JAST

Journal of
American Studies of Turkey
No. 63 (Spring 2025)

Corresponding Author
Catarina Moura, PhD Candidate
Department of Modern Literatures and Cultures
Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal
ORCID# 0000-0002-7388-1035
E-mail: catarina.mra@gmail.com

Article Information
Type: Research Article
Submitted: 3.3.2025
Accepted: 7.5.2025
Published: 30.6.2025

Citation: Moura, Catarina. "Between 'Good Migrants' and Redeemed Agents: Exploring Migrant and Border Patrol Portrayals in *The Line Becomes a River* (2018)." *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, no. 63, 2025, pp. 35-48.

Between 'Good Migrants' and Redeemed Agents: Exploring Migrant and Border Patrol Portrayals in *The Line Becomes a River* (2018)

Abstract

Francisco Cantú's *The Line Becomes a River* (2018) is a commercially and critically acclaimed memoir. This article analyzes its portrayal of both migrants and Border Patrol agents. The first section draws on historical and theoretical frameworks to highlight how the "good migrant" trope—emphasizing whiteness, assimilation of American culture, and economic contribution—emerged and has persisted since the country's formation. It concludes that this trope deeply influences Cantú's portrayal of migrants and reflects on the consequences of this depiction. The second section examines the portrayal of Border Patrol agents and argues that, although Cantú can capture some nuances of his colleagues' actions and, to a certain extent, expose the institutional practices designed to dehumanize migrants, the text ultimately implies that true empathy and reform rely on an individual's personal experiences—like his own. This curtails the memoir's broader critical impact and limits its contributions to a deeper debate on the US government's institutional practices towards migration.

Keywords: Migration, US-Mexico border, border patrol, memoir

'İyi Göçmenler' ve Islah Olmuş Sınır Devriyeleri Arasında: *The Line Becomes a River* (2018) Adlı Eserde Göçmen ve Sınır Devriyesi Temsillerinin İncelenmesi

Öz

Francisco Cantú'nun *The Line Becomes a River* (2018) adlı eseri büyük beğeni kazanmış bir anı kitabıdır. Bu makale, eserde göçmenlerin ve sınır devriyesinin nasıl tasvir edildiğini analiz etmektedir. Makalenin ilk bölümünde beyazlık, Amerikan kültürüne uyum sağlama ve ekonomik katkı bağlamında tanımlanan "iyi göçmen" klişesinin nasıl ortaya çıktığı ve sürdürüldüğü vurgulanmaktadır. Bu klişenin Cantú'nun göçmen tasvirlerini derinden etkilediği ve bu tasvirler üzerinden bir değerlendirme yaptığı sonucuna varılmaktadır. İkinci bölümde ise sınır devriyesinin tasviri incelenmekte ve Cantú'nun meslektaşlarının davranışlarındaki bazı nüansları yakalayabildiği, belli ölçüde göçmenleri insanlık dışı kılmayı amaçlayan kurumsal uygulamaları açığa çıkarabildiği ileri sürülmekle birlikte, metnin nihayetinde gerçek empati ve reformun bireysel deneyimlere dayandığı izlenimini verdiği savunulmaktadır. Bu durum, eserin eleştirel etkisini kısıtlamakta ve ABD hükümetinin göçmenlere yönelik kurumsal uygulamalarına dair daha derin bir tartışmaya katkılarını sınırlandırmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Göç, ABD-Meksika sınırı, sınır devriyesi, anı

Introduction

The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Mexican Border (2018) is Francisco Cantú's memoir, covering the period between 2008 and 2012, when he worked as a Border Patrol agent in Arizona and Texas. As Taylor observes, the Sonoran Desert, where Cantú served, is "the scene of the greatest wave of undocumented migrants" (306). Cantú had studied the US-Mexico border at university as part of his degree in International Relations. Feeling that what he learned was too theoretical, he decided to join the Border Patrol to experience the lived reality of the border. It is important to note that Cantú is a third-generation Mexican on his mother's side and that, as the reader learns throughout the book, Cantú's mother ensured that, while growing up, he remained connected to his Mexican roots.

