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Sustaining the Borderlands in the Age of NAFTA: Development, Politics, and Participation on the US-Mexico Border

Suzanne Simon

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Sustaining the Borderlands in the Age of NAFTA provides the only book-length study of the impact on residents of the US-Mexico border of NAFTA's Environmental and Labor Side Accords, which required each state to enforce labor and environmental regulations. Through field research in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, anthropologist Suzanne Simon tests the premise that the side accords would encourage Mexican grassroots democratization. The effectiveness of the side accords was tied to transparency and accountability and practically bound to opportunities for Mexican border populations to participate in the side accord petitioning and civil society input mechanisms. Simon conducted sixteen months of fieldwork with both a group of environmental activists and a group of those fighting for labor justice in Mexico. Both of these groups became enmeshed in the types of cross-border advocacy networks and coalition building efforts that are typical of the NAFTA era.

Although the key to the side accords' anticipated success lay in their ostensibly generous encouragement of a participatory politics and sustainable development opportunities, *Sustaining the Borderlands* reveals that the Mexican border populations for which they were largely created are effectively excluded from participating due to the ongoing online, territorial, class, and cultural barriers that shape the borderlands. Rather than experiencing the side accords and their companion institutions as transparent and accessible, residents experienced them as opaque and indecipherable. Simon concludes that the side accords have failed to deliver on their promise of bringing democracy to Mexico because practical mechanisms that would ensure their effective implementation were never put in place.

NAFTA took effect at a time when Mexico was undergoing a democratic transition. The treaty was supposed to encourage this transition and improve environmental and labor conditions on the US-Mexico border. This book demonstrates that, twenty years later, the promises of NAFTA have not come to pass.

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