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Emily Pittman
University of Toronto

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Navigating Violence, Addiction, Poverty, and Disability

A Two-Spirit Journey: The Autobiography of a Lesbian Ojibwa-Cree Elder by MA-NEE CHACABY with MARY LOUISA PLUMMER
University of Manitoba Press, 2016 \$24.95

Reviewed by **EMILY LEUNG-PITTMAN**

A Two-Spirit Journey is the 18th release in the Critical Studies in Native History Series produced by the University of Manitoba. The autobiography is an as-told-to narrative that combines Western social science methods and Indigenous oral history traditions. By undertaking this project, Chacaby sought to help her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren understand their histories and her own, and also to share her extraordinary life story with a wider audience.

From the start, Ma-Nee Chacaby and Mary Louisa Plummer are precise in their storytelling and carefully avoid suppressing ambiguity and nuance. Instead, the authors employ a flexible, relational method in line with traditional Indigenous knowledge production, as in this passage:

My grandmother always called me 'Ma-Nee.' She liked that name because it sounded like the name of a French artist who my grandfather admired. Today I believe she must have meant Manet or Monet. More than anything else, though, my grandmother said she named me after a beautiful *miinikaa* (place with many blueberries) as I had been born in the blueberry season. (7)

A Two-Spirit Journey is not a biography for the faint of heart. By the second page of the book, Chacaby has

already recounted the tribal violence that orphaned her *kokum* (grandmother) as a young child. In subsequent chapters, she weaves together her experiences of child abuse, incest, and bullying; extreme sexual, physical, and psychological violence; racism, poverty, and homelessness; and alcohol addiction. From childhood through adulthood, Chacaby survives repeated violations by people in positions of trust, from her step-father to her first and second husbands to the predatory men in the Alcoholics Anonymous chapter in Thunder Bay.

Despite the severity and frequency of harms recounted, the book remains accessible to survivors of related interpersonal traumas. Chacaby's humility, matter-of-fact storytelling voice, and uncommon hunting and trapping skills evoke compassion and respect. Moments of normalcy in Chacaby's childhood provide a reprieve for the reader. Chacaby also acknowledges the kindness of acquaintances and strangers in her life, such as the taxi drivers who intervened when she was brutally attacked after coming out as gay in Thunder Bay.

Through its winding narrative, the book does away with the trite question of why women stay in abusive relationships and replaces it with more fundamental and practical sites of inquiry and action. For instance, where have families, communities, and governments failed indigenous children, not only within, but also *outside* residential schools? Under which circumstances are communities unable to help children experiencing abuse? When is leaving not an option for abused women and under which circumstances do abused women leave? And, where do individuals find strength in communities experiencing high levels of violence,

neglect, and poverty? For Chacaby, returning to spiritual teachings and being in the bush are lifelong healers and sources of medicine.

Disability is a significant element of Chacaby's life journey, alongside long-term mental health sequelae derived from her traumas. When doctors deem her legally blind, Chacaby is barred from driving, loses her community outreach job, becomes severely depressed, and almost relapses into alcohol abuse: "I felt like I was losing my identity, my hard-won independence, and my financial security, all in one go" she explains (135). In later life, Chacaby also suffers from endometriosis, arthritis, glaucoma, cataracts, and PTSD, which require surgery, residential treatment, and long-term counselling.

The book's subtitle, *The Autobiography of a Lesbian Ojibwa-Cree Elder*, seems to privilege the "lesbian" component of Chacaby's life over a whole range of other complex identities that are not mentioned. Since the word "lesbian" itself is not a stable term or concept, I would have liked Plummer to discuss how Ma-Nee understands and uses the term, how this editorial choice was made, and how the reader might situate the book within the canon of queer scholarship. I am similarly curious about where this text falls within critical disability scholarship.

Each of the eleven chapter titles lists the time period in which its contents take place—e.g. "First Discoveries, Joys and Sorrows: Early Childhood in Ombabika (1952–1958)." Aside from chapters three and four, each chapter also includes a place name to frame its contents. However, several chapters seem somewhat awkwardly titled—e.g. "Living and Parenting in Thunder Bay and Sault Ste. Marie before Sobriety (1970–1975)"—

which takes away from the authentic voice otherwise emanating from the collaboration.

In the afterword, Plummer does well to describe the book's contribution to the literature and the benefits and drawbacks of as-told-to Indigenous accounts. However, the afterword is missing an explanation of how Plummer came to befriend Chacaby, which is striking given the non-Native scholar's thorough discussion of relational Indigenous paradigms.

A Two-Spirit Journey is a vivid work for students and researchers seeking to understand intersectionality and Indigenous ways of knowing. It is also a gift for public health and social service professionals looking to understand social determinants of health within Canada's diverse population. Yet, exposure to stories like Chacaby's should also be a mandatory part of provincial and territorial school and university curricula, replacing outdated history textbooks and enabling the next generation to understand their place within a complex settler-colonial landscape.

In a culture that dehumanizes indigenous peoples and the poor, this memoir forces the reader to confront racist and classist stereotypes and begin the emotional labour required for reconciliation. Chacaby's book is a triumph, providing a bridge across social divides with its searing humanity.

EMILY LEUNG-PITTMAN has a graduate specialization in Ethnic and Pluralism Studies from the University of Toronto. Her research examines the intersections between gender, race, colonialism, and health. She has lived and worked in sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, Australasia, and North America.