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Riley Red Klug
rak0027@mix.wvu.edu

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A Line Becomes a River: An Introduction to the Border

Riley Klug

Abstract

The campus read of 2021-2022, *A Line Becomes a River* by Francisco Cantú, tells a wonderful story of identity, history, and immigration. This story brings up a number of broader contemporary topics of politics, human rights, and militarization of the border, and nuanced topics such as the harshness of many border patrol workers, the laws they enforce and follow, and the militarization of the border. These topics and their real-world manifestations are supplemented by a thorough literature review of works from prominent immigration scholars in fields of social work, anthropology, history, journalism, and government. This paper takes a look at the campus read, as well as a number of other contemporary sources on immigration and human rights to discuss how these topics manifest in modern political thought and legal regulations on immigration allowance or reform, as well as other topics.

Introduction

Throughout the book, *A Line Becomes a River* by Francisco Cantú, we are faced with a number of topics, some more nuanced than the rest. Law enforcement, law, border patrol, immigration, familial impact, and other such topics were thrown at the reader, taking them through a rollercoaster of emotion and a terrifyingly real look at the lives of those involved with the US–Mexico Border. More nuanced themes such as the toll one’s job can take on a person and the mental health issues faced by families impacted by immigration and border patrol agents were thrown throughout the read, occasionally reminding us of the humanity of border agents and families. This paper takes a look at the campus read, as well as a number of other contemporary sources on immigration and human rights to discuss how these topics manifest in modern political thought and legal regulations on immigration allowance or reform, as well as other topics.

Francisco Cantú’s memoir, *A Line Becomes a River*, 2018, follows his life through his life during and after his time as a border patrol agent. Cantú tells of his experiences from his time at the academy, on the field, in the office, and even in the court room as he helps a friend through his deportation journey. He

tells of his experiences with migrants in the US-Mexico borderlands, discussing the life of immigrants he briefly met, as well as his life and thoughts dealing with the mental hardships of border patrol work (Cantú, 2018).

This memoir was extremely impactful, teaching many the issues faced by border patrol agents, migrants, and families of migrants. Cantú invites readers to learn from his experiences and gives them the opportunity to learn the same history he was taught at the academy, giving an outsider an inside look at the border and its stories. These firsthand looks allow readers to see the real intricacies of these border issues that so many choose to avoid. We are faced with the brutality of the border, the pain, sorrow, and fear that it inflicts on those who try to cross and their families. This entirely human quality of the world is often forgotten when it comes to politics, which have decimated the current views many individuals have on Hispanic appearing individuals and migrants. This text gives readers this view of immigration work and issues that they may otherwise be blind or ignorant of, developing on the lived experiences of immigrants, their families, and those who live and work on the border.

History of the Border: The Creation of the US—Mexico Border Wall

In *A Line Becomes a River*, Cantú repeatedly gives us a brief history of the border and its creation. We are told of the ways in which people delineated the border, how the border was decided, and the troubles many people went through to delegate this imaginary yet tangible line between the United States and Mexico (Cantú 2018). This fictitious border line the main barrier many people face when searching for a better life. This invisible barrier stops thousands of people from living better and kills many of the thousands it stops. Cantú's lecture gave us another, closer to home argument, stating how West Virginia was once a border, uncharted and wild, as delineated by the proclamation line (Cantú, Lecture, November 16, 2021). This discussion of the proclamation line and the territories kept away from American citizens shows even further how imaginary this border truly is. So, what happens to those who cross this imaginary line?

The development of the US—Mexico Border has been long in the works. As the early colonies traveled Westward, questions of where Mexico ended and where the US began popped up frequently. The Gadsden Purchase of 1849 was a solution to this issue, as Mexico sold an extremely large portion of its land, almost 530,000 square miles of land in modern day US to the government for \$15,000,000.00 and an additional \$3,200,000.00 for claims (Schmidt, 1961, 246). This sale, coupled with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo at the same time sold the gold rush territory in Mexico to the United States, creating what is almost the modern-day US—Mexico Border. A series of articles and commissioners attempted to survey the land for a substantial amount of time, eventually ending

with the Bartlett-Condé agreement of 1850, in which the United States surrendered nearly 6,000 square miles of territory back to Mexico (Ibid, p. 250). These final touches created what is now the modern border of US and Mexico.

Contrary to popular belief, the building of the US—Mexico Border Wall began in 1918, when the Mayor of Nogales on the Mexican side of the border chose to build a wall between the two cities (St. John 2018). After the erection of this border wall, others were put up between many border towns spanning the two nations (Ibid). Later fences erected by the United States in the 1940's-1990's were placed in ways that made “unauthorized” migration between the two countries dangerous for border crossers, which began the cruel defense tactic that is now known as Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD) (Ibid). In 2006, the Secure Fence Act was signed by President Bush which reinforced existing fencing at the border, built hundreds of miles of new border walls, and created a 110 yard “border zone” on the US side of the border for customs workers (Brandys et al 2018, pp 136). Other Border actions such as the REAL ID Act during President Obama’s term were also impactful to the creation of the Border Wall. However, President Trump and his relatively anti-immigration platform had a very large impact on the creation of the Border Wall.

Many of Trump’s campaign promises upon election emphasized a strong reform of the immigrant “issue” in the United States, which included the building of a border wall and improved deportation practices (Browning, 2020, pp. 130). Shortly after his election, the building of the border wall, which he affectionately called “The Wall,” began. During his presidency, hundreds of miles of border wall was built, funded by American taxpayers against Trump’s original campaign promise, until it was halted by President Biden in 2021 (Hansen 2022). The recent history of the border wall’s construction has spurred tons of political discourse in American voters across party lines. This leads us to the question, how has the political discourse surrounding the immigration “debate” led to the development of public opinion in the sphere of immigration?

Politics of the Border: Human Rights as a Political Controversy

Political stances on the topic of immigration and border patrol have been stirring in the United States since long before I was able to understand this topic. Recently, during and after Donald Trump’s presidency, the politics of immigration have been heavily amplified, especially in the alarmist and hostile tweets posted by @realDonaldTrump on Twitter (Gounari, 2018, pp. 218). However, this negative view of immigration was sparked well before Trump’s presidency.

This negative framing of immigrants undoubtedly comes from political campaigns and legislation that arose shortly after WWI, with immigration restriction passed in the Immigration Act of 1924, signed by Calvin Coolidge (Fonner 2017, pp. 755-759). This is the start of anti-immigration policy and history in the United States. Politics have become motivated by one's stance on immigration, with Trump's "Build the Wall" sentiment being one of his top political campaigns in 2015 and 2019 (Browning, 2020, pp. 130).

From Cantú's campus talk on November 16th, he begins by discussing the past politics of immigration, the stance that Thomas Jefferson held stating that "immigration is a human right," an inalienable right of the people to move to find better lives for themselves and their families (Cantú, Lecture, November 16, 2021). How is it that these views changed so drastically to the anti-immigration mindset many Americans have now? The political atmosphere of the 21st century has become riddled with terribly framed sentiments, that "immigrants are stealing our jobs," and "immigrants are criminals," which leads us to the issue of reframing.

Political discourse on this issue has largely framed the ways in which individuals learn about the history and continuance of Mexican American immigration, adding unnecessary details and leaving out information necessary to have a full understanding of the issue. Cantú discussed in his lecture the now "long-standing conflation of migrants with criminals," which of course damages the views individuals have on migration (Cantú, Lecture, November 16, 2021). This view can be seen in the recent induction of the "holiday" by President Trump, the National Day of Remembrance for Americans Killed by Illegal Aliens, which happened to coincide with the Hispanic holiday of Día de los Muertos (Trump, Proclamation, October 30, 2020). This framing of migrants as criminals and "aliens," and the use of dangerous language to describe migration and migrants is extremely prevalent in media and society, continuing to damage the views individuals have on migrants.

This issue of the Border Wall is framed as something that is beneficial to all Americans, and largely as something all Americans should want. However, is that really the case? In a case study done in 2019 by Craig Kafura and Dina Smeltz, they have said that only 39% of Americans define immigration as a "critical threat," which is a large decline from the 1990's (Kafura et al, 2019, p. 3). Overall trends for all party's thoughts on immigration as a critical threat have gone down by 15-40% in Democratic and Independent Parties but has gone up by 15% in the Republican Party (Kafura et al, 2019, p. 4). A large number of Republicans, 7 in 10, say that reducing illegal immigration is a goal, whereas only 2 in 10 Democrats agree (Kafura et al, 2019, p. 4). With these numbers in mind, we can see that a majority of American voters do not believe the Border Wall and enhanced immigration policies would be beneficial or necessary to the continuation of the United States.

This view can be greatly improved through the reframing of violent language and generalizations when discussing border issues. By refraining from using certain language when discussing migration issues, stereotypes perpetuated at the border can be mitigated and the American view of migration can be improved. Asmus brings in how to approach narratives on immigration in K-12 courses by introducing Young Adult (YA) literature with personal narratives on immigration, which will build empathy in the reader and an author—audience connection that is harder to find in other academic texts (Asmus, 2018, p. 19). Reframing student introductions to topics like immigration can greatly improve the overall mindset that individuals have on immigration. However, this improvement must be worked for and taught, just as one must learn about the border and its history when discussing the issues faced around it.

Militarization of the Border: The Development of Prevention Through Deterrence

Law enforcement such as Congressmen and women who create the laws, the courts who enact them, and the border patrol agents who enforce them, are all to be held accountable for the issues at the border. Cantú discusses the highly militarized border and the problems this has caused for migrants (Cantú, Lecture, November 16, 2021). We also see this militarized border discussed in Jason De León's ethnography, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, in which the themes of Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD) has led to a weaponized border near safe crossing locations, forcing migrants to travel through harsher locations in order to cross into the United States (De León 2015, pp. 23-37).

First, we must define PTD and what the goals are. PTD is a form of border patrol in which a “decisive number” of enforcement officers are deployed to work at the US—Mexico Border at major entry points (US Border Patrol, 1994, pp. 6). This enhanced military and police presence at the entry points aims at “raising the risk of apprehension high enough to be an effective deterrent,” effectively working to stop illegal immigration before it starts (US Border Patrol, 1994, pp. 6). With that in mind, one can see that the clear goal of Prevention Through Deterrence is to prevent illegal immigration by making the trip ‘futile,’ with the high apprehension rate being off putting to potential immigrants. This plan seems as though it may work, but does it really?

The main goal of PTD is to stop individuals from crossing the border in the first place; however, it seems as though that the over policing of the border is not actually stopping migrants from attempting to and crossing the US—Mexico Border. Since the year 2000, there have been an estimated 5 million migrants have crossed the border into the United States (De León, 2016). De León also stated in his ethnography that 92-98% of those that do not succeed in crossing

the border the first time are able to make it across on their second attempt (De León, 2015, pp. 106). Even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants still chose to cross, with the number of apprehensions per month being the largest ever since the year 2000 (Morrissey, 2021). With these statistics in mind, we can see that PTD is not actually deterring migrants from crossing the border, so what is it that PTD is doing?

Prevention Through Deterrence began by placing more law enforcement officers at the urban entry points of the border, these entry points allowed for relatively free and safer travel between the United States and Mexico. In putting law enforcement in these urban entry points, migrants would be forced to traverse “remote, uninhabited expanses of land,” putting themselves in “mortal danger,” (US Border Patrol, 1994, p. 2). While in communication with migrants, De León noted that not only was the journey harsher, but it was also much longer, going from 20 days to cross Mexico, to weeks to get out of the state of Chiapas (De León, 2016). Considering the hostile terrain, the length of time it would take to immigrate to the United States, the heat, and dangerous animals found on the new migrant trail, the federal policymakers are “essentially outsourcing border enforcement to nature,” (De León, 2016). Thankfully, not all who make the attempt to cross the border die on the migrant trail, but what happens to those who live?

Many Mexican migrants who attempt to cross the border get caught, while only some make it across undetected. Those who are not so lucky get tried and detained in US custody for a number of days, that number relating to how many times they have been caught attempting to cross (Cantú 2018). Cantú discussed how detainee’s, even those who are granted legal asylum in the United States, are held in buildings “unaccountable and shut off from public view,” seemingly treating these migrants and asylum seekers as if they do not deserve to be seen (Cantú, Lecture, November 16, 2021). Migrants and asylum seekers are kept in these for-profit detention centers for as long as possible, waiting to be deported back to their home countries. These detention centers profit off of the “legal” holding and detaining of migrants and asylum seekers, commodifying the bodies of migrant individuals (Cantú, Lecture, November 16, 2021). Migrants are further discouraged from filing for asylum due to the lengthy paperwork and detention they face while waiting for the papers to be filed and processed (Heyman, 1995, p. 268).

These attempts at militarizing the border and the creation of Prevention Through Deterrence has lead mainly to the furthered harm of Mexican and Latin American migrants hoping to cross into the United States. Many different subjects regarding the militarization of the border and immigration has sparked the creativity of a number of people, looking to speak out about the hostility and violence found on the migrant trail.

Art of the Border: Personal Reflections on Immigration

These detention centers, the creation of the border wall, the death of migrants on the trail, and the confiscation of migrant's items upon detention has developed a new subject within the art world. Humanitarian efforts to depict the horrors and death of the migrant trail are seen throughout contemporary art and visual media over the last decade. Artists like Lauren Gill, Jenny Polak, and Tom Kiefer have had a number of things to say on the issue of immigration in the United States. Touching on topics such as detention centers and confiscation of migrant belongings, these artists tell an inside story of the lives of migrants on the border.

Photos cannot be taken of detention centers, making it difficult for people to see the conditions of these centers where migrants are forced to stay after they have been apprehended. Artists Lauren Gill and Jenny Polak have worked together to depict these detention centers in a 3-dimensional computer rendering entitled *Hard Place* (Desai, 2010, p. 431). *Hard Place* renders these centers in different US states such as California, Arizona, Texas, and many others, showing the harsh conditions that migrants endure within these detention centers for "unknown" periods of time (Desai, 2010, p. 431). These art pieces offer an astounding look at the true conditions that migrants and asylum seekers are kept in once detained. These 3D looks at detention centers can be found at Jenny Polak's artist website, JennyPolak.com.

Upon detention, many of migrant's belongings are taken from them, just as possessions are taken from those being admitted to jail (Holson, 2018). Artist Tom Kiefer has made a career with art made from what is taken from immigrants upon detention. Working on the border as a janitor, Kiefer had access to the confiscated and later trashed items from migrants (Holson, 2018). His pieces such as *Tuny*, *Nuevo Testamentos*, and *Toy Car Pile Up* show the items taken from migrants at the border, with these objects developing upon the humanity of those being detained and the life they had lived up until their detention. Kiefer's other works and this collection on immigration can be found at his artist website, TomKiefer.com. Other works show a more astounding tale of things taken at the border, specifically human life. The Undocumented Migration Project (UMP) worked with a number of US museums to put of installation pieces of toe tags of deceased migrants, including the city they were migrating from before their death (Undocumented Migration Project, 2020). Viewers are introduced to a relatively sterile environment in which they are faced with the death of hundreds, if not thousands of migrants who passed when dealing with the hostile terrain of the Sonoran Desert.

Conclusion and Thoughts

Through a look at Cantú's book, *A Line Becomes a River*, and his lecture at West Virginia University's Festival of Ideas, this paper analyzed many topics of discussion regarding the US—Mexico Border. It is through substantial interconnectedness that the ideas of politics, framing, history, detention, and law enforcement have sprung about, everything circling back, becoming the reason for and the consequence of migration ideas, politics, and law enforcement. These ideas have all become topics of thought in my mind, helping me to better understand ideas, stances, and arguments for and against immigration.

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Author Bio

I am a sophomore Art History and Anthropology double major at West Virginia University. I have been taking a look at the Ancient and Contemporary arts, cultures, and issues of Latin America as a whole. My studies have shown me to a number of different avenues within Latin American Studies, bringing me currently to the contemporary issue of Immigration and human rights. I will

continue my studies in Latin America, broadening my knowledge base on the ancient and contemporary of the Latin American world.