***David Pellow: Standing at the Intersection of Activism and Academia***

By: Arley Titzler

Perched on the fourth floor of Bren Hall at UC Santa Barbara, the wall-to-wall windows in David Pellow’s office overlook the Pacific ocean, an expanse of glittering, deep-blue water, hugging the famous California coastline. On the horizon, the Channel Islands peek through a misty haze. In the background, the mountains surrounding Santa Barbara frame the scene. It is no surprise that this picturesque landscape, which envelops UCSB’s campus, attracts and inspires professors, such as Pellow, who study environmental issues.

**An Influential Childhood**

Pellow credits his father, an avid outdoorsman, as the original source of his fascination with nature. Throughout Pellow’s childhood, his father would take the family out in the mountains to go fishing, hiking, camping, and swimming in rivers and lakes. “I just grew up loving being outdoors, loving nature,” says Pellow, describing memorable family outings:

My father had been in the army, and he would call these survival missions. On Sundays if it was raining, he would say, “you guys want to go out and cook hot dogs and marshmallows?” “Yeah, how would we do that Dad? It’s raining.” He goes, “well, I can show you how to take wood, find wood, split it open, and get dry wood from within the log, and then under a tent or a tarp, you know, make a fire.” “That doesn’t sound fun.” “Doesn’t matter, we’re going.”

Pellow’s parents also influenced his passion for studying social issues. In the 1950s and 1960s, they were involved in the African-American civil rights movement. He remembers, “they were always talking about, and instilling in me, values of social justice, and the power of ordinary people to make social change.”

Throughout his upbringing, Pellow learned to love nature, which made him aware of environmental problems, and he also grew to understand the importance of civil rights and social justice. It wasn’t until he read the book *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* by Robert Bullard, during his time as an undergraduate student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, that he began to consider the intersection between ideas of social justice, civil rights, and sustainability. In *Dumping in Dixie*, Bullard explained the emergence of the environmental justice movement as a combination of the civil rights movement and the mainstream environmental movement.

**Pursuing a Life in Academia**

After undergrad, Pellow continued his education, receiving both a Master of Arts and a PhD in Sociology from Northwestern University. Currently, he is the Dehlsen Endowed Chair in the Environmental Studies department at UCSB, and teaches several classes, such as: Animals in Human Society, Global Environmental Movements, and Power, Justice, and the Environment.

Pellow has dedicated his subsequent career in academia to studying environmental justice, environmental racism, and environmental inequalities, which all stem from social inequalities that are deeply ingrained in the structure of our society. He thinks that the environmental justice movement is extremely important, because it emphasizes both justice for all people, and ecological sustainability. The movement’s greatest accomplishment? “Thinking about how we think about the environment… we redefine the environment as the places where, we as humans, live, work, and play.” The environmental justice movement utilizes the concept of intersectionality, and it is this interdisciplinary way of thinking that will help a necessary culture shift occur. This culture shift sees humans as part of the environment around us, instead of separate from it.

In the past, social movements have relied heavily on asking the courts, or public policy-makers, to make changes. “The environmental justice movement, that in my opinion, is its fatal flaw. We are demanding and requesting and begging the institutions who created this problem to solve it, and they have no interest in doing that,” he asserts. Pellow firmly believes in moving away from trying to work within this structure, and moving toward a society that takes direct action to correct environmental wrongdoings. It used to be that laws were considered separately from each other, and the intersection between social identities was invisible under the law, the law offered no protection to people who stood in that intersection. Further, by using an intersectional approach, Pellow thinks that activists can move past single-issue politics, crossing lines that have been put in place by previous policies, actually creating more success.

**Intersectionality, Privilege, and Oppression**

He also highlights how intersectionality can help increase our understanding of dual concepts—oppression and privilege:

It's really important that people use intersectionality precisely so that we can get out of ourselves, and so that we can see, that there is to my knowledge, no population and no individual who is purely privileged or purely oppressed. That means, everybody out there has some degree of privilege.

According to Pellow, simply being able to call ourselves “human” gives us a sense of privilege, because we inherently set our species apart from other species. We think of our place on planet earth as superior to that of other species. We think of nature as a separate entity from ourselves, and this way of thinking has led to the idea that nature is a resource we can exploit for our benefit, without consideration of our impacts.

Though Pellow steadfastly supports using intersectionality as a tool to evolve our worldviews and influence societal change, he also warns of situations in which intersectionality has the potential to go too far. His opinion builds on the idea of privilege, and hinges on the idea that no one voice should be dominant in the conversation about social and environmental justice:

I don't want to center anybody or anything. That's been the problem. Let's center this group, and then everyone else feels excluded. I understand you've been discriminated against, I understand that you've been the subject and target of timeless oppression. That doesn't mean that you get to direct everyone else's future. That means, you should be at the table with everyone else, and have a voice.

