'round
and 'round
Says, "Step up close, you red galoots, I'll mo-o-o-o-w you down!"

In other cases, the lyrics evoke contemplative atmospheres at sunset, when the landscape takes on a dreamy quality in which even a rifle can be a cherished companion, as in *My Rifle, My Pony and Me*, in *Rio Bravo* (directed by Howard Hawks and released in 1959):

(7) The sun is sinking in the west
The cattle go down to the stream
The redwing settles in the nest
It's time for a cowboy to dream

Purple light in the canyons
That's where I long to be
With my three good companions
Just my rifle, pony and me

The relationship with popular culture is equally seen in the echoes of folk tales and indeed of Gothic stories that are found in songs that evoke events in the distant past, mythical/ metaphorical places, such as the 'river of no return' (discussed below), and ghosts. One of the most famous songs to have appeared in a Western movie, Bob Dylan's *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* (see Section 1 above), strikingly includes the same address to a female (motherly) figure by a dying man as in the anonymous traditional ballad *Lord Randal* (see Child 1882-98, I: 151-166):¹⁹

(8)

<i>Knockin' on Heaven's Door</i>	<i>Lord Randal</i>
Mama, take this badge off of me I can't use it anymore It's gettin' dark, too dark for me to see I feel like I'm knockin' on heaven's door [...]	'O where ha' you been, Lord Randal, my son? And where ha' you been, my handsome young man? 'I ha' been at the greenwood; mother, mak my bed soon, For I'm wearied wi' hunting, and fain wad lie down.

¹⁹ Previously Dylan had quoted this ballad almost verbatim in his 1962 song *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*.

Mama, put my guns in the ground	
I can't shoot them anymore	
That long black cloud is comin'	
	down
I feel like I'm knockin' on heaven's	
	door

An example of a tale set in the distant past is found in Bob Nolan's *Song of the Bandit*, in *Outlaws of the Prairie* (directed by Sam Nelson and released in 1937):

- (9) Long, long ago in old Wyoming lived a maid,
 Fair as the sweetest flower bloomin' in the glade.
 She loved a bandit bold who roamed the prairie o'er
 And every night she'd listen for his call.
 Then, far to the west, his voice came ringin',
 Ridin' a wild horse, he came singin'...
 "Hee lee o lee yip I o lee aye!" [...]

Also, *River of No Return* (sung by Marilyn Monroe in the film with the same title, directed by Otto Preminger and released in 1954) tells a story of love and loss, with the ghostly call of the lover bound to be unanswered forever:

- (10) If you listen you can hear it call. (Wailaree)
 There is a river called the river of no return
 Sometimes it's peaceful and sometimes wild and free
 Love is a traveller on the river of no return
 Swept on forever to be lost in the stormy sea. (Wailaree)

I can hear the river call (no return, no return)
 I can hear my lover call, "come to me"
 I lost my love on the river
 And forever my heart will yearn
 Gone, gone forever
 Down the river of no return
 Wailaree, wailaree...
 You never return to me

Ghostly voices can also be heard at the sites of famous battles, such as the one at the Alamo (fought between 23rd February and 6th March 1836), or where outlaws carried out their infamous activity and are now ‘ghost riders in the sky’, as another well-known mid-twentieth-century song would label them. In films, such songs are found in *The Ballad of the Alamo* (sung in the film called *The Alamo*, directed by John Wayne and released in 1960) and in *The 3.10 to Yuma* (featuring in the film with the same title directed by Delmer Daves and released in 1957):

(11)

<i>The Ballad of the Alamo</i>	<i>The 3.10 to Yuma</i>
In the southern part of Texas	There is a lonely train called the 3.10
In the town of San Antone	to Yuma
There’s a fortress all in ruins	The pounding of the wheels is more
that the weeds have overgrown	like a mournful sigh
You may look in vain for crosses	There’s a legend and there’s a rumor
and you’ll never see a-one	When you take the 3.10 to Yuma
But sometimes between the	You can see the ghosts of outlaws go
setting and the rising of the sun	ridin’ by [...]
You can hear a ghostly bugle	
As the men go marching by	
You can hear them as they answer	
To that roll call in the sky. [...]	

