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Multiple Belongings and Composite Identities of Young People from the South of Guanajuato, Mexico

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Abstract

This article is based on semi-structured interviews with young high-school and sophomore students who came back from the United States to Guanajuato intending to analyse the life trajectory of young migrants based on the notion of multiple belongings and composite identities proposed by Amin Maalouf. Based on it we want to advance the idea that the perspectives that emphasize assimilation or transnationalism do not help explain the process of coming back, on a generation of young people who grew up irregularly in the United States and were forced to return to Mexico. We propose that a compound identity is emerging in the North American region, one that allows migrants and their children to develop multiple belongings to cultures, territories and jobs that facilitate the resilience of these young people in their life trajectories on different social spaces.

Keywords: *Migratory trajectory; multiple belongings; compound identities; assimilation; transnationalism; North America.*

Introduction

Guanajuato has a centennial experience of migration to the United States. It is an event that creates in the individual, a sense of belonging and adaptation to different social spaces, whether they are lived or imagined. Migration has been explained as a supranational connection of political communities in which migrants and their families interact on a daily basis, despite political borders (Levitt and Glick - Schiller, 2004); or by the assimilation capacity of individuals to the new society (Itzigshohn, 2015). The idea that is analysed in this paper is that the young migrant returnees have become resilient from the construction of a compound identity that is integrated from multiple belongings (Maalouf, 1998). With it, they do not deny their belonging to the community in which they grew up, but they have also included it into another one, that is developing in the community in which they are continuing their lives. That is to say, the compound identity of these young people derives from their personal migration trajectory, or from belonging to a family that has built their well-being based on mobility and have become resilient into their lived-territories beyond their legal status.

These identities and multiple belongings are analysed through the individual narratives of four young students. Three of them come back from the United States. The fourth is a member of a migrant family that has experienced the migration of his father, although he has never established in the United States. These identities are an expression of their immigration status in the United States and the reinsertion as members of legally alien communities. We conceived that identities were shaped according to the territory, beyond the permanent and daily contacts that maintain the

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sense of belonging to transnational communities (Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004; Portes, et al., 2003).

We focus on the process individuals construct a compound identity. We explore the idea that identity is not the result of a single strong element, but it is made up of multiple belongings. This accentuates the individual capacity of empathy to diverse political, religious, cultural, sexual communities, and reinforces the particular sense of each individual (Maalouf, 1998). We take distance from the author, however, in a fundamental point, because while Maalouf (1998, p.22) emphasizes on how a sensation of risk perceived by an individual towards some of his belongings, causes the person to radicalize in its defence, we aim to reflect on the person resilience according to the context and circumstances experienced by young migrants.

This text has three parts. The first will develop the identity elements proposed by Maalouf, enriching the discussion with the idea of social resilience. In trying to make this synthesis, we seek to highlight two points: one, take a distance from transnationalism, that assumes that national belongings are structured by the social bonds that are maintained in different political spaces, or abandoned by assimilation to the new country (Portes, et al., 2003; Glick-Schiller, 2005; Galindo, 2009; Waldinger, 2015a, 2015b). Second, the discussion of identity as the result of multiple belongings (Maalouf, 1998), and the development of resiliency of young people who count on different belongings in relation to their mobile lives, the density of their social networks, and the reconstruction of their lives in new social spaces. Our argument recognises in the individual not only a multiplicity of belongings but also a capability for resilience that means, individual's multiple belongings adapt to the spaces and trajectories of daily life, which reconstructs and extends its social networks, independently of the national or juridical belonging to new spaces.

The second part will continue with the analysis of the migratory narratives of 4 young people. We will highlight their feelings of national belonging, their identification with the territorial space, their social networks, their use of the language and their vision of the North American space, including the United States and Mexico. This will lead us to the final discussion, on which we seek to ponder how migration has spliced multiple forms of belonging, facilitating young migrants to become resilient.

