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## A multidisciplinary review essay of Francisco Cantú's book *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border,* Vintage, London, 2019



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Eveline Dürr and Catherine Whittaker

# A multidisciplinary review essay of Francisco Cantú's book *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border*, Vintage, London, 2019

## Introduction

What makes this review essay on Francisco Cantú's bestselling book on the US-Mexican border regimes uniquely thought-provoking – and, in equal measure, challenging – is the diversity of the disciplines involved and their relationship to the subject matter. The idea behind the essay emerged within the context of the truly multidisciplinary collaborative research center 1369 formed in July 2019 at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich (LMU), 'Cultures of Vigilance: Transformations, Spaces, Techniques.'<sup>1</sup> In this instance, 'vigilance' refers to wherever and whenever we are asked to pay attention to something specific, and also to react to, or report anything we have noticed in a specific way. More often than not, this kind of individual attentiveness is linked to goals set by others. In this research setting, our working group's aim has been to analyze notions of 'subjectivation', that is, the process of becoming a subject in relation to practices of vigilance. Thus, our working group explored what different disciplines can gain from reflecting on and analyzing the same text and which aspects of it they consider particularly relevant to ongoing debates on vigilance and subjectivation. What kind of subtexts are brought to light by these divergent readings and what aspects do some disciplines stress that others would not have noticed in such detail? Furthermore, with a keen eye for the research context we share within the collaborative research center, what insights can this text produce for one's own discipline?

This approach requires an openness to different viewpoints and reactions in order to make space for an interdisciplinary exchange of thoughts and approaches.

While the issues addressed in Cantú's work are obviously highly relevant to the field of English and American Studies, as well as Social and Cultural Anthropology (along with other disciplines that are not represented in this working group), this is not so much the case for German Medieval Literature Studies and Early Modern History (which do happen to be represented). Rather than seeking to homogenize our understandings of this text, we aim to capitalize on the diversity and heterogeneity of our disciplines, and their idiosyncratic relatedness to the issues debated in the book. Moreover, the review benefits from the individual authors' viewpoints and the ways in which Cantú's work is contextualized with regards to their respective disciplines. Each author links Cantú's work to specific approaches and perspectives, depending on an author's given research interest as well as their scholarly career stage and experience.

In this introductory note, we will sketch the disciplinary context of individual reviewers' perspectives, as well as briefly introduce Cantú's book. The work is a best-selling memoir describing Cantú's time as a US border agent in the Arizona and Texas deserts between 2008 and 2012. Cantú is a light-skinned man of mixed Anglo and Mexican descent, who studied the US-Mexican border in college as part of his International Relations degree before becoming a border agent. His book knowledge is elegantly fused with his first-hand experience of the complex conditions at the border in his poetic, evocative, and compulsively readable prose. *The Line Becomes A River* is particularly remarkable for its exploration of border agents' development of a vigilant subjectivity and its vivid images of the ruggedly beautiful and dangerous desert. According to our

reading, one of the book's most striking aspects is how it humanizes migrants and border agents alike.

The book is divided into three parts. In part one, Cantú describes his training and subject formation as a border agent, during which he witnesses the violence involved in policing desert crossings. Gradually, he finds himself becoming complicit in the perpetration of that violence, despite his best intentions of treating migrants with dignity. In part two, Cantú takes on a new role as an intelligence analyst for the border agency. By analyzing reports about the gruesome practices of human traffickers who work for Mexican cartels, Cantú gains an awareness of the violence that forces people to cross the border and risk their lives in doing so. Then, in part three, Cantú reflects on his time as a border agent and how he became personally affected by border policies when a good friend was deported and separated from his family. This experience leads Cantú to confront his complicity with a system that dehumanizes migrants and effectively kills them. While the book avoids making an explicit political argument, instead allowing readers to make up their own minds about the portrayed situation at the border, in the "Author's Note", Cantú addresses the role of his positionality and does ultimately express solidarity with those attempting to cross into the US.

Cantú's book thus lends itself to an in-depth exploration of the socio-political context of the border, in which border agents, residents, and undocumented migrants all lead lives marked by vigilance, watching each other in various ways – be it in terms of care or control. As an illustration of vigilance and how people gradually adopt it as part of their being, the book is highly relevant to our individual projects and the research center more broadly.

While this review reads Cantú's text through different disciplinary angles and lenses, we do not omit similarities and connections emerging from the individual reviews. For instance, the seminal works of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault on power and subject formation are fundamental references for all disciplines involved. This is particularly apparent when discussing the multiple ambiguities in Cantú's text, for instance, regarding the formation of the subject as a border agent, when the protagonist feels torn between his duty, personal values, and heritage. Other examples include his experiences of the contradictions of daily life at the border and balancing his US nationality, loyalties, and family expectations. Cantú wields his reflexivity as a tool with which to distance himself from the issues involved – perhaps more in a psychological sense than a social one. In the process, he constructs a selfhood, which emerges from this very distance between the self and its mirror image (Lacan 1948). Ultimately, the subject has to deal with its own subjectivation, or 'subjection' in Butler's (Butler 1997) terms. Power works in various ways here: for instance, how does one know how to behave in front of a police officer? What is the broader power structure that has created this situation and what kind of agency do the subjects involved have?

Furthermore, all reviews highlight multiple borders and practices of border-making. As the US-Mexican border marks the steep power divide between the Global North and the Global South, it evokes questions regarding racialized categories of

belonging and citizenship, as well as (white) privileges, rights, and moralities. The border and its contingency promote both law enforcement and its transgression. For many reasons, for instance the dynamic historical context, this border seems to be artificial, while at the same time it is also a natural one due to the course of the Rio Grande, making it almost impossible for individuals to take a neutral stance: they are compelled to instead develop a politicized subjectivity. The border is a "line" in the sense of being a boundary that at once separates and unifies the 'nation', which can be seen as an imagined entity of supposedly homogenous people in the light of emerging capitalism (Anderson 1991). In that sense, it is simply a modern referent for belonging and for categorizing supposedly homogenous people. Furthermore, borders appear in many different forms in Cantú's book, challenging and shaping not only the landscape, but also social relationships, political positionalities and racialized power asymmetries. Although the desert landscape is a prominent and notable feature within Cantú's book, this is one aspect that we have not been able to address in great detail. However, the topics we have assembled here are by no means lacking in variety and nuance, while broadly converging around the concepts of power and subject formation mentioned above. In turn, the authors examine the power of ambiguity and excess, bodies, spirituality, political negotiations throughout history, and vigilance practices.

