Double Dimensionality: Unveiling Dominique Rankin's Journey of Diagnosing and Healing in His Autobiography *They Called Us Savages* (2020)

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Abstract: Dominique Rankin, the Anicinape author and one of the last hereditary chiefs, published his autobiography *They Called Us Savages* in 2020 and this article examines its two dimensions: On the one hand, how he (re)constructs his individual identity through diagnosing and writing about his traumatic experiences at the Saint-Marc-de-Figuery Residential School. On the other hand, how he expands this individual healing to a collective one by transforming his retrospective endeavor into a medium of social communication. Therefore, it is intended to foster intra, inter and non-Indigenous coping with the assimilationist ideologies of the Canadian government and the Catholic Church. To foster this aspect in greater depth, he contrasts European knowledge systems with Indigenous cosmology while reflecting on the collaborative nexus between state and faith. Consequently, he negotiates and mediates his individual, as well as a collective self-conscious, healed and proud Indigenous Canadian identity.

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On June 6, 2020, Pope Francis expressed his sorrow at the tragic news of a mass grave that had been discovered at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in Canada. The grave contained over 200 bodies of Indigenous people. The Pope shared the news during his Angelus address, highlighting that the discovery had marked a long and problematic chapter in the past of Canada. In this period, institutions that were run by Christian organizations and were

funded by the government had sought to assimilate Indigenous children into the standards of Euro-Canadian culture (Cernuzio, 2022). Accordingly, in his speech, the Pope stated that focusing on the truth, delivering justice to the instruments of forced assimilation, as well as contributing to intra, inter and non-Indigenous healing – particularly regarding the boarding school system were central aims in the context of ongoing social debates:

> It is necessary to remember how the policies of assimilation and enfranchisement, which also included the residential school system, were devastating for the people of these lands. […] I think back on the stories you told: how the policies of assimilation ended up systematically marginalizing the indigenous peoples; how also through the system of residential schools your languages and cultures were denigrated and suppressed; how children suffered physical, verbal, psychological and spiritual abuse; how they were taken away from their homes at a young age, and how that indelibly affected relationships between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren (Francis, 2020).

The Pope's apology was an important initial step towards reflecting on past injustices. Ladisch adds that the boarding school system was not fully dismantled until the 1990s and that in this context, it is important to shed light on the intergenerational harm caused by this system of forced assimilation which continues to negatively affect Indigenous communities to this very day. However, she insists that during and after the Pope's speech, a great number of Indigenous people were disappointed that the Pope had not addressed a central and rampant issue within these establishments – sexual abuse. Furthermore, she adds:

> The Pope's words reflect a personal apology but not a clear apology on behalf of the Catholic Church as an institution. […] There needs to be a concerted effort to unravel the colonialist ideas that underpinned the residential school system and are the root of persistent racism today (Anonym., 2022).

Accordingly, the Pope as a representative of the Catholic Church should have addressed the topic of sexual assault and its role in the systematic erasure of Indigenous cultures, traditions, and languages to contribute to an intergenerational process of healing.

In the same year that these mass graves were discovered, Dominique Rankin, an Anicinape author and one of the last hereditary chiefs, published his autobiography *They Called Us Savages* (2020), particularly shedding light on the issues that are rather pushed into the background by the Pope. Rankin was born in 1947 and called Kapiteotak by his parents, which means "the

one whose crying is heard from afar" (Rankin, 2022: 39)[1]. Yet, he was given the Christian name Dominique Rankin. Not because he was born with this religion but rather because the circumstances of the 20th century in North America did not allow him to practice his Indigenous spirituality. As the son of Chief Tom Rankin and Emma Moé of the Cree Nation, Rankin was chosen at an early age to succeed his father in also becoming a chief. However, he was taken away by the authorities as a child and sent to the St.-Marc-de-Figuery Residential School, near Amos, where he stayed until he became a teenager. During this period, the omnipresence of violence affected his physical and psychological state tremendously. After his stay, he became an alcohol addict and survived a suicide attempt. The religious figures in these schools forcibly assimilated these children, as well as physically and emotionally abused them.

The subject of this article is how Rankin diagnoses his traumatic experiences and how he heals through his process of writing on himself and for himself. Rankin negotiates his individual Anicinape identity and uses the communicative function of his narration to construct a collective Indigenous Canadian identity. In other words, his narrative and sharing it with a readership fosters intra, inter and non-Indigenous healing from the trauma caused by the Euro-Canadian state and the Catholic Church, particularly because the collective memory of First Nations is similar: "It's stupefying to discover how similar these testimonies are, irrespective of, whether they concern residential schools in western or eastern Canada, or whether they were Catholic or Protestant establishments" (74). Rankin underscores how molestation and sexual exploitation result in lasting trauma and lifelong mental issues. He adds that many of the adults who survived a boarding school lose themselves in drug or alcohol abuse or commit suicide (114) because they involuntarily insist on silence. Rankin breaks this silence and transforms his narrative into a therapeutic text that helps him to work on his personal issues, but at the same time allows him to serve as a role model for the Anicinape, as well as for First Nations and Canadians.

Rankin's narration links his Anicinape identity to the broader context of Indigenous Canadian identity and inspires First Nations and Canadians to process their trauma collectively, which leads me to the research thesis of this article: Dominique Rankin's autobiography *They Called Us Savages* (2020) is a medium of identity negotiation and social communication, through which he diagnoses his individual physical, psychological and sexual abuse, as a consequence of assimilationist Euro-Canadian ideologies and expands it to the broader context of Canadian society to foster intra, inter and non-Indigenous coping with trauma.

