Serving the master text, rethinking digital paratexts in the social issue film: *Who is Dayani Cristal?* (Marc Silver, 2013).

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We are in an age of multiple digital platforms where our entertainment, news, work, social life and social activism are conducted through our smart phones, tablets, laptops or desktop computers, or most probably a range of these simultaneously. This has significant consequences for our understanding of the primacy of certain texts over others, and leads to a dismantling of hierarchies relating to films and their paratexts. In this article I focus on a specific social issue – migration from Central America and Mexico to the United States – and the texts that engage with this issue. The main case study is the activist project behind the film *Who is Dayani Cristal?* (Marc Silver, 2013), and I argue that the film and project are a salient example of an emerging new paradigm for the human rights documentary. In addition to the usual paratextual components of interviews with the filmmakers, focus on the star body (in this case that of Gael García Bernal), promotional material, and DVD extras, this is a film that broadens the scope of additional material to contain extra-textual activist, educational and community work, to the point that it destabilises the distinctions between core and surrounding texts.

*Who is Dayani Cristal?* is a documentary that seeks to uncover the identity of a man who has died while making the dangerous journey through Mexico to the United States. This film is a particularly high profile example of an interactive human rights documentary thanks to the urgency of the issue it is chronicling, its star endorsement and, as we will see, the sophisticated extra-filmic advocacy work carried
out by digital media forms and human rights organisations attached to the Dayani Cristal Project. The dead man’s route is retraced by the well-known actor, producer, director and activist Gael García Bernal, who co-produced the film, and shares a screen credit with Silver. García Bernal’s active involvement with the film raises its profile and serves to draw attention to the plight of the migrants, the high death toll occasioned by the dangers of the journey, and the work being done to reunite families with the deceased. However, the world of *Who is Dayani Cristal?* expands well beyond the film, integrating it into a website comprising the following pages, with further extensive material on each virtual page: ‘The Film’; ‘Take Action’; ‘Learn’; ‘Border Stories’; ‘Find Missing People’; and ‘Shop’. The ‘Shop’ button includes details on where to stream or buy the film; a free ibook, in which readers ‘can explore the complex issues surrounding migration in greater detail’; and border songs, sales of which go towards providing water for the migrant-refugees. The website also hosts a Press Pack, the film’s impact assessment document, and a toolkit – ‘a resource for screening hosts, advocates, activists, to organize and mobilize around the issues explored in *Who is Dayani Cristal?’*

**Figure 1. The homepage of the *Who is Dayani Cristal?* website**

In addition to the trailer, the DVD bonus package includes *Los invisibles*, a documentary made for Amnesty International in 2010, also a collaboration between Silver and García Bernal, that features interviews with migrant-refugees and a ‘Role Play Conversation between Gael García Bernal and Padre Alejandro Solalinde’, civil rights advocate and founder of Brothers of the Road refuge for migrants. The Dayani Cristal Project has also facilitated the foundation of the Colibri Center for Human Rights, of which more later, and community action taken by villagers to provide
access to water and improvements to the primary/secondary school for the Honduran village of El Escanito, that features in the film.7

As with most films, a dedicated website is the first result given in a Google search for the film by its title, and this means that a high proportion of those interested in the film will first engage with the website. Nonetheless, this is a website with a difference. In contrast to those of mainstream commercial productions it is not just a promotional tool for the film, but rather the principal platform for an interactive engagement with a serious social issue. The film is most likely to be watched on the same digital device used to access the website, as it had a limited theatrical release and in addition to the DVD is available via the streaming services of iTunes, Netflix, and Fandor (streaming options are listed on the websites ‘shop’ button). The website was also launched before the film’s release in 2014, and the film was streamed via ‘Univision and Fusion to over 2 million Latino and English-speaking audiences’.8

