

## Facing Old Age and Searching for Regeneration in a Dying American West: Gregory Martin's *Mountain City*

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Contemporary western American literature is increasingly departing from the traditional association between the West and youth in classical frontier mythology, showing an aging, gray and often ill West, as illustrated by authors such as Cormac McCarthy, Marilynne Robinson, Wallace Stegner and Ken Haruf, to name just a few examples. This perspective also plays a powerful role in Gregory Martin's *Mountain City* (2000), an impressive memoir about a decaying Nevada mining town and its aging population. This article explores the interaction between living and aging in Martin's book. It is often a continuous dialogical process of exchange and overlap where Martin revises western mythology centered on the youth trope and deconstructs negative images of old age and disease. Martin offers a realistic portrait of a fading western way of life. However, his emphasis on the vanishing condition of traditional western stereotypes turns out to be problematic. In fact, Martin's bleak vision of the Old West and its broken promises coexists in *Mountain City* with his recognition of the pervasive quality of the archetypal western regenerative influence, as exemplified by the power of this declining community to heal the narrator's placelessness and provide him with a sense of "homeplace" and a cultural identity.

Keywords: American West; Gregory Martin; old age; place; identity; home

### Afrontando la vejez y buscando la regeneración en un Oeste norteamericano moribundo: *Mountain City*, de Gregory Martin

La literatura contemporánea del Oeste norteamericano progresivamente se ha ido alejando de la tradicional asociación entre el Oeste y la juventud en el imaginario clásico de este territorio, mostrando un Oeste en proceso de envejecimiento, gris y a menudo enfermo, tal y como puede verse en diversas obras de Cormac McCarthy, Marilynne Robinson, Wallace

Stegner o Ken Haruf, por citar sólo a algunos autores. Este punto de vista desempeña un papel fundamental en la obra de Gregory Martin, *Mountain City* (2000), un brillante relato acerca de un pueblo minero de Nevada condenado a extinguirse, con su población cada vez más envejecida. El presente artículo analiza la interacción entre el ansia vital de sus habitantes y su progresivo envejecimiento. A menudo se trata de un proceso dialógico con múltiples solapamientos en cuya representación Martin cuestiona la mitología del Oeste centrada en el tropo de la juventud y deconstruye imágenes negativas sobre la vejez y la enfermedad. Martin ofrece una visión realista de un modo de vida tradicional del Oeste en proceso de desaparición. Sin embargo, su visión pesimista sobre el viejo Oeste y sus promesas rotas coexiste en *Mountain City* con la aceptación de la pervivencia del arquetípico rol del Oeste como fuente de regeneración, tal y como queda de manifiesto a través del poder de esta comunidad en declive para poner fin al desarraigo del narrador y proporcionarle un sentimiento de afinidad con un lugar y una identidad cultural.

Palabras clave: Oeste norteamericano; no-ficción; Gregory Martin; vejez; lugar; identidad; hogar

Go West, young man, go West, and grow up with the country.  
(Horace Greeley, *New York Tribune*, 1865)

You think when you wake up in the morning yesterday don't count. But yesterday is all that does count. What else is there? Your life is made out of the days it's made out of. Nothin else.  
(Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 2005)