However, there are more than echoes of other genres when religious references are taken into consideration. It is undeniable that the West was also won on religious grounds, although literature does not seem to acknowledge that (see Tompkins 1992: 28). The numerous conversion narratives published throughout Late Modern times and indeed the grammars of Native languages that were written for or by Christian missionaries stress the importance of religion in the creation of a new cultural environment intended to replace the existing one.²⁰ Indeed, the song that features as the Finale Ultimo in the soundtrack of *How the West Was*

²⁰ On conversion narratives see, among others, Gordis (2005) and Henkel (2014); as for early descriptions of Native American languages on the part of British and French missionaries, see – most recently – Kilarski (2018).

Won,²¹ the film directed by John Ford, George Marshall, Henry Hathaway and Richard Thorpe (uncredited) and released in 1963, presents settlers as armed with “Bible, fist and gun”:

- (12) The promised land, the land of plenty rich with gold
Here came dreamers with Bible, fist and gun
Bound for land, across the plains their wagons rolled
Hell bent for leather – that’s how the West was won

This ideological approach is seen on various occasions when the creation of a shared image of that achievement is pursued. The belief that it was the USA’s ‘Manifest Destiny’ to conquer new territory²² is reflected in the instances of biblical phraseology interspersed in songs that call the West “the promised land”, such as *Bonanza*, and “the land of milk and honey”: at the beginning of the same *How the West Was Won*, the song “I Am Bound for the Promised Land” actually uses both metaphors:

- (13) The promised land I’m going, I’m going, going, going to the bountiful,
bountiful land!
Roll, wagons, roll! I am bound for the promised land, I’m bound for
the promised land

Oh who will come and go with me I am bound for the promised land
It’s a land of plenty that never fails
Where trees immortal grow,
Where rocks and hills and brooks and vales
With milk and honey flow [...]

In addition, there are echoes of the lexical and syntactic patterns of Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 in *The Green Leaves of Summer*, performed in the above-mentioned film of 1960, *The Alamo*:

²¹ The soundtrack was authored by Ken Darby (lyrics) and Alfred Newman (music), and also included adaptations of classic or traditional songs, such as *Greensleeves*, a sixteenth-century tune which became “A Home in the Meadow” and was sung by Debbie Reynolds in the section titled “The Plains”, directed by Henry Hathaway.

²² It is a belief that influenced a broad range of genres, from literature to the figurative arts, as painters and, later, photographers also contributed greatly to the creation of an idealized image of the West (see Cartosio 2016).

(14)

<i>The Green Leaves of Summer</i>	Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 ²²
A time to be reapin', a time to be sowin'.	There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for
The green leaves of Summer are callin' me home.	every event under heaven – A time to give birth and a time to die;
'Twas so good to be young then, in a season of plenty,	A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.
When the catfish were jumpin' as high as the sky.	A time to kill and a time to heal; A time to tear down and a time to
A time just for plantin', a time just for ploughin'.	build up. A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to mourn and a time to
A time to be courtin' a girl of your own.	dance. A time to throw stones and a time to
'Twas so good to be young then, to be close to the earth,	gather stones; A time to embrace and a time to shun
And to stand by your wife at the moment of birth.	embracing. A time to search and a time to give
A time to be reapin', a time to be sowin'.	up as lost; A time to keep and a time to throw
The green leaves of Summer are callin' me home.	away. A time to tear apart and a time to
'Twas so good to be young then, With the sweet smell of apples,	sew together; A time to be silent and a time to speak.
And the owl in the pine tree a-winkin' his eye.	A time to love and a time to hate; A time for war and a time for peace.
A time just for plantin', a time just for ploughin'.	
A time just for livin', a place for to die.	
'Twas so good to be young then, to be close to the earth,	
Now the green leaves of Summer are callin' me home.	

²³ This is based on the text of the *New American Standard Bible*, first published in 1960 and available at <https://biblehub.com/nasb/ecclesiastes/3.htm>. This version was chosen on account of the viability that it would have for a large part of the envisaged audiences at the time.

