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Subaltern Identity in Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Last Crossing*

The metaphor of the Canadian mosaic has served Canadian cultural interests in two ways. First, as an image signifying respect for diversity, it represents the ideal of Canadian society as a design to which each piece contributes, while still retaining its own colour and shape. Second, it serves to distinguish Canadian cultural values from those of the United States—the national agenda figured as a mosaic made up of discrete pieces which retain their integrity rather than a ‘melting pot’ in which differences are obliterated as each element is dissolved in the whole. However, the metaphor of the Canadian mosaic encompasses not only formal respect for difference but also resistance to the idea of blending or crossing that dilutes an identity based upon origins. The emphasis is on retaining a strong sense of historical identity rooted in the discrete experience of cohorts defined by race, ethnicity, gender, region. This essentialist impulse in narratives of identity formation is reflected in contemporary Canadian fiction that focuses on the experience of particular elements of the cultural mosaic—for example, gays, First Nations peoples, Scots, Moravians, Newfoundlanders—and portrays as failure or loss the emergence of hybrid or cosmopolitan identity.

Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Last Crossing*¹ is a novel about different kinds of crossings. The most obvious is the crossing of geographical territory. Travel across the Atlantic and across the Canadian west structures much of the action of the novel. One of the four internal narrators, Charles Gaunt, crosses the Atlantic twice in 1871 in a failed effort to bring his twin brother Simon home to England. During his nearly nine-month quest, the period chronicled in the bulk of the novel, Gaunt and a mixed party of British, Canadians, and Americans traverse the American prairie west, ranging from Fort Benton, on the Missouri River in the U.S. territory of northern Montana, to Fort Edmonton, on the North Saskatchewan River in what is now Alberta, Canada. The novel's title, *The Last Crossing*, anticipates Gaunt's likely return to Canada twenty-five years later.

The concept of crossing resonates as well in a spectrum of vexed relationships involving intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and culture. The framework of travel and quests for people who are lost or hiding fosters encounters in which subjectivity and identity are constantly in play. In using those terms, I adopt the distinctions articulated by Linda Martín Alcoff, employing ‘subjectivity’ to refer to the internal or lived sense of self and ‘identity’ to refer to the social self, the roles or categories a person occupies in a particular cultural context.² Vanderhaeghe's novel exploits the complexities of its historical setting to construct a series of possibilities for fluid or alternative identities. As the key characters

move from one setting to another, they have opportunities to define themselves and be recognized as British or Canadian, heterosexual or homosexual, white or Native, gentleman or lady or folk

In the interwoven narratives that comprise this text, the motif of crossing acquires very specific implications. It is not analogous to the crossing of two plants to create a hybrid. Changes, encounters, and decisions are possible, but not the melding of unlike things or the erasure of boundaries. Cultural crossing is analogous to the crossing of a river from one side to the other or the encounter of opposites, as when we speak of one person crossing another—meeting adversely, implying obstruction or thwarting. In *The Last Crossing*, cultures intersect, but they are not contiguous or reconciled. The failure of societies to support hybrid identities and the failed efforts of individuals to sustain a hybrid sense of self are emphasized in four alternating first-person narratives, as well as the enveloping third-person narration. Ultimately, each character in the novel who is in a position to ‘cross’, to negotiate public and private identity, makes an essentialist choice. Thus, the novel can be read against continuing debates about the relationship between subjectivity and social or cultural identity, especially challenges to the ideal of hybridity in some versions of postmodernism and renewed debates about essentialism in postcolonial theory. More narrowly, it addresses the valorisation of discreteness and purity implicit in the ideal of the Canadian mosaic.