## 1. INTRODUCTION: LITERARY GERONTOLOGY AND THE AMERICAN WEST

From the late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first increasing attention is being paid to the treatment of old age within different cultures.<sup>1</sup> After a long period of oblivion and neglect, age and aging are now emerging topics in cultural studies, as illustrated by the recent expansion of engaging gerontological approaches through the lens of the arts and humanities. The increase in life expectancy in the industrialized world, epitomized by the so-called “greying” of the United States and most western European countries, has given rise to a growing concern with the experiences of aging and old age. Writers have started to pay more attention to aging issues and critical examinations of older age have also gained prominence in literary studies, though literary gerontology is still quite a novelty. Representations of aging and old age have been too often explored as “a motif, metaphor, or symbol of something else; love, time, creativity, memory, mortality” (Wallace 2011, 391). In fact, as recently as 1988 Kathleen Woodward was arguing that “among the categories of social division in a given culture and historical period (we may include race, gender, class and age) only age has remained invisible, not subject to analysis” (90). Similarly, five years later Anne Wyatt-Brown claimed that “aging is a missing category in current literary theory” (1993, 1). However, in the last three decades the treatment of aging in literature has come of age, as exemplified by such remarkable titles as Prisca von Bagnell and Patricia Spencer Soper's *Perceptions of Aging in Literature* (1989), Kathleen Woodward's *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (1991), Anne Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen's *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (1993), Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker's *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective* (1999), Mike Hepworth's *Stories of Ageing* (2000), Maria O'Neill and Carmen Zamorano's *The Aesthetics of Ageing* (2002), Maria Vidal-Grau and Núria Casado-Gual's *The Polemics of Ageing as Reflected in Literatures in English* (2004), Brian J. Worsfold's *The Art of Ageing: Textualising the Phases of Life* (2005) and *Acculturating Age: Approaches to Cultural Gerontology* (2011),<sup>2</sup> Heike Hartung

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<sup>2</sup> The last four volumes mentioned are compilations of essays edited by members of the research group Dedal-Lit (Department of English and Linguistics, University of Lleida), a group that has played a key role in the increasing visibility of literary gerontology in Europe.

and Roberta Maierhofer's *Narratives of Life: Mediating Age* (2009), and Margaret Morganroth Gullette's *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (2011), to name just a few of the relevant titles on literature as a gerontological resource. The creation of such associations as the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS), founded in 2011, or its American version, the North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS), established two years later, also illustrates the increasing academic interest in the study of cultural aging, including literary representations of aging and old age.

Cultural obsession with youth has often eclipsed the issues of aging and old age in many western countries, particularly in the United States, a nation that historically has vindicated youth as one of its main social and cultural identity traits. As Neil Campbell has suggested, America has traditionally viewed itself as “a mythic nation of youthfulness, formed out of the rejection of the ‘parent’ culture and creating itself anew” (2004, 2). For Campbell, America's fascination with youth is exemplified by several cultural creation myths such as Ponce de Leon's search for the Fountain of Youth in Florida or George Washington's youthful energy to chop down his father's English cherry tree in a symbolic break with the Old World (2). This attachment to the youth trope also accounts for the scarce attention paid to the treatment of aging in American literature and culture until recently. As Roberta Maierhofer has stated, “American studies has been slow to pick up the topic of aging and incorporate it into its teaching and research” (1999, 255).

The invisibility of aging has been particularly remarkable in studies focused on the American West, a territory whose mythology has usually been associated with the youth motif. Horace Greeley's famous motto for the westward expansion (“Go West, young man, go West and grow up with the country”) in 1865 is just an example of this long-established connection between the West and the youth trope, a fundamental ingredient of the whole Manifest Destiny ideology.<sup>3</sup> For Greeley the West epitomized the promised land for young Americans searching for prosperity and success. As he remarked in his short-lived journal *The New Yorker* in 1838 (361): “If any young man is about to commence in the world, we say to him, publicly and privately, Go to the West. There your capacities are surely to be appreciated and your industry rewarded.” Western mythology centered on the youth trope has also tended to envision the region as the quintessential territory for regeneration and a new beginning. For example, Frederick Jackson Turner's classic frontier thesis idealized the West as “an opportunity for social development continually to begin over again, wherever society gave signs of breaking into classes. Here was a magic fountain of youth in which America continuously bathed and was rejuvenated.”<sup>4</sup> As Henry Nash Smith argued in his

<sup>3</sup> Although Horace Greeley is generally credited with having coined this phrase, it seems that Greeley himself claimed that John B. L. Soule, an Indiana journalist, was the actual originator of the phrase in an editorial in the *Terre Haute (Indiana) Express* in 1851 (Hendrickson 2000, 491). However, its origins still remain elusive. In fact, Thomas Fuller claimed that “John Soule had nothing whatsoever to do with the phrase” (2004, 242).

