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Water Crisis in Flint, Michigan: Interview with David Pellow, Ph.D.

Sylvia Hood Washington¹ and David Pellow²

Dr. Sylvia Hood Washington: Dr. Pellow, it is an honor for the *Journal* to interview you on this topic, as you are one of the most prolific environmental justice scholars to have published research on this issue. As a sociologist, you have also incorporated aspects of public health and technology into your work in environmental justice. These are aspects very relevant to the focus of our discussion.

I would like to begin by framing our discussion around your views on what is happening in Flint, Michigan, what led to this water crisis, what lies ahead, and what are the realistic solutions.

You have published articles in *Environmental Justice* and in *Human Health and Environmental Inequalities*, and have participated in something called “Public Participation in Environmental Justice Access to Federal Decision-Making,” which are all related to this issue. But in thinking about this topic, I would even go back to your first monograph, which was *Garbage Wars*, because here, as with Flint, we are talking about a majority-minority African American city—a city in which African Americans make up a majority of the local population—that had a democratically elected mayor and an environmental decision tied directly to technological decisions and public health outcomes.

Given this parallel background, could you please begin by giving our readers an overview of what you think happened in Flint from environmental justice, social, historical, and political perspectives?

Dr. David Pellow: Certainly, and I would first like to say that it is an honor to be affiliated with you, Dr. Washington, and with *Environmental Justice*. It is the

most important outlet and medium available for scholars and anyone to access information—cutting-edge, innovative information—on the sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, and the policy-relevant work on environmental justice. So thank you for all the work you have done.

My understanding of what happened is that Flint, like many cities—too many cities in this country—with a high percentage of working-class and low-income folks and, as you said, a majority-minority population, with a majority of African American residents, found itself in dire financial straits.

Among other things, the government in Flint was given an appointed and unelected official who, in a bid to save money and, I guess, to be fiscally responsible, switched the primary water source for the community from the Detroit River and, I believe, by extension Lake Huron, to the Flint River. This was deeply unfortunate and problematic in so many ways. The first, of course, was that this person was unelected, he was appointed, and it was a political appointment. This introduces the problem of a democracy deficit. This person was not someone that the residents of the city had asked for or even had a chance to interview and choose for this position.

Then we have the technical, environmental issue, which is that the Flint River is contaminated. It is highly corrosive, and when the water interacted with the pipes in the city system and in people’s homes, the pipes leached lead. My understanding is that this was also deeply troubling because it is usually entirely avoidable. Water utility managers and scientists from around the country have said that corrosion control is something routinely applied in a situation like this to ensure that lead leaching from pipes does not occur.

I recently met with author Charles Fishman who, in addition to writing *The New York Times* bestselling book *The Wal-Mart Effect*, more recently wrote the book *The Big First*. He also said that what occurred in Flint was incredibly unfortunate precisely because it was so routine in terms of being a situation in which there is a threat to a water

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system that water managers know how to handle using corrosion controls, with phosphorous and other elements and materials that could have prevented this problem.

We are then faced with the question, “Why did this happen?” Was it to save money? You may want to save money, but do you want to do that at the expense of public health? In the end, the city may have been able to save money and still have treated this water situation at a cost of about \$80 a day, which is not very expensive at all from the standpoint of a municipal budget.

But, you and I know that this is an unfortunate but classic case of environmental racism, environmental injustice. Again, we have a community of color, of working-class folks whose well-being, health, and welfare are really not the priority, apparently, for the unelected and appointed emergency manager. Saving money should be a priority. We should always be fiscally responsible. But if you do so at the expense of human health, then we really have a problem. Let’s face it, this is a world-class lead poisoning epidemic.

Dr. Washington: I agree. The lead levels ranged from 25 parts per billion and higher. In one home, the level was over 2,000 parts per billion. The regulations, the Safe Water Drinking Act and the Lead and Copper Act of 1991, have set the limit to 15 parts per billion.

Dr. Pellow: So they were off the charts.

Dr. Washington: I would like to talk about the socioeconomic impact of environmental injustice, the tradeoffs. Some of the articles I have read indicated that the emergency manager wanted to save \$5 million.

In the state of Michigan, according to the reading I have done, all but one of the school districts and cities in which emergency managers have been appointed have been majority-minority African American towns.

