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WRITING REVENANTS

Corporealizing Memory in the Francophone Theater of Wajdi Mouawad

The corporeality of language is primordial in theater. The intersection of body and text is an essential element of performance, as actor-embodied text is often at the core of the encounter between spectators and actors.¹ In Western theater traditions, from Ancient Greek tragedy to contemporary French and Francophone political theater, the body (*corps*), more specifically the dead body (corpse)—by way of murder, war, or sacrifice—is also frequently the point of departure for dramatic conflict and eventual moral or political reflection.² In the tetralogy *Le sang des promesses*,³ by the Canadian-Lebanese playwright Wajdi Mouawad, revenants, the corps(es) of characters, haunt the stage. Using *Incendies* (2003), the second play of the series, as a case study, this paper examines the importance of the corps(e)—at once dead and hauntingly present—and its connection to writing in Mouawad’s work.⁴ The staging of the revenant, Nawal, in *Incendies*, creates a memory space for those lost to real-life geopolitical conflicts. The *re-membering* of this body, through the writing of and embodiment onstage of this corpse’s *members*, aims to purge the individual and collective pain of sociopolitical trauma. To open a space for reparative memory, Mouawad uses the revenant to fracture temporal space and linear narrative, and as such, the dramatic action and the textual tissue of the play are determined by the presence, physical and metaphorical, of this body. Finally, in *Incendies*, an equivalence is established between the practice of writing and our ability to bury our dead, to allow corps(es) and our collective conscious to rest in peace through textual remembrance.

Wajdi Mouawad’s *Incendies*, or *Scorched* as it has been translated, is a reworking of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*: it is a story of twins, Janine (Jeanne) and Simon Marwan, who, upon their mother Nawal’s death, find themselves on a quest for the truth of her story, and by extension, their background. Immigrants ignorant of their family origins, the twins are directed by their mother’s legal will to deliver to their father and brother—the existence of both of whom is unknown to Janine and Simon—envelops containing letters from Nawal. Janine and Simon travel to Nawal’s homeland, a loosely figured Lebanon—though Mouawad is careful never to anchor the text fully in this location. After a series of discoveries, the twins find that their brother and father are one and the same: they learn that Nawal had given birth to a love child as a young teenager, that the child had been sent away out of shame by Nawal’s family, and that, though Nawal had spent her young adult years scouring a country torn by civil war to find her son, she had thought that she had failed. Nawal, the children find out, had become a guerrilla fighter during the war and was eventually taken prisoner. In prison, she had been raped by a guard and had given birth to her twins, Janine and Simon. Not until many years later, during the trial of this prison guard, Abou Tarek, did Nawal realize, that he was in fact her long lost son, Nihad. After hearing this testimony, Nawal went silent, never speaking again, save once on the day she died.

As a result of her silence, Nawal's children learn of her story and of the identity of their father/brother only after their mother's death, through the quest she has literally willed them to undertake. Mouawad carefully crafts the action of the play, written largely according to the Aristotelian tragic model, so that the moment of peripeteia and anagnorisis is experienced by the spectator, Janine, Simon, and Nihad/Abou Tarek almost simultaneously. The climax is all the more impactful because the spectator has come to know Nawal throughout the play—through her revenant. Nawal is theatrically called forth from the grave to inhabit the stage—a present absence—through multiple textual strategies and in multiple dramatic and temporal spaces; only when Janine and Simon have fulfilled her request to find their brother and father, to discover their mother's past and their identities, can they properly bury her and inscribe her gravestone with her name, thereby allowing the revenant to rest.

In *Incendies*, Oedipal ghosts must be revealed to extinguish the fires that scorch the hearts and minds of its characters. In this work, the revenants are not merely truths that haunt the minds of the characters, as they do in Sophocles. Instead, Mouawad physically stages revenants—doubles that embody the truth of the past. Deceased before the opening lines of the play, Mouawad's Nawal is a revenant. Though not a zombie-like corpse or ethereal ghost, she nonetheless “comes back:” her corps(e) is rendered present onstage through her writings and voice, her recorded silence or breath, and the incarnated memory of her younger selves.

