



**INCITE
ITEMS**

For Educational Iconoclasm

Calling All Inspired Intellectuals

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Kaitlin Smith is the founder of Wild Mind Collective. The collective consists of several formats, including a podcast, website, blog, and Facebook page. Its mission is to counter the toxic effects of the neoliberal-consumerist-industrial complex that counts as today's academia, a state of affairs that "poses significant problems in both the lives of individuals and in broader communities hungry for the contributions of visionary thinkers rendered meek and self-doubting through academic socialization." The following piece first appeared on the [Wild Mind Collective](#) blog.

Calling All Inspired Intellectuals

As conditions within colleges and universities around the U.S. grow ever more dire for many knowledge workers, it is no longer terribly controversial to regard academia as a space of chronic disempowerment and emotional abuse for nearly everyone who enters its professional socialization process. This is particularly so for those inspired to amplify marginalized perspectives, deliver biting social critique, or resurface traditions of contemplation that contrast with the logic of mechanistic scholarly production.

This blog entry chronicles my experience walking without a map in response to these warnings as an inspired intellectual—someone with an unquenchable love of ideas and an unwavering commitment to personal authenticity in pursuing them. Though I have hesitated to launch this project with an extended discussion of my own experience, I believe that things will not change for this community until we find the courage to marry intellection with vulnerability in open dialogue and await no one's authorization.

It all started for me after watching Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* documentary in high school. After giving some of his writing a cursory read and feeling inspired by his courage and intelligence, I concluded that I, too, wanted to become a professor-radical public intellectual. Perhaps needless to say, I did not understand that those things overlap only very infrequently. Despite that, this goal was reinforced at the picturesque Swarthmore College where I was groomed to continue along this trajectory and did so until a fortuitous trip to New York City brought my journey to a grinding halt. During a research trip to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, I began to perceive the dehumanizing levels of abstraction inherent in the research process as an engine of personal estrangement and the whole experience as a precursor to the isolation that awaited me as a professional academic woman. I had previously read plenty of harrowing stories about the particular experiences of

many scholars of color, the unique challenges faced by academic women of childbearing age, and the consequences of the hiring freeze that had been occurring at the time. There was something about riding the New York subway every day amid droves of strangers that amplified my manufactured estrangement and revealed that inertia would continue to push me along that path unless and until I forcibly stopped it. Suddenly, the prospect of launching into a highly consuming career in which I would not be able to speak candidly, would be undermined in pursuing partnership and motherhood, and made perpetually precarious felt like a choice that would quickly be made for me if I did not decide to hit the brakes. Though I did put on the brakes, I would soon learn that forging my own path—without clear models or support—was not at all easy.

My realizations prompted me to halt the process of applying to doctoral programs and, instead, begin work in healing arts—psychotherapy and modalities that nurture the mind-body-spirit. Like the tender places within some humanistic disciplines, this is a domain where narratives can be rewritten at the level of the self and the community against all apparent odds. Through a combination of primarily self-directed study in healing arts and master’s-level training and practice in psychodynamic psychotherapy, I gained rich experience working one-on-one with clients. Unsurprisingly, however, it was not long before my “intellectual DNA” resurfaced to call me back to neglected parts of myself. Throughout graduate study and clinical training, I remained the person who had many more questions than could be answered, who was unsatisfied with the mainstream paradigm of treatment, and perpetually frustrated by the politics of academic and medical knowledge production more generally. Rather than feeling at peace during client sessions, I desired a platform from which to share my ideas and engage others in dialogue. I also wanted the freedom to speak openly about my own experiences in the first person (not only a no-no within scholarly writing but also in the psychoanalytic / psychodynamic tradition in which I was trained).

What truly prompted me to re-evaluate this new direction, however, was work with supervisory figures who diagnosed my intellectualism and lack of apparent anger as pathological for a black woman. They asserted that I was “too cerebral” for the clinical profession and communicated that, in general, critical thinking beyond a certain threshold is simply not valued within the field. Though I did not know this at the outset, the anti-intellectualism present within the field is a known problem amongst many of its defectors and, hence, a particularly poor destination for someone with my innate proclivities. Scenarios like these seem to be among the worst nightmares of many academics I have known. The threat of such experiences beyond the ivory tower seems to be the glue that keep a great many people in line amid severe cognitive dissonance. Though I certainly wouldn’t wish these particular experiences upon anyone, I know firsthand how difficult it is for socially marginalized people who think critically and speak courageously to work under people who are simultaneously intimidated by us and empowered to reinforce their dominant position. The opportunity to, at least seemingly, not have a boss and engage primarily with colleagues who demonstrate some measure of sociopolitical awareness seem to be among the major selling points of the academic career for people who meet this profile. When your self-expression disturbs stereotypical renderings of your community, finding a career where you can gain genuine respect for being yourself can feel like an impossible task. As it turns out, this seeming impossibility led me back into the lion’s den.

