Dear America

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOSE ANTONIO VARGAS

Journalist, activist, and filmmaker Jose Antonio Vargas is frequently called the "most famous undocumented immigrant in America." As he explains in *Dear America*, he was born in the Philippines and moved to California to live with his U.S. citizen grandparents at age 12. Four years later, when he tried to obtain a driver's license, he learned that he was undocumented. Fortunately, a network of generous, caring adults helped him find a scholarship to attend San Francisco State University and then start a career in journalism. After internships at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Philadelphia Daily News*, and *The Washington Post*, Vargas went on to a full-time position at the Style section of the *Post*. He covered topics ranging from video games to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting. In fact, he turned his HIV/AIDS coverage into a 2010 documentary, *The Other City*, and his team won a Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News Reporting for their work on the Virginia Tech shooting. Vargas went on to cover the 2008 presidential campaign, with a particular focus on technology and social media. In 2009, he joined *The Huffington Post*, where he edited the paper's technology and college sections. After years of silence on the subject, Vargas publicly revealed his immigration status in a 2011 essay for *The New York Times Magazine*. In the process, he became the most visible undocumented immigrant activist in the United States. The same year, Vargas also founded the nonprofit Define American, which spearheaded the successful push to replace the term "illegal" with "undocumented" in mainstream news. As he recounts in *Dear America*, he also wrote a major *Time* magazine cover story about undocumented immigrants in 2012, testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee in 2013, and was arrested by the Border Patrol in a high-profile case in McAllen, Texas in 2014. In addition to writing this book, he has spent the 2010s directing Define American and making films, including the film *Documented* about his own life and the documentary *White People* for MTV. As of 2021, he is currently working on his next book, *White Is Not a Country*, which is scheduled for publication in 2023.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Dear America*, Vargas argues that, to understand immigration politics and the experiences of undocumented people in the U.S. today, his readers have to first understand the history of U.S. immigration policy. In particular, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 has shaped the modern U.S. by eliminating national quotas that gave strong preferences to white European immigrants, while strictly limiting immigration from Asia. As a result, this law led to a rapid expansion of immigration from the Philippines, where Vargas was born and his mother and siblings continue to live. Of course, this flow of immigrants was also part of the legacy of U.S. colonialism. The Philippines was a Spanish colony from the mid-1500s until 1898, when the U.S. captured it during the Spanish-American War. The U.S. continued to rule the Philippines until after World War II, which helps explain the extensive connections between the two nations today. Notably, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos—including many of Vargas's family members—served in the U.S. military during World War II. However, through the infamous Recission Act of 1946, the U.S. retroactively cancelled the military benefits it promised these soldiers. After 1965, the new immigration system enabled Filipinos to migrate to the U.S. in significant numbers for the first time, but it quickly proved inadequate because of the strict quotas it put on visas from any given country. This is why it took a decade for Vargas's grandparents to join his aunt in the U.S., and why his mother has been waiting for a green card for decades. Meanwhile, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act also put some of the first legal restrictions on migration from the Americas, including by criminalizing a centuries-old tradition of informal migration between Mexico and the southwestern U.S. In the 1990s, the Clinton administration substantially increased immigration enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border and began deporting undocumented people from the U.S. in unprecedented numbers. Then, the Bush administration closely linked immigration to terrorism, which helps explain why the border has gradually become more and more militarized. The Obama administration deported more immigrants than ever before, while failing to pass the DREAM Act that would give a path to citizenship to undocumented people who entered the U.S. as children. (Instead, it implemented the DACA program as a temporary substitute.) Since the mid-2010s, immigration has become one of the most controversial political issues in the U.S.—in particular, Donald Trump rose to the presidency largely by appealing to anti-immigration sentiments. Vargas hopes that this history can show his readers that U.S. government policy is actually responsible for making certain immigrants "illegal."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Dear America is Jose Antonio Vargas's first book, but he worked as a reporter for more than a decade before writing it. In the book, he mentions many of his most significant articles, including his coming out essay in *The New York Times Magazine*, "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant" (June 2011). He also recalls interviewing Mark Zuckerberg for the feature "The Face