1 All subsequent references without an author or year refer to this primary source.

The methodological approach of this article is based on Sidonie Smith's and Julia Watson's (2010) toolkit which proposes twenty-four strategies to analyze life narratives. Smith and Watson argue that authors of autobiographies tell stories and present themselves in the public to gain agency. In this context, this article covers three major categories: Firstly, how Rankin constructs his individual and a collective composite identity with both Anicinape and Canadian elements. He transforms his narrative into a form of writing back to the Canadian state and the Catholic Church to negotiate his own story of decolonization. His autobiography becomes a therapeutic and meaning-making agency where he portrays his younger and more naive character who throughout his process of dialectic develops self-consciousness. Therefore, the *self* and the *other* form a *hybrid* unity. The second chapter sheds light on how Rankin aims to contrast Euro-Canadian and Indigenous knowledge systems. He emphasizes the importance of traditional ceremonies by giving each chapter of his autobiography the name of a council fire which is a ceremony among First Nations. They serve as a sacred space for decision-making and unity. Through these council fires and his dialectic, he mediates between these two nations to build a bridge that creates a sense of wholeness. Thus, he addresses not only Anicinape communities nor Indigenous ones but rather the Canadian nation as such to actively participate in his memories.

Shaping the *Self*: A Journey of Identity Negotiation

Rankin's *They Called Us Savages* intends to create an individual and a collective *identity*. Rankin perceives and interprets his past and the current society of Indigenous and Euro-Canadian people, defining his individual orientation towards it. In this context, Rankin's identity is dependent on his own identification and the one by others, which means that it is a constituent element of socially constructed systems of meaning and knowledge. Throughout his autobiography, it is maintained, altered, and even reformed through societal relations, constructions and negotiation processes (Depkat, 2015: 44). Accordingly, identity as a social phenomenon emerges from the dialectic between an individual and a society. It becomes intelligible as soon as it is located in the world (Berger / Luckmann, 1967: 194 ff.). Rankin initiates his healing process by engaging in writing, through which he initially (re)constructs his individual identity. Foucault (1986: 51) highlights that writing as an exercise, done by oneself and on oneself is a beneficial activity for the writer, where this person reactualizes specific memories and constitutes the *self*.

Particularly the survival of the residential school experiences leads to the fact that through writing, Rankin returns to his tribe and embodies a healed Indigenous Canadian identity with a sense of wholeness. Thus, his identity is

composed of Anicinape elements and modern Canadian concepts. It is neither a simple and binary opposition between his past and present experiences nor between the *other* and the *self,* but a complex mixture. It does not end in a Canadian identity nor in an Indigenous one, but it gets constructed through his desire to retell his memory. Depkat (2015: 44 ff.) overlooks what I consider an important point and argues that autobiographies as means of social mediation are linked to performance and narrative. Rankin observes himself and his environment, for instance his family members, and gives meaning to the memories, to negotiate his individual identity, through diagnosing the atrocities of the Canadian state and the Catholic Church. In this context, he evaluates his *cultural and social*, as well as his *religious identity* while reflecting on his *personal values and beliefs*.

Cultural and social identity: Firstly, Rankin emphasizes the importance of language as an aspect of cultural and social identity. In the "First Fire" (25 ff.), he creates an inter-Indigenous identity by referring to parallels between his Anicinape circle and other tribes, like the Abenaki (28). He underscores how these allegedly inferior communities form a unity and live in harmony with each other. In this context, he reflects on the matter of Euro-Canadians showing efforts in the beginning, such as speaking Indigenous languages (47; 57). Yet, this act of kindness turns out to be the commencement of assimilating Indigenous tribes in supposedly "good faith" (56).

Secondly, the destruction of Indigenous identities and the construction of a Euro-Canadian identity is presented in the "Fifth Fire" (71 ff.): as soon as Rankin arrives in the residential school, a language barrier comes to existence (72). This language barrier rapidly changes into a strict ban of the usage of his Anicinape mother tongue (75), the language he is the "most comfortable with" (76). Furthermore, he writes about a specific memory where he insists that the term and concept *rape* does not even exist in his mother tongue so that he struggles to articulate and inform his mother about the punishments and cruelties towards Indigenous children in boarding schools (86). Yet, he wishes to communicate the atrocities he has to endure within the walls of the boarding school, most importantly the sexual abuse: "After the boys were found asleep in their beds, the three night lurkers would make their appearance. […] The first time they came for me, I was still eight years old" (80). Within the walls of these schools the children were not only abused but also manipulated to such an extent that even Rankin himself loathes his own mother tongue and feels ashamed to speak it in public, so that he becomes insulting towards his father, telling him he should stop speaking his "filthy language" (116). Nevertheless, a monologue of realization towards the end of his narrative underscores inter alia how (re)gains his Anicinape identity and proudly stands up for his mother tongue which he once neglected: "Could I

adopt the white language when my heart preferred by far to express itself in the Anicinape language?" (116).

In the introductory chapter titled "Ickote Kitcipison" (19 ff.) he provides the reader with a detailed description of his nation's magnificent teachings, linking the social circle of the Anicinape with terms such as "harmony" (21) and "happiness" (22), in contrast to the arrival and traditions of the Euro-Canadians, using expressions such as "death" (21) and "Evil Spirit" (22) that lead to the deconstruction of cultural and social identities, particularly in boarding schools. However, the "Wampum Belt's teachings […] brought [him] back to [his] true history, […] culture, and […] faith" (24). He adds: "Still to this day, this Prophecy enlightens me" (24). Therefore, by writing about these cruelties on the one hand and his teachings on the other, he seeks to negotiate an empowered intra-Indigenous and Anicinape identity: "Be proud of who you are!" (116). Consequently, his social identity advocates for Indigenous communities. In addition, he underscores that not only his own resilience but also that of a great number of other Indigenous people mirrors the determination of Indigenous communities to uphold their social identity (131).