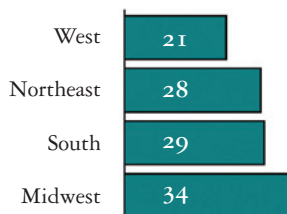
<sup>4</sup> Address at the dedication of a new high school building at Turner's home town of Portage, Wisconsin, January 1, 1896, reported in the *Portage Weekly Democrat*, January 3, 1896 (Turner Papers, Henry E. Huntington Library, quoted in Smith [1950] 1982, 254).

seminal work *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* ([1950] 1982), Turner focused on the idea of nature to create “a poetic account of the influence of free land as a rebirth, a regeneration, a rejuvenation of man and society constantly recurring where civilization came into contact with the wilderness along the frontier” ([1950] 1982, 253). Similarly, James K. Folsom has claimed that for Turner “the presence of the frontier represents a force which constantly rejuvenates an American society that, left to itself, would become constantly more over-refined and decadent” (1989, 92). Even in contemporary times the figure of the West as a magic fountain of youth seems to retain part of its appeal for Americans, who still seem to identify the West with youth and regeneration. For example, according to a 2009 Pew Research survey (see Figure 1), older Americans in the West feel younger and healthier than older people in the rest of the country. According to the same survey, feeling young seems almost inevitably correlated with happiness, with those Americans living in the West being more likely to be happy than those living in other regions of the United States: “if you want to be among a lot of older folks who feel young and happy, the West looks like your best bet” (Pew Research Center 2009, n.p.)

Figure 1. “Go West, Old Man: Where Older Adults Feel Young at Heart”  
(Pew Research Center. Social and Demographic Trends 2009, n.p.)

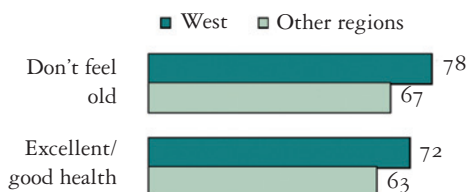
**Who Feels Old, by Region**

% of those 65 and older who say they feel old



**Older Americans in the West Feel Younger, Healthier**

Percentages based on those 65 and older



Note: Sample sizes for subgroups are as follows: West, n=308; Other regions, n=1,024

Despite the resilience of the youth trope and its mythology in the American West, recent western American literature has started to explore old age and ageism, showing an aging, gray and often ill West. For example, the experience of aging figures prominently in some notable novels published in the last five decades, such as Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* (1971), Ken Haruf's *The Tie That Binds* (1984), Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2004) and Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005). Contemporary western American authors are increasingly departing from the traditional association between the West and youth to address a variety of aspects related to old age, including health in later life, family relationships, interpersonal communication, intergenerational conflict, cultural perceptions of the elderly, the connection between place and identity in older generations, or gender, race and class issues. Stories of aging in the American West often show the potential of fiction for "understanding variations in the meaning of experience of ageing in society" (Hepworth 2000, 1). However, insightful descriptions of aging in contemporary western American literature are not restricted to the fictional realm, as illustrated by the book to be discussed in the present article, Gregory Martin's insightful memoir *Mountain City* (2000). This work received a Washington State Book Award and was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. It was translated into Spanish in 2001. The book also won Martin a Silver Pen Award from the University of Nevada Reno, and a place in the Nevada Writers' Hall of Fame.