Emphasizing the autobiographic angle in Cantú's *Dispatches from the Border*, Klaus Benesch, a professor of English and American Studies, references works by Gloria Anzaldúa, Cormack McCarthy and Frederick Douglass amongst others, to situate this text set at the US-Mexican border within the American literature canon more broadly. Drawing on Butler and Foucault, he also interprets the socio-political conditions at the border as a kind of utopian space. He focusses on the violent ambiguities of the border, where Border Patrol agents and migrants emerge as equally relatable, and flawed, individuals in their shared humanity, however subject to deeply unequal transnational politics of migration along racialized lines. Benesch also highlights the excesses of the border, as it is precisely because of the fascinating multifaceted nature of the book that it is easy to lose oneself in its details. Given that it is not always clear where Cantú wishes to place his emphasis, Benesch reflects on the book in general terms, rather than diving into specific aspects of the book in detail. His comments thus offer a general framework for interpreting the memoir.

Another angle emerges from engaging disciplines that only rarely come into contact with topics related to the US-Mexican border, such as German Medieval Literature Studies. Hannah Michel, a doctoral student in the research training group on vigilance, draws on Judith Butler to stress the significance of both body and border in the formation and articulation of the subject. In order to act as a Border Patrol officer, a particular body is required to correspond with the social and environmental conditions – a body that often contrasts with migrants' bodies, not only with regards to skin color and physical appearance, but also in terms of habitus, which refers to often subconscious practices such as movement (ducking, walking, driving) and gestures. In her text, the ambivalence of the body

<sup>1</sup> The CRC 1369 "Cultures of Vigilance" is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and aims to research the historical and cultural foundations of vigilance. For more information, please visit our website: <https://www.en.sfb1369.uni-muenchen.de/the-crc/index.html>.



is fully in display, particularly, when she discusses vigilance as a practice. Emphasizing a less obvious aspect of vigilant behavior, she frames the protagonist as a literary subject and hints at the relationship created between the text and the reader. Ultimately, she highlights the underlying ambivalent structure of Cantú's text and argues that the protagonist places responsibility on the reader to form a political opinion – a process which requires attentiveness and watchfulness on part of the reader towards their own positionality. It is the process of being confronted with, and reflecting on, one's own discernment that triggers subject formation.

Agnes Rugel, also a doctoral student in German Medieval Literature Studies, stresses yet a very different dimension of this text – one rarely mentioned in reviews of Cantú's book. She explicitly addresses the role of spirituality as an important sub-theme in the book. She draws on the myth of Saint Francis and the wolf and on medieval worldviews to better understand the complicated yet often neglected social relationships and interactions portrayed in Cantú's work. While visions, dreams and even nightmares can be disembodied, that is, out-of-body experiences, they also open up new spaces for reflection on non-Western forms of subject formation, as in the case of Native American cultural heritage. Extraordinary fear, irritation and metaphysical experiences have vigilant authority vis-à-vis the subject, allowing it to reflect on itself. These specific conditions of the protagonist's soul and his spirituality point to dimensions beyond the subject while still being part of the subject. Similarly, being thus in 'nature' inspires enlightened moments of meaning-making. Hence, when bathing in the river, the protagonist becomes aware of the border's fundamental absurdity – which then transforms into nothing but a river. Yet there is little consolation in these more than human experiences, as they do not alleviate the violent ambiguities previously mentioned by Benesch. At the end of the day, salvation cannot be expected.

Brendan Röder, a postdoctoral researcher in Early Modern History, examines what historians can take away from Cantú's book. This is not an easy task, and an unusual one, as historians rarely deal with 'fiction' or novels as a source of knowledge from which to draw scholarly conclusions. How can historians make use of 'soft' sources, such as short stories or interviews? Cantú's text lends itself to these explorations, as it contains a range of historical sources, events and dates. Röder highlights the artificiality of borders and their contingency, how and why borders come into existence in the first place, and what makes some shift and others stay firm. Their highly political texture is not merely the product of changing border policies, but points to the artificiality and fragility of notions of nationhood at large. Thus, Cantú's text is not only useful for understanding the specific history of the Mexican American border; it is also an excellent starting point for developing a broader understanding of borders throughout history. It challenges historians to think about what it means to deconstruct borders through writing, freeing them of their deceptive fixity as lines on maps and transforming them again into rivers and other porous natural boundaries. Of particular relevance to the twin topics of vigilance and subjectivity, Röder's essay recontextu-

alizes the norms of exclusion at the US-Mexican border from a broader historical and European perspective.

Finally, as social anthropologists, Catherine Whittaker and Eveline Dürr focus on the interplay between vigilance practices and the making of the borderlands – and vice versa. Vigilance is seen as both a practice and a concept with transformative power, particularly with regard to subjectivity. In the context of the US-Mexican borderlands, the power of vigilance is linked to, and shaped by, white privilege, enabling some bodies to cross the border or inhabit the borderlands more easily and inconspicuously than others. Yet, whether racialized as White or Brown through practices and technologies of vigilance, all borderland bodies are vigilant, albeit in different ways and to different ends. For the undocumented migrant it is a matter of sheer survival, for the border agent, a question of professionalism, duty, and self-protection. Whittaker and Dürr take up some of the critiques this book has received regarding the legitimacy of the author as a narrator and representative of border life. These echo key discussion points in postcolonial scholarship and anthropology more broadly, as representational politics are relevant for both fiction and ethnography.

## Beyond Autobiography Klaus Benesch, English and American Literature Studies

Ever since Gloria Anzaldúa's 1987 *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, no book – with the possible exception of Cormack McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* – has traced the violent ambiguities of the US-Mexican border more poignantly and more rivetingly than Francisco Cantú's fictionalized memoir *The Line Becomes a River*. Like Anzaldúa's classic account of the hybrid geo-political and cultural spaces of the American Southwest, Cantú's memoir creates a hybrid textual space in which quotations from history books, academic studies, novels, and support letters written to document the integrity of defendants before court cross-fertilize with personal observation, authorial discourse, and even dreams. Though mostly autobiographical, *The Line Becomes a River* is not exclusively about Cantú's personal experience; rather, as the subtitle "Dispatches from the Mexican Border" suggests, it carries a message that reaches far beyond the author's own life and times. Taking his four years as a US Border Patrol agent, from 2008 to 2012, as its point of departure, the book eventually tells a much larger story, one in which good and bad, right and wrong, Gringos and Mexicans incrementally blur to form a politically, socially, and ethnically complex reality that is ever harder to unravel.

At the outset, Cantú claims the existential space of the desert, where life and death are inextricably bound up, as his prime motif to join the US Border Patrol. Against explicit advice from his mother, he insists on getting an inside view of things, to learn first-hand how bad the situation at the US-Mexican border actually is, how the people in charge of enforcing rules and legislation, issued thousands of miles away in Washington, negotiate the innate ambiguities and often cruelty of border patrolling. Written against the backdrop of fierce political debates about ever more restrictive immigration policies that peaked with the Trump campaign pushing for a 'wall' to ward off the nation from alleged waves of illegal immigrants from the South, Cantú's narrative is all but timely. And yet, this author stubbornly refrains (mostly) from taking sides or indulging in political discourse; his is a broader interest in the psychological mechanisms that undergird many of these policies, how people, hither and thither of the border, deal with their incongruities and paradoxes. Yet far from being merely a detached observer, Cantú deliberately seeks to become involved – not just with the enforcers, the US Border Patrol, but also, in a later chapter, with an undocumented Mexican migrant worker who goes by the name of José. José's three kids have all been born in the US, and thus carry US passports, which makes it harder for him to hold his family together. When José finally re-crosses the border into Mexico to care for his dying mother, he forsakes his chances of ever returning to his wife and children legally.

José's story introduces a moment of empathy and human touch into this otherwise sobering and, given the many references to historiographic and scholarly sources, largely unemotional account of the US-Mexican borderlands. Using a technique well-known from Frederick Douglass' famous *Narrative*

of *an American Slave* (1845), José's plight hits home with the reader, opening up new avenues for rethinking the suffering of many illegal immigrants and the, often difficult, moral choices they have to make. The more we are drawn into this subplot, the more we understand that much of the bad that happens in the borderlands is instigated not so much by human ill will, but by the artificiality of the border itself. This becomes glaringly apparent in the intersections in which Cantú repeatedly quotes from both historical and historiographic sources documenting the negotiating and drawing up of the US-Mexican borderline. Reading these paragraphs, one cannot but realize the artificiality of borders in general, of how policy-driven and ideologically loaded the idea of a 'natural' border actually is. Thus, in an epilogue to the book, Cantú relates a hiking trip in Big Bend National Park where the (border-)line literally becomes a river. As he jumps in and, several times, criss-crosses the Rio Grande, he finds the artificial boundary of the border to eventually dissipate and morph into a natural, borderless utopian space: "I stood to walk along the adjacent shorelines, until finally, for one brief moment, I forgot in which country I stood" (p. 247).

*The Line Becomes a River* reveals that the malaise of the borderlands – though undeniably wrought by misguided and racist policy decisions – is also largely psychological. The scarce, truncated exchanges, say in a police car, a detention facility or in the court house, between those who attempt to cross the border illegally and those who try to patrol the border and stop illegal immigration are rarely on a par with the complex cultural and historic forces that drive immigration. Enthralled to laws and regulations that are made elsewhere, Border Patrol officers, such is the bleak quintessence of Cantú's years of hands-on experience, are often unable to 'see' the immigrants, to recognize their humanity and thus to empathize with their deplorable fate. Significantly, if also somewhat paradoxically, the very vigilance and attention they are drilled to muster towards the illegal alien from the South prevents them from seeing and understanding what is actually going on. The myriad ways in which subjectivity is thereby either misconstrued, i.e. based on false assumptions about the Other's motives and incentives, or flat-out denied by willfully demoting the individuality and personal grievance of each migrant, are blatantly exposed in this inside border narrative. Unable to reach out to a fellow human being in distress, Border Patrol officers, rather than deconstructing the negative force of the border, often engage in cynicism or, worse, the ethically dubious act of destroying the water supplies of immigrants thereby willfully accepting their excruciatingly painful death while crossing the desert. At the end of the day, it is the border itself that blinds both parties, the suspect and the enforcer, and that pits both against each other in an ongoing battle for survival and power.

It should not go unnoticed, however, that Cantú's dispatches from the border occasionally suffer from the author's eagerness to support the narrative with para-textual commentary and numerous references to academic sources (including Judith Butler). Though all are pertinent to the major themes and issues in the book, they are also somewhat distracting. Similarly, the sheer range of topics – political, psychological,

social – covered by this otherwise very personal story of the borderlands, makes it difficult to sort out the imperative from the peripheral. True, no narrative about the American-Mexican Southwest can avoid mentioning the violent politics of narco-trafficking, drug cartels, and mobsters. Yet the causes for the continuing havoc they wreak upon Mexican border towns and the unimagined brutality with which they pursue their malicious business objectives go deeper and are more complex than the – mostly socio-psychological – explanations offered in the book. That said, *The Line Becomes a River* is an extraordinarily stimulating and strikingly honest account of both the human and political disaster of decades if not centuries of failed immigration and border policies in the American Southwest, on both the American as well as the Mexican side of the border.

