A Privileged Working Space

Todd Parry

tcparry@ucdavis.edu

This document has been submitted for consideration for the American Studies Writing Prize- Upper Division.
A Privileged Working Space

Armando put one foot on the bottom step of the extension ladder, hesitated, and then the other. He began to climb slowly. In one hand were a few tools that he would need once he arrived at the top; the other hand held tightly to the ladder. The ladder itself, as an extension of Armando’s nervous feet, began to shake in my hands. About sixteen feet above us was the ceiling, almost complete, except still not insulated; that was our job. Twelve feet below us were the concrete stairs that led from the bottom floor up to the floor upon which we, and the ladder, stood. A fall from this position would likely mean paralysis or death; at best, Armando would sustain several broken bones. Thinking about him falling, and landing, was making me feel sick.

What we were doing was illegal, and we both knew it; the simple fact that the Superintendent of this jobsite had asked us to do this was also illegal. If a representative from OSHA had seen what we were doing, the entire project would have been shut down immediately. The laws that Armando and I were breaking had been instigated by OSHA to protect people like us from being asked to do these kinds of things, and the fines associated with violating them start in the tens of thousands of dollars, and soar far higher. Constructing buildings can be unpredictable, and whenever situations that are this dangerous arise, additional scaffolding, complete with safety harnesses, is supposed to be brought in to ensure that no one falls, and if anyone does, everyone survives. “Don’t worry,” the Superintendent had reassured us. “I’ll have someone watch for OSHA trucks from the door while you’re up there,” before adding, with a slight smile, “Just don’t fall.”
A few minutes earlier, when I had been asked to work on this part of the ceiling, I had refused immediately. I had only been working for this company for a few months, and the training materials that forbid employees to do anything nearly so unsafe were still fresh in my mind. I called my production manager Micky, and explained what the Superintendent had requested. “That’s okay,” Micky said. “You don’t have to do it if you really don’t think it’s safe. Hey, is Armando around? Could you put him on the phone?”

As the employee tasked with training me, Armando was standing at my side. He was in his mid-twenties, was married, and had three children. My sense was that he had been working for this company for a few years. While training me, had told me that as an infant, his parents had brought him to the US from Mexico illegally, but that the Reagan administration had given them amnesty in 1986. I handed him my phone. He said “Yeah” a few times, then “Okay,” and handed my phone back. He sighed, and asked me to hold the ladder for him so that he could insulate the area of the ceiling in question.

“Are you serious?” I asked. “You’re gonna do that?”

“If I don’t do it,” he replied, “they send me home.”

I would later learn all about how Armando, along with several other installers, had been dismissed from jobsites before for complaining about unsafe working conditions. They were told that whatever it was that they had expressed concern over was all the work that was available that day, and were sent home without pay. This was a standard practice of our company to incentivize installers to not complain, because accommodating safety regulation complaints was costly and time consuming, and the company had a pressing interest in keeping these costs as low as possible.
However, regardless of the fact that it was not uncommon for me to refuse to perform duties that I knew were illegal for superintendents to even ask someone to do without proper safety equipment, I was never sent home for doing so. On occasion, arrangements had to be made for additional equipment to be brought in and set up so that I could safely complete a job; more commonly, my boss would just have another installer pick up where I left off, while I went on to something else.

It would be years before I would fully realize that in this moment, Armando was on the ladder, and I was on the ground, because I was white and he was not. But even while standing there, holding the ladder, witnessing that moment of flagrant racial injustice, participating in and enabling it, I remember thinking two things: “Please don’t fall,” and, less optimistically, “He should’ve stood up for himself.”

I still didn’t get it.

I had been hired a few months earlier in the spring of 2006. A friend of mine named Jeremy and I had worked side by side stocking shelves at Wal-Mart for a little over a year when his girlfriend became pregnant. With a baby on the way, Jeremy wanted a better-paying job, and found one working for a local affiliate of a giant construction corporation that insulated buildings. Although the job was not exactly fun, Jeremy said that he was immediately making almost twice as much money, insisted it was worth it, and suggested that I give it a try. I asked if he thought the company would hire me; he said that he would talk with his boss, and suggested I come in and fill out an application.

