

“Illegal Immigrants” in the USA: Invisible in Life, Invisible in Death

Review of Documentary, Who is Dayani Cristal? Shows Illegal immigrants Found Dead in US Deserts

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The documentary, Who is Dayani Cristal? shows illegal immigrants found dead in US deserts.[i] Acclaimed actor, Gael García Bernal, tells one man’s story. He leaves his Honduran family, crowds onto the top of trains, reaches a border he can’t cross, enters a country that doesn’t want him, and dies in the desert, alone. US officials mostly fail to identify corpses. One refers sadly to people “invisible in life, invisible in death”.

To say people are invisible is to say they don’t count. It’s to say that whether they are visible or invisible doesn’t matter. In fact, there is no such question because invisibility is expected. We don’t ask questions about what is expected. It makes no sense to do so. When a situation is the way we expect it to be, we don’t ask why it is that way. There is no need.

And we don’t explain it. That would be silly. Until recently, no women taught Philosophy. This could be observed. But women were not rational. So Philosophy departments weren’t supposed to hire women. As such, it wouldn’t matter how many times women are counted, their absence noted. Information about women in Philosophy was useless. It had no point. It had nothing to explain.

A political movement raised the question: Why aren’t women in Philosophy? It was a movement that challenged expectations by challenging practises supporting them. It took a long time, and still needs time. Women remain marginalized in Philosophy, our issues taught in electives, not core courses. But at least there’s a question. We can ask why this is happening, as if it could be otherwise.

We don’t seek explanations for what is expected. The “marketplace of ideas” is a fiction, suggesting ideas are out there to be considered, chosen according to their merits, like consumer goods in a supermarket. If an idea is popular, chosen by the educated majority, it has merit. Or so it is believed. Yet some ideas are largely unconsidered, although known. They are ideas explaining what is not questioned.

Emergence of the “invisible in life, invisible in death” is a case in point. The “march of humanity” in Latin America, where it occurs, is explained by anti-imperialism, led by Cuba. But anti-imperialism is not meaningful if imperialism is expected, if it’s not in question. Like women doing philosophy, if the world has to be the way it is, and cannot be otherwise, the idea gets little traction. It has nothing to explain.

I thought of this when I read David Brooks' recent *NYT* article, commenting that José Martí explains the strong sense of national pride existing in Cuba and absent in the US.[ii] Brooks mentions that Martí was an anti-imperialist who "shifted the national imagination, who told Cubans who they were and what their story was" and that Martí "inspired a common faith in a dignified future".

So he did. But Martí worked hard for that "dignified future". After all, it's is not available to the "invisible in life, invisible in death". Dignity applies to persons. It has to do with respect for persons *as persons*. Thus, Martí, at the height of his career, dedicated *La Edad de Oro*, a children's journal, to the idea of dignity. Latin American children should walk free in their own lands. They weren't already doing that.

Brooks quotes Martí's statement that independence requires a "change of spirit, not of form" as if Martí, unlike Fidel Castro, did not want revolution, at least not a socialist one. True, Martí did not think Latin American independence would result from removing the tyrants. But Martí's "change of spirit" is profound, targeting the foundations of US imperialism, its ideology.

It is clear in the first few paragraphs of the article Brooks cites, "Our America". Martí famously claims that "weapons of ideas are worth more than weapons of steel". The war imagery is no accident. Martí knew imperialism well enough that he gave no truck to the "marketplace of ideas". He knew imperialism makes some people into non-people and, importantly, eliminates the surprise.

For this reason, just a few paragraphs up from the quote Brooks picks out, Martí makes a striking claim. Or at least, it should be striking to Brooks, who thinks Martí is a liberal. Latin American leaders, Martí writes, must bring about "by means and institutions . . . the desirable state in which every man knows himself and is active". [iii] That is, *governments* must create conditions for people to know themselves.

Liberals (and libertarians) reject this way of thinking, taking it to invite repression. After all, who is to say which institutions provide conditions for me to "know myself and be active"? Only I can know that. Only I know what is best for me. The idea that government, or leaders, should transform conditions *for my good* is suspect. And the project, Martí adds, is to replace "imported forms and ideas".

It is to transform how people think. Liberals typically think we live best when we live from the "inside", according to our own beliefs and values, however we construe them. Some think the view uncontroversial. It is not, since smart people have thought otherwise. It is also likely to be false since "our own" beliefs and values can be severely skewed by systematically unjust conditions, undetected.

They can be skewed by the reality of people sitting on the tops of trains, riding to their death in a foreign desert, without identity. Martí knew this reality. The tiger of imperialism, he writes (also in "Our America"), crouches "behind every tree, in every corner . . . claws unsheathed, flames shooting from his eyes". It is hard to detect, for it "creeps back in the night to find its prey . . . on velvet paws". [iv]

Its consequences are deep-seated, seeping into expectations people hold for themselves, not just in the South. Even Simón Bolívar, who considered himself liberal, found liberalism naïve when it comes to freedom. The philosophers who invented it, from "civilized Europe . .

. lover of liberty” were mostly ignorant of those “even lower than servitude . . . lost, or worse, absent from the universe”[v].

When people are “absent from the universe”, they have to get back in, which requires politics that transform institutions that transform what people can imagine. As the Brazilian philosopher Frei Betto writes, “the mediation of philosophy doesn’t suffice for understanding the political and structural reason for the massive existence of the non- person”.[vi] He means that understanding imperialism is itself dependent upon resisting it.

This is because the “massive existence of the non-person” is not an idea out there in the marketplace, to be picked without disturbing the other goods. It becomes believable when other ideas are rejected, such as a certain way of thinking about the primacy of individuals. Martí was committed to that primacy but he didn’t buy into the idea that I can realize it by looking to myself, regardless of how many people sit on trains, invisible.

Martí also writes, “the only result of digging up external gold is to live without gold inside”.^[vii] This also should be a striking claim. It not only suggests that we might *not* spend our lives “digging up external gold”, as if we might live better some other way. It is also striking because it suggests the “gold inside” might not be there, that it might be missed. “Gold inside” is not whatever we think it is.

The “gold inside”, meaning humanity, has to be discovered. Indeed, for Martí, discovering it is our most difficult task.[viii] This is because, like Marx, he maintained that human beings must create the world that creates us. Allen Wood notes that many Marxists miss the “mystical shell” of Marx’s naturalism, realism and essentialism,[ix] that is, his vision of who we are as natural creatures within a causally interconnected universe, needing to discover conditions, not just for living a good human life, but for imagining its possibility.

It is odd that Brooks misses Martí’s fierce anti-liberalism. But perhaps he doesn’t recognize what it explains, which is anti-imperialism. Che Guevara said, “We are realists. We believe the impossible”. It’s a point about reason. If we think the world cannot be otherwise than motivated by greed and plunder, even if true, we won’t ask why it is that way. And then the answer, even if known, can be ignored.

Cuba has pursued the answer in myriad ways. Yet García Bernal also misses it. Interviewed by David Frost, he is asked why he so loves *Motorcycle Diaries*, in which he plays Che Guevara.[x] He is evasive, even defensive. He loves the film because “of people working ... to make a really good movie . . . because obviously everyone has a point of view about who [Guevara] was . . . It’s not like he was a democrat.”

Guevara was a democrat, committed to the people’s power to rule themselves, the literal meaning of “democracy.” But he knew those who are “invisible in life, invisible in death”, precisely as portrayed in *Who is Dayani Cristal?* and *Motorcycle Diaries*. When Frost asks whether Che was “very good news for Latin America and for Cuba in the long run,” García makes no reference to that reality. Guevara, he says weakly, was a “symptom of the times.”

Perhaps García Bernal, like Brooks, thinks “digging up external gold” is all there is, and all there can be. If so, it makes no sense to ask why, as if it could be otherwise. Even worse, an alternative view, even if offered, is not recognized for what it is. Such is the danger of the mythical marketplace of ideas. García knows about people sitting on trains and even about Che Guevara. He has the information. It’s useless.



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Her most recent articles are: “Humanism and Embodiment: Remarks on Cause and Effect” *Hypatia* (November 2013), 28(4), 733-748; “Cuba’s Internationalism and Martí’s ‘trenches of ideas’” *Journal on African Philosophy* (2012) (5); “Revolutionary Love in José Martí and Che Guevara” *Journal on African Philosophy* (2012) No. 6: “Secularism, Ethics, Philosophy: A Case for Epistemic Humility”. *Secularism and Islamism: Iran and beyond Saeed Rahnama and Haideh Moghissieds. Comparative Studies of South Asia, African and the Middle East* 31 (2011) (1) (Duke University Press).

Notes.

[i] Dir. Marc Silver, Pulse Films, 2013

[ii] “José Martí: The National Poet”, *New York Times*, April 22 2016 <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/opinion/jose-marti-the-national-poet.html?emc=eta1&r=0> [Accessed May 23 2016]

[iii] *José Martí: Selected Writings* Tr. Esther Allen (Penquin 2002) 290.

[iv] *Selected* 292– 93

[v] “The Jamaica letter: Response from a South American to a gentleman from this island”. In David Bushnell (Ed.), *Simón Bolívar, el libertador*. (Frederick H. Fornoff, Trans.) (Oxford University Press, 2003) (Originally published 1815): 19– 20

[vi] cited in Castro Ruz, Fidel, *Fidel and Religion: Castro Talks on Revolution and Religion with Frie Betto*. (Tr. Cuban Centre for translation and interpretation) (Simon & Schuster, 1987) 61.

[vii] *Selected*, 43

[viii] *Selected*, 49

[ix] Wood, Allen, *Karl Marx: Arguments of the philosophers: Second edition* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004) 266

[x] García Bernal, Gael. (2013, July). *The Frost Interviews*. Retrieved from [http:// www](http://www)

.aljazeera .com /programmes /frostinterview /2013 /10 /gael-garcia-bernal-being
-optimistic-201310314277471630 .html [Accessed November 4, 2013].

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