### Borders and Bodies Hannah Michel, German Medieval Literature Studies

“The border is in our blood, for Christ’s sake” (p. 23), the protagonist’s mother tells him on the first pages of Francisco Cantú’s controversial autobiographical book. This sentence foreshadows its main conflict and central theme. Throughout, the border is depicted as a line that is fluid, not only an external structure, but a concept that stretches its inescapable roots into the very bodies of the ones that come to execute its power. More broadly, the book tells the story of Cantú’s time as a border patrol agent in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. As a third-generation Mexican American, it is indeed a job that not only highlights his divided identity, but challenges his beliefs. Fulfilling his duty as a good and upstanding American citizen becomes almost impossible as his role on the border is in stark contrast to his compassion for others. And most importantly, it highlights the failings in American border-policy that often plays into the very hands of the criminal underworld they intend to fight.

The close relationships between the border, the body and the power that expresses itself through them lend themselves well to post-structural analysis. As Foucault writes in his work *Discipline and Punish*, politics demand a certain control over body and soul. The surveillance that is imposed on the individual by the modern compulsion to characterize and classify eventually turns into them monitoring themselves and their bodies. It is externalized in everyday actions, especially visible in state-related organizations like the military or a prison (Foucault 1977). Cantú seems to be aware of these connections when he describes “how the soul can buckle when placed within a structure” (p. 76). Even so, the protagonist is not strictly subjecting himself to the rules of the government. Instead, he is caught in the permanent struggle of obeying and opposing his orders, all while identifying as Mexican American and having to ensure that a strict anti-immigration policy is adhered to. His ambivalent identity makes the relationship between personal identity and governance especially precarious.

Judith Butler, who also puts the body at the forefront of her political philosophy, continues the French tradition of thinking of the subject as one that is *subjecting* itself to some form of power. Only in denying this dependency, an ‘I’ can emerge. She argues further that *ambivalence* is the birthplace of agency (Butler 1997, p. 9–11). By continuing this line of thought, it becomes clear why Cantú is such a compelling protagonist: nowhere else is the power of the American state as visible as in his ambiguous identity. Every doubt, even in the smallest everyday actions, becomes a moment of either cementing the law or opposing the very system he has sworn to serve. By showing these struggles, he can function as a literary subject as well; not only a narrator of his memoir but a character within the story. The constant need to position himself in relation to these opposing forces questions his ethics as well as his ability to act independently from the things that formed his body: his identity as a Mexican-American and the paramilitary training he underwent as a border agent.

As post-structuralist philosophers paint power as something that is inescapable, the actors of Cantú’s story find themselves in similarly bleak scenarios. The hostile desert is well suited as the stage for reassessing the very rules that one takes for granted. It forces decisions that always depend on a system of beliefs and norms that have to be questioned in the process: be it the state, family, ethical values or one’s own identity. As Cantú himself puts it in an interview with *The Guardian*: “I have no urge to look away from the border, not just our border but borders globally. I think they’re sort of these microcosms of all of these painful, beautiful, violent, incomprehensible mysteries of our modern lives. We’re embodied by them” (Kenny 2018). His idiosyncratic phrasing prompts a closer look at the way that Cantú’s body and identity reflect the transitional state he finds himself in. His ambivalent position allows perspectives to shift. Starting out with an insight into the work as a border agent (“The kinship I shared with them – the badge, the gun, the wrangling of human beings, the slow severing of spirit”, p. 210), he turns to a civilian life but becomes involved once more when a Mexican friend of his is stopped from entering the US again. It is then that his privileged position becomes clear. At the same time, his ability to cross the border and adopt different viewpoints makes him the perfect protagonist for the story he wants to tell.

Considering the ongoing controversy around American border politics, the choice to publish a book with a border agent as a likeable figure seems unconventional. Politics-wise, the book presents itself at first as a no man’s land that mirrors the borderland it takes place in. At the beginning, instead of positioning itself clearly on one side or the other, it inspires the readers to think for themselves, to re-evaluate actions anew on every page. In trying to decipher the political intentions of the book, another border becomes visible: the invisible line that runs between the reader and the text. By demanding engagement, that line begins to blur.

At this point, it is relevant to remark on the focalization of the novel. Fitting the autobiographical form, Cantú chose to present his ‘dispatches’ from a first-person perspective. At times, his narration almost resembles a diary, a constant observer of his own actions, and we, the readers, by extent *secondary* observers. The way it is told, the story expresses the desire to report on facts while employing a deeply subjective narrative. It is a closeness that leads the readers into assuming a false sense of conspiratorial union. Furthermore, it glosses over how carefully constructed his memoir actually is. The “Author’s Note” (pp. 249–268) – written in December 2018 and therefore only part of later editions – presents para-textual evidence not only of political intent, but also of the awareness with which he incorporates academic theory into his narrative. There, he cites Butler alongside Agamben, giving insight into his writing process and taking away the illusion of detached naiveté that characterizes his writing style. We can also see that his way of engaging the reader is carefully selected: “[...] I sought to leave room for readers to construct their own moral interpretation of the events described” (p. 253).

Much of this is reflected in the epilogue, in which the protagonist returns to the US-Mexican border, this time as a tour-

ist. The strangely conciliatory atmosphere paints the previous events in an almost nostalgic light, especially when contrasted with current US border politics. The scene ends with him swimming in a river, floating from side to side, the easiness of which mirrors his constantly shifting perspectives. His position and our understanding of it remains ultimately ambivalent.

It is this kind of tension that marks the book as a truly political work. The way the story is told makes it susceptible to critique from those who accuse him of appropriating the struggles of immigrants, but at the same time it challenges the beliefs of firm opponents of immigration by starting out at a point that is somewhere in between the extremes of American border politics.

