

# Reflections on Becoming White... or, Avoiding the button factory by **Maria Moriarty**

**This article grew out of my reading of two articles that explore concepts of skill, whiteness, masculinity, gender and identity in contemporary discourses on training, and in relation to the early work of Frontier College.**

In reading and reflecting on these articles I found myself thinking of my own journey, from my beginnings as the child of a working-class family in Ireland to the university-educated, liberal left-leaning, Canadian adult I have become.

The first article, by Thomas Dunk, looks at ideas of "skill" as a social construct, that is to say, as a concept developed within a particular culture or society, rather than as an objective reality. Dunk argues "the [training] discourse frequently transforms the concept of skill into something that might more accurately and honestly be described as attitude or character structure. In this context, the boundary between skills training, acculturation and/or assimilation becomes blurred" (p. 130).

Claiming that "European and North American societies have a strong tradition of associating skilled work with white males" (p. 120), Dunk explores the understanding and base of such character traits as sobriety, reliability, punctuality, acceptance of fate and willingness to be compliant that are often seen to be those of "good" skilled working men. These traits, he argues, are the very ones that are often identified as lacking in the discourse about skills deficits and the need for training. As a result, "one of the ideological functions of the emphasis on training is the redirection of concern away from racism, ethnic prejudice and sexism in the labour market and toward the special needs of these 'others'" (p. 115).

I found that this article resonated for me and challenged me to consider the shifts and currents in adult literacy in Ontario and elsewhere, particularly in relation to the ever-increasing emphasis on adult literacy as preparation for work, and the by now fairly well-established tendency to correlate adult literacy with the development of "skills" that will enable students to enter the workforce and to fit in and succeed there. Along with Dunk, I want to ask "what

and whose conception of skill, [is] training... supposed to serve"? (p. 101)

This article also raised some questions for me in relation to my long association with the labour movement—ideas about the "ideal worker" embodying the values and qualities associated with the white working-class male and conceptions of "an honest day's work for an honest day's pay". Where, I wonder, does gender fit here, how deeply have we accepted and internalized these inherited traditions and norms? How can we examine these conceptions of work,

working, how to work and what work is, through the lens of gender and conceptions of whiteness so we can get at and perhaps unpack notions of what is normative, and explore the ways in which what is accepted as "natural" or "good" or "ordinary" or "honest" have been constructed?

What might that mean in relation to what Dunk describes as "the ambivalent meanings of such terms as skill, education and training"? (p. 112)

The second article, by Pierre Walter, is a fascinating account of the early work of Frontier College, framed in the context of the provision of "literacy

and citizenship education to labouring immigrant men on the resource frontier. [Frontier College] was the quintessential embodiment of the grand project of Anglo-Canadian nation building" (p. 42).

Walter describes how this "imagined community" of national identity was articulated and promoted through the literacy programs of Frontier College, and how the idea of the community was fostered and advanced. He also examines the ideas of race, class and gender upon which Canada was based. According to Walter, the Social Gospel movement of the late 19th century promoted the belief that "'Christianizing' and 'Canadianizing' immigrant foreigners would result in immigrant workers being 'uplifted' to a higher plane of spirituality and indeed civilization." (p. 45). These twin efforts would, it was hoped, result in "[t]he imagined Canadian [as] a man who now locates himself in an upright hierarchy of personal identity with God as superior, followed by Empire, Canada and family. The good Canadian man is the protector of weaker females,



is diligent, helpful to others, honest and clean, but does not deny his virile campman masculinity" (p. 47).

These values were an integral part of the literacy curriculum developed by Frontier College and embodied in the white, university-educated men who were sent out to teach in the camps. "Here the idea was that contact with 'wholesome,' clean-living, loyal, Canadian, English-speaking men would...serve as the model of good citizenship immigrant men could emulate" (p.49).

As I was reading these articles, I was struck by the parallels between the imagined ideal working man and the ideal Canadian man, and how these ideals neatly correlate with ideas of what makes a good worker and what we appear to accept as objective descriptions of what is "good" and "honest" and what constitutes progress and accomplishment for individuals.

I began to think about my own journey. I am a pale-skinned, blue-eyed Northern European woman. When I was growing up in Dublin, Ireland, in the 1950s and '60s, my parents—neither of whom had gone past grade seven—valued education above everything else. Getting an education was the means to a better life. My father was a factory foreman. My mother was, well, a mother: she described herself as a housewife. What they wanted for their children was an education that would give us opportunities that they had not had. Work in an office, clean hands at the end of the day, status, money and pensions (for the boys—the girls would marry). The process of getting us there meant keeping us in school (compulsory, state-funded schooling ended at 14) and paying for our education.

The education we received was an Irish version of the classic British minor public school model—literature (English and Irish), Latin, math, Irish history, world history (i.e., Western world history, white world history), domestic science, geography, French and field hockey. We had dance lessons, etiquette classes and elocution lessons to "round us out."

It seems to me now that we were inculcated with the values of an imagined world. In this imagined world, life would be easier than in the working-class world. We were to become good, Irish, Catholic, middle-class women with a smattering of French, the ability to set a proper table and to make appropriate small talk in unaccented English. We would, after a brief stint as teachers or civil servants, devote ourselves to looking after our husbands and children and creating orderly, hygienic homes.

We were frequently told that if we did not work hard in school, obey and succeed we would end up in a button factory. The inference was that we belonged there and that it was only through the grace of our

middle-class teachers that we had another option. The shadow of the button factory loomed large and dark in my early adolescent imagination. I wanted out. I wanted to live in this orderly, middle-class, predictable and benign imagined world.

So what does all this have to do with skill or whiteness or masculinity or gender or identity? Well, my sense is that I am a working-class girl who "made good." I entered the class that controls language and explains the world. I am, in a way, the very model of what can happen if one complies—if one takes up the values of the dominant class. I am aware of a certain irony here. In this version of the imagined world, I have the means and the leisure, the sense of entitlement that allows me to reflect on this experience, to read these articles and to engage in critique. Like Peggy McIntosh, I see that "white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day.... White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks." I am not completely oblivious to this, as McIntosh says I am meant to be—in a way, my parents bought that knapsack and filled it with special provisions. Now that I have them I can look back from this privileged vantage point and begin to contemplate how it happened.

It seems to me that we need to look at how whiteness as a concept exists, how it happens, how it plays out and what that means for literacy and learning. We need to reflect on how seldom issues of race, class and gender come up when we talk about skills and learning and we need somehow to work together to raise those issues, to think about how our concepts are constructed, to examine systems and structures, to explore our own experiences and to try to illuminate the darker corners of what we accept and take for granted. ■

**Maria Moriarty**, was born in Dublin, Ireland in the very early 1950's, a true baby-boomer. Born to be wild she moved to Canada in 1975 and the moment she arrived she knew she was at home. She has been involved in adult literacy work in Ontario since the early 1990s, working at AlphaPlus and as a literacy activist in CUPE.

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#### SOURCES:

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