5. Live the dream: From the screen to the trail

There can be little doubt that many images that have first appeared on the silver screen have shaped the collective perception of 'the West'. As shown by Rosso (2008, 2010 and 2016) and Cartosio (2018), American literature and popular culture have re-invented the story of real-life characters like 'Billy the Kid' in countless dime novels, actual novels and, later, films. Indeed, the connection between the film and the tourist industries is made visible in the reference to the Autry Museum of the American West at Gene Autry's website, where visitors are invited to enjoy "world-class galleries filled with Native American art and artefacts, film memorabilia, historic firearms, paintings, and more" (www.geneautry.com/museum/). Moreover, on the same page there is also a link to another museum said to hold "an outstanding collection of memorabilia of Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Rex Allen, Tex Ritter, Jimmy Wakely, Eddie Dean, and many others who appeared in the much-loved musical Western movies of the 1930s and '40s": it is the Gene Autry, Oklahoma Museum, which the site presents as "a fan favorite".

On the homepage of the latter museum, an obviously promotional text invites visitors to a kind of virtual time travel by underlining the coalescence of experiences derived from remembering the films and visiting the museum:

The **Gene Autry Oklahoma Museum** houses the *World's Largest Collection of Vintage Cowboys in Entertainment Memorabilia* from the 1920s to present day. Of course, *Gene Autry* and the *Singing Cowboys* are prominent but we just love all cowboys (and cowgirls). Cowboys and Cowgirls from Radio to Vinyl to Tape to CDs and from Film to Television to YouTube (live or animated) and web, they're all so entertaining!

Visitors to the Museum learn about the Cowboy Way of Life, enjoy past memories while creating new ones, and discover a bit about what was Berwyn, Oklahoma, now the Town of Gene Autry.

(<https://geneautryoklamuseum.org/>, original emphasis)

Similarly, there is a specific gallery on Western performers in the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, and again in the presentation of the gallery the contribution of such performers to the 'creation' and recording of both stories and legends is acknowledged:

The Williams Companies Western Performers Gallery explores the various ways the American West has been represented in literature and film. Honoring Western popular icons who have contributed to the creating and recording the stories and legends of the West. Gallery highlights include John Wayne as both performer and collector, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans material, a multimedia review of Western culture narrated by Sam Elliott and mid-century memorabilia.

(<https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/all-galleries/the-williams-companies-western-performers-gallery/>)

In addition, the same museum regularly runs exhibitions that are meant to appeal to film audiences; among these, we may mention one that ran between November 15th 2019 and May 10th 2020, and was on *True Grit*, a film two versions of which have appeared in less than fifty years (one directed by Henry Hathaway in 1969 and starring John Wayne, the other directed by Joel Coen in 2010);²⁴ another exhibition ran between November 15th 2019 and July 5th 2020, and invited visitors to “Find your Western” through the acknowledgement that “Consumption of the West through popular media has been a mainstay of Western culture”.²⁵

However, it is not just performers who elicit interest; stories and places can be just as evocative for present-day visitors who may only have heard of them in films. For this reason, the website of the Museum of the Mountain Man in Pinedale, WY, (<https://museumofthemountainman.com/>) hosts a page in which what is supposed to be the true story underpinning the plot of the 2015 film *The Revenant* is disentangled from myth and legend.²⁶

As for the famous OK Corral, the identification of visitors to Tombstone, AZ, with film characters and stars is exactly what the homepage of the city’s site takes for granted:

A refuge for international travelers [sic] looking for the REAL America, the true Old West, here in Cochise County. Where you’ll walk on the same boardwalk as Wyatt Earp, on his way to the OK Corral shootout. Drink in the same saloons. And, if you want, ride a horse down the old trails and shoot your single-action .45 revolver at targets in the sweet-smelling sagebrush.

(<http://gotombstone.org/>)

²⁴ See <https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/exhibition/two-grits/>.

²⁵ See <https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/exhibition/find-your-western/>.

²⁶ See <http://hughglass.org/the-legend/revenant-the-movie/>.

Indeed, visitors can print out a map of Tombstone in 1882, so as to make sure they are actually walking in the footsteps of Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday (presumably humming the title song of the 1957 film starring Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas).

Although other examples could be provided, these probably outline most clearly how identity can be reinforced, when not actually constructed, through language in a broad range of media and – even more importantly – how such mechanisms are effective across time, since their validity may well span several decades.