In the end, it is this border that is most like a river – a continuously flowing stream of critical thought that carries and changes the reader throughout their experience of reading the book. And as the ambivalent protagonist continuously reassesses and develops, he takes us with him. The border upstages Cantú as the protagonist, as it becomes essential for telling the story. At the same time, it shows how important it is to question the voices of the text that we are reading. Apart from the question as to what kind of political opinions the author holds, narrative and perspective can be deceiving when used as a tool for politics – especially since not every author is considerate enough to provide us with an “Author’s Note”.



## Spirituality

### Agnes Rugel, German Medieval Literature Studies

Dedicated to those “who risk their souls to cross or patrol an unnatural divide,” Francisco Cantú's book *The Line Becomes a River* has drawn much criticism. The author seems to treat the two opposing groups of perpetrators and victims as equals in two respects: having souls and being afflicted by an ‘unnatural divide.’ This begs a non-trivial question that relates to all literature: is it morally wrong to write about evil beyond morality? Working with literature from the medieval period often confronts the reader with moral codes that seem incomprehensible to our times. However, we can understand the experiences transmitted through the text. Whether sadness of separation after an illicit night of love, a mother's fear of losing her son to the same personality constraints as his father, or the difficulties of finding one's own goal – literature has always been a space for known or recognizable experiences. This review will focus on Cantú's life experience as presented in his book. Comparing it with a piece of medieval spiritual poetry helps to also emphasize aspects interesting to Medieval German Literature Studies.

Throughout the book, one vexing issue continuously shows up in a ruthless fashion: violence as a behavioral trait with destructive power over human lives. The protagonist's experience slowly reveals what his vigilance at the service of the border authorities does to him. How is vigilance and violence against others and against oneself connected? Is violence part of the system and does it become a part of you as soon as you become part of the system, as the mother of the narrator suspects (see p. 19)? Alternatively, is it rooted in your genes and governs you according to the way you were raised (see pp. 146–148)? Is it pathological, causing “moral injury” (p. 150) by perverting learned moral standards?

Cited scientists and studies, while offering numbers and analyses, keep circling around the mother's statement near the end of the book. She states that besides the mass deaths and family tragedies caused by the border as a political institution, José, the narrator's friend, still “is unique” (p. 229) in his desperate struggle to cross the border into the United States back to his family. Quantifications alone fail to express the implications crossing attempts have on people.

Similarly, the narrator's path to this low point of his four-year journey is unique. The dispatches from his years in service as a border patrol agent and the aftermath portray how becoming vigilant is used for institutionalized violence and what implications this has on the narrator's ‘soul’.

In Cantú's book, the unifying element of the three chapters is the legend of the narrator's prominent namesake St. Francis, in which the saint tames a wolf. Originally, this legend is part of a fourteenth century collection of legends in Italian about St. Francis and his fellow friars, called Fioretti di San Francesco (see Várvaro 1972). There, the animal threatens the community of Gubbio in medieval Umbria until St. Francis is able to reach an agreement with it. Hereupon, the wolf keeps peace with the inhabitants in exchange for a daily meal until

his death. The iconic depiction of St Francis holding the the wolf's front paw in his hand, with the wolf's head inclined towards the saint who is in the midst of blessing the animal, formed a tradition handed down for centuries. The narrator's mother reads him the legend of the “Fioretti” as a bedtime story (pp. 81f.). In the book, the wolf as a central theme is mentioned at the beginning of each of the three chapters. Thus, right on the first pages he appears in the narrator's dream. Slowly the “truly fearsome, but also wise” (p. 14) wolf approaches the narrator by pressing his front paws into his chest and leaning on him. The original legend is altered, so that the wolf, instead of lowering his head in agreement, licks out the mouth of his counterpart. The inability to communicate with the animal emerges again after the protagonist dreams that he kills two people, leaving one to die in agony. Upon waking, the narrator tries and fails to imitate St. Francis and tame the wolf, making peace with it.

The third chapter starts with Carl Jung's psychoanalytical explanation of what wolves signify in dreams. Representing unconscious anxieties and preoccupations, Jung advises the reader to deal with this phenomenon by begging one's fears to completely take over, to eat one up as it were, “Please devour me” (p. 165). Coping is a process – it requires getting over unknown fears and accepting ‘evil’ as something “lodged in human nature itself” (p. 164). The intended unity with oneself seems only to be possible at the expense of one's own moral tenets by accepting that evil is necessary. However, Jung's analysis proves as useless as the narrator himself in the face of the growing hopelessness of José's situation. Here, being an example of the suffocating course and uncountable multitude of dreadful events connected to the border, the book provides a real sense of the violence that drives migrants to leave their countries, making the horrors of the border tangible. The question of justice where crime is facilitated or even encouraged by the state does not remain negated or neglected. However, the unanswered cry for true consolation resounds most loudly.

The legend of St. Francis and the wolf serves as a role model for the ideal relationship between nature in opposition to civilization. St. Francis is often portrayed as living in harmony with animals, plants, celestial bodies – calling even death “soror mea mors”<sup>2</sup> (Da Varazze 2007, p. 1154). As described in the legends, St. Francis expresses the fundamental principle of medieval thought that “everything in creation has a referential character” (Weddige 2008, p. 70). The legend forming the pillar of the book's narrative structure recalls a mentality that was first practiced in the fourteenth century. The omnipresence of saints in liturgy and common life in medieval Europe contributed “to the fact that every situation, every suffering, every concern of daily life is oriented towards the proper patron”<sup>3</sup> (Wehrli 1997, p. 564ff.). The patrons served as mediators and witnesses to higher spheres, transcending themselves towards the Christian doctrines of incarnation and resurrection.

<sup>2</sup> “my sister death”.  
<sup>3</sup> Translated by A.R.