When I came into the office I met a man named Ken, who was the branch manager. I introduced myself as “Jeremy’s friend Todd,” and he asked me a few questions about myself and my work history. Before he had even handed me a blank job application, he had hired me, which
other installers would later tell me is extraordinarily uncommon (typically, applicants not only have to fill out and turn in the application, but their references are checked, and applicants undergo criminal-background and drug screenings). Ken asked when I could start; I said anytime. He told me to come in the following Monday morning ready to go, and that I could give him my completed application then. The drug screening was never mentioned, and I never took one.

Upon starting this new job, it did not take long for me to realize that the color lines that divided the office staff (the managers, salespeople, and human resources personnel) from the installers were striking; the former was overwhelmingly white, and the latter was almost exclusively Latino (with Jeremy and I being the only two exceptions). This seemed odd, troubling even, but I did not dwell on it too much. Construction workers rarely spend time at warehouses where the offices are, and the old adage “Out of sight, out of mind” held true in this instance. Also, as someone who typically did not think much about race anyway, it was easy for me to forget.

The first couple of months of this new job had been strikingly different than what I was used to. Firstly, the construction industry in Las Vegas was booming, and my new company was struggling to keep up, continuously asking for more and more production from laborers. It was summer in Las Vegas, and temperatures could rise to 110-115 degrees Fahrenheit. We sometimes worked twelve or more hours per day. This job could also be very dangerous. It is common for insulators to work on top of scaffolding at heights of thirty to forty feet off of the ground. We were expected to go into places (attics and subfloor crawlspaces for instance) teeming with rodents, black widow spiders, broken glass, hazardous or highly flammable chemicals, and any number of other hazards. I still preferred it to working at Wal-Mart.
One thing that had always bothered me while working at Wal-Mart was the way the managers there police the behavior of the employees. The result seemed to be that most of my coworkers seemed to project a false presentation of themselves, like a faux-corporate demeanor. It seemed wholly inauthentic, as if I were to run into them someplace else, they would be totally different people. This may have been done out of perceived necessity (to remain employable), but regardless, it seemed difficult to break down these exteriors and really connect with anyone on a personal level, which I felt made the days pass much more slowly. Cliques and alliances were omnipresent; it seemed petty and disenchanted.

That mentality did not apply at my new job. I noticed that there seemed to be a kinship among the installers at this company that I did not have with the other workers in my previous workplace. I felt that I got to know almost everyone on a really personal level, and quickly. There was also something about working with others under difficult and dangerous circumstances that seemed to bring us together. My new coworkers were happy to help me with questions or anything else that I needed help with. Difficult work and unrealistic time expectations can be extremely frustrating, and as a result, coworkers see each other at their best and at their most vulnerable. The work was miserable, but the installers commiserated. We were a team.

Additionally, my paychecks were about the same as they had been at Wal-Mart, except I was getting them every week, instead of every other week. At twenty-one, for the first time, I felt like a legitimate adult. I decided that I wanted to keep this job, and worked hard to do so.

By the following spring, long after the incident with Armando, my original enthusiasm for this job was wearing off. By this point it had become clear that this company expected employees to routinely risk their safety, but claimed to be sincerely concerned. Liability had a
very strong presence; when blatantly unsafe conditions did arise, if the installers did not
adamantly object, management would look the other way. We had safety meetings every
Wednesday morning, during which Micky would run through a specified topic of safety concern
for the week. On one occasion, he described how installers should never use scaffolding that was
not OSHA compliant, and that it was the installers’ responsibility to ensure that we had all the
right scaffolding that we needed to safely complete our duties on a given jobsite. Someone
pointed out to him that given the entire scaffold inventory, one could not piece together one
single scaffold that was OSHA compliant, let alone enough for all the crews that work on any
given day. He acted surprised, and stated that he would “talk with Corporate” about buying more
scaffolding. As a condition of continuing the work day, we all signed paperwork indicating that
we had been instructed and understood that it was our responsibility to ensure that we only used
OSHA approved scaffolding. Additional scaffolding was never purchased.

I was also beginning to feel trapped by this job. As a condition of employment, this job
mandated that employees work full-time; for me, this meant that I could not go back to school,
which was something I had been considering, and that my girlfriend at the time, who was a very
successful student, had been urging me to do. My Dad, a life-long construction worker, had
warned me against this cyclical nature of laborious work. After about eight months of working in
the field, I was seriously considering quitting to seek another job that would allow me to attend a
local community college in the fall. It was then that I was offered a promotion.