Multiple Belongings and Resilient Identities

The first distinction in this work is based on what Amin Maalouf (1998, pp. 22-24) defines as major identities. That is, one's belonging to a national community, a religious community or, finally, a social class. The first two, have been defined in terms of belonging to an imagined community, which can also be lived at a distance (Anderson, 1991; Anderson 1992; Glick-Schiller, 2005). These strong identities are built and shared collectively. The latter is defined, in terms of the material reproduction of individuals. It is on the basis of these major identities, above all fitting into a national community, on which is based the idea of transnationalism (Glick-Schiller, 2005; Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004). That is, belonging to an imagined community (Anderson, 1991) that moves in geographical spaces that surpass borders and is sustained from continuous and permanent individual contacts (Portes et al., 2003). In this sense, migration encourages these imagined communities to move through the territories, as part of a repertoire of attributes that an individual has to ensure a sense of *belonging* and a *way of being*, regardless borders (Waldinger, 2015b).

As belongings are defined by language, religion, ethnicity, and are reinforced from the origins and relationships with others, Maalouf identifies a variety of identity resources that exist simultaneously within an individual; an idea that goes beyond a mobile belonging that either remains transnationally or is lost in assimilation to a new national community (Waldinger, 2015a).



That would make the migrant a victim of a tribal conception of identity in which the migrant is forced to choose between his native land or the country that welcomed him (Maalouf, 1998 p. 54). Assimilation presumes one belonging prevailing over the others definitively. A process young migrant returning to a legal 'home' are unable to live. This is why we emphasise that the feelings of belonging constitute a changing hierarchy of identifications through their lifetime.

In other words, we understand identity as an identification process, rather than as a permanent state that can move across borders (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Hall, 2003). Stuart Hall, (2003, pp. 2-3) highlights the discursive perspective that sees identification as a construction, which isn't determined in the sense that it can always be won or lost, maintained or abandoned. So, we assume that identifications help generate a repertoire from which the individual can draw to adapt to the different social arenas that conditions of mobile life. These repertoires include not only the categories used by instances of authority but also the individual recognition of characteristics shared with other people or social groups (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Hall, 2003). The individual then can develop simultaneous, not mutually exclusive, belongings. From here we derive the possibility that identity is resilient, that is, that the individual has a repertoire of identifications that can be adapted according to external factors that affect him (Vila Freyer, et al., 2016; Vila Freyer, 2017). That is, an individual endowed with multiple belongings can facilitate its resilience due to its compound identity, which leaves the simultaneous notion of transnationalism, as the need to establish permanent contacts in time and space, useless. As a consequence, if a migrant person, or his offspring, develops these multiple belongings during their life trajectory, he will have a greater ability to adapt to the different living spaces in which they interact. A feature that comes with the centennial culture of migration Guanajuato has.

Maalouf (1998, p.33) states that the basic elements of identity are found in the individual from birth: physical characteristics, sex, colour, which acquire meaning in the social environment and are reinforced by the environment, or multiple environments. These elements give the individual his capacity for resilience, as defined in behavioural psychology: the ability to continue the individual's development, even though this is altered by a wound (Cyrułnik, 2015). The mother first, and the community later, provide the individual with internal resources that explain the ability to react within more or less solid developmental guides. The community will allow "the possibility of finding the places of affection, activities, and words that (...) provide the resilient guides that will allow you to resume an altered development" (Cyrułnik, 2015, p. 27). Hall and Lamont (2013, p. 13) have recovered it to analyze the "ability of a social group to maintain its physical, mental health, material sustainability, sense of dignity and community belonging in front of the challenges that arise (...) not to come back to a previous state, but to achieve well-being, even when this entails significant modifications on the behaviour or social structures that frame and give meaning to the behaviour". In this sense, migrant's social resilience is the result of an active response process, the product of a creative process in which one creates tools, collective resources and new narratives that sustain their well-being in the face of change.

Return migration of young people seems to form a compound resilient identity with which young people have blended multiple belongings that result from socialisation in a destination community, without this implying choosing or abandoning belonging to the community of birth, to which they are forced to come back and to reconstruct their lives. These elements make it easy for them to widen their repertoire of identifications and to craft denser social networks in, at least, two universes that include languages, social codes, spaces of living, etc. which makes it difficult to emphasize in the argument both assimilationism and transnationalism, because these concepts do not explain the process lived by migrants, and especially their children, once settled back in Mexico.