## 2. *MOUNTAIN CITY*: A FADING COMMUNITY WHERE OLD AGE DOES NOT MEAN SURRENDER

Gregory Martin's affecting and illuminating debut memoir depicts his family's life in a remote northeastern Nevada town of thirty-three residents. He focuses his memoir on the grocery store (Tremewan's) run by his extended family, the descendants of Basque shepherders and Cornish tin miners. Tremewan's store, with its humorous exchanges between Uncle Mel and his customers, is not only at the center of the memoir but also at the center of Mountain City, a place identified early in the book as a declining community, as a relic of the boom-and-bust mining past of the American West: "Mountain City is not a town or a city or anything else. Mountain City is copper and a little silver and less gold. Mountain City is a state of flux and impermanence" (2000, 45). Through Mountain City, Martin epitomizes a dying rural West, a region of failed promises and broken dreams, offering a realistic approach to its history and to the life of his relatives, departing from traditional romanticized versions of westward expansion. He admits the influence of the hope trope on the genesis and precarious development of Mountain City, but he emphasizes the weight of failure in the overall history of this place, as exemplified by its abandoned mines, a powerful testimony to the stereotypical boom-and-bust cycle of the West. In fact, Martin defines this town as "a place of repetition, a Western archetype for hope and failed hope and failure"

(46). Mountain City might be regarded as a metaphor for the vanishing of certain traditional ideas and motifs linked to frontier mythology, such as youth, individualism and opportunity. In its decay, it is doomed to become a ghost town, where no one, except the narrator and his cousin (both temporary residents), is younger than forty. Death haunts the place and, in fact, by the end of the book two residents of Mountain City, including the narrator's grandmother have died. This dying community is also affected by other circumstances that testify to the frailty of the town, such as poverty, isolation and illness. It is also worth noting Martin's recurrent use of a winter setting to portray the experiences of Mountain City's inhabitants in what may be viewed as a symbolic reference to the fading western way of life, to the winter of the Old West and its frontier mythology.

Although the inhabitants of Mountain City are aware of being part of a dying community in a sick and decaying place, Martin does not present their lives as displeasing or worthless. Instead, he stresses their endurance and perseverance despite their age, illness, economic adversity, the certain end of the town or difficult weather conditions. Mountain City residents do not quit because, like the narrator's grandmother, they have been taught to believe that "the weather is hard, but it's not as hard as you are" (Martin 2000, 114). Old age is not associated with regret about a golden, wasted youth, but rather with stoical endurance because old age does not mean surrender. As Barbara Lefcowitz and Allan Lefcowitz have stated, "what is distinctive about the perseverance of an old person is the fact that he or she persists despite awareness of a severely limited time frame, an awareness that differs sharply from the vague recognition, 'someday I will die,' common to human beings of any age" (1984, 134). Significantly enough, Mountain City residents do not retire and the only one who takes time off from work is the young and restless narrator, Gregory Martin himself, who spends summers and a post-college year there. The elderly people in this town manage to busy themselves with several daily activities because, after all, as Richard Eder has argued, "you can't retire from bitter cold, frozen pipes, treacherous roads and mortality's worm, hungrier day by day" (2000, n.p.).

Martin portrays Mountain City residents' losing battle with time as a dialogical process of exchange and overlap between living and aging. It is a dual process where both the individual and the community display their refusal to give up fighting. Thus, the book contains insightful stories about individual elders who demonstrate their perseverance in their daily activities. Particularly noteworthy is the case of the narrator's grandfather (Gramps), who struggles to maintain his perspective, his sense of humor and his independence amidst increasing frailty and health problems. Martin, for example, stresses his grandfather's stoical endurance to keep on with his daily chores without depending on others' help. Certainly, this insistence on being self-sufficient might be regarded as a matter of pride or stubbornness, but also as a way for Gramps to feel alive: "Taking care of his yard is something Gramps can still do, and as the number of such things diminishes, it's not something he'll let

