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## Who is Dayani Cristal?

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# Who is Dayani Cristal?

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Who is Dayani Cristal?* (2013) directed by Marc Silver.

## **Keywords**

Immigration, Mexico

*Who Is Dayani Cristal?*

Directed by Marc Silver

(World Documentary)

*Who Is Dayani Cristal?* is a well-intentioned but disjointed documentary-drama on immigration. It all began in 2008 when Gael García Bernal, Marc Silver, Thomas



Benski and Lucas Ochoa decided that they wanted to tell a story about what Bernal calls “one of the main factors that has shaped the history of mankind and the planet: migration.” They learnt that each year during the summer months approximately 200 hundred bodies are recovered from the desert in and around Pima County, Arizona and most of these bodies are unidentified. The film begins with the discovery of one such brown and bloated body who bears a tattoo on his chest: "Dayani Cristal." The documentary traces not only the dedicated detective work on this side of the border to discover this John Doe's identity, but dramatizes the migrant's journey from Honduras to Arizona.

They wanted to tell a story that followed the whole process - from the discovery of someone in the desert, to the forensic investigation into their identity, to finding their family and their burial at home. “We had to find a way of creating

visually compelling, exciting cinema that was at once a meditation on mortality and bereavement and at the same time a forensic procedural, a mystery and in some ways a road movie,” explains producer Thomas Benski. Unfortunately this tripartite genre melding fails to come together in the end. The pathos of the immigrant’s family coupled with the empathy of various doctors and investigators in Arizona are more than enough to carry a dramatic documentary. Casting a white-skinned, well spoken, European-trained Mexican actor with nice teeth (Gael Garcia Bernal) in the role of the poor immigrant was distracting. Interspersing this dramatic reenactment with the documentary footage only detracted from the power of the heartbreaking story. For a better narrative account of the perilous journey from Central America to the U.S. look no further than the Sundance 2009 feature, *Sin Nombre*.

While stylistically this film fails, it succeeds in giving a human face and back story to the hundreds of unidentified migrants who die each year in the desert. "It’s easier to argue the politics when we take the humanity out of the equation” explains writer Mark Monroe. The body found in the desert becomes a beloved husband who loved his three children dearly, a cherished son, husband, brother, friend. This migrant had a name, Dilcy Yohan. He was from a small town in Honduras and died far from home at age 29, only a few miles south of the city of Tucson, Arizona.

Spirituality is a sustaining force for the migrants. The film pauses at the Brother on the Road shelter in Ixtepec, Mexico. This place offers more than a hot meal, a place to play soccer, or wash your clothes; it offers weary migrants spiritual food for the journey northward. The Catholic priest who runs the shelter articulated a fundamental tenet of Liberation Theology: "The poor are the spiritual reserve of the earth." At the Brother on the Road shelter travelers are handed a small booklet containing *The Migrant's Prayer* to comfort them on the road. This prayer book ends the film and begins with the declaration: "The journey towards you, O Lord, is life." Indeed, life is fundamentally what most of these economically-driven immigrants are seeking. Those seeking an immigration documentary that delves deeper into the role of spirituality and migration should screen Daniel Groody's *Dying to Live: a Migrant's Journey*.

*Who is Dayani Cristal?* is a well-intended immigration documentary that lost its way. Marc Silver did not recognize that his unique contribution to the genre of immigration docs was his access to the morgue in Pima, Arizona and the wealth of human stories in cold storage. — Jeanette Reedy Solano