

☞ CHAPTER 11 ☞

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*'LINDA MORENITA':*  
SKIN COLOUR, BEAUTY AND THE POLITICS  
OF MESTIZAJE IN MEXICO

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I had a classmate while doing my Ph.D. He was the best in his class, better than the *gringos*<sup>1</sup> and other foreigners, but when you see him you think: 'In Mexico, they wouldn't give a penny for this guy'. Because he was the typical Mexican: short, *morenito*,<sup>2</sup> skinny ... I mean like ... very insignificant physically. (Paulina, 49, Mexico City)

Beauty, appearance, and racialized perceptions of skin colour, as 'regimes of difference' (Ahmed 1998), are notions that inform each other within specific social and historical configurations. In this chapter I will explore the workings of such regimes within the specific configurations of Mexicanness and *mestizaje* (racial mixing).<sup>3</sup> How do these regimes of difference collide 'differently'? Is there an unequal basis on which they operate? These questions will guide us in a discussion of the relationship between skin colour, beauty, visibility and racial discourses, as well as the accumulation of meaning that such ideas have in their empirical experience.

This analysis draws from a research project concerned with the 'quality' of contemporary practices of racism in Mexico in relation to discourses of *mestizaje*, 'race' and nation. Through focus group discussions and life-story interviews based on family photograph albums, I explored how the women who participated in this study understand and experience their racialized, gendered and classed bodies and national identity in a context where racism has been rendered invisible. Here I will concentrate on the participants concern with skin colour and beauty as identifiable aspects of contemporary racist practices in Mexico. Throughout the women's accounts, their experience of, and relation to, skin colour and beauty emerged as key elements in their self-perception. Skin colour and beauty also appeared to be clearly linked with a series of emotions such as shame,

pain, inadequacy, and the desire to be 'normal' and to not be 'insignificant'. The connections between the shame of being or not being beautiful, the desire to look and be 'normal', the sense of uneasiness with their appearance and the fear of being perceived as 'insignificant', revealed precisely that relationship between racism, visibility and the construction of the feminine. Such connections and collisions also revealed the ways in which they were affected by the specific cultural and social formations of Mexican racial and national identities.

The body is being permanently and unavoidably read and, as Craig wrote when analysing the links between beauty, racism and the body, 'any body ... exists at a congested crossroad of forces. Bodies provide us with a principal means of expression, yet our bodies are read in ways that defy our intentions. We act on others through our bodies, but nonetheless our bodies are the sites of the embodiment of social control' (Craig 2006: 160). Bodies are then metaphors, mediums of culture (Bordo 1997), and as such they have also become a battleground – a site of struggle where 'the collision between regimes of difference' (Ahmed 1998: 47) in a 'congested crossroad of forces' takes place. But can 'regimes of difference' or 'forces' collide and coexist at the same time? The term 'collision' encapsulates a striking contradiction. On the one hand, the action of colliding implies the use of force: it is the 'violent encounter of a moving body with another'. Collision refers to the 'encounter of opposed ideas, interests, etc.', which is characterized as hostile. On the other, collision also refers to 'coming into contact (with no notion of violent opposition or hostility); action of mind upon mind, or the like'.<sup>4</sup> So, simultaneously, 'collision' might or might not be accompanied by hostility, conflict or force; but mainly, 'collision' refers to the encounter of ideas, ways of thinking, and bodies in movement. We then have the notion of a 'regime', which is 'the set of conditions under which a system occurs or is maintained'.<sup>5</sup> Regimes of difference will then organize and reproduce social understandings of beauty, femininity, 'race', class, gender, age, and so on, as markers which are basically dissimilar and sometimes exclusive of each other. All of these regimes of difference coincide in the body, inscribing on it their own hierarchies, rules and demands. In this light, I want to explore the ways in which a sense of 'inequality' operates in the collision of regimes of difference. I am interested in both the 'encounter' but also the 'value' assigned to each of these sets of conditions – the specifics of the collision of difference in the mestiza female body. More concretely, in this chapter I am concerned with the ways in which notions of 'race', nation and femininity get configured and are constantly (re)done/(re)created in the participants' bodies. So the questions are: 'what might the cultural rules and hierarchies inscribed on the mestiza body be in terms of 'race' and femininity?' and 'what does the concern with body and beauty reveal about these women's racialized everyday experiences?'

