Theater as a Site for “Following Back the Thread of Memory” in Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive*

by

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Introduction

In a recent article in the American Theater Magazine, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel writes of the hauntingly relevant and enduring impact of her 1997 play *How I Learned to Drive*. Celebrating its 20th anniversary, she reflects on the remarkably restorative healing powers of writing this play:

> It felt as if the play was rewriting me, and I will always remember the sensation of lightness I had in the middle of the night as I wrote it. This is the gift of theatre and of writing: a transubstantiation of pain and secrecy into light, into community, into understanding if not acceptance.¹

Vogel regards the theater as a divine space of transformation and empathy. She attributes its effectiveness to the community it assembles and the potentiality of renewal and working-through it possesses. *How I Learned to Drive*, in particular, invites a theater of deconstruction and reconstruction. *How I Learned to Drive* follows Li’l Bit, named by her family after her genitalia, as she goes back in time and revisits a collection of her most formative childhood memories. Told with a non-linear timeline, Li’l Bit jumps temporally into memories of her sex education taught by her family. Most notably and central to the play, she revisits memories of her Uncle Peck who sexually abuses her in a car since age eleven while also teaching her to drive. By revisiting the past, Li’l Bit reintegrates her trauma into her present, and thus moves forward into a restored future. Vogel uses theatrical conventions like direct address, fantasy engagement, temporal fluidity, and the presence of an audience to create an environment of confrontation and healing.

This paper examines how *How I Learned to Drive* engages with traumatic memory. It investigates how theater, with its spatial, temporal and fantastical
capabilities invites a nuanced understanding of the human psyche and traumatic memory’s non-linear, fragmented, and fluid ways of assessing the past. Feminist trauma studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich proposes that trauma needs a new kind of archive, one that challenges scientific, linear and public displays of memorialization:

Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all. Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. It thus demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma’s ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral.²

The fluid ephemera that Cvetkovich refers to exists in performance because theater does not have to abide by any linear, objective narrative. It flirts with fantasy and reality while often employing multiple realities. Theater calls for tangible bodies to exist relationally together. It can be anchored in multiple temporalities at once, that bend, blend, and collapse into each other, much like the way memory functions, dysfunctions, tricks and enriches us with its self-made tales.³ It looks forward while it looks back, pooling and collecting what did, might, should, and could happen. Always building new upon the history that came before it, theater is simultaneously a graveyard and a launching pad, with time gone and that which is about to become.

This paper analyses Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive* with a psychoanalytic lens. Psychoanalysis has increasingly become a useful tool in describing both trauma and performance because it provides “tools to probe the elusive, receding notions of Reality and the Subject that turned especially suspect in the theatrical world of simulacra and mediatized spectacles.”⁴ Performance asks psychoanalytical questions
because it is an investigation of human interactions, significations and “directly involves corporeal individuals breathing, thinking, speaking, moving in front of other similar organisms.”

Theater, as in psychoanalysis, utilizes and simultaneously unpacks representation. Of course I recognize that psychoanalysis is founded upon racist, sexist and homophobic underpinnings. It relies on the Oedipal complex at the center, rendering incest, women and people of color unintelligible.

However, for the purposes of this paper, psychoanalytical techniques will be distilled and separated from their historical origins. Psychoanalysis will be engaged insofar as it discusses trauma and the reparative practices of talking-through. Coined “the talking cure,” psychoanalysis means “following back the thread of memory” to address and reintegrate the primal scene, that is, the first moment repressed moment that results in a separation of the self and the Other (While a fuller understanding of psychoanalysis is fruitful for further investigating this play, a more thorough explanation is beyond the scope of this paper). 

*How I Learned to Drive* engages with psychoanalysis in the way that it unravels Li’l Bit’s past. The audience witnesses Li’l Bit create and intervene in representations of her childhood. The theater space is presented then, as an illusory site of remembrance, reconstruction and reintegration.

As feminist psychoanalytic theorist Ann Pellegrini points out:

> Part of the problem with trauma is precisely its resilience to the literal, to the thing itself, and it may be this resistance to the literal that also makes the literary and, yes, the theatrical such resonant sites through which to think trauma anew.

This paper examines how and why traumatic intervention and processing resonates so soundly in a theatrical space.
Chapter One presents the structure and behavior of traumatic memory and then proposes the ways *How I Learned to Drive* utilizes that framework. I compare psychiatrist Judith Herman’s articulations of how traumatic memory functions to Vogel’s theatrical representation of Li’l Bit’s re-visitation, specifically with regards to temporality and fantasy. Chapter Two discusses the relationship between embodiment and memory. Using Bryoni Trezise’s definition of “the memory affect” and Susan Leigh Foster’s conclusions about embodied affective recall, I examine embodiment in *How I Learned to Drive*, and how it can be employed to work through trauma. Chapter Three investigates how an audience bears witness to performance and the restorative powers of being seen. In this chapter I directly employ psychoanalytic theory to unravel Vogel’s play structure and the development of her central character, Li’l Bit.
Chapter One: Memory

Theater is a generative site for unraveling trauma because it can function as memory naturally does. Psychiatrist Judith Herman explains that traumatic memory is recorded differently than normal memory because “the traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness” through flashbacks and nightmares. Flashbacks can be sparked by the most mundane stimuli and transport the survivor into a vivid, emotional, whole body experience. Traumatic memories rupture the typical relationship between event and memory. Evoking this tension, How I Learned to Drive expresses abnormal memory in the form of non-linear narrative. Vogel sets the character Li’l Bit on a path of remembrance drive by flashbacks, both pleasant and painful.

Remembering is an active and transformative process, as “memory heuristically places us on a grid whose coordinates are both constructed and determined,” constantly reframing how we figure the world in relation to ourselves. The memory is constructed as it is replayed in the flashback. In this sense, memory has its own ontology, or nature of being, detached from the initial occurrence. Similar to memory, theater recalls in the present, while simultaneously pulling one back into the past. Past and present are in constant conversation, informing and affecting the other. Furthermore, non-linear theatrical narrative explicitly sheds light on the connection between past, present and future. The potential for change also goes both ways: present circumstances or information can change what or how something is remembered; and similarly, the remembrance of the past can change the present state of being. Precisely because of their elusive and ever-evolving nature, theater and
memory have the potential to be reinvestigated and if necessary, recreated or rewritten.

