

**“TRAUMA AND EMOTIONAL APATHY”: BY FRANCISCO
CANTU’S THE LINE BECOMES A RIVER: DISPATCHES
FROM THE BORDER**

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ABSTRACT

In this study, Francisco Caunt's memoir "The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border" (2018) is examined from a philosophical perspective. Using Topolski's political ethics of relationality based on Levinas's notion of alterity and Arendt's notion of plurality, Caunt examines trauma as encountered by fusing the personal, intersubjective, and public spheres. It is argued that Caunt's memoir negotiates subjectivity in relational terms through his experience both as an officer in the federal police force and as an emotionally engaged immediate witness of undocumented immigrants' experiences, revealing complex human reality in the U.S./Mexico borderland that reveals the immigrant body as the product of alarmist discourse, illegal industries, and geopolitical hegemony. As well, it asserts that making a conscious authentic choice is the ultimate signpost of our humanity and selves in the context of a polarising (transnational) debate because it affirms traumas and emotional detachment views that sustain personal responsibility and relationality within a network of Others is what makes life worth living.

Keywords: Humanity, Trauma, immigrants, violence, boundaries and Human Life.

INTRODUCTION

Francisco Cantu was baptised in 1985 in the city of Santa Rosa, California. Cantu's grandfather on his mother's side came to the U.S. from Mexico when he was a child, and Cantu's mother did her best to teach him about his Mexican roots. Cantu's parents split up when he was young, and he and his mother moved several times because she worked as a park ranger before settling in Prescott, Arizona, where Cantu lived until he went to college in Washington, D.C. Cantu went to college to learn about the border. When he graduated, he joined Border Patrol to learn more about the area and its politics. Between 2008 and 2012, he worked for the agency. For the first two years, he was in the field in Arizona. After that, he worked in intelligence in Tucson and then El Paso, Texas. During these years, he lost faith in the Border Patrol and how it treated migrants like they were less than human. After he left in 2012, he got a Fulbright Scholarship and went to the Netherlands to study the situation of people seeking asylum. Later, he went to the University of Arizona to get an MFA in

nonfiction creative writing and started writing about his time with the Border Patrol. This is the book that would become "The Line Becomes a River".

"The modern border between the United States and Mexico was mostly set by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848," Cantu writes. "In 1853, that boundary was changed: instead of following a river across Arizona, the border would be marked by a straight line drawn by humans." In *The Line Becomes a River*, Cantu thinks about how arbitrary the border is many times. Cantu also says that even after the border was set up and carefully marked by a survey team, it was still pretty easy to cross until the 1990s, when the US Border Patrol shut down border crossings in big cities like El Paso, Texas, and San Diego, California, forcing desperate migrants to cross through the harsh desert instead. Cantu also talks about violent events that have happened in Mexico every 100 years and killed hundreds of thousands of people. These include the Mexican War of Independence in 1810–1811, the Mexican Revolution in 1910–1920, and the drug war that started when President Calderón came to power in 2006 with policies that would encourage cartel violence.

"I'm sick of books that talk about the border. (...) I want to see what the border is really like every day. I know it might be ugly and dangerous, but I can't think of a better way to learn about the place. (Cantu 22-23).

In the above passage, Francisco Cantu tells his mother why he joined the border patrol. He emphasises that you can't learn about the border from books or theories. Cantu wrote a book called *The Line Becomes a River* (2018) about his time as a US border patrol agent in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. He did this to try to make sense of what he saw and did on the border. Or, to put it another way, to accept the reality that he helped make by enforcing and putting into place border policies. So, his book is not a piece of embedded or investigative/undercover journalism. Instead, it is a testimony of the things he has seen and done, set within the larger story of immigration and politics.

Francisco Cantu gets a job with the United States Border Patrol right after he graduates from college, where he studied the border between the U.S. and Mexico. As the grandson of a Mexican migrant and a young adult who has lived in the American Southwest for almost all of his life, Cantu has always known something about the border. He hopes that working for Border Patrol will help him learn more about the region and its politics.

During his training, when his boss tells him scary stories from the field, he starts to wonder what kind of work he's getting himself into. Many of his classmates have quit because the training is hard. Cantu's close relationship with his mother is already showing signs of strain. When she raises questions about the morality and safety of working for Border Patrol, he gets defensive.

After three months of training on the job, Cantu works with a large group of other new recruits. An agent's job is to find people trying to illegally cross the desert from Mexico into the U.S. and bring them to the patrol station, where they are either processed and sent back to Mexico or kept to face legal charges in the U.S. Cantu usually talks to the migrants he catches in Spanish and asks them where they are from. His fellow trainees and bosses, on the other hand, are often rude, like when they urinate on the belongings of migrants.