According to Couser, the memoir "now rivals fiction in popularity and critical esteem and exceeds it in cultural currency" (3). This author adds that this popularity stems from the need people have to own their life stories, telling them on their own terms (8). The questions surrounding memoir writing are manifold and go beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, for the exploration of the themes addressed in this article, it is important to acknowledge that *The Line Becomes a River* is a memoir, written a few years after Cantú left the Border Patrol. Thus, the reader encounters a homodiegetic narrator, with Cantú as the protagonist of the story he is telling, granting the audience access to his personal memories. This only shifts in the final part of the book, when José, an undocumented migrant who Cantú meets while working at a coffee shop, becomes the narrator. Intertwined with Cantú's personal story are the results of his own investigation about the border, drawing on sources that range from Mexican government data, information from American foreign correspondents in Mexico to books by journalists and historians, documentaries, poems, among other sources.

The book is divided into three parts and includes a prologue and an epilogue. An author's note was added to later editions.[1] In the first part, Cantú starts the training program to join the Border Patrol as a field agent. The process the agents undergo before being deployed to the field contributes to a lack of regard for the humanity of the migrants they will encounter in the borderlands. The second part begins as Cantú takes a new role as an intelligence analyst in the Border Patrol office and ceases to be a field agent. In the third part of the book, Cantú has quit the Border Patrol and is working in a coffee shop. This part mainly focuses on José, a Mexican immigrant who works with Cantú and who has been living in the US for over 30 years without papers. When José's mother dies, he goes back to Mexico for her funeral, but when returning to the US, he is arrested by the Border Patrol. Cantú is unable to help José, despite his experience with the institutional practices that have created a pattern of incarceration, deportation, and death for mobile subjects on the US-Mexico border. In *The Line Becomes a River*, the border and the borderlands are represented as a space of multifaceted conflicts. In the book, Cantú introduces these conflicts as a result of the fostering of a continuum of violence since before the formation of the border between the two nations.

This article investigates how the identities of migrants and Border Patrol agents are depicted in Cantú's memoir and what the broader implications of these portrayals are for our understanding of

identity, power, and conflict along the US-Mexico border. The analysis is divided into two sections, the first section examines the portrayal of migrants and relates it to the so-called "good migrant" trope. The second section focuses on the depiction of Border Patrol agents and, most importantly, Cantú himself, reflecting how these representations reinforce or subvert current institutional practices. This article also ponders the broader impacts of the memoir, particularly in light of its portrayal of these two groups, and suggests that the implications are twofold: on the one hand, the migrants in the book seem to be absolved of their "crimes" if they fall under the category of "good migrants," a persistent trope in American discourse on migration; on the other hand, Cantú's portrayal appears to exonerate Border Patrol agents by depicting them not only as ruthless enforcers but also as victims of a system. Furthermore, Cantú's trajectory suggests that only a direct encounter with the Other truly reveals the violence of the border and migration system—a problematic premise, as will be discussed.

The "Good Migrant" in *The Line Becomes a River*

Francisco Cantú's *The Line Becomes a River* depicts the protagonist's encounter with migrants along the US-Mexico border. In this section, it will be argued that the narrative frames these individuals as so-called "good migrants"—a characterization that shapes how readers view their experiences and influences the broader public discourse on migration. Given the book's commercial success and non-fiction status, its portrayal carries added weight and underscores the need to examine the implications of perpetuating the "good migrant" trope. Nikesh Shukla and Chimene Suleyman demonstrate the importance of the "good migrant" concept in their prominent collection of essays *The Good Migrant*.[2] In the introduction to the essays, the authors explain how migrants are judged by different standards than non-migrants and how they have to achieve an extraordinary deed to be considered good, as their baseline is always that they are bad.

The concept of the "good migrant," in the American context, emerged almost in parallel with the birth of the country itself, appearing in one of the oldest federal statutes, the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 (Motomura 18), which already reflected the government's views towards the role of foreigners in the economic growth and settlement of the country. From the outset, it was expected that the prospective American citizens would not be a burden to the country and, in fact, would contribute to the growth of the newly formed country.