Theater’s temporal elasticity makes it conducive to expressing and unpacking memory. According to Attilio Favorini, theater is a “time art,” meaning it reflects “the flowing character of all temporally ordered experience.” It uses time as a tool to construct and deconstruct narrative. Theater, like memory, can be temporally elusive, flowing in and out, interrupting linear narrative. Moreover, theater exists in a liminal time zone, that is, a time zone completely outside of everyday life. In this elusive time/space continuum, the rules of the ‘real’ world don’t apply. Theater’s liminality is formed because the theatrical space is typically a dark room, filled with a community of strangers; theater tells a narrative that can jump decades or exist in a different world entirely. Theater has an elusive and illusive time signature that defies daily life. Time is expressive, and can be compacted, reversed, magnified, or elongated. These qualities make theater successful in chronicling the past and functioning like memory.

In a similar way, memory, especially traumatic memory, does not always follow a linear narrative account. Remembering takes us back into the past, while time still ticks in the present. Non-linearity, as it is used in How I Learned to Drive, therefore, properly expresses how memory situates a person between multiple and simultaneous temporalities. Li’l Bit, a now jaded 35-year-old woman, jumps back in time to revisit memories from her past, specifically those surrounding female sexualization and Uncle Peck. Li’l Bit doesn’t go back in time in chronological order: Vogel writes the scene sequence so that memories trigger each other. This theatrical decision parallels traumatic thought because, as gender studies scholar Ann
Cvetkovich articulates, “given the overwhelming nature of physical and emotional stimuli, the memory of trauma may not give rise to a conventional narrative, it may instead consist of a series of intense and detailed, yet fragmented, psychophysical experiences.”

Using this framework, Vogel situates Li’l Bit on a remembrance/time continuum that jumps forward, backward and sideward and uses driving instruction to frame and guide temporal shifts. For example, Vogel transitions from Li’l Bit’s middle school memories into a scene titled “The Photo Shoot,” a decision not based on chronology, but on Li’l Bit’s affective experience and associations between these memories. This transition begins with a middle school sequence, titled “The Anthropology of the Female Body in Ninth Grade – Or a Walk Down Mammary Lane” which is a montage of three distinct and scarring middle school memories. Each one lasts approximately 30 seconds to one minute, flowing from one to the other, and explains how Li’l Bit became prematurely aware of her womanly physique. The first takes place in the hallways where she is accused of having breasts made of “foam rubber” as a prepubescent boy grabs them. The second moves into the girls’ locker room where two tweens spy on Li’l Bit as she undresses and laugh when they see her breasts are real. The final scene takes place at the school dance, where Li’l Bit confides in her friends about her self-consciousness of her chest and haunting fear of being watched. Midway through the third scene, time begins to melt as the stage direction reads, “In another space, in a strange light, Uncle Peck stands and stares at Li’l Bit’s body. He is setting up a tripod, but he just stands, appreciative, watching her.” Li’l Bit’s classmate Greg (described in the stage direction as “ardent, sincere
and socially inept, Greg will become a successful gynecologist” asks Li’l Bit to dance and is continuously rejected. After his third attempt, Li’l Bit leaves the sock hop behind and is drawn towards Peck, falling into the memory of the 1965 Photoshoot. Both scenes are driven by the male gaze. Her affective experience carries her from one to the other. In the photoshoot Uncle Peck takes promiscuous photographs of Li’l Bit in his basement. She agrees to be a model as a favor to Peck, but is quickly betrayed and weighed down by the materiality of her body as she learns that Peck intends to send the photographs to Playboy. This transition reveals how incessant objectification comes from all angles of her life. In this transition, Li’l Bit begins to connect the dots. By stringing these memories together by affect, rather than timeline, Li’l Bit begins to witness the formation of her present self.

Non-linearity also greatly informs how we interpret each moment in the play. The intimate scenes with Peck are seen differently depending upon what came before. The first time the audience sees Peck and Li’l Bit in a car, Bit is seventeen-years-old and not yet revealed to be his niece. Knowing only this much, their relationship seems risky but acceptable. When Peck hints at wanting a sexual experience with shampoo, Li’l Bit retorts, “Stop being bad,” which could be heard as almost flirtatious or playful. However, as the play progresses and the audience learns more about the abusive foundation of their relationship, those same car scenes are understood quite differently. The audience is set up, as Pellegrini points out, to rethink narratives previously understood: “One conventional depiction – older (married) man and younger woman – turns into another, less depicted perhaps, but no less ‘ordinary’ scenario.” This transformation at the beginning of the play sets a precedent to
reexamine seemingly “conventional” narrative for the rest of the play. Vogel initially withholds information, speaking to the necessary ambiguities of memory and the details Li’l Bit chooses to conceal. She reveals the infinite web of connections inside memory, wherein each event is influenced by and influential on related instances. Therefore, to understand the full picture, Li’l Bit must examine everything.

“Sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson,” Li’l Bit says to the audience at the top of the play. Carefully and methodically unraveling what happened forces the audience to set judgment aside because they literally do not have enough information. Vogel masterfully requires the audience to sit with the discomfort and absorb a complete picture. The non-linearity the audience witnesses simulates the confusion and complications of remembering some details, but not all. This “disconnect between what is experienced and what is apprehended or assimilated” is a way of coping, and can be called the “enigma of survival.” Perhaps the “enigma of survival” lies in the process of editing the memories together.

Li’l Bit’s ability to control which memories resurface changes throughout the play. At the beginning, Li’l Bit fondly paints a picture of her old home:

the crumbling concrete of U.S. One winds its way past one-room revival churches, the porno drive-in, and boarded motels with For Sale signs tumbling down.

Thereafter, she smoothly and purposefully transitions us into a memory with Peck:

It’s 1969. And I am very old, very cynical of the world, and I know it all. In short, I am seventeen years old, parking off a dark lane with a married man on an early summer night.

The audience is taken on a journey with Li’l Bit in the driver’s seat. She revisits with a purpose. This control, however, is not always present. Since recollection can be
volatile and spontaneous, Li’l Bit occasionally falls into memories involuntarily, with stage directions like “A voice intrudes,” or “A voice cuts in,” the voice being the marking of a change in scene. She finds herself “thrust unknowingly into a painful past when she encounters triggering circumstances in her present.” Her control in the first two-thirds of the play abruptly halts after “The Photoshoot” scene, whereby all following memories are introduced by Male Greek Chorus. Thereafter, she is thrown into the memories, often without her consent. “The Photoshoot” scene closes as Li’l Bit unbuttons her blouse for Peck and then Male Greek Chorus forcibly interrupts, announcing: “Aunt Mary on behalf of her husband.” We see Aunt Mary plea to the audience for understanding and approval, a vision that probably comes from something Li’l Bit once unintentionally overheard or anxiously imagined was said. Li’l Bit no longer introduces the memories, implying her loss of control as she sinks deeper into and closer to her traumatic past. Vogel is evoking the uncanniness of traumatic reenactments because, as Judith Herman notes, “even as they are consciously chosen, they have a feeling of involuntariness.” The traumatized subject is often assailed by sensation or emotion or event of trauma. Studies show that this happens because subjects often are compelled to reenact or materialize those sensations.