Additionally, his autobiographical writing is closely tied to community and family relations. Rankin shares stories about his family and elders and portrays the "shell bead belt" (19), a belt made from shell ornaments and a sacred piece which holds symbolic meaning and passes wisdom from one generation to another to strengthen interconnectedness. An intergenerational dialogue between him and his grandfather, "*Comis* Mikisi" (142) bridges generational gaps and helps him and the reader to understand and reinforce his social identity while highlighting the assistance of his tribal traditions which contribute to a broader discourse on First Nations' rights and cultural preservation.

Religious identity: Furthermore, Rankin portrays the immense negative influence of the Euro-Canadian government and the Catholic Church on Indigenous belief systems. Consequently, he reflects on the imposition of a foreign religion, in this case Christianity and how it affects his personal and communal spiritual practices and identity negatively: "evangelization" (43), "conversion" (43), as well as "Christian traditions" (43) and "mandatory baptism and marriages" (43) contribute to homogenized and assimilated generations of Indigenous people , as Europeans did not tolerate and accept the nomadic lifestyle of so called "Savages" (56). He highlights how these are compelled to practice the religion and worldview of the allegedly superior Europeans from the very first moment they are born: "Once a year, the priests gathered infants and summarily designated some white man or other as their godfather" (43). In boarding schools, Indigenous children are baptized and given Christian

names, yet they are addressed by their numbers, which further highlights the marginalization and objectification of them and their human dignity. Rankin to this day remembers his atrocious number which is "47" (75). Similarly, elder children, adolescents and adults are manipulated to convert to Christianity (43). These manipulations included the concept of sin, written in the testament, such as "Hell and Devil" (57) to frighten the Anicinape and impose church attendances. Moreover, his autobiography helps him and numerous Indigenous communities to start expeditions to revive and reclaim their belief systems. His narrative serves as a compelling account of rediscovery and alignment with his intra-Indigenous ancestral spirituality:

> 'I am Anicinape,' I thought. 'A Real, Man… A human being living in harmony with nature.' The more I lived in silence, the more time was on my side. The more I took the time to live, the more I could hear the voice of my intuition. The more I listened, the more I knew who I really was. The more I appreciated myself, the more I wanted to be good and true. The more I acted in harmony with my own nature and nature itself, the more I was in communion with Mother Earth and Creator. The more I made my peace with life, the more my spirit and body felt strong and good" (135 f.).

The preceding citation underscores how Rankin declares his Indigenous Canadian identity towards the end of his narration, in the seventh council fire. He asserts a reclaimed sense of the *self*. Moreover, he evaluates that silently living in harmony with nature helped him to move away from the consequences of Euro-Canadian presence – exclusion, expropriation and imposition. Further, the repetitive structure *the more* is an anaphora which portrays his progressive transformation, thus, how each action in his journey leads to a deeper level of (re)constructing his identity and reinforcing his alignment with nature. Accordingly, he aims to maintain religious and cultural customs of his tribe, despite prevailing predicaments and particularly, his parents who continue to practice Indigenous believes, serve as an example and role model for him (57).

Personal values and beliefs: Additionally, Rankin communicates personal values and beliefs while connecting them to his physical and mental health. In this context, he constructs a spatial identity and evaluates his profound connection to his ancestral lands and the natural environment: "Could I work in a concrete box in the middle of a city, when all my being was forever calling out for the forest?" (116). Thus, the land is not only a physical place but rather a source of spiritual and cultural formation, which means that it must be protected and preserved. Even though Rankin now has the financial capacity

and possesses modern means of transport, such as a car and boat, he maintains ancestral ways to get in touch with holy nature (134).

Nevertheless, he does not neglect his Canadian identity, as it became a constitutive element of his presence. It is now reframed and put together in a new way with his Indigenous one and creates a *Third Space,* which Bhabha describes as one that emerges through the contact zone between different cultures. It is a hybrid space of negotiation and interaction, where new identities and meanings are constructed and binary oppositions are challenged (Bhabha, 1994: 37). Rankin as a representative of the Indigenous and Canadian society is located within this ambiguous and ambivalent identity which is highly complex – modern Canadian elements coexist with his ancestral Anicinape traditions.

Moreover, Rankin reflects on his individual commitment to social and political activism, which underscores his advocacy for Indigenous rights and the revitalization of Indigenous culture: "The two of us had the idea of creating a small ethnocultural centre, where people could spend a few hours or an entire night in a tipi, sample our traditional meals, and discover our Traditional Knowledge" (137). By writing about his project, he raises awareness and advocates for a change to create a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, as well as dismantle prejudices towards First Nations. Whereas Rankin initially addresses the tremendous impact of his traumatic past, leading to psychological distress and intergenerational trauma, through his process of writing and towards the end, his narrative becomes a source of strength and healing:

> The Medicine Man in me has truly blossomed. I've learned to draw out from the depths of my being the courage to speak up about the most painful moments of my life, in the firm and sincere belief that doing so can in turn help my peers escape their own silence. I've learned to find the words to convey my ancestors' message of peace as best I can, without fearing the prejudices or taboos of yesterday. I've become a nomad again, and I now travel the world at the invitation of peoples and nations. Humanity has reached the point where it knows it must put an end to destruction (148).