Notwithstanding this origin, scholars highlight that the development of this trope was closely linked to racial exclusion policies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly through the national origin quota system of the 1920s, namely the Immigration Act of 1924. This Act established a "racial hierarchy of desirability" (Ngai 45), given that different quotas were established for different countries, with the higher quota for Northern and Western European countries, i.e., white migrants. According to Mae Ngai, this racial desirability still influences immigration policies and the political discourse around it. In the US, the good migrant trope is intrinsically connected to racial background, meaning that a good migrant is a "whiter" migrant (Hackl 1002). Nonetheless, during this time period, migration from Mexico was encouraged by agriculturalists, who demanded access to cheap labor. The Federal Government responded with "a wartime guestworker program that allowed growers to recruit workers from Mexico for temporary employment as agricultural laborers" (Weber 61). A few years later, the interest in cheap Mexican

labor increased and the Bracero Program was created. This program, which lasted from 1942 to 1964, allowed the entrance of 4,000 Mexican agriculture workers per year, on a temporary visa, though many more entered and stayed after their visas ended. These undocumented workers were placed in an extremely vulnerable and precarious position (Alfaro-Velcamp 1725-1726).

In addition to racial desirability, the "good migrant" is characterized as migrating for "legitimate reasons: improving their lives and fleeing violence" (de Léon 2) and as pure sufferers who will greatly contribute to their new countries (de Léon 12). Thus, either the migrant shows that he or she is in great peril or that he or she will contribute to the economic growth of the country. Regarding the former condition, the idea that a migrant has to prove their life is in danger in their home country in order to be granted entry to the country is inscribed in the definition of the refugee status.[3] This excludes people who face economic hardships in their home country, are victims of natural disasters or are affected by the outbreak of military coup (Alfaro-Velcamp 1744). This has led primarily to the admission of political refugees from former communist countries, who are "usually well-educated and from middle- or upper-class backgrounds" (Daniels 383) and who will have better chances to be economically successful and contribute to the growth of the US. Further, this also shows how refugee policy emphasizes the political beliefs of individuals who are better aligned with the US.

The idea of contributing to the economic growth of the US is of the utmost importance when defining a good migrant: discourse about the benefits or perils of migration is almost always accompanied by discussions of labor, economic value, and growth. In this framing, the "good migrant" is not only someone who escapes dire circumstances—like violence or economic insecurity—but also someone whose productivity is clearly advantageous to the host nation. As a result, migrants' value is often reduced to their potential to enhance economic growth. Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp, reflecting on Bonnie Honig's contribution to this area, explains that there is a narrative linking capitalism and migration, in which the influx of migrants, who must be valuable workers, feeds the promise of upward mobility and reinforces the narrative of meritocracy. As she explains, "the hard work of a good migrant in a capitalist economy triumphs over the work of a less motivated national citizen. Thus, meritocracy prevails" (1717; my translation). Further, for a migrant to be an asset to the country's economy, he or she must be in good health. Alfaro-Velcamp exposes how, since the late 19th century, the admission of foreigners into the US has been intertwined with health and medical conditions, rules that reflected the nation's anxieties about foreigners becoming a burden on the state and nativist prejudices, as Americans were afraid of diseases foreigners might bring (1727-1731).

Also, there are dynamics of invisibility and visibility in place which, as explained by Hackl, "demand that immigrants and members of minorities fulfil certain stereotypes of behaviour and identity, while expecting them to make undesirable aspects of who they are invisible" (989). This is due to one of the arguments used in anti-immigration discourse: if newcomers differ too greatly in culture and social norms from the local population, they may not fully integrate, or, in a more extremist version of this argument, their presence could profoundly reshape a host society's demographics and cultural identity (Bloemraad et al. 2). Thus, "highly 'valued' immigrants tend to be those with

greater similarity in attitudes, values, and ethnicity to members of the destination community" (Bloemraad et al. 10). In the American context, stemming particularly from the "American melting pot"[4] myth (Gordon), it was expected that migrants absorb American culture, language, and values in such a complete way that they would become tantamount to people who have been living in the country for more generations (Bloemraad et al. 7). The question of language has been especially poignant as an entry criterion in the country since the early 1900s. Furthermore, the "good migrant" is also expected to have what Alfaro-Velcamp calls "the elusive concept of good moral character" (1711; my translation), which implies maintaining sexual purity by avoiding polygamy, prostitution, and adultery, as well as contributing to the prosperity of the country and its fellow citizens through the migrant's knowledge, skills, and altruism (1711).

To sum up, the "good migrant" trope, in the American context, is defined by whiteness,[5] migrating for "legitimate reasons" such as fleeing violence or improving one's economic conditions. To do so, the migrant must not be a burden to the country and must add economic value. Further, it is expected that he/she possesses a "good moral character," avoiding deviant behaviors and that he/she rapidly assimilates American culture. Furthermore, Alejandra De León emphasizes that this ideal is "perpetuated and co-created by those who help them" (12), as well as by "leading academic and journalistic arguments" (11). Thus, the "good migrant" trope is continuously reinforced by policymakers, academics, and the media, shaping both public sentiment and immigration policy to favor those who most closely align with US economic and cultural expectations. It also underscores how stereotypes and rigid categories ("bad" versus "good" migrants) not only shape individual migrant experiences but also reinforce a broader system that is lenient only toward "good migrants."

Literature offers an important venue to counter these hegemonic discourses. However, as will be addressed, *The Line Becomes a River* fails to do so. This is quite noticeable in the way Cantú chooses to present many of his interactions with the migrants he apprehends and deports. A clear example of this is the case of an unnamed man who, when brought to the detention center and while waiting to be deported, starts cleaning: "I just want to know if there is something I can do while I wait, something to help. I can take out the trash or clean out the cells. I want to show you that I'm here to work, that I'm not a bad person. I'm not here to bring in drugs, I'm not here to do anything illegal. I want to work" (Cantú 31). This migrant fully embodies the "good migrant" trope. Even though he knows he will be deported back to Mexico, he still wants to prove that he came to the US to work hard, and he uses the little time he has left in this country to do so. Moreover, this unnamed migrant shows how he equates being a good person with hard work, reflecting the deep-seated anxieties migrants often feel about having to prove their worth to the host society. Cantú reinforces this perspective by simply asserting that he knows this unnamed migrant only wants to work and is not there to do anything illegal (31).

Another encounter Cantú has with two migrants, a married couple sleeping in the town's church, is also illustrative of this (38-39). The wife, who is pregnant, speaks perfect English because she grew up in the US (despite never obtaining legal status) and wants their child to have better opportunities, as she once did. The husband is a good Catholic who prays and thanks God even after being found by the Border Patrol. The wife serves as a symbol of the power of American

culture: although she could not continue living in the country, she is so deeply molded by its values that she wishes the same fate for her child. The husband embodies purity and devotion, reaffirming his morality by expressing gratitude to God despite adversity, thus further aligning with the "good migrant" narrative.

The power of American culture is also illustrated in Cantú's encounter with Martin, a migrant who he apprehends but takes for a meal before deporting: "Before leaving town, I asked him if he was hungry. You should eat something now, I told him, at the station there's only juice and crackers. I asked what he was hungry for. What do Americans eat? he asked. I laughed. Here we eat mostly Mexican food. He looked at me unbelievingly. But we also eat hamburgers, I said. We pulled into a McDonald's" (46). Martin shows curiosity about "what Americans eat," even when he is on the verge of deportation, and the decision to go McDonald's—a symbol of American capitalism—further emphasizes the paradox of accepting American culture while being excluded by its political and legal framework.

The trope of the "good migrant" is most noticeable in the character of José, whose story occupies the third part of the book. He is described as a model citizen by everyone who knows him, including American friends, co-workers, and the local pastor. Many of them write letters to help his lawyers make a strong case and to raise money (Cantú 214-220). José's lawyer also explains to his wife that his case has a higher chance of success if he had "received death threats . . . if he's part of an ethnic or political minority" (197), or if they can show that "José is someone special or unique" (199). The way José's story is presented, particularly the last section of the book, when he becomes the narrator, encourages the reader to side with him and to understand the efforts made to bring him back, given that he is a "good migrant." This also exposes the power of this trope within the American legal system. Furthermore, Cantú's personal relationship with José becomes the final catalyst for his own inner reconciliation: grappling with his identity as a third generation Mexican, as a former Border Patrol agent and as someone directly involved in a migrant's attempt to return to the US. The consequences of this will be addressed in the second part of this article.