Cantu mixes his own stories about working at the border with facts from the past. In particular, he talks about how hard and political it was to find and mark the border in the middle of the 19th century.

Cantu meets a steady stream of migrants, both dead and alive, after he finishes school. Cantu is kind, respectful, and interested in the lives of the migrants, so he often gets close to them. But he is already having bad dreams that make him feel anxious. For example, he dreams that he is grinding his teeth out. Cantu's dreams about his teeth get worse, and soon a dentist tells him that he is grinding his teeth too much. When his friend and co-worker Morales is hurt in a motorcycle accident, Cantu is too scared to go see him and then won't let himself cry.

Cantu worries one night that a suspect has followed him home and is waiting on the corner of his street. Soon after that, he goes to a shooting range to practise and shoots a small bird on purpose. As someone whose mother was a park ranger and taught him to love and respect nature, Cantu is shocked and scared by his own behaviour and what it could mean about how his job is changing him.

Cantu was a field agent for two years and did a good job. Because of this, he was given a new job as an intelligence officer in Tucson. His first job in intelligence is to write reports about important things that happen along the border, like gang and cartel members, big drug busts, dead bodies, and shootings involving Border Patrol agents. Cantu starts getting emails every day with information about cartel activity, including horrible photos of bodies that have been cut up and mutilated by cartel violence. His bad dreams are getting worse and often involve violence or wolves, which come to represent the violence that lurks in people's minds.

The story is getting more and more broken up. Cantu's story about working in intelligence is interspersed with newspaper articles, academic studies, and poems that show how Mexican migrants really live and how little their plight is covered in the United States. He tells stories about another agent named Cantu who dies in the field and about going to his great-funeral aunt's in San Diego, where he spends time with the Mexican side of his family.

Hayward, Cantu's boss, gets a promotion to a job in El Paso, Texas, and asks Cantu to apply for a job below him. Cantu does, and he gets it. Hayward, Cantu, and Beto and Manuel, two of Cantu's new coworkers, will soon go to New Mexico to look into a possible drug trafficking plan. After that, Cantu stays in New Mexico to see his father's brother. The brother talks about how much he loves nature and the wilderness, but also how much damage he has done to it as a contractor. Cantu thinks about his own fears and inner conflicts as he thinks about this contradiction, but he doesn't tell them.

Cantu mixes his own story with stories about the violence in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, which is just across the Rio Grande from his new home in El Paso, Texas. He uses articles about the murders of women, called femicides, that started happening in the city in the 1990s. He also uses articles about the violence and chaos that started happening around the city in 2006, when the drug war in Mexico got worse.

Cantu and Beto help Manuel move into his new house. After that, Beto and Cantu talk about their ties to Mexico. Even though they both have family on the other side of the border, neither of them has crossed it since they started working for Border Patrol. Cantu's

nightmares, on the other hand, are getting worse and happening more often. Now, he dreams about being in Ciudad Juárez sometimes.

After an agent shoots and kills a migrant, Cantu's boss, Hayward, tells him about his own trauma and grief from when he was a young agent in his early 20s and killed a migrant. In this way, Cantu shows research that proves there is a gene linked to violent tendencies, but he also says that the gene only comes out when a child has been hurt or abused.

He then talks about the time he was supposed to take care of Beto's dog over the weekend, but the dog got away and cut another dog's throat. Cantu is very upset by all the violence. Cantu moves on from the story about the dog to talk about moral injury, a condition most often seen in soldiers in which a person's mind is hurt by having to accept things they know are wrong.

Hayward sends Cantu, Manuel, and Beto to do surveillance near where Cantu used to work in the field. At the end of a work day, they find a migrant whose group has left her behind. Cantu takes the woman to the station to be processed and to take care of her blistered feet. She tells him in Spanish that he is a good person, but he doesn't agree. Cantu tells Hayward, his boss, that he has decided to take a research scholarship to study abroad and doesn't plan to come back to the agency afterward.

The story skips ahead a few years. Cantu now works at a coffee shop and goes to school for an MFA in writing. At work, he becomes friends with a maintenance worker named José, who turns out to be an illegal immigrant. After going back to Mexico to be with his mother while she was dying, José got stuck below the border. He is no longer with his wife and three sons, whom he loves very much. He is caught trying to sneak across the border, so he has to go to court.

Cantu uses his contacts in border patrol to help José's family see him and to help his legal case. Walter, José's court-appointed lawyer, tells Cantu that most Border Patrol officers have lost their humanity and are cruel to migrants because they don't see them as real people. Walter doesn't know Cantu's job history.

