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Becoming Seres Puentes: Teresa Leal, the Toxic Tour, and Five Decades of Capacity-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines capacity building on the U.S. - Mexico Border by indigenous, Latino/a/x and People of Color activists working for social and environmental justice, from the 1980s through the first decade of the twenty-first century. The essay begins with a description of a toxic tour offered at the 1999 American Society of Environmental Historians (ASEH) Annual Conference and ends with insights gathered in a panel discussion with Teresa Leal (Opata) at the 2011 ASEH twelve years later. The essay focuses on Leal's five-decade legacy of empowering women, her community, her fellow activists, and her academic colleagues to 'become seres puentes or bridge-beings' who work for equity and intergenerational justice by engaging in performative collective actions such as the toxic tour.

KEYWORDS: environmental justice, toxic tour, U.S.- Mexico border, performative collective action, intergenerational justice

On April 29, 2016, Teresa Leal, a beloved, social and environmental justice activist, took part in a "Border Seder," or lunch beginning the Jewish Passover holiday, performed on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border fence. She seemed as vibrant as ever, but it was the last time that people in Nogales—a city that stretches on both sides of the border from the states of Arizona in the United States to Sonora in Mexico—would see her in public. A few days later, she unexpectedly passed away of natural causes (Boran). [1]

According to her friend and fellow activist Richard Boran, Leal chose to participate in the Seder on the Mexican side of *Ambos Nogales*, which means "both Nogales" in Spanish. Most residents see their community not as separate municipalities, but as a home to indigenous peoples who inhabited it long before two modern nations divided it. Leal sat only inches from the steel barrier for the Seder organized by the Border Patrol Victims Network. She sat with the family of sixteen-year-old José Antonio Elena Rodríguez, who was shot ten times in the back by a Border Patrol agent for throwing rocks in 2012. Their seats were close to the exact place he lost his life. The Passover ceremony, which invokes a longing for freedom, called upon Nogales community members and the world to reflect on the suffering caused by the border wall. The tables suggested sitting down for dialogue about actions that might ensure justice for the next generation.

As Boran writes in a celebration of life published on the Border Patrol Victims Network blog, "The impact of Teresa's life transcended the border." She had witnessed what was an "imaginary line in the sand" when she was a young girl become a political divide enforced by a 14-foot-high steel fence (Boran). Although she may not have been as internationally recognized as the Kenyan Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai of the Green Belt Movement (2003) or the American activist Grace Lee Boggs (2012), she was as dedicated to achieving social and environmental justice as they. Leal sought to make the often imperceptible, yet material impacts of catastrophic environmental change (and its connections to the steel fence and to the steady stream of migrants coming from the South) visible to people living on the border and beyond. She worked from her early teens for border health, native and women's rights, the environment, and immigration justice.

Leal was born in Navajoa, Sonora, Mexico in 1946. Her grandparents were descendants of the Opata and Mayo indigenous peoples who, before contact with the Spanish and the introduction of European diseases, were the most numerous inhabitants of Sonora, living in the river valleys between the Tumacácori, Parajito, and Santa Cruz Mountains nestled around Nogales, which was known as the "place where the black walnut trees grow."[2] The Opata were "story keepers," Leal would often say in presentations to community or academic audiences. They were renowned for remembering and recounting the stories and traditions of the indigenous groups living in the Sonoran region.[3] Over her lifetime, Leal felt responsible for telling the stories of Sonoran Desert inhabitants, human and nonhuman, on both sides of the border.

Because she crossed the border so frequently with her mother who worked as a housekeeper on the U.S. side, she was already speaking fluent English and Spanish by the time she was three years old. Her language skills, her Opata relationship to "story-keeping," and later, her permanent resident green card, would become powerful tools in what she called her toolbox of strategies for achieving a lasting social and environmental justice for Ambos Nogales and the greater Sonoran Desert region.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, she was witness to the Mexican side of Ambos Nogales exploding into a city of 350,000 that became home to over 100 *maquiladoras*, or foreign-owned assembly

plants (Di Chiro "Living" 116). The exponential proliferation of these factories, especially after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, the United States, and Canada, led to a steadily growing flow of migrants from the interior of Mexico and other Latin American countries into Nogales. In the first few months after taking their jobs, they were usually homeless. Building on her experiences in the 1960s working with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union (UFWU), and specifically her work educating women in the fields about the dangers of toxins,[4] Leal recognized the need to go beyond witnessing of injustices to taking action.[5] With women working in the maquilas, she co-organized Comadres (co-mothers), whose primary goal was to empower women to stand up for their rights and exchange information about the chemical toxicity of the materials they were handling in the workplace; Comadres also worked to locate places for workers to build homes, gain access to potable water, and develop "income-generating strategies, such as weaving and sewing co-ops, to supplement their poverty-level wages" (Di Chiro "Living," 118).

In what follows, I focus on the ground-shifting work of Comadres from 1999 to 2011, with an eye towards the use of the "toxic tour" to build an activist and academic network throughout the region. As cultural geographer and environmental justice scholar Giovanna Di Chiro explains in an article more detailed than I have space for here, toxic tours deliberately play with notions of tourism and ecotourism ("Bearing" 277-279). By the 1990s, these tours had become an educational and political tool offering community organizations a way to tell their stories by offering "brief snapshots into the lived realities of people struggling with the devastation of toxic pollution" while also inviting "tourists" to see some of the more positive features of the community (Di Chiro "Bearing" 291). This essay begins with a description of a toxic tour taken by Giovanna Di Chiro at the 1999 American Society of Environmental Historians (ASEH) Annual Conference where she met Teresa Leal. I then briefly describe a "mini-toxic-tour" offered to Di Chiro and myself in 2000, and end with some of the insights gathered in a panel discussion with Teresa Leal at the 2011. The essay look backs at Leal's five-decade-legacy of empowering women, her community, her fellow activists, and her academic colleagues to "become *seres puentes*, 'bridge-beings'" who work for equity and intergenerational justice by engaging in performative collective actions, such as the toxic tour and the Border Seder.[6]

Coalitional Activism, Environmental Justice Critical Studies, and a Training

Like other environmental justice organizations in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States, Leal and her Comadres began leading "toxic tours" for city and state officials, church councils, Environmental Protection Agency officials, and others. As Giovanna Di Chiro explains in "Bearing Witness or Taking Action? Toxic Tourism and Environmental Justice" (2000), these tours were a kind of performance piece involving "tourists" in a work of cultural production that could creatively contradict notions of what was becoming known popularly in the 1980s and 90s as "the ecotour" ("Bearing" 277-279). The notion of a "toxic tour" plays with the conception of an ecotour, which take tourists to a threatened ecosystem to help preserve and conserve wild species. The toxic tour, in contrast, would take tourists to the places and neighborhoods where groups of people are burdened inequitably with the toxic byproducts of industrial society. When she wrote this essay, Di Chiro was no stranger to the toxic tour. She had already participated in several. In 1999, she had been on the plush, air-conditioned bus that transported a group of academics attending the ASEH Annual Conference in Tucson, Arizona, on an "environmental justice" toxic tour. Led by Nogales Comadre Teresa Leal and her fellow Tucsonans for a Clean Environment activists Rose Augustine and Anne Montaño, the tour traveled first to downtown Tucson Barrio El Agujero and the Connie Chambers Public Housing Project—both neighborhoods that were dealing with toxic assaults from nearby polluting facilities. The group then traveled to Nogales. Speaking in clear, commanding voices into the bus's P.A. system, recalls Di Chiro, Leal, Augustine and Montaño recounted painful stories and appalling statistics of unusually high incidences of neurological disease, miscarriage, and birth defects suffered by the low-income, indigenous, and Latino residents of these two sister communities. This ASEH tour was among the first offered by Comadres to members of an academic organization. Going forward, they would also offer tours for the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and the American Studies Association (ASA).