However, Li’l Bit introduces the final scene of the play, stepping back into the role of narrator for the scene which depicts her first sexual encounter with Uncle Peck. She leads into this scene with a conversation with her mother, introduced by Li’l Bit as “The summer of 1962. On Men, Sex, and Women: Part III.” Her mother insists that she doesn’t go on a long drive with her uncle to the beach. After Li’l Bit
relentlessly begs, mother concedes: “All right. But I’m warning you – if anything happens, I hold you responsible.”24 Li’l Bit then enters the car with Peck, announcing “1962. On the Back Roads of Carolina: The First Driving Lesson.” 25 By deciding to once again introduce these final scenes, she demonstrates that she has regained control of her past. She voluntarily faces her violent beginning with Uncle Peck and the familial forces that lead her there. This time, the stage directions explain that Li’l Bit inhabits this memory with forgiveness: “Peck puts his hands on Li’l Bit’s breasts. She relaxes against him, silent, accepting his touch.”26 Vogel uses the convention of introduction to capture the voluntary and involuntary qualities of memory. For Li’l Bit, these introductions become a way to reclaim and rewrite her relationship to these past events.

Additionally, How I Learned to Drive grapples with the infinite layers of memory, for while Li’l Bit is in one, she is often pushed into another, spiraling deeper into recesses of her psyche. For example, in the middle of series of memories called “On Men, Sex and Women Part One” and “On Men, Sex and Women Part Two”, where her grandmother and mother teach Bit about sex, another memory cuts in that Li’l Bit describes as “1979. A long bus trip to Upstate New York.”27 Fifteen years after the kitchen scene, she recounts sleeping with an underage student she meets on a bus and finally realizes the allure of being Uncle Peck:

Oh. Oh – this is the allure. Being older. Being the first. Being the translator, the teacher, the epicure, the already jaded. This is how the giver gets taken.28 Placing this memory in between her formative memories about sex illuminates the cause and effects of her upbringing. This memory is triggered because she finally
notices how her familial pressures molded her relationship to sex. In this instance, reconstructing a memory leads Li’l Bit to reexamine and redefine others she never intended. By reliving the past, she also reprocesses and rewrites its significance.

Another way theater functions similar to memory is in the way it regards fantasy. Memory is often understood as the “sphere of the already actualized,” associating it with “truth” understood scientifically. In testimonies, memorials and normatively chronicled recollection, factual narration is often considered the only legitimate expression. However, psychologist Janice Haaken refutes this. She proposes that fantasy is just as important as the ‘real’ because our memories are not just factual, but subjective events. Haaken proposes that recollection is merely interpretation of what occurred, accumulating sensorial, somatic and affective traces:

A fundamental feature of human intelligence is the capacity to reconstruct events and to create new meanings and whole narratives out of memory fragments. Fantasy, as Freud pointed out, can be just as ‘real’ and determinative of mental life as external events.

Theater captures these elusive and subjective qualities that dip into the fantastical. A play can accommodate realities that bend factual form because it is, in a sense, a form that creates artifice and fiction. In *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel uses subjective storytelling to tell Li’l Bit’s personal truth.

Vogel uses fantastical conventions such as song to convey a deeper truth of Li’l Bit’s experiences. For example, when Li’l Bit asks her mother and grandmother about sex, they have orgasms on stage mid-explanation. Her grandmother says “Men are bulls. Big bulls,” cueing the stage direction “*The Greek Chorus is getting aroused,*” where mother and grandmother erotically describe primal masculinity. Watching Li’l Bit’s mother and grandmother gyrate and climax as they talk about the
horrors of men conveys the embarrassment Li’l Bit must have felt, as well as the mixed messages she constantly grew up around. This fantasy moment evokes her affective experience. Another example occurs during the middle school dance vignette, where alien-like beeps propagate from Li’l Bit’s chest, drawing men to her. Greg, her previously introduced classmate who is so short that his “head is at Li’l Bit’s chest level,” asks Li’l Bit to dance three times. Just based on the facts, there is nothing distinctly fantastical about this; however, Greg asks her because he is pulled to her chest by the beeping noise, evoking the undercurrent anxiety and objectification that stick with Li’l Bit, after all these years. Fantasy functions as a window into Li’l Bit’s emotional memory of the dance, which is no less true than the objective narrative.

Fantasy also replicates the fickle and sometimes unreliable nature of recollection. For example, Vogel uses collage and historical quotes in “A Mother’s Guide to Social Drinking” to capture the sincere and yet fabricated quality of a child’s memory. This monologue occurs inside the memory where Uncle Peck takes Li’l Bit, age 16, out to a nice dinner after she achieves her driver’s license. He fervently offers to buy her a drink and in an attempt to make the right decision, Li’l Bit conjures up fragmented tidbits of information her mother has given her in three renditions of “A Mother’s Guide to Social Drinking.” Mother begins with sensible advice like “Never drink on an empty stomach,” and “Never mix your drinks. Stay with one all night long, like the man you came in with: bourbon, gin or tequila till dawn.” Interspersed in this speech are historical phrases like “When in the course of human events it becomes necessary” from the Declaration of Independence or “damn the torpedoes,
full speed ahead!” from Officer David Glasgow Farragut of the Civil War. Imbedded
in the sound advice are details she probably learned in history class around that time.
Similarly, her mother lists ladies’ drinks like “daiquiris and mai tais” to be weary of
and ends the list with “hemorrhages and hurricanes,” comically disrupting reliant
recall and revealing the very human and innocent patch-worked nature of memory.

