Convocation Essay Questions

After reading The Line Becomes a River, please carefully read the two-part prompts below and select the one that most appeals to you. Produce a response of about 750 words (this is flexible for creative responses in genres other than prose) in which you both engage the book, quoting specific passages to provide examples or to clarify your ideas, and reflect upon your own unique experience and perspective. This essay, which will be collected, will prepare you for the Convocation discussion. Check out The College Reads website for additional resources!

(1) Creativity on the Line
In the concluding Author’s Note, Cantú writes that his book “seeks to function as literature rather than reportage, to resonate more deeply within the soul rather than the mind.” This approach can lead to a powerful, immersive reading experience. It also demands much of the reader as we are not told how to feel or think about these often brief and unconnected scenes, but rather asked to construct, as Cantú puts it, our own “moral interpretation.” In the first part of your response, introduce us to and closely analyze one narrative moment or vignette that you found particularly evocative and effective. What makes this moment so powerful? How does Cantú use small details to convey certain unspoken tensions and emotions?

(2) What Lies Beyond Idealism
In one of the early conversations that Cantú has with his mother about his motivations for joining the Border Patrol, he says that “I know there’s something here I can’t look away from…. Whatever it is, I’ll never understand it unless I’m close to it.” Do you think that Cantú’s time in the Border Patrol gave him the understanding he was looking for? In the first part of your response, highlight and explore a few key moments in the narrative where you think Cantú’s early idealism seemed to be either supported or challenged. Where on the spectrum between idealism and despair do you think that Cantú ultimately concludes his account? If we are not left with clear answers to the border crisis, what are we ultimately left with?

(3) Solving the Unsolvable
Cantú enters the Border Patrol with hopes that his university studies, complemented by a few years of boots-on-the-ground experience as an agent and witness, will yield ideas for policy solutions to the ongoing border crisis. As is clear from Cantú’s narrative, viable immigration reform can seem hopelessly impossible as the border continues to invite violence, destroy families, and consume a significant level of human, environmental, and economic resources. In the first part of your response, discuss a moment in Cantú’s account where the failures of border policy are most pronounced. Beyond these apparent failures, do you think Cantú offers a glimmer of hope? If so, where do you find evidence for this?

After introducing the reader to a key part of Cantú’s text, reflect upon how the immigration debate has changed in light of family separations at the border, the threat of losing key protections for undocumented individuals, the current administration’s push for an enhanced border wall, and a broad increase in deportations and criminal prosecutions for those who cross the border illegally. Given all of these complexities, what do you think are the most promising solutions to the current border crisis? And how would you encourage someone with an opposite point of view to consider those solutions?

Learn more about the border and organizations addressing the crisis...