
Book Review: Bunisha Samuels

In a climate when borders have become contentious commodities, *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border* by Francisco Cantu attempts to humanize the experience of Mexican migrants and unmask the violent realities of the American borders. Through his memoir, Francisco Cantu utilizes his own experiences as the grandson of a Mexican immigrant professionally involved within the American border, to vividly portray the harsh realities faced by migrants today. In addition, he aims to expose the violence American immigration policies and enforcement practices have caused. He chronicles his story in three parts: as a field officer for the US Border Patrol, an intelligence collections officer, and then a barista after his return to academia.

To begin his story, Cantu reminisces upon the comradery and warmth he received when travelling back to Mexico with his mother. He recalls the Mexican man who assisted his injured mother and reminded him that “aquí están en su casa,” meaning that “here [you] are in [your] home”. This is juxtaposed to the bitterness and hostility migrants face when crossing the American border. As Cantu’s story progresses, the duality of borders is revealed. On one hand, the border is an invisible line into Mexico that is open to anyone of Mexican ancestry. While, on the other hand going into America, it also acts as rigid gatekeeper that determines who is worthy of the ‘American fantasy’. Establishing its own regime, the politics of borders is a reoccurring theme throughout the novel.

Transitioning into the first part of his story, Cantu recounts his training and work as a field officer within the US Border Patrol intercepting, stalking, and tracking individuals attempting to cross from Mexico into America. The second part focuses on his experience in border intelligence. Finally, the third component centers his experience after leaving Border Patrol. Interwoven into all three components of his professional journey are memories of Cantu’s childhood, the relationships he forms, and the violence that surrounds him.

It is not difficult for me to tumble into the story and contemplate the morality crisis that Cantu experiences. As a third-generation Mexican migrant, Cantu does not shield the reader from understanding that within his bi-racial identity, he uniquely identifies himself with the border. The border symbolizes “the tension between the two cultures [he] carr[ied] inside”1 and fuels his interest in joining the Border Patrol. Despite his mother’s active disapproval of Cantu’s decision to join the Border Patrol, he does so regardless. For his mother, the border is viewed to be racist and intrinsically violent. A notion that Cantu initially contradicts through the vivid depiction of the charisma of his co-workers, half of which are Hispanic by arguing that they “aren’t joining the Border Patrol to oppress others”2. Instead, they have joined the Border Patrol as it presented them with an “opportunity for service, stability, financial security,”3. Subsequently, the author vibrantly describes his co-workers in a way that briefly destabilizes the perceptions of the rigidity, and inhumanity of the American Border Patrol.

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1 Cantú, *The Line Becomes A River: Dispatches from The Border*, 24.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
This serves to symbolize his early naivety. In which, he asserts his belief that “stepping into a system doesn’t mean that the system becomes you” ⁴. He views his role as being able to provide a relatable face and language to the deportees, as a means of subverting the injustice and peril they are about to experience. For me, his initial arguments, in no way dismisses or negates the vicious reality of what has been occurring at the border. And the actions, that Cantu, himself, could not sleep with or avoid. Interestingly, Cantu’s mother is the character embodiment of the morale that Cantu discovers later into his story.

Through his work, Cantu, not only brings to light the dehumanizing nature of borders, he also partakes in this reality. For example, Cantu and his workmates often engage in confiscating (stealing), destroying and vandalizing the supplies and essentialities of migrants crossing the border. This was meant to discourage migrants from continuing their journey. However, in the middle of the dessert, urinating on migrant belongings and emptying all their water bottles, in my perception acts as a demonstration of power. It is utilized as a means of reminding migrants of their vulnerabilities and status as the inferior “other”. In addition, these acts appeared to be reckless and detrimental. A notion that Cantu recognizes when he begins to encounter the missing bodies of migrants that had died without access to water, or food scattered through the dessert. It should be noted and acknowledged that many of these migrants were not affiliated with any criminal activity. Instead, their only crime was seeking out a better life for themselves and their families, away from the danger and commodification from some of the Mexican gangs, who precariously utilize Mexican citizens as subjugated drug transporters.

In many ways, the border appears to be constructed to render those on the opposite side as inhumane and undeserving unworthy of entrance. Even Cantu acknowledges that his “mind had become so filled with violence” that he “could barely perceive the beauty of the landscape around [him]”⁵. This de-humanization of migrants occurs, regardless of the migrant’s life experiences, or intentions on various levels of immigration policy and enforcement. Even Cantu’s immigrant friend Jose, who, despite living in America for thirty years, is detained after visiting his mother in Mexico. He is violently torn from his family, his children and the life he has known for thirty years. There is no recognition of what he has built in thirty years within America. Instead, he is reduced to just one more deportation case. Regardless of these hurdles, Jose tells Cantu that he will return, despite the criminality and his possible death. As “it is a situation of emotion, of love”.

_The Line Becomes a River: Dispatched from the Border_ by Francisco Cantu reveals the abhorrent present-day reality that migrants must face when crossing the border, as well as the circumstances for why they make such life-threatening decisions. Immigration policies and enforcement are callous in nature and do not view migrants as people, thereby remaining unbothered by the terrifying condition of their plight.

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⁴ Ibid, 25.
⁵ Ibid, 129.