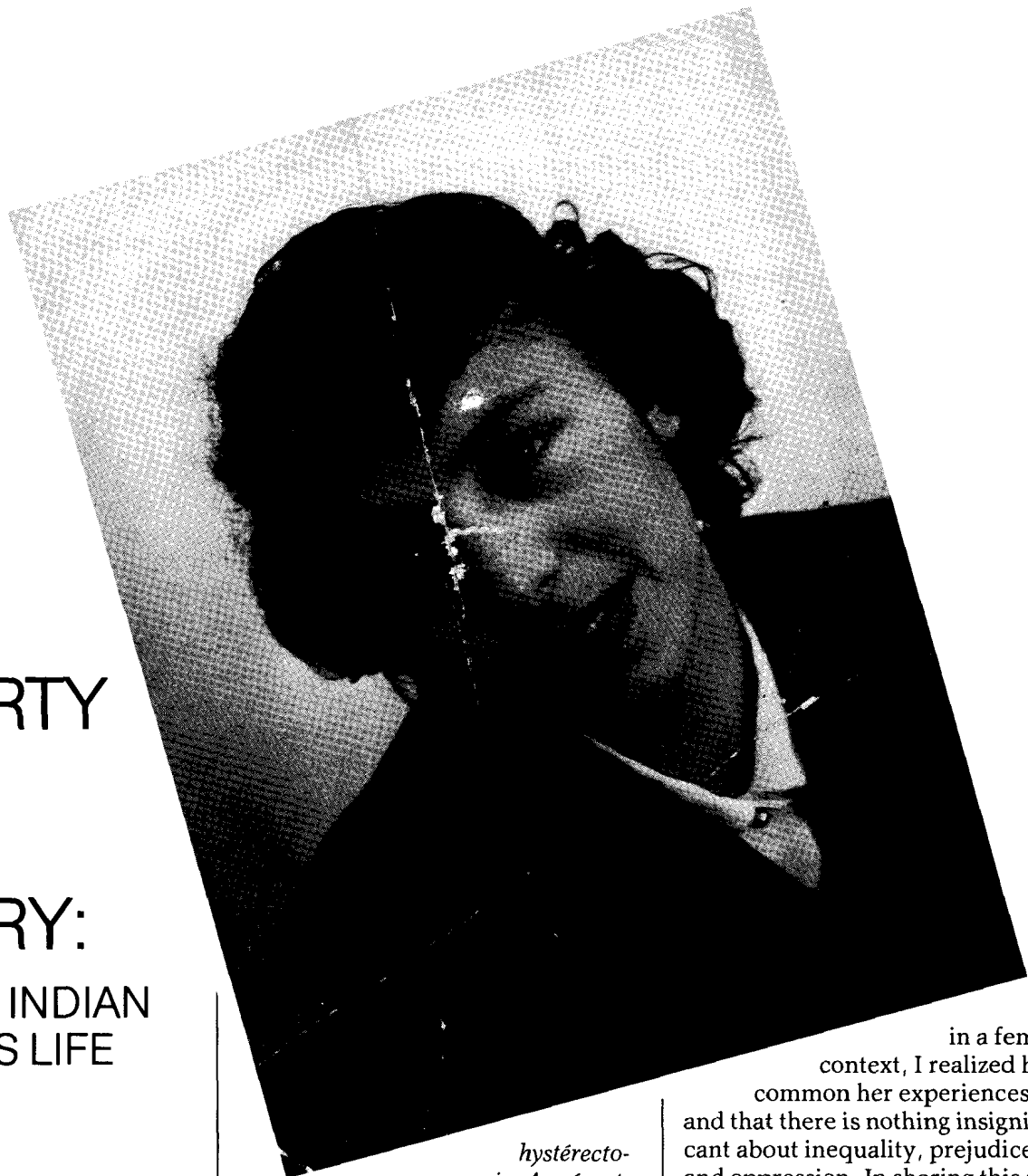


THE POVERTY & THE POETRY:

A NATIVE INDIAN WOMAN'S LIFE HISTORY

Garry Klugie

Marguerite Rose Klugie est une femme Loucheux de la tribu L'int-chanpe Dagrib des Territoires du Nord-Ouest. Toute sa vie elle a été victime des préjugés sexuels et des inégalités sociales auxquels doivent faire face les femmes autochtones. Sa recherche d'une identité et d'une place dans la société a été longue. Marguerite a appris qu'être femme signifiait forcément être mère, quelque soit sa volonté et ses rêves. Elle eut plusieurs enfants en dehors du mariage et sentit qu'on la méprisait en tant que mère célibataire, tandis que les pères de ses enfants ne prirent aucune responsabilité et ne furent aucunement désapprouvés par la communauté. Quand elle s'est mariée son mari est devenu une charge supplémentaire. C'est lui, pas elle qui a décidé que Marguerite devait subir une



hystérectomie. A présent, ses derniers enfants sont presque adultes et elle se réjouit à l'idée de pouvoir faire ce qui lui plaît.