This multi-platform approach has become symptomatic of the way that advocacy work uses digital tools. Indeed, Who is Dayani Cristal? can be seen to share many characteristics with the open space documentary as conceptualised by Helen de Michiel and Patricia R. Zimmermann.9 They discuss projects from around the world ‘that migrate across transmedia formations – from videos, to websites, to media events, to dialogues, to archives, to performance’.10 For them ‘open space documentary is where technologies meet places meet people’.11 These documentaries mark a shift from the auteurist commercial product to the collaborative community-based project with multiple media all at the service of a community-based issue. De Michiel and Zimmermann highlight a number of areas that characterise the ethos of the open space documentary including the shifts: ‘from characters to communities’,12
‘from one to many’, ‘from story to stories’ and ‘from closure to open’. They suggest a spatial movement ‘from the documentary triangle to the documentary circle’, that is from the relationship between ‘film-maker, subject and audience’ to ‘an open space circle of mutual concern and collaboration’. All of these elements in what can effectively be seen as a manifesto for a new documentary form, can be identified in *Who is Dayani Cristal?* as will be seen in the analysis that follows.

My argument connects with Josetxo Cerdán and Miguel Fernández Labayen’s adoption of the term ‘cartographic cinema’ in this dossier. The metaphor of the map can be applied to the entirety of the paratextual world that extends beyond the frame of the film to all the digital practices of storytelling and activism that articulate the struggles of the subjects, in this case those faced by Central American and Mexican migrant-refugees. Expanding on the point by Cerdán and Fernández Labayen, what Google Earth makes invisible (spaces that include refugee camps and war and conflict zones) the open space text makes visible. The world outside the cinematic frame is the constant referent in *Who is Dayani Cristal?* and is foregrounded through the ways that the paratexts map this geo-political conflict zone. New forms of spatial mapping allow the viewer/reader to ‘enter’ the issue through multiple points with the interactive website serving as a generator of paratexts.

The cartographic imaginary in *Who is Dayani Cristal?* foregrounds the urgency of its topic through its texts and paratexts. In this respect, it represents a growing trend. As de Michiel and Zimmermann note, different strands of activism are using digital media as a tool for advocacy and social impact. Some of these take the form of open space documentaries and present viewers with a new model for the social issue/human rights documentary with the film itself constituting one of a wide
range of media forms. My contention here is that, in these cases, the social issue is the master text that all the others must serve, here, the human rights of migrant-refugees. The ‘master/serve’ binary is loaded nonetheless; its application here represents a call for rethinking the hierarchies structuring the way we consume fact-based film content, with the film one text of many. The term ‘master text’ in literature on the paratext refers to the film or television text, and paratexts are conceptualised as separate supporting materials. For instance, Garrett Castleberry notes that ‘paratexts traditionally encircle a master text without necessarily penetrating its diegetic space’. In my reading of human rights films, in contrast, the film itself become one of multiple paratexts alongside digital engagement and activist tools, and digital media marketing campaigns, although it may well be a privileged text used as a hook to serve the overarching social issue. Filmmakers are experimenting with a range of media and going beyond an exclusive reliance on film to disseminate their message about the harsh conditions experienced by migrant-refugees. It is interesting to note that the multi-Academy award-winning Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu has moved away from traditional film in order to raise awareness of the erosion of migrants’ human rights in a VR installation. Carne y Arena (‘Flesh and Sand’) premiered at the Cannes film festival in 2017. Carne y Arena was also shown at Milan’s Fondazione Prada and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Cornelia Klecker has provided a useful overview of the paratext from its original formulation by Gérard Genette to its applications in Film Studies. Klecker highlights some of the principal approaches taken to contextualise the new direction that I am suggesting here for films that engage with urgent social issues. She explains Genette’s focus on ‘a wide range of paratexts, such as the book cover, the title page, dedications, inscriptions, epigraphs, prefaces, and intertitles’. She notes that
Genette’s study of peritexts and epitexts (the elements which combine to create the paratext) ‘can be easily transferred to film and used as a descriptive device. Titles, subtitles, and title sequences fulfil the characteristics of peritextual elements and film posters and trailers belong to the category of epitexts’.19

