Ex Occidente Lux?
An Archaeology of Later Capitalism in the Nineteenth-Century West

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Babbitt (bab’it): 1. any of various alloys of tin with smaller amounts of antimony and copper, used as an antifriction lining for bearings. 2. a self-satisfied person who conforms readily to conventional, middle-class ideas and ideals, esp. of business and material success: from the main character in the novel (1922) [by Sinclair Lewis].

INTRODUCTION: OLD BEARINGS, NEW DIRECTIONS, AND SINCLAIR LEWIS

In the summer of 1985 I was cataloguing a sparse trash scatter out in the sagebrush behind a ranch at the northeast end of Paradise Valley, Nevada. For the most part, the dump had yielded a disappointingly meager and conventional list of items: early machine-made sauce bottles, some generic white ironstone, bits of kerosene-lamp chimney glass, and some fragments of shoe leather inexplicably overlooked by the local coyotes. The dates ranged in the first two decades of the twentieth century, a full 40 years too late for the homesteading period I had been hoping to find. But they did mesh reassuringly with the dates of ranch tenancy by a local Basque family, the Mendiolas. Nothing in the trash dump was particularly redolent of Basque ethnicity, but I was getting used to that. At least there were some family descendants still living in the Valley. Maybe I could interview them about when they’d lived on the Reinhart Ranch.

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In amongst the other debris were one or two objects I could not identify. One piece particularly intrigued me: a cast-metal bearing, obviously part of some larger piece of ranch equipment, with a residue of silvery metal dribbled around the bottom of the cup. Robert Humphrey, the Reinhart's current owner and a retired Nevada sheriff who'd grown up on ranches in the eastern part of the state in the 1930s, kindly explained the mysteries of babbitt to me, and the specific use of the soft tin alloy to mend and refit old, worn bearings. I remember thinking what a delicious irony this brought to the name of Sinclair Lewis's protagonist of his 1922 novel, *Babbitt*; that it honestly did not occur to me that Lewis might have noticed the same irony can be attributed to that sublime hubris characteristic of early graduate school years.

It is equally telling that I found the babbitt bearing to be an insignificant artifact from too recent a period. The significant events in the Valley's history had occurred in the early years of settlement, and in the subsequent decades of the silver-mining boom and commercial grain and cattle production. By the 1920s, it was all over; the "bust" had begun. Besides, the bearing itself represented the modern technology of internal combustion engines, of John Deere and Henry Ford. These were the known, contemporary aspects of the Valley's material culture, as opposed to those of the unknown past that I was there to explore. I did not even photograph it.

Trapped in a frontier mythology that owed as much to Zane Grey and Lorne Green as it did to Frederick Jackson Turner, it never occurred to me to treat the bust as an event at least as significant as the boom had been. I did not see the quality of Basque ethnicity in the Mendiola family's tenancy of the ranch, as opposed to direct ownership. And I read babbitt bearings as one of those quaintly self-reliant practices prized by the local ranchers, venerated in their stories about making a living in the Nevada desert. The bearing represented an idiosyncratic modification of a mainstream technology not substantially different from the one familiar to me. I failed to recognize it for what it was: an integral component of an altogether different technology, and one that, for that time and place, had been very much in the mainstream. People had even written novels about it.

This paper makes two basic points. First, the vantage point of the American West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is an important one from which to contemplate an archaeology of later capitalism because of the relatively later dates involved and the ambiguously peripheral position the region has occupied in the nation's social and economic history. Second, any such archaeology, regardless of