My mother Marguerite Rose Klugie, a Loucheux woman of the L'int-chanpe Dagrib tribe in the Northwest Territories, could have remained an embarrassment to me if it hadn't been for a life-history project that gave me the opportunity and tools to understand her experiences and life in the context of gender-role prejudices and social inequalities. For years I had refused to identify with my mother, even though she was my only real parent. So many of Marguerite's problems and qualities that were confusing and unacceptable to me I dismissed as both isolated and insignificant. As a result of analysing Marguerite's

life in a feminist context, I realized how common her experiences are and that there is nothing insignificant about inequality, prejudice, and oppression. In sharing this rewritten version of Marguerite's life history, I hope that others will expand their sense of involvement in the status of minority women in Canada.

The struggle for a feeling of belonging and self-identity began early for Marguerite as a result of a series of losses. In 1936, three years after she was born, Marguerite and her mother were involved in an airplane accident which her mother did not survive and in which Marguerite suffered severe head and body injuries. Shortly afterward her father sent Marguerite's younger brother and older sister to the Ft. Resolution Grey Nun Mission to join Marguerite, who was there recovering. Recuperating in a private room for the next few years, Marguerite's

whole life was guided by older women and men: the nuns, nurses, and doctors who cared for her. Everyone in her isolated adult environment provided models that combined responsibility, piousness, independence, chastity, nurturing, and altruism. These replaced what would have been her family values. The Grey Nuns had done a good job of teaching her exaggerated female behaviour. Years later Marguerite commented that she always pushed me to be free because she felt that her own childhood rambunctiousness had been stifled.

Practices of sexual segregation and cultural repression had a strong effect on Marguerite's life. The Canadian film *Somewhere Between* portrays the effect of early missionary educational practices on Indian women of British Columbia: alienation from their own people, loneliness, and a sense of helplessness are reported by many other native Indian women. In the residential schools they could neither play with nor speak their own language with their own brothers. It seems very likely that this segregation has not only isolated generations of native Indian women — and men — from their culture but also from understanding each other, both inside and outside a family situation.

Adolescence pitched Marguerite into another stage of questioning and painful growth. Formal education, which had begun for Marguerite when she was seven, continued until she was sixteen, when she finished grade nine. Her peers often felt that because Marguerite needed special medical attention, she was spoiled. Her teachers also seemed to be insensitive to her background. These attitudes of her peers and teachers often made schooling a humiliating and awkward time that taught Marguerite to keep her inner feelings to herself. However, with one friend, Magdalena, she shared her feelings and dreams. What might have been a great comfort

turned into another loss when young Magdalena died of tuberculosis. Marguerite recalls comforting Magdalena during her last days: "We would hold each other and cry . . . I prayed to her then, saying that all my life would be a sacrifice . . . I replaced



her suffering and death with my life."

Marguerite's sense of being a woman was marked by changes in her sexuality. Marguerite's first period was not a time of celebration but rather an experience that brought on isolation and shame. Like all of the other young women, Marguerite had not been prepared for the change. When it occurred each girl was taken from the larger dormitory for a few days and given a rag for cleaning herself — nothing was explained. Marguerite's treatment of her own daughter's menstruation was different. She made a

conscious effort to make the change a time of celebration instead of punishment.

During Marguerite's youth explosive conflicts with the nuns were common for many of the children. One such encounter left Marguerite with many shattered teeth that were not repaired for years. Because of her appearance, she says she didn't "bother with men" for a long time.

Marguerite left the convent when she was twenty-one years old. She recalls that that occasion was the first time she consciously considered herself a woman; consequently, she needed to begin a new way of life. Marguerite and Magdalena's older sister, Geraldine, moved to Fort Smith for work. Being self-supportive was difficult but it was much more fulfilling than living in the convent. After only one year of the new independence and growth Marguerite contracted tuberculosis. Not only did she have to wear a body cast for over two years but she was also once again dependent on others for her physical and emotional needs. Yet Marguerite's attitude remained powerfully understanding, almost healing — "it just happened so I accepted it and did what I liked."

Geraldine remained a friend to Marguerite through her illness, and when Marguerite was finally released she and Geraldine trained as nurses together until they decided to take jobs as cooks in a Yellowknife mine. Here both women "tried to nurture a good life. We were very independent economically. I was in control and this allowed me to express my freedom." Soon, though, Marguerite realized that being a woman almost certainly meant becoming a mother, regardless of her hopes and dreams.

Marguerite knows, from painful experience, the truth of Buffy Saint-Marie's song "Better to Find Out for Yourself":

Ev'ry baby that's been born, been spanked, and made to cry,

Ev'ry young woman that's been loved, been shaken, and made to sigh,

Ev'ry woman that's ever been loved, has told me, told me true,

Take his heart and run away, as he would do to you. . .

Marguerite's first sexual relationship with a man ended in pregnancy and abandonment. From the outset Marguerite learned that childbearing and childrearing were left to be woman's work; fatherhood was relatively meaningless. Paul, Marguerite's first child, was born in 1956 in an Edmonton winter, 2,000 miles from Yellowknife, without a prospective father. Her decision to give birth in Edmonton and then to put Paul up for adoption was a reaction to the unavoidable social attitude which, in the north at least, labelled single pregnant women as promiscuous misfits. Both of these judgments, that children are the responsibility of women and that unmarried pregnant women are promiscuous, protected the men in Marguerite's life from facing social criticism when they abandoned her and from taking responsibility for their own sexuality.

