

I Remember, or the Transmigration of Hazel Jane Plante

Hazel Jane Plante

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I remember telling my supervisor A that I was trans.¹ We were in a Starbucks in the middle of the crappy mall at the base of our campus. I told her that I didn't know how this would play out. I said that things were starting to bubble up for me, so I thought she should know, in case I felt the urge to shift things overnight. I talked a lot. Years later, I barely recall this meeting. I'm seeing it filtered through a thick gauze, most of my words mercifully blotted out.

When I finally stopped talking, A said she'd do her best to support me, that she'd never been through this before ("Same," I said, laughing), and that if she made any mistakes or misspoke it would be out of ignorance, not lack of care. Then, she apologized for second wave feminism and said she was more surprised to learn that I was an angry child than she was to learn that I was trans.

I remember wearing a huge hat on my commute to work for months. My face seemed ravaged and was strewn with stubble. I needed to keep my skin as shielded from the sun as possible so the painful, pricey sessions of laser could do their smells-like-burnt-popcorn magic. Suddenly, I

1. To anonymize folks, I will assign them consecutive letters of the alphabet.

flash on all the times Le Tigre's "Deceptacon" gave me a jolt of you-can-do-this-for-a-few-more-months energy as I walked with that enormous floppy hat and my unshaven, sunburned-looking face from the SkyTrain station to the entrance of the mall. Only now, several years later, do I realize that a Decepticon is a type of Transformer. Decepticons are the villains. And now I'm wondering why I chose that particular song for the three-minute-long walk from transit to work. Maybe it was its spunky, catchy refrain shouting that everything was all right. I probably needed that frenetic reassurance because things sure as shit did not feel all right. But I was game to let Kathleen Hanna lull me into phantasmal all-right-ness for a spell.

I remember going for a fancy lunch with my ex/bestie/roommate B shortly after sending an email to my library colleagues informing them that I was transitioning. In a summer dress at the upscale restaurant, I scrolled on my phone through replies from colleagues, bracing myself for the worst. The messages were mostly lovely, with a few clumsy-but-inoffensive replies thrown into the mix. To be sure, the Venn diagram of my overlapping privileges positioned me for one of the smoothest transitions imaginable: I was a white trans woman working in a feminized profession at an academic institution who transitioned mid-career. I thought of gender-variant folks I knew who'd transitioned in workplaces that were far less welcoming, including trans femmes who worked as plumbers and mechanics. I felt lucky and embarrassed.

I'd also transitioned the same day on social media. Most of my friends already knew, but this was a pretty massive shift for the wider circle of people in my life. I kept feeling the pull to refresh my phone, bracing myself for linguistic Molotov cocktails or laugh react emojis. I ordered an overpriced burger and a Sazerac. B had helped with my transition in countless ways. At the time, I couldn't fathom all the ways my transition affected her. I still can't. When our drinks arrived, we probably said something and clinked glasses.

That entire day is a blur, but I do recall feeling more relieved than jubilant. Like a good Virgo librarian, I'd spent over a year putting dozens

of dominos in place so I could send out that work email (subject line: “transitioning”). I’d answered blunt and barbed questions about my gender to access the care that I needed. I’d threaded my way through physical and virtual labyrinths to get to the right gates and said the right things to change my name and my gender marker on every official document. I’d waited like a good girl for each glacial change. I’d combed through best practices on transitioning at work. Some of these “best practices” left me aghast. I recall one document from a major company that suggested having a staff meeting where an employee’s new gender identity would be announced.² This was framed as a way to allow colleagues to ask questions and voice concerns. There was the suggestion that the transitioning employee might want to make a video introducing their new self. I imagined dozens of my colleagues crowded into a room on the sixth floor of the library, sipping coffee and eating slices of cake with (sickeningly sweet) pink icing, watching an oversized, overly-femme version of me telling them my new name and pronouns, making an awkward joke or two. Then, I saw someone from admin floating the question, “So, how do you feel about working with Hazel?” No. Just, no.

I remember going for coffee with my friend C, a faculty member who I’d bonded with over the years while collaborating on creative in-depth research-related projects for her courses. When I told her that I was trans, she exhaled deeply. “Oh, my god,” she said. “I thought you were going to tell me you were dying. This is good news.” We hugged.