What does that say about voting franchise? We elect a mayor. We elect a council. We elect all of these different managers of a city to operate infrastructure for the protection of public health, and then that goes out the window?

Dr. Pellow: That is correct.

Dr. Washington: I would like your perspectives on this point, because as a historian for environmental justice, I believe that obtaining the franchise, getting modern civil rights in the last half of the twentieth century, allowed us, in theory, to make decisions to control our geography. But this is a pure case of these rights being thrown completely out of the window and turning the paradigm upside down.

You can vote for a mayor, you can vote for a governor, but you are not actually voting directly for your interests anymore. I think that changes the discourse about environmental justice.

Dr. Pellow: That is a really powerful, profound point. As you stated, we have achieved the right to vote. We

have fought for the right to participate in elections. We have marched. The Civil Rights movement, which was also an international movement—people were inspired around the world by what was happening in the United States and taking a second and closer look at their own situations in countries all over the world—was incredibly important for the African American community in particular. We were suffering under legal apartheid and needed to shake off the shackles of that system from the bottom up and to push this country closer to living out the true values of a real democracy.

But then we have this problem of the privatization of policymaking with these emergency managers and these city managers. And that, I think, connects to a whole host of issues that are facing all communities, particularly working-class communities, immigrant communities, and indigenous communities and communities of color that have been assaulted not only by governments, but also by privatizing authorities—institutions like corporations that are working hand in hand with governments.

Even more importantly, as you pointed out, if this was about saving money, then in some ways it did not matter whether it involved government or industry. It was the ideology of profit and cost-cutting. Wherever we see that, whether it is in healthcare, education, transportation, air safety, or environmental protection, then it is going to be a problem.

We need to connect what is happening in Flint with this broader, more pervasive, and I think pernicious problem, this ideology and practice and value of privatized power. We can see this with the *Citizens United v. FEC* case, with the *McCutcheon v. FEC* case that came after that, and we can even go back to 1886 with the *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Co.* case before the Supreme Court, all of which added up to give corporations the power of political speech.

This is happening at the same time that human beings have been progressively denied access to political speech. Yes, we have the vote and we are able to vote in a mayor, but if the mayor or governor then appoints people who are making decisions based on the ideology of privatization and cost-cutting and are doing so without the oversight and the authority of the people, then we do not have democracy.

I was very impressed with the show *Democracy Now*. They developed a special—I believe it was called *Thirsty for Democracy*—for which they went out to Flint and interviewed numerous residents, activists, and family members who were organizing around this case. One woman in particular put it so well, and I am just going to paraphrase what she said: “You know, we really do not have a water problem. We have a democracy problem.”

I think that really sums it up. As Charles Fishman said to me the other day, “There is plenty of water on this planet. There is plenty of water to go around.” We have a democracy problem. We have a people problem.

The people who are organizing our water systems, who are in charge of our water systems and access to potable, safe drinking water, they need to be held accountable.

Dr. Washington: I am one of the Governor's appointees to the Illinois' Commission on Environmental Justice. Illinois is in Region 5, which includes Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana. To my knowledge, there were at least three violations of the Safe Water Drinking Act and the Lead and Copper Act in Flint. That relates directly to the issue of democracy. When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) created these environmental regulations in the 1970s, the purpose was to protect public health. The action in Flint clearly was a move by an appointed emergency manager to save costs, but in violation of existing legislation to protect public health.

In what kind of society can we have a violation of laws that are in place and are backed up by science to protect human health just so we can save money? The legacy in Flint will not be the economic costs saved, it will be the human costs of this decision that will endure for at least two or three generations because of the damage to IQ, learning disabilities, and violence associated with lead poisoning. Would you please comment on that aspect?

Dr. Pellow: That is another really powerful point, that we had these laws in place, that the intention and design and spirit of the law is to protect public health, human health, and environmental health, and yet you have people flagrantly violating the law. And people were lying—let us be really, really clear—bold-faced lying about the safety of the drinking water again and again and again, from the governor to the various regulators.

There was an especially disturbing story about the Genesee County Jail, where the inmates there were given bottled water for about five days because the authorities knew about the water crisis. But after five days the bottled water ran out for the inmates. The employees, including the prison guards and the wardens, continued to drink the safer, cleaner, filtered bottled water, but they forced the inmates, including pregnant women, to drink the contaminated water.

