Introduction

Yes, I would say I’m indígena [indigenous], maybe because of all these ideas about nationalism … and the education system in Mexico that makes you recognise yourself as such, but when, for example, you’re out, and you run to cross the street [instead of just walking], and somebody shouts at you, ‘oh, you’re an Indio’. You say: ‘no, don’t call me an Indio because I’m not an Indio’. There is like a problem to acknowledge it … we don’t know how to recognise if we are indígenas, or if we are mestizos, or if we are Spaniards and descend from the Spaniards (Montserrat, 29, Mexico City)

Mestiza/o is a racial category that emerged as a key component of the ideological myth of formation of the Mexican nation, namely mestizaje, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In such a project of state formation, Mexican is equivalent to Mestiza. It refers to those who represent Mexicanness and therefore those who are closer to the model of the ideal subjects of the Mexican Mestiza nation. Mestizaje, as this ideological framework, boosts an implied rhetoric of inclusiveness while concealing processes of exclusion and racism ‘based on the idea of the inferiority of blacks and indigenous peoples and, in practice, of discrimination against them’ (Wade 2001: 849). Mestiza is then seen as a term both relatively ‘neutral’ (i.e. all Mexicans are Mestizas/os) but also as highly ‘loaded’ (implying possibilities of inclusion and exclusion to the national myth).

To recognise racism is to make a formal declaration of a discriminatory practice. Recognising racism in a context such as Mexico involves
bringing the unrecognised into the boundaries of recognition: Mexican practices of racism are currently unrecognisable. Firstly, this is because of the complexity of their everydayness – the multiplicity of ways racist practices pervade social life. Secondly, the protracted separation of race and nation in social, governmental and academic discourses over the twentieth century has created a situation where racism, as a structuring principle that organises social life and creates ‘racist logics’, is not recognised institutionally or publicly, but is lived as an individual-embodied experience. Such experience is seldom related to the now questionable understandings of ‘race’ and wider power and structural dynamics, but more often perceived as personal fault or ‘just how things are’. This scenario is further complicated, as explained earlier, by the prevalent racial discourse of mestizaje rooted in discourses of national identity and citizenship.

Drawing from empirical research on contemporary practices of racism and understandings of the discourse of mestizaje, this chapter presents an examination of the ambiguities of Mestiza identity as an unproblematised but racialised identity. This analysis considers the limits of racial recognition in what could be considered a raceless (Goldberg 2002) context. This context has fostered a process of racial and racist normalisation that allows Mexican people to express and be convinced by the widespread idea that in Mexico there is no racism because ‘we are all mixed’. Mexicans do not recognise themselves as racial subjects, but as national subjects and citizens. In this scenario, recognition of racism is not preceded by the explicit claim of belonging to the specific Mestiza racial identity but a citizenship status. As Montserrat notes previously, while there is ‘like a problem’ of acknowledging ‘what’ Mexicans are and ‘we don’t know how to recognise’, there is a stark claim when specific situations, like crossing a street running, are unavoidably attached to understandings of what Indígena people ‘are’ and ‘do’. Paradoxically, what Montserrat is describing, the shouting in the street, the despising of the uncivilised Indígena, is not commonly understood as racism, rather as ‘just what Indígena people do’ and how they are usually treated. She definitely does not want to be (mis)recognised: ‘I am not an Indio.’ In this chapter, I explore why there is a difficulty in identifying simultaneously as citizens and racialised subjects, and argue that taking on Mestiza identity is a precarious process. On the one hand, as an identity akin to ‘whiteness’ and with the promise of privilege, the space of the Mestiza becomes the unnamed favoured national paradigm. On the other, mestizaje disorients any clear sense of coherence between a racial discourse and a