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Creativity, Fragments of the History of an Idea

Materialities, Economies, Empiricism and Things
Cultural Studies Association of Australasia Annual Conference, 2012
University of Sydney

It is frequently maintained that creativity is a desirable and wholly positive attribute — implicit in such a claim is the idea that creativity is also an ideologically neutral attribute. Creativity is regularly understood to exist beyond ideology and politics, and more significantly, perhaps, beyond history. For this reason, cultural histories of the creative idea commonly take a substantialist approach to their object of study — in that they take as their starting point an idea of creativity as a fixed or substantial reality that exists outside and beyond the historical field. The manifold possibilities of history are therefore reduced to a narrative about approaches to, or departures from, this fixed constant, and the task of the historian is reduced to one of identifying and describing pure and unadulterated forms of the creative idea, or unmasking corrupt and alienated versions. Hence, for example, in Raymond Williams' influential histories of the creative idea, successive historical figures come 'very near to' (1961/2001: 37) apprehending creativity for what it really is, or else depart from this extra-historical constant in ways that Williams' judges to be 'confusing and at times seriously misleading' (Williams 1976/1983: 84).

Creativity, in short, is traditionally apprehended in essentialist terms. It is therefore unsurprising that at some point in its more recent history the creative idea made the familiar leap from ideal essence to biological fact. Creativity is currently the subject of significant investigations in the sciences, and its physiological foundations are the subject of particular investigation in neuroscience. This paper explores the becoming biological of the creative idea — particularly the way in which the creative idea has been tethered to the

ideology of individualism and the rise of capital.

Camilla Nelson lectures in English Literature and Communications at the University of Notre Dame, Australia. She is the author of two novels, including *Perverse Acts,* which was awarded the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Best Young Australian Novelist's of the Year, and *Crooked,* which was shortlisted for the Ned Kelly Awards. Her academic essays have appeared in a variety of journals including *Text, New Writing, Rethinking History* and *Cultural Studies Review*.