Migratory Narratives and Multiple Belongings

This part is constructed from four semi-structured interviews conducted in 2016 to young students in the communities of Apaseo el Alto, Celaya and Salvatierra. We chose the cases that express the most different possible scenarios of returning: Patty, a daughter of regularized migrants who, born in the United States, was actually immigrating to his father's home-town; Alejandro, a young deportee; Luis, a son of a migrant residing in the United States who has never lived in the United States, even if he has papers to do so; Ivonne, a young woman who grew up undocumented in the United States and whose family voluntarily came back. The interviews sought to know the personal narrative about their migratory experience, the way they understand migration, their sense of community and national belongings, how they have experienced migration, as well as the main problems they have faced moving from North to South.

Patty¹

At the time of the interview, Patty was 16 years old. She had lived three years in Mexico, and her main challenge was learning Spanish. Her immigration history began when her parents - he, a circular migrant who is now a naturalised American - and - she, born in the US, the daughter of Mexicans - settled in Mexico. Although Mexico has been part of their history, Patty doesn't feel Mexican. She is here because of her parent's decision. Her life changed radically as she moved from the suburbs of Chicago to Apaseo el Alto. Although her life in Mexico is more independent, she is afraid of getting lost; she doesn't know the geography, nor the nearby places. Her father still had a carpentry business in the United States and frequently travels to maintain it to keep an income in dollars. Migration to Mexico allows him to pay for private schools for their daughters and ensure they can go to college.

Despite the time spent in Mexico and her dual citizenship, Patty doesn't feel Mexican. The most important change she has experienced is having become bilingual. She explains it because she says, she still speaks with an accent, her customs make her different. When she describes herself, she says "I'm not going to feel Mexican [ever]. I am not like that". When we ask her to describe what it means to 'be like that', she established her ignorance of geographical space and language as the first source of identity "because [being Mexican] is knowing how to walk here in Apaseo (...) isn't to get lost, isn't it? It is to be able to walk". The second characteristic describes her social networks "Friends from there and [the ones] from here are different" (...). "Here they gossip more, there [in the US] they are calmer, it is as if they don't care. Here they are more understanding, yet very opinionated". In this interpretation, Patty begins to recognise her ability to belong to both communities.

Patty arrived in Mexico without speaking Spanish. She thought "I was going to miss a good friend, and the way of life, (...) the cold and the snow (...) I remember that I was frightened of Mexico because I didn't speak Spanish, (...) *what I was more afraid of, was not knowing*". She says the most important learning from the migratory experience has been that "*I know more, I am more resistant*". She defines that endurance as based on knowledge: of commanding the language, of space and of adaptation to school. "[The teachers] are more demanding, but I am also more committed. *I became more committed*. Before I didn't do homework, now I'm more alive. *I adapted*". The recognition of the resistance and ability to adapt keeping her loyalty with her original

¹ Interview in Apaseo el Alto, February 23rd, 2016.



identity, makes her narrative, as of an intercultural person, who dominates, sometimes without realising it, spaces, based on the recognition of her simultaneous belonging to both communities.

Arturo ²

Arturo, a 17-year-old boy, who at the time of the interview, was a few months away from finishing high school. He was deported to Mexico when he was 15 and can't come back to the US in 10 years. His migratory history began when his parents divorced, and his mother took him to the United States when he was one year old. They lived in a small community in Texas and returned to settle in a small community in Apaseo el Alto. Arturo visited Mexico at the age of 6, lived a year, in which he learned to speak Spanish and to adapt to family values. When about a decade later, his family decided to regularise their immigration status in the United States, on the recommendation of a lawyer, they crossed the border into Ciudad Juárez. The US Consulate denied them a visa arguing a long list of violations to different legislation. This is how he and his mother were stranded at the border unable to come back home.

Arturo left a life of a *mojado* -wetback- in the United States, to a life in Mexico in which he had to 'legalise' his situation. The border that is part of his personal history seems to follow him in his process of adaptation to Mexico. For him, living as a *mojado* was "almost everything normal". Sometimes he was afraid because, in Texas, the *migra* went a lot to the houses. "I was afraid that someday for any little thing, they could grab us (...) although being illegal is simply not having documents. For me, it doesn't matter to have papers or not. As I saw things, there were many who are citizens and were the worst people... One that doesn't have papers has lived as friendly with everyone. So, for me being illegal it's just a word, a label, that they gave to people". A person's migratory situation is a label with which one lives with, and his ordinary life was all about going unnoticed and being kind to others.