In the extract that started this chapter, Paulina expressed her opinion of one of her classmates while studying in the United States, and remarked on the physical 'insignificance' of the 'typical Mexican'. This extract, apart from being one of the very few references to Mexican men's appearance, reveals in its rawness a popular perception of the looks of the 'typical Mexican man', and it gives an example of the prevailing ways in Mexico of expressing judgement on others' appearance. This physical description, 'short, *morenito* and skinny', works as part of the criteria that generally informs the sort of looks that are considered 'adequate'; that is, they correspond to how a Mexican person is 'expected' to look. Although that does not necessarily mean that such looks are therefore desirable, they can certainly be accepted as 'how things are'. In this brief sentence Paulina revealed the different layers which make up the perception of the 'other' and which interact with the field of vision within which these judgements are recreated: from broader aspects such as education and class, to notions of nation and belonging based on physical appearance.

Paulina talks about the 'typical' appearance of the Mexican, using these terms to configure a national identification, and implies that this particular image offers a sense of belonging. What is most interesting is the 'insignificant' value with which this image is attributed, which can also be applied to the notion of being Mexican itself. To be 'insignificant' is to be 'devoid of meaning; meaningless: of speech, word, gestures, etc'.<sup>6</sup> It also means to be 'without efficacy; ineffective; of no importance; immaterial; trivial'. However, it can also refer to being 'an unimportant or contemptible person', and thus to be 'despicable'.<sup>7</sup> I remember though that in the interview Paulina talked about this example with both a sense of indignation and a straightforward understanding of 'how things work': 'In Mexico, they wouldn't give a penny for this guy'. The issues that this idea raises are interesting. Paulina is deducing, with what seems a sense of practicality, that regardless of her classmate's status as an excellent Ph.D. student, his physical appearance (height, skin colour and size) is completely bound to his Mexicanness and, rather than guaranteeing his success, will be an obstacle to it.

What does it mean to relate appearance with nationality, image with belonging, or physical insignificance with being Mexican? Moreover, what does it mean to suggest therefore that his value as a person is at stake? Firstly, these sets of relationships can tell us about the historical and homogenizing configurations within which identities are constructed, where the visual plays a fundamental role in filtering or distinguishing people's social positions. To deduce that those social positions and distinctions end up being fundamental criteria for deciding people's fate would be simplistic. However, what is significant is that the possibility of the existence, circulation and reproduction of such perceptions has a pervasive impact on people's self-understanding, as well as on the organization of social relationships.

Throughout the interviews, the participants expressed a concern about establishing their distance from these physical descriptions: they 'know' that in so far as you look like the typical Mexican 'nobody would give a penny for you'. How can one recreate a sense of national identity if the identification with one's space of belonging implies an intrinsic devaluation? In this sense, beauty could be thought of, in this specific context, as an aspiration, a lure (Felski 2006) or a tendency (Berlant 2002) that works as a way out of the stigma of Mexicanness, of insignificance. Here we are witnessing the collision within the mestiza body, not only of regimes of difference in relation to 'race' and beauty, but also the regime of Mexicanness, of national ascription, which simultaneously carries racial underpinnings. If the value of insignificance is attributed to the appearance of a person and to what a Mexican should 'look' like, we are witnessing a quite confusing and distressing scenario. If to be Mexican is to be insignificant – or even contemptible – the constant struggle over beauty is no surprise; that is, the consideration of beauty as a way out of the stigma of Mexicanness and, therefore, of insignificance. However, the difficulty arises when the cultural understandings and everyday experiences of notions such as femininity, racial identity or national ascriptions, as distinctive and exclusive 'regimes', make the lives of these women utterly confusing.

### **In Mexico 'There is No Racism'**

The Americas have long been an arena for extraordinary mixtures of cultures and peoples born of diasporas from Africa, Asia and Europe. These mixtures have given rise to different racial constructions, known in the Caribbean as *creolization* and in Latin America as *Mestizaje*, that have been used to syncretize and refashion race and ethnic mixture into distinct forms of national identity. (Safa 1998: 3)

In Mexico, the term 'mestiza' has passed from being used to refer to the children of Spanish and indigenous inhabitants of what was called New Spain after the Spanish Conquest in 1521 and is now the Mexican territory, to being the prototype of the individuals who made up the new nation after independence from Spain in 1821. From this moment onwards, Mexico entered a process of modifying the law in terms of racial discrimination, and common ideas of equality were widespread as a consequence of the challenge from strong liberal ideologies of the time. Nevertheless, the imposition of the mestiza as the subject of national identity, the heritage of the colonial process of miscegenation but ideologically reconstructed in order to create the new sense of nation with the revolution of 1910, has hidden and grown different forms of racisms. In this context I argue that old colonial racial categories remain, and 'passing' towards 'whiteness' – in its peculiar

Mexican version – is still a goal for the inhabitants, a problematic area in terms of identity, and a non-spoken rule of social stratification.

