The campus-wide summer reading for the 2019-2020 academic year is Francisco Cantú’s *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border*. Cantú was raised in West Texas by the daughter of a Mexican immigrant who worked as a guide in a national park. Attending American University in Washington D.C., he studied international relations and became obsessed with studying the borderlands where he grew up. As graduation approached, a job with the U.S. Border Patrol presented itself as a way to experience the realities of the border for himself. He rationalized, “I’ll never understand it unless I’m close to it.” The job seemed to be a natural step toward doing policy work or immigration law.

Joining the agency at age 23, Cantú served as an agent for the Border Patrol from 2008-2012 in the deserts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas—but the experience failed to answer his questions. In a recent interview, Cantú attests to the nuanced nature of the border issue, saying, “If we’re going to have any meaningful conversation…it has to start from a place that recognizes this as a deeply, deeply complex issue, regardless of race. I was attracted to the border as a way of getting answers to all these questions I had, but after all these years, I only have more questions.”

In addition to the growing number of questions, working with the Patrol began to take a toll on Cantú’s psyche. *The Line Becomes a River*, much like his surreal dreams, presents fragments of Cantú’s experience at the border. Aside from the historical information that is interspersed in the narrative, there is little of the economic or political context that surrounds immigration policy. The book is primarily about Cantú himself. It is a memoir of a young man attempting to understand identity and violence, and discovering a human connection that is stronger than the border.

Cantú began writing to make sense of his experience at the border, earning an MFA at the University of Arizona and completing the first manuscript of *The Line Becomes a River* in 2016. As the book went to publication, he hoped that this book would be a “relic of an uglier time in the past.” Unfortunately, that has not been the case.

The book was named a Top 10 Book of 2018 by *The Washington Post*, was shortlisted for the 2019 Andrew Carnegie Medal of Excellence, and was a finalist for the National Book Critic Circle Nonfiction Award. A former Fulbright fellow, Cantú is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize, a
2017 Whiting Award, and a 2018 Art for Justice fellowship. His writing and translations have been featured in *The New York Times*, *Best American Essays*, *Harper’s* and *Guernica*, as well as on NPR’s *This American Life*.

Our conversation about Cantú’s book will begin during New Student Orientation. Right from the start, you’ll be developing your ability to read carefully, think critically, and write persuasively. Because the orientation schedule will involve many events, you will need to complete your reading of *The Line Becomes a River* before you arrive on campus on Saturday, August 31st.

Your first step will be to purchase the book: copies will be available for purchase at the Luther Book Shop during Summer Registration. You’ll write your first Paideia paper about *The Line Becomes a River*, and, as with each of our readings, it will be important to have your own copy at hand for discussion.

Paideia is fundamentally a course in reading and writing. We’ve provided questions below to help you read closely and thoughtfully. Please think about these questions as you read the entire book, making notes as you go. Answering the questions will, without a doubt, better prepare you to participate in class discussions of the book.

Writing notes in the margins as you read may be the best way to enhance your comprehension—and those annotations will prove to be extremely useful when it’s time to write about the book! When you have finished a section, stop to review what you’ve read and capture in a few notes what the section was about.

**Prologue and Part I, pp. 3-77**

1. Reading carefully to make inferences based on the memoir, what do you understand as Cantú’s motives for working for the Border Patrol?

2. Cantú’s mother is introduced early in the narrative and reappears throughout the story. How does his mother hold Cantú accountable or keep him tethered to their shared morals and identity? Does Cantú’s assertion that “stepping into a system doesn’t mean that the system becomes you” hold true?

3. What feelings does Cantú experience in his early encounters with individual border crossers and quitters?

4. Is Cantú able to reconcile the violent or disrespectful acts he witnesses at the border? Why do agents desecrate the belongings of crossers and drain the water jugs that they find in the desert?
5. What signs are there that working at the border comes with a cost to Cantú’s psyche? Is there anything that suggests to you that his human spirit or psychological well-being is at risk?

6. How does the historical information that is interspersed throughout the narrative help you to understand the nature of the border? Find examples of how Cantú sees the borderlands as an arbitrary, “unnatural divide”—desolate and inhospitable to life—yet at the same time a beautiful, almost surreal, landscape.

**Part II, pp. 81-160**

The section opens with a story that the author’s mother read to him when he was a child. In the story, San Francisco de Asís makes peace with a fearsome wolf by promising the wolf that it will no longer suffer hunger if it promises to stop killing livestock and devouring people. As Cantú struggles to come to terms with the border environment, you can anticipate that this section will include realistic and disturbing representations of violence.

7. In his new position at the intel center, how does Cantú deal with the normalization of violence at the border? What is his response to that violence? After reading pp. 150-151, do you think the author is experiencing moral confusion or simply accepting things that he knows are wrong?

8. In the 1990s, policy makers instituted “Operation Gatekeeper,” which hardened border security in urban areas where it was easier to cross, reasoning that the difficult, desolate conditions of the desert would serve as its own deterrent. How does Cantú demonstrate that desert rescue operations have become an “unintended consequence” of this deterrence policy? How are migrants commodified by smugglers and coyotes?

9. On pp. 114-115, Cantú refers to the book *Antigona Gonzalez* by Sara Uribe, which is about a search for the body of a lost brother among the thousands lost in the war against drug trafficking. How does the anonymity of bodies, including those of women, “negate the essential humanity of the victims”? How do commonly used metaphors also dehumanize migrants (109-110)? What does it mean, on pp. 144-145, to “turn the numbers back into people”?

10. To what extent does the author seem to be motivated to understand his third-generation Mexican American identity? Find parts of the narrative where this somewhat-latent sense of identity strikes a chord in Cantú.
Part III and Epilogue, pp. 163-247

On page 189, Cantú suggests that his friend might have managed to get legal status through Obama administration regulations that allow parents of U.S. citizen children to stay in the country. Cantú is referring to DAPA, which was subsequently invalidated by the courts, leaving no such protection for parents of citizens. There currently is no way for undocumented immigrants (parents of citizens or otherwise) to become legal.

11. The third part of the memoir recounts Cantú’s working in the immigration system in a different capacity: using what he knows to advocate for an undocumented friend. What does the author learn about the far-reaching emotional and logistical effects of enforcement at the border?

12. Through the case study of José Martinez-Cruz, Cantú unveils a human story behind the statistics. What set of values drives José to face legal consequences and risk his life to repeatedly cross the border?

13. On p. 206, Cantú wonders, “Was I merely being driven to make good for the lives I had sent back across the line?” Do you think that Cantú helps José and his family to earn redemption for himself or out of genuine empathy? To what extent can he leave behind his moral responsibility as a Border Patrol agent? Is redemption possible or has the violence that the author witnessed become part of who he is?

14. The author gives over the final pages of Part 3 (from p. 233) to José’s point of view, to allow José to give voice to his own experience and convictions. What impact does this choice have on you as a reader? What is your assessment of José’s moral equation?

15. At the close of his memoir, Cantú writes about swimming in the Rio Grande, “crossing the river time and again…until finally, for one brief moment, I forgot in which country I stood.” How has Cantú made you think differently about the nature of borders?

We are pleased to announce that Francisco Cantú, author of The Line Becomes a River, will join us on campus for the Fall 2019 Opening Convocation as well as an on-stage interview and book signing.