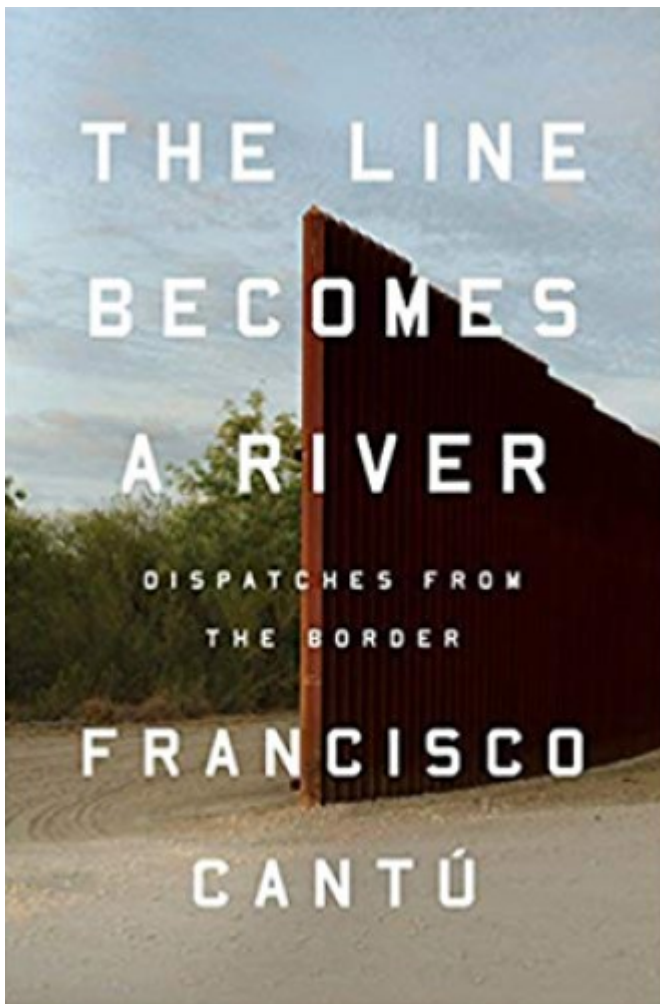


On patrol at the border

When Francisco Cantú took a job as a border patrol agent, he didn't consider the cost to his humanity.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [January 16, 2019](#) issue

In Review



The Line Becomes a River

Dispatches from the Border

By Francisco Cantú

Riverhead

When Donald Trump was running for president, he often told the people at his campaign rallies that his administration would “build a great, great wall on our southern border.” This was one of his most crowd-pleasing lines. But what is the border—in our imaginations, in our hearts, and in reality? What is it geographically? Historically? Personally? Francisco Cantú explores these questions in his deft, imaginative, and compelling memoir of his time as a border patrol agent.

Cantú opens with a visit that he and his mother make to Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, just before he enters the border patrol academy. He is a recent college graduate who majored in international relations and border studies and who craves a more concrete understanding of how the border has shaped him and his family. His mother is no fan of his decision. She worries about the toll working as a border patrol agent might take on him, both physically and emotionally. She is not wrong, but Cantú is eager to test himself against his ideas.

As the pair make stops along the way to Juárez, they are warned, “Juárez is dangerous.” While they are there, his mother steps into a pothole and twists her ankle in the middle of a busy street. Cantú panics. She can’t walk. Cars are starting to race toward them from a stop light that has just turned green. Help appears from everywhere. A woman bends down to calm Cantú’s mother. A man helps Cantú pick her up and carry her across the street. Another gets out of his truck to direct traffic. After they have safely helped his mother to the other side, one of the men turns to the pair and says, “In Juárez, we take care of one another.” Then he invites them to his market stand for quesadillas.

The tone of the book is confessional. Cantú is a deeply conflicted border patrol agent. The better he gets at his job, the more pained he is about it. As much as he would like to figure out how to stop narcotics smugglers, and as intriguing as it is to learn how to spot evidence of human activity in the desert, his job entails arresting a lot of vulnerable people who are caught in the deadly game that the border has become. As his work for the border patrol continues, his nightmares intensify. While he depicts his fellow border patrol agents with humanity, humor, and compassion, he dreams often of a wolf that is waiting to devour him.

One night, Cantú jogs up into the hills of El Paso and looks across the border. “I struggled to discern the exact location of the border as it flowed through an illuminated expanse.” He remembers the two Juárezes that now exist in his imagination. One of them is the stuff of nightmares: “maquiladoras, narcos, sicarios, delinquents, military, police, poverty, femicide, rape, kidnapping, disappearance, homicide, massacres, shootings, turf wars, mass graves, corruption, decay, and erosion.” The other is a city of human beings who “extend, without hesitation, the most basic kindness toward one another, people who lived and breathed in the city as if it were entirely ordinary, as if it were a place worth coming to, worth living in, worth remaining.”

Cantú does not stay a border patrol agent for long. The cost to his psyche is too high. One of the most satisfying—and controversial—passages in the book is when he returns to civilian life and starts working in a coffee shop while in graduate school. “I ground pre-weighed beans and started the drip machine, filling three insulated airpots with coffee. I dialed in the espresso grind, weighing and timing each shot until I got the right yield, the right ratio of grounds in to liquid out.” The simple humanity of the work, the simple pleasure of good coffee, serves as a kind of panacea.

But the border returns in another way. A man named José comes into the coffee shop every day and invites Cantú to share his breakfast burrito. The two become friends, and José never misses a day. Then he is gone. His employer tells Cantú that José has gone to Mexico to be with his dying mother. After that, he cannot get home. Cantú is caught up in José’s story, his family, and its relationship to the border. Cantú begins a different journey, on the other side of the migrant crisis.

Cantú has been criticized for the position of privilege from which he explores the border and its human-caused crises in this book. He is a light-skinned U.S. citizen of Latino heritage. He can come and go freely across the border. He can become a border patrol agent and then decide it’s too heartbreaking to continue. He can retreat into the coffee shop and graduate school. He can write a book about his experience and have it reviewed by the *New York Times*. Meanwhile, people are dying, families are being separated, and bodies are being found (or not found).

It’s not unfair criticism, but it is undermined by the way Cantú uses his privilege to explore both himself and his environment. He puts himself at risk in several different ways. He humanizes issues at every turn. In so doing, Cantú offers a deep and

personal meditation on the border, which—despite many surveys, fences, walls, agents, monuments, checkpoints, helicopters, military personnel, and cameras—remains a fluid crossing of human beings, in both death and life.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Border confessions.”