others do for him” (Martin 2000, 150). Despite an increasing feeling of uselessness, Mountain City residents never remain inactive and are committed to continuing to live in a place where life has never been easy, and which is now even more difficult due to their increasing health problems. Their perseverance parallels the historical tenacity of the town, a place with 130 years of history, whose inhabitants refused to leave after the end of the mining booms of 1870, 1919 and 1934. Their attachment to Mountain City illustrates their strong sense of place and their reverence for the land and it could even be interpreted as an example of their loyalty to a traditional western way of life. However, we should not misunderstand the endurance of Mountain City residents as a proud vindication of frontier mythology. Actually, the narrator’s relatives exemplify the rejection of a romanticized view of the West: “For Gramps and his dad, the dream of the West never meant what Louis L’Amour or Hollywood said and continued to say it meant, over and over and over. They took the jobs that were available, because they didn’t want to go someplace else. They were trying to figure a way to stick to the landscape” (Martin 2000, 32).

Martin’s memoir does not present aging in Mountain City as a uniform process, instead revealing the multiple dimensions and variations of this experience. As Stephen Katz has claimed: “no ‘single knowledge’ of ageing is possible because the ‘meanings’ of ageing and old age are scattered, plural, contradictory, and enigmatic [. . .] Age is everywhere, but the world’s cultures have taught us that age has no fixed locus” (1996, 1). For example, in *Mountain City* the narrator’s grandmother (Grandma), as her husband is still alive, is viewed as the *other* by the widows of the town. She does not qualify to join them at the local bar (to drink coffee and play the slots), in spite of being of a similar age: “merely being old or gray or frail or lonely or divorced, singly or in combinations, is not enough. Your husband must be dead” (2000, 21-22). While the book acknowledges the existence of individual variations in the process of aging—in Brian J. Worsfold’s words, “every experience of aging is unique as every individual is unique” (2011, xix)—it also underscores the common features underlying the condition of growing older. Martin departs from the myth of rugged individualism associated with the westward expansion to underscore the relevance of communal elements, presenting aging as a process shaped by continuous interaction between the individual and the community. The book consists of individual stories of aging, but they are carefully intertwined, with Tremewan’s store acting as the center of the community and the place where individual experiences converge to create a compelling mosaic of aging in the rural West. Mountain City’s residents are able to age in their small community where familiarity, trust and solidarity are key ingredients to explaining its survival. The mining town’s residents have to cope with aging in a physically hostile environment, in a space removed from their original cultures and traditions, as exemplified by their Basque forebears, whose surnames and figurative connection to places suggest “heritage and rootedness and belonging” (Martin 2000, 54). However, Martin’s relatives and their neighbors manage to grow old together in



their close-knit community, with aging being seen as a cross-cultural and intercultural process and most relationships being based on a sense of shared history. After all, the process of aging is often based on the tension between the private self and the social aspects of coming to terms with one's mortality. As Mike Hepworth has argued, "to understand the experience of ageing, we have to understand both the personal and social meanings that individuals give to ageing—to see the world through their eyes and how they define a particular situation" (2000, 15).

### 3. PLACE, IDENTITY AND THE INTERGENERATIONAL IMPACT OF AGING

Although Martin's memoir seems to break with stereotyped visions of the West, his departure from traditional frontier mythology becomes problematic when we analyze the impact of his interplay with both his elder relatives and the town itself on his identity. In fact, it might be argued that Martin also recreates in his memoir some traditional tropes of western mythology. This ambivalence towards the western archetype is not surprising, as Edwin Fusell has claimed, "the American West is almost by definition indefinite and undefinable, or at least changing, pluralistic, and ambiguous in signification" (1965, 4) and "from the onset, the American concept of frontier reveals a shifting character and a striking ambivalence" (6).