Lastly, theater and memory have parallel structures in the way they both
function as a medium for affect to travel through. Performance studies scholar Bryoni
Trezise describes the relationship between memory and affect as the memory affect,
which she defines as “a quality of reminiscence that invokes a feeling of embodied
recall that does not locate a prior experience at its basis.” 34 The memory affect
describes how we can feel in the present because of, or in reaction to, the past. In
everyday memory, this refers to how somatic, emotional and sensorial experiences
travel through tangled temporalities that simultaneously exist. In the context of
theater, it might refer to how actors embody someone other than themselves and
through embodiment affectively access their character’s inner life. Trezise offers that
“Feelings, as both the conduit of experience and the way that we experience our
experience, have effects for the future and on behalf of the past.” 35 She suggests that
feeling is what defines a memory and therefore, informs how we remember a past
event. The past, present and future are inextricably intertwined so one cannot exist or
be properly understood without the others. This is particularly useful in remembering
traumatic memory because with trauma, “the cut between memory and event is
attenuated to the point of fracture.” 36 What is implicit in the memory affect is an
overwhelming futurity in memory: the re-exploration of the past generates a new
moment in the present, that thus bears on the future. What is felt when remembering is distinctly its own ontological entity; remembrance is a new life for a memory, one that is influenced by the past and effects the future. Furthermore, theater, like memory, carries affect in the representation of narratives. Theater’s affective porousness make it an ideal site to unravel trauma.

In summary, theater balances on and blurs the line between fantasy and fact, past and present, intentional and involuntary. It can manipulate time and space to explore the sensations of living. Memory is a representation of what once occurred, and therefore should be considered separate from the initial occurrence. In this way, theater so effectively captures the essence of memory because each performance is inevitably different due to the composition of the audience, date and context of the performance and the mental life of the performers. How I Learned to Drive uses the versatility of theater to properly capture the sensorial and affective truths of memory most intentionally. It uses time, space, fantasy and non-linearity to re-experience, reprocess and consequently, reintegrate Li’l Bit’s past into her present life narrative.
Chapter Two: Embodiment

Theater is a unique art form in its essential liveness, a quality that necessitates visible and tangible representation, or embodiment. *How I Learned to Drive* grapples with embodiment in theater in two distinct ways. The first, which is intrinsic to theater that acknowledges its pretense, is that actors embody the characters. The actors recite text, adopt given circumstances and context as their own, and physically portray people who are not themselves. However, there is another way: affective embodiment. Affective embodiment in this context refers to the affective, or emotional, recall that occurs when engaging in physical representation. In *How I Learned to Drive*, the central character, Li’l Bit, recounts traumatic memories from her past in a non-linear order on stage. As she temporally jumps from memory to memory, she physically and emotionally embodies her age at that time. Her mode and degree of physicality differs from memory to memory depending on her proximity and willingness to engage with it. Sometimes she narrates the past from the present, she watches moments unfold, and she actively participates inside some of them. Interestingly, the first memory she shows has a glaring absence of physicality. Li’l Bit climbs into a Buick Riviera next to Uncle Peck and the stage directions indicate the following:

*Li’l Bit climbs in beside him, seventeen years old and tense. Throughout the following, the two sit facing directly front. They do not touch. Their bodies remain passive. Only their facial expressions emote.* 37

During the scene Uncle Peck takes off her bra, but only pantomimes the action in front of him. There is a distinct separation between body and mind. If reparation involves a reintegration of the two, then it makes sense that these begin extremely
separate. At the end of the play, after we witness Peck sexually assaulting eleven-year-old Li’l Bit, she acknowledges this separation and reflects: “That was the last day I lived in my body. I retreated above the neck, and I’ve lived inside the ‘fire’ in my head ever since.”

Vogel purposefully resists complete engagement at the beginning, pointing to how trauma resides in the body and Li’l Bit’s reticence of recovering those sensations. By starting with a slate so physically restrained, the audience is more affected by the embodiment and touching that follows. Vogel is withholding physical information at the beginning, just as she does with narrative details.

Li’l Bit eventually reaches an understanding of self through embodiment because affect and experience live in the body. Trezise proposes that feeling is a “corporeal impression that is at once psychic, somatic and sensorial,” meaning that it exists concurrently in the body and the mind. For example, when we are nervous our stomach drops or the hairs on our arms stick up straight and when we are joyful our mouth curls up in a grin. Our feelings register within, through and impressed upon our skin, while also being cognitively generated and understood. Affect is the center of all experience, so therefore, experience is corporeal. Phenomenology supports this assertion. Philosophers like Maurice Merlau Ponty say that experience exists “midway between mind and body.” He connects “experience to the privileged locus of consciousness,” meaning that our consciousness is signified through the accumulation of experience. Merlau Ponty also “demonstrates that experience is always necessarily embodied, corporeally constituted, located in and as the subject’s incarnation.” Our experience, our consciousness, is all located somatically.
Therefore, a physical expression of memory, like theater, should beget the most subjectively ‘correct’ results. If memory is stored corporeally, then it makes sense to reopen them through a physical medium, like theater.

Vogel engages in a second almost ‘meta-theatrical’ exploration of embodiment in addition to the typical layer that is actor embodying character. In *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel also has characters embody other characters: Greek Chorus morphs into all surrounding people in Li’l Bit’s life and Li’l Bit morphs into different ages and instances of herself. For example, every time they are depicting memories in the kitchen, the Greek Chorus play Mother, Grandma, and Big Papa. In scenes at the middle school, the Greek Chorus becomes pre-pubescent, pimpled tweens. Similarly, Li’l Bit jumps from age to age in order to reach the kernel of what happened to her. She must remember, and on stage embody, all ages and events surrounding her sexualized upbringing. The structure of the play parallels the structure of remembering, but because there is an audience, the remembering is slightly different, paralleling how memory shifts each time we remember. With these two layers of embodiment exploration, *How I Learned to Drive* stretches the boundaries of what it means to physically recall.

Embodiment alone produces affect. Theater literally requires actors to perform verbal and psychic embodiment of characters. If remembering is an intrinsically corporeal experience, then inversely, beginning with embodiment can help an actor access the inner life and memories of a character. Studies show that there is an affective transaction that occurs in theatrical embodiment. Performance studies scholar Susan Leigh Foster proposes that this affective exchange in performance is
empathic. She proposes that there is a literal affective mimesis occurring between text/physical score and performers, and performers and audience. Speaking specifically of dance, although it applies to theater as well, Foster calls this empathic link “inner mimicry.” She explains that movement travels mimetically because “a kinesthetic miming of the tensile progressions of the musculature specified in choreography,” just like affect. In other words, our bodies physiologically react to and mime movement around them. If affect resides in the body, then a spectator unconsciously senses “the tensions of expansiveness, the floating of the driving momentums that compose the dancer’s motion” and furthermore experience the choreographer’s emotionality. Embodiment produces inner intensities and frictions. Merlin Donald produces a scientific claim that mimesis developed as an evolutionary “invention of representational acts with the purpose of social communication” to interpret and assimilate into a standing social structure. Embodiment is a tool for understanding history and social codes. For Li’l Bit, it serves the purpose of coming to understand and move on from her personal history.