One year before Di Chiro's ASEH tour, in 1998, I met Teresa Leal at an Environmental Justice community training in Tucson, Arizona. I was finishing *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice and Ecocriticism* (2001), a book that would become the first ecocritical study of the environmental justice (EJ) movement and an emerging canon I called 'the literature of environmental justice' (129-130). I was researching the ways that novelists were beginning to fictionalize the work of environmental justice activists and represent an emerging movement that was building on the activism of Black, Indigenous, Latino/a/x, Feminist, and People of Color groups who were building on the shoulders of their Abolitionist, women's suffrage, Civil Rights and Farm Worker movement forebears (Adamson *American Indian Literature*, 47, 29). I wanted to better understand the fictional environmental justice characters I was reading about in novels such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* (1993).

Castillo, for instance, does not specifically call her fictional characters' actions "environmental justice activism." However, on her acknowledgement page, she thanks members of the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP). This real-world environmental justice group seeks to empower New Mexican communities to realize racial and gender equality and social and economic justice.[7] In

the early 90s, SWOP aimed to educate community members about the role that multinational corporations were playing in undermining the sovereignty and health of indigenous and Latino/a/x communities. They organized educational initiatives aimed at building community capacity to protect local cultures, lifeways, and ecological systems from outside political forces exerted by high-tech and extraction-type industries. There are clear connections in the novel to the issues and organizing activities of SWOP—and to similar issues around which Comadres in Nogales were organizing. Sofia, the main female character is mother to four daughters, and decides to run for mayor and organize a group of comadres that will work on behalf of her impoverished New Mexican community. Sophia and her fictional comadres are not only providing their community with opportunities for education; they are raising questions about the toxic contamination caused by the "high-tech" industries located in nearby urban areas where their children are moving to take jobs and escape the high unemployment in their own communities. The concern over toxins links Castillo's fictional comadres to the real-world efforts of the Comadres organization to assist maquila workers, who are mostly poor women of indigenous and Latino/a/x decent. Castillo depicts labor exploitation and toxic contamination when one of Sophia's daughters, Fe, takes a job in a factory where she is exposed to chemicals used in the process of building weapons for the Pentagon. Shortly thereafter, Fe miscarries a baby, and her family begins smelling chemicals on her breath. Her ghastly death clearly alludes to the kind of chemical handling and dumping which workers employed by multinational industrial plants are routinely required to perform.

At the training in Tucson, I will never forget the electrifying energy Leal exuded in her presentation on the fight against toxins, but also how clear it was that Ana Castillo was inspired by the women of Comadres, SWOP, and also the cohosts of the training, Tucsonans for a Clean Environment (TCE). Historically, this grassroots group has been one of the very few environmental justice groups to win a lawsuit against a multinational corporation. TCE sued Hughes Aircraft Company on behalf of hundreds of mostly Latino/a/x and indigenous Southside Tucson residents who had been exposed to trichloroethylene-contaminated water. Trichloroethylene, an industrial solvent used to clean aircraft parts, had been dumped into the area's sewage system by Hughes from the late 1940s. By the 1980s, this chemical had seeped into the aquifer from which drinking water was drawn and triggered massive illnesses, including cancer, lupus, central nervous disorders, and birth defects. In June 1991, they won their case, with Hughes settling out of court for $84.5 million dollars, a sum that the community used to fund a neighborhood center and health clinics (Adamson *American Indian Literature*, 183). This case involving Hughes Aircraft likely contributes some details to Castillo's description of the factory where character Fe works.

Leal's command of toxics issues in real-world communities in the Southwest was clear in every presentation she gave but she also studied anthropology at the National Autonomous University in Mexico City after high school. After becoming a mother, her passion turned towards reading history, which she did voraciously. This explains why, as an adult, she would become a widely recognized historian and curator at Pimeria Alta Historical Society on the U.S. side of the border. Known to university professors and students throughout the region, her encyclopedic knowledge of Mexican heritage and history, combined with her linguistic genius, allowed her to take, at different times in her life, part-time work as an editor, a reporter for several newspapers, and a translator for high-profile visitors to the border, including National Public Radio reporters and U.S. Presidential Cabinet Secretaries. She ran a bilingual radio call-in program for several years that reached both sides of the border and provided a forum for public education on many regional social justice and immigration issues. She also worked with Sonoran Environment Research Institute, Inc. (SERI),[8] which partners with low-income and minority communities to protect the environment and improve community health, especially among native and Latino/a/x women living along the border.