Life in the United States was very pleasant, while life in Mexico is difficult. From what he describes, his life in the United States was also limited. His stepfather was a regularised truck driver and his mother, an undocumented, sold ice cream or cakes from home. "There, because of my friends, I used to come home from school, and they would phone me, 'hey come over here, let's play', and I spent time with them. Here I do not know why, but I am given that difficulty of having friends. I barely hang out with my classmates, I only go out with my family. Friendship with people of my age has been very different from what it was in the United States". Contrary to Patty's sensation of gained independence, Arturo has found it challenging to be recognized by his natural social mates. As Patty, he just not has the feeling he can act as 'them'.

Here everyone talks to each other, and I just talk to certain people. I'm not so confident about talking to everybody. That's one thing, and another I see that their parents have a good job. Since we arrived, my parents have survived from a little food stand, and they are barely making enough money so that we can eat (...) What it has been easier for me [to be part of] is family. Since we arrived, as I say, they accepted us. As here with the customs, with the words in English that they do not understand, and things like that...

In this testimony, the resources provided by his family have allowed them to restart their lives. His aunt and uncle helped him enrol in school. Like the others, socialising with people of his age, feeling recognised and accepted has shown its difficulty. This largely explains he is living a new

² Interview in Apaseo el Alto, on February 23rd, 2016.



form of isolation and trying to go unnoticed in Mexico as well, in addition to he is now carrying the stigma of deportation. He also misses to play football in school "I didn't see it as a great luxury to be able to train every day, but since I arrived here, I saw that I miss it a lot".

Arturo's family lost everything. What he describes as a comfortable life in the United States: "the house, the TV in every room, the kitchen things, the furniture (...) to get to live with my uncle and his family first, and then in a local food stand on the side of the highway that we have to adapt as a home". He wishes he can also make the "the good money I could earn there by cutting the grass of the neighbours; here I have worked on several things, and it is difficult for me to get money as to pay for my own expenses". Like Patty, Arturo feels disadvantaged because he does not know the space, or he can't yet locate where he lives on a map. He has had to reinforce his Spanish fluency. He has studied with scholarships, and he is not sure whether he will be able to get the money to apply to college or to be able to gain scholarships or financial support. He has lost independence.

Arturo's capability for resilience makes him, without he has realised it, a stronger person. "What I have learned is to be grateful for everything that I have had and for what I have now, because you never know what can come next. We never even imagined that they were going to take away everything we had". For Arturo, the United States "means, as I see it right now, it is a place of opportunities. Because with little effort you can have a good job and good services. Here it is more difficult [to find] a simple job that pays well. There, you get good money doing any little thing, enough as to have your own house, your own car... Here you have to decide between one thing and another". He can't either say if he feels Mexican or American "because from the moment I remember, always my Mexican customs (...) But yes, we also adopt customs of the United States, so you can say that I am between Mexican and American. I could not say I'm 100 per cent Mexican, or I'm 100 per cent American".

During the interview, he realised that being totally bilingual and knowing how to move in two cultures are advantages that he has over his fellows. It turned out to be a discovery for him, accustomed to living with the stigma of disadvantage, or of building a life that has taught him going unnoticed. Although he has found classmates who are also migrant returnees, the others came back to Mexico as a result of a free family decision. Arturo was forced to return, and he is unable to reenter the United States for ten years, a period in his life when he expects to define what is essential for him: study, make a career, start a family. He believes that when he becomes 25, and can go back, he'd have made his life in Mexico. For now, he thinks he won't try to go back.

Luis³

Luis is a member of a mixed family. His father has circulated between Chicago and Guanajuato, and every year he spends three months in Mexico. In that situation, he met his mother and established his family. His mother's family is a family of middle-class university's degree professionals in Celaya; his father's family is a family of migrants who are engaged in gardening work *-yarda-* in Chicago. Luis has a green card to undertake his life in the United States. At the moment he is a sophomore, he says that for him the United States would only represent being a gardener, as his father.