Rankin relies on the example of the Anicinape language that is expunged in residential schools. However, through writing, he upholds an essential aspect of his tribe – the linguistic one while emphasizing its significance for the negotiation of his individual identity. Similarly, traditional practices and customs, as well as family relationships and Indigenous circles help to obtain a healed social identity. Despite assimilation processes, Rankin follows his ancestral spirituality to (re)construct his religious identity and pursue his values and beliefs. He communicates the striking role of nature and land, as well as their

immense positive effects on his process of healing and personal growth. Thus, Rankin aims to heal individually, as well collectively – by being a cultural broker and constructing a composite identity. Wolf (1956: 1076) defines the term *broker* as a person who mediates between different groups to integrate them in the same society. Hall (1990: 224 ff.) underscores that these destructed identities are not grounded in the impact of the past but in the re-framing of it and that "experience only begins to be healed when these forgotten connections are once more set in place", in Rankin's case by writing about himself and for himself. His identity does not belong to the past but also to the future where he does not only have a single Canadian or an Indigenous identity but rather a mixture of both. He positions himself between these two poles. Therefore, Rankin not only fosters Anicinape healing but a Canadian one as such, in the context of ongoing debates about remembering the instrumentalization of First Nations.

Worlds Apart: Contrasting European Knowledge Systems with Indigenous Cosmology

Rankin not only mediates his process of healing, contributing to the negotiation of his individual and a collective Indigenous Canadian identity, but he also sheds light on the contradictory knowledge systems of the Canadian state and the Catholic Church. Indigenous systems of knowledge are challenging to describe, as they are grounded in fundamentally different understandings of the world. Therefore, the following chapter aims to explore the relationship between native and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems in Rankin's autobiography while highlighting striking areas of Indigenous knowledge and analyzing the concept of Indigenous adaptation, to understand Rankin's inner conflict with *in-betweenness* and the ultimate negotiation of a composite identity where he as a cultural broker builds a bridge between First Nations and Canadian systems through the publication of his text.

Kidwell claims that Western ideology includes objects that are given a set value and that serve as a currency, thus, wampum belts crafted from wampum beads are interpreted through Western lenses as a means of commerce. However, in Indigenous cosmology they are regarded as *symbols of contractual obligations* and carry sacred words spoken into them, which underscore the highly symbolic meaning (Kidwell, 2002: 88). Rankin further adds that a "keeper of a Wampum Belt has been declared by his peers worthy of protecting his Nation's most precious teachings" (20) and when he receives the belt, he becomes a central figure of his tribe and finds peace (24). Hence, the bead contributes to the understanding of different cultural worldviews and serves as a holy object of cultural healing. Additionally, Rankin demonstrates how

European terms, such as "'rent' and 'bills' were completely foreign" to them (65) and therefore, infiltrated more into his Anicinape philosophy where "the right to shelter, food, and clothes applies to everyone, without exception" (65). This infiltration rapidly turns into an inevitable demise of Indigenous culture. Bhabha defines this ambivalent space of contact as a sphere that includes a "structure of identification that occurs precisely in the elliptical *in-between*, where the shadow of the other falls upon the self" (60). In other words, European knowledge systems fall upon Anicinape cosmology, which unavoidably leads to fewer people practicing Indigenous values and norms and to the expansion of a Eurocentric understanding of the world.

Depkat observes that Indigenous cosmology is based on the idea of an *indissoluble connection* of being that links humans with animate and inanimate nature, to form a complex network of relationships. Additionally, Indigenous cosmology includes the immaterial and invisible world because the dead and not-yet-born, as well as the spirits and gods, are also connected to the respective living generation. Accordingly, Indigenous systems of knowledge are characterized as magical (Depkat, 2020: 124). In this context, Rankin mentions his "own spirit and the Great Spirit" (151) to cope with the atrocities of the past and emphasize the spiritual connection of the material and the immaterial world. He portrays his bond to his father and his mother even after they pass away and insists on their interconnectedness (137).

Furthermore, he emphasizes the importance of traditional ceremonies, such as council fires. As mentioned above each chapter is given the name of a fire that serves as a sacred practice to make the individuals participating in it more open, grounded and connected with people who have passed away and those on earth. Thus, it is a ceremony which represents a place where Indigenous communication has its origins. He uses the words of various prophets to begin each chapter in his autobiographical text with the transmission of Indigenous knowledge, wisdom and heritage and to highlight that the visions of these spiritual figures come true: "In this time the direction of the Sacred Shell will be lost" (39). In contrast, followers of the Catholic Church are emphatic about the concept of "Heaven and Hell" (76) after death, which has a disturbing effect on Rankin. Yet, he is not able to resist, as the "brainwashing process" (77) progresses enormously fast so that the children captivated in boarding schools have no other choice than to rapidly adapt (78). The given power dynamics in the 20th century do not allow a cultural growth on both sides, but by contrast, lead to a demise of Indigenous cosmology. Yet, years after the assimilationist acts, Rankin decides by choice to accept both, his Indigenous and Canadian heritage and to expand his identity to a space *in-between*. Bhabha (1994: 60) defines this term as a new space where perspectives emerge and binaries such as the *self* and the *other* are fluid. In this context, Rankin's identity is not a mere Indigenous or a Canadian one. It is

multifaceted, challenges hierarchies and transforms into a space of resistance where he as a marginalized person redefines himself.

Moreover, Kidwell (2002: 89) argues that in Indigenous cosmology *metaphors* are used to organize beings into categories that are based on their relationships to the world and physical phenomena are seen as manifestations of spiritual power. Accordingly, Rankin demonstrates how Indigenous tribes rely on similarities of form and function, while the usage of images forms a sense of identity between two objects. For instance, the "turtle-shaped island" (25) makes the unknown land of North America (29) familiar, due to its similarity with a known animal that holds significance in diverse ways across various tribes. To take a case in point, the Iroquois tribe believes in the *Turtle Island* – the primordial creation story, where the earth is formed on the back of a turtle. This story serves as a symbol of harmony and balance between the natural world and humans, reminding the tribes to live peacefully with nature (Levine et al., 2017: 31). Subsequently, the Iroquois tribe has a different interpretation of the turtle-shaped island than the Anicinape tribe. Therefore, there is a variety of intra-Indigenous worldviews, but their reverence for nature and the important meaning of living in harmony with their land are common themes among their cosmology. These analogies and metaphors are deeply ingrained in Indigenous culture since they rely on pre-existing and widespread assumptions about the nature of relationships between objects. This concept, however, does not exist in the rational manner of European approaches, which further contributes to Rankin's inner conflict – defining who he is and where he belongs, particularly during and after the physical, psychological and sexual abuse in St.-Marc-de-Figuery.