From the opening scenes of the play, this revenant is present onstage, for the spectators and characters alike, through her writings. In the second scene, in which Janine and Simon learn of their mother's last wishes at the notary Alphonse (Hermile) Lebel's office, Nawal's presence is felt through her Last Will and Testament. Through the reading of this written record, Nawal speaks from beyond the grave. When the will is read by Lebel, her voice is echoed: “Tous mes avoirs seront partagés équitablement entre Jeanne Simon Marwan, enfants jumeaux nés de mon ventre. L'argent sera légué équitablement à l'un et à l'autre et mes meubles seront distribués selon leurs désirs et selon leurs accords. [...]” [“All my assets are to be divided equally between the twins Janine and Simon Marwan, my offspring, flesh of my flesh. I leave my money to them in equal shares, and I want my furniture to be disposed of according to their wishes and mutual consent. [...]”]⁵ The first person perspective and the persistence of the possessive “my” bring Nawal past death into the present through her written text. The reading of her will is performative: it legally establishes her directives and allows her voice to sound in death.

Nawal's revenant is not only made present through her writings but also through her voice. At times, her voice is mediated through that of another character's. Her palliative nurse Antoine, the last person to hear her speak and the only one to hear her break her 5-years silence, doubles Nawal's voice when relating her last words to Janine: “La voix de votre mère résonne encore à mes oreilles : ‘Maintenant que nous sommes ensemble, ça va mieux.’ Ce sont exactement les mots qu'elle a prononcés. Je vous ai appelée aussitôt.” [“I can still hear your mother's

voice ringing in my ears. ‘Now that we’re together, everything feels better.’ Those were her exact words. I called you immediately.”⁶ In other instances, Nawal’s presence is evoked through the silent voice—the breath. Antoine recorded her silence in hopes that he would catch her speaking in private. Through these audiotapes, Nawal’s respiration and movement haunt the stage. In Scene 14, Nawal’s silence resonates:

JEANNE: Simon. Viens t’asseoir à côté de moi. Écoute. Écoute un peu.

JEANNE donne l’un des écouteurs de son casque à SIMON qui le plaque contre son oreille. JEANNE plaque l’autre écouteur contre la sienne. Tous deux écoutent le silence.

On l’entend respirer.

SIMON: Tu écoutes du silence !...

JEANNE: C’est son silence.

[JANINE: Simon, come sit beside me. Listen. Listen for a bit.

JANINE gives SIMON one of her earphones and he presses it to his ear. JANINE presses the other earphone to her ear. They both listen to the silence.

You can hear her breathing. You can hear her move.

SIMON: You’re listening to silence!

JANINE: It’s her silence.]⁷

In this case, another writing technology, the tape recorder, captures Nawal’s respiration. The recording of her breath—the sound of the filling and emptying of her lungs—brings her corps(e) and her silence into the playing space. Furthermore, her silence speaks: Nawal’s respiration indicates that if she remains silent, it is not because her body is incapable of supporting voice, but because she has been rendered mute by the inability to articulate the horrors she has experienced. Through the revenant’s breath, the silent voice of trauma sounds.

Nawal’s presence is also brought to bear through the technique of doubling. Throughout the play, Nawal is often physically doubled when the past events, as discovered by her children, are enacted by the multiple actors who incarnate her. Nawal comes back fully, then, at different stages of her life to inhabit the stage: the revenant is given whole—voice and body reincorporated—in the actors’ embodiment of her life story.

Moreover, Nawal’s mutism is broken as her doubles emerge from the past. When Janine, who has finally decided to engage in the identity quest, takes her

envelope from the notary's office, Nawal's incarnated voice from the past overlaps the voices of the present for the first time. The past is layered on top of the present when Lebel calls out for Janine and Nawal, age 14, calls out for her teenage love, Nihad's father, Wahab.

Jeanne sort.

Nawal (14 ans) est dans le bureau.

HERMILE LEBEL sort de son bureau et appelle du couloir.

LEBEL: Jeanne !

NAWAL: *(appelant)* Wahab!

LEBEL: Jeanne ! Jeanne !

HERMILE LEBEL revient, sort son téléphone portable et compose un numéro.

NAWAL: *(appelant)* Wahab!

WAHAB: *(au loin)* Nawal!

NAWAL: *(appelant)* Wahab!

WAHAB: *(au loin)* Nawal!