In *Mountain City* Martin reenacts classical frontier mythology centered on the opposition between the civilized East, represented in the memoir by Martin himself, and the wild or primitive West, epitomized by this remote mining town, whose inhabitants refuse to adjust to the priorities and demands of the modern world: "there are no stoplights and no stop signs" (Martin 2000, 8), "the man's wearing a suit, which, in Mountain City, is like wearing a Halloween costume" (18). Martin's status in the book resembles that of classical frontier figures due to his ability to negotiate between these two opposing worlds. Due to his educational background he seems to play, at least at the beginning of his memoir, an archetypal civilizing role, particularly in his exchanges with his uncle Mel, whose behavior he finds peculiar, not to say eccentric. Martin's intellectual and civilizing attitude initially clashes with the traditional and rudimentary ways and views of the community, as seen, for example, in his own attempts to explain Zeno's paradox to his uncle. However, Mountain City also works as a safety valve for Martin, as a place for opportunity and escape, one of the classical ingredients of frontier imaginary. He manages to free himself from the constraints of civilization in a rough environment that symbolizes the wilderness of classical frontier mythology, a place where "cultural refinement and emphasis on manners give way to pragmatic empiricism" (Busby 1989, 96). The old mining town fits into the traditional redeeming function of the West in frontier mythology because it is able to heal Martin's identity crisis in the increasingly homogenized and anonymous American society. Actually, for Martin the American West continues to play its archetypal role as a source of regeneration because his immersion in this vanishing community is able

to provide him with a sense of homeplace and a cultural identity that he misses: “I have lived in twenty-one places in twelve states in twenty-seven years” (Martin 2000, 55). Throughout this time, he has kept returning to Mountain City, not just to help his relatives at the store or to spend time with them knowing that their death was close, but also because he did not feel as whole anywhere else. He had graduated from college with a degree in philosophy, but he was still searching for his identity. He faced placelessness and a growing distance from his cultural identity and, in particular, from his Basque cultural heritage. As a matter of fact, the book emphasizes the importance of the etymology of family names among the Basques, mourning the loss of their figurative connection to landscape provoked by migration and acculturation: “cultural identity, the homeplace, and the relationship between cultural identity and homeplace are lost” (Martin 2000, 55). Thus Martin’s visits to Mountain City become a journey of self-discovery in which his grandparents and other old people in the town work as his guides to discover the meaning of his life. As were many others who went West in the past, he is looking for a new beginning, for a place to belong to. As Martin himself has explained in an essay recently published: “I was born in Radford, Virginia, but that town is just a name and a place on a map [. . .] I did not know where I belonged [. . .] I was like one of those sheepherders who needed to come in off the range and be taken in. But I didn’t have an old country. There was no place, not one, that actually *was* my home” (2011, iv-v, italics in original). The West, even if it is a dying West, as epitomized by Mountain City, seems to retain its potential for rebirth and renewal, healing Martin’s uprootedness and providing him with a sense of loyalty and attachment to a dying community that he regards as his homeplace.

The concept of home in *Mountain City* is brilliantly explored by Martin in his memoir in connection not only with his personal longing for a place to belong to, but also with the lifestyle of Mountain City residents. It is a town with very few houses, where most people live in trailers. This idea seems to recall once again the archetypal celebration of mobility, freedom and reinvention in western mythology. Certainly, trailer homes epitomize a transient mentality, free from the constraints of community life, and stereotypical views about the West and its history: “Let’s get a house that moves so that when the price of gold (or silver or copper or whatever) goes to shit, we can get the hell out” (Martin 2000, 55). Nevertheless, Mountain City inhabitants do not meet traditional expectations about American and, in particular, western mobility.<sup>5</sup> They do not move either physically or socially (physical and geographical movement in the American experience traditionally included a search for social mobility) and their behavior basically embodies a resident idiosyncrasy and economic limitations.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> According to the US Census Bureau, the average American moves approximately fourteen times in his or her lifetime (United States Census Bureau, accessed online on March 15, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Most Americans living in mobile homes are usually associated with low income and low occupational prestige. As Diana Kendall, for example, has noted, “as used by the media, the terms ‘white trash’ and ‘trailer trash’ often have similar meanings, whether or not the individuals in question actually live in trailers” (2005, 158).

In fact, the townsfolk have only moved to trailers in the yard for practical reasons of an economic nature: "None of the old, empty houses in Mountain City is fit to live in [. . .] And no one in Mountain City can afford to haul all the building materials the eighty-four miles from Elko, they couldn't pay for both the labor and the daily round-trip transportation costs of the construction crew" (Martin 2000, 56). The notion of *home* becomes a key factor in understanding the experience of aging, and it can be analyzed from a symbolic interactionist perspective, an approach that acknowledges "the central role symbols and images play in the social organization of human life and consequently the central role played by symbols in the creation of the individual human self" (Hepworth 2000, 11). The individual self-consciousness of *home* and, in general, of places and spaces may be regarded as a symbolic experience and contributes to shaping age identities (Hoskins 1998, 1-24; Hepworth 2000, 72-98). In *Mountain City* the trailer homes of the town's residents serve to transcend traditional dichotomies between attachment to place and mobility (they are ready to move, but they refuse to do so, choosing instead to grow old in a dying place), showing the interdependence between both spheres and their interconnection with aging issues.

Martin's interaction with Mountain City residents also allows him to revise his own idea of home. His time in this town makes him realize that at last he has found a place to belong to. He has been able to overcome his uneasiness about his lack of a homeplace: "What is the name for the homesickness of the person who does not know where home is?" (Martin 2011, v). The long hours he has spent in Mountain City with his relatives have provided him with a cultural identity and an answer to his journey of self-discovery. He is aware that his true home is the American West and, in particular, Mountain City, the place where his soul resides. However, Martin's concept of home is a dynamic one because feeling at home in one place does not necessarily involve residing there: "*Home* means different things to different people [. . .] To me, home is the place I cannot keep from disappearing" (Martin 2000, 191, italics in original). Gregory Martin's emphasis on home reflects a common trend in postfrontier western writing, where there is an increasing interest in the experience of staying in the West rather than in the archetypal image of going West. As Russell Martin notes, "it appears that the region's writers are paying rather more attention to the issue of home, at once simple and enormously complex, to the questions of why and how we stay anchored here despite that sweep of change" (1992, xix).

In *Mountain City* Martin offers a mosaic of personal memories where place and identity are often immersed in a continuous dialogical process of exchange and imbrication. Although his affection for the town and its inhabitants is obvious in the book, Martin refuses to portray an idealized view either of the place or of its local characters. His aim is to capture the town and the lifestyle of his relatives and neighbors, recording their sense of place from a realistic perspective, even though he feels emotionally attached to Mountain City and its residents. As Gregory Martin himself has argued, "places are not perfect, and neither are people. People are flawed, and I knew then [. . .] that readers

don't become less sympathetic when they learn a character's flaws, they become more sympathetic. They see themselves. To portray people as they are is an act of compassion and empathy" (2011, viii-ix). His memoir re-enacts geographies, celebrating the experience of conjunction, of becoming intimate with place, and emphasizing the role of intergenerational family interaction in this process. Martin does not only paint a realistic and compelling portrait of Mountain City's residents and their powerful sense of place, but he also vindicates the social role of old people, criticizing ageism, as exemplified by contemporary attitudes towards the elderly, and in particular, by their devaluation in present-day society:<sup>7</sup> "Back then, you know, it used to be that young guys would look after the older ones, take the tougher jobs, the more physical work, leave the older ones some slack, keep them on the payroll. It's not like that anymore. Progress, you know. Efficiency" (Martin 2000, 146). The book deconstructs negative images of old age and disease, emphasizing the benefits of interpersonal interaction between different generations and vindicating the value and usefulness of old-aged people, apart from their traditional role as memory agents. As Doris Lessing, for example, stated: "Lucky the culture where the old can talk to the young and the young can talk to the old" (in Gray 2004, 94). Martin's memoir reveals the high rewards that he gets from his relationship with his older relatives and friends in Mountain City. He learns from them the true nature of one's identity, "how you feel about living in the world is who you are" (Martin 2000, 178) and how to face time without anxiety. In fact, this intergenerational communication will become a key aspect in Martin's facing up to his own aging process: "I'm happy to be in a blizzard with my grandparents, sharing this time with them as their health fades and they enter their last days, however graceful or awkward. It's instructive, these things they say to each other, in teasing, in love, after sixty-two years of marriage. They're teaching me how to grow old" (Martin 2000, 169).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