The cycle of abandonment did not stop until after the birth of three more children: me, my brother James (whom I have never met), and my sister Barbara; even then, in the long run, there seemed to be little comfort. Like Paul and Marie, James and Barbara were eventually put up for adoption, more because of poverty than social pressure this time. When Eugene was born, the father, Stanley Johnson, decided to stay with Marguerite to "start" a family. Now Marguerite, the childbearer and child caregiver, had one more to look after: Stanley. In this respect she seems to fit a common pattern.

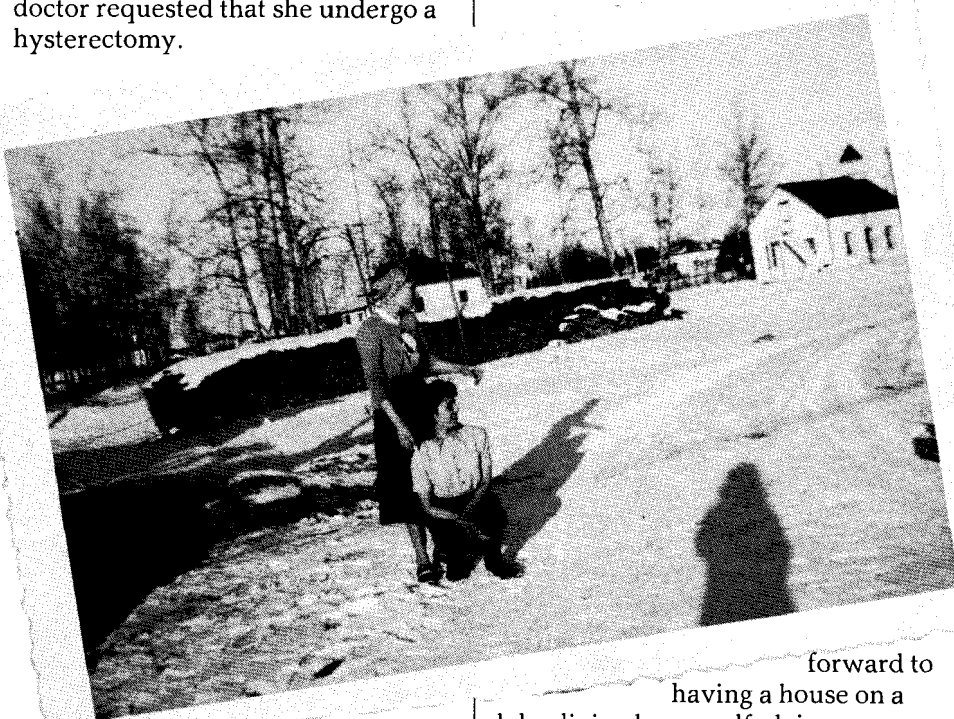
In an analysis of twenty-two life histories of women, Marjorie Mitchell found that after marrying, many women found themselves "burdened not only with the responsibilities of childcare . . . but also

with longer standing responsibilities of husband care" (mimeo, Camosun College, Victoria, B.C., 1978). Accepting the extra physical, sexual, and emotional demands was, for Marguerite, a means of fulfilling her own needs. Her comments on why she remained in the relationship after they both began drinking and Stanley began beating her makes this very clear: "I would be very angry and sad, but I had no alternatives. I needed him so I could keep the children . . . no one else would help me."

Repeated incidents of loss and physical violation are indications of Marguerite's status as a Canadian native Indian woman. Between the ages of twenty and forty, when Marguerite had her last child, Monica, she had given birth to eleven children. Five were put up for adoption and two others, Benjamin and Douglas, died before they were two years old. Only four children have remained with her. After eleven natural birthings, in which Marguerite always had an episiotomy, her doctor requested that she undergo a hysterectomy.

empty, defeated, and outraged. "It wasn't fair . . . the power they had. Stan secretly arranged the whole thing . . . I guess he thought that after that I couldn't get pregnant so he could have as much sex as he wanted, but I said no."

In 1974, Marguerite took me, my brother, and two sisters from Edmonton to the Yukon, where Stanley had been working for over a year. Again Marguerite reminded me of the hardship of being a single parent. While Stanley was away she had to explain to the younger children where their father was and undertake all of the household and social demands we created. But in the Yukon there was a stronger sense of family and the children grew up in a clean, quiet, natural setting. Today Marguerite is waiting and working to support a family of three. She is going through the last motions of childrearing, after which she can use her own time, energy, and love for herself: "I'm not worried about growing old . . . I'm looking



Yet the circumstances were less than professional. Instead of acknowledging Marguerite's right to control her body, her doctor asked Stanley for permission to perform the operation. Marguerite cried for weeks afterward, feeling

forward to having a house on a lake, living by myself, doing some sewing, and starting to paint again."

Though fashionable liberal ideologies maintain that individuals have freedom of access to all the social institutions that bring personal progress or growth, it seems truer to say that access to these institutions varies according to sex and race.