Rankin's system of belief additionally evaluates the respect for environment and the responsibility of humans to *maintain balance with nature*. Kidwell argues that this is the major divergence between Indigenous and European knowledge systems, particularly in the perception of human role in the environment. Thus, in Indigenous cultures human beings are integral participants of the processes in nature. But, in contrast, in the European system of knowledge human beings are either passive observers who stand outside those actions, not giving any spiritual meaning to nature (Kidwell, 2002: 98) or externals who dominate over nature. In this context, Rollings argues that Europeans justify their missionary efforts in North America with specific biblical phrases, so he takes the following biblical excerpt as reference: "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Genesis 1:28). Furthermore, he adds that Christian culture consists of seizing, controlling and consuming the natural environment, whereas Indigenous people have an ethos that rather revolves around reciprocity and harmony with social, natural and immaterial

worlds (Rollings, 2002: 122). Consequently, Europeans not only instrumentalize the Bible to justify their missionary efforts in North America. They also use it to have power and control over nature. Moreover, Rankin emphasizes that the spread of technologies endangers humans of distancing themselves from nature with its healing character. Similarly, he argues that "weapons of mass destruction, […] polluting power plants, […] commercialism, and […] media that feeds us more misinformation than truth" (150) are detrimental. These tools initiated by Europeans destroy the spiritual connection between human beings and nature, as well as the land they live on. Rankin insists on upholding a balance and recognizing the spiritual significance of nature by defining the meaning of his tribe's name *Anicinape* as "human living in harmony with nature" (26). Throughout his autobiography, he continues to highlight the utmost importance of nature for Indigenous ceremonies (57).

The Anicinape tribe also personifies the *earth as a feminine unity* or attributes feminine qualities to it. On the one hand, Rankin refers to the planet as "Mother Earth" (35), insisting on the importance of staying in physical touch with this feminine entity (35), as a connection of healing and as an exchange of spiritual energy. In this context, he highlights a specific violent act in St.-Marc-de-Figuery, where the religious figures shave the children's head – a gesture that destroys Indigenous cosmological performances. It is deeply humiliating for him and his identity that he remembers his father's word:

> Your hair speaks to your life energy. They're the antennae that keep you in communion with the Earth. In our tradition, men let their hair grow out to show the bond they share with Mother Earth, also with women. Your hair is therefore a symbol of your respect for the Feminine (72).

The significance of keeping long hair whether male or female represents their respect for "Mother Earth" (78). The personification reflects a concept of earth as a life-giving and nurturing equivalent to a mother, who provides all living beings with sustenance, fertility, as well as nourishment. This idea reflects Indigenous mythology about creation stories that depict the earth as a female force involved in the foundation of existence. He also portrays the sacred meaning of the earth embodying feminine energy and emphasizing the importance of honoring and respecting the planet as a living unity: "How could humans 'own' the Earth? Isn't it us, rather, who belong to Her?" (65). By contrast, he observes Europeans as "robots […] [that] lose all interest in caring for the common good, Mother Earth, and all her inhabitants" (78), underscoring their unsustainability and disrespect for the ground they live on and all its inhabitants who do not fit into their Western ideologies.

Additionally, Kidwell emphasizes that Christian worldviews aim for the ultimate goal of salvation, while Indigenous worldviews place more impor-

tance on *recurring events*, such as crop growth and harvests, as well as animal mating and migration, and the movements of celestial bodies (Kidwell, 2002: 91). Rankin portrays how his tribe, as well as other Indigenous circles change their place of residence because of the change in weather. In the cold months these families leave their home for six months to go to a warmer and safer place. Once there, young and old, man and woman help each other to build a new home that will offer them protection for the following harsh months (30 ff.). Whereas Indigenous people use the cycle of nature as an orientation, Euro-Canadians rely on linear successions. In addition, Rankin demonstrates the Indigenous concept of cardinal directions, by assigning each direction a spiritual quality of an animal (49). By insisting on spirituality in every aspect of life, he arrives to process the overwhelming consequences of the degradation of Indigenous culture, tradition and identity: "We had to submit and reject our heritage to such a degree that I sometimes forget for a second or two that times have changed. […] '[T]hey called us Savages and tried making 'proper white children' out of us'" (149). However, through these eight council fires Rankin negotiates a composite identity with both ancestral Indigenous and modern Canadian ways of living and becomes a national healer: "I felt that the time was right for developing new bonds and relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people" (136).

In conclusion, Rankin portrays the complex relationship between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, using his autobiography as a tool to explore this dynamic. He discusses how Indigenous belief systems clash with European ideologies. He highlights the importance of symbolism, interconnectedness with the immaterial, the feminization of earth and the cycles of nature. Yet, the infiltration of European knowledge systems leads to *in-betweenness*, thus, to being torn between adapting to the dominant culture that is forced upon him and preserving his Indigenous heritage. Nevertheless, through his process of writing this space in-between transforms into a composite identity with a sense of wholeness.

