

## PREFACE



On a day during the cold months of 1549, the slave Catalina de Velasco waited to meet the friar Bartolomé de las Casas, a famous man whom she fervently hoped would testify on her behalf as she petitioned for her freedom in a Spanish court. She stood in an austere and dimly lit room of the monastery furnished with high-backed chairs and a long, polished table. Religious paintings hung on the walls. Catalina was a minor of twenty years, and her legal representative (*curador*) had insisted she be examined in person to see if she was truly an *india*. Only a few days before, she had been granted permission by the Council of the Indies to travel over a two-day period to the Monastery of San Pablo, the temporary residence of several notable friars. These men were experts in all things Mexican; they could examine her physiognomy—the shape of her head and face, her coloration—with great authority. She was certain they would help her win her freedom.

Months before, several judges of the council had scrutinized her while the curador stood by her side. Her mistress, the marquess of Villafranca, Doña Inés de Pimentel, had also demanded to be present at the hearing, if only to intimidate her.<sup>1</sup> The judges had then determined that she was an india, but not a mestiza—the daughter of a Spanish Christian and an india—as Catalina had claimed. She had made this claim because her deceased mother had once told her that her father was a Christian.

The New Laws of 1542 had been passed in Castile, stating that *indios* from Spanish domains were free and could no longer be enslaved. Catalina bore no scar or royal brand on her face that would have marked her as a legally captured slave from the Spanish territories, yet to gain her freedom, she still had to prove that she had come from Mexico, not somewhere in the Portuguese empire as her mistress claimed. As her legal representative explained

to her, indio slaves from the Portuguese domains had no legal rights to be free, whereas those from the Spanish kingdoms did, thanks to the efforts of Las Casas and others. Like many indios who had crossed the Atlantic, Catalina had made the journey as a small child and could not remember her place of origin, although Mexico occurred to her later.<sup>2</sup> The problem, however, was that she had traveled by ship from Mexico to Lisbon, and it was there that Doña Inés de Pimentel had purchased her and taken her to Castile to join the retinue of servants and other slaves in the palace, now Catalina's prison. Given these circumstances, what evidence besides her physical person and the remembrance of things past did she have to prove her origins?

It had been so difficult to leave her mistress's palace, with guards hovering about her bedroom door at all hours. What a relief to have been granted permission to appear before such important friars at the monastery. She straightened her back and folded her hands as she heard footsteps approaching. A moment later, Bartolomé de las Casas stepped through the door, his black robes skimming the floor. Catalina had heard stories about this great man, who was slightly stooped with years: how he had freed many indios from slavery, how he had fought in New Spain and in Castile for their freedom from tyranny.

After silently considering her aspect, facial features, and coloration, Las Casas nodded to the scribe, who began writing. Yes, the friar affirmed, the young woman was from somewhere in New Spain, the broad territorial domain that included Mexico. He dictated: "It seems to be so to this witness, because, as it is well known, I resided for many years in New Spain and I have much experience with the indios and indias of that land." He then added, "Although she is not a mestiza, she could easily have been stolen and brought as a child to these kingdoms and [brought to Castile] from Portugal by passengers who come to these kingdoms."<sup>3</sup> In two sentences he thus confirmed that she looked like an india from the Spanish domains. He also made it clear that the illegal traffic in slaves between Spanish America and Portugal and between Portugal and Castile made Catalina's journey into bondage plausible.

That same day, on the heels of Las Casas's testimony at the monastery, came those of Rodrigo Ladrada, the longtime companion of Las Casas, and of Vasco de Quiroga, another virtuous man who had worked diligently to protect the indios of Mexico from mistreatment. Both confirmed what Las Casas had said.

Once the council had deliberated over these testimonies and those of the marquess, Catalina was freed. No doubt that singular day in the brief

company of Bartolomé de las Casas remained etched in her mind for the rest of her life. Before his death, in 1566, Las Casas went on to issue other terse statements confirming the places of origin of indios named Esteban, Martín Quintín, and Balthasar, all of whom were also freed.<sup>4</sup>