One of the concerns that guide this chapter is precisely the debate about the existence of notions of ‘race’ and practices of racism in contemporary Mexico. Knight (1990) discusses how some Mexican authorities have denied the existence of racism since the revolution of 1910 due to the conscious efforts of the political elites to homogenize a sense of nation in a rather complex and heterogeneous society. However, ‘racism can be driven underground (not necessarily very far underground); it can shift its premises (e.g. from biological to other, ostensibly more plausible, determinants) without that ideological shift substantially affecting its daily practice’ (ibid.: 98). So for Knight, racism, racist beliefs and practices have been transformed in Mexico underpinned by both a change in discourse (that denies racism) and a constant discriminatory practice that has allowed a social space where exclusion and social inequality maintain their shaping force of social relations. Knight then writes:

But racism did not wither on the vine. Against the confident obituaries of Mexican racism ... we could set more sombre estimates of an ‘omnipresent dimension’ of racism in Mexican society, or of a ‘profoundly racist ideology’ which, according to one analysis, underpins the rule of both traditional rural caciques and also newer ‘liberal technocratic’ regional bourgeoisies. (Knight 1990: 99)

It is in this sense that I am concerned with the exploration of this ‘omnipresent dimension’ of racism in Mexican society and its ‘profoundly racist ideology’. My aim is to give an account of the forms in which racism has taken shape: how racism permeates people’s lives. In the context of my research, the ‘omnipresent dimension’ of racism is expressed both in a variety of everyday practices that have deep effects on women’s life experience, and in the ways in which women relate to what I call ‘mestizaje logic’. Indeed, I want to suggest that central to racist practices in Mexico has been the concept of racial mixture, or *mestizaje*, its cultural and historical ‘omnipresent dimension’, and the coexistence of its variety of understandings within miscegenation discourses, official nationalistic governmental policies and invisible and all-pervasive logics of prejudice. Although racial signifiers in Mexico have been transformed by the perception of ‘mixing’ throughout time, as well as by the effect of social stratification along class lines, they remain part of more complex logics of discrimination. It is through these *mestizaje* logics that the negotiating of belonging to the nation takes place. *Mestizaje* logics are strategies of racial differentiation that permeate Mexican social life. They are in operation when, for example, there is a discourse towards improving one’s appearance or achieving fairer skin colour without making explicit links to the notions of ‘race’ that underpin

such discourse or reference to how those understandings have come into being through history. What a 'mestizaje logic' does is to disconnect the personal experience of racism from the broader social context that reproduces it, and also to erase the links with its historical process of formation. When operating through such logic, racism loses its name and its referents, and becomes 'just what we do' and 'just how things are'. It is in this context that I want to focus on the significance of skin colour in its relation to notions of beauty and Mexican women's experiences of racism.

Beauty, appearance, physical features, and racialized perceptions of skin colour are notions that inform each other within the specific historical configuration of mestizaje and Mexicanness. Taking this into account, I want to think of beauty in its materialization in female racialized bodies, where their skin is a witness to and bearer of history. At the same time, I want to consider skin colour and beauty as notions that struggle with the visible in the construction of the feminine, and the problems this raises for the racialized body.

### **The Uneasiness with Skin Colour**

From the analysis of the focus groups and the life-story interviews, the relevance of skin colour appeared to be extremely important, and an uneasy issue for the participants. This uneasiness is commonly referred to when talking about racial and racist experiences. I want to suggest that such uneasiness is strongly linked to a relatively complex, overshadowed and unspoken association of skin colour with beauty, physical features, racist practices and the specific Mexican history of racial discourses, where the different uses of mestizaje play a key role.

A good way of introducing elements to understand the uneasiness with skin colour is reflected in the following extract of a focus group discussion. The difficulty of agreeing what it means to be white/fair (*güera/güerita*) or dark (*morena/morenita* or *prieta/o*) appeared clearly in one of the discussions. The following extract points out women's difficulties in determining skin colour variations and tonalities with any precision.