In contemporary theory, as Alcoff notes, ‘there has been a noticeable thaw regarding the term “essentialism.” What was once perfunctorily denounced . . . has recently been tentatively examined . . . for possible signs of validity’ (313). Her comment occurs in the context of an argument for postpositivist realism. Two of the claims advanced by postpositivist realists are particularly salient to this novel: first, the proposition that the range of identities an individual can plausibly ‘construct’ or ‘choose’ is limited, because identities refer outward to specific social worlds,³ and second, the argument that while interpolated cultural identities are always constraining, they are not always, in Wendy Brown’s phrase, ‘wounded attachments’, but can, on the contrary, be enabling and enriching.⁴

It is precisely this paradox that recurs in the novel’s tapestry of cultural crossings. In any particular cultural context, individuals are offered a narrow spectrum of identity categories. But they have choices, or in some cases create options for themselves, that express essential elements of their subjectivity. Moreover, most of the key characters in Vanderhaeghe’s novel embrace a subaltern identity—Canadian rather than British, provincial rather than elite, Native rather than white, homosexual rather than heterosexual. The question of how to understand this accommodation of the personal to the social is a crucial one. Since no social category of identity recognizes the complexity of individual subjectivity, the issue is whether, in Judith Butler’s terms, these characters have ‘embraced . . . the injurious term’⁵ or whether they have affirmed an identity that is, for them, worth its price. The novel, in other words, develops a series of subject positions that can be read as evidence of abjection

or of agency

To demonstrate the development of this paradox in multiple strands of the novel, I will sketch briefly two of the situations in which it plays out and then discuss a third more fully. One thread of the novel follows a bittersweet love affair between the British gentleman Charles Gaunt and a Canadian frontier woman, Lucy Stovall. Their liaison is recognized as a mismatch by everyone, including the couple themselves. Although Charles initially imagines that there is some third place—not Canada, not England—where they could make a life together, Lucy always knows that she must renounce Charles or shame him and betray herself. In her narration, Lucy says of her relationship with Charles, ‘I understood how the signposts of each of our solitary roads can hardly be read by the other because they are so unlike. Sometimes Charles and me can scarce make out each other’s speech. Him with his high-flown turns of phrase and his high-stepping words, me with my homely country talk, all knots to him that he can hardly pick apart’ (319). Rejecting Charles, Lucy accepts instead as a suitor Custis Straw—a worthy man, but not her life’s great love—and a life in Canada that is commensurate with her sense of who she is.

In a second strand of plot, Charles’s twin, Simon, once he has left England for North America, acknowledges his homosexuality and forms a relationship with a Native American *bote* or *berdache*, a figure familiar in many North American Native tribes.⁶ A *berdache* is a person with two spirits, generally a transvestite, with powers of physical and spiritual healing. In the language of the novel, ‘it’s the mystery of two spirits in one body that makes a *bote* holy, a creature both male and female, yet more than either. It gives [the *bote*] extraordinary spirit power’ (355). A *bote* or *berdache*, by definition, expresses hybrid subjectivity, but with no hint of transgression or loss. S/he inhabits an available social role in Native American culture. In other words, in North American tribal cultures, the *berdache* represents an established social category fully integrated with other sanctioned social identities to which an individual may be called. In nineteenth century Euro-American culture, however, there is no corresponding public identity. Thus, for Simon, the price of this relationship is withdrawal from his family and his European heritage.

The third strand, and the one I will take up in more detail, offers a fictionalized portrait of an historical figure, Jerry Potts, who lived in Alberta and Saskatchewan from about 1840 to 1896. The son of a Scottish father and a Blackfoot mother, Potts was one of a number of half Scottish, half Native American hunters, interpreters, and guides working on the western Canadian prairies. He mediated between the indigenous tribes and the European and Euro-American administrators, businessmen, and travellers who held economic and social power in the Canadian west. In Vanderhaeghe’s novel, Jerry Potts serves as the guide for Charles Gaunt’s expedition to find his brother, and in Potts, the issues of subjectivity and social identity at the core of the novel have their fullest development.

The historical Jerry Potts is documented in records of the period, including letters and diaries, newspapers, and archives of North West Mounted Police. Various accounts of Potts in English agree on the circumstances of his early life, his extraordinary sense of

