



Who is Dayani Cristal? Discussion Guide

Director: Marc Silver

Year: 2013

Time: 85 min

You might know this director from:
The Leech and the Earthworm (2003)

FILM SUMMARY

Two words - Dayani Cristal - tattooed across the chest of an otherwise unidentifiable man found dead in the Arizona desert serve as the focal point around which director Marc Silver and actor Gael García Bernal tell their story of hope and despair on the wild frontier.

Traversing the hot dusty terrain of Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and Arizona, WHO IS DAYANI CRISTAL? picks up scattered clues along the trail to identify the man left for dead just a 20-minute car ride outside of Tucson. This film contains three narratives: one a forensic testimony and procedural study of the work of U.S. authorities, one a poetic reenactment by Bernal as he retraces the presumed footsteps of the tattooed John Doe, and one a heart-breaking glimpse at the community from where the anonymous migrant originated.

Rich in imagery, in wide-sweeping shots of the extensive barricade marking the U.S.-Mexican border, in mournful words provided by those who knew the fallen migrant, WHO IS DAYANI CRISTAL? places U.S. immigration policy amidst the stark desert landscape and asks: How is law weightier than life? Or in the words of forensic anthropologist Bruce Anderson, "How many deaths does it take to say enough is enough?" The dehumanization of migrants carries on. The stack of unidentified remains amasses. The despair expands. The forensic specialists, the local police, the border officials chase their tales as the problem increases with the severity of the law. And out on the road a fraternity forms, fuelled forwards by hope, with God the ever-present factor.

Once Dilcy Yohan Sandres-Martinez, the 29-year-old husband and father of three, is revealed, and we stare into the eyes of 3-year-old Dayani Cristal, who will never again feel her father's embrace, the case against such hostile immigration policy seems complete. The jury is still out on whether life or the law wins in the end.

FILM THEMES

When an economic issue translates into nameless corpses surfacing in the Arizona desert, the facts of the severely disparate opportunities offered across borderlines come into sharp focus.

MIGRATION AS A HUMAN, NOT CRIMINAL, ACT

“Migrants are not a threat. They are an opportunity.” With these words, Father Alejandro stated an age-old truth. Being the opportunists we are, humans have always migrated. It is in our blood to move, to wander, to adventure for more with the hope of a greater future. The men, women, and children crossing the border are rarely criminals on a mission to hurt, kill, pillage, damage. They are hopeful human beings not content with the poverty they are subjected to back home, individuals who have heard the tales of a promised land. By migrating out into the world, they are tapping into the most human desire of all – the search for better.

THE PROMISED LAND

Since the United States was founded, immigrants have fled to the promised land in the hopes of creating a new life, leaving the past behind, making a difference where none was possible at home. The American dream, complete with visions of gold-paved streets, is alive and kicking to many from countries south of the border. As they gaze north across the horizon, the telescope of hope sharpens and the prospect of a greater life comes into focus. The cycle continues, and the fabled green grasses of the United States beckon people to risk it all, to put their lives on the line for the American dream.

AN ECONOMIC MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

An Hispanic work force generates millions of dollars across the United States. Yet the southern U.S. border – the one that geographically connects the country that serves and the country that asks to be served – is one of the more fortified, restricted, highly barricaded borderlines out there. The people needed to keep the U.S. mechanism in motion are barred from entering in a legal, safe manner. Treating these once hopeful migrants as criminals, the U.S. government funds a wall, a non-living entity. Billions of dollars are invested in fighting a war against those who hope to break free from the doldrums, and the importance of legality over human life becomes status quo within immigration policy.

RELIGION, THE CONSTANT

God is ever-present in Hispanic culture. In the marketplace, on the hearth, in the back of a dusty pickup truck, in the pocket of an anonymous body found in the Sonoran Desert. For people living far below the poverty line with no opportunity for miles around, religion is the saving grace, the constant hope, the light and love that will never disappear. As they set off on a journey of life and death, full of fear, hope, anxiety, and uncertainty, God is the single surety. He will follow them through it all, never abandon their side, never condemn them for trying nor leave them when the terrain is troublesome. The less control one has, the more room made for religion.