LEBEL: Allô, Jeanne ? / C'est maître Lebel / Il y a une chose à laquelle je viens de penser.

NAWAL: *(appelant)* Wahab!

WAHAB: *(au loin)* Nawal!

LEBEL: Votre mère a connu votre père lorsqu'elle était très jeune.

NAWAL: *(appelant)* Wahab!

LEBEL: Je vous le dis, je ne sais pas si vous le saviez.

WAHAB: *(au loin)* Nawal!

[Janine exits.

Nawal (age 14) is in the office.

ALPHONSE LEBEL, walks out of the office and calls from the hallway.

LEBEL: Janine!

NAWAL: *(calling)* Wahab!

LEBEL: Janine! Janine!

ALPHONSE LEBEL comes back into the office, takes out his cellphone and dials a number.

NAWAL: *(calling)* Wahab!

WAHAB: *(in the distance)* Nawal!

NAWAL: *(calling)* Wahab!

WAHAB: *(in the distance)* Nawal!

LEBEL: Hello, Janine? It's Notary Lebel. I just thought of something.

NAWAL: *(calling)* Wahab!

WAHAB: *(in the distance)* Nawal!

LEBEL: Your mother met your father when she was very young.

NAWAL: *(calling)* Wahab!

LEBEL: I just wanted to tell you, I don't know if you knew that.

WAHAB: *(in the distance)* Nawal!] ⁸

The embodiment of Nawals from the past—doubled and sometimes tripled revenants of the deceased at ages 14, 15, 45, and 60—allows the spectators to hear her voice, to see her body, to witness her experiences directly. As in the above scene, the actors playing the “present” (the dramatic space of the identity quest) do not hear these voices or see these bodies; still, in key moments, the voices from the past speak across the temporal boundary between past and present. For example, in Scene 20, Nawal addresses Janine for the first time across space and time. When Janine wonders aloud, “Où m’entraînes-tu, maman ? Où m’entraînes-tu ?” [“Where are you leading me Mama? Where are you leading me?”], the revenant responds as if speaking from the grave, “ Au cœur même du polygone, Jeanne, au cœur même du polygone.” [“To the very heart of the polygon, Janine, to the very heart of the polygon.”]⁹ The revenant, whether present in body, in voice, or in both, guides her children in the search for their origins.

Finally, the revenant is rendered present most powerfully when Nawal's writing itself prompts the embodied telling of her past. In these cases, it is her writing in particular, read silently onstage by Janine, Simon, or Nihad, that brings her corps(e), body and voice, into the dramatic space. The notebook that she wills to Simon—in which she has inscribed the testimony she gave at her rapist/son's trial—and her letters—those written to Abou Tarek/Nihad, Janine, and Simon, which

eventually reveal their identities—bring her voice and body into presence through the written word. When in Scene 29, “La parole de Nawal” [“Nawal Speaks”], Simon opens the notebook to read its contents, Nawal, age 60, appears in the space to enact her testimony at trial:

Simon ouvre le cahier rouge.

Nawal (60 ans) témoigne devant les juges.

NAWAL: Madame la présidente, mesdames et messieurs le jury. Mon témoignage, je le ferai debout, les yeux ouverts, car souvent on m’a forcée à les tenir fermés. Mon témoignage, je le ferai face à mon bourreau. Abou Tarek.

[Simon opens the red notebook.

Nawal (age sixty) is testifying before the tribunal.

NAWAL: Madam President, ladies and gentleman of the tribunal. I wish to make my testimony standing, eyes wide open, because I was often forced to keep them closed. I will make my testimony facing my torturer, Abou Tarek.]¹⁰

Writing gives rise to the enactment of the past. Simon does not read the contents aloud; instead, spectators witness, embodied, the event that Nawal’s writing describes. When the spectators view firsthand, as if in the present, Nawal’s past, they are reminded that presently her corpse is in the ground. In this way, her body appears to them as both dead and living, a corpse and a vibrant being. Consequently, she “speaks” from beyond the grave. Through these powerful instances of writing and reading, the defunct Nawal—her body and voice—are reclaimed from death to haunt the stage, to guide Janine and Simon, and to reveal theatrically the discoveries of her children as their quest unfolds.