As explained by De León, "the good migrant trope remains problematic as it reinforces the idea that there is only one way to be perceived as deserving of help, trust, and compassion" (14). This means that only migrants who perform as "good migrants" have higher chances of being treated better by not only the Border Patrol but also all the institutions they encounter in the process, such as the courts. On the other hand, the ones who do not comply with this stereotype are more likely to be stigmatized and, consequently, to suffer from violence and abuse (De León 15). Furthermore, other practical implications of maintaining of the "good migrant" trope are that conditionality is imposed on migrants, which may upend potential citizenship claims and rights (Hackl 994). As such, this trope not only harms migrants when entering the country but also during the bureaucratic process they must undergo to obtain their papers, permanent residency, and even eventually citizenship.

Mabel Moraña proposes that border crossing produces "emancipatory connotations, since they transgress restrictive boundaries thus interrupting the discourses of power and empowering

the other in his/her struggle for reterritorialization" (95). Yet rather than looking into how these emancipatory connotations can be deployed, *The Line Becomes a River* deliberately chooses to side with current discourses that equate compassion with a performance of the "good migrant." By not portraying more complex migrant identities and by failing to offer a platform from which to question this trope, the book loses the chance to consider "irregular migration as civil disobedience . . . as a practical critique of the nation-state" (Moraña 95).

The Redeemed Border Patrol Agent in *The Line Becomes a River*

This section will argue that the portrayal of Border Patrol agents in *The Line Becomes a River* sheds light on the complexities of being part of a system that is designed to dehumanize the "other" and instigate violent behavior. Nevertheless, it suggests that the only possible redemption for these agents—one that Cantú achieves—is when there is a personal encounter with the "other," and this "other" is a "good migrant."

The novel begins by addressing how institutionalized practices around border control enforcement contribute to the dehumanization of migrants. This is demonstrated in the training Cantú receives before going into the field (19-20). This training indoctrinates him into a system where, at least for a time, he believes he is not liable for his actions: "Field agents don't write border policy. We just show up and patrol where we're assigned. My mother shook her head as if my words were those of an apologist or a fanatic" (Cantú 91). Cantú further conveys the idea that the blame lies with the system, not with the workers who are there only to enforce the law. At first, Cantú is critical of his colleagues' indifference, describing their lack of interest in the history of the border and its consequences for their work (16). He also notes that most agents are not able to speak Spanish (22), which he considers an important part of the job, and that they seem to show little regard for bureaucratic rules (28-30). This paints a picture of an uninvolved and, to a certain extent, apathetic workforce, which might deflect responsibility for their actions.

Nevertheless, Cantú also describes situations in which his colleagues are capable of committing terrible acts—such as Robles, who knocked a migrant into the water despite knowing the migrant could not swim. Still, Cantú manages to humanize Robles, who, a year after this incident, jumped into the Colorado River to save another migrant (18). He also depicts scenes where agents share moments with migrants, exchanging stories or sharing food (51). Furthermore, Cantú notes that many of them are Hispanics who grew up in border towns (17, 24), hold degrees, and have families (24), implying that they are, after all, regular people. Therefore, Cantú portrays his fellow agents as flawed human beings who commit cruel and sanctionable actions. Perhaps the most illustrative example for this tension between the agents' humanity and cruelty is the following:

> Of course, what you do depends on who you're with, depends on what kind of agent you are, what kind of agent you want to become, but it's true that we slash their bottles and drain their water into the dry earth, that we dump their backpacks and pile their food and clothes to be crushed and pissed on and stepped over, strewn across the desert and set ablaze. (33)

Cantú explains that all agents are different and have the agency to decide what to do, but he ultimately admits that, in the end, they all follow the same institutional practices, which are extremely cruel toward migrants. Still, Cantú offers a justification for this: "And Christ, it sounds terrible, and maybe it is, but the idea is that when they come out from their hiding places, when they regroup and return to find their stockpiles ransacked and stripped, they'll realize their situation, that they're fucked, that it's hopeless to continue, and they'll quit right then and there, they'll save themselves" (33). Cantú's justification—that the Border Patrol agents use these tactics to somehow convince migrants to go back to Mexico—is not convincing because migrants would still need these provisions to return through the desert. As Benesch puts it:

> Significantly, if also somewhat paradoxically, the very vigilance and attention they [Border Patrol agents] are drilled to muster towards the illegal alien from the South prevents them from seeing and understanding what is actually going on . . . Border Patrol officers, rather than deconstructing the negative force of the border, often engage in cynicism or, worse, the ethically dubious act. (7)

Such cynicism and ethically dubious acts are partly the result of the training that Border Patrol agents undergo, during which their identities are shaped by institutional practices that contrast them with migrants. Whitaker and Dürr explain that "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" (5). This, combined with the institutionalized system of surveillance and violence, leads agents to experience moral injuries which alienate them and prevent them from empathizing with the migrants, much like what happens to soldiers on the battlefield.

Thus, *The Line Becomes a River* reveals how the system's ingrained practices shape human behavior, perpetuating violence and the dehumanization of migrants. This system also creates moral injuries borne by those who enact it, underscoring a profound tension between institutional mandate and personal agency. Nevertheless, this can be problematic, as Cantú positions the agents as victims of the same system that institutionalizes violence against migrants. He dedicates the book to "all those who risk their souls to traverse or patrol an unnatural divide" rather than the migrants who suffer from their cruelty.

Cantú is also personally affected by the tension between institutional mandate and personal agency, as he tries to reconcile three aspects of his identity: first, he is a law enforcement agent; second, he is a witness to the violence against migrants; and third, he is a third-generation Mexican. As Cantú's mother emphasizes, "The border is in our blood, for Christ's sake" (23). Voicing his Mexican identity, Cantú's mother accompanies the process of change he undergoes and serves as a moral compass, constantly questioning him. The first point of tension between Cantú and his mother arises when he tells her he wants to join the Border Patrol: "I'm tired of studying, I'm tired of reading about the border in books. I want to be on the ground, out in the field, I want to see the realities of the border day in and day out. I know it might be ugly, I know it might be dangerous, but I don't see any better way to truly understand the place" (22). Cantú is dissatisfied with his education and believes

he needs to experience the border in a more practical sense. Röder confirms that "the tension between theory and practice is one of the recurring themes of the novel" (12). The conversation between the two characters foreshadows other tensions that are further explored throughout the narrative, such as those that arise from Cantú's dual identity: I don't know if the border is a place for me to understand myself, but I know there's something here I can't look away from. Maybe it's the desert, maybe it's the closeness of life and death, maybe it's the tension between the two cultures we carry inside us. Whatever it is, I'll never understand it unless I'm close to it" (23). As a result, Cantú joins the Border Patrol believing he will be of great help to the migrants crossing the border because he speaks Spanish and has lived in Mexico (25). He even believes this job will be important if he wishes to become "an immigration lawyer or a policy maker" (25). This idealistic outlook initially reveals Cantú's naivety: he overlooks the reality that the Border Patrol is primarily an enforcement agency, designed to deter illegal crossings rather than to provide assistance. He does not seem to reflect on the most impactful and controversial aspects of the job, showing either a lack of knowledge or a misunderstanding of the system he is about to join.

Cantú's mother tries to warn him and insists that the Border Patrol is "a paramilitary police force . . . you must understand you are stepping into a system, an institution with little regard for people" (24). Cantú responds that "stepping into a system doesn't mean that the system becomes you" (25). Yet he immediately admits, "as I spoke, doubts flickered through my mind" (25), which shows that while he initially appears to be naive, it is now clearer that he has some inkling of what this job might entail and that he is, in fact, making a conscious decision. In addition, his upbringing in the borderlands and his four years studying the border at university have provided him with knowledge about the Border Patrol's role. In fact, Cantú recognizes from the start that the practices of the Border Patrol have failed to address the most pressing questions regarding migration, namely human and drug trafficking. Furthermore, he notices that institutional strategies have, in fact, contributed to the rise of these activities, whose consequences are felt by ordinary people.