For Genette, the function of the paratext in literature is to present the primary text, and ‘to ensure the text’s presence in the world,20 with ‘the paratextual element [...] always subordinate to “its” text’.21 This formulation has, to a degree, been contested by Jonathan Gray,22 who argues for more ‘off-screen studies’ through studies of paratexts.23 His interest is on the additional meanings that they generate for the central text, and while they are not peripheral, their relationship to the source text is foregrounded. Gray notes that ‘paratexts are not simply add-ons, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them.’24 While Gray highlights the fact that many will only consume the paratext, using a journey analogy he argues that the ultimate destination for audiences is a source text: ‘Paratexts are the greeters, gatekeepers, and cheerleaders for and of the media, filters through which we must pass on our way to “the text itself”’.25

While this centrality of the source media text works well, in the main, when commercial interests are prioritised, it can be displaced in cases when urgent human rights issues are addressed. Open space documentaries are created to respond to such issues. In the case of the Dayani Cristal project the conditions faced by Central American and Mexican migrants operate as the main source text. In these instances, media forms seek to take on the role of social intervention and advocacy, consciousness raising and transformation. In short, filmmakers, actors, social media
and social impact staff employed on the film and related projects, are all working to serve the bigger story – the social issue. The interests of social advocacy reconfigure the established economy of the film industry with its focus on the commercial pillars of stars, auteurs, fans and genre tropes.

Scholars working in the field of literary studies have noted the value of the personal story to draw attention to social issues. As Sophia McClennen, paraphrasing Joseph Slaughter writes, ‘the very idea of rights is inseparable from stories that envision them’. Slaughter notes, ‘personal stories are the contemporary currency of human rights projects’. He writes about the value of personal stories and testimonies and explores the overlap between the use of storytelling and human rights in fiction and in the work of organisations such as Amnesty International:

while not possible to make a clear cause and effect case between literature and action [...] looking back, it is possible to see that the rise of personal story politics and memoir culture in the 1970s and 1980s coincided with mass movements for decolonization, civil rights, women’s rights and sexual freedoms.

The use of the story to draw attention to urgent issues is a key strategy in human rights films and paratexts. They adopt the story-centred human rights approach noted by Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore in their work on literature, with stories helping readers/audiences ‘forge solidarity across difference’. A non-exhaustive list of films dealing with migration or immigration in the region demonstrates the flourishing of cinema with a focus on stories in the context of this social issue. While they take diverse approaches, and come from a range of production contexts, these films share the desire to place the migrants-
refugees/immigrants at the centre of the narrative. This approach centred on the subject’s story is also apparent in the Dayani Cristal project in both the film and paratexts. Nonetheless, in accordance with the ethos of the open space documentary these stories are not conceptualized as isolated or individualised, and the protagonists come to stand in for members of their communities (‘from one to many’; ‘from story to stories’ from de Michiel and Zimmermann’s formulation).31 It is significant that in one section of the website ‘Border Stories’32 users are encouraged to add their own stories to a virtual US-Mexico border wall, contributions that appear in Spanish and English accompanied by images of the borderscape and a soundscape that conjures the wind blowing across the desert.

The film itself not only names the protagonist, it gives posthumous life to an unidentified corpse that the documentary opens with. All that is initially known about the man is that he died in 2010 while crossing the Sonora desert in Arizona, and that he has a tattoo on his chest with the name ‘Dayani Cristal’.33 The documentary takes the audience on a journey of discovery as, through the work of a range of officials, the man they refer to as Dayani Cristal has his real name and identity revealed. These officials include staff at the Search and Rescue Unit in Pima County, Arizona, and staff at the Medical Examiner’s Office in Tucson, Arizona, including medical death investigator Charles Harding, Forensic Anthropologist Bruce Anderson, and Robin Reineke, coordinator of the missing migrant project (later to develop into the Colibri Center for Human Rights). Others officials involved in identifying the corpse and returning his remains to his home include Lorenia Ivon Ton-Quevedo, a missing persons investigator at the Mexican consulate in Arizona, and Atrid Kaemper from the Honduran consulate in Phoenix, Arizona (as it is established that the dead man was Honduran).
In a parallel story the documentary recreates the journey of García Bernal. He travels along the same route taken by the deceased man, and talks to migrant refugees and the man’s family and friends. Through the work of the officials, he is revealed to be Dilcy Yohan Sandres Martínez of El Escanito, a small rural village in Honduras. The film gives a name, an identity and a community back to the dead man, and resolves the mystery of Dayani Cristal, who is discovered to be Dilecy’s young daughter. This revelation removes connotations of violence and gang membership often associated with tattoos and migrants, and audiences discover a family man travelling to earn money for his young son’s Leukaemia treatment, and for his family’s upkeep. In this way, issues of space, power, ethnicity and knowledge are addressed in the geographical journey mapped through two bodies, one anonymous and dead, and another famous and living. While García Bernal’s migration journey is clearly simulated and audience credibility is stretched by the fact that the migrant-refugees he meets along the journey appear not to know who he is, he uses his privileged star body to highlight the fate of Sandres Martínez, and others who share his social status.