Roxana: But look, it's very funny, well that's what it's like at my house: when my boy was born, he came out very red and one nurse said: 'oh he is going to be *güerito*', and all the nurses called him '*El Güero*', he was '*The Güero of the Hospital*', and I said: 'hey, wait a moment, my boy is *morenito*, and the father is *moreno*, why he is not going to be like that?'

Carla: Did you bring the photographs?

Roxana: Yes, I'll show them to you, and you'll see the father too ...  
[She shows the photographs] This is my boy.

Margarita: Mmm ... Well ... *moreno, moreno, moreno*, not really ...

Roxana: Why would he not be *moreno*? He is *prieto moreno* ...

- Bertha: Look, I am *morena* and your husband is lighter than me.  
 Carla: Well ... you are light *morena*.  
 Roxana: But the funny thing is that he's always saying: 'Hey, why is the boy *moreno*?' My husband is the one asking why he is *moreno*. And I say to him: 'Well, because he's your son'. I always tell him that it's because he is his son.  
 Carla: But what was he expecting?  
 Margarita: Yes, it's like in the villages in the countryside, where all the women are *morenitas* and they still say: 'oh, hopefully my baby will come out *güerito*!'  
 Roxana: Yes ... you say: 'it's not possible ...'  
 Lorena: Yes you hear that a lot: 'the baby is very pretty; it came out *güerito* ...'

*Morena*, *prieta* and *güera* are all adjectives that refer to particular types of skin colour. *Morena* and *prieta* are very similar in their meaning; they both refer to a female with dark skin colour, or to be more precise, with 'darker-than-others' skin colour in a given context, although *prieta* could be used in a pejorative way depending on the intonation. *Güera* is an adjective used to describe a female who is perceived as having either white or 'whiter-than-others' skin colour, or maybe with blonde or light brown hair. Similar to *morena*, it can also be said of the fairest person in a given group, such as a family. When these words end in 'o' they refer to a male: *moreno*, *prieto*, *güero*.

In this extract we can see how these women's views reflect two important issues about skin colour: its visual 'relationality' and the unspoken shared cultural understanding it implies. So if skin colour is defined in relation to another person's skin colour, it seems that Margarita, Roxana, Bertha and Carla have completely different perceptions of what 'having dark skin' means. However, through their conversation they are repositioning their perception of their own skin colour and the people they are talking about (Roxana's son and the women in the countryside) within the specific setting of the focus group. The focus group here becomes an experiential event: it is the gathering together of these women in the space of the focus group that facilitates this repositioning and mutual assignation of, in this case, skin colour. In other words, and as Lancaster (2003) argues, if skin colour and colour-related words are relational, and more concretely visually relational, then they have to be renegotiated through 'comparative assessments and shifting contexts' (ibid.: 103); I would argue that this is what the participants are doing when they look at themselves and at the photographs, and make visible and explicit their perceptions of difference. Moreover, they are making evident the non-fixity of skin colour perceptions, because it is not what skin colour you 'have' (since this is indefinable and somewhat unimportant), but what colour you are 'perceived' to 'have' and 'be' at a precise moment and place in time. Skin colour is constantly (re) assigned through situated interactions and experiences.

The second issue, brought up in this conversation, is that if such a visually relational event was possible, then at the same time as such negotiation is enacted, a circulation of shared cultural understandings is also occurring. Different discourses of national identity and mestizaje conflate in these shared cultural understandings. For example, when the participants are talking about the expectations of the women in the pueblos of the countryside, they are referring to the idea that the women expect their children to be born with fairer skin colour than themselves and their partners. Another part of the extract that expresses these links between national, racial and mestizaje discourses is when Roxana's husband asks her about the skin colour of their child, wondering with surprise why their child has dark skin. Roxana replies: 'Well, because he is your son'. While the answer seems obvious, as if talking of inherited characteristics, what is striking is that the husband was puzzled enough to have posed the question, and that she had to reiterate this seemingly obvious detail. The disbelief suggested in his question does not indicate that he is being naïve, but instead is responding to an expectation of different and 'improved' (i.e. fairer) skin colour and physical features for their child.