Some of the other installers had been with the company for ten years or longer, but had
never been promoted; I thought that this company must really like me. I really had been trying to
do well. Having a sincere concern for the environment obliged me to insulate these buildings as
well as I could, and being the youngest installer on the crew, as well as a “white guy,” I also felt
I had to prove myself to the others, and kept my production numbers high. There was a substantial pay increase associated with the promotion, as well as a litany of other perks like a company phone, a pick-up truck, free gasoline, and health and dental benefits. I thought that all of my hard work from the previous eight months had not gone unrecognized. Most notably, I thought that if I took this job, my girlfriend and I could finally move out of my parents’ house. Considering this, I spoke with the branch manager Ken about the prospect of going back to school. He said that he would be willing to let me leave for a few hours, a couple days per week, to go to class. I accepted the promotion.

From the inside of the management circle, I began to connect the dots to the real reason that I had been offered the promotion. I had worked around explicitly racist people in the field as an installer, but had dismissed these people, firstly, as isolated and aberrant, and secondly, as innocuous, at least as far as the careers of their targets were concerned. For example, one day when I was working in the field, I arrived on a jobsite that was a pretty standard commercial building. I introduced myself to the superintendent, who said “You’re the insulator?” I said yes. He said “You speak English?” I said yes. He said “And you’re white?!” I said “Uhh, yeah.” His reply was “It must be my birthday!” I asked where he wanted me to start; he told me. I did not think too much of it, but just dismissed him as an idiot, something adults just have to deal with from time to time.

I quickly learned that these people are not as harmless as one may like to think. As the employee now tasked with fielding scheduling phone calls, I would routinely take calls from contractors requesting white installers “…because they can speak English.” I would tell these people that was not a problem, that “All of our installers speak English,” which was true. Some would say that was fine, while others were less accepting. On one occasion, after being assured
that the installer we would send would absolutely speak English, a contractor added “Well, he better not steal anything.” It was obvious that he was using language as a proxy for race, and by extension, his language preference was code for racism; he did not necessarily want an English-speaking installer, he wanted a white installer. I spoke with my boss Micky about this, thinking that he may wish to speak with the contractor personally about what he had said. Micky said that I should just send Jeremy, and forget about it.

This was the turning point at which I began to realize that I was in the position that I was in because staffing a white person in it was convenient for the company, that in this industry, whiteness was in demand, and by extension, anything else was considered second-class, or less desirable. This pattern continued. Most applicants were Latino. The one white installer who applied while I was in management was named Jeff, and was also hired on the spot and not drug-tested. I personally fired him less than two weeks later for arriving at work in the morning while still under the influence of the preceding night’s LSD (he had confided in Jeremy, who reiterated the confession to me. As Jeff was leaving, he began throwing other people’s tools across the parking lot, and then ran some over with his car on his way out. Presumably, his criminal history was also not screened).

Most customers did not seem to think twice about the installer’s race, but still some contractors specifically asked for white installers, which began to make me feel awfully guilty. I was also now tasked with conducting the weekly safety meetings. The night before these meetings, I was given a couple of pages of information that I was to go over with the installers, and I was to reiterate any objections to Micky, who at this point, did not even arrive until well after these meetings were over and everyone had left. I was told that if anyone refused to sign the
paperwork, I had to send them home until they agreed to sign. If they still refused, they would be fired. No one ever refused to sign the paperwork.

School was going surprisingly well, but problems with my roommates had left my girlfriend and I back in my parent’s house. Also, the management job was extremely stressful for me; due to my lack of experience in insulation, I commonly found myself clueless as to what the customers were requesting of the installers. They would call and ask me to schedule something like a soffit pre-hang with 3035-HD FSK, flange-stapled. I would have to ask something like “Now, what exactly is that?” I should not have been given that job; it was flatly embarrassing.