*Mountain City* may be defined as an insightful and authentic approach to the contemporary rural West, where Martin challenges both the traditional frontier mythology trope and certain classical images of aging in American culture. His memoir revises archetypal mythic discourses about the American West centered on individualism, youth and movement tropes, though it also shows the resilience of some mythic conceptions of this region, in particular, the notion of the West as a source of spiritual regeneration, rebirth and renewal. It is a book that testifies to the increasing visibility of aging and elderly people in western American literature, confronting traditional cultural assumptions about the aging process and exploring the close connections between

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<sup>7</sup> The term "ageism" was coined by Robert N. Butler who equated discrimination against old people with racism and sexism and claimed that "age-ism reflects a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged—a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, 'uselessness,' and death" (1969, 243).

concepts of place and identity and the older population. Martin's memoir reflects the need to reconsider both stereotypical popular limited visions of the American West and standard constructions of old age in America. A culture that traditionally has favored innovation and youth and has focused on avoiding or resisting old age is bound to pay more attention to an increasingly aging population for whom youth only represents the past.<sup>8</sup> In this sense Martin's experiences among the elders of Mountain City work as a powerful argument against negative cultural constructions of old age and in favor of interpersonal and intergenerational communication. As Laurel Porter has noted, "the very young report that they would rather die than become old or ugly or ill. But the more human contact we have with the aged, the more love and respect we can feel for these morally strong, often courageous versions of ourselves who have seen more, understood more, and done more than we" (1984, 8).

Martin's memoir illustrates the power of storytelling not only to record one's sense of place but also to make sense of our individual subjective experience of aging. As Sue Taylor points out in relation to stories of aging in general, "as the older character in the storyline confronts issues associated with old age and their own ideas of self, so does the reader" (2002, 125). Similarly, Mike Hepworth has insisted on the value of storytelling to understand "the interactional variations in the experience of ageing: namely, the interplay between body and self, self and others, objects, places and spaces, and some risks to which these are exposed in later life" (2000, 19). *Mountain City* should not be regarded simply as an elegy to a dilapidated mining town in rural Nevada or to an old western lifestyle, because the very fact of telling the story of this place serves to bring it to life again, rescuing the town from an almost inevitable physical disappearance. Although the book illustrates the power of the oral tradition of telling the story of a community, as exemplified by the stories exchanged at Tremewan's store, Martin's memoir also reveals the need to preserve these stories on paper for future generations, for the young ones to remember the town and its people. The author knows that Mountain City is fading and that his relatives' health is deteriorating. In fact eleven years after the publication of the memoir only twenty-four people lived in Mountain City, Martin's grandparents had died and Tremewan's store had closed (Martin 2011, xi).<sup>9</sup> However, Martin is aware that due to his book the town and its inhabitants will remain not only in his mind but also in the mind of its readers: "The artist's task is to elegize and defy elegy, at once. We make a record because memory will fail us. We make a record because the people we love will die and their memories will die with them. The towns we love grow more haunted with each passing year" (Martin 2011, xi). Mountain City and its residents may disappear physically, but Martin's memoir certainly testifies to the power of literature to preserve a town in the collective conscience.

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, by 2050 the United States is expected to have 111 million people aged sixty or over (Phillipson 2013, 15).

<sup>9</sup> His uncle, Mel Basañez, would die a year later. See his obituary in *The Reno Gazette Journal* (October 23-24, 2012).

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