This expectation of 'improvement' links to another example from the above extract: the use of the verb '*salir*', which literally means 'to go out'. This is a very particular term used in relation to small children at the moment when they are born. For the translation, I believed the phrase 'to come out' gave a better sense. Relatives, friends and medical staff, as well as passers-by, will often ask the new mother and/or father how the baby 'came out'. This term does not relate to the health of the child or how is the mother doing, or even a general enquiry about how the delivery was, but to the baby's skin colour. Significantly, the fact that such a question can even be asked indicates that a degree of uncertainty and unpredictability is 'allowed', 'permitted' or 'expected'. It is as if the child's skin colour will not necessarily be related to that of the parents, as if maybe some 'magical' combination, genetic inheritance or white European blood could show up and bestow upon the parents the 'good luck' of a *güerita/o*, and therefore a 'pretty' baby. In other words, an implicit understanding or logic of mestizaje, as both a biological and desirable process, and its possible outcomes, is still current in people's imaginations.

It is then the character of relationality, the possibility of negotiation and the expectation of improvement which give women's concerns with skin colour and appearance a deeper interconnection and significance. In relation to notions of 'race' within which, for example, skin colour has been worked into a vital physical/visible signifier of difference (Wade 1997), it is also the one with black or darker skin who is unmarked in relation to the marked white/lighter individual (Phelan 1996). When trying to understand the basis for the distinction between 'blackness' and 'whiteness', or in the Mexican case, between *indígenas*,<sup>8</sup> mestizas or *güeras*, visual representations lead to multiple



interpretations that depend on specific racial discourses – with particular historical formations – and ongoing performances of identity. As Phelan says, ‘the focus on the skin as the visible marker of race is itself a form of feminising those races which are not white. Reading the body as the sign of identity is the way men regulate the bodies of women’ (Phelan 1996: 10).

These approaches to sexual and racial difference become rather complex when applied to the study of subjects who have been constructed within postcolonial discourses; that is, subjects who have developed themselves within a context of being a visually fixed, stereotyped other (Bhabha 1999). Here, I am interested in Mexican mestiza women and their experiences in relation to skin colour and beauty, but from the particular perspective of the visible: the ways they see and are seen, the elements that interact to inform their gaze, the meanings and values of the metaphor of their own image. From Phelan’s perspective, mestiza women could be regarded as ‘unmarked’ beings struggling with both the desire to see themselves and the impossibility of doing so other than through another’s gaze – which is already informed as much as their own. Their social conditions as women and mestizas located in a postcolonial developing country are ideal for reproducing sexual and racial identities as stereotypes that facilitate prevailing discriminatory relationships. Their bodies and skins are ‘signifiers of discrimination [that] must be processed as visible’ (Bhabha 1999: 376).

### **Skin Colour, Beauty and Mestizaje Logic**

Consuelo, when looking at one of her photographs, shared her experience of what can be thought of as the possible terms for beauty, skin colour and physical appearance: ‘They used to call me “*prieta* [dark], *cabezona* [big head], and *dientuda* [goofy]”, and I used to say: “Why do I have such big teeth? Why am I so *morena*?”’ (Consuelo, 29, Leon). *Prieta*, as explained before, refers to a female with ‘darker-than-others’ skin colour, and it can have a pejorative connotation depending on intonation (as in this case); *cabezona* refers to a female with a large head (*cabeza*); and *dientuda*, which I translated as ‘goofy’, refers to a female with big teeth (*dientes*). Due to the context of this expression and Consuelo’s intonation when sharing her experience, it seems that these three words were used with a pejorative sense and were meant to be offensive.

Consuelo approaches her understanding of beauty via what it is not. If ‘they’ call her those names with the intention to offend and bully her, then for Consuelo it seems to mean that her appearance is in contrast to what is considered adequate and acceptable. To be beautiful means not to have dark skin colour, not to have a large head, and not to have big teeth. But this belief leaves Consuelo in an

upsetting situation where she asks herself: 'Why do I have such big teeth? Why am I so *morena*?' As in the case of Roxana and her husband mentioned above, these questions have no satisfactory answer. They seem to be asked as if an answer is both possible and impossible: they are poignant. Is there something to be explained? Is it just a rhetorical complaint without any expectation of resolution? How and why it is even possible to ask for a reason for one's appearance? On the one hand, these questions seem to arise from the notion that 'things' can happen to the body. It seems that 'things' such as specific sizes, colours, heights, and features work in favour of beauty and against ugliness. But, on the other hand, these questions also suggest that such things 'could' have been manipulated, planned or worked out previously; they could have been negotiated. The possibility of negotiation appears as central to the development of Mexican people's sense of belonging and can be observed in transformed modes in everyday practices, experiences and identities. The recurrence of this sense of a negotiation extends this discussion to its possible links with the interaction between the performance of femininity and the specificity of contemporary Mexican racial discourses and practices of racism; in other words, the ways in which *mestizaje* logic operates in the realm of beauty. Let me explain further.