Social Communication: Weaving a Narrative of Identity and Community

As Tardif acknowledges, Rankin aims „to deliver a message of hope to those who suffer from their pasts, either individually or collectively, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds" (12). This can be linked to Rankin's aim as a representative of the Anicinape nation to shift Canada's system and heal collectively. Accordingly, his autobiography operates within the realm of *social communication*, facilitating public communicative processes, through which he creates a new form of interaction between Indigenous and Canadians to define their

identities. Rankin highlights the negative consequences of power dynamics. The supposedly superior Euro-Canadians, in particular politicians and religious figures, deconstruct identities of First Nations and assimilate their descendants into "proper white children" (16) who fit in "a completely justified assimilation" (56). Thus, he not only fosters intra, and inter-Indigenous processing of trauma but rather expands this dialectic to Canada's society as such. He focuses on the imperializing eye of the government and church and urges individuals and institutions to empathize with and take responsibility for Indigenous communities by actively participating in reconciliation efforts.

Rankin promotes allyship between First Nations and Canadians. Consequently, his narration becomes a catalyst for broader healing to restore dignity and mutual respect. Further, Rankin's communicative goal is cultural remembrance, hence, collective memory, as identity is primarily constructed through remembering. However, Rankin as a representative of the Anicinape nation shifts from an individual remembrance to a collective one to convey a message of restoration and healing while considering the dignity of those involved. Yet, the meaning created through Rankin's narration is not static. It rather evolves dynamically in times of change. Depkat (2015: 43 ff.) argues that cultural systems transform through these social communications. Rankin represents his own life and existence by (re)constructing past experiences. Ultimately, he gives an account of his own mental development, considering various areas which play a significant role in communicating the message to the collective.

Linke addresses a range of topics that are frequently used in autobiographical writing (2019: 417 ff.). In the following, I will analyze the aspects of Linke's work that are relevant for the analysis of Rankin's narration, as they reflect the concept of social communication within the autobiographical negotiation of identity. The most important topics are *phases of life*, therefore, childhood and adolescence and *genealogy,* hence familial and social relationships. Furthermore, the material form of the *body* and life in *captivity*, thus a life which is forcibly directed by other people or institutions, as well as *truthfulness and authenticity* which are constitutive elements of this genre.

Phases of life: Rankin, on the one hand, leads the reader through his diverse life stages which are separated into council fires. The three main stages are firstly, general information about him and his environment, as well as the beginnings of his life. The second stage, as a culmination in the narration, is the diagnosis and reflection of his trauma caused by his stay at the boarding school. The third stage portrays his aim to heal from his past and reconnect with his spirituality and ultimately, to negotiate a healed identity. Consequently, the foreword by Marie-Josée Tardif, the prologue, the "First Fire" (25 ff.) and the "Second Fire" (39 ff.), including his birth represent the first phase. Rankin fosters knowledge about Indigenous communities and allows the reader to

participate in the dawn of his life story. The following four chapters mirror the second stage. In the "Third Fire" (51 ff.) he reflects on how Indigenous people become instruments of forced assimilation (56). Thereupon, he addresses, how, welcoming Euro-Canadian people and caring for them is linked to a breach of trust, ending with a "series of increasingly restrictive measures that ultimately aimed to assimilate [their] peoples" (63). The following fire deals with the "darkest subject of [his] story": the residential schools for Indian children" (70). With this specific topic, Rankin aims to communicate a shattering collective memory of children, in other words the "sexual urges" (73) of religious figures that lead to "[t]ears" (73) and "horrified" (73) young children. He puts emphasis on the disrespectful behavior of religious figures on Indigenous bodies (72). Rankin writes about his childhood of "six years" (74) spent inside this institution to sensitize the reader and communicate his "fear and deep sorrow" (74). He underscores that a large number of First Nations children are exposed to massive "physical, psychological, and sexual violence" (74).

Additionally, he starts this chapter with the Gradual Civilization Act[2], comparing it to committing "cultural genocide" (73). Evans (2003: 51) argues that the government is determined to exclude Indigenous people by proclaiming a law which forces them to "demonstrate that they had become educated/civilized but were compelled to renounce their rights to share in communal payments, to individuate their land and to disassociate themselves from their communities". Likewise, in the "Sixth Fire" Rankin highlights that the residential school era takes away the language and religion of First Nations, so that "they had lost their will to live and their purpose of living" (105). The last two chapters represent his adulthood and his individual aim to actively cope with his trauma. In the seventh chapter, Rankin conveys that he wants to move on from his traumatic past but is yet constantly dragged back, making it hard for him to come to terms with it (126). However, in the "Eighth Fire: The Light That Rests Upon Our Choices", where the title already symbolizes that in order to heal from his past, he must face his memories, particularly his residential school experiences which are still "haunting [him] in a powerful way" (143). He concedes:

> Accept that the past was over, and that it couldn't be changed. Accept to speak about it freely, with neither shame nor fear. Accept the fact that we all possess within us the power of Medicine, here and now (144).

2 The fifth Parliament of the Province of Canada passes an act to foster the gradual civilization of Indigenous tribes in 1857. This act instrumentalizes government policy to assimilate First Nations into the economic and social standards of the Euro-Canadian society (Robinson, 2024).