So much attention in the form of official investigations and star power is dedicated to answering the film’s titular question that it is hard not to feel a degree of frustration at the lack of care given to Sandres Martínez in life, compared to the resources dedicated to him in death. While this frustration has a legitimate basis in the neglect of the rights of migrant-refugees, nonetheless, for families who never hear news of their deceased relatives this is important work, and it is work that extends beyond the film through the Dayani Cristal project. The paratexts housed in the website outline this work, and connect Sandres Martínez to those who share his socio-economic conditions. In this area too the film shares an essential element of the open
space documentary and creates the ‘open space circle of mutual concern and collaboration’.

The story of the documentary connects to multiple others through the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, created as part of the Dayani Cristal Project. Their activities are found under the ‘Find Missing People’ button where visitors are invited to ‘Report a Missing Person on the Border’. This takes us to Colibrí’s own website, where readers learn that the staff at the Center ‘work with families, forensic scientists and humanitarians to end migrant death and related suffering on the U.S.-Mexico border’ and assist in the repatriation of the bodies of the deceased. The importance of story-telling is also central to this organisation that developed thanks to the Dayani Cristal Project. Colibrí, in turn, has developed ‘Historias y Recuerdos’, a story-sharing project offered by the Center to families of those who have been lost on the U.S.-Mexico border. In terms of online presence, the Center’s advocacy work continues on its Facebook page. At the start of 2017, during the early days of the Trump administration, the page was featuring stories of the arrest and deportation of undocumented Mexican and Central American migrants by ICE, and the breaking up of families.

The film, then, is very much conceptualised as a springboard for further action realised extra-textually. This is an explicit goal of the project: ‘Our social impact campaign aimed to humanize and universalize the migration story, while creating direct pathways to action’.

Figure 2. The ‘take action’ page on the Who is Dayani Cristal? website
This emphasis on digital paratexts is unsurprising when considering that the director describes himself as a ‘social impact strategist’, and the project’s co-creator is social impact director and transmedia producer Lina Srivastava. In fact, ‘Who Is Dayani Cristal?’ had its origins in a website launched by Silver and his collaborators prior to making the film, for which members of the public were invited to ‘send in stories of resistance against economic division and barriers between rich and poor.’ The genesis of the film came from one of these stories about ‘skulls and skeletons in the desert of Arizona’, which resonated with Silver, and both the film and the impact campaign were developed concurrently.

Film in this narrative is, then, not the privileged text, but a part of the master text that on its own is limited in scope. This is made very clear in the impact assessment: ‘we wanted our campaign to tell a story of complexity from multiple perspectives that couldn’t be told within the confines of a linear 90-minute film’. The point is also reinforced when considering the project partners and their social-issue, advocacy and charitable focus – these include among others The Colibri Center for Human Rights, Washington Office on Latin America, Catholic Relief Services, World Policy Institute, Amnesty International, Amnesty Mexico, Amnesty US. The film succeeds in producing a form of resolution in the eventual return of the remains of the dead man and his funeral, as the whole village turns out to bury and mourn Dilcy Yohan Sandres Martínez. This is an event that has been made possible thanks to the filmmakers and the officials working to return the deceased to their homelands in an inverse form of deportation. Yet, my analysis of the Dayani Cristal project (of which the film is just an element) has demonstrated the potential of the paratexts to signify the lack of closure of the master text, the Central American-Mexican-US refugee-migration crisis itself, and encourage further activist discourse.
When considered from this perspective, we can open up the discussion beyond the example of *Who is Dayani Cristal?*: every media form, including feature films, documentaries, short films, websites, books, photographs, artwork, and music can be seen as paratexts that serve to draw attention to the master text in cases where cultural artefacts address urgent socio-political issues. Film is a powerful medium yet, on its own, its capacity to change the social landscape it symbolically attempts to re-map is limited. In this digital age filmmakers have joined forces with web-developers, social impact strategists, regional advocacy organisations, human rights activists and charities to create open space texts that seek to have direct impact in the world outside the screen, with films occupying one point on a larger map.46