“I would like all Americans to acknowledge that they benefit from a blue-collar labor force that has brown skin.”

Bruce Anderson

“Somebody had a dream, but they ended up being a number, a statistic.”

Lorenia Ivon Ton-Quevedo

“Poor people are the spiritual reserve of the world.”

Father Alejandro Solalinde

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Name five feelings WHO IS DAYANI CRISTAL? evoked in you.
2. What is your ancestry? Did your family originally immigrate to the country which you now call home?
3. Is there a large foreign-born population in your community? If so, are they well received or treated as outsiders by the locals?
4. Do you think that the United States' immigration laws should be relaxed in order to aid more migrants to safely enter the country?
5. Do you believe that developed countries require a foreign blue-collar working force in order to maintain their standard of living?
6. Have you ever lived in a country other than your country of birth? If so, how did it feel to be a foreigner?
7. What are your thoughts about children who are born to illegal immigrants? Do they hold any responsibility, and if so when and where does this responsibility begin?
8. What are the reasons different people migrate? Should people be encouraged to migrate, or to remain in their place of birth?
9. Did you think Gael García Bernal's presence in the film added or detracted from the plot?
10. Most of the migrants introduced in the film appeared to be religious. How does an individual's faith impact the decision to make such a treacherous migration?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- **WHO IS DAYANI CRISTAL?** won a Cinematography Award at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival, while being nominated for the Grand Jury Prize.
- While gathering information for the film, Gael García Bernal and director Marc Silver made four short films for Amnesty called *The Invisibles*, which exposed some of the struggles faced by migrants traveling through Mexico on their way to the United States. This process informed much of **WHO IS DAYANI CRISTAL?**
- The U.N. defines the term migrant as “an individual who has resided in a foreign country for more than one year irrespective of the causes, voluntary or involuntary, and the means, regular or irregular, used to migrate.” The International Organization for Migration divides migrants into 5 categories: documented, economic, irregular, skilled, and temporary. By this definition, Dilcy Yohan Sandres Martinez – the subject of **WHO IS DAYANI CRISTAL?** – was none of these types of migrants, an invisible.
- In 1960, Europeans constituted the majority of U.S. immigrants, with 13% originating from Italy and 10% from Germany. By 2012, Latin Americans and Asians had far surpassed Europeans, with 28% of U.S. immigrants coming from Mexico. India and China came in second and third place after Mexico.
- Gael García Bernal was born in Guadalajara, Mexico. Both of his parents were actors.
- California has the highest immigrant population out of all U.S. states, with 27% of Californians – or 10.3 million inhabitants – being immigrants, followed by New York (23%), New Jersey (21%), Florida (19%), and Nevada (19%).
- The first time data was collected on the country of birth of individuals in the U.S. was for the 1850 decennial census. This was also the first time the census bureau attempted to record every member of every household, including women, children, and slaves. In that year, there were 2.2 million immigrants in the U.S., approximately 10% of the overall population. By 1890, high levels of European immigration helped push the foreign-born U.S. population up to 15%.
- The majority of expatriate Hondurans move to the U.S., with an estimated 1 million – 15% of the domestic population – calling the U.S. home.
- Smugglers on the U.S.-Mexico border, aiding people to cross illegally into the United States, are informally referred to as “coyotes.”
- An immigrant to the United States is classified illegal for three reasons: entering the U.S. at any time or place other than those designated, alluding examination by an immigration agent, or attempting to enter the U.S. using false identification papers. Prison term for the first offense is six months, followed by two years for the second offense. Arizona SB 1070 is the toughest-ever illegal immigration bill in the U.S.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Give others the chance to learn from its story.
2. **Consider** donating to the [Colibrí Center for Human Rights](#), an organization helping to identify human remains on the U.S.-Mexico border, in order to assist families searching for a loved one.
3. **Volunteer** time or money with [Hermanos en el Camino](#) (Brothers on the Road), which assists migrants on their way from Mexico to the United States.
4. **Support** The [Washington Office on Latin America](#) (WOLA) – an organization that promotes human rights, democracy, and social justice.
5. **Consider** your own background and those of the people in your life. Migration is featured in all of our lives.

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Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.