One example of late medieval German poetry is a songbook from a Cistercian monastery in former Bohemia, in Hohenfurt.<sup>4</sup> It was produced in the middle of the fifteenth century, probably as a one-off manuscript. This book contains a cycle of songs that display the conversion of a ‘sinner’. The sinner is portrayed as a loose collection of different parts – soul, heart, body, reason – reminiscent of a Picasso painting (see Schnyder 2004, p. 140f.).<sup>5</sup> A prominent part of his conversion process is the watchman – a figure who stands between the sinner and a transcendent authority, and one who has a broader view than the ‘sinner’ himself, whilst at the same time sharing intimate insights with the sinner. Many of the songs consist of dialogues between these two individuals. The opening song is a twenty-nine-line wake-up call that calls the sinner to return to the kinship of God (see *ibid.*, p. 137–139).<sup>6</sup> He is called to follow his soul instead of his body, to use his reason to trust in a merciful God and to repent his sins from the bottom of his heart. The aim of this conversion is a unity of the sinner with himself, in that he directs all his attention to a personal God – remaining a fragile unity. This attention is equated with being awake, since the ‘sinner’ must engage all his inner components for this. The watchman is not identical to God, but he is also not to be equated with the sinner, as being woken up is not a self-reflexive act. Thus, the question remains – who is the watchman?

Cantú's book shows that the vigilance required by the border-system does not allow all the elements of the narrator's personality to be expressed. His body increasingly rebels against the psychological strain, as evidenced by his involuntary grinding his teeth at night. The movements of his heart – believed to house the mind and affection in medieval times and which is responsible for creating feelings of compassion – are suppressed in service at the border, where human behavior towards lawbreakers is not appreciated. As a border agent, the narrator reaches the limits of his ‘soul’. Not being able to cope with the experiences gained working to patrol the border, the narrator's feelings of helplessness caused by his inability “somehow unlock the border” (p. 142) increase each day. Discovering it as a place of institutionalized violence and even becoming complicit with it, “deep running” (*ibid.*) questions converge here – remaining unanswered. Therefore, the vigilance required by the border patrol is only partial in nature. It negates elements of the narrator's personality to the extent that he has to give up his job.

What relevance could this have for medieval poetry? Without mentioning him, the book reveals a special side to the watchman as a poetological function. The watchman is not the mother of the narrator, even if she is insightful and vigilant in her own way, and it is not she who enables him to break out of the circle of violence in which he finds himself. It is the narrator himself who is awakened by nightmares, discomfort

<sup>4</sup> This work is at the center of my dissertation project in medieval literature associated with the project “Vigilance and Attentiveness. The Literary Dynamics of Self-Observation and the Observation of Others in German Poetry in the Middle Ages,” being part of the CRC 1369.

<sup>5</sup> Stand auf, dw armer sünder.

<sup>6</sup> Wach auf, dw sünder, schwacher man.

and the inability to bear daily life at his workplace. The watchman is integrated into the protagonist, but as “a ‘glass difference’ that separates and at the same time connects, a third that mediates between inside and outside and yet neither one nor the other belongs entirely to the one or the other”<sup>7</sup> (Kiening 2003, p. 168), one who remains nebulous and seems to fail as a mediator. The narrator's desire for a peaceful relationship with and unity with the ‘wolf’ awakens an active attention to the inner elements of the his personality, as opposed to the vigilance required of him whilst patrolling the border. However, this awakening remains unfulfilled as the narrator cannot follow in Saint Francis's footsteps. Having failed to make peace with the wolf, he helplessly faces the “giant [...] the thing that crushes” (p. 222), which he himself helped to build.

<sup>7</sup> Translated by A.R.

## History Brendan Röder, Early Modern History

"I spent four years in college studying international relations and learning about the border through policy and history", the protagonist of *The Line Becomes a River* tells his mother, who is concerned about him joining the US Border Patrol imminently. He is tired of reading about the border in books and wants to experience it in reality. Indeed, the tension between theory and practice is one of the recurring themes of the novel and theoretical observation from a distance is indeed very different from the view of a border patrol agent on the lookout for signs of illegal movement. It is notable, however, that Cantú adds a diachronic dimension to his description of the border by inserting sections of historical narrative into the first part of his dispatches. They seem, at first glance, to serve as a purely descriptive introduction to the area's history, much more detached from the main story than later passages, which trace the steps toward current border policy from the 1990s to the Zero Tolerance era under Donald Trump. Passages on the history of twentieth century violence in Mexico and Europe, such as quotations from Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands* also have a more explicit purpose of interrogating how to deal with victims. In what follows, I would like to reflect on the status of the sections of pre-twentieth century history and take them as a starting point to illustrate some aspects of border-history and its political role. How does history describe the process of a river becoming a line – that is the tightening of borders – and what role, if any, does history play in an envisioned reverse process – the eponymous line becoming a river again? What, in turn, can historians learn from a literary text such as Cantú's? As a historian working on vigilance in early modern times, I will pay particular attention to how this historical narrative on the evolution of borders also implies an increase of watchfulness towards people on the move.

In 1706, Cantú tells us, the missionary Eusebio Kino climbed the summit of a volcanic peak "just south of the international boundary line that would come, 150 years later, to separate the territory of the United States from the contiguous lands of Mexico" (p. 34). This is more than a mere geographical statement. It is a reminder of the radical difference between the now and then, as well as between different ways of relating to nature. To the Jesuit missionary from today's Northern Italy, educated at the Bavarian college of Ingolstadt, the land seemed rough, just as its inhabitants were. While those people were clearly distinct from neighboring tribes, they would "grant passage" to others to collect salt at the nearby sea and saw the whole terrain as "a single unbroken expanse". This situation was about to change with the 1848 US-Mexican war looming. Three further historical intermissions describe nineteenth century definitions of the border and the practices used to construct it. Cantú describes the erection of monuments that mark the line, their symbolic value as materially present, visible markers, but also their fragility. In the 1880s, for instance, the line drawn in the 1850s had become contentious in many places, re-defined by local actors, with boundary markers destroyed or removed. The ensuing renewal of mon-

uments and the clearer definition of the border can be seen as a step on the long path toward the current border. Any traveler crossing the line would now *see* the border – via the monuments embodying it. However, nowhere does Cantú mention that he would *be seen* – an elementary feature of the present situation described in the rest of the book. The situation in the nineteenth century, then, is still nowhere close to the regular patrols or the technological surveillance the protagonist takes part in, but the foundations have already been laid.