As Alejandro's social resources in Mexico, Luis' network provides and limits his opportunities in the US. His family would afford the social and material resources to adapt to Chicago. He had not even considered the possibility that his university studies in Mexico would help him to form a company of his own in the United States based on those social resources. "The United States is,

³ Interviewed in Celaya, Guanajuato, on March 1st, 2016.



well when I was a child, it was the place I want to go to [like my dad], right now it's like an alternative (...) it's like if I can't do what I want here, I can go there, save money, and then come back". While for Patty, Arturo and Ivonne, the United States is a beautiful place to live in, with opportunities they have not found in Mexico, in the imagination of Luis the US is only hard work, without intermediate points in life, the narrative of his father's.

Migration has also meant an improvement in the quality of life, for the less educated family of his father, while the family's income on the mother's side in Mexico is similar due to the opportunities offered by education. Both families, he says, have the same quality of life in Mexico and in the United States, although his father's family wouldn't have achieved them if they've stayed in Mexico and remained as peasants, with rainfed land. Contrary to the other interviewees, Luis doesn't consider migration as an opportunity. The fundamental difference is in his university studies "I would not have assisted to college for 4 years to go to work *like that* in the US". Irregular migration is for Luis. "It's like living without freedom (...) because if ever you are arrested even for the smallest thing, they almost immediately will be deporting you (...) Migration [is] *like to be there but hidden all the time. That is not to live fully in that country*". That idea, built from conversations with his father, that migrants could not go out because they have to live trying to go unnoticed, like Alejandro and Ivonne, "*it's because if they see one, that one put everyone else at risk*". The family of Luis's father is a family of migrants, three generations of men linked to the United States.

Ivonne ⁴

Ivonne is a member of a family that migrated in 1999s due to the difficulty her father had in maintaining an irregular circular migration to the United States. She arrived when she was two years old and lived nine years in Georgia. Her parent's siblings have years legally settled in Calhoun and Dalton. When they decided to return, her father stayed for more than three years to finish building their house in a community of Salvatierra. At the time of the interview, she was a sophomore.

For Ivonne, growing up as *mojada* was as normal. The main learning experience is that "being a migrant isn't bad in itself, through that you learn good and bad experiences. Even if they are drastic changes like coming back here to live in the community of origin (...) *Being illegal is like not having proof that you live there*". And yes, as everyone else in this paper it is learning to live with the concern of not to be noticed, not to pass near police checkpoints, or to hide under beds or in bath tubes in case the *migra* arrives home, because they "are there, but without evidence of their being".

She thinks that when they came back things just 'got complicated'. "When we come backed (...) we were still illegal [in Mexico] for a while" she says joking. "My mother already had my naissance proof (...), but the problem is that of my sister, who born in the US, she has the American act, and we had to do the Mexican one from here". That makes her feel that they are here, but without the full evidence, again. Illegality has become a game between her and her sister, for, even in Mexico, the illegality of a member of her family continues to be a threat, a part of her daily life.

Within the description of Ivonne's life in the United States, she was the only one who spoke of discrimination and mistreatment by naturalised Mexicans or Americans. She describes her memories:

I do not know if it is true, but we lived a beautiful childhood. Let's say we didn't live with luxuries, but one had what one fancied. We used to have big family reunions frequently. At

⁴ Interview in Salvatierra, Guanajuato, on April 21st, 2016.



Christmas my dad bought us a lot of toys, it was like an easier life (...) We moved many times, when the bail was fulfilled... In the first place we had, we were living in an apartment, and later when my sister was born, we moved to a house, it was a very old house. As it was too big, we rented parts of it to cousins and acquaintances of my dad, it had like four rooms. Then afterwards we moved again (...) I always dream of that house. I think I still dream of it because we lived the best moments as a family there.

Ivonne's parents decided to return because her father worked fewer hours and money wasn't enough. It is one of the cases in which the mother came back with the girls, and the father kept sending money from the United States. In Mexico, they keep facing irregular conditions: first, Mexican border officials asked them for bribes to let them cross their furniture; the little sister has problems accessing public services in Mexico because she is considered a foreigner. "The money that my dad brought when he finally joined us, was not enough when my little sister needed a surgery. As my little sister didn't have *Seguro Popular*, my father had to spend his savings both in her health problems and in regularise her papers".

The second problem was that it took her dad more than a year to find a job. Her parents had serious economic difficulties: "They hired him in the factory where he said, the foreman humiliated him (...) he gave him the lower position even though he had already managed the same machinery in the United States". Like Arturo, their ability to adapt was sustained on the effective and material resources the community provided because her extended family is already settled in the US.