Even more embarrassing were the quality-control checks that I was giving “randomly” to installers (“randomly” meaning whenever Micky asked me to). I would go to a jobsite and tell an employee, who perhaps outranked me by ten or fifteen years, that according to this checklist, his work was not good enough, and had to ask him to redo it. It was impossible to miss the negativity conveyed by the recipients of these requests, who perhaps would, or perhaps would not, accommodate my request after I had left. I felt like my relatively new friends saw me as a sell-out, and a racist one at that.

It was also from this vantage point as a manager that I was able to see the regularity with which some of my Latino colleagues were treated so poorly. On one occasion, an installer named Pedro went to a jobsite just like he would on any other morning. He was greeted at a gate that surrounded the building by a guard who demanded to see proof of his American citizenship. Pedro showed him his driver’s license, and insisted that he was a citizen, but the guard said that was not good enough, and refused to allow Pedro entry onto the premises. Pedro returned to the warehouse, livid, shouting “They won’t let me work because I’m Mexican!” He explained to Micky what had happened, and Micky called the company to verify the story. Whomever he
spoke with reiterated what Pedro had said without denying anything. Micky sent Pedro home for the day, and had me go to complete the job. When I arrived, nobody asked me for proof of anything.

I grew to resent the job, and myself for taking it. I was also unhappy in Las Vegas, and felt that my education had no future there. So when an opportunity came for me to take another job with another insulation company in Sacramento, I jumped on it, and I got it. I could go back into the crew, back to installing, without the headaches of management. In a couple of years, when I was ready to transfer to a four-year university, I could apply to Californian universities, and when accepted, could pay in-state tuition. As soon as I could figure out the logistics of going to Sacramento, I was gone.

I was disappointed to learn that things in Sacramento were not much different, although it was a relief to not have to be on the executing end. Again, most of the office staff was white, and most of the installers were Latino, but it did seem less common to run into flagrantly racist people on jobsites. I settled into a routine, working during the day and taking classes at Sacramento City College at night.

A couple years later, in the spring of 2012, I was offered another promotion. This time, the job offer was to head a project that was completely new to the company; in fact, it was relatively new to the industry. Installers would be going into the concurrently occupied homes of clients and “weatherizing” them; that is, we would replace and upgrade the insulation in their attics, foam-seal air leaks in the buildings, and so on, in an attempt to reduce energy consumption, and by extension, to lower energy bills for occupants. It seemed like a great project, and I really liked the way it sounded.
When I spoke with the salesperson to whom the contracts belonged (the man who had recommended me for the job), he said “Todd, I really like you for this job. You’re polite, you’re reasonably intelligent, and you’re white.” I said “Excuse me?” Laughing, he said that he did not mean anything bad by “reasonably intelligent.”

I said “No, the other thing. I’m white?”

He said “Well, Todd, a lot of these people don’t want Mexicans coming and going into their homes. It’s not a good thing, but when customers complain, we have to fix it. We have to pick someone who’s presentable. You don’t think it’s best to just avoid the problem altogether?”

My heart sank. All of the shame from my old management job resurfaced. I would like to say that I quit out of principle, that I told this salesperson how awful what he had said was. The truth is I was afraid that if I did, I would not be able to cover the cost of my upcoming tuition bill. I knew that I could not accept this job, but told him I would have to think about it. I ended up telling my boss that because I was quitting to go to school full-time soon anyway, I did not want to have to train for a new job that I was just going to quit, and that he would probably be better off with someone like Ruben or Mario, who were great workers, and had smaller body frames that made it easier to move around in attics. Things went back to normal for me. Six months or so later, I quit my job officially, and moved to Davis.

Ostensibly, these two companies justified executing these racist acts with the claim that they had to do so because whiteness is what some of the clients and customers preferred. This accommodationist posture legitimizes workplace racism, replicates it, and enables the cycle to continue. My own actions truly were extremely selfish, and in retrospect, are profoundly embarrassing. But they also speak to how sneaky institutionalized racism can be. When I was offered the promotion at the Las Vegas company, for instance, I did not consider that I was being
treated better because I was white, that accepting the offer was exorbitantly unfair, and that by accepting it I was further entrenching institutionalized racial inequalities in America. I simply thought ‘How great! Now I can move out of my parents’ house and start attending school! They’re even going to give me a truck!’