Diane, who works at the coffee shop where José and Cantu work, sets up for an immigration lawyer to help José with his case. Cantu helps José's wife, Lupe, put together a long petition for José to stay in the country. The petition includes letters from José's wife, sons, pastor, and friends attesting to his good character. Still, José is sent away.

Soon after, Lupe tells Cantu that José is still in Mexico trying to cross the border, and that people traffickers have been to her house to bother and try to get money from her. Around this time, Cantu tells his mother about José and how sad he is about all the people just like José that he has deported. His mother tells him that he needs to figure out what to do with the violence he saw while working for Border Patrol. She tells him he should go see José in Mexico.

When Cantu goes to see José, José tells him that he will keep breaking the law to try to get into the U.S. because he is a good father. He doesn't want to raise his sons in Mexico, where there is a lot of violence, so he must find a way to be with them in the U.S. He loves the U.S., but he thinks that the border is cruel.

In the last part of the story, Cantu is in Big Bend National Park. He is watching a man ride a horse across the Rio Grande, which is the border between Mexico and the United States. The man asks Cantu to have breakfast with him the next morning in his village, and Cantu agrees. Getting across the border is as easy as getting on the horse of a stranger. Later that day, Cantu goes swimming in the river, and for a while, he forgets in which country he is.

Cantu talks about what has happened on the border since he wrote the book, including the Trump administration's policy of separating families trying to cross the border. This note was written in December 2018 and included with the paperback edition. He says that most people in the U.S. are appalled by the policy, but that terrible things have been happening on the border for years, so this isn't a new thing. He wants the culture of violence on the border and the ways it has become normalised to be turned down by everyone.

TRAUMA EXPERIENCED

Francisco Cantu went to college to learn about the border between the U.S. and Mexico. He then got a job with the U.S. Border Patrol in the hopes that working there would help him understand the border better. But he is not ready for the fact that he will have to face death and desperation every day. As a field agent, it's his job to track down migrants who are crossing the desert in harsh conditions, many of them to get away from danger at home, and to turn over to the legal system anyone he finds alive. He does a great job at work and moves up quickly in the agency, but his personal relationships suffer and he starts having nightmares. He can't feel the feelings he pushed down while working for Border Patrol until he's been out of the job for a long time. Cantu sees the same emotional distance in other people whose lives cross the border, which suggests that it's impossible to see so much suffering without shutting down emotionally. This creates a cycle of pain in which the amount of suffering at the border leads to apathy and indifference, which in turn lets the violence continue.

As a border agent, it's hard for Cantu to keep close relationships with people because it would require him to use the emotional parts of himself that he has to shut down in order to do his job. When Cantu's fellow patrol officer Morales has a motorcycle accident, he goes to see him in the hospital. But when he starts to feel sad, he leaves. Standing in the parking lot, he writes,

"My face got hot, and I could feel water building up in my eyes. [...] I decided I wouldn't go back, and I wouldn't let the water build up into tears".

Cantu doesn't want to cry because he's used to keeping his feelings inside and because he's afraid of what might happen if he lets himself feel them. Later, after Cantu has been out of Border Patrol for a few years, he calls his mother, who can tell he is hiding something.

"This feels like it used to," she tells him, explaining, "It's like when you were on the border. [...] All those years, I knew things were weighing on you, but you were so sensitive to my questions that I couldn't ask about it, I couldn't show concern, and I couldn't reach you."

Cantu couldn't keep close relationships with people because the emotional stress of his job made it hard for him to do so. Cantu also talks about how some people stop caring about the

suffering at the border, which makes it sound like this is a pretty common thing in communities near the border and an important part of how the border works. Cantu mostly uses quotes from an interview that writer Charles Bowden did with a former sicario, which is a hit man who worked for a drug cartel. The sicario says,

"Almost always, he and all the cartel men he knew and worked with were high and drunk while doing their jobs."

These jobs included killing and torturing people, and this sicario often didn't fully realize what he'd done until he sobered up a few days later. By including this testimony of emotional repression, Cantu gives the sicario a face and shows that this kind of disconnection from the suffering along the border is very common. Cantu also talks about a doctor who works at a morgue in Ciudad Juárez. There, she takes care of the many bodies of people who have been killed or hurt because of drug violence in the city. The doctor says,

"In order to get through the day, she had to think of the dead bodies as medical evidence, not as human bodies."

