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Review: Lives on the Line: Dispatches from the U.S.-Mexican Border

By Miriam Davidson

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Davidson Miriam. *Lives on the Line: Dispatches from the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2000. 211 pp. ISBN 0-8165-1998-6 (softcover). US\$17.95. Recycled, acid-free paper.

A tale of modern slavery at the U.S.-Mexico border, *Lives on the Line* reports on the lives of Mexican immigrants and their exploitation by international factories (or *maquiladoras*) in the twin cities of Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora. Davidson combines documentation gathered through in-depth research with interviews to compile vivid portrayals of humans surviving on the border of the world's foremost economic power.

In only five stories, Davidson depicts "the violence, poverty, and environmental devastation" of Nogales, but also "the optimism of young people striving for a better life" (p. 9). Despite a faint note of optimism, the amount of work to be performed before citizens from both cities could contemplate the idea of a decent lifestyle appears enormous. Although such work has already started, it takes place at a very slow pace. In the meantime, "Ambos Nogales is getting worse. People are dying, and time is running out" (p. 79).

Davidson is not afraid of writing about the shortcomings of the U.S. government as well as the disinterest of the Mexican government towards their own citizens. She shows that, although labor, human rights, and environmental groups in the United States condemned the factories as exploiters and polluters, toxic contamination continues, and citizens from both sides of the border die from environmental abuses and waste dumping.

What emerges from this book is the image of a country's economy built on slavery; where the poorer and less educated are treated as disposable tools. It is a well-documented fact that such behavior has been part of U.S. culture since 1787. Nowadays, Chinese and African slaves have been replaced by Mexicans, and history simply repeats itself. What is more scandalous is that these workers have to struggle to secure a basic meal while others located only a few miles away, on the other side of the border, are wasting food.

But the United States is not the only source of the problems. Indeed, the Mexican government was eager to accept the implantation of foreign factories at the border regardless of the working and living conditions of the

workers. In any case, the book gives an insight into the wrongdoing of big corporations and the suffering of uneducated laborers. It goes beyond the basic concept of racism and physical abuse, and once more, highlights the fact that capitalism, greed, and self-interest are the main cause of misery.

Davidson was skillful in her work, as she gathered not only the views and opinions of Mexicans but also of white Americans (local residents, border patrols, factory managers, and so forth), thus giving a broad picture of the border community. From these portraits, Nogales appears to be evolving on its own, abandoned by both the United States and Mexico.

The book is easy to read but definitively not for the fainthearted. All the misery revealed in *Lives on the Line* makes you want to avoid stepping a foot in this place that has next to no chance to become a tourist spot.

Lives on the Line is an interesting piece of journalism that reveals a shameful face of America.

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