There is an important contrast between the opportunities represented by Mexico and the United States in Ivonne's personal narrative. Although her speech only keeps good memories of life in the United States, and nostalgia makes part of her narration, her family always shared their houses with other families. She has more difficulties recognising and defining her multiple belongings. In her narrative about Mexico, everything is associated with the deprivation, bullying at school, for the periods when there was no food at their table... Like Patty, she considers that the experience has made her someone stronger although Ivonne refuses to recognise any possible membership in the United States. "I hate to speak English" she assures. Like Arturo and Patty, when she came back, she didn't know her parents' hometown nor couldn't read or write in Spanish properly. She was stigmatized as a *norteña*. There is a part of her that is Mexican and another part that "is just there". The one that is there is the image that includes friends, school, the places where she spent the weekends with her parents, the houses in which she lived, the houses of her aunts. "Here [in Mexico] there are also [good] moments, almost similar, but at the same time different. For the same reason that here that things are very different *like here you do not have everything easily*".

Discussion and Conclusion

The lives of these young people have been marked by migration. The first element that jolts is the classification: being daughter or son of a *mojado*, or being *mojados* themselves. It is the migratory status that generates a first attribute of their belonging and a reason for not gaining full recognition by their communities either in Mexico or the US. Although for them being 'illegals' is just a label, their narratives also inferred stigmatization. The stigma was implicit of a way of living in which they have to be unnoticeable, if not invisible, in order to elude problems for them and their families. In the case of Luis, having residency means just an opportunity to approach the intense hand-labour of his father, as a way to reproduce an identity that comes from abroad.

The second element is that coming back forces the adaptation to the social spaces, to the effective and material resources provided by family. Their personal perception of their difference



with their Mexican fellows because they do not know the language, speak with an accent, and are unaware of space. Without residence papers in the North, they lived a vulnerable life in which invisibility was the note; they have been forced to resume their life in Mexico without papers in order to continue their studies or to gain 'legal' existence. Paradoxically, it is in Mexico, their 'own' country, where they feel more vulnerable because they have faced serious economic difficulties, their peers bullying them for speaking with accents, their lack of social groups, their ignorance of the geography, and their relationship with the state passing through corruption. The family provides them with the first social resources with which to readapt and reconstitute themselves.

A third point is the process of reestablishing their sense of belonging and incorporating it to their repertoires. The fear of getting lost, of not knowing where they are, makes it difficult for them to develop a sense of belonging. To this, one must add the effort needed to reintegrate into their parents' communities of origin, the same that expelled them for the lack of opportunities. They are immigrants to new places in which they need to learn to make friends, understanding the process of school education, the social dynamics among adolescents, and to different social codes. All these have prevented them from identifying advantages -such as proficiency in the English language, their new repertory of identifications, and the bicultural personalities - that could place them within the labour dynamic under better conditions in Mexico. This may be because their transit to bilingualism is experienced as a disadvantage, a factor of disintegration, of mockery.

The last element is that of transnationality. The narratives of the children on this story show that they define themselves and establish their new welfare conditions based on the compound identity and their double belonging: they were integrated, as undocumented aliens, into their communities in the United States, and now, they are structuring their belonging to the Mexican ones. This doesn't imply that they have to opt for one or the other, and in doing so, they are reinforcing their resilience capacity, sustained by their multiple belongings, structured despite their difficulties. This makes legality a pretext of membership because it depends on belonging to the community, friendship, everyday life, language fluency, and space knowledge. They are in the process of structuring a composite identity: none have left aside their ability to be part of American society, while they include Mexican in their identification repertoires.

Young people who have come back assume migration as a disadvantage instead of visualising a strengthened personal narrative and denser social networks gained from a mobile life trajectory. For this reason, it is interesting to reflect on the multiple belongings of the young people of Guanajuato, as a way to reappraise the migrants. The returning of young people from the United States frames the emergence of a generation with a compound identity. This compound identity based on multiple belongings becomes a comparative advantage for them if they could develop recognition of their ability to belong to two societies, which by this fact alone would cease to be mutually exclusive, to frame a common space, North American.

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264 *Multiple Belongings and Composite Identities of Young People*

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