Cantú's historical outline of the establishment of the current border can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, it may simply be a historical description of a certain locality where there was no border before 1848/1853. This seems rather obvious for the first episode, given that neither Mexico nor the US existed as states in the early eighteenth century. Regarding the following sections, both the US as well Mexico existed and shared a border in 1848, so one could also argue that this is a story about how an existing border has now simply been moved to a new location. I would like to test a second, more far-reaching interpretation of Cantú's passages that offers more to discuss regarding the role of history more generally. What the reader would learn from these passages is that 'border' as a concept and practice is itself historically contingent. The evocation of the early modern missions and the nineteenth century treaties and land surveyors are telling in this light. Both topics transcend the specific setting of North America and can be linked to broader visions of borders in history. The Jesuit missionary-cosmographer, for instance, seems like an ideal illustration of European attempts to collect natural knowledge, especially through the production of maps, and establish boundaries. As historical research has shown, Jesuit missionaries were regularly involved in the construction of geographical knowledge in the early modern Americas and, in the Spanish and Portuguese empires, were often consulted when it came to territorial conflicts (Herzog 2015).

While historical studies on borders are as vast and heterogeneous as the phenomenon itself, the idea that a clear-cut delineation between territories, as we know them, are a product of nineteenth century nation states has been brought forward powerfully. In his study of the French-Spanish border for instance, Peter Sahlins has shown that it took until the eighteenth and even nineteenth century to delineate the seemingly "natural border" between the two countries after the peace of 1659 (Sahlins 1989). Relativizing the historical meaning of borders is in line with the deconstruction of national character and various "invented" traditions through demonstrating the exact mechanisms of their construction. As a high point in European scholarship through various disciplines, one may mention the year 1983, which saw the publication of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *Invented Tradition*, Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.

To what extent then can the historical episodes be read as not just descriptive but also as devices used to create a powerful historical and political argument, in some way contributing to the "line becoming a river"? If the historical evolution of the border as a line and the practices of control and watchful-

ness surrounding it are made visible as something historically contingent, does this make the border less "hard" as a reality? Certainly, this reality will continue to threaten the lives of those trying to cross it and – as Cantú shows – weighs heavily on some of those enforcing it. The point is also not to idealize the past or to advocate for literally turning back time. Few of us would probably want to change places with Father Kino or his contemporaries. The same is true for periods depicted in works critical of contemporary Western societies – think of the gruesome description of the early modern age in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* or the world before the evolution of the modern medical gaze in his *Birth of the Clinic*. These works, rather than imagining an ideal past, are part of a history of the present, which in a Foucauldian sense "deploys genealogical inquiry and the uncovering of hidden conflicts and contexts as a means of re-valuing the value of contemporary phenomena" (Garland 2014, p. 365). Taken together then, the episodes in Cantú evoke a powerful notion of historical dynamics and do their share of de-naturalizing not just a specific border, but also the ways that borders work today.

If history, then, fulfills a specific function in Cantú, one can also ask what his text offers historians, especially those interested in borders and vigilance. While the concepts and the enforcement of borders in any contemporary sense is highly disputed for the medieval and early modern periods, it is nevertheless fruitful to examine certain points and zones of increased attention both by authorities and common people. The notion of people moving around more freely before the evolution of modern borders would be an inaccurate generalization (even if one leaves aside the social and legal restrictions such as serfdom). City gates, mountain passes and fjords, for instance, served to control people passing freely through various regions. Enforcement could happen continuously or in moments of crisis, such as war or spreading epidemics. Not entirely unlike today, the circulation of goods was often explicitly encouraged by authorities while certain groups of people were to be kept from entering a territory or a city – a trend that increased during the early modern period (see Boes 2007). Norms of exclusion refer to Jews, beggars, suspicious foreigners in general and, especially in times of epidemics, those suspected to be infected. Checks as disease prevention measures particularly resonate with the point in time at which this text was written (spring 2020), when borders all over the world had been closed (or movement severely restricted) due to the coronavirus pandemic. While the technological circumstances were very different from today, to enforce borders, early modern guards, as well as vigilant citizens, were provided with a set criteria of specifying who was allowed to pass and who was not. People on the watch for anyone appearing "sick" or "foreign" and authorities issuing health certificates seems structurally similar to some modes of control instituted in today's pandemic crisis. Embodied difference (appearance, language etc.) and documents, such as health passes, were also used (alongside other measures). The history of identification and identity – concepts central to Cantú's reflections at the end of his book – offers an interesting overlap between discussions of past and current migration. If European history teaches us

how identity papers gradually turned from a privilege of very few, often noble, travelers into a legal duty for everybody, texts such as Cantú's recount the daily lives of those who fall short of such requirements. Even today, the border is not only regulated through paper technologies, but through appearance and the body, as I believe Cantú shows as well, and this matters profoundly. The knowledge of history will not immediately help a passenger undergoing rigorous border checks. However, just as historians have a lot to learn from literary, journalistic, political and scientific texts on contemporary borders, I believe the same is true vice versa.



## Vigilance Catherine Whittaker and Eveline Dürr, Social and Cultural Anthropology

Francisco Cantú's bestselling memoir of his time as a border agent poses important questions about the US-Mexican borderlands as a space defined by vigilance. It challenges us to re-evaluate who belongs where, in the sense that the border as a physical and imagined symbol of anti-immigration vigilance reifies human beings as parts of nation states by racializing and ethnizing space. Thus, vigilance, as represented by the border and those policing and crossing it, transforms people's subjectivities. In ethnographic detail, Cantú shows us through his own example and those of others he encounters how people's sense of self is reshaped through vigilance and through the violence and suffering that accompanies it. However, it is only in the "Author's Note" that he makes this analysis explicit. His writing and distinctive perspective has triggered much debate and reflexivity surrounding the sensory, embodied consequences of border policies.