However, it is important to note that affect experienced in embodiment is distinctly different from the original affect from the experience it is replicating. It is impossible to truly record what affective exchange occurred, or to reproduce the context in which it originally grew. Therefore, affect cannot be recreated exactly. Affect exists in the present, even if it refers to the past. This is particularly important to note in the performance of trauma, as in How I Learned to Drive, because embodying trauma in a play with the goal of embodying a particular affect is
“reproducing signs without substance.” This would happen if the goal is to experience what was felt at that time.

As defined at the end of section one, Trezise proposes another kind of affect that accounts for temporal separation: the memory affect. She describes the memory affect as residing in the body, connecting the self to its history of affect from within and without:

Notions of depth and immanence characterize memory’s latent grounding of the self in the present, such that ‘body memories manifest themselves as continually vanishing into the depths of our corporeal existence - and just as continually welling up from the same depths.’ Implied is the idea that there is not only the faculty of sensory recollection but also, equally, the faculty by which the body might sense itself remembering.

She elucidates the embodied residence of affect and how, then practices of embodiment can recover past affects. The memory affect engages “a means to think through the specific mode of corporeality that uses the presence of feeling to mediate and remediate other feelings (those said to be of, and in, the past).” In other words, memory affect proposes feeling as a conduit of connecting to the past, in a new “remediated” or healing way. If all of this is true, then embodiment of trauma, if done correctly, can be a site of reparation. In the context of the play, this idea refers to Li’l Bit’s experience re-constructing the past and the affect she recovers from her life. For the actor, affect can be conjured up from an obviously unrelated experience but can still profoundly be relayed physically into performance. For the event of a memory is distinct from the initial event itself. This all points to the ephemerality and fluidity of memory.
Repetition further complicates embodiment, a crucial element of most performance. Theater is repeated in rehearsal and with an extended run. Logistically, it is paramount that the text and physicality be remembered so the actors can be properly lit each night. Embodiment, therefore, becomes both choreography and a practice. The last scene, “You and the Reverse Gear,” where Peck sexually assaults Li’l Bit age 11, is physically the inverse of the first, as Li’l Bit embodies the moment divorced from the text. Because of the explicit, isolated physical representation of what occurred, I directed this scene by treating it at first like dance. We did this by assigning each movement to a count and a breath, and at first, extracting it from emotion. As explained previously, the physicality does not live in a vacuum untouched by affect because affect lives in the body. What we discovered was that most of the character work and given circumstances built on their own because they were already generated through the physical score. By repeating the motions in rehearsal, embodiment became the carrier of affect and the carrier of the memory.
Chapter Three: Bearing Witness

In *How I Learned to Drive* it seems that Paula Vogel, for a myriad of reasons and through a variety of ways, invites active audience engagement. Through content, suggested staging, temporality and a fluctuating fourth wall, the audience is reminded of their ontological reality and consequently, is confronted with their own moral compass while watching. In a 1997 interview with *The New York Times*, shortly after *How I Learned to Drive*’s debut at the Vineyard Theater in New York, Vogel commented:

> I want to seduce an audience. If they can go along for a ride they wouldn’t ordinarily take, or don’t even know they’re taking, then they might see highly charged political issues in a new and unexpected way.\(^5^0\)

Vogel invites the audience to reexamine their pre-existing notions of morality and victimhood. She wants viewers to be surprised, even with a seemingly black and white narrative. To find a traumatic tale seductive is to leave judgment at the theater door and to watch with an open mind. Obviously, there is no way to predict or control how an audience enters a theater or engages with the performance; however, Vogel masterfully sets up the beginning of the play so that expectations, at least temporarily, are put on hold. The first line of the play is spoken by Li’l Bit. Without priming the audience or giving anything away, she asks them to bear with her as she tells her story:

> Sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson. We’re going to start our lesson tonight on an early, warm summer evening.\(^5^1\)

Using “we” as she addresses the audience for the first time sets a precedent that she is going on a journey and intends to take them along the whole way. Without knowing
where they are headed, the audience is asked to sit with Li’l Bit, as she teaches a lesson by way of the past. From the opening statement of the play, the audience becomes an integral part of Li’l Bit’s personal unraveling process.

To “teach a lesson” with moments of her past requires Li’l Bit to commit those memories to language. A great portion of lingering trauma is situated in the secrecy around the event, so psychiatrist Judith Herman argues that a fundamental step towards remembrance, mourning and healing is linguistic articulation. She describes traumatic memory as “wordless and static” and says that translating the pictorial, sensorial and affective residue into words is essential because it allows for the traumatic memory to be “integrated into the survivor’s life story.” This process of integration includes verbalization and validation from others. Each memory in *How I Learned to Drive* begins with an introduction of place and time, either said by Li’l Bit or Male Greek Chorus. The memory, quite literally, is spoken into existence. Language becomes Li’l Bit’s access into the past. According to Herman, a necessary component of linguistic processing is the listener. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, she discusses the necessity of a therapist as a second party to listen and help the survivor process what occurred. A successful therapist, she writes, fulfills a role of solidarity and affirmation:

> Throughout the exploration of the trauma story, the therapist is called upon to provide a context that is at once cognitive, emotional, and moral. The therapist normalizes the patient’s responses, facilitates naming and the use of language, and shares the emotional burden of the trauma.

The audience, by no means, is asked to take on a role like this. To imply such a task would be presumptuous and would reduce attendance. However, what is
implicit in this comparison of theater and psychoanalytic thought is active attendance. *How I Learned to Drive* pushes boundaries of safe and easy coexistence between actor/character within the narrative and with the audience. It powerfully, pleasurably and painfully asks the audience to bear witness to trauma verbalized and embodied. Herman argues that being heard is particularly important with an invisible wound like sexual abuse:

> The incest survivor is trapped in the absolute necessity for both of these opposites to be realized simultaneously - at once to keep her secret and to have it (her) be known. What the child who is abused and the adult survivor of incest must accomplish is not to become a witness but to have a witness.55

> The incest survivor must face an impossible set of contradictions that “cannot be resolved within the simple simplistic binary of concealment and display.”56

Instead, as Vogel attempts to accomplish, the survivor must negotiate between both extremities and find solace in the gap between the two. Theater, specifically in *How I Learned to Drive*, is a possible site for this in-between partially because it demands active viewership, rather than passive voyeurism.57