Consuelo's complaints could be directed towards personal family stories, which is how in a commonsense fashion such accounts are usually understood: 'it is my problem', 'my family is just like that', 'this is how things are'. However, they also point towards a social history that has granted to the process of *mestizaje* the promise of the power of flexibility, of moulding and directing Mexican people towards perfection. Here the notion of *mestiza* as both an achieved and ascribed status (Knight 1990) is particularly significant. The promise of achievement proclaims that the 'race will be improved', and if this does not happen in such a way – if people's appearances do not approximate to the 'white ideal' – individuals can be blamed, since they have not foreseen or planned adequately, as part of a personalized project of the self, where 'negotiating one's appearance' is possible and desirable. This specific promise of *mestizaje* has proven to be more of a myth than a trustworthy reality, bringing in the element of chance as the only explanation when 'the race is not improved'. Has *mestizaje* worked in favour of randomness, giving some Mexican women and men the 'benefit' of beauty and others the 'benefit' of dreaming what it could have been like to 'look' different? Would this difference make them look the same as the admired 'white' others? Would they perhaps have fair skin, 'coloured' eyes, 'fine' features – could they perhaps be beautiful? As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, there seem to be traces of the colonial understanding of *mestizaje* as a 'highly flexible' social identity within the caste system in this extract. The logic of 'improving the race' by 'whitening' the population and approaching people's appearance to

a 'white-Europeanized' ideal is implicit in Consuelo's story. The questioning of her appearance bears this racist logic – mestizaje logic – and is a testimony of the unspoken rules of a social hierarchy of distinctions, and of the codes that circulate within the particular Mexican configuration of the visible world.

The significance of beauty here goes beyond its conception as a space of submission through which women are determined and objectified by a male gaze (Bartky 1990). Furthermore, it challenges such understandings of women's experiences and asks for a deeper and renewed 'complicated' analysis (Felski 2006, Craig 2006, Colebrook 2006). What these women experienced is the sharp pain of feeling fundamentally inadequate, together with the constant fear of being perceived as 'insignificant', beyond their own psychological profiles or specific personal stories. These women's 'beauty talk' revealed the ways in which the shame of not being/feeling beautiful and the desire to be/look 'normal', interact with the relationships between racial discourses, the visible and the construction of the feminine. Such interaction re-creates the links between emotions and the reproduction of racism, which are at the core of Mexican culture and society, calling for a renewal of the claim of the personal as clearly political.

Practices and concerns around and about skin colour and beauty are by no means trivial; they actually reveal the depth of racial attitudes and their consequences for the performance of femininity and the sense of self-worth. Moreover, as Brand argues, '[f]or women, beauty has always mattered – in a personal way and as an inevitable and underlying sociopolitical framework for how they operate in the world' (Brand 2000: 5–6). Skin colour and beauty, and the practices and concerns around them, raise alternative ways of approaching, from a feminist perspective, the analysis of women's experiences in contemporary postcolonial societies. These practices are strongly linked to the uniqueness of the 'omnipresent dimension' (Knight 1990: 99) of racism in Mexico, the notion of 'mestizaje logic', and the stereotypes that inform women's sense of national identity.

### **Mestizaje, Mexicanness and Beauty**

The questions that follow then are: how should this Mexican mestiza female body be seen and read? How can we build a complex reading that can explicate the collision between regimes of difference? Could skin colour and beauty be concerns that exemplify this collision? Ahmed proposes 'to think through the skin as a surface upon which differences collide' (Ahmed 1998: 47). In the first instance, beauty could be thought of as something that happens on the surface of the body and that is valued visually. Although the 'thing by which beauty is judged' (Weekes 1997) is inscribed on the female mestiza

body, in the specificity of her skin and her features, this perspective would not necessarily account for the moment and the process in which the act of seeing enacts a particular social configuration of the visual and makes a judgement about specific bodies. The female mestiza body not only carries meaning on its surface, but, more significantly, its meaning is negotiated in relation to and in comparison with other bodies. This is to say that beauty in the mestiza woman is not something she 'has', but is a characteristic that is socially 'given' to her and which she has the potential to 'negotiate'. The specific surface of the body can provide clues for racial identity, national belonging, familial resemblance and cultural capital. Nevertheless, it is the performance of each body, the specific interaction between bodies, and the embodied distinctions between regimes of difference, which locates bodies socially.