**“The one lasting truth is change,” – Octavia Butler**

As we move through our life experiences, our outlook on life and environmentalism is constantly changing and evolving. Pellow sees each new life event as an addition to our background, creating a conglomeration of experiences that collectively shape our views. For him, academics have been a large part of his background; both his parents were professors, and he attended school from kindergarten to twelfth grade, then continued studying in undergraduate and graduate school, and today he remains in academia as a professor and scholar. But he also considers his role as a citizen of a community outside of UCSB as a source of ideas and inspiration, saying, “I bring ideas from [my] communities into academia, and I take ideas from academia back out.” This connects back to Pellow’s emphasis of intersectionality. He leverages the porous boundaries between the distinct parts of his life, to bring ideas of activism and grassroots social change to an academic setting, and conversely to apply knowledge he gains in academia in a practical way.

**Finding Passion in Unexpected Places**

Pellow describes how he became interested in certain areas of specialized research as almost accidental or by chance. “I fall into, I stumble into these projects when I meet people,” he explains. Two of the intersectional research topics that have interested Pellow throughout his career are: labor rights in the Silicon Valley, and social justice in prisons.

While he was doing a post-doctoral fellowship at UC Berkeley, Pellow began looking around for “a community to work with, to study, to join, around some environmental justice issues.” He found the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, a grassroots organization committed to holding the rapidly-expanding high-tech industry accountable for human health and environmental justice in the workplace. Pellow thinks the connection between labor rights and environmental justice has been under-considered and under-theorized in research and social movements. In 2006, Pellow, along with Ted Smith and David A. Sonnenfield, published *Challenging the Chip: Labor Rights and Environmental Justice in the Global Electronics Industry*. Going back to the idea of the environment as a place where we live, work, and play, Pellow maintains that the workplace is actually inseparable from environmental issues.

Pellow’s interest in studying prisons emerged from an earlier project he conducted on radical animal rights advocates and radical environmentalists, many of whom had spent time in prison for their efforts. “At the end of that project, I thought, it’s really wild that saving the planet or saving the environment and nature is a crime,” Pellow says, then continues, “I wondered if there were any other connections between criminal justice issues and environmental issues.” He knew there were lots of people who did work on criminal justice, but very few had made this connection to environmental challenges. Upon researching this question, he found the Prison Ecology Project. “I feel like this environmental issue is this missing piece that could really bring a lot of people together, to make change, for environmental issues, for human rights, and for prison issues,” he adds.

Intersectionality came up again in Pellow’s work on prisons, when he realized how his research related back to workers in the Silicon Valley. Much of electronic-waste recycling work for the high-tech industry was done by prisoners and other workers, who were largely immigrant or otherwise marginalized populations. Pellow’s efforts for social and environmental justice in these sectors have found considerable success. Reflecting on these successes, Pellow explains, “We got Dell and the UC system to stop working with recyclers who were/are working with the prison system.” The UC system, responding to pressure from scholars and students alike, recently agreed to divest $25 million from labor within the prison system, however they have not yet completed this transition. Pellow pointed to the possibility of presenting environmental justice as a new angle to encourage the UC system to continue the divestment process.

**A Dark Reality, and a Silver Lining**

There is a refreshing quality to Pellow’s unrelenting and sometimes brutal honesty about the disheartening state of our society and environment, because there is a glimmer of hope hiding behind each and every word he says. Despite the extraordinary fight waged by environmental scientists and activists, we are still hurdling towards disaster and catastrophe. But no matter how dark our reality is, we can still see a positive in the sheer number of people who have been mobilized through both interest and concern, by environmental movements. Still, Pellow seems to find comfort in the notion that the duration of human existence is infinitesimal compared to the existence of the universe. Though he concedes that many people will not see his perspective as positive, he confidently asserts, “we've been on this planet this long, we're not going to be here much longer. No species is going to last forever.”

Why does Pellow see the inevitable demise of the human race as a positive thing? On some level, Pellow sees his life’s work as stretching far beyond environmental and social justice; to him, this fight is also about humanity. To him, our continued physical existence is both improbable and devastating to the world around us. Pellow approaches our continued existence in a somewhat spiritual way, referencing a TED talk, whose beautiful message still resonates with him: “We're made of star dust. We're made of things that have been around forever. Yes, you and I, in this particular form, won't last forever, but we'll always be here… We're going to be around forever, but hopefully in a much different or ecologically productive form.”