This means that she has to shut down her ability to feel empathy in order to survive. Cantu also starts to have nightmares as he works, which is a clear sign of repressed emotions trying to get out. This shows again that people who live near the U.S.–Mexico border have to emotionally numb themselves to deal with the suffering around them. Cantu starts his story about his time in Border Patrol with a dream in which he visits a wolf in a cave. He writes, "The animal seems both scary and wise." Later, wolves come back to him in his dreams. These wolves represent the violence he has pushed down into his subconscious, but it is "wise" for him to face it if he wants to come out of his experience whole.

Later, Cantu talks about Jung's idea of "shadow," which is made up of a person's repressed thoughts and feelings that quietly shape their life. Cantu says that, just as he will have to face everything he has hidden from himself, society will have to face its own shadow, which is the humanity it hasn't seen in all the people whose lives have been ended or destroyed by the border. So, Cantu shows that the suppression of human and caring responses to the problems at the border hurts both the minds of individuals and the minds of society as a whole.

RE-IMAGING

In "The Line Becomes a River," we learn that it takes moral imagination to change the way we act. His mother says that Cantu's work with the border patrol has made him a part of the world he has helped make. We could say that writing his memoir was Cantu's way of trying to show an alternative borderland and, by extension, an alternative way of being in the world. This would help him deal with the moral complexities he faces. Instead of looking at the border as a heterotopia in the sense of a real city, we could say that Cantu's memoir is a heterotopia: a literary representation of (another) borderland. Kelvin T. Knight has said that the heterotopia was never meant to be used as a way to study a real urban space. Knight points out that Foucault's different definitions of heterotopia seem to contradict each other. For example, Foucault says that heterotopia is both an unimaginable space that can only be represented in language and a kind of semi-mythical real site. But when Knight looks at the

very literary tone and context of a radio lecture Foucault gave on this topic, he says that the heterotopia was never meant to be a way to study a real urban space. Instead, it is "a set of literary motifs that writers use to show an alternative way of arranging space."

Within the space of literature, there is a creative transformation of space that represents and flips other spaces, making it hard to tell what is real and what is made up. When we look at heterotopia as a tool of the literary imagination, we can see how Cantu uses it in *The Line Becomes a River* to try to imagine a different way for space to be set up, a different way for the borderland to be set up. This is a moral and personal journey in which Cantu has come to deal with the world he helped make and its questions of guilt, redemption, and responsibility. This is a moral imagination task. Cantu's memoir doesn't make the border a zone of exception by making its biopolitical violence part of the landscape. Instead, it shows how the state of exception is put into action by making the border seem normal. Even though his memoir doesn't answer the questions he raises and struggles with, we can find strength and potential in the way it shows other stories, other points of view, and thus other spaces. In the last pages of the book, you can see what (another) borderland could be like. Cantu is in the border town of Boquillas. He says he is not a *migra*, which is a ranger, but a tourist. A place where a man he meets tells him, "The narcos don't bother us, and the rangers and *la migra* don't bother us either." His guide tells him, "Here, the law comes from the people," when he asks why there aren't cameras or sensors there. Cantu realises that for a short time, he forgot in which country he was standing when he was in the Boquillas Canyon, which is near the Rio Grande. All around me, the land shook and breathed as a single unit.

So, Cantu's haunting memoir does not end on a note of hopelessness or ask for forgiveness. Rather, it shows how literature has the poetic power to imagine another borderland because of its imaginative power. For Cantu, this is a "liquid landscape," which is a place where different things, cultures, and identities flow into and out of each other. As a tourist, Cantu walks through the landscape, almost as if he is aware of how he can change just like a river.

CONCLUSION

In the book *The Line Becomes a River* by Francisco Cantu: *Dispatches from the Border* is not just a piece of writing about how memory works, nor is it just an autobiographical project that talks about itself. Cantu's autobiographical act is both a response to reality and an attempt to create it by exploring what it means to be human in this day and age. It does not deal with the traditional concerns of the autobiographical genre, which are the realisation of a coherent identity and psychological healing. Instead, it disrupts both. It advances the political ethics of relationality and confirms the existentialist idea that responsibility is a key part of our humanity and, by extension, our ability to choose for ourselves. The main character's search for identity is based on trauma and emotional detachment. "The Line Becomes a River" uses existentialist themes like shame, alienation, angst, and death and compares them to the complex human realities of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. It does this by putting the geopolitical, geoeconomic, and media constructions of the U.S.-Mexico border next to the complex human realities of the borderlands. This shows how the production of the body, memory, and trauma that is tied to power relations creates multiple. Because of this, Cantu's

memoir is, at its core, a story about the lives of "Others" that makes readers feel like they know them and care about them. It does this by giving the objectified immigrant a public voice and autobiographical agency. This brings the literary into the social and political arenas and adds new perspectives to the story of human rights and the contentious transnational and national immigration debate.

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