The skin then becomes, effectively and affectively, 'a surface upon which differences collide' (Ahmed 1998: 47) and a 'site of social crisis and instability' (ibid.: 52). It is on the skin that issues such as beauty, appearance and colour are debated and are literally worked and suffered for; it is there where they are also felt, some or many of the times with shame, fear or disgust. It is on the skin where 'body work' (Gimlin 2002) is performed and reflected. It is through the discourses of the skin that bodies are diagnosed as healthy or diseased, are 'normalized' or 'stigmatized' (Goffman 1963), are racially marked or unmarked (Phelan 1996), are made visible or invisible (Goldberg 1997). As Probyn (2001) argues, it is through the different shades and textures of the skin that histories of inequality can be read. She writes:

Any investigation of skin must start here. It must start in the present in order to seek ways of connecting to the past. It must start in the acknowledgement of the fact that skin matters, matters viscerally, and in different ways. It must begin in an acknowledgement of the different shades, textures and feel of skin, of skin as testimony both to the subjective state of individuals and to the histories that have moulded them ... Skin becomes a living proof of the ways in which individuals seek to inhabit this land. (Probyn 2001: 87)

Feelings of lack and shame, and the willingness to improve one's appearance, are reproduced within a social context where the 'omnipresent dimension' (Knight 1990: 99) of racism – 'mestizaje logic' – operates. The irreconcilable relation between beauty and the mestiza body, the dark-skinned body, makes the performance of femininity difficult and sometimes impossible. How can you be dark, *morena*, mestiza – and beautiful? How can you be Mexican mestiza without relating to insignificance? How could these women's racialized bodies and their informed gazes not confront their everyday experience? This analysis has pointed to the accumulation of meaning that informs a notion such as skin colour and beauty in its

empirical experience. When these women see themselves in a mirror, in their photographs, in the stories that others tell about them, they cannot avoid the social configuration of the visual world, where beauty, skin colour, bodily features and the performance of femininity collide. To contemplate a social configuration of the visible is to confront the idea of looking as an unmediated act, and to confirm the constructed character of the informed gaze. It is precisely the collision of regimes of difference that points to the social configuration of the visible. In such a configuration, in such a collision, several elements come together – the informed gaze, notions of beauty, feelings of shame – creating a sort of ‘mestizaje moment’. The ‘omnipresent dimension’ of racism is then fully revealed when that configuration/collision occurs.

### Notes

1. ‘*Gringo*’ is a popular Mexican way of naming ‘white-looking’ foreigners, mainly from the United States. With the ending ‘o’ it refers to a male, and with ‘a’ to a female (*gringa*).
2. *Morenito/a* comes from *moreno/a* which refers to a dark-skinned male (o) or female (a) and the ending *-ito/ita* indicates its diminutive. ‘*Linda Morenita*’ from the title means ‘pretty dark-skinned woman’ in Spanish. This does not necessarily mean the phrase refers to a child or young woman but as it is a way to show ‘softness’, approachability, and/or tenderness.
3. *Mestizaje* is understood here as a set of discourses of racial mixture. The OED defines it as: ‘interbreeding and cultural intermixing of Spanish and American Indian people (originally in Mexico, and subsequently also in other parts of Latin America); miscegenation, racial and cultural intermixing’, The Oxford English Dictionary (2002).
4. ‘collision’, The Oxford English Dictionary (2006).
5. ‘regime’, The Oxford English Dictionary (2006).
6. ‘insignificant’, The Oxford English Dictionary (2006).
7. ‘contemptible’, The Oxford English Dictionary (2006).
8. ‘*Indígena(s)*’ is the name given to the indigenous population of Mexico, nowadays comprising fifty-six different ethnic groups. Some authors use the more traditional ‘*india/o(s)*’, which has a clear pejorative connotation in its everyday use. Although both terms (*indígena/india*) are problematic, I have decided to use *indígena* as a more ‘respectful’ word. I discuss the problematic of both terms elsewhere (Moreno Figueroa 2006).

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