Rankin and his siblings are forcibly separated from their parents and brought to the St.-Marc-de-Figuery Residential School in Quebec which is run by the Catholic Church. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada states what I consider important: "The assault on […] identity began the moment the child took the first step across the school's threshold" (Anonym., 2012: 22). Rankin particularly highlights the cruelties on the day of the arrival, such as cutting Indigenous children's hair or forcing them to wear the same uniform. His clothes "that Mom so lovingly made [him] go up in smoke" (73). Thus, these children become instruments of the Catholic Church, who need to forcibly assimilate. Furthermore, strict and disciplined daily routines which included Mass and catechism lessons "had a particularly disconcerting effect on [him]" (76). Young children are deprived of love, attention and affection from their friends and families and are no longer able to express their identities. Ultimately, he writes about physical, psychological and particularly sexual abuse:

> Young boys march out of the showers one by one, horrified. Tears roll down their cheeks in silence, for fear and shock have stifled their voices. I will soon learn why: three religious men await us in the showers, and they too are completely naked. Under the pretext of showing us how to wash ourselves, they use us to satisfy their sick sexual urges. Nowadays, I can put words to the thing. However, at eight years old, I'm defenceless […] One thing is certain: these men are doing us harm (73).

Through diagnosing and communicating his life chronologically and by particularly focusing on his days in the St.-Marc-de-Figuery Residential School, he mediates the system he has survived, thus, constructs and questions it to convey his message to the readership. Hence, Rankin describes how communicating these three life stages to an audience helps him to attempt inner healing, hoping to help others to heal and grow spiritually, as well (151).

Genealogy and family: On the other hand, Rankin examines, as well as communicates his familial relations. He begins with tracing his family tree and discovering his family's history, thus, how his mother, belonged to the "Cree Nation" (40) and his father to the "Mami8nni stock" (40). By providing the reader with information about his genealogy and then portraying his "mother in that state – crying and sensing [their] inner anguish" (85), because of unscrupulous methods used in boarding schools, he sensitizes the reader and helps Indigenous people who are suffering from their past to (re)construct their identity that was destroyed in these establishments. He describes how these children are manipulated into thinking that their families are no longer relevant for them nor decent: "Look at how filthy our parents are," and "It's true. They do look like a couple of Savages" (85). Additionally, through-

out his narrative he states that he experiences anger and struggles with low self-esteem, unable to love others, which caused resentment towards his father (115). Although, Rankin mentions that his family alliances loosen because of the Euro-Canadian state and the Catholic Church, he, towards the end of his autobiography, reconnects with his family members and uncovers his ancestral roots by becoming a Medicine man (140). Through becoming one he helps his Anicinape tribe to also heal from the cruelties of the past and emphasizes the importance of collective healing (152) by developing his story along the quest to find his family and explore his ancestral tribes and nations.

Body: Additionally, Rankin portrays the material form of himself, his body, to demonstrate his individual growth and endurance, after an extensive period of suffering in the boarding schools. Consequently, his body serves as a metaphorical feature to describe, give meaning, and accept the harsh physical and psychological abuse in the residential school. In the beginning of his autobiography, Rankin migrates with his family to a warmer place, portraying his body as free and independent: "The journey took several days, but there was no need to hurry, for it was a pleasure, not a chore. When we felt weary, we simply stopped and set up camp for the night" (33). However, this freedom slowly fades when their lands, including their bodies are exploited by the British, the so called "Kimoti8inni in the Algonquin language, which means 'Thief People'" (42).

In particular, the moment of arrival of an RCMP officer at his family's shelter is the first symbolic incident, representing the imminent complete absence of freedom (72). Then, within the walls of St.-Marc-de-Figuery, Rankin and the other children and adolescents experience one of the worst chapters: "The general atmosphere of the six years I spent inside those concrete walls was a grim one, perpetually characterized by fear and deep sorrow" (74). The missionaries make the children suffer from physical and emotional abuse: "If you keep speaking your foul tongue, we'll cut it out!" (75). Rankin incorporates his suffering in a wider cultural context. Therefore, he reflects on his own body and the bodies of these children that also mirror their psychological state of mind. Especially, the *Fifth Fire: The Great Tear* gives a detailed insight into the atrocities exerted on the bodies of the captives, which then lead to physical illness: "In today's world, a great number of Indigenous people are struggling with diabetes" (135), as well as psychological issues and suicidal thoughts: "I managed to escape into the forest with a sturdy rope that I found in the shop, quite determined to hang myself" (109). He emphasizes that a vast majority of residential school survivors continue to suffer from their memories, resulting in addictions, such as alcohol and drug abuse (114). Additionally, Rankin writes about the death of his brother. He passed away because of alcoholism. Rankin himself as a former alcohol addict addresses these causes and

effects of the boarding school system on the bodies of the survivors. However, through his narrative he manages to receive back physical and psychological freedom. Simultaneously, he attempts to heal collectively while encompassing the whole Canadian society: "we must heal together" (152) and "Indeed, the Prophecy alludes to the stages of growth experienced by every individual and every community (152).

Captivity: Rankin evaluates that he was forced to pass his childhood and adolescence imprisoned in the St.-Marc-de-Figuery. He conveys the message that government and church collaborate to expand Christianity. Consequently, his memories of captivity are associated with the concept of survival. In this context, it is important to note that trauma is one of the central topics in his autobiography, as Rankin attempts to give a voice to unspeakable events which take place in residential schools, grappling with mental and physical wounds: "Brother Boivin suddenly grabbed him by the neck to give him a smack […], and […] struck him so hard that our classmate's forehead rammed violently against the wall corner and started gushing blood" (80). He gives testimony and represents these education systems as painful confinements, which influenced and continue to influence the story of every single individual who was imprisoned and Canadians who participate in ongoing debates about these establishments.

Truthfulness and authenticity: According to the French academic Lejeune (1971: 23), the autobiographical pact is an essential part of this genre as the author strives to represent his life truthfully. Therefore, an agreement between author and reader leads to the assumption that the author declares his commitment to the reader to portray his life in such a severe manner that the reader puts trust in the truthfulness of it (Missinne, 2019: 222). In other words, autobiographies serve on the one hand, as sources of material from the past and on the other hand, offer insight into how individuals construct their identities and create meaning in diverse cultural contexts (Depkat, 2015: 45). A sober analysis of Rankin's narration reveals that the narrator and the character about whom the storyline is told share the same name, which is also identical with the name of the cover and the title of the autobiography, including the term "Savages" further implies an aspect of truth, as it is a term personally witnessed by the author.