> The survivor of incest requires a listener, or witness, to acknowledge that her memories are real. However, as feminist psychoanalyst Lynda Hart explains in her book *Between the Body and the Flesh*, this becomes an issue for the trauma survivor, as reality is too often understood as a dichotomy between fact and fiction, leaving anyone who falls outside of these bounds deemed psychotic.58 The incest survivor, she argues, requires a fluid sense of reality toarticulate the affective experience of trauma and reintegrate it into her life. Hart points out that we live in a culture where the survivor is not supposed to survive:
The fact that she does is due to her own symbolic if you will, that is necessarily discordant with the dominant order’s symbolic. In other words, the incest survivor knows that reality is a ruse that masks the Real, but she is forced to articulate this knowledge through a conceptual system that cannot be interpreted by dominant codes as other than pathological.59

The “dominant order’s symbolic” (meaning the big Other, i.e., the norms, ethics, language we are born into) only understands sexual violence and its after-effects clinically, factually and as symptoms of another cause. The normative discourse available privileges reality and is “the ruse that masks the Real.” However, the ‘Real’, in psychoanalytic terms, is a person’s materiality, that is, her body which is resistant to symbolization all together. Therefore, there is no available lexicon of the Real. Moreover, if the incest survivor’s reality exists in her in-articulable corporeality, then she must create an entirely new symbolic to voice her story. She must find a new language, outside of the dominant symbolic order to translate the past into. By telling her own story theatrically using fantasy and non-linearity, Li’l Bit expresses her truth.

Perhaps this is why How I Learned to Drive does not follow the dichotomy of fact/fiction and creates its own symbolic. Instead, it resides exactly on the line between fantasy and truth. Hart proposes that fantasy as used by the incest survivor reintegrates and describes the un-describable. In reference to another piece of art, although it applies to How I Learned to Drive, Hart proposes that language itself can be reparative:

These fantasies are not monologues, that narrate the history of her abuse. They are dreams of a performance that take place in psychoanalytic time – the future anterior – the past that will have been.60
*How I Learned to Drive* uses the future anterior because Li’l Bit, in the present, reinvestigates the past. By unearthing what has already occurred, she alters her future. She ignites “the past that will have been.” Hart cites French feminist Catherine Clement, who defines the future anterior as “a memory curious about its own future… the future anterior alters history: the miraculous tense, the tense of healing.”61 By setting a present Li’l Bit in scenes from the past, Vogel curiously goes back in time to disrupt what has already been.

This psychoanalytic concept or retroactive signification stems from linguistics. Lacan explains that “a sentence closes its signification only with its last term, each term being anticipated in the construction constituted by the other terms and, inversely, sealing their meaning by its retroactive effect.”62 In other words, sentences don’t derive meaning until their ending, the point of signification. This is, according to Lacanian psychoanalytic reasoning, true of a person’s character as well:

That is a retroversion effect by which the subject, at each stage, becomes what he was (to be) before that, and “he will have been” is only announced in the future perfect tense. Here arises the ambiguity of a misrecognizing that is essential to knowing myself. For, in this “rear view,” all the subject can be sure of is the anticipated image - which he had caught of himself in his mirror - coming to meet him.63

Signification arrives after the fact, so who Li’l Bit is, is a projection of what she anticipates she “will have been.” Li’l Bit is looking back in the “rear view” to understand the signifiers that strung together make her current person signified and whole. By looking back as she moves forward, she is examining the past as capable of repairing her future self. This rearview imagery pervades the whole play, beginning as a quotidian, ritualistic practice of safe driving. When Uncle Peck first teaches her to drive, he sternly instructs her to adjust her side and rearview mirrors as
the one of the first things to do when entering a car. It becomes an important practice for her. Then, at the end of the play, having come to terms with her past, Li’l Bit once again revisits the rearview mirror, looking back:

As Li’l Bit adjusts the rearview mirror, a faint light strikes the spirit of Uncle Peck, who is sitting in the back seat of the car. She sees him in the mirror. She smiles at him, and he nods at her. They are happy to be going for a long drive together.64

We nostalgically watch her perform this car routine, but this time, she can only see her own image in relation to Peck’s. Uncle Peck, who once haunted her past, now benignly sits in her present, welcome there. After checking her mirror, she looks at the audience, smiling: “And then, I floor it.”65 In a seemingly monumental and dramatized ending, Li’l Bit pushes onward, with the shadow of her Uncle Peck always lingering in her rearview. Now that she has intervened, witnessed and forgiven Peck, she can carry her past with a difference into the future. Verbalizing this process to another person “becomes the working condition of coming to know it.”66

This process of “coming to know” in How I Learned to Drive involves speaking directly to the audience. Employing direct address implicates the audience because it acknowledges that people are watching in the same time and space. The audience becomes a part of the architecture of the theatrical world. There is no ‘fourth wall’ that separates one sphere from another. Vogel utilizes this Brechtian convention primarily through monologues, although each time in distinctly different ways. The direct address by Aunt Mary, Uncle Peck’s wife, is similar to testimony, casting the audience as both a jury of peers and a confidant. She boasts about his character and attentiveness, saying “Every night, he does the dishes. The second he comes home,
he’s taking out the garbage, or doing yard work, lifting heavy things I can’t.” She prides herself on her domesticity that he relies on so deeply. However, her true feelings seep out, as she confides to the audience about her deep-rooted resentment and anger towards Li’l Bit. The candor of “She’s a sly one, that one is. She knows exactly what she’s doing; she’s twisted Peck around her little finger and thinks it’s all a big secret” disturbingly echoes common misconceptions about pedophilia and sexual abuse, that the survivor was asking for it or brought it upon herself.

Simultaneously, this is also testimony of a woman who deeply loves her husband and wants marital normalcy once again. By hearing Aunt Mary’s side of the story, the audience is situated right in the center of conflicting positions: to empathize with a forgotten wife and to be repelled by her victim-blaming view of Li’l Bit. Speaking directly to the audience can be confronting, forcing them to remember their own corporeality and question their own personal beliefs. As is done throughout the play, Vogel forces the audience to critically question their personal moral codes and sit with the ambiguous.