I remember asking my new supervisor D and my previous supervisor A, both of whom I really liked and trusted, if they would help me transition. “Yes,” they both said in an instant. I don’t remember how it happened or who suggested it, but I added another member to my small transition team: E, who was my dean. We held a few furtive meetings so I could talk through my transitioning timelines and the inventories

2. I don’t think this odd gender reveal party involved explosives and colored smoke, but I could be wrong.

I'd made of the dozens of things that needed to be done. In the end, I decided to take a two-week vacation. I would send an email to colleagues after one week of vacation. E offered to send a follow-up email shortly after my message affirming both the library and the university's support for my transition. That would give my colleagues a week to adjust to the news and allow other folks time to make the remaining changes on the transitioning inventory (e.g., updating my name throughout the website). Then, I'd return to work.

C told me she imagined me strutting into the entrance of the library with a wind machine, Beyoncé-style. I laughed. I told her that I wanted none of that: no wind machine, no 'It's-A-Girl' cards signed by my colleagues, no one blasting "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" No, thank you.

I remember resisting asking the colleagues on my tiny transition team to use the right pronouns (she/her) for me. I hadn't changed my "gender presentation" (what a fucking phrase) yet, so I felt like it would be too much work to ask them to address me as a woman. The Smiths song "You Just Haven't Earned It Yet, Baby" ran through my head regularly.

I remember bracing myself when I entered the women's washroom near my office for the first time. This is easy to remember because I still brace myself every time I enter a women's washroom or any gendered space. So far, I've been lucky, but I'm always aware that this time things could go sideways and I may be met with vitriol or violence.

I remember wondering how I could simply be myself but also always unambiguously telegraph my femininity to strangers. (Forget Fermat's Last Theorem; this is an actual conundrum.)

I remember attending a day-long symposium on gender and sexuality in librarianship the day after I sent my "transitioning" email to colleagues. I still remember what I wore to the symposium: a long black button-up top made of rayon (it's so hard to iron, friends!), blue jeans, and stylish blue-and-cream Fluevogs. I bought the Fluevogs the day before (i.e., the

day I transitioned). As I walked from my apartment in the West End to the downtown campus, it started to drizzle. I'd never really walked in heels before, and these shoes have a short 1.5-inch heel.³ I felt wobbly in my shoes, but I also felt wobbly in my body and in my femininity.

Two female colleagues at the symposium told me that when they read my email about transitioning the day before, they'd cheered and high-fived. I don't remember how I responded. I probably laughed.

That night, I went out for drinks and fell in with a few cool, smart librarians who worked at North Carolina State University (NCSU). A month earlier, North Carolina had passed an awful anti-trans bathroom bill. These librarians told me that everyone they knew thought the bill was bullshit. We talked a bunch, drank a bunch. They invited me for a late dinner. I hesitated and debated (are they just asking me cuz I'm a baby queer trans girl and their state is fucking with my shit?) and eventually agreed to go (they seemed genuine; plus, they were bright, funny, queer, and—okay, I'll just say it—kinda cute).

One of the NCSU librarians had to fly to Seoul, Korea, the next morning, so she'd told us she was going to turn in early. When she heard that I was going to go for dinner and more drinks, she changed her plans. "If she's going," she said, hitching a thumb at me, "I'm going, too." At that moment, I felt like a cherry blossom that had finally burst from its tiny bud. A couple hours later, I wobbled home. At one point, I slipped on rain-slicked cobblestones and almost fell. But, no, somehow, I managed, just barely, to stay upright the entire night.

I remember being misgendered by a TA at the start of a research skills workshop. I thanked the TA for introducing me and told a roomful of students that I was, in fact, a woman.

3. I just measured the tapered heels. As I type, the shoes are fairly glowing on the table in the afternoon light. I imagine these gorgeous shoes pulling a Pixar, coming alive, glowering at me, their tongues wagging, "Why don't you love us? You knew we were a tad pinchy when you bought us. Our official name is Promise, but we might as well be called Sexy Librarian." I might reply, "Oh, gosh, you're so cute (and, yes, subtly sexy!), but you've given me blisters. Plus, there's a global pandemic. I'm sorry."

I remember foregrounding my transness and my pronouns in communications with profs and TAs whose classes I visited. For at least a few years, I worried about being misgendered every time a prof, TA, or student started talking about me. (Let's be real: Every time I'm in front of a class I still wonder if I'll be misgendered.)

I remember being on a hiring committee at the campus where I worked before transitioning, the one with the crappy mall. I went to a coffee shop I used to frequent. I was dressed in a blue blazer with white polka dots, a crisp white button-up, blue-and-white polka dot pants, blue-and-cream Fluevogs, and a short blonde dyke-style cut.

When I placed my order, the barista behind the counter said, "That's such a great look. You look like Bowie when he was super cool and not trying too hard." "Aw, thanks," I said. At the time, I wanted to crawl into a broom closet, curl into a ball, and weep because all I heard was "he."

I remember being given a prize by my elementary school librarian Mrs. F. There was no ceremony. We were in her cramped office, and she was just giving me something small, like a bookmark with tassels or a scratch-and-sniff sticker. But I was so excited. Like, super-duper excited. I was maybe eight or nine years old. I started flapping both my hands, like you might do if they were soaking wet and you wanted to dry them lickety-split. Mrs. F looked at me flap-flap-flapping my excited hands and said, "I used to do that when I was a little girl." I felt dumb. I felt numb. I bit my tongue. I stopped my weird, girlish flapping.

I remember being at a three-day-long workshop for managers. I wasn't a manager and didn't want to be a manager, but I had been part of a team at the library who worked with the woman running the workshop, and I liked and respected her. I felt like I could learn from her. And I wanted to learn how to make meaningful changes without being in a leadership position.

There were about thirty or forty people in the workshop, about a dozen of whom were from my library. On the first day, we went around

the room, each of us explaining what we wanted to get out of the workshop. What I wanted to say was this: “I want to figure out how to top from the bottom.” But that might be a bit much for a breezy, sunny Wednesday morning with everyone quietly sipping coffee and nibbling on pastries and cut fruit. I imagined myself making hand gestures to explain “topping” and “bottoming.” And, uh, no. That language was far too queer. In the end, I said something about how I worried that I was seen as a squeaky wheel, a noisy killjoy. I said that I wanted to make a more melodious squeak, to make the kind of noise that might make my colleagues think, “Oh, I like the sound of your squeak.”

Later, one person approvingly repeated the phrase “melodious squeak” to me while we filled our lunch trays with watery soup, iceberg-lettuce-based salad, and they-all-taste-pretty-much-the-same wraps.

While getting a coffee refill, a colleague who was once my supervisor dead-named me. “Hazel,” I said. “My name is Hazel.”

“Oh, right. Oops.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s still hard for me to remember.”

“I get it. It’s okay.”

I remember prominently and purposefully referring to myself in the third person in classes and in consultations, to signal my pronouns. “Maybe later,” I’d say, “you’ll be wondering, ‘What did she say? What did Hazel say?’ She showed me how to do this magical research thing. So, this two-minute-long video will totally remind you of how to do this magic thing.” (I still do this. All. The. Time.)

I remember meeting with someone in HR to share my experiences being a trans faculty member and transitioning at my university. She told me she was unaware that there were any trans faculty members at my institution, which has over 1000 faculty members. She was gobsmacked when I showed her my extensive transition-related checklists and timelines. Before then, she had no idea how much work it is to transition in a system that sees gender and identities as fixed.

Coda: More than five years later, my computing ID, which is required to log into every system at my university, is still derived from my dead name. I've been offered a new computing ID, but I have to be prepared for it to break each time I log into a new system. (There are over a hundred different systems, and there's no inventory of all the separate places your computing ID is stored; I still come across at least one or two new systems with my dead name each year, most recently while using a professional development form and a survey tool.)

I've suggested ways of making transitioning more seamless, but I've been told on different occasions that a) we're moving to a new system soon, b) this is a priority, and c) I just need to be patient. It's not like my computing ID is displayed prominently in the upper right-hand corner of some of these systems or like researchers see it when I log into resources during workshops and consultations. Oh, right, it is super visible in all those places. To quote that cartoon meme dog drinking coffee surrounded by flames: "This is fine." It's not as if that cute doggo thinks about quitting their job on the regular.

I remember standing outside a university auditorium when I overheard a couple of students talking about "pounding" energy drinks to stay awake for this class. Clearly, "Introduction to Human Sexuality and Sexual Behavior" was not the intellectual fuckfest these bros were expecting. And now, here I was, a just-out queer trans femme librarian, waiting to deliver a scintillating hands-on session to 200-300 first-year students on information literacy.

I remember sobbing in my office because anti-trans events kept happening in libraries and universities, and now one was slated to happen at my university. I'd done everything I could behind the scenes to elucidate how utterly fucking deplorable this event was and how it would hurt people I love and care about, how it would hurt me. I contacted every person at my institution who could cancel this event. I used my sharpest language to marshal my strongest arguments. I also made myself vulnerable in my messages, because I know these noxious events are

anything but neutral; they normalize, legitimize, and amplify hatred and violence against people with complicated genders, especially racialized trans femmes.

Every person with power who deigned to reply to my messages said their hands were tied, that the event, as unbalanced and unfortunate as it was, had to go ahead. I wondered how I would react the next time I saw the high-up administrator who often said hello to me at queer events, who had replied to my message by stating that this unfortunate event could not be canceled. I wondered if I could resist yelling unfortunate words at her. I wondered how it would feel to spit in her fortunate face.

I remember a colleague asking me quietly if I was acquainted with imposter syndrome. I nodded. She confessed that she suffered from it. "Same," I said. "I even feel like an imposter in my gender sometimes." A wave of worry flowed through me. I should not have said that aloud. My access to femininity already felt provisional. I should avoid admitting that gender is weird and messy and just pretend that I wanted to play with Barbie dolls as a kid.

I remember accessing a therapist through a program that would be covered by work. When we met, I listed a few challenging things going on in my life and told her which one I wanted to discuss. About ten or fifteen minutes into the session, she said, "Hazel, that's a nice name. What was your name before?" I told her that was an awful question to ask, that it was something she should never ask a trans client. She was surprised, thinking it was a harmless question. I told her my current issues were not related to my gender. I steered the session back to the issue that I came to discuss. A little while later, she wondered aloud if some of my problems were related to my genitals.

I remember agonizing over how much or how little to include in my "hey-I'm-trans" message to colleagues. In the end, I decided to aim for brevity and levity.

Here is what I sent:

Dear colleagues,

I'm sending this message to let you know that I'm transgender, and I'll be transitioning at work.

My new name is Hazel Plante and I'll be going by female pronouns (i.e., she/her/hers). My email address is now hazel_plante@sfu.ca.

I recognize this will be an adjustment for many of you. Honest mistakes will be made (especially initially) and that's okay. There's no need to walk on eggshells around me. Really. I'm the same person I've always been.

My transition probably won't affect most of you, aside from adjusting to my new name and pronouns. (If you didn't know me before receiving this message, you may not need to make any adjustments whatsoever. Well done.)

Last year, Harvard Business Review published a brief article called "What to Do When Your Colleague Comes Out as Transgender" that seems appropriate to share. (And I can't resist sharing a not-appropriate-for-work-but-I'm-on-vacation-so-why-not segment from Last Week Tonight with John Oliver on transgender rights [warning: this video includes quite a bit of cussing, but it's also surprisingly informative].)

I'm currently in the middle of a short vacation, but I look forward to returning to work at the start of May.

Thanks,

Hazel

Looking back, I still think this message works. I avoided justifying my transition, which was a sad staple of so many "hey-I'm-trans" sample work emails that I saw in some "best practices" guides. I emphasized that this wasn't a big deal. And I linked to a couple of resources—one practical and factual, one incisive and hilarious—that might be helpful.

Now I find myself drawn to the following sentence of my message: "I'm the same person I've always been." Here, I seem to be reassuring my colleagues (and myself) that things won't change. Several years later, I recognize that so many things have shifted. And it hasn't been a jostling—like how luggage shifts during a flight—so much as it's been an

unmooring, a razing, a fumbling, a slow-fast/embarrassing-liberating/public-private bursting. At times, it has felt closer to transmigrating than transitioning.⁴

I'm reminded of a Philip K. Dick novel called *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*. And now I'm wondering what colleagues who have known me for a good stretch of time would say if they were interviewed for an oral history project called *The Transmigration of Hazel Jane Plante*.

I remember another librarian at my university telling me they were sorry they'd have to miss an event being held at the library to celebrate the launch of my first novel, *Little Blue Encyclopedia (for Vivian)*. I was gobsmacked, because they'd recently publicly applauded the decision by Vancouver Public Library (VPL) to allow a notorious transphobe to hold an event at the library.

Here's the comment my colleague posted in the comments section of an article on VPL being banned from Vancouver Pride, which is a copy of a message they sent to VPL director Christina de Castell:

Dear Christina,

A quick note to say I applaud your position on this matter. You are spot on - however offensive the event may have been to some, it is a completely legitimate example of the library's necessary commitment [sic] to the exercise of free speech and intellectual freedom, as you say - and Pride is out of line in their critique of the Library's stance and in 'banning' VPL from this year's parade.

Many senior academic and institutional representatives have in recent years caved in to this sort of illiberal, censoring, 'deplatforming' pressure - it is especially evident on North American campuses. Your position - which was no doubt difficult to take and maintain - is courageous and sane and absolutely the correct one.

Thank you and best wishes.

[my colleague]⁵

4. If this sounds over-the-top, I will mention that people have grieved me, while I'm alive. And I've understood. All of this is to say that "transitioning" is an all-too-tidy word for a messy, ongoing process.

5. All comments from this article, which was published in July 2019, have since been removed. I still have a copy because at the time I linked to and

I remember signing copies of my novel after a well-attended, delightful launch at a local bookstore. One of the people in line was the chair of VPL's board when the library rented a room for a transphobic event. My body jolted into panic mode. Should I refuse to sign her book? Spit in her face?⁶ She was no longer the chair of the library board, so I told myself that publicly haranguing her would do no good. I'd just be a hysterical trans girl. Plus, I'd recently learned that she was tight with a friend of mine, a trans woman I adore. I signed her book. It's the only copy I've signed that didn't end with "love, Hazel." For what it's worth, I withheld "love."

A couple of weeks later at the same bookstore, she approached me at a launch for a book by another trans femme writer. She came up to me after a friend of mine wandered off to look at books or pee or something. The ex-chair of VPL's board told me that she was sitting in a chair on the other side of the room, reading my novel and fangirling. I don't recall how I responded. But I know that I didn't cause a scene. There were no accusations. There was no spit. I didn't even tell her that she never replied to an email I sent to her and her fellow board members less than a year before, trying to persuade them to cancel this transphobic event.

Here's what I sent:

Dear [chair of the library board and future fan of my novel] and other VPL Board members,

I'm emailing to convey my concerns over VPL's decision to rent a meeting room for Meghan Murphy's upcoming talk, "Gender Identity Ideology and Women's Rights."

Meghan Murphy is a well-known proponent of transphobia. It's not coincidental that she strongly opposed Bill C-16, which added gender

quoted the comment in an email to A, my former supervisor, because this comment prompted me to reconsider whether or not to hold a launch event for my novel at my library.

6. Before writing this piece, I didn't realize how much I want to spit in people's faces. (Note to self: Think more deeply about spit.)

identity and expression to the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code. She testified against it and published several pieces on its perceived anti-feminism. Before Senate, she argued that women are oppressed “solely due to biology” and has stated repeatedly that trans women are men, both of which are clearly untrue and, equally clearly, transphobic.

I’m a trans woman (and a librarian), and I have no desire to “engage constructively” in an “open dialogue” about whether or not I deserve to exist. From past experiences, engaging with trans exclusionary (so-called) radical (so-called) feminists only leads to harm. Anyone familiar with Meghan Murphy’s stance on gender identity knows exactly what she will be saying at this event.

I understand that the organizers of this event have promised “not to contravene the Criminal Code of Canada and the Human Rights Act of British Columbia during the course of their rental/program, and [that] this statement [was] included in [their] rental contract.” If this event goes ahead, I’m interested in knowing how VPL plans to ensure that the event doesn’t contravene the Criminal Code of Canada and the Human Rights Act of British Columbia, which the organizers have apparently promised to do.

If VPL is serious about community-led librarianship, it should do more to consider the safety and voices of those in trans communities. Transphobic and transmisogynistic views such as those held by this speaker feed directly into physical and verbal violence against trans people, and the decision to continue allowing this talk negates whatever positive effects have resulted from VPL’s external programming and internal consultations around trans inclusion.

While it is possible to claim that offering a platform to someone does not constitute the endorsement of their ideas, the fact remains that this event will take place at VPL, and it will be perceived by many patrons as being part of VPL’s programming slate, a fact that Murphy is clearly relying on.

The booking of public meeting rooms for controversial topics often brings up debates on intellectual freedom and free speech. However, if VPL truly wants to be a safe space for trans folks, our safety should be prioritized. VPL’s meeting room policy allows for it to refuse or cancel bookings, so I would encourage you to do so to support those most affected by this decision.

Thanks,

Hazel

I remember that, while writing my next novel, the narrator started describing how trans women “are too good for this world. It isn’t safe enough for us. It’s killing us. It’s especially awful for Black and brown and Indigenous trans women. They deserve safety. They deserve love. They deserve to live with ease. They deserve joy and pleasure. They belong in a world that is good enough for them.” I think my narrator is right. In fiction, I’m often trying to write into a world that I wish existed, a world where I can breathe deeply and feel at home. It would be lovely if I felt at ease around librarians and if I felt at home in libraries. At times, I felt that way before transitioning. Sadly, as a visible trans femme librarian, I feel neither at ease nor at home.

I remember in my initial proposal for this chapter framing it as a ‘stroboscopic piece’ that would display an array of emotions related to being a trans librarian.

Oh, I’ve just located my submitted proposal. Here it is:

For my chapter, I will share a kaleidoscopic collection of snippets related to being a trans femme librarian at a university in Canada. Some snippets will stem from before I transitioned. Some will involve transitioning. Some will fall on the ‘after’ side of the transitional fence. They will run the emotional gamut: positive, negative, mundane, bizarre, funny. I’ll be using the “I remember” constraint, which was first used by Joe Brainard in his memoir *I Remember* (1970). Essentially, my piece will be a series of work-related, trans-specific memories, each of them beginning with the phrase “I remember ...” This structure (or, perhaps, ‘stricture’ is more apt here) will afford my piece a strobe-like effect that will allow me to tumble through a series of memories (not to worry: there will be a method to my weirdness) and help convey some of the emotional jumble that being trans in the workplace (and the world) can have.

While writing the first draft of this piece, I realized how much anger I have. There are far fewer positive, mundane, bizarre, and funny memories

here than I thought there would be. But I think my anger is healthy and legitimate, because I feel forsaken by my institution and my profession.

And now I'm wondering if I should cut the reference to spitting in the face of a queer administrator at my institution. It feels like TOO MUCH. And I'm thinking about all the things that I left out of this piece because they felt like TOO MUCH. The trans lady doth complain too fucking much. I should be quiet and happy because I'm allowed to be here. It's as though an unspoken message thrums below the surface. *You have the audacity to exist, and we're letting you live. We even let you transition. You're welcome. Isn't that enough for you, Hazel? (Okay, sometimes you're not welcome, but you're still a lucky duck.) I mean, who do you think you are? (Don't ever forget how lucky you are.) What more do you want? (You are so bloody lucky.)*

About the Author

Hazel Jane Plante is an academic librarian, cat photographer, and writer. Her debut novel *Little Blue Encyclopedia (for Vivian)* (Metonymy Press, 2019) was given a Lambda Literary award for trans fiction. She also releases music under the name lo-fi lioness and helms the podcast t4t, which is about writing while trans. She currently lives in Vancouver on the unceded ancestral territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓w̓x̓w̓7mesh (Squamish), and sə́lilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.