

LAND,
ART
A Cultural
Ecology
Handbook

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ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND

RSA

Edited by Max Andrews

High-tech Injustice

Free Soil interviews David Naguib Pellow and Lisa Sun-Hee Park

Their work as media-based artists whose main areas of focus are social and cultural issues in relation to the environment led Free Soil to question the impact of the computers and other tools we use in our practice. This provoked us to examine the local consequences of the global high-technology electronics industry, a sector that is often considered clean but in fact uses vast amounts of material and power resources, while producing gigantic amounts of toxic waste. *Gardening Silicon Valley Superfund Sites*, an ongoing Free Soil project initiated in 2005, evolved due to the fact that the epicentre of this semiconductor and computer-related industry – in Silicon Valley, Santa Clara County, California – has the highest concentration of heavily polluted ‘Superfund’ sites in the US.¹ This work developed with a public tour of the Valley in summer 2006 which looked at the industry’s local effects and early utopian beginnings. We found David Naguib Pellow and Lisa Sun-Hee Park’s 2002 book *The Silicon Valley of Dreams: Environmental Injustice, Immigrant Workers, and the High-Tech Global Economy* to be one of the most in-depth accounts of the environmental consequences and working conditions of the industry.² At the same time, it shows how activism and documentary research play a crucial role in bringing attention to and changing such situations. This interview was conducted by email during June 2006.

FS Free Soil

LSHP Lisa Sun-Hee Park

DNP David Naguib Pellow

FS What led you to write your book *The Silicon Valley of Dreams*?

LSHP David has had a long-running interest as a scholar and activist focusing on environmental and labour issues. During a postdoctoral year at UC [University of California] Berkeley’s School of Public Health, he began to work with an environmental justice organisation in San Jose and got to know the community activists in the area. Much of my work has focused on immigrant labour and health. That same year, I was a postdoctoral fellow across the bay at UC San Francisco at the Institute for Health Policy Studies. The stories and issues that David raised from his work in Silicon Valley intrigued me because they coincided not only with my research interests but also with my family history. When my family first emigrated to the US from South Korea, we lived in the Mountain View area of Silicon Valley and my parents, aunts and uncles all worked in the high-tech industry at some point. The book *The Silicon Valley of Dreams* became a culmination of both of our scholarly and personal commitments.

FS For the book you were doing a lot of fieldwork, and working with environmental justice organisations. You describe this as participatory research – can you tell us about your research methodologies?

DNP/LSHP Our goal as participatory researchers was to collaborate with activists to produce new knowledge that would also be of potential use to those pursuing an agenda for social change. Our work was reviewed not only by academics but also activists. Personally, I was more nervous about the activists’ response given their ‘on-the-ground’ expertise. In the end, it worked out well and this research project has helped us develop strong, continuing relationships with people we respect.

FS The book puts emphasis on documenting and describing the often dangerous conditions in which

people work and live. At the same time you make an effort to talk about what there is to fight for, i.e. environmental justice. Can you describe this concept?

DNP/LSHP Environmental justice is a goal, a vision in which all communities have the right to live, work, play, pray and learn in environments free of toxics; these are environments characterised by democratic governance and accountability. In other words, environmental justice is the combination of social justice and ecological sustainability. As we investigate this concept further, we find that where there is oppression there is always resistance. Frequently, resistance manifests itself in ways that are not always self-evident. You have to look for it and we believe that documenting these activities is an important tool for understanding the politics of environmental justice.

FS Can you give an example of how the high-tech industry has endangered the environment and people’s working conditions, that is examples of environmental injustice in the Silicon Valley/San Jose area and where it is most evident?

DNP/LSHP The electronics industry is a chemical intensive industry, which means that environmental injustices are par for the course, rather than accidental occurrences or aberrations. The chemicals being used in this industry are inherently dangerous, and have been linked to a wide range of health impairments that disproportionately affect immigrant women and other workers of colour. There is still much work to be done in Silicon Valley to ensure better, safer working and living conditions.

FS There have been some efforts to clean up after pollution made by the high-tech industry. What is your view on the Superfund programme?

DNP/LSHP There has been little progress in this regard. The Superfund programme itself has been effectively dismantled and de-funded by the Bush regime and the most toxic operations in Silicon Valley have not been cleaned up; instead, the toxics have been shipped abroad to places in Latin America and Asia, as the electronics industry globalises.

PS: There are some organisations working with the issues you are dealing with in your book; Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition and the Basel Action Network, to mention two. Can you give examples on how grassroots organisations have shaped the agenda or contributed to change?

DNP/LSHP: Grassroots organisations have not only contributed to the social change agenda but formed and led the movement. There wouldn't be a story without them. From the media campaigns that first exposed the environmental issues in the high-tech industry to the ongoing worker safety and leadership training programmes, community organisations have kept the issue in the public eye and forced the government and corporations to at least pay some attention to environmental and worker hazards.

PS: What are, in your view, the most effective strategies for change, and what would be the most important steps in bettering conditions?

DNP/LSHP: Social change in this field requires collaborative transnational strategies. In 2002, the International Campaign for Responsible Technology (ICRT) was launched in San Jose. This is a solidarity network comprised of activists and scholars supporting environmental justice and labour rights campaigns around the world where electronics industry clusters are found. As a result of legislative and corporate campaigns, many states in the US, the EU, and companies like Hewlett-Packard, Compaq, Dell and Apple have all adopted more environmentally friendly approaches to electronics production and disposal as a direct result of the pressure that the ICRT and its member groups have applied.

PS: Since you have written the book, the industrial production of computer parts is increasingly being moved to Mexico and Asia. Can you talk about the global perspective in this, because it seems that when production moves, it is often to areas that haven't got environmental standards in place and have little or no tradition of environmental activism?

DNP/LSHP: These transnational movements of production are not happenstance. Hazardous technologies and toxic wastes from high-tech production move to those countries with weak environmental regulations. But as we noted earlier, we often must look deeper to find resistance practices, including environmental activism. Judging by recent campaigns against the electronics, timber, mining, petroleum and hydropower industries, we think it's safe to say that Latin America and Asia both have impressive environmental justice movement networks operating within indigenous and working-class communities. But even these home-grown movements must reach out transnationally to create a true global grassroots resistance force, and this is why the ICRT and related global networks have formed in recent years. Global problems require global solutions.

- 1 A Superfund site is any land in the United States that has been contaminated by hazardous waste and identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the 1980 Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) as a candidate for cleanup because it poses a risk to public health and the environment. There are 79 Superfund sites in Silicon Valley – the most concentrated number of sites in the US. Nineteen of these sites were contaminated by high-tech firms in the manufacturing of computer chips, which used highly toxic chemicals including, trichloroethylene, Freon, trichloroethane and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). (nd.)
- 2 David Naguib Pellow and Lisa Sun-Hee Park, *The Silicon Valley of Dreams: Environmental Injustice, Immigrant Workers, and the High-Tech Global Economy*, New York University Press, New York and London, 2002.



Boy hired to haul electronic scrap from Alaba market in Lagos, Nigeria, to this nearby informal dump sitting on a swamp. Imported scrap, televisions and computers that could not be repaired get deposited and burned. © Basel Action Network 2006