As his time in the Border Patrol progresses, Cantú's fears about becoming part of the system are confirmed. This is shown in a scene where he finds the previously mentioned young undocumented migrant couple sleeping in a church. He speaks to them in Spanish and is moved by their border-crossing story. The man asks him: "Listen, he said, do you think you could bring us back to Mexico, como hermano? You could drive us down to the border . . . Like a brother" (40). But Cantú immediately answers that he cannot do that and that he must bring them in for processing and deportation: "I turned my head and then bolted the cage and shut the door" (41). Perhaps the most shocking aspect of this interaction is when the reader learns that Cantú quickly forgot the couple's names (41). Not remembering or attributing names to the migrants he encounters signals that Cantú has indeed become an active participant in the system and perceives them as a dehumanized "other," whose names are not worth remembering.

In another encounter with migrants, this becomes even more distressing. One of the main reasons Cantú gave for joining the Border Patrol was the fact that he could help more migrants because he speaks Spanish. However, when his colleague Mortenson asks him to translate a conversation with a woman who was picked up in the desert with two small girls, Cantú replies that he will

not be able to help. This swift decision leads Cantú to experience emotional isolation as he tries to distance himself from the situation but is unable to escape the psychological tool of his line of work, as made clear by his thoughts after this incident: "As I drove away from the station I tried not to think of the girls, and my hands began to shake at the wheel. I wanted to call my mother, but it was too late" (52).

Progressively, Cantú begins to realize he is changing, and he worries about the outcomes of his decision to join the Border Patrol. This culminates in a scene where, woken up in the middle of the night by one of the many nightmares that plague him, he acknowledges that, "for several minutes I stared into the mirror, trying to recognize myself" (117). He also feels the physical toll of his work, such as nightmares and teeth grinding and identifies these as symptoms of a "moral injury" (150), a PTSD-like condition.

This process of trauma and change culminates in Cantú leaving the Border Patrol and returning to university, working at a coffee shop to support his studies. It is there that he meets José. This last part of the book cements Cantú's position amid his personal conflicts. By bearing witness to José's attempts to reunite with his family in the US, Cantú recognizes his institutional role in the "machine" that continues to construct the border as a site of conflict, surveillance, and violence. As Cantú notices in court, when accompanying José's hearing:

> I had apprehended and processed countless men and women for deportation, many of whom I sent without thinking to pass through this very room . . . I realized, too, that despite my small role within the system, despite hours of training and studying at the academy, I had little inkling of what happened to those I arrested after I turned over their paperwork and went home from my shift. (186)

In the end, José's situation is the final catalyst for the resolution of the inner conflict. Cantú positions himself against the same institutional rules that had changed him: he fantasizes about bringing José "safely through the desert, past the sensors and watchtowers, past the agents patrolling distant trails and dirt roads, past the highway checkpoints" (229). This shows that Cantú's "proximity to the Other and their relational bond produce a transformative form of disturbance that nurtures both responsibility and the subject's sense of self" (Runtić and Drenjančević 154). Toward the end of *The Line Becomes a River*, we see this notion fully realized when José takes over as narrator, putting the Other at the helm of the narrative.

The protagonist undergoes a transformation, driven by the inner conflict between his identity and values, the role he had to play as a Border Patrol agent, and his position as a person directly involved in a migrant's trauma story. As Kate Mehuron explains, "his character's self-representation is unique: a remorseful perpetrator who discovers his moral injury as he enacts harm to others and seeks to make amends to those harmed by his actions" (33).

Unfortunately, the novel's conclusion seems to suggest that only through an encounter with a "good migrant" can views about the so-called border crisis be changed. Furthermore, it implies

that this change in perceptions is contingent on a personal relationship with the borderland, which, in Cantú's case, materializes through his heritage. Also, as Mehuron suggests, in this memoir, "material and collective reparation fall into the void of institutional acknowledgment of the harms done by Border Security policies, officers' conduct toward migrants, and collusions with terrorism at the border" (41), given it does not include those who have disappeared in the "intersectional violence occasioned by cartel terrorism and the anti-migrant policies of nation-states" (41). In addition, I argue that Cantú's approach suggests that only individuals positioned closer to the "other" can truly grasp the effects of the violent practices of an agency like the Border Patrol. This is problematic because it excludes all who do not belong to this category, which is itself volatile and problematic, and it fails to offer a path for any truly collective or systemic reckoning with the violent structures at play.