During the years in which the Tucson lawsuit proceeded through the courts, Comadres began networking with Tucsonans for a Clean Environment and other EJ groups. Teresa and other Comadres could see the neon green and rust-colored effluent being discharged from one or another maquila – Sony, Canon, General Motors, Guess, Samsonite – directly into the sewage systems or into the dry riverbed of the Santa Cruz River. Leal learned how to gather water samples from the springs and rivers in Nogales and submit them to Grupo Ecologista Independiente, a group of scientists and activists, for chemical analysis (Adamson et al. *EJ Reader*, 45-46; Di Chiro "Living," 121). By the 1990s, Leal recalled, it was clear that there was "a need for a broader network of community based and independent trade union groups at the US-Mexico border." [9] Comadres, Tucsonans for a Clean Environment, SWOP, and over 80 other grassroots indigenous and labor groups came together in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to form the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ). The aim of SNEEJ was to teach people about the law and about strategies that could help them defend and protect their cultures, identities, lifestyles, and environments. Workshops were held to network communities and strategize about fund-raising (Adamson et al. *EJ Reader*, 51).

Leal was invited to join SNEEJ "along with other activists from [Mexico]." However, she "happened to be the only one from the Nogales area" with a green card and therefore the only woman who could travel to Albuquerque.[10] Within a short time, she was elected to serve SNEEJ as cochair of the Coordinating Council. In this capacity, she helped organize campaigns at the local, national, and international levels. This work also took her to meetings around the world including, in 1991, the First Annual People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. This defining moment in the environmental justice movement's organization brought over 300 community leaders from the United States, Canada, Central and South America, and the Marshall Islands together

to draft a set of *17 Principles of Environmental Justice* that would guide an emerging political process to pursue environmental justice in all the places people "live, work, play, and worship" (EJnet.org). The winning outcome of the Tucson lawsuit was another defining moment, and at the training I attended, Leal, as a "keeper of the stories," recounted this movement history. One year later, Leal met Di Chiro at the 1999 ASEH Conference. In communication with us both, she suggested that we join her for a private "mini-toxic-tour" of Tucson, Nogales, and the Santa Cruz River watershed.

Mini-Toxic Tour: Traversing the Santa Cruz River Watershed

After picking up Di Chiro at the Tucson airport, spending time with Rose Augustine, then leaving Tucson to head south to Nogales, we picked up Leal at the Pimeria Alta Historical Society and headed across the international border. To reach Nogales' industrial park district, I drove through streets teeming with midday shoppers, school children lugging heavy backpacks, and North American tourists seeking bargains. Leal was keen for us to see the parts of the Santa Cruz River watershed that were still clean, because they were upstream from the maquiladoras. We followed the river south on eroded, washboard roads so rough that the oil cap on my Geo Prizm shook off! For several miles, unbeknownst to us, the oil was splattering under the hood, and spilling out on the dirt road. By the time we noticed, the oil was completely drained. We stopped the car, wondering if we should wait for another driver to come along on the completely isolated road or risk driving several miles to the next *ejido* (communal farm) with an empty oil pan. Before long, a military cargo truck full of armed Mexican troopers stopped and asked if we needed help. Teresa explained our situation, and in a moment that I later thought foreshadowed a future in which water will be the most precious natural resource, we traded three big plastic bottles of water for enough oil to get us back to the *colonias* we planned to visit. I have thought of that moment often, especially when I remember how Leal was fighting on two fronts at once: to find accessible sources of potable water for people living in the *colonias* with no public services, and to keep the Santa Cruz watershed free of toxins and healthy for future generations of humans and nonhumans.

I tell this anecdote because it is so important to note that Leal's concern for the place she lived was not focused solely on the human. She understood that "nature" could not be defined outside the parameters of human activities and that human and nonhuman health were inextricably entwined. She explained to us that the Santa Cruz River originated in the Canelo Hills on the Mexican side of Nogales, then flowed north to Tucson, then to Phoenix, where it joined the Salt and Gila Rivers, and eventually flowed into the Colorado River. Thus, chemicals dumped into the Santa Cruz in Mexico would eventually reach the most critical watersheds of North America, killing fish and birds along the way. As Leal said at the environmental justice training where I first met her, "pollution does not need a passport to cross the border." Like her Opata ancestors, she had appointed herself the keeper of the river's story, and determined that she would tell it to as many people as possible, whether on toxic tours, at academic conferences, or in community trainings. She worked closely with the Audubon Society and joined with the Sierra Club to sue the Environmental Protection Agency for allowing toxins to flow into the river and kill birds and fish. By working with activists such as Leal, the Sierra Club—and other mainstream environmental groups—that had previously focused on wilderness conservation and preservation but consistently failed to address the issues that concerned people of color, such as corporate contamination of their neighborhoods or uranium mining in sovereign Indian nations, began to temper their definitions of "nature" to include the places that diverse peoples live, work, play and worship.

On our private tour, Di Chiro and I had witnessed the ways in which Leal traversed multiple borders— political, geographic, cultural, epistemic – on a daily basis to produce an engaged environmental expertise that articulated diverse indigenous and scientific knowledge systems, both professional and lay, as she built a transnational advocacy network devoted to environmental justice on the border (Di Chiro "Living" 113).[11] Over the next twelve years, we would continue our conversations, collaborations, and border crossings with Leal as we sought to bridge the gap between academia and activist communities in support of the environmental justice movement. Together, we organized toxic tours, symposia, and panel presentations at major conferences. For each, we leveraged the resources of our universities to find funding and honoraria for activists from communities such as Ambos Nogales to attend academic conferences, since most lack resources for travel and because we determined that they should be compensated for their valuable time. In this way, we began "building bridges" between activists and academics that typically did not meet in the same places.

Out of some of these meetings and related research, new fields, including Environmental Justice Critical Studies and the Environmental Humanities began emerging. Today these fields have produced a vast literature of case studies, demographies, and statistics proving that globalization and development are contributing to toxic dumps, species extinctions, deforestation, erosion, and acidifying oceans (e.g., Adamson et al.; Pellow et al.) Engaging in intersectional analysis that focuses on these problems, and which borrows from women's studies, gender studies, ecofeminist studies, critical race studies, ecocriticism and ethnic studies, scholars who focus on environmental justice are concerned not only with public policy, but also with culture, ideology and representation. They see the expressive arts—novels, films, community gardens, street theater—as effective means through which to offer individuals and communities creative ways to "uncover problems" that often are connected, such as sexual and gender discrimination, poverty, and environmental degradation in both urban and non-urban places. Castillo's novel, *So Far from God*, is only one example of this important work in the realm of the arts and humanities.

Importantly, at academic conferences strengthening environmental justice critical studies and the environmental humanities, self-taught intellectual/activists such as Leal illustrated that theory was not something that only academics could generate. Activists such as Leal were engaging in what we might call an "intersectional activism," reflective of the "intersectional analysis" that, today, is revealing the unevenness of inequality across diverse individuals and groups. Leal's grasp of the ways that human-nonhuman injustices were rooted in racism, militarism, colonialism, slavery, capitalism, land theft of Native peoples, and gender violence was nothing short of extensive and inspiring. She was equally committed to teaching women working in the maquiladoras and academics at conferences to understand these intersections and build a network capable of innovating new tools for raising the quality of life in border *colonias*.

In conference sessions over the years at the ASEH, ASLE and ASA, we began discussing the roles and relationships of activists and academics in the movement. Di Chiro proposed eloquently in "Living is for Everyone" that the role of the academic was twofold: to "provide crucial insight into the intransigence of political, economic, and cultural systems" and to "trace the persistence of alternative worldviews and lifeways envisioned by communities that suffer the negative consequences, but receive few of the benefits, of modern industrial society" (Di Chiro "Living," 113). While pointing out the reasons systems were not working, academics would also do work that was more optimistic: they would bring into critical conversation the innovative ideas, voices, perspectives, and hope-filled network-building practices of environmental justice activists who are "materializing the conditions of possibility for social and environmental change" (Di Chiro "Living," 113). One of those practices is the toxic tour and in the next section, I examine how this hope-filled action builds networks and encourages people to become what Leal calls "*seres puentes"* or "bridge beings."