It was easy for me to think that Armando should have stood up for himself like I had because I had never been sent home for refusing unsafe work, and did not have to worry about whether he was going to be able to feed his kids the following week. Nevada legislation, ironically called “The Right to Hire,” stipulates that employers can fire employees at any given time, without even having to cite a reason. That company could have fired either of us for refusing dangerous work without safety equipment. I was able to refuse dangerous situations because this company perceived a need to have more white people working for them; Armando, being Latino, lacked that perceived value.

People too often give too much trust and credibility to institutions like massive corporations in America, because American law explicitly forbids discrimination in the workplace. This viewpoint, however, neglects that it is not uncommon for individuals who are the victims of discrimination to feel too fearful of the prospect of losing their jobs, and not being able to find another, to bring a lawsuit or even file a formal complaint. Common sentiment defers to anti-discrimination laws put in place, but neglects that mega-corporations like the two I worked for employ dozens of human resource attorneys for the exclusive purpose of dealing with whistleblowers who complain (and separate teams of attorneys that deal with everything else).

Capitalism stipulates that whatever is most profitable for businesses is intrinsically better. This mindset creates a false reality that indicates that because whiteness is preferred in some arenas (by racist clients), whiteness should be preferred in all business matters that involve
external customers. This results in racial minorities being deprived of the prospect of upward mobility, and are pushed down into the ugly cycles of poverty. It may be true that the majority of people in a given construction market are not overtly racist to the point of requesting exclusively white workers on their projects. But some do. On the other hand, racially-progressive clients and customers do not complain regardless of the worker’s race. The result is that white workers are more universally utilized by companies that make their services available to both sides, and that white people are able to find and keep jobs more easily than anyone who is not white. Businesses are willing to play along in the interest of maximizing their profits, which they routinely claim is their responsibility to which the shareholders hold management teams accountable, and when specific incidents do arise, staff attorneys typically blame the installers.

As someone for whom the American system has worked thus far, I have to admit that I feel a certain amount of ambivalence, even a slight guilt, when disparaging it writ large. But it cannot be ignored that it is absolutely heartbreaking to consider that so many of my friends will not have the same opportunities that I have had, and that I likely will continue to have, because they are not white. Affirmative action measures are helpful, and need to be taken more seriously, because they grant racial minorities a certain amount of institutionalized privilege in the tug-of-war of racial workplace equality, and instigate an opposing force that pulls at the other end. At minimum, there needs to be much stronger oversight of private companies in the US, with deterrence policies that have much sharper teeth. As it is, it is too easy for companies to get around these laws.

I grew up in a very working-class setting, and in fact only graduated high school because a sympathetic counselor exaggerated my work-credit hours to cover deficiencies elsewhere on my transcript. No one expected me to go to college, particularly myself, and I certainly did not
expect to do well in college. But because of my race, I occupied a space (in management) that literally allowed me to begin attending college; without that privilege, I would probably still be installing building insulation full-time. It is not difficult to imagine that individuals to whom white privilege is unavailable have similar experiences, but are not so successful in the workplace, and any motivation and opportunity that they had for pursuing a higher education dissipates.

Racism undoubtedly does exist in the present day US, and the laws that explicitly forbid workplace discrimination are often ignored. It is not always easy for poor whites in America to move up the socioeconomic ladder, but racial minorities who are born into working-class environments must carry the additional burden of racism, institutionalized or otherwise, as they try to ascend into higher socioeconomic classes. I became far more aware of privileges that are given to white people when I was working around others who mostly were not white, and even as someone who considers himself racially progressive, initially, these privileges were still difficult to see, as I initially attributed my success to my own strengths. The fact is my successes in this arena are more strongly associated with racism than with my own personal talents.

While working in the construction industry, I was able to more easily get a job, was given preferential treatment, promoted faster, and ostensibly, was able to quit to attend college full-time because of privileges that had been allotted to me, directly and indirectly, through white privilege. Affirmative action programs and legal deterrence policies are helpful, but realistically, have been available for decades, and have largely been unsuccessful (consider the current socioeconomic discrepancies between racial groups in the United States). It is also important to point out that voters have to want these programs, and if the white majority does not understand why these programs are necessary, they likely will not vote for them. Awareness is no substitute
for action, but it may be that an enhanced awareness of white privilege in the workplace, and elsewhere, is a good first step.