Direct address is used again but in a different way in “Uncle Peck teaches Cousin Bobby How To Fish”, where the audience, maybe, is cast as Cousin Bobby. This monologue begins, in a sense, as foreplay for Bobby, priming him, drawing him in with care and paternal attention: “Sky's pretty spectacular — there's some beer in the cooler next to the crab salad I packed, so help yourself if you get hungry. Are you hungry? Thirsty? Holler if you are.” Uncle Peck is the attentive, charismatic and paternal uncle who cares for Bobby, teaches him to fish, and also offers him a beer. However, the relationship quickly darkens when Peck offers to take Bobby to a secret
hideout: “But it’s a secret place - you can’t tell anybody we’ve gone there – least of all your mom or your sisters.” What was once a benign fishing trip is now questionable at best. Viewers cannot help but wonder what Peck actually plans on doing with Cousin Bobby. In a retroactive effect, the audience is jolted back to the beginning to review what was said to re-understand it. The fishing instructions are now intelligible as steps of seduction. This duality of meaning is painful and self-reflective. Just as Li’l Bit’s process of reintegration during the entire play, the audience is forced back to the beginning to re-signify what they incorrectly or differently understood.

This story also finds healing through erasure. Women and gender studies scholar Mary K. DeShazer claims that Li’l Bit, like many trauma survivors, experiences the “relentless struggle for remembrance,” but also “the self-negating, contradictory, conflictual remembrance of - precisely - an amnesia.” Bit explains in her concluding address to the audience that from the first moment of abuse, she collapsed into her interior: “That was the last day I lived in my body” she says. “I retreated above the neck, and I’ve lived inside the ‘fire’ in my head ever since.” The unnamable fire, the memory not to be tapped, is a sort of self-preserving amnesia that lingers until reopened. Cvetkovich notes that traumatic reactions range from numbness and dissociation to “hyperarousal” and “heightened sensitivity.” She observes the following:

The obstacle to retrieving the memory of trauma is not necessarily that it has been repressed but that due to dissociation, for example, it was never experienced in the first place. Or given the overwhelming nature of physical and emotional stimuli, the memory of trauma may not give rise to a conventional narrative; it may instead consist of a series of
intense and detailed, yet fragmented, psychophysical experiences. In the previously mentioned final scene titled “1962. On the Back Roads of Carolina: The First Driving Lesson,” the audience witnesses Li’l Bit age eleven being violated by her uncle but in this representation, her voice is separate from her body. The stage direction reads: “The Teenage Greek Chorus member stands apart on stage. She will speak all of Li’l Bit’s lines. Li’l Bit sits beside Peck in the front seat. She looks at him closely, remembering.” According to Anne Pellegrini, the separation is not dissociation; rather, it is this:

the doubling, or standing in, that is witness and that is also the intersubjective occasion of the self. The scene explicitly represents what it means to remember trauma and bear witness, a remembering and a witnessing that blur the lines between self and other, inside and out, past and present.

Functioning as almost a pseudo-psychoanalytic “primal scene”, this moment marks Li’l Bit’s separation of the self and the Other. This moment retroactively signifies all proceeding moments. However, precisely because this scene is a signifier in her life, it is simultaneously meaningless in itself and an instant that Li’l Bit is forever subject to. Understanding comes after experience, just as her language for this moment arrives later. With new understanding, Li’l Bit re-experiences this memory with a difference. This time, when Uncle Peck touches her for the first time, “She relaxes against him, silent, accepting his touch.” She participates in an “intersubjective” personal re-acquaintance where she simultaneously experiences the memory of her 11-year-old self and of her remembering 35-year-old self. Paradoxically, it is precisely through separating her voice and her body that Li’l Bit finds internal unity.
Jumping temporally back and forth also complicates conceptions of reference. The non-linearity of *How I Learned to Drive* jolts the audience out of passive viewership because the viewer cannot assume causality. In all memory, there is a disconnect between what happened and what is remembered, leaving an “epistemic gap” of verifiable knowledge. Not knowing for sure what initially occurred “also opens up the question of referentiality, frustrating simple methods of experience and reference, event and representation.” The remembered version is no less important that the initial event. Without reference or linearity, like in linguistic signification, the audience of *How I Learned to Drive* cannot draw any conclusions or judgements or understand the full picture until the end. Before that, each memory can be thought of as an unrelated, meaningless signifier. As isolated memories, each scene alone does not accurately communicate the “lesson” Li’l Bit is trying to teach. It is in the stringing together that signification is found.

*How I Learned to Drive* lives in the gap between representation and event and uses the inbetweenness to cathect the past and the present. We once again revisit the first line of the play, noticing that Vogel sets up questions of referentiality: “Sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson.” The temporal frame of that sentence integrates the past and the present. “You first have to teach a lesson” is in the present perfect tense, a tense that integrates the past and the present. To simply tell the secret that Li’l Bit was sexually abused by her Uncle Peck would be to shut down any further explanation or working through. Teaching a lesson, however, is an inherently temporal experience, one that requires breaking down a concept. To teach requires a student, which in this case, is the audience and maybe even herself. Li’l Bit
floats in and out of the memories, sometimes watching from outside, and other times embodying the moment from the inside. Her process of reconstructing her story to the audience is precisely how she finds closure.

However, this re-visitation of the past can come at a cost. As previously explained, most theater is a repeated affair (unless it is a one rehearsal one-night-only theatrical event). Actors are required to recreate a sense of novelty each performance, as if the event has never happened before, while maintaining meticulously crafted movement, objective and overall curation. If the material is a simulation or representation of violence “the wound becomes a site of repetition.”80 The affective labor required to dig into such wounds is violent. To be the body that experiences a representation of violence comes at the cost of physiological effects that can trigger previous experience. Hart notes that the label of survivor is at stake in retelling trauma: “Narrating the trauma entails a second becoming, an ironic resurrection that could equal death for the survivor.”81 This challenge and burden cannot be understated.

Therefore, producing traumatic material requires creating a safe space. Discourse around today’s theater grapples with the purpose and need of trigger warning and content notices, all with the intent of protecting the viewer from potential personally harmful or triggering material. However, Ann Cvetkovich proposes, fear of flashbacks might be partially misguided. She argues that repetitions and ritualization of flashbacks are part of the therapeutic process. This coincides with Herman’s logic that translating memories into language helps repair and reintegrate what happened into a person’s life. However, a theater isn’t a therapist’s office and
because of this fundamental difference, producing theater requires attention to aesthetic, spatial and temporal considerations of processing trauma. Cvetkovich argues that perhaps an artistic space that stirs up controversy should be considered a successful one because “the power of the notion of safe space resides in its double status as the name for both a space free of conflict and a space in which conflict and anger can emerge as a necessary component of psychic resolution.” She suggests that such friction and discomfort are essential to transformation and healing. Li’l Bit prods discomfort in front of an audience in order to wholly unravel her past and find resolution.