geographical location, which made him a valued guide, and his laconic speech. Potts was the son of Andrew R. Potts, a Scottish immigrant working as a clerk for the American Fur Company at Fort McKenzie, and Namopisi, a member of the Kanai or Blood tribe, one of the Native American tribes that comprises the Blackfoot Nation. Andrew Potts was shot by a Piegan Indian (also a Blackfoottribe) when his son was less than two years old. Two other Scots were responsible for the boy's upbringing, to the extent that he was brought up by anyone at all. In Vanderhaeghe's novel, Charles Gaunt comments accurately that Potts' early life seems to rival one of Dickens's novels as a 'chronicle of childhood hardship and ill-usage' (82). After his father's death, his mother left him at the fur trading post and returned to her tribe. He was cared for until the age of five or six by a Scot named Alexander Harvey, a trader notorious for his vicious temper and cruel violence. Harvey's behaviour was so extreme that he was a detriment to the company that employed him in the highly competitive fur trade. As a result, he was essentially run out of the country, abandoning the still very young Jerry Potts without explanation or warning. Fortunately Potts was taken up by another Scot, the highly respected Andrew Dawson, an accountant who eventually became chief factor of the post at Fort Benton. Dawson took responsibility for Potts until Dawson too was transferred when the boy was in his early teens. Sometime during the period with Dawson, Potts re-established a relationship with his mother and began to spend time with the Kanai. By the time he was a young adult, Potts was intimately familiar with the fur trade, accustomed to navigating on his own in the geography of the prairie-mountain west, and conversant in several Native languages.

Jerry Potts' contribution to history derives from his long service as a guide for the North West Mounted Police. Two forces were largely responsible for holding the territory north of the 49th parallel for Canada: the Canadian fur trading companies and the North West Mounted Police. The exploration and commerce with Native peoples that accompanied the fur trade, particularly the permanent posts established by the Hudson's Bay Company and the exploration and mapping undertaken by Alexander McKenzie on behalf of the North West Company, laid claim to the territory. But by Potts' time, competition from American trading companies and particularly the whisky trade had brought more Americans into the country and challenged established alliances with Native tribes. After the Cypress Hills Massacre in 1873 (a massacre of Assiniboine at the site of a cluster of whisky forts), it was the formation of the North West Mounted Police and the aggressive action of the police against the whisky traders that ultimately established Canadian control of the region. By all accounts, Jerry Potts was extraordinarily valuable to the Mounties, particularly in the early years, both for his assistance in forging relationships with Native tribes and his accuracy in moving through the treeless, roadless prairies. In spite of the fact that he was himself a heavy drinker all of his life, Potts disapproved of the whisky trade and held the traders indirectly responsible for the deaths of his father, mother, and half-brother, all murdered, in separate incidents, by tribal people intoxicated with cheap liquor. Hired as a guide by the first Commissioner of the newly formed mounted police in 1874, he remained on the payroll until

his death in 1896, when he was buried with military honours, all of the pallbearers retired members of the mounted police.

What is known of Jerry Potts' life is ripe for myth-making. Part of the sentimental myth is the representation of Potts as genuinely hybrid, successfully crossing racial and cultural boundaries, in both his inner life and his public identity. Popular accounts of Potts assert that he 'moved easily' in both white and Native societies,⁷ that he felt 'a love and understanding of his people, both whites and Indian'.⁸ Hugh A. Dempsey, in a 1967 article for a western history magazine, writes: 'It is difficult to say whether Jerry Potts' greatest allegiance was to the whites or the Indians'.⁹ Yet Dempsey also describes Potts' limitations as an interpreter and recounts stories demonstrating his unfamiliarity with Euro-American life, for example his confusion concerning the function of a chamber pot. Popular tales construct his one or two-word answers to questions as wit and his reluctance to engage in conversation as aloofness. But in spite of the fact that his strongest influences in his early years were two English-speaking Scots, Potts' reputation among whites for laconic speech may have reflected not a personality trait but a lack of fluency in English beyond utilitarian exchanges. While Potts reputedly recognized his written name and could reproduce his signature, he was otherwise unlettered. Accounts of his service as an interpreter for the North West Mounted Police emphasise his habit of offering very brief translations of long speeches. On at least one occasion in 1877, an alternate interpreter had to be found for a treaty-signing ceremony because Potts confessed that he could not understand Lieutenant-Governor David Laird's ornate English (Dempsey 15). Dempsey also suggests that Blackfoot speakers, who like many other Native Americans valued a tradition of highly elaborated oratory, were disappointed in Potts' inability to render their sophisticated language in English for the benefit of their treaty partners

A history of the Mounted Police states that while Potts moved back and forth between two worlds, 'in his heart he was an Indian'.¹⁰ Indeed, once he reached adulthood, Potts' personal life evolved almost entirely within the context of Native culture. His four wives were all Native women, and he lived with different tribal groups according to the alliances of his wives, one of whom was Crow, two Piegan, and one Kanai. He was honoured among the Blackfoot for his prowess in battles with the Crow and the Cree, and some accounts claim that he achieved the status of a minor chief. He has numerous living descendants, all of whom consider themselves Native Americans.

