

TEACHING GUIDE

DEAR AMERICA,



*Notes of an
Undocumented Citizen*

Jose Antonio Vargas

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE



About the Book

Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen is an urgent, provocative and deeply personal account from Jose Antonio Vargas, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who happens to be the most well-known undocumented immigrant in the United States. Born in the Philippines and brought to the U.S. illegally as a 12-year-old, Vargas hid in plain-sight for years, and went on to write for some of the most prestigious news organizations in the country while lying about where he came from and how he got here. After publicly admitting his undocumented status—risking his career and personal safety—Vargas has challenged the definition of what it means to be an American. Both a letter to and a window into Vargas's America, *Dear America* is a transformative argument about migration and citizenship, and an intimate, searing exploration on what it means when the country you call your home doesn't consider you one of its own.

About the Author

Jose Antonio Vargas, a journalist and filmmaker, is the founder and CEO of the non-profit [Define American](#). His work has appeared internationally in *TIME*, as well as in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Washington Post*, where he won a Pulitzer Prize as part of a reporting team. In 2014, he received the Freedom to Write Award from PEN Center USA. He directed the documentary feature *Documented* and MTV special *White People*, which was nominated for an Emmy Award. An elementary school named after him will open in his hometown of Mountain View, California in 2019.

About this Guide

This guide is organized into two sections: discussion questions that ask both larger thematic questions about the book as a means of allowing students to think across the entire text, as well as questions which put parts of *Dear America* in conversation with each other.

A set of writing prompts is also included; these questions can also be used for discussion.

Discussion Questions

PART I: LYING

- Jose writes that Lolo's definition of America was "something you wear, something you buy, something you eat [...]. It was consumption all around" (9). How do you think Lolo comes to understanding America this way?
- Why is acceptance in school something important for Jose to achieve? What does it mean to him?
- What is colorism? In what ways does colorism affect Jose growing up?
- Jose learns the truth about his green card from Lolo. What are the ways in which learning the truth prompts Jose to question feelings of belonging, trust, and security he's found in his life?

PART II: PASSING

- How does the library help Jose create a "masked" identity?
- What are some attitudes and behaviors Jose adopts to survive? Do you feel compartmentalizing his various relationships is extreme or is necessary to his day-to-day survival?
- Jose writes, "If I was not considered an American because I didn't have the right papers, then practicing journalism—writing in English, interviewing Americans, making sense of the people and places around me—was my way of writing myself into America" (58). How does writing create a way of being for Jose that makes him feel productive and like he belongs?
- Jose writes about Toni Morrison's idea of the master narrative, that the stories of those in power dominate the culture and make it harder for others to see themselves in the fabric of American culture. As a young adult, he saw America's master narrative as being white or black, and that anything out of the margins of this view was not easily seen or understood by a mass audience. Do you think Jose's story and that of others have changed the master narrative overtime? Do you face versions of a master narrative of American culture in your own life?
- Throughout his life, various communities help Jose when he confides in them about his immigration status: from applying to college and receiving financial aid, to getting jobs, to, essentially, passing as an American citizen. Why do you think they help Jose and not report him or his family?
- For his 30th birthday, Jose decides to introduce the various parts of his life to each other: his family, his friends, coworkers, and mentors. Why is uniting all the parts of himself so important to him?

PART III: HIDING

- ICE tells him that they will not comment on his immigration case, even after he has publicly revealed his immigration status. If you made this call, what would you have preferred to hear? A verdict of impending deportation, or "no comment"?
- Do you think Jose has made any peace with his mother's decision to send him to America, knowing he would be in the United States illegally?
- For a book that involves so much truth-telling, no matter how painful some memories are to bring up, Jose acknowledges that he didn't want to learn the truth of why he was released from detention in McAllen, Texas after only 8 hours. In broad terms, he talks about the connections and help from which he may have benefitted through actions and connections of his friends. Why do you think these circumstances and this truth were difficult for him to confront?

- Jose discusses how national media has often used dehumanizing language of undocumented people. Do you think words matter in how Americans perceive immigrants?
- Jose discusses how anti-immigrant hate groups have utilized media to mainstream their agenda using national cable networks like Fox News. Should journalists work harder to verify the comments made by their sources? Do sources matter when discussing immigration by national news organizations?

Writing Prompts:

- In the prologue Jose writes, “This book is about homelessness, not in a traditional sense, but the unsettled, unmoored psychological state that undocumented immigrants like me find ourselves in. This book is about lying and being forced to lie to get by; about passing as an American and as a contributing citizen; about families, keeping them together and having to make new ones when you can’t. This book is about constantly hiding from the government and, in the process, hiding from ourselves. This book is about what it means to not have a home.” Does defining immigration in terms of homelessness change the way you think about immigration and undocumented people?
- When Jose fills out an employment form for the first time (pp. 70-1), he confesses to checking the American citizen box and tells himself that he will earn that box. Is this a question most American citizens ever think about much, how one earns national citizenship?
- Throughout the book Jose is quick to recognize the privilege he experiences as an undocumented immigrant: the wealthy community in which he grew up that helped him with everything from a driver’s license to college applications to school trips; the editors and mentors he had throughout his journalism career—people who learned the truth about his immigration status and helped him anyway. How would you characterize Jose’s feeling about the help he receives? How does he think about that help when he’s detained with young children—and able to get out of the detention center after a comparably short amount of time?
- Near the end of the book, Jose talks about what he calls the “citizenship of participation” (195). For him, the phrase means, “Citizenship is showing up. Citizenship is using your voice while making sure you hear other people around you. Citizenship is how you live your life” (195-96). In what ways is Jose’s definition changing what we typically associate with citizenship? Are these alternatives more positive or negative than the word’s usual connotations?

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