Just as Li’l Bit does for herself, How I Learned to Drive asks the audience to witness, experience and curiously investigate how their personal experiences and memories interact with what they watch, knowing that they may not have the tools to deal with what they see. How I Learned to Drive is theater of confrontation. To warn the audience of what is to come recognizes each theater patron’s personal baggage and assumes they will bring it in with them. Understanding this expectation, theater makers must reconsider the uptake of traumatic story. Perhaps for this reason, Vogel oscillates on a scale from explicitness, pushing the boundaries of the audience, to reserve, recognizing the dangers of unearthing violence. However, Vogel still has an eye on caring for the audience. In the character descriptions, she notes, “I would strongly recommend casting a young woman who is ‘of legal age,’ that is, twenty-one to twenty-five years old who can look as close to eleven as possible. The contrast with the other cast members will help. If the actor is too young, the audience may feel uncomfortable.” Despite the occasionally extreme moments of embodiment that
occur throughout the piece, Vogel still makes sure her play is accessible and productive, not harmful, for the audience.

To bear witness to Li’l Bit’s story is to validate her story. Even if she employs hyperbole or metaphor, her performance is the direct representation of her bodily experience. Through direct address and non-linearity, the audience might find at one time or another that they turn inward and question how or why they feel the way they do. By asking the audience to bear witness, Vogel is asking the audience to verify Li’l Bit’s complicated reality as true, and perhaps, not so uncommon. Retroactive re-interpretation requires listening all the way through. *How I Learned to Drive*’s structure is doing exactly what Li’l Bit is attempting to do.
Conclusion

*How I Learned to Drive* proposes a radical shift in the way we chronicle and talk about sexual violence. Vogel moves away from reductive understandings of victim/perpetrator discourse and asks the audience to look at a more holistic picture. By considering all sides of Uncle Peck and Li’l Bit’s relationship and Li’l Bit’s relationship with her family, the audience witnesses the convoluted and complicated realities of real-life trauma. Vogel’s rendering of Li’l Bit shows that a survivor is not inherently a victim, but perhaps can be an agent of her own rehabilitation. By limiting the amount of information released throughout the play, Vogel demands an expanded scope of understanding for a subject that seldom is discussed. Vogel doesn’t sugar coat the uncomfortable; she invites us to be seduced and surprised by our own conflicting understanding of seemingly black and white violence. Vogel advocates that resisting a victim/perpetrator dynamic is empowering:

I would say that we can receive great love from people who harm us…. We are living in a culture of victimization, and great harm can be inflicted by well-intentioned therapists, social workers, and talk show hosts who encourage people to dwell in their identity as victim. Without denying or forgetting original pain, I wanted to write about the great gifts that can also be inside that box of abuse. My play dramatizes the gifts we receive from the people who hurt us.  

The label “victim” often seems perpetuated externally. Vogel depicts a person who chooses to survive and confront her demons head on.

Vogel also depicts a sexual assailant with whom we can empathize. Uncle Peck is charming and impossibly lovable, further complicating his atrocious acts. Towards the end of the play in an address to the audience, Li’l Bit tragically wonders:

Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven? … And I see Uncle Peck in my mind, in his Chevy ’56, a spirit driving
up and down the back roads of Carolina – looking for a young girl who, of her own free will, will love him. Release him.86

At once, Vogel points to cyclical violence and Uncle Peck’s human desire for connection and love. By portraying these conflicting realities throughout the play, Vogel challenges the audience to humanize Peck, fitting him into our world. Scholar Jennifer Griffiths illuminates: “The pedophile may be the ultimate bogeyman, one that needs to be demystified in order for victims to claim empowerment. If the pedophile remains an all-powerful evil, he becomes impossible to survive, to overcome.”87 His humanness makes Li’l Bit able to reenter the memory and reclaim details of her story. Li’l Bit’s empathy helps her move on. By making Uncle Peck identifiable, the audience can view this story as something that transcends fiction. Uncle Peck becomes a figure to hate and to love, to identify with, simulating the ever-complicated paradox of being a survivor.

When I chose to direct *How I Learned to Drive* a year ago, while sexual violence was as rampant as ever, the voices sounding alarm were muffled and stifled. Since then, speaking out against sexual violence and telling personal stories has co-opted the national stage. With predecessors like “Take Back the Night” and “We Speak We Stand” and movements of today that reach as high as the White House, Li’l Bit’s public rehabilitation rings as salient as ever. The kind of memorialization and working-through that feminist trauma studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich, Janice Haaken and playwright Paula Vogel seem to advocate for is one that is reliant on a sea of listeners. It requires resounding validation that survivors are heard and echoed on a
national level. In the year of *How I Learned to Drive*’s 20th anniversary, it’s all the more heartbreaking to realize that Li’l Bit’s story is as prevalent as ever.

My essay attempts to chronicle all the ways in which Vogel creates a restorative environment for her complex character, Li’l Bit, to revisit and reintegrate her trauma into her life narrative. The presence of an audience and the flexibility of narrative articulation make a theater space an evocative and truthful one in which to unravel traumatic memory. As a public forum, that space is also one of communal identification and unity for those with similar experiences to not feel alone.

Throughout the play, there are many references to the things not said in Li’l Bit’s family. During “On Men, Sex and Women Part Two” Li’l Bit’s mother blames Grandma for not teaching her about sex and instead sending her to a priest: “You could have helped me! You could have told me something about the facts of life!”

Or Aunt Mary laments the unspoken distance she has with her husband: “I know he has troubles … whatever has burrowed deeper than the scar tissue – and we don’t talk about it.”

Even at the end of the play, we see Li’l Bit, age 13, in an attempt to cheer up Uncle Peck, offer to start meeting him in the car to talk through his feelings and knowingly offer, “I don’t think I’d want Mom to know. Or Aunt Mary. I wouldn’t want them to think - .” In a family of silence, violence is perpetuated generation after generation. As Paula Vogel disturbingly points out, “it takes a whole village to molest a child.” And we, the audience, are complicit as we watch violence prevail and repeat in both serious and comic forms. Yet Vogel’s use of a non-linear structure helps us understand the role of memory in unlocking the trauma and to grow in understanding along with Li’l Bit.
The very act of Li’l Bit telling her story to an audience, then, is radical. I have argued that Vogel’s use of direct address, embodiment and memory demonstrates how theater may function as a salient site for reparation because it provides a platform to accurately and imaginatively portray the nuances and affective fantasies that accompany subjective memory. *How I Learned to Drive* offers insight into thinking through trauma and reparation because Vogel shapes the narrative to unravel in a psychologically sound way, taking the audience on an ever-complicated journey of love, pain and ultimately, forgiveness.
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