Epilogue

Reflections and Refractions from the Southwest Borderlands

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Some nine miles downstream from where I write in Santa Fe, New Mexico, there thrives a “living history” museum known as El Rancho de Las Golondrinas (The Ranch of the Swallows). Its core buildings date from 1710, when the rancho served as a paraje, or resting place, along el camino real de tierra adentro (the royal road of the interior lands) that connected Mexico City to its far distant colonial settlements in the province of Nuevo Mexico. Established by Miguel Vega y Coca, the rancho flourished and grew with the increase in trade through the era of the Bourbon Reforms and, especially, after the 1821 opening of the St. Louis to Chihuahua “Santa Fe Trail” that linked American and Mexican producers and consumers in a vibrant international trade.

Those familiar with the architecture of the Southwest might see echoes of the Spanish and North African countryside in the rancho today, a complex covering more than 160 acres and featuring a fortified, adobe placita (compound residence), complete with defensive tower; a nineteenth-century home and all of its outbuildings, a molasses mill, a threshing ground, several primitive water mills, a blacksmith shop, a wheelwright shop, a winery, and extensive vineyards (figure E.1). Many of the essential elements of Spanish and Mexican lifeways may be seen reenacted on the museum’s programs, from sheep shearing to wool weaving, from corn and wheat fields to grain milling, from Catholic blessings of the acequias (irrigation ditches) in the spring to autumn harvest festivals replete with burrows grinding sorghum into molasses.

But one aspect of southwestern life is not relived for the visiting public, although gestured within the fortified compound. In one
corner of the placita, well secured by a heavy wooden door is the cuarto de cautivos (captives’ room), wherein, according to the interpretive materials, lived Indian captives seized in warfare and housed at the rancho, either as laborers or awaiting purchase and “adoption” by other Spanish colonial families (figure E.2). The interpretive staff of Golondrinas deserves credit for noting the existence of the room and its occupants, but—like the furo surrounding the proposed depiction of African slavery at living museums such as Colonial Williamsburg and Jamestown—the lingering sensitivity among indigenous peoples in New Mexico, and awkwardness among the descendants of Spanish colonists, has prevented any attempt to portray Indian slavery at public events1 (Gable and Handler 1993, 1994, 1997; Gable, Handler, and Lawson 1992).

Doing so would not be impossible, however. Throughout the lands formerly within the embrace of New Spain there exists a rich panoply of folk performance that grew from the practice. A staple of Christmas and New Year’s ceremonies is the Matachines Dance, “the beautiful dance of subjugation” that portrays the conquest, courtship, and “marriage” of Cortez’s consort La Malinche or Malantzín