Furthermore, the revenant—Nawal’s doubled body—affects the temporal and dramatic space of the play. In performance, several temporal spaces are in place: Janine and Simon’s fictional present; Nawal’s fictional past at multiple points in her life; and the present of the spectators who are themselves confronted by all of these fictional temporal spaces simultaneously. Mouawad also weaves together multiple narrative threads: the thread of Janine and Simon’s quest and the many threads of Nawal’s past. The playwright not only performs sophisticated switches between the various dramatic and temporal spaces, but also orchestrates them such that they are sometimes complexly layered. In the moment leading up to the climax of *Incendies*—the moment in which Abou Tarek/Nihad learns that he is father to his brother and sister—the numerous dramatic and temporal spaces overlap in a single moment. The stage directions read:

NAWAL (15 ans) accouche de NIHAD.

NAWAL (45 ans) accouche de JEANNE et SIMON.

NAWAL (60 ans) reconnaît son fils.

JEANNE, SIMON, et NIHAD sont tous trois ensemble dans la même pièce.

[NAWAL (age fifteen) gives birth to NIHAD.

NAWAL (age forty-five) gives birth To JANINE and SIMON.

NAWAL (age sixty) recognizes her son.

JANINE, SIMON, and NIHAD are all together.]¹¹

Mouawad's adroit manipulation of layers of dramatic and temporal space fractures the narrative, creating a thickness of time, space, and *récit*. And this comingling of present and past, which interrupts the linear narrative much like a flashback (a technique usually associated with cinema, not theater), is made possible by the multiple doublings of Nawal's body. The dramaturgical structure is determined by the presence of this *corps* and this corpse, by Nawal's body as figured in both the past (as an alive presence in the memory space) and present (as the presence of an absence in death). In short, the functioning of this play depends on the revenant.

The revenant makes possible the staging of memory, as the physical doubling of Nawal—and the consequent playing of the images of her past in front of the audience—creates a memory space. Mouawad's narrative technique does not merely relate textually the events of Nawal's life but physically re-members the body itself in front of the spectators. The staging of Nawal's body at different moments from the past, in conjunction with the present, necessitates a cognitive blending on the spectators' part. The spectators' brains must perform the sophisticated task of simultaneously blending the perception of multiple temporal and dramatic spaces. Through this process, spectators understand that they are at once witnessing the physical incarnation both of Nawal's past and of that which is being recounted to her children in the present. The result is that spectators see simultaneously a past in which Nawal lives and a present in which Nawal is dead, in which she waits to be properly buried while Janine and Simon complete their quest.

This juxtaposition of past and present creates a memory space in which the past is brought to life in images. By embodying the past in the revenant, Mouawad is able to stage the process of remembering, to create a theatrical technique that reflects the mental process of recollection. According to Paul Ricoeur, memory relies on the creation of images: "The presence in which the representation of the past seems to consist [...] appear[s] to be that of the image. We say interchangeably that we represent a past event to ourselves or that we have an image of it [...]."¹² Just as the function of memory depends on the bringing of images to the mind's eye, Mouawad's theatrical memory space depends on the placing of images of the past in front of the spectators; he achieves the staging of these images, and consequently of recollection and memory, through the physical presence of the revenant. The

technique of bringing images of the past to life in view of the spectators enables Mouawad to render memory—an ordinarily interior, mental, and individual cognitive process—exterior, physical, and collective.

Given that Nawal’s writing—which by theatrical magic brings her body back to inhabit the flashbacks—is crucial to the creation of the memory space, Mouawad makes a connection between the revenant, writing, and memory—specifically reparative memory. Throughout *Incendies*, Mouawad uses the revenant to represent the haunting of transgenerational trauma, a theatrical approach that resonates with Marianne Hirsch’s theory of “postmemory.” Investigating the “transgenerational reach of trauma,” Hirsch argues that the “postgeneration,” or the “generation after” the traumatic event, can “connect so deeply to the previous generation’s remembrances of the past that they identify connections as a form of *memory*, and that in certain extreme circumstances, memory *can* be transferred to those who were not actually there to live the event.”¹³ The palpable nature of revenant-embodied memory in *Incendies*—the way memory is felt almost to be *experienced* firsthand by the spectators and Janine and Simon—is a manner of staging the “memory” of the postgeneration.

Mouawad, moreover, points to the importance of writing in the postgeneration’s process of reparative remembering. In multiple instances, writing is set up as analogous to overcoming the past and burying the dead—in short, to healing trauma. Firstly, young Nawal promises her grandmother, Nazira, that she will learn to read, write, count, and speak. In Scene 9, Nazira, on her deathbed, demands: “Écoute ce qu’une vieille femme qui va mourir a à te dire : apprend à lire, apprend à écrire, apprend à compter, apprend à parler. Apprends. C’est ta seule chance de ne pas nous ressembler. Promets-le-moi.” [“Listen to what an old woman on her deathbed has to say to you: learn to read, learn to write, learn to count, learn to speak. Learn. It’s your only hope if you don’t want to turn out like us. Promise me you will.”]¹⁴ According to her grandmother, learning in general, but particularly, writing and reading are essential to overcoming the past. Nazira cannot rest in peace until Nawal has made good on her promise and proven it by engraving her grandmother’s name on her gravestone. Engraving—writing in stone—casts writing as essential to burying the dead, essential not just to bearing witness to the dead’s name and memory but also to moving beyond the horrors of the past.

The connection between the revenant, writing, and reparative memory is also echoed in Nawal’s last wishes, which parallel those of her grandmother. She instructs her children to engrave her gravestone only once they have found their brother and father and learned of their identities. In this case, Nawal uses writing (in the form of her will, notebook, and letters) to end her silence—itsself emblematic of unspeakable trauma—and guide her children on a quest to know the past in order to overcome it. Only once they have discovered their origins and faced the traumatic truth of their identities can they, in turn, engrave their mother’s gravestone, write her name *in memoriam*. In the symbolism of the engraving on gravestones, Mouawad sets up parallels between writing and discovering of one’s identity, writing and properly burying the dead, writing and remembering, and

writing and healing past wounds. In *Incendies*, Mouawad figures writing as crucial to repairing individual and familial memory in order to move into the future.

If writing can be an act of reparative remembering on the individual and familial level, Mouawad seems to be reflecting on how this might also be true for the larger collective. He looks to writing as a way to remember collective trauma, bear witness to it, and hopefully, effectively bury it for good. In the play, he stages a debate over whether or not language, writing, and to some extent art (song and performance) have the power to stop the horrors of war, to end conflicts. While posing these questions, he also figures the arts as capable of soothing, supporting, and guiding in times of horror. Overall, his exploration of writing, art, and healing is not conclusive: characters sing while executing enemies, but also to encourage their fellow prisoners; Nawal and her best friend, Sawda, fight over the efficacy of their newspaper in supporting their side of the raging civil war, only to turn to violence when the newspaper eventually fails to convince the factions to lay down their arms. In short, Mouawad is not sure of writing's ability to stop conflict and war, but he does seem to suggest that writing can help heal the psychological wounds of those conflicts and allow victims to move into the future. In *Incendies*, Mouawad tests the following hypothesis: if writing can heal the horrors of the past on an individual and familial level, as it does for Nawal, Janine, and Simon, then it can also do so for societies at large. By having the Marwan family's story intersect with a broader sociopolitical trauma—civil war—Mouawad suggests by association that their journey to remembrance and healing—which begins and ends with writing—could be the same for the collective. In *Incendies* then, Mouawad not only stages individual and familial reparative memory, but also attempts, through the act of writing the play itself, to perform healing in the collective.

Indeed, in her final letter, Nawal suggests to Simon that he should reconstruct history, that he should remember: “À présent, il faut reconstruire l'histoire. / L'histoire est en miettes. / Doucement / Consoler chaque morceau / Doucement / Guérir chaque souvenir / Doucement / Berceur chaque image.” [“Now history must be reconstructed. / History is in ruins. / Gently / Console every shred. / Gently / Cure every moment / Gently / Rock every image.”]¹⁵ Here, “reconstructing history” is synonymous with healing from the past in order to move into the future.

Reconstructing is a re-remembering of pieces—“shreds” that must be “consoled [...] gently” and “cured” by “gentle [...] rock[ing],” as if they were babies, fragments of human members, the result of the horrors of war, that must be tenderly put back together. Through Nawal's letter, Mouawad calls for history to be lovingly re-remembered through collective memory and mourning. Only then can traumatized collectives heal and move on. In *Incendies*, the reflex of looking backward serves to move us forward.