Bridging Activism and Academia for Environmental Justice

In 2003, I was funded by the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) to organize "The Globalism and Environmental Justice Symposium" which would explore how to bridge the gap between environmental justice studies and activism. Teresa Leal, Margo Tamez (Lipan Apache), and Lori Thomas-Riddle (Akimel O'odham)—indigenous women activists and scholars with first-hand experience fighting for environmental justice communities in the Sonoran Desert borderlands—joined me as co-organizers. The symposium, held in Tucson, focused on urban nature, native lands, and grassroots activism, and examined the effects of globalism, corporate capitalism, and the selective, disproportionate distribution of toxic waste at native sacred sites and in the environments of low-income communities and people of color. The goal was specifically to push academic conversations about environmental justice beyond a focus on problems and towards proactive networking and successful actions that generate ideas for sustainable and hopeful futures.

Based on our experience of "building bridges" by funding activists to attend academic conferences, the symposium was unusual for convening not just academics, but writers, activists, artists, politicians, factory managers, workers, graduate students, seasoned community leaders, young rising stars in the people-of-color environmental justice movement, and tribal community members from the Hopi, Zuni, Navajo, Tohono O'odham and Akimel O'odham Nations of Arizona and Mexico. To be inclusive of everyone who wished to attend, housing and registration costs were kept low or free and food was provided for activists and graduate students by Food Not Bombs. Spanish translation was provided at every event so that people from both sides of the border could attend.

Unlike previous conferences that added a "toxic tour" as a peripheral field trip, we organized the ASLE Symposium to make the toxic tour the only scheduled event on the first day. As a result, over 90 of the symposium's 250 participants elected to take the trip across the U.S.-Mexico border to Nogales, Sonora, and the experience became central to most discussions that took place over the next two days. Once across the border, Leal guided those on the tour through three *colonias*. At one of the more progressive maquilas we heard from a factory manager and an environmental engineer who were working to make conditions in the factory better for the employees. We heard from artists who paint murals on the border fence to catalyze critical thinking and hope and from community leaders who were working to provide municipal services to the *colonias*. Throughout the tour, Leal discussed the struggle of social justice and environmental groups who are dealing with complicated issues caused by international trade agreements and corporate capitalist practices that do not take account of the social, cultural, and environmental impacts that will occur in border communities.

Teresa Leal at 2004 EJ Symposium

Back in Tucson for more conventional panel discussions, we addressed the role of the writers fictionalizing not only the problems associated with environmental injustices, but characters who are engaging in actions to build networks and find solutions. In my own presentation, I drew connections between Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* and the toxic tour we had just experienced. When put into a context with the activities of SWOP, Comadres, Tucsonans for a Clean Environment, SNEEJ, and the EJ Summit, Fe's miscarriage and death illustrates why grass-roots groups must do more than raise awareness about problems if they hope to save their children and communities. Contemplative reflection, by itself, cannot lead to a clear understanding of the processes at work in a world where corporations allow persistent organic pollutants (POPs) to escape into the environment and find their way into body fats and breast milk, damage reproductive systems, cause birth defects, and literally threaten a community's health and survival. Fe's exposure to unseen chemicals helps to illustrate why place-based environmental justice groups focus not only on local community issues, but also challenge transnational corporate rhetoric about the benefits of free trade by gaining a broad understanding of global politics, civil rights legislation, toxics issues, and multinational trade agreement law which are affecting their communities.