Vanderhaeghe portrays Jerry Potts as a person of divided subjectivity, who chooses to affirm a social identity that empowers him. He explains to himself his mother's leaving him at the fort when she returned to her people in terms of her desire for him to benefit from both branches of his heritage: 'Many years ago, his mother . . . had dreamed he would be the child of three fathers. Not Kanai, not white, but a being made strong and strange by mixed blood and mixed influences' (361). He remembers with admiration stories Dawson told him of Scottish raiders 'who swept down from the high country into the land of the English' (336). However, in nineteenth century North America, the attitude of Euro-American culture

toward a mixed race person was not that he was something strong and strange, but on the contrary that he was nothing, defined by a lack of identity. Jerry Pott's actual obituary, originally published in the *Macleod Gazette* on July 14, 1896, and quoted in part in Vanderhaeghe's text, praises Potts as someone who made an extraordinary contribution in spite of being a 'half-breed'. The denigrating references to mixed race status, embedded in what is clearly meant to be a laudatory account, are all the more stinging for being so off-handed. The detriments of the half-breed are so well understood that they do not need to be explained: 'A half-breed, with all that name implies . . .' (cited in Long 214). The obituary continues: 'Had he been other than he was, had he been like so many of his unfortunate race and class, it is not too much to say that the history of the North West would have been vastly different to what it is' (Long 215). But at the time of the novel's account of him, in his early 30s, Potts understands clearly that he has the option to be Native, but not the option to be white, or to be both:

The Nitsi-tapi accept him as one of their own, despite his Scotchman father. The whites will never do the same. The white are proud of their blood, always boasting that theirs is stronger than the blood of any other people. So how is it that the strong blood doesn't overcome the weaker? If they believe what they say, why isn't he a Scotchman? But even Dawson, The Almost Father he loved, never believed him a true Scotchman. He thought like all whites. One drop of black blood makes a man a nigger, and one drop of Kanai blood makes Jerry Potts a red nigger. (Vanderhaeghe 98)

It is precisely because he is regarded as not-white that Potts is valuable to Euro-American culture. When Charles Gaunt asks for a reference before hiring Potts, an employee of the I.G. Baker trading company testifies to his competency in the Native world:

Potts carries a map of every river, every butte, every coulee, every pimple on the prairie's ass up there in his head. But more important, once you set foot into Blackfoot country he's your safe passage. Potts is worth a troop of cavalry. He stands mighty high in their estimation. The Blackfoot call him Bear Child, and that's more than just a name like John or Joe, it's a title of honour. They gave it to him after he led them in a mighty battle with the Crow. If Jerry Potts is with you and your party keeps its nose clean, don't give offence, the Blackfoot won't touch a hair on your heads. (85)

Potts embraces Blackfoot identity because Blackfoot culture embraces him, and Euro-American culture does not. But that mutual embrace is real and fortifying. As an adult, Potts recognizes that 'to live life divided is dangerous, a confusion that sickens the spirit' (100). On one hand he settles for an identity that only partially expresses his subjectivity. On the

other hand, he seizes an identity that affords him honour, power, and status. In the context of Vanderhaeghe's novel, the tragedy imminent in Potts' social situation is mitigated in two ways. First, Potts' story is no more tragic than the other stories with which it is intercut. Second, Potts (in Vanderhaeghe's representation) sees the impossibility of a hybrid social identity not as the specific denial of him and others like him by Euro-American culture but as the way of the world.