Despite my longstanding misgivings, it was this experience of feeling deeply pathologized, coerced, and misappropriated that led me to take my next career steps within academia after all. Wasting away in a field in which some of my greatest assets were being received as liabilities seemed like an unconscionable, unsustainable waste of time, health, and spirit. As I examined the examples and role models around me, I struggled to imagine conducting the work that felt like mine without the organizing framework of a doctoral program. I knew that I wanted to write, speak, and conduct events related to the ritual of education, academic knowledge production, and the bankruptcy of symbolic

culture alone for driving social transformation. I was also inspired by existing lines of inquiry within Africana philosophy, indigenous thought, and ecophilosophy as I reflected upon these issues. Though the social vision behind my ideas seemed to run counter to the purpose of most traditional departments within the U.S., my private thinking was that I wouldn't necessarily become a professor for all of the reasons that had given me pause years prior. In my imagination, I would become some sort of hybrid of public intellectual and entrepreneur once I emerged sufficiently prepared and adorned with the PhD.

As you might imagine, however, things within my doctoral program at UChicago hardly went according to plan. One of the primary faculty I had intended to work with ended up taking a role at another institution without informing me and the advisor who was ultimately assigned to me was chronically unresponsive. I was irritated that I was wasting days, weeks, and months arguing with colleagues and professors about the merits of a project that was subsequently published in a similar form by someone else roughly a year later with positive critical reception. Though I may have found a more congenial home within an interdisciplinary department or one with a more overt activist stance, the basic qualms that stopped me from taking this path earlier resurfaced with much greater clarity. Beyond the obvious challenges that afflict almost everyone on the job market in the humanities and humanistic social sciences, I found that my abstract misgivings became more concrete as I learned more about my professors' real lives. From the constant relocations, lack of significant relationships, and lack of agency to speak their truths on campus and off, I simply could not imagine committing to that life-long marathon. In addition, I also began to experience some significant health challenges that were difficult to address on my meager fellowship stipend and that was severely aggravated by conditions of chronic stress. It became clear that choosing myself and choosing to live out my interior academic fantasy were mutually exclusive paths. After a summer of tough deliberation, I chose the former and have never looked back.

Though I had not been sure how I would weather the unique challenges of the academic socialization process before I started, I failed to understand how the process fundamentally changes people and would urge me to change, too. While some people may consider this a character flaw, I believe that my unrelenting stubbornness and inability to tolerate conditions of servitude saved me from what may have become many years and decades of suffering in service to an idealized career vision that is increasingly askew from reality. The notion that one will simply get the degree and get out promptly, unchanged and unscathed, is an irrelevant pipe dream for so very many people. The fanciful equation in which the existing me + PhD will invariably = a better version of myself just doesn't balance out. The self who endures the process of domestication may very well be markedly different in mind, body, and spirit than its predecessor (and not necessarily in a manner that the person would elect to repeat). What would happen if we could begin claiming that latter state of completion and self-authorization in the here and now?

Despite my early exposure to the horror stories of too many committed and impassioned people within this industry, my and others' willingness to thrust ourselves into this toxic system suggests the need for a new space that helps inspired intellectuals build meaningful bodies of work and care for themselves irrespective of academic affiliation. Regardless of the slew of digital opinion pieces warning us of impending danger and abject precarity, it is extremely difficult to act upon such knowledge without a clear sense of viable alternatives and a supportive community to bear witness.

I have launched the Wild Mind Collective website because I believe that this void poses significant problems in both the lives of individuals and in broader communities hungry for the contributions of visionary thinkers rendered meek and self-doubting through academic socialization. Whether someone makes their professional home in academia, beyond it, or somewhere in-between, I want to live in a world in which all inspired intellectuals feel empowered to deliver

authentic bodies of work within their chosen domains. I believe that our world desperately needs this sea change and we do, too.

If this issue has touched you or someone you know and you would like to be part of this conversation, I hope that you will tell me about your experience in the comments, share this post with a friend, and join my [mailing list](https://www.wildmindcollective.com/subscribe) (<https://www.wildmindcollective.com/subscribe>).