Wrapping up the conference, Leal invited attendees to become *seres puentes*, "bridge beings" or bridge builders. "It is rare for an individual," she said, "to bring about substantial change alone, so people must build bridges that allow people to move from awareness of an injustice to action to address and find solutions to the injustice."[12] She challenged both academics and activists attending the symposium to contribute meaningfully to social and environmental justice by telling stories, teaching about artworks and fiction, and engaging in performative actions such as toxic tours. Build bridges between the vast numbers of people suffering inequities, she said, and your students, communities and networks. Tell them we are being poisoned and dying. Become *seres puentes* and help us build our capacity to achieve a better, more equitable and just future in our border communities. Her reference to the 'poisoned and dying' strongly invoked a scene in *So Far from God*. Main character Sophia and her fellow comadres who have lost children to toxic exposure hang pictures of their loved ones around their necks. In an alternative performance of the Catholic "Way of the Cross" ritual, they stop at 12 stations along a path. At each station, they discuss the "things that were killing their land and turning the people of those lands into an endangered species" (Castillo 241–2). They declare, "we, as a people, are being eliminated from the ecosystem, too… Don't anybody care about that?" (242). The Way of the Cross ritual, like the toxic tour, becomes a series of performative opportunities for the participants to become 'beings' who bridge ideas, voices, and perspectives, with network-building practices that materialize "the conditions of possibility for social and environmental change" (Di Chiro "Living" 113).

Assessing a Decade of Collaboration

To prepare for the 2011 ASEH Conference in Phoenix, Arizona, I invited Teresa Leal and Giovanna Di Chiro to stay at my house for three days before the meeting. Held twelve years after the first ASEH toxic tour in 1999, this gathering offered us the opportunity to meet again and assess the toxic tour as a coalition building tool. We prepared slides, wrote our talks, and invited some of the activists we had worked with at the 2004 Symposium to attend our session to think about the outcomes of the social change opportunities that activists and academics had built together over the course of more than a decade.

When asked at the session if she thought the toxic tour had been an effective tool, Teresa Leal said that around 1991, after the EJ Summit and the attention-grabbing win by Tucsonans for a Clean Environment, she began to be contacted by concerned "politicians, academics, and solidarity groups" who wanted to visit Nogales and learn more about "the issues." They wanted me to "show them around and bring them in contact with the people and places affected…. *I gladly began to do so because it was a blessedly natural way of getting the word out* (emphasis Leal's)."[13] Di Chiro recalled that at the conclusion of the first ASEH toxic tour, she had asked Leal and Augustine for their thoughts about the commitment, time and energy it takes to lead a tour. Both confessed to being exhausted from having to relive the memory of a child's death or their own or a relative's experience with cancer. However, they agreed that although the toxic tours were fatiguing and labor-intensive actions to organize, "this is a history that has to be told, and we decided that since this was a group of historians who might tell the story, it was worth it."[14] Leal also emphasized a point that she often made, "Events are good to prove a point, but it's not the everyday work we do" (Adamson et al. *EJ Reader* 53). The most important work was community training, like the meeting she led when I first met her. Movements "do not exist if there isn't… rotation of information and leadership…. [This is why] our biggest endeavor is training. We don't do politicking or lobbying; we do training and teach people to organize" (Adamson et al. *EJ Reader* 51).

In an update on the conditions at the border that continued to make individual and collective action so important, Leal told the ASEH audience about the worsening situation with immigration, border health, and the environment, all exacerbated by continued U.S. government efforts to build taller and longer fences.

> The material wall continues to grow more solid and psychotic as time goes on. I get up every morning [and]… prepare to travel 4 blocks North, wait in line, cross the border, then walk 2 blocks to get to work at the museum. My average is about a 1.5 hour wait. As I stand in line, I also see the ICE [Immigration Control and Enforcement] buses arrive by the fence and more deported people deboarding. Many limping because they are recovering

> from many days of walking in the hot desert sun with no food or water until they realize that all they want to do is get caught by the Migra (Border Patrol) and avoid dying like others they have had to leave behind in their death marches that initially began as a path to a new beginning or at least an end to poverty and slavery.... I watch their sad faces as they get off the bus, pick up their belongings bunched up in a plastic bag with their name on a tag. As a result of standing and feeling their frustration and terrible impotence, and being the creative or stubborn person I am, I have now added another move to [my morning routine]. I charge both my cellphones -Mexican and U.S.- so that if I detect desolation in their eyes, I can at least break that disconnect by offering my cellphones. THANK GOD FOR CRICKET UNLIMITED CALLS AND TEXT MESSAGES [Emphasis Leal's]. I... shamelessly offer them my U.S. cellphone in order for them to reconnect with the life they suddenly left behind in the states when they got picked up by ICE.
>
> The wall dampens people's dreams and pride.... But it has not stopped... our right to topple those walls and turn them into bridges. [15]

Here Leal illustrates how she bridges witnessing with action on a daily basis in her own life to become *seres puentes* in support of justice, equity and dignity.

Conclusion: Five Decades of Capacity-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border

Woman around the world, from Africa to North America—including Wangari Maathai, Grace Lee Boggs, and Teresa Leal—have played a major role in the EJ movement as they have worked to reveal the often imperceptible, yet material impacts of toxic spills and climate change in ways that allow their communities to imagine how to fight back and become *seres puentes.*

They face terrible odds that were illustrated by her seat, at the 2016 Border Seder, next to the family of José Antonio Elena Rodríguez. Leal had participated in many events calling attention to Rodriguez's murder, usually acting as the English-Spanish translator bridging the languages and communities in her beloved Nogales. To use the words of Di Chiro, she embodied a "hope-filled activism" that materialized "the conditions of possibility for social and environmental change" (Di Chiro "Living," 113).

It is my hope that in the process of writing this essay, long overdue, I have made transparent how Teresa Leal's work, and now her memory, have created a model for others to follow as they seek to become *seres puentes*.

NOTES

[1] My deepest thanks to José R. Soto, PhD, the youngest son of Teresa Leal, for reading this article and granting permission to write about his mother. Personal email to me dated June 14, 2021. I also thank my friend and colleague Giovanna Di Chiro for reading this essay for accuracy and for granting permission to print photos from her field research.

[2] In Spanish *nogales* means walnuts.

[3] See Joni Adamson, "Teresa Leal." *Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States (ELLUS).* Revised 2nd Edition. Suzanne Oboler and Deena Gonzales, eds. London: Oxford University Press, 2011.

[4] Leal attended high school in Sahuarita and Tucson, Arizona. After school let out in the afternoons, she would go to the cotton fields and distribute flyers warning agricultural workers about the dangers of chemicals and alerting them to the schedules of the planes spraying herbicides and pesticides (Adamson 2002, 46-47).

[5] See Giovanna Di Chiro, "Bearing Witness or Taking Action?: Toxic Tourism and Environmental Justice," a study of the toxic tour which explains why environmental justice groups emphasize action over 'seeing' although seeing/witnessing is recognized as an important first step towards concrete action.

[6] After the 2011 ASEH Conference, Leal, Di Chiro and I began exchanging emails as we prepared to co-write an article assessing the toxic tour. Because of busy schedules, that essay was unfortunately never written. This essay attempts to right that missed opportunity.

[7] See SWOP's homepage, https://www.swop.net/.

[8] See SERI's homepage, https://www.seriaz.org/.

[9] Personal email from Teresa Leal to Joni Adamson, dated August 31, 2010.

[10] Personal email to the author from Teresa Leal dated August 31, 2010.

[11] Di Chiro's "Living is for Everyone" narrates our private toxic tour experiences in much more analytical depth than I can go into in this short essay; I encourage those with interest to read the essay closely.

[12] Joni Adamson's personal notes from Leal's conference talk at the ASLE EJ Symposium, September 25, 2004.

[13] Personal email to the author from Teresa Leal dated August 31, 2010.

[14] In a personal email to the author dated December 2, 2011, Giovanna Di Chiro told me that she recorded these words while on our 1999 "mini-tour" of the Santa Cruz River corridor. They originated in her interviews with Teresa Leal and Rose Marie Augustine and took place in Tucson, Arizona, on April 16, 1999.

[15] Personal email to the author from Teresa Leal dated December 2, 2011, written for the essay we planned to write but did not finish. I have edited this statement for brevity, punctuation and clarity.

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