To sum up, through writing he "aspire[s] to share a message of healing and [he has] the responsibility of communicating it to the best of his ability" (83), in other words "this written testimony forces [him] to stir up the past and revisit it" (83). Rankin copes with mental issues by articulating, interpreting, as well as clearly defining them and their triggers. By giving the readership an insight into his various phases of life, particularly into his childhood and the

trauma that follows in his adolescence, he aims to communicate his memories and give hope to those who are still in the process of dealing with their traumatic past. Additionally, he portrays his genealogy and family to highlight how the education system manipulated Indigenous children into thinking their families are detrimental to their upward social mobility. By demonstrating how, initially, his relationship to his family deteriorates drastically but then improves as he attempts to negotiate his identity, he, simultaneously, attempts to construct a collective identity. His body serves as a metaphor to convey his mental and spiritual growth throughout the process of writing his autobiography. Consequently, he aims to give a voice to the ones who cannot be heard by extensively writing about his memory in captivity. Ultimately, truthfulness and authenticity contribute to the fact that the reader can identify, understand and internalize this sense of wholeness – with Indigenous and Canadian elements.

Indigenous People in Contemporary Canada

The preceding analysis was able to demonstrate that Rankin's autobiography has a double dimension – the negotiation of an Indigenous Canadian identity and social communication while diagnosing trauma and healing from the atrocities of the Canadian government and the Catholic Church. This confirms the previous assumption underlying this article that his writing practice documents individual abuse and helps entire Indigenous generations in Canada suffering from the traumatic consequences of allegedly Euro-Canadian superiority, to construct a collective assertive identity. To foster this process, Rankin facilitates public dialectics, through which social agents define their identities and values. Through reinterpreting and reflecting on the past, Rankin's work becomes a narrative of orientation. Thus, his identity is subject to a dynamic process of autobiographical negotiation, in which a proud Anicinape Canadian identity is ultimately constructed in the context of a broader cultural system. To emphasize his diffuse identity, Rankin transforms European textuality, dismantles Euro-Canadian dominance and incorporates the Anicinape language to respect linguistic variations and idioms. Therefore, he insists on embedding fluid and dynamic aspects of storytelling and the usage of vivid imagery and metaphors instead of relying on a linear paradigm. To highlight the drastic consequences of assimilationist Euro-Canadian ideologies more, he contrasts European knowledge systems and Indigenous cosmology to insist on the contradictory worldviews – empirical, scientific, secular and controlling knowledge systems in opposition to holistic, spiritual, interconnected and community-based cosmology. Therefore, Rankin acknowledges and celebrates his progress of healing through writing

and aims to help intra, inter, and non-Indigenous communities to profit from his therapeutic and holistic journey while benefitting from his act of writing in self-exploration and collective healing.

Today, Canada engages in reflecting on historical injustices of Indigenous people, particularly regarding the boarding school system. The establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission focuses on the impact of residential schools and serves as a platform for survivors to communicate their stories. Churches, as well as diverse levels of government in Canada apologized for their central role in the mistreatment of Indigenous communities. Stephen Harper, the Conservative Prime Minister of Canada issued an apology on June 11, 2008:

> These objectives were based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, 'to kill the Indian in the child.' Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country[3].

Thus, the boarding school era is a betrayal to Indigenous children, families, cultures, and nations. From the very first moment these institutions were established, their aim was to assimilate these children because of their ethnicity (Anonym., 2012: 86).

However, despite these reconciliation efforts, Indigenous people in North America continue to face various challenges. These numerous issues include health disparities, educational inequalities, inadequate housing, and high rates of poverty. An analysis from 2016 shows that Indigenous people in Canada struggle with barriers, thus, they face inadequate housing conditions. Additionally, these communities encounter challenges in renovation of housing and construction or securing financing for the purchase of homes, because of the *Indian Act* that prohibits the utilization of properties on reserves as collateral in lending agreements. A census from 2021 shows that Indigenous people in Canada, with a percentage of 18.8%, are more likely to live in a low-income household than the rest of the population. Moreover, the census reveals that fewer Indigenous people consider an Indigenous language as their mother tongue, although the *Indigenous Language Act* in 2019 is expected to revitalize these languages[4].

Accordingly, it is safe to say that the Pope's speech on July 25, 2022, did not end the barriers Indigenous communities are facing to this very day. Yet, it was a first step, like Rankin's autobiography. On the contrary, it is important to raise awareness of these contemporary societal issues existing in a country

3 https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1571589171655

4 https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220921/dq220921a-eng.htm

attributed with the concept of a *cultural mosaic* – a metaphorical expression that represents multiculturalism and conveys the notion that in this culturally diverse society, every single ethnic group plays a crucial role on the general composition, like individual pieces in a mosaic that create a vibrant and multifarious whole (Gibbon, 1938: 5 ff.). Therefore, it is contradictory to the worldview of the Euro-Canadian state and the Catholic Church, which insisted on displacement and suppression to systemically assimilate and form a homogenous whole. This means that it is of utmost importance to foster Indigenous communities to recover and heal from these Euro-Canadian and Christian ideologies, so that they, with their richness in culture, can contribute to Canada's societal tapestry. Ultimately, these first steps towards Indigenous healing are not sufficient but crucial to cope with trauma, build strong relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, preserve cultural practices, focus on the mental health, foster resilience, and create an equitable society – while listening to and respecting the voices of every single Indigenous person in his or her journey of healing.

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