of Facebook" in *The New Yorker* (September 2010) and taking the famous cover photo for his *Time* magazine story "Not Legal Not Leaving" (June 2012). Vargas has also made several documentaries, including *The Other City* (2010), *Documented* (2013), and *White People* (2015). In *Dear America*, Vargas also writes at length about two of his favorite books: Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and President John F. Kennedy's call for immigration reform, *A Nation of Immigrants* (1958). The epigraph to *Dear America* comes from the prominent Filipino American writer Carlos Bulosan's best-known work, the autobiographical novel *America Is in the Heart: A Personal History* (1943). Other significant 21st-century books about undocumented immigrants in the U.S. include Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans* (2020), Dan-el Padilla Peralta's memoir *Undocumented: A Dominican Boy's Odyssey from a Homeless Shelter to the Ivy League* (2015), and William Pérez's *We Are Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream* (2009). Grace Talusan writes about immigrating from the Philippines to the United States in her memoir *The Body Papers* (2019), while Elaine Castillo's novel *America Is Not the Heart* (2018) is set in the 1990s Bay Area Filipino American community where Vargas grew up.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen
- **When Written:** 2011-2018
- **Where Written:** Across the United States
- **When Published:** September 18, 2018
- **Literary Period:** 21st century American literature
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** The United States (mainly Mountain View, CA and Washington, D.C.)
- **Climax:** Vargas gets detained and released by the Border Patrol in 2014; after Trump's election, Vargas leaves his apartment to avoid deportation
- **Antagonist:** The U.S. immigration system
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Back to Where It All Started. Mountain View, California—where Vargas spent his first years in the U.S.—named its newest elementary school after him in recognition of his achievements. When he first heard the news, Vargas thought it was a joke, but it wasn't. Jose Antonio Vargas Elementary School officially opened on August 19, 2019.

PLOT SUMMARY

Dear America is Jose Antonio Vargas's memoir about his life as an undocumented immigrant in the United States. At age 12, he left the Philippines to join his grandparents in California. He soon learned that he wasn't supposed to be there: his passport and green card were fake. He realized that his undocumented status would prevent him from working legally and leave him open to deportation at any time. This would make it nearly impossible for him to truly make the U.S. his home. But Vargas decided that the only solution was to try and "pass" as a U.S. citizen. It worked: he managed to attend college and become a successful journalist. But by 2011, the stress of hiding his status from friends, coworkers, and the public had become too overwhelming. Vargas decided to publicly come out as undocumented, and ever since, he has become one of the most prominent immigrant activists in the United States.

Vargas introduces *Dear America* by noting that, by the time his readers pick up his book, he might have already been deported—after all, undocumented people like him face more dangers during the Trump administration than ever before. Then, he explains how he became an undocumented immigrant in the first place. He was 12 years old in 1993, when his mother sent him on a plane from Manila, the capital of the Philippines, to California. She promised to follow him, but she couldn't—in fact, they haven't seen each other since. When Vargas arrived in the U.S., his grandparents (Lolo and Lola in Tagalog) threw him a welcome party and showered him with gifts, but he still felt out of place. He struggled with English and didn't fit in at school. He couldn't figure out the divide between Black, white, Latinx, and Asian students at his school, and he had no idea where Filipinos fit into the mix.

When he was sixteen, Vargas went to get a **driver's license** at the DMV, but the woman behind the counter told him that his green card was fake. At home, Lolo confirmed that Vargas was in the U.S. illegally. But this was a long time in the making. Years earlier, Lolo and Lola, who were U.S. citizens, had petitioned for Vargas and his mother to join them in the U.S. But they lied about Vargas's mother being single. When they realized that this lie could cause them serious legal problems, they withdrew their petition. This left no legal way for Vargas to come to the U.S., so Lola and Lolo brought him over with fake papers instead. They hoped that, once Vargas came of age, he would marry an American woman and become a citizen. There was just one problem: Vargas is gay. In high school, while he kept his immigration status a closely guarded secret, he quickly embraced his sexuality and came out of the closet.

Vargas figured that the best way to cope with being undocumented was to Americanize himself as much as possible. He obsessively watched American movies, read American magazines, and listened to American music. He also constantly asked questions, and one of his high school teachers suggested that he should think about becoming a journalist. He soon realized that she was right: he felt like journalism could be his "way of writing [him]self into America." He started an

internship at the local newspaper and even set up a job for himself after graduation. But the adults around him at school—the principal Pat Hyland, the superintendent Rich Fischer, and Fischer's assistant, Mary Moore—were surprised and worried to hear that he wasn't going to college. He eventually admitted the real reason: he was undocumented, so he couldn't get financial aid. But Hyland, Fischer, and Moore found him a scholarship through the wealthy investor Jim Strand, and he enrolled at San Francisco State University. Before his first semester, he did an internship at the *San Francisco Chronicle*—but to get the position, he had to lie about his immigration status on the application. He repeated this lie to get internships at the *Philadelphia Daily News* and *Washington Post* during college. When he needed a driver's license for the *Post*, Hyland, Fischer, Moore, and Strand helped him get one from Oregon, the only state that didn't require proof of citizenship or legal residency.