More specifically, Cantú's claims that constant vigilance, one's own as well as that of other people and of the highly technologized border itself, allows people living in the borderlands to become complicit with a system designed to curtail immigration – a cruel system that costs thousands of lives every year and rips families apart:

"In the borderlands you become conditioned, above all, to living with an ever-present sense of unease, of being watched, of moving through a landscape that has been resignified as a transitional terrain – a place made to exist, literally and figuratively, at the margins. To inhabit such a place is to inhabit a state of in-between-ness, a space where the ground is aggressively claimed, but the people who belong to it, and those seeking to cross it, are rejected" (p. 255).

Cantú's detailed observations of how borderland vigilance shapes selfhood and limits individuals' agency, provide useful insights for anthropology, where vigilance is an undertheorized concept. According to Vigh, environments of uncertainty produce "a constant awareness and preparedness toward the negative potentialities of social figures and forces" (Vigh 2011, p. 99). This hypervigilance "creates a hyper-signified environment in which there are perceived markers of difference in almost anything, from clothing styles, to haircuts, to sports, schools, and music" (Vigh 2011, p. 104). In the borderlands, Cantú describes how these bodily and sensory markers of difference are of course also perceived as key markers of an individual's subjectivity, supposedly rendering their immigration status legible to the trained eye. Therefore, he presents the body and the senses as sites of possible violence and as markers of the 'border', understood as both concrete and imagined entities.

In Part One of the book, Cantú focuses on how he slowly develops a vigilant subjectivity through his border agent training. We can learn here how emergent processes of self-formation are related to acquiring individual watchfulness and vigilant practices. Cantú begins with learning to read signs of human activity in the desert. Looking for undocumented

migrants in this way means developing a constant alertness, and eventually, a vigilant subjectivity. Even when off duty, Cantú often notices the presence of undocumented migrants when going about town: "I often recognized subtle marks left by the crossing of the border, an understanding of its physical and abstract dimensions, a lingering impression of its weight" (p. 169).

This shows how vigilance practices gradually become part of the self, both for those crossing and for those policing the border. Thus, vigilance transforms the self, while simultaneously showing the agency of the borderlands as a physical landscape and imagined space. In this way, the self is at once a product and agent of vigilance. Vigilant practices cannot be separated from the specific nature of the borderlands and therefore come to shape specific kinds of subjectivities.

Cantú describes how, after becoming good at his job by having developed this constant vigilance, soon a disturbing, bodily sense of subconscious dread and paranoia invaded his consciousness, as he is haunted by troubling dreams, causing him to grind his teeth at night. After an encounter with a potential cartel member near the border, Cantú becomes paranoid, worrying that he might have been followed home. At the next opportunity, he drives to the firing range to prove to himself that he is capable of defending himself if he needs to, that he can even kill a person. When he shoots a little yellow bird on the range, a symbol of innocence and defenselessness, Cantú seems to suggest that working as an ever-vigilant border agent means having to sacrifice part of his ability to act with compassion. In that sense, vigilance reveals itself as having the power to transform individual agency, potentially distorting it from being a vital force to becoming a more deadly one.

Even if border agents, like Cantú, are themselves of Mexican descent and want to help people, he explains that they are working within a system that is more powerful than them, which greatly limits his and anyone else's ability to resist. Despite his mother's objections, Cantú became a border agent because he falsely believed that, "stepping into a system doesn't mean that the system becomes you" (p. 25). In retrospect, Cantú realizes he was wrong to believe he could change violent institutions from within and that he might "learn to subvert it without participating in it [myself]" (p. 251). In fact, the vigilant selfhood he had cultivated through his training as a border agent gave him power vis-à-vis undocumented migrants, but limited his agency to act against the cruelty of the border enforcement system.

Cantú's reflections on the relationship between subjectivity and power, politics, and institutions is reminiscent of Audre Lorde's feminist essay from the 1970s, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Lorde explains that genuine change toward achieving justice for all is possible, but it requires those who are structurally well positioned to seek a more radical approach. Rather than function within an oppressive system and contribute to perpetuating it, they should instead give up some of their privilege to stand with more disadvantaged others. Thus, the insight Cantú presents us with represents what Indigenous anthropologist Kim TallBear

refers to as "settler epiphanies"<sup>8</sup> – knowledge that has long existed among oppressed minorities, and which White settlers are often late to learn. In that sense, we are learning nothing new when Cantú urges his readers to be vigilant – not to protect primarily our privileges, but to protect our humanity.

Yet it is questionable to what extent Cantú's work is actually contributing to dismantling the system that empowered him as a White-passing male border agent. Celebrated by CNN and the New York Times, Cantú has been accused of capitalizing on the suffering of those crossing the border, whereas books by those who have themselves crossed the border do not receive the same amount of attention. Of course, this is a familiar accusation for many anthropologists, who have similarly been characterized as enriching themselves by studying the suffering of cultural "Others" (Robbins 2013). Unlike many anthropologists, Cantú does not claim to speak for the suffering

'Other', but he does describe his experience of living among undocumented migrants in the US as deeply transformative, allowing him to move from one kind of vigilant selfhood to another kind of awareness and watchfulness. It is only when Cantú sees his undocumented friend José risking deportation and permanent separation from his family and therefore is himself moved by their grief that he fully acknowledges his own participation in the politics of deportation, and his unwillingness to confront himself with its effects.

This realization is a pivotal, transformational moment in Cantú's life and leads him to develop an activist stance in resisting the current immigration system. Thus, Cantú suggests that we need to think about vigilance and the agency it enables or disables in terms of its embodied, sensory experience. It follows that we need to ask what kind of vigilance activist-writers like Cantú and anthropologists need to cultivate within themselves in order to de-center our own privileged perspective while centering and amplifying the voices of those who are marginalized and oppressed by current border policies.

8 [https://twitter.com/hashtag/SettlerEpiphany?src=hashtag\\_click](https://twitter.com/hashtag/SettlerEpiphany?src=hashtag_click)

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