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1 For more examples of such documentaries, see Helen de Michiel and Patricia R. Zimermann, ‘Documentary as Open Space’, in Brian Winston (ed) *The Documentary Film Book* (London: British Film Institute, 2013), pp. 355-365. See also *The Undocumented* (Marco Williams, 2013), a film on United States immigration policy and the deaths in the desert in Southern Arizona. The film draws on an interactive website and visitors are invited to play a game where they can choose to play as patrol or as a migrant. *The Undocumented*, <http://theundocumented.com> accessed 3 April 2017. There is a growing corpus of films that share the focus on migration in the region, and while a number have been critically and commercially successful, few are as sophisticated as *Who is Dayani Cristal?* in their use of digital media. For examples of recent popular films, see Deborah Shaw, ‘Films you should watch to counter anti-migrant rhetoric’, *The Conversation*, 2 February 2017, <https://theconversation.com/films-you-should-watch-to-counter-american-anti-migrant-rhetoric-69540> accessed 1 October 2017.


4 ‘Who is Dayani Cristal? Press pack’,


6 ‘Who is Dayani Cristal? Action Tool Kit’,


8 Ibid.


10 Ibid. p. 356.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid. p. 358.

14 Ibid. p. 355.


19 Ibid. Peritexts, such as the preface and title are located within the book itself; epitexts are located outside the literary text and examples are interviews or the author’s diary. Genette, Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation, pp.4-5.


21 Ibid., p. 12.

22 Jonathan Gray, Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts (New York University Press, 2010).

23 Ibid., p.4.

24 Ibid., p.6.

25 Ibid., p.17.


For an overview of these films, see Deborah Shaw, ‘Migrant Identities in Film: *Sin Nombre* and migration films from Mexico and Central America to the United States,’ *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*, vol. 3, no. 12 (2012), pp. 227-240.


In terms of subject matter the film has a lot in common with the Peruvian film *NN* (Héctor Gálvez, 2014). The title refers to the Latin term, ‘nomen nescio’ for unnamed person. Of this film Sarah Barrow notes that it is a crime drama that focuses ‘on the professionals who are tasked with exhuming and attempting to identify the victims of conflict found in mass graves’. Like *Who is Dayani Cristal?*, it is based on the real discovery of a body with only a photograph to identify the man. See Sarah Barrow, *Contemporary Peruvian Cinema: History, Identity and Violence on Screen* (London: I.B. Tauris, forthcoming).

De Michiel and Zimermann, ‘Documentary as Open Space’, p. 358.

‘Colibrí Center About’, <http://www.colibricenter.org/about-us/> accessed 3 March 2017. At the time of writing (April, 2017), it is a tragic indication of the ever more precarious situation for migrants under the Trump administration, that readers are met with a warning in Spanish and English that there is at least a four week wait for a response as they are ‘currently experiencing an extremely high volume of phone calls and website submissions’.

Ibid.

Ibid.

ICE is the acronym for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and, at the time of writing (April, 2017), the organization has been extremely active in deporting Mexican and Central American immigrants, a high number of whom have been in the United States for many years, and they have been heavily criticized for this practice. See Ed Pilkington and Rory Carroll, ‘Immigrant rights groups brace for more deportation raids: “This is the beginning”’, *The Guardian*, 13 February 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/13/immigration-deportation-raids-donald-trump-travel-ban> accessed 27 March 2017.
For more information on specify community action taken by Dayani Cristal project partners Catholic Relief Services, see the impact assessment.

I would like to thank Lina for taking the time to read the article and confirm and correct key information.


Rothe, ‘To Set Off Is to Die a Little’.


Ibid.

Ibid.

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENT XXXX]