After college, Vargas returned to work at *The Washington Post*. While he constantly worried that someone would find out about his immigration status, he loved his job and totally immersed himself in it. He covered technology and video games, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the Virginia Tech massacre. Later, he got to cover the 2008 presidential election and write a feature on Mark Zuckerberg. But when he got a phone call informing him that he had won a Pulitzer Prize, his first reaction was terror: he worried that someone would find out he was undocumented. Although he was very successful, he also felt deeply alienated—he couldn't be honest with the people around him. In 2011, he decided he couldn't lie anymore: it was time to come out as undocumented.

After consulting with several lawyers and celebrating his thirtieth birthday surrounded by friends, family, and colleagues—most of whom had never met each other—Vargas published the essay "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant" in *The New York Times Magazine*. He wanted to help Americans better understand how undocumented people live, and in his essay, he tried to give fellow journalists the details they needed to do serious, fact-based reporting about immigration. Vargas points out that the vast majority of Americans—including most prominent journalists—know next to nothing about the U.S. immigration system. For instance, most Americans don't know that undocumented immigrants pay taxes. They don't understand how the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 opened the U.S. up to further immigration from Asia while criminalizing undocumented immigration from Latin America. And most importantly, they don't recognize that immigration is the demographic and historical foundation of the United States. As a result, they often view immigrants as nameless, faceless laborers, not full human beings with their own lives, rights, and needs.

After publishing his article, Vargas knew that he had to start using his public platform to advocate for other undocumented people. He co-founded the nonprofit organization Define American, which tries to change the stories told about immigration in the United States. He wrote an article about undocumented immigration for *Time* magazine and organized a photoshoot with 35 undocumented young people for **the cover**. And he appeared all over cable television—including on Fox News. Ultimately, Vargas became a well-known figure. People stopped him in public, most with praise, but some with disparaging insults and threats. Even progressives attacked him for not being poor or oppressed enough to represent the undocumented community.

Although he's famous now, Vargas still struggles to feel safe and secure in the U.S. He faces all the same legal challenges as before and he can't vote, travel outside the U.S., or access any public benefits. In part because of his precarious status and the pain of leaving his mother behind in the Philippines, he struggles to form close or committed relationships. After Donald Trump's election, he left his apartment and started living in hotels across the country so that the government couldn't easily deport him. At the same time, he also went to protest at Congress because he believes that true citizenship shouldn't be about legal papers, but rather about people's participation in their society and contributions to the common good.

And then, in 2014, Vargas ended up in an immigration jail, surrounded by terrified child refugees from Central America. He explains how the U.S. only started detaining immigrants, including asylum seekers, after the government started demonizing **"illegal" immigrants** and limiting their rights in the 1990s. Sitting in the detention facility, Vargas wondered if his time in the U.S. was finally up. He ended up there because he had gone to McAllen, Texas, near the U.S.-Mexico border, for a protest. The Border Patrol arrested him at a checkpoint in the airport and locked him up in the facility. But to his surprise, it eventually let him go. It helped that he was a famous journalist with powerful friends, and that sending him back to the Philippines was much harder than sending people across the border to Mexico. Still, this experience—especially meeting the young refugees—led him to reflect on the profound sacrifices that parents like his own mother make in order to send their children to the U.S. He still wonders whether it has all been worth it.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jose Antonio Vargas – The author of *Dear America* is a Pulitzer Prize-winning Filipino American journalist and filmmaker. As he explains in the book, he was born in the Philippines, but at the age of 12, he immigrated to the United States to live with his grandparents (Lolo and Lola). Four years later, he learned that

his immigration documents were fake—which made him an undocumented immigrant. Still, thanks to the support and generosity of his many friends and mentors (like Pat Hyland, Rich Fischer, Mary Moore, and Jim Strand), Vargas managed to attend college and become a widely respected journalist at the *Washington Post*. In 2011, he publicly revealed his undocumented status in an essay for *The New York Times Magazine*. In the years since, he has run the nonprofit organization Define American while continuing to write, speak, and make documentary films about immigration. In *Dear America*, he explores the personal, professional, and political consequences of living as an undocumented immigrant in the U.S., with no available path to legal citizenship. He explains how the outdated, dysfunctional U.S. immigration system has cut him off from his mother and siblings in the Philippines, while forcing him to deal with the constant threat of deportation. He reveals how he struggles to find a sense of safety or belonging in the U.S., a country that often treats undocumented immigrants as mere laborers and political tokens, rather than real human beings. And he also explores the history of the U.S. immigration system—and, more importantly, why U.S. citizens and journalists know so little about it.

Vargas's Mother – While Jose Antonio Vargas was growing up and becoming a journalist in the U.S., his mother, Emelie Salinas, was living with her two younger children and her long-term boyfriend Jimmy in Manila. She and Vargas were inseparable when he was a boy, but in 1993, she decided to send him to California to live with her parents (Lola and Lolo). She planned to follow him to the U.S., but couldn't get a visa. Meanwhile, Vargas could not leave the U.S. because he was undocumented. As a result, Vargas and his mother have not seen each other in person in more than twenty-five years. While they stay in touch, Vargas explains that they often keep an emotional distance in order to avoid feeling the unbearable pain of their long separation. All in all, the reader learns very little about her, in part because Vargas cannot be present for any of her life. But at the very end of the book, Vargas and his mother have a long, heartfelt conversation, and she asks if perhaps Vargas should return home to the Philippines. Vargas's tragic separation from his mother represents the unnecessary cruelty of the U.S. immigration system and the outsized sacrifices that immigrants make in order to secure a better life.

Lola – Lola (Tagalog for "grandma") is Jose Antonio Vargas's grandmother Leonila Salinas. In 1984, she and Lolo moved to California, where their daughter Florie already lived. Lola began working as a food server, and she and Lolo became citizens just before their grandson (Vargas) reached them in 1993. Lola took care of Vargas during his teenage years and constantly worried about him after he became a journalist, but always remained supportive. Vargas frequently thinks about the sacrifices Lola made to come to the U.S. and, in particular, the way Lola's decision to immigrate cut off her relationship to Vargas's mother.

Lolo – "Lolo" (Tagalog for "grandpa") is Jose Antonio Vargas's grandfather Ted Salinas, who housed and raised Vargas after he arrived in California at age 12. After he and Lola followed their daughter Florie to the United States in 1984, Lolo began working as a night security guard and sending money back to Vargas's mother in the Philippines. Lolo also saved up the $4,500 to bring his grandson to the U.S. with fake documentation. By the time Vargas arrived, Lola and Lolo were proud U.S. citizens. But Lolo was also a devout Catholic, and he hoped that Vargas would marry a woman to "get legal." He was furious when Vargas came out as gay and even briefly kicked him out of the house. He also constantly worried that Vargas's high-profile journalism career would get him deported. However, despite all their differences, Vargas and Lolo reconciled shortly before Lolo's death in 2011.

Aunt Florie – Lolo's sister Florida, or Florie, is "the matriarch of the matriarchs" in Jose Antonio Vargas's family. After she married a Filipino American who was serving in the U.S. Marines, she became the first person in the family to move to the U.S. She then petitioned for her other siblings, including Lolo, to follow her.

Jim Strand – Jim Strand is the wealthy California investor who started the scholarship fund that enabled Jose Antonio Vargas to go to college. Strand became one of Vargas's most important mentors: he helped Vargas meet with immigration lawyers, supported Vargas throughout his journalism career, and eventually appointed Vargas to the advisory board of his scholarship fund.

Maria Gabriela ("Gaby") Pacheco – Gaby Pacheco is an educator and immigrants rights activist whose protest march from Miami to Washington, D.C. contributed to the creation of the DACA program. She became nationally prominent starting in 2004, when she helped lead an online movement of undocumented youth calling for the DREAM Act. She inspired Jose Antonio Vargas to publicly come out as undocumented, and Vargas also interviewed her for his **Time magazine cover story**.

Pat Hyland – Pat Hyland, Jose Antonio Vargas's high school principal, is one of his most important mentors and confidants. In high school, she noticed Vargas's dedication to after-school activities, then started giving him rides after school. She also introduced him to Rich Fischer. Later, like Fischer, Mary Moore, and Jim Strand, Hyland also advised and supported Vargas throughout college and his journalism career.

President Obama – Barack Obama was the president of the United States from 2009 to 2017. While he implemented the DACA program, he also greatly ramped up deportations, for which immigration activists often call him the "Deporter-in-Chief" (a play on "Commander-in-Chief"). Jose Antonio Vargas also covered Obama as a journalist during the 2008

presidential campaign.

President Trump – Donald Trump was the president of the United States from 2017 to 2021. Jose Antonio Vargas considers Trump's presidency the worst era for immigrants in modern U.S. history because Trump's political strategy was largely based around demonizing immigrants. Vargas tried to counter Trump's talking points by going on Fox News, and after Trump's victory, he left his L.A. apartment because he worried that keeping a permanent address would leave him vulnerable to deportation.

Rich Fischer – Rich Fischer was the superintendent of Jose Antonio Vargas's school district and one of his key mentors during high school. He remains an important part of Vargas's "white family." Fischer helped Vargas get into college, set him up with immigration lawyers, and even taught him how to drive. Like Pat Hyland, Mary Moore, and Jim Strand, Fisher also supported Vargas throughout his careers in journalism and activism.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Vargas's Father – Jose Antonio Vargas's father was the son of a Manila businessman; they had virtually no relationship, since Vargas's father abandoned Vargas and his mother when Vargas was still a toddler. He died of lung cancer in 2011.

Alida Garcia – Alida Garcia is an immigration lawyer and a close friend of Jose Antonio Vargas.

Uncle Conrad – Conrad Salinas, Lolo's nephew and Jose Antonio Vargas's uncle, is a former rice farmer and construction worker who became an officer in the U.S. Navy. He now lives in San Diego, and he is widely respected and beloved in Vargas's family.

Cristina Jiménez – Cristina Jiménez is the founder and director of the immigrant rights organization United We Dream. In 2014, she contacted Jose Antonio Vargas to ask if he wanted to represent Define American at the U.S.-Mexico border. When he arrived, Jiménez helped him strategize to avoid immigration checkpoints.

Jake Brewer – Between 2007 and his tragic death in 2015, Jake Brewer was one of Jose Antonio Vargas's closest friends and confidants. He was also an expert in online organizing, and he helped Vargas launch Define American. Brewer's death forced Vargas to confront his fear of intimacy and commitment.

Mark Zuckerberg – Mark Zuckerberg is the world-famous founder of Facebook. In 2010, Jose Antonio Vargas interviewed him for a feature in *The New Yorker*.

Mario – Mario is the young Mexican American Border Patrol agent who interviewed Jose Antonio Vargas in the McAllen, Texas immigration detention center in 2014.

Mary Moore – Mary Moore, Rich Fischer's assistant, has been one of Jose Antonio Vargas's most loyal mentors since high school. She constantly writes him greeting cards, and he considers her part of his family.

Mexican José – "Mexican José" was a student at Jose Antonio Vargas's middle school. When he asked Vargas if he had a green card, Vargas realized that he didn't understand his own immigration status.

President Clinton – Bill Clinton was the president of the United States from 1993 to 2001. He passed and implemented "tough on crime" laws that made immigration enforcement far more violent and greatly restricted immigrants' rights in the U.S.

Uncle Rolan – Rolan is Jose Antonio Vargas's uncle (his mother's younger brother, and Lola and Lolo's son). Roland moved to California just two years before Vargas, and they even shared a bedroom for much of Vargas's youth.

Ryan Eller – Ryan Eller was a minister and activist from Kentucky who served as the campaign director for Define American.

Teresa Moore – Teresa Moore is a journalist and editor in California. She edited Jose Antonio Vargas's writing when he was a high school student and recommended him for the *San Francisco Chronicle* internship that launched his career.

Toni Morrison – Toni Morrison was the Pulitzer and Nobel Prize-winning novelist whose work deeply inspired Jose Antonio Vargas in his youth. (In particular, Vargas loved her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*.)

An Immigration Lawyer – One of Jose Antonio Vargas's immigration lawyers who cautioned him against publicly admitting to breaking the law in his 2011 "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant" essay.

An Immigration Journalist – Journalist who told Jose Antonio Vargas that even when American citizens are told the facts about immigration, they often don't care or else disbelieve these facts, due to the influence of right-wing media outlets.

TERMS

Define American – Define American is the immigration-focused nonprofit that **Jose Antonio Vargas** co-founded in 2011 and has helped run ever since. The organization uses public relations campaigns and media consultancy to change the stories told about immigrants and immigration in the U.S.

DREAM Act – The DREAM Act is a proposed bill that would give residency, work permits, and a path to citizenship to undocumented Americans who entