

## Wajdi Mouawad's *Seuls*: When the body performs memory.



**Wajdi Mouawad's *Seuls*  
: When the body performs memory.**

**By Rachel M. Watson**

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“We are buildings inhabited by a renter about whom we know nothing. Our renovated façades present well. But who is this madman suffering from insomnia who, on the inside, paces round and round for hours, turning the lights off and on?”[\[1\]](#)

In an essay about his work, Lebanese-Canadian playwright, Wajdi Mouawad, compares the body to a building, inhabited by an Other. On first glance, Mouawad may seem to be using figurative language to illustrate psychological trauma, the “madness” caused by repressed memories. More consideration should be given, however, to Mouawad’s use of physical terms to describe the phenomenon of disunited self. Indeed, in his architectural analogy, Mouawad presents the experience of housing the Other in one’s body in concrete, material terms (building, façade), in terms of physical movement (pacing), and in terms of changing physical environments perceptible to the sense of sight (light and darkness). His insistence on the physical and material in his description of the relationship between the self and the haunting Other—together with his choice of theatre, an embodied medium—belies the notion that Mouawad is singularly interested in the psychological and evidences a concern for exploring the physiological relationship between ourselves and the Other in us, the past selves from which we feel distant but which, nonetheless, inhabit our bodies.

In fact, much of Mouawad’s oeuvre stages and investigates embodied memory: in *Forests* (2009) a

mysterious ancestral bone is found in a character's brain when she experiences flashbacks, and tattoos help family members recognize each other and remember their ties; in *Tideline* (2009) a corpse accompanies an origin quest, and in *Scorched* (2009), breath—the silent voice of the body—“speaks” the horrors of the past when trauma has imposed silence. *Seuls* (2008), though—the one-man play written, directed, and performed by Mouawad himself—is the most complex instance of the theatermaker's interest in the embodied nature of memory.

In broad strokes, the plot of *Seuls* traces Harwan, the protagonist's, search for self after exile. A Lebanese-Canadian doctoral student, who has grown up in Montreal after fleeing the Lebanese Civil War, Harwan is working on a dissertation on Robert Lepage entitled *The Frame as Identitary Space in the Solos of Robert Lepage*. He lives in a bland, nearly empty apartment, where he mopes about in his underwear struggling to write the conclusion to his thesis. Tellingly, he cannot find this conclusion to his questions about identity. He is alone and lonely—his solitude only interrupted by phone calls from his sister and father, and also his thesis advisor, who informs him that he needs to finish his thesis immediately. Rushing to finish, Harwan sets off for Saint Petersburg to interview Lepage who is there rehearsing his newest solo about identity and Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. While taking a passport photo in a photobooth before leaving, Harwan learns that his father has suffered a stroke and is in a coma. Visiting his father in the hospital, Harwan laments his loss of Arabic and his youthful love of painting—underscoring his sense that he has lost something of himself.

When Harwan arrives at his hotel in Saint Petersburg, Mouawad explodes the realist dramatic space that dominates the first half of the play, and shifts into a performative one. Harwan opens his suitcase only to discover it is filled with painting supplies instead of his belongings. He checks the luggage tag: it is blank; his name has disappeared. The telephone rings, uncannily his home voicemail picks up, and he listens with incredulity as his sister Layla reveals the news that he, not his father, is in a coma. Terrified, he picks up his thesis and finds that—like the luggage tags—the pages are blank. All indicators of his identity, as well as his academic inquiry into identity, have been erased from this room. Panicking, he attempts to open the window and discovers that he is walled in. Suddenly, from within this room with no exit, he can see, through plastic panels in the upstage wall of the room, the image of his intubated body. From this place of complete alienation from his body, Harwan begins to paint. For the remainder of the play, he paints the floors and walls with his body, with sticks, with the pages of his thesis. He imprints his silhouette on the plastic panels and eventually outlines a kind of crude self-portrait upstage center.

Examining the relationship between identity, the self, and the body in *Seuls*, Mouawad draws on his own biography—his flight from war-torn Lebanon and exile in Canada—to demonstrate the distance those in exile feel from their origins and, therefore, themselves. In *Seuls*, which can be translated as “alone,” “lonely,” or “only,” the self is not only “other” but it is also multiple: the estrangement from the singular self...caused by the trauma of exile...results in a fracturing of identity—one becomes several. As the title suggests, Harwan is not *seul*—Mouawad does not attribute to him the singular adjective for “alone” that would be logically and grammatically correct in this instance; instead, the singular Harwan is *seuls*—with an *s*—“alone” in the plural. Fractured, multiple, distanced from himself—both self and “other(s)” —he occupies a space of alterity.

In this exploration of the otherness of/to self, Mouawad centers the body—highlighting the somatic experience of alterity. By doubling, sometimes tripling, Harwan's body throughout the first section of the play, Mouawad plays with the notions of bodily continuity and discontinuity: the spectators witness

Harwan's search for self, for his origins—represented by his childhood love of painting and his connection to his native Arabic—in a *mise en scène* that underscores the character's loss of the physical know-how necessary to complete these tasks, the “otherness” to his body that he feels as a result, and his desire to recover his identity by reintegrating these skills into his organic knowledge. More precisely, in *Seuls*, Mouawad not only stages “self-portraits,” as Virginia Preston has suggested, but he also theatricalizes the Merleau-Pontian notion of bodily non-coincidence and the struggle to regain unified body through the physical experience of Pollock-like action painting.

20<sup>th</sup> century French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment, and in particular his notion of the phantom limb, can elucidate the somatic dynamics at play in Mouawad's work. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty hypothesizes the “lived body” as central to human experience of the phenomenal world. Critical of both rationalism and empiricism, Merleau-Ponty argues for a third way of understanding consciousness and subjectivity: the union of the body and mind in the incarnate, perceiving subject.

To illustrate his theory of the incarnate subject, Merleau-Ponty investigates the phenomenon of the phantom limb. In his study, Merleau-Ponty sets about trying to understand why an amputee can still feel pain in this missing limb and sometimes endeavor to use it. Merleau-Ponty argues that psychology falls short in explaining the phenomenon. Given that the symptoms of the phantom limb disappear when the nerves connecting the lost limb to the brain are severed, physiology must also be implicated, he claims.

Central to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the phantom limb is his concept of the *habitual body* and the *actual, or present, body*. The phenomenologist posits a body in which the habitual body—our instinctive sense of our bodies in space and all the possibilities open to it—and the present body—our body's actual capabilities in the present—are layered. In the case of the phantom limb, the habitual body schema of the amputee and the present body are in contradiction: due to the mutilation, objects in the perceptual field that were once manipulable are no longer so. When the amputee's world arouses in him the intention to manipulate objects that his actual body cannot operate, the sensation of the phantom limb can occur.

Merleau-Ponty sees the phenomenon of the phantom limb as evidence of bodily memory—the sedimentation of the past in the body. Ulrika Maude expertly explicates: “Through the two bodily layers, the habitual body and the present body, the body is, in fact, the meeting place of the past, the present, and the future, because it extends the past into the bodily present, simultaneously containing the outlines of the future that the body anticipates.” [2] For Merleau-Ponty, “the past's structure” haunts the present in the phantom limb, which, as bodily memory is “held by some intentional threads to the structure of the horizon of the lived past.” [3] Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty sees in the phantom limb a kind of organic repression that allows us “to establish the junction of the ‘psychical’ and the ‘physiological’”—the third path between Cartesian dualism and the scientific reductionism of empiricism. [4]

In *Seuls*, Mouawad theatricalizes the phantom limb, or more precisely the phantom body. He accomplishes this through a series of scenic devices, which, from the first scenes of the play, double Harwan's body, making it appear to be haunted by phantom bodies of his past. Midway through scene 2, “Telephone,” Mouawad first splinters the unified vision of Harwan by projecting a filmed double of his body onstage. While Harwan sits on his bed, trying to write to no avail, his doubled body appears for the first time as a shadow: it enters from stage right, walks towards Harwan, and reaches for the back of the protagonist's head as if, separated from himself, the shadow double is trying to return to his body. Over

the course of the next few scenes (until Harwan's stroke, which marks the transition from a scripted play to a performance of body art), Harwan's body is, through the technology of image projection, doubled in several ways. First, the body is made present through a filmed double—sometimes a shadow/silhouette and sometimes a fully-realized, detailed, color image of Harwan. Harwan's filmed body double moves throughout the space like a phantom, and acts on Harwan. The double's haunting makes Harwan physically ill-at-ease: he tosses and turns, sits uncomfortably, and rubs his face, neck, and shoulders. Additionally, the visual and temporal unity of Harwan's body is fractured through a series of photographs of him that are projected within the frame of the upstage-center window. The projected photographs, ranging from childhood images to more recent ones, make visible the Harwans of the past. Finally, as Harwan is often brightly lit from the front, the shadow of the material body of the actor plays on the stage, effectively tripling the representation of his body. Indeed, the spectator simultaneously sees the material body of the actor, its shadow, and a filmed or photographic double. The many doubles of Harwan's body not only render him multiple by fracturing the visual unity of his physical presence onstage, but they also challenge temporal unity by layering it. These doubles appear in the context of Harwan's study of identitary spaces; they haunt him during and after telephone conversations with his father and sister in which they discuss their former life in Lebanon, the war, and their exile; they appear also through photographs—images that arrest the past and bring it into the present. The doubles, then, are presented as linked to Harwan's past and to his questions about identity. As such, spectators come to see Harwan's body doubles not just as projections of a multiplicity of selves, but of *former* selves—of the past's structure that haunts the present.



*Seuls* at the Theatre de la Colline. Photo: Thibaut Baron.

This past that will not stay past—the embodied memory materialized in Harwan’s doubles—evidences a series of disjointed selves. And these phantom bodies, like the Merleau-Pontian phantom limb, represent the juncture of the psychological and the physical. Harwan’s trauma haunts psychologically (he feels distance from his own name) *and* physically, and *perhaps physically before psychologically* because it is largely a result of a *loss of bodily know-how*. Mouawad attributes Harwan’s anguish to a loss of the bodily knowledge connected with activities that he could physically carry out as a child—speaking Arabic and painting. As they were integrated into his intuitive body image, Harwan had carried out these actions pre-reflectively. These aspects of Harwan’s habitual body schema are eventually lost to him when he is torn from the context in which he practices them.

Specifically, in scene 4, “Father,” Arabic is portrayed as lost bodily know-how. Musing aloud to his non-responsive father, Harwan reflects on what he has lost as a result of his exile: “What would I have become? Here, in this moment, I would be speaking Arabic.”<sup>[5]</sup> When he finally does attempt to speak Arabic, the result is a physical struggle.<sup>[6]</sup> He trips over his words, stumbling over guttural and vowel sounds and grimacing as he attempts to place his tongue and articulators in the proper positions. The Arabic that he eventually manages to spit out is slow, broken, and labored. Clearly, the loss of his native language is not only a question of forgotten vocabulary and grammatical structure, but also a matter of the loss of the physical capacity to form these phonemes. Speaking Arabic is no longer a pre-reflexive operation for Harwan; his present body has lost the organic knowledge necessary to accomplish this task without conscious reflection and careful manipulation of the mouth.

Similarly, painting is no longer on Mouawad’s horizon of physical possibilities. As a child in Lebanon, he had developed a love of painting, and, by force of habit, had incorporated this activity into his habitual body schema. In the family’s flight, though, his painting materials were left behind. Since, once in exile, the objects were no longer on his horizon of manipulable objects, he lost the bodily knowledge necessary to complete this task pre-intentionally. This loss of this motor activity contributes to his sense of alterity. Harwan recognizes that if he had remained in Lebanon, and had, therefore, continued to paint, he might have become (or remained) another version of himself: “What would I have become if we had not left Lebanon? I would certainly have continued to paint the night skies. And if I had continued to paint the night skies, I would maybe have started to paint other things: faces and landscapes...and if I had continued to paint, what would I have become...?”<sup>[7]</sup> Harwan describes painting as a form of self-expression by which he would have “become:” this expressive motor activity would have contributed to his development and the construction of his sense of self.

In Harwan’s case, the “habitual body”—that which knew how to paint and speak Arabic and which was lost with the loss of homeland—does not coincide with the “present body,” which can no longer accomplish these tasks and, thus, suffers the traumatic wound of separation from its origins. The experience of bodily non-coincidence—the feeling of physical otherness to oneself—plagues those who have experienced the trauma of exile—and is what Mouawad materializes through Harwan’s doubles. Through the moving and still images that represent Harwan’s former selves, Mouawad represents the bodily memory of the past, its traumas, and the resulting feeling of alterity. Associating unified identity with his habitual body, Harwan wonders if he can regain the past that reverberates in his bones: “If I rediscover painting, Papa, do you think that I would start to speak Arabic again?”<sup>[8]</sup>

In the second half of the play, Mouawad stages Harwan’s pursuit of just that. When the protagonist



discovers himself in a coma-like dreamscape, alone with a suitcase full of paint, the piece shifts formally from a conventional drama to a kind of performance art, through which Harwan seeks bodily continuity and unified self through the somatic performance of ritualistic, full-body action painting. In this time regained, the phantom doubles that have haunted him as projections are no longer present. These hauntings are replaced by Harwan's performance, through which—as he exhumes the sediments of the past housed in his body, giving them shape by inscribing them on the plastic surfaces that have effectively become canvases—he will enact and repair his corporeal non-coincidence, eventually banishing his phantom body. Beginning his performance of embodied memory, Harwan presses his body against the upstage plastic membranes, leaving red imprints of his silhouette—torso, arms, legs, and hands—reminiscent of Yves Klein's blue *Anthropometries*. Here though, Harwan's body, which serves as a paintbrush as did Klein's female models, not only captures the “once thereness” of a missing body—his habitual body—but also attempts *to locate* his lost body through painting.<sup>[9]</sup> He inscribes his body onstage in order to attempt to visualize it, to find it, to render it present, to re-member through painting the body schema lost with the past. Through his body painting, he digs through the past sedimented within him and projects the body/ies he finds there.

Harwan creates a space for refiguring his lost habitual body. Defining the pictorial space in which he will re-member his body through a kind of self-portrait, Harwan slaps red handprints to the right and left of the empty space under his name. He, then, removes his pants and affixes them to the wall below the handprints. In doing so, Harwan has delineated the empty space which he will attempt to fill with the image of his body, rediscovered and configured through the performance of past trauma.

In the next movement of his performative painting, Harwan covers the stage in drips, smears, splatters, and splashes of blue, red, green, and yellow paint. Performing an action painting that echoes the techniques of Jackson Pollock, he uses a wooden stick, his hands, and his body to cover the stage—flats and floor—in paint. Harwan enters into a kind of rhapsodic trance, as he rediscovers the physical sensations of painting—the movement, rhythm, repetition, and gestures. Almost dancing, he imposes the energy of his body onto the empty planes around him. As he throws himself into a once familiar motor activity, the space between Harwan's habitual and present bodies begins to narrow, and as it does, fragments of the past layered in his body surface. He represents the loss he has experienced as he moves through its embodied remembering. In this purging, both the pain of past trauma and the joy of rediscovering a beloved childhood form of self-expression emerge. Harwan relives the trauma of the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil war and his subsequent exile, symbolically blinding and disemboweling himself with paint. Reliving trauma by painting it allows Harwan to face the memory of bombs falling in his garden and to work through the confusion of the bodily non-coincidence, of the feeling of being alien to himself that resulted from having to flee that cherished childhood space.

Performing his loss eventually leads Harwan to feel the joy of recovering his lost bodily-knowledge and childhood passion. As he paints, his body begins to remember this motor activity. Regaining the skill that was rooted in his habitual body, Harwan starts to feel more like himself. He removes the “blinded” mask and staples it in the place of his head in the self-portrait he has slowly been sketching. When he outlines the self-portrait to give it more precise bodily contours, the image of the body schema for which he has been searching takes full shape. Having painted his way through embodied trauma, Harwan, suddenly jubilant, paints in exuberant silence until the sounds of his childhood—bird song, the friendly barking of a dog, bells, and chirping cicadas—return; at which point, he lies down, facing upwards, and begins to count the stars in Arabic. The motor memory of painting has helped him recover the pleasurable state of bodily

coincidence: through action painting, he has rediscovered previously lost physical know-how, recovered the horizons of his past, and ultimately reunified his body. No longer non-coincident to himself, he is again able to speak his native language.

A symbolic resolution of his struggles with fractured identity, Harwan turns upstage to discover the image of Rembrandt's *The Prodigal Son* projected over the self-portrait that he has painted. Falling on his knees before the image, Harwan places himself within the contours of the projected body of the son. The father's hands rest on Harwan's paint-covered shoulders, as if to welcome him back into the frame of the painting. Harwan stands, slashing a hole in the "canvas" with a knife, and climbs into the painting. Having re-membered his habitual body through action painting, he "comes home" not to any father, but to painting itself—to the union of body and artistic expression in color, movement, and gesture.

In the final image of the play, the lights shift, and the projection of *The Prodigal Son* fades away. What remains is the image of Harwan, his head emerging from the cut in the canvas in such a way that it completes his self-portrait. In the end, instead of entering into Rembrandt's work, he has climbed into his own self-image, rejoining the habitual body schema that he recovered through painting, and thereby, returning to himself. Writing his own embodied memory through the movement, gestures, rhythms of splattering paint has exorcised his psychological and physical trauma. His phantom body has been painted away, and multiplicity no longer wounds. Ultimately, this final posture represents at once a return and a rebirth. The vagina-like opening in the surface of the painting leaves spectators with the impression that, in the womb of his own self-portrait, Harwan has returned to the frame of his original identity space—the space from which his "I" will be born(e) into the future as an anchored self, capable of negotiating the Others that make it up.

Further evidence of this reparative return and rebirth, Harwan has, apparently, found a conclusion to his work on identity spaces. While Harwan climbs into his portrait, his thesis director reads, via voice-over, the conclusion to his thesis, found, the professor says, in Harwan's belongings the day of his stroke: Harwan has concluded that "the frame is the place of all possibilities [...]. It is of a paradoxical nature: this finite place is the place of the infinite, the limit that offers the limitless, the border-opening [...] a space where the body, finally liberated, reaches the shores of rediscovered sensations."<sup>[10]</sup> Harwan's bodily "rediscover[y] [of] sensations" through action painting has brought answers to his questions about identity and framing in Lepage's work—a line of inquiry which reflected his own sense of disunity and his desire to regain his original framework, his habitual body. Having used his body to paint through the trauma of loss, Harwan has succeeded in finding himself again—reframing himself, or his self, within his self-portrait. And if, for Harwan, the canvas represents the liberating frame, the "finite" "limit" that allows for "infinite" and "limitless" self-expression, then for Mouawad—himself playing Harwan in what is ultimately a psychodrama—the theatre represents the same—a finite framework in which the infinite possibilities for embodied re-membering allow one to explore trauma, render it, and recover, even if fleetingly, a sense of wholeness.



*Seuls* at the Theatre de la Colline. Photo: Thibaut Baron.

In the final moments of *Seuls*, Harwan asks himself, “How does one say memory in Arabic?”<sup>[11]</sup> Mouawad, in this work, seems to suggest that in the wounding absence of one’s native language—the idiom and specific motor memory that Mouawad figures as constituting the self—one “says” memory through the movement, gesture, rhythms, tones and intonations traced by the language of the body in space and captured in splashes, splatters, and streaks of paint. Mouawad suggests the possibility of recovering memory, and therefore potentially healing, through performative art.



[1] Wajdi Mouawad, "Nous sommes des immeubles." *Les Tigres de Wajdi Mouawad*. Les Carnets du Grand T, n. 14 (Nantes: Joca Seria, 2009): 53.

[2] Ulrika Maude, *Beckett, Technology, and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 14. In Maude's study of Beckett, she locates in *Krapp's Last Tape* a staging of the phantom limb and bodily memory.

[3] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, (1945) *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Donald A. Landes. (London: Routledge, 2012), 88.

[4] Merleau-Ponty 82.

[5] Wajdi Mouawad, *Seuls* (Montreal: Leméac/Actes Sud, 2008), 150. The translations of Mouawad's texts are my own.

[6] This is evident only by viewing the mise en scène. It is not carried through graphically in the published text.

[7] Mouawad, *Seuls*, 150.

[8] Mouawad, *Seuls*, 151.

[9] Virginia Preston, "Imag/ing Theatre in Wajdi Mouawad's *Seuls*." *Theatre Forum*, no. 35 (Jan. 2009): 21.

[10] Mouawad, *Seuls*, 182.

[11] Mouawad, *Seuls*, 184.

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