Potts' first wife was a Crow woman, a member of a tribe who were traditional enemies of the Blackfoot nation. Initially, they lived with her Crow band, and Potts was accepted because his connections with Andrew Dawson and the American Fur Company ensured that the band would have ready access to trade goods. But after Dawson's departure, Potts' relationship with his wife and her tribe became brittle. When active conflict resumed between the Crow and the Blackfoot, he was regarded, and regarded himself, as Blackfoot. He and his wife separated, their young son remaining with his mother and gradually becoming more and more fully enculturated in Crow language, social practices, and belief systems. In Vanderhaeghe's novel, Potts recognizes in his estrangement from his son parallels both to his own early abandonment and his broader social positioning. His son must be Crow or Kanai; he cannot be both:

It is a great sorrow to Potts to think his son will grow up to be a Crow speaker, will never learn more than a few simple words of the beautiful language of the Kanai, just enough to hurl insults at them when they meet in battle. It is even sadder to know that his son is being raised to hate the blood of his own veins, being taught to call the Real People the Treacherous Ones in the fashion of the Crow. His son's spirit will be divided like his own is, never at rest. Mitchell the Crow-Kanai, Jerry Potts the Scotchman-Kanai. (99)

In the end, Potts accepts that his son will be not just a stranger, but an enemy: 'To his son, Mitchell, he was now dead. But perhaps to be shaped by many hands was a fortunate thing, far better than to be shaped by a single hand. A bundle of sticks does not break as easily as one stick. For Mitchell's sake, he prayed his son would become such a bundle. Whatever Jerry Potts could give him had already been given' (361). Thus, the failure of hybridity that Potts confronts bitterly in his own experience is reiterated in the Native American context within which his son will acquire a foundational identity as either Crow or Kanai.

Only once does Potts observe a powerful public expression of hybrid subjectivity. Potts is renowned among the Blackfoot for his prowess in battle against another traditional enemy, the Cree. Fighting with the Cree are two half-breed brothers, the Sutherlands, like Potts the sons of a Scottish father and a Native mother, like him men who have chosen to define themselves as Native, although unlike Potts the Sutherlands are fair enough to pass for white. Defeated in battle, the Sutherlands enact the death ritual of the Cree and other Native peoples in a way that honours their hybrid subjectivity:

The Sutherlands can read the gestures of the Blackfoot, their faces, and they know that in moments they will die. In a high, piping voice of defiance, Curly Hair begins to sing his death chant in Cree. In a low, sombre voice swelling deep from his broad chest, Yellow Hair launches into a different song.

The strangeness of an English death chant fills the Blackfoot with amazement, holds them still.

‘Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise him, all creatures here below;
Praise him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.’ (335)

Jerry Potts is profoundly moved by the Sutherlands’ ‘singing their two sides, the Cree and the Scottish’ (336), both of which resonate so strongly with Potts’ own dual heritage. But even this metaphorically compelling scene is nicely calibrated to retain its ambiguity. The Sutherland brothers are two men, not one. One spontaneously sings in Cree; one in English. As individuals, each chooses one of the languages and therefore one of the identities that their social location has made available to them. Individually each sings a single song. Taken together, they express their hybrid subjectivity. But even that joint acknowledgement of their two selves is honoured only in defeat, only at the point of death.

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NOTES

1. Vanderhaeghe, Guy, *The Last Crossing* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2002).
2. Alcoff, Linda Martín, ‘Who’s Afraid of Identity Politics?’ in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, ed. Paula M. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 335–36.
3. Moya, Paula M., ‘Postmodernism, ‘Realism,’ and the Politics of Identity: Cherríe Moraga and Chicana Feminism’, in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, ed. Paula M. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 87. See also Satya P. Mohanty, ‘The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Cultural Condition’, in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*, ed. Paula M. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 56.
4. Brown, Wendy, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 66–76.
5. Butler, Judith, *The Psychic Life of Power: Studies in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press,

- 1997), 104.
6. Williams, Walter L., *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).
 7. Meyers, Ted. *Jerry Potts*. <<http://www.larned.net/rogmyers/potts.htm>> [accessed 13 May 2003] (para. 6 of 21).
 8. Long, Philip S., Foreword, *Jerry Potts: Scout, Frontiersman, and Hero* (Calgary: Bonanza, 1974).
 9. Dempsey, Hugh A., 'Jerry Potts: Plainsman', *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 17 (1967), 6.
 10. Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 'Jerry Potts', *The March West* <<http://www.rcmpmarchwest.com/eng/history/characters/Potts.html>> [accessed 2 May 2003] (para. 4 of 9).