In other words, limiting critical awareness to those who have direct interpersonal connections with the borderland and traumatic first-hand migrant experience suggests that larger institutional reforms remain unattainable. While Cantú seems to gain a deeper understanding of the ramifications of his role as a Border Patrol agent, the same transformation does not occur among his colleagues, despite their portrayal as casualties of the system. Consequently, the memoir risks reinforcing the idea that empathy is contingent on proximity rather than advocating for a more inclusive, far-reaching mode of understanding and accountability. Furthermore, Cantú and José form a bond not only due to their proximity but also because José is portrayed as a "good migrant." Thus, proximity is also contingent upon migrants' performance of the "good migrant" trope, given that migrants who perform accordingly are more likely to be treated humanely by a system designed to deter them from accessing the United States.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the current research on US-Mexico border literature by analyzing Francisco Cantú's *The Line Becomes a River*. The memoir follows Cantú from joining the Border Patrol to his departure and subsequent personal involvement in helping a migrant he befriends return to the US. Several of Cantú's encounters with migrants are portrayed as interactions with so-called "good migrants." The "good migrant" trope dates back to the earliest waves of migration to the US and has persisted since the birth of the new nation. The "good migrant" is someone who moves to the US for legitimate reasons, either to flee a specific type of persecution and violence in their home country or to seek economic opportunities, and, most importantly, to be an asset to the country's economy rather than a burden. Also, the "good migrant" is preferably white, quickly assimilates into US culture, often by making his own identity invisible, and is characterized by a strong moral character. The "good migrant" is believed to have better chances of not suffering from the systemic violence that continues to be inflicted by the institutions that surveil, control, and legislate the US-Mexico border. This article has shown how problematic this trope is, starting with the fact that it is seemingly unachievable due to its ethereal and ambiguous nature. Therefore, though still a very powerful trope, it excludes most migrants, putting them in peril not only when they try to enter the country but also when they try to regularize their documentation. Moreover, the systemic violence suffered by migrants, whether physical or institutional, is broadly accepted by public opinion when migrants are not viewed as "good migrants."

In the case of the Border Patrol agents, the memoir shows them as flawed individuals capable of committing cruel and sanctionable actions, but above all, as human. Cantú stresses that they are also victims of institutionalized violence and deadly policies. This implies that, similarly to migrants who perform as the "good migrant," Border Patrol agents are also compelled to perform a role, and the characteristics of this role are constructed in opposition to migrants' identities, which have been framed as dangerous, criminal and illegal. Cantú himself epitomizes this process, as the reader follows his journey from a naïve recruit to an officer completely desensitized to the violence and cruelty he bears witness. Cantú is able to confront and dissect his inner conflict after meeting José and accompanying his deportation and subsequent attempt to return to the US. This process offers Cantú the opportunity to see the lived consequences of the border policies for the "other."

It has been argued that this focus on personal relationships narrows the possibilities for a more systemic critique, thereby underscoring the tension between individual empathy and broader structural responsibility in US immigration policies and raising questions about how lasting change might be achieved. Through Cantú's own transformation and José's story, the memoir suggests that true empathy and redemption are contingent on a personal bond with a "good migrant," which disregards explicit and far-reaching structural injustices and the myriads of migrants who do not fit this stereotype.

Future research should examine other first-person border narratives through a comparative lens, to investigate how memoirs either reinforce or challenge the "good migrant" trope and the perceived necessity of personal encounters for empathy. This necessarily involves incorporating a diverse range of perspectives, including those of migrants themselves. Only in this way can literature serve as a foundation for building a structural critique, helping to broaden our understanding of the US-Mexico border's complexities and potentially informing more comprehensive, equitable policy debates.

Notes

[1] According to Michel, in the author's note, Cantú "presents para-textual evidence not only of political intent, but also of the awareness with which he incorporates academic theory into his narrative" (9).

[2] A follow-up volume to Shukla's *The Good Migrant* (2016) which focused on the British context.

[3] 101(a)(42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA).

[4] For a complete analysis of the Myth of "Melting Pot," see Paul Heike (2014).

[5] Despite the undeniable importance of whiteness, the trope of the "good migrant" also evolved to accommodate a so-called "model minority:" Asians. For a thorough study of this topic, see Madeline Hsu.

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