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 CRC 1369 formed in July 2019 at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU), ‘Cultures of Vigilance: Transformations, Foundations of Vigilance’. For more information, please visit our website: https://www.en.sfb1369.uni-muenchen.de/the-crc/index.html.

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 instance, the ambivalence of the 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 to mental conditions – a body that often contrasts with migrants’ bodies. Some of these issues involved – perhaps more in a psychological sense than in a political one – 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 Banisch, 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 viole-
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.

Similarly, the sheer range of topics—political, psychological, cultural and historic forces that drive immigration. Enthralled by artifice, she exposes 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 committing the very crimes that are theoretically one of the prime motifs to join the US Border Patrol. Against explicit assertions 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 his 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 ethically complex reality that is ever harder to unravel.

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 referred to 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 survival, for the border agent, a sublime realm. She draws on the myth of Saint Francis and the wolf and on medieval worldviews to better understand the complicated yet often neglected social interactions and intersections 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 Benches. At the end of the day, salvation cannot be expected.

Brendan Röder, a postdoctoral researcher in Early Modern Literature Studies, stresses yet a very different dimension of this text—one rarely mentioned in reviews of Cantú’s book. He explicitly addresses the role of spirituality as an important sub-theme in the book. He draws on the myth of Saint Francis and the wolf and on medieval worldviews to better understand the complicated yet often neglected social interactions and intersections 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 Benches. At the end of the day, salvation cannot be expected.

Beyond Autobiography
Klaus Benesch, English and American Literature Studies

Epilogue: Dispatches from the Border

The Line Becomes a River

Catherine Whittaker

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’s 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 or 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 not only in the interpretative framework 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 being crossed is that between White and Brown, and from 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, yet not straightforwardly established, legal incentives, or flat-out denied by willfully demoting the individual 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 exquisitely 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 epiphanial. Few, 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 forms the 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, she says, does the subject appear. 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 as only a narrator of his own identity 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. Pitting 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 naïveté 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).

After this is reflected in the epilogue, in which the protagonist returns to the US-Mexican border, this time as a tourist. 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 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”.
Shantyta
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 passion, or 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 constantly 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 enter the soul of an exemplary man, luring him to 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 right hand of God calls 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 mortal tenets by accepting that evil is necessary. However, Jung’s analysis proves useless as the narrator himself in the face of the growing hopelessness of José’s situation. Here, being the 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 neglected or negated. 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 “sor- roro meos”2 (Da Varazze 2007, p. 115f.). As described in the legend, the wolf expresses his fundamental principle of medieval thought that “everything in creation has a referential character” (Wedgde 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”3 (Wehrli 1997, p. 366f.). The patrons served as mediators and witnesses to higher spheres, transmitting themselves towards the Christian doctrines of incarnation and resurrection.

One example of late medieval German poetry is a songbook from a Cistercian monastery in former Bohemia, in Hohen- furth.4 It was placed 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. 148f.).5 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 kin- ship of God (see ibid., p. 137–139).6 He is called to follow his soul, a mother’s fear of losing her son 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? In the nature itself.

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 involun- tary grinding his teeth at night. The movements of his heart—believed to house the mind and affection in medieval times—is a mediator. The narrator’s desire for a peaceful relationship with the wolf, he helplessly faces the “giant [...] the thing that crushes” (p. 222), which he himself helped to build.

2 “my own death.”
3 Translated by A.R.
4 This work is at the center of my dissertation project in medieval literature associated with the project “Tigiane und Alloneines. The Literary Dynamics of Self-Observation and the Observation of Others in German Poetry in the Middle Ages,” being part of the CRC 1349.
5 “Stand auf, der armer sünder.”
6 “Wach auf, der sünder, schmerzer man.”
7 Translated by A.R.
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 thickening of borders – and what role, if any, does history play in an envisioned reversion 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 toward 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” and crossed the line, which had not yet been surveyed, marking a place on the map of the area that would later on 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 the world – be it a river or a border again. 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 boundaries moving as far as 150 years later, to the north or south of the 1848/1853 border that separated the territory of the United States from the contiguous lands of Mexico. These 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 de-normalizing a given era” (Garland 2014, p. 365). Taken together then, the episodes in Cantú evoke a powerful notion of historical dynamics and do their share of de-normalizing 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 high not just descriptive but also as devices used to create a powerful historical and political argument, in some way contributing to the construction of an ideal past or to advocate for literally turning back time. Few 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 best-selling 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 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 high-tech-nologized border itself, allows people living in the borderlands to become complicit with a system designed to curtail immi-gration – a parallel 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 transition 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 subjectivity. According to Cantú, such a constant state of vulnerability produces “a constant awareness and preparedness toward thepressive 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 refers to as “settler epiphanies” – knowledge that has long ex-isted among oppressed minorities, and which White settlers are often late learners. In that sense, we are learning something new when Cantú urges his readers to be vigilant – not to pro-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 re-ceive the same amount of attention. Of course, this is a famil iar accusation for many anthropologists, who have similarly been characterized as enacting themselves by studying the suffering of cultural “Others” (Robbins 2013). Unlike many an-thropologists, 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 himself moved by their grief that he fully acknowledges his own participation in the politics of deportation, and his un-willingness 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 re-sisting 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-writ ers such as Cantú and anthropologists need to cultivate within themselves in order to de-center our own privileged perspec-tive while centering and amplifying the voices of those who are marginalized and oppressed by current border policies.

References

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