I have done some research on this, and there are several other situations around the country where prisoners have been forced to drink contaminated water, in places like Grimes County, Texas, and Charleston, West Virginia.

Again, this gets back to the question of democracy. Prisoners are deprived of all sorts of rights, and they are powerless to make decisions over basic human needs. But those of us who are lucky enough to be allegedly free, as you pointed out, are subject to decisions made by people who are appointed by our elected officials, who may be violating the law and lying to us again and again.

We also have Congress and the courts gutting key portions of the Voting Rights Act. So we continue to see legal disenfranchisement and skirting of laws, violating of laws, poisoning of people, and contaminating of communities while bureaucrats—unelected and elected alike—and corporations continue to make out like bandits.

Going back to the Genesee County Jail situation, do not forget that working-class people and people of color make up the vast majority of folks in jail.

Dr. Washington: African Americans account for 33% of the U.S. prison population, yet comprise less than 14% of the overall U.S. population.

Dr. Pellow: Absolutely. We have a democracy problem, and we need to be not only coming up with stronger grassroots empowerment proposals to strengthen our democracy, but I also think we need to be thinking beyond the state, and beyond the government for ways to safeguard water supply, delivery, access, etc. If we cannot trust the government, who can we trust?

Maybe there are some grassroots solutions to these problems, in which we can look to communities and to a history of communal water management systems like the acequia system we see in the southwestern United States, where people are actually able to exercise democratic control over their water supply.

Dr. Washington: David, how can we have sustainable activism within the community of Flint when the children there, who represent the next generation, were poisoned? We changed those children at conception, when they were in their mothers' wombs and those women drank the contaminated water. We changed those children's ability to participate in society, their ability to function academically and intellectually, and to participate in the workforce. What do we do in light of that fact? Where is the justice? Where do you see justice for children and communities who have been altered at the biological level?

Dr. Pellow: That is an important and difficult question. Lead poisoning can be treated; we can manage it, but it is, in many cases, irreversible in terms of the damage. Do we write off this cohort, this generation, these folks who have been poisoned? Or do we ask the more difficult question you just asked: "How do we acknowledge this situation, acknowledge this violation, this crime, that has been imposed and visited upon so many of members of our younger generation, and how can we move forward?"

I have been really touched by some of the research, some of the scholarship that is coming out of critical race and ethnic studies. Lisa Cacho, John Marquez, and others have been putting forth the idea that we have seen before in other work, but they have come out boldly with these frameworks and arguments suggesting that we live in a white supremacist society. By that I mean a society that values whiteness more than it values other communities, particularly other communities of color.

In a society such as this, people of color, and in this case in particular people of African descent, are viewed as racially expendable. They are surplus. They are often viewed as ungovernable, as a social contaminant, a cultural pollutant. You hear how Donald Trump talks disparagingly about Mexicans who come to the United States and about Muslims—that is the language of nativism and racial expendability. People do not realize that those kinds of views are also an environmental reality. That they inform environmental policymaking or industrial practice, resulting in environmental racism.

I think it is very clear that people of color are often viewed as a problem. The geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who wrote a book called *The Golden Gulag* about the prison system in California, calls it the prison fix. The dominant (and deeply flawed) view is all of these people of color produce problems related to crime, drug abuse, and other social ills that place a strain on society. We have the prison system to fix that, and we have seen the ballooning of the prison population, which now stands at more than 2 million people. That has been the solution.

Michelle Alexander has written about this issue as well, talking about the new Jim Crow. I have been thinking, writing, and speaking about it from an environmental justice perspective, emphasizing the need to acknowledge the idea that these populations are viewed as expendable by dominant communities and institutions. We can document that in terms of the way policymaking plays out, and Flint is a good example.

Coming back to your question about children who have been poisoned by lead, from an environmental justice perspective, my view is that we need to draw on the knowledge, the frameworks of the environmental sciences, the environmental humanities and social sciences, and on basic ecological thinking and basic human rights frameworks and say that each and every one of us, especially including the children in our communities that have been poisoned by lead, is no longer expendable, but rather we are indispensable. We are indispensable to our collective futures.

How we treat those of us who are most vulnerable, for example, who have been the targets of lead poisoning, will reflect the true basis of our society, our values, and the future possibilities of creating a truly democratic society that is inclusive of all.

That is my response to the problem of expendability. The children of Flint, the 2.4 million people in prison, and the people who have been poisoned the world over, are all indispensable members of our social systems and ecosystems. That kind of a framework, in my opinion, is critical to building democracy, but also environmental and ecological justice, because each and everyone one of us is linked together in webs of interdependence.

What happens to one of us affects directly or indirectly everyone else. That is the fundamental principle of ecology that we teach and on which we base our research; that there is no separation. When we create that separation between people, or between humans and non-humans and nature, then we have these problems. That is the core of why we have environmental racism.

Dr. Washington: You mentioned human rights. Is Flint a call for environmental justice reparations, as regulations in existence to protect human health were not complied with? Do we need environmental justice reparations for communities like Flint that are biologically damaged and will be for generations?

Dr. Pellow: Yes, I believe we do, but I am not sure what form those reparations would take. That question gets back again to democracy, and I think we would

need to have an extended process of community input, of community gatherings or town halls at which people could share their viewpoints, which would be documented and used as the basis for developing a plan for reparations.

There are, of course, many precedents for reparations, including the \$2.4 billion lawsuit judgment against the U.S. Department of Agriculture for decades of racist treatment and discrimination against black farmers. There have been reparations for our Japanese-American brothers and sisters who were thrown into concentration camps. While no reparations can compensate fully for the damage done, that community at least has been recognized as a community that has suffered.

We have also had reparations for some Jews who were imprisoned and taken to labor camps during the Nazi-led Holocaust. We have had apologies for all sorts of human rights violations and atrocities, including the Sand Creek massacre in Colorado in the nineteenth century.

I think reparations for Flint are more than warranted and more than legitimate, because the point of making reparations is to make amends for a wrong that has been done, to try to repair damage that someone has visited upon others.

For me, the question is, “What is the form of reparations?” I think that if we want to connect reparations to democracy, it would be short-sighted to frame reparations primarily around monetary compensation. This is particularly the case given the devastating lack of solid and sustainable economic institutions in a lot of our communities of color, which makes it very difficult for financial compensation, for monetary compensation to equal dollars that actually circulate and turn over and over again in our communities to create real wealth in a local geographic space.

We have seen this scenario in the Native American community. I have heard the figure that 98 out of every 100 federal dollars that go to the average Native American reservation circulate and are in and out of the community in something like 24 or 48 hours, precisely for the same reason. They do not have the strong locally owned institutions and businesses that can circulate and turn over those dollars. Of course we know why that is; it is because of centuries of discrimination across communities of color.

If the community of Flint were to decide that monetary compensation is what it wants, then that would be its decision. But the people have to make that decision. They have to be heard.

Dr. Washington: We are about to go into an election at the end of the year, a very contentious election for both parties. Flint happened on the watch of an African American President and a democratically elected mayor. What do you think would be the best thing that could happen for communities like Flint moving forward, and how should this issue stay in the forefront? We had environmental regulations. We had the franchise. All of this broke down. So what is it that we need to look for in the future, and what type

of things should we be asking for in our newly elected President and administration?

Dr. Pellow: I think you have just asked the most important question, which reminds us of the fact that, in my view at least, the tragedy in Flint is not primarily about water. It is primarily about democracy and the lack thereof.

In some ways, the fact that this happened on the watch of a black President and that an elected mayor was then replaced by an appointed emergency manager in Flint gives me hope in the sense that I view it as an opportunity, even an invitation to think more deeply about the way that democracy ought to operate and the way that racial politics and the experience of race in this country actually play out.

Black people, people of African descent, people of color, European Americans, all of these different populations are highly diverse and are necessarily connected to families, friends, colleagues and relations all over the planet. I have relatives in Europe, in Latin America, in Africa, and in the Caribbean. I see this as an opportunity to redefine community.

Actually, I find it fascinating and a positive thing when I see African Americans debating each other across generations, across political divides, and across geography around Hillary Rodham Clinton versus Bernie Sanders in their campaigns for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. I think it is a wonderful thing that so many black folks are out there wanting to vote for Bernie Sanders, just as I think it is a great thing that so many folks from communities of color, from black communities are voting for or want to vote for Hillary Clinton. We are not this monolithic block and we do not experience life and politics and even racism in the same way.

The Black Lives Matter movement has been a really wonderful thing that has brought this out. You have people of different generations from the same families who have been affected by racist police violence who are supporting different candidates—Bernie Sanders versus Hillary Clinton. That is a good thing. No politician should take anyone's vote for granted, and we should not take our political allegiances and leanings for granted just because we are of a particular racial or ethnic group.

I, despite all of the madness, the hoopla, and the unfortunate developments, particularly from the Republican side in this campaign election season, am actually heartened by how this has unfolded in terms of the diversity of views within communities of color.

To bring this back to what has happened in Flint, I am reminded that Flint is in the same state as Detroit and other places such as Ann Arbor and southeast Michigan, where there has for many decades been a vibrant environmental justice movement, and social justice, food justice, and workers movements. The U.S. Social Forum was held there a few years ago, with an extraordinary gathering of activists and community leaders from all over coming to say, "If we can rebuild and reimagine a place that has struggled as much as Detroit, then we can do this anywhere."

Grace Lee Boggs, the great scholar, thinker, intellectual, author, activist, and environmental justice leader, may she rest in peace, once said to me and a group of activists in Chicago, "You know, I do not necessarily think of myself as just an environmental justice activist. I think of myself as a movement activist." At that time she was about 76 years old and had been involved in more social movements than I could shake a stick at, including being deeply involved in the creation of what had been called the Midwest Great Lakes Environmental Justice Network.

She had a long view of history and of the future and she did what Angela Davis talks about in her new book, intersectional movement thinking. Moving away from thinking about important social issues in isolation from other issues, moving beyond a single issue politics and thinking in siloes, toward cross-movement, intersectional thinking. I would call it ecological, multi-issue, multi-sectoral thinking.

The more we can encourage people to do that in communities across the planet, the better off we will be. This is an opportunity—whether it reflects on the Presidential campaign or the betrayal by the governor, Rick Snyder, and by the mayor and the emergency manager in Flint—to take the question of democracy so seriously that we do not simply ask, "What is our President, our Congress, our mayor doing for us?", and stop there. We do not only ask, "Who are we going to vote for at the ballot box?", and stop there.

We need to do all of that, of course, but we also need to ask, "How, on a daily basis, can I envision and enact collectively with my fellow human beings and my more-than humans relations; deep democracy at the most mundane everyday level all the way up to the most dominant and powerful institutions in this country?" We have to do that.

"You talked earlier about the violation of various laws. We currently have another free trade agreement, the Transpacific Partnership Agreement, being negotiated. Free trade agreements might arguably bring benefits to some people, but we know they have a notorious history of violating laws and even overturning laws that we have voted for and created in various societies and democracy.

Sovereignty is at stake here at all levels, from the local, as in Flint, all the way up to international agreements. One of the best ways to ensure democracy and environmental justice is if we all see ourselves as indispensable to our collective futures and we are all empowered to speak up the way that people in Flint spoke up when they saw that their water was no longer clear, that it was dirty, that it smelled and tasted funny, and that people's hair was falling out. People were getting sick. People were getting rashes.

People understand when something is wrong, and people have to feel that they can be empowered to speak up and to take action when necessary.

I am a very strong believer in democracy starting at the most basic level. That means each and every one of us in our households, our communities, exercising power and

not always relying on the government to do that for us. We may, in fact, have to force the government to do that.

That is what Black Lives Matter has reminded us: That there is a government out there; there is a police force out there; and we have mayors out there. They have jobs to do, but we may need to remind them what their jobs are, we may need to vote them out of power if they are not doing their jobs, and we may need to put people in those offices who can do the jobs. Even with that, if we look to the courts, if we look to the state, if we look to the legal

system to bring us justice, we are likely to be disappointed unless we are hounding them every step of the way. So I think we need to define justice more broadly.

Dr. Washington: Thank you, David. You have made so many powerful points that are important for our readers to hear. I am especially glad you integrated the contributions of Black Lives Matter and the human rights movement, and this global perspective, as well as emphasizing the importance of being engaged.