Like the purging of the infamous Theban curse in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Mouawad attempts through performative writing (and a performance of writing both in and through the play) to heal the wounds of traumatic violence, not only of the Lebanese Civil War—as he never names this place—but of war and violence across the globe.¹⁶ The cleansing rain of the last tableau suggests that the fires of trauma—

this Oedipal play’s particular curse—have been stamped out through self-discovery, through self-knowledge, and most of all, through writing.

Notes

1. For references to “corporeality of the word,” see Mary Noonan’s book on voice in the work of 20th century French women playwrights, *Echo’s Voice: The Theaters of Sarraute, Duras, Cixous and Renaude*. For more on the centrality of the “encounter,” see Jerzy Grotowski’s *Towards a Poor Theater* and Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space*.
2. Hélène Cixous, in her essay *Aller à la mer*, makes this argument gender specific. She maintains that the female corpse is the starting point for much of the Western theater canon. For Cixous, attending this theater—participating in the representation and continuation of a patriarchal structure that places women in the position of victim—amounts to “attending her own funeral.” Calling for a new theater of female “body-presence,” she hopes for an end to theatrical writing that relegates women’s bodies to the role of “sacrificial object.”
3. *Littoral* (1997), *Incendies* (2003), *Forêts* (2006), and *Ciels* (2009) make up the series.
4. In the three works of the tetraology that deal with origin quests (*Littoral*, *Incendies*, and *Forêts*), the missing or deceased body prompts the action of the play. Inspired by Greek tragedy, dead and absent bodies are motors of these plots. Just as the former King of Thebes’ murder, and the resulting plague, is the backdrop against which Oedipus sets out to know his identity, Mouawad’s characters come to know their past, the trauma of which they are inheritors, when there is a death in the family. In *Littoral*, the corpse of Wilfrid’s departed father is staged and serves as guide: the corpse speaks to his son, chides him, encourages him, teaches him, while Wilfrid carries the patriarch’s body through his homeland in search of proper burial ground. In *Incendies*, as we will see, the matriarch Nawal, comes back to haunt the stage, a revenant, through the words in her writings. In *Forêts*, the jawbone of an ancestor, found embedded in the brain of a later generation, triggers the search. And in *Ciels*, though not an origin quest, a suicide begins a different kind of questioning.
5. Mouawad, *Incendies*, 16.
Mouawad, *Scorched*, 6.
6. Mouawad, *Incendies*, 45-6.
Mouawad, *Scorched*, 37.
7. Mouawad, *Incendies*, 54.
Mouawad, *Scorched*, 48.
8. Mouawad, *Incendies*, 31-2.
Mouawad, *Scorched*, 21-22.
9. The “polygon”: Mouawad uses the figure of the polygon symbolically throughout the text. Janine, a math professor, introduces this geometric figure to the students in her class on graph theory. She asks them to analyze visibility graphs of polygons to determine which vertices are visible from each particular angle of each shape. Mouawad employs this mathematical problem as symbolic of Janine’s personal questions about the visibility of her past, about her ability to “see” the truth of her origins. In this passage, Nawal uses the “heart of the polygon” figuratively to indicate that she is leading Janine to a place of complete knowledge of her past.
Mouawad, *Incendies*, 74.
Mouawad, *Scorched*, 69.
10. Mouawad, *Incendies*, 101.
Mouawad, *Scorched*, 100.
11. Mouawad, *Incendies*, 125.
Mouawad, *Scorched*, 129.
12. Ricoeur, 5.
13. Hirsch 3.
14. Mouawad, *Incendies*, 41.
Mouawad, *Scorched*, 32.
15. Mouawad, *Incendies*, 130-31.

Mouawad, *Scorched*, 133-34.

16. For references to non-competitive, multidirectional, and transnational memory, see Max Silverman's *Palimpsestic Memory*.

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---, *Forêts*, 2006, (Leméac, 2009).

---, *Incendies*, 2003, (Leméac, 2009).

---, *Littoral*, 1997, (Leméac, 2009).

---, *Scorched* (2003), trans. Linda Gaboriau (Playrights Canada Press, 2011).