6. Concluding remarks

As this preliminary investigation of lyrics in Western movies and TV series has shown, there are many different functions that such lyrics may have and the pragmatic success of them is due both to their memorability (indicated by their immediate recognizability even decades after they were written) and to the associations they evoke with a cherished, idealized past. Not only can such songs function as blurbs and/or as punctuation of the story: they can present a specific image of the (main) characters and of how they relate to one another, with their distinctive gender roles (for example, the male hero shoots and kills, or roves over the range, while his lady love patiently waits). They can also supplement dialogue, such as when protagonists or additional characters tell stories through ballads or evoke different atmospheres in peaceful interludes among otherwise violent scenarios; lyrics also depict landscapes and scenes, in this case referring to mental images that are often stereotypical in their recurring traits. In addition, they can appeal to shared values, typically those encoded in religious terms.

What all these functions have in common is that they elicit the viewers' emotive response and their participation and acceptance of shared identities across time and space. For this reason, they are highly valuable contributions to multimodal artefacts and – from a sociolinguistic point of view – they enhance the perception of historical stability both in language and in identities.

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APPENDIX

Corpus samples discussed in this article

TV Series

	Year	Song	TV series	Network	Lyrics	Music
1.	1959-65	Title song	<i>Rawhide</i>	CBS	Ned Washington	Dimitri Tiomkin
2.	1959-73	Title song	<i>Bonanza</i>	NBC	Ray Evans	Jay Livingston
3.	1965-67	Title song	<i>F Troop</i>	ABC	Irving Taylor	William Lava

Films

	Year	Song	Film	Director	Lyrics	Music
1.	1935	The Happy Cowboy	<i>The Old Homestead</i>	William Nigh	Bob Nolan	Bob Nolan
2.	1935	Way Out West in Texas	<i>The Sagebrush Troubadour</i>	Joseph I. Kane	Gene Autry	Gene Autry
3.	1936	Money Ain't No Use Anyhow	<i>The Old Corral</i>	Joseph I. Kane	Gene Autry	Gene Autry
4.	1937	Song of the Bandit	<i>Outlaws of the Prairie</i>	Sam Nelson	Bob Nolan	Bob Nolan
5.	1938	A No-Good Son-of-a-gun	<i>The Call of the Rockies</i>	Alan James	Bob Nolan	Bob Nolan

6.	1939	Cody of the Pony Express	<i>The Thundering West</i>	Sam Nelson	Bob Nolan	Bob Nolan
7.	1941	Back in the Saddle Again	<i>Back in the Saddle</i>	Lew Landers	Gene Autry	Gene Autry
8.	1942	Cowboy Serenade	<i>Cowboy Serenade</i>	William Morgan	Rich Hall	Rich Hall
9.	1946	You Ain't Heard Nothin' Till You Hear Him Roar	<i>Heldorado</i>	William Witney	Bob Nolan	Bob Nolan
10.	1952	The Ballad of High Noon	<i>High Noon</i>	Fred Zinneman	Ned Washington	Dimitri Tiomkin
11.	1954	Johnny Guitar	<i>Johnny Guitar</i>	Nicholas Ray	Peggy Lee	Victor Young
12.	1954	River of No Return	<i>River of No Return</i>	Otto Preminger	Ken Darby	Lionel Newman
13.	1957	3.10 to Yuma	<i>3.10 to Yuma</i>	Delmer Daves	Ned Washington	George Duning
14.	1957	Gunfight at the OK Corral	<i>Gunfight at the OK Corral</i>	John Sturges	Ned Washington	Dimitri Tiomkin
15.	1959	My Rifle, My Pony and Me	<i>Rio Bravo</i>	Howard Hawks	Paul Francis Webster	Dimitri Tiomkin
16.	1960	The Ballad of the Alamo	<i>The Alamo</i>	John Wayne	Paul Francis Webster	Dimitri Tiomkin
17.	1960	The Green Leaves of Summer	<i>The Alamo</i>	John Wayne	Paul Francis Webster	Dimitri Tiomkin
18.	1963	How the West Was Won	<i>How the West Was Won</i>	John Ford, George Marshall, Henry Hathaway and Richard Thorpe (uncredited)	Ken Darby	Alfred Newman

19.	1969	Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head	<i>Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid</i>	George Roy Hill	Hal David	Burt Bacharach
20.	1973	Knocking on Heaven's Door	<i>Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid</i>	Sam Peckinpah	Bob Dylan	Bob Dylan

Address: MARINA DOSSENA, Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Straniere,
Università degli Studi di Bergamo. Piazza Rosate 2 - 24129 Bergamo, Italy.

ORCID code: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8025-6086>