

**Writing and Society Research Centre, University of Western Sydney**

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**Feisty and childless (a cut and paste; a polylogue)**

Biographical note:

Hazel Smith is a research professor in the Writing and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. She is author of *The Writing Experiment: strategies for innovative creative writing* (Allen and Unwin, 2005) and *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara: difference, homosexuality, topography* (Liverpool University Press, 2000). She is co-author of *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945* (Harwood Academic, 1997) and co-editor with Roger Dean of *Practice-led Research Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* (Edinburgh University Press 2009). She is co-editor with Roger Dean of *soundsRite*, a journal of new media writing and sound, based at the University of Western Sydney. Hazel is a poet, performer and new media artist, and has published three volumes of poetry, three CDs of performance work and numerous multimedia works. Her latest volume of creative work, with accompanying CD Rom, is *The Erotics of Geography: poetry, performance texts, new media works*, (Tinfish Press, 2008). She is a member of australYSIS, the sound and intermedia arts group, and has performed her work extensively in USA, Europe, UK and Australasia. She also had a previous career as a professional violinist. Her website is at [www.australysis.com](http://www.australysis.com) and her email is [hazel.smith@uws.edu.au](mailto:hazel.smith@uws.edu.au)

Keywords:

Creative writing

A long time ago I decided that I wasn't going to have any children. People need to feel they're right, and have to convince everyone else that they are. We suppress other biological urges: nobody thinks fidelity is 'weird'. E-researchers have found that people derive more satisfaction from eating, exercising, shopping, napping, or watching television, than taking care of their kids. Looking after the kids appears to be only slightly more pleasant than doing the housework.

A long time ago I decided that I wasn't going to have any children. We're used to childless women running things, they used to be called nuns. Did you 'just know' you wanted to be a mother? Well I 'just know' I don't. I do worry about being lonely when I'm older. I pursue volunteer work for charity, I give blood, I've offered to donate my eggs. Look, I like kids – I just couldn't eat one whole.

Childless women subvert discourses round constructions of femininity. *As a mother myself*, meaning that only women with children have real feelings. A filmmaker, talking to the *New York Times*, probably *is* more comfortable discussing her films than her uterus. First Romeo wants to marry Julia. I have experienced firsthand the effects of bad parenting, and I don't want to perpetuate that. My partner doesn't want kids. I lack the appropriate resources. I was never drawn to dolls. I wonder why I am so ambivalent about my own status: why at times I feel myself a lesser being, even as I despise anybody who sees me that way.

I think having children is the greatest experience of any lifetime. My childhood was enriched by a childfree uncle, who took us to galleries and films we would not otherwise have seen. There is a constant drip, drip, drip of pressure, a need to justify your self in a way parents never have to do. If childbirth and rearing are so bloody essential, why do so many abortions happen every year? I am on constant alert, fearful of the stray remark or image that will rock my equilibrium.

A long time ago I decided that I wasn't going to have children, and a long time ago the world decided I wasn't, because I didn't have children. The time has just gone and it was or wasn't a long time ago for time is short. And in short, I am not sure whether I decided to have children or not, maybe I did and maybe I didn't.

## Endnote

1. Sources for this poem include *The Age*, *The Drum Opinion*, *Jezebel*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Childless By Choice* survey (2004-06), found at [http://www.childlessbychoiceproject.com/Childless\\_by\\_Choice\\_Survey.html](http://www.childlessbychoiceproject.com/Childless_by_Choice_Survey.html), and works by Gilbert, D 2007 *Stumbling on Happiness*, New York: Vintage; and, Gillespie, R 2000 'When No Means No: disbelief, disregard and deviance as discourses of voluntary childlessness' *Women's Studies International Forum* 23(2): 223-34.

## **Research background**

This text results from a research project that analyzed publications about voluntary childlessness, a subject addressed in only a few sociological and psychological texts and almost entirely absent from poetry and fiction. I explore the topic through conceptual or ‘uncreative’ writing techniques (Goldsmith 2011), that cut-and paste texts from the Internet, resist conventional poetic techniques and minimise revision.

## **Research contribution**

Exploring the intersection of poetry, documentary, performance and prose, the text presents voluntary childlessness through rapidly changing and conflicting perspectives, to show that willed childlessness varies, and may combine positive and negative aspects. It morphs the ‘cut up’ into ‘cut and paste’, combining snippets from newspapers articles, interactive forums and academic discourses about voluntary childlessness, found through Google searching. It, unusually, fuses this technique with the ‘polylogue’ (Smith 2005: 123), a performative monologue of contradictory voices that is designed for solo live performance, and employs the iteration characteristic of experimental writing.

## **Research significance**

The piece puts voluntary childlessness into the literary arena. It foregrounds ‘uncreative writing’ in Australia, has been enthusiastically received in New Zealand and the UK (Performances 2012), and forms part of a body of experimental work by me that has been extensively published and performed internationally.

## **Works cited**

Goldsmith, K 2011 *Uncreative Writing: managing language in the digital age*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Performances: Trans-Tasman poetry symposium, Auckland University, 2012; The Other Room poetry reading, Leeds Gallery, UK, 2012.

Smith, H 2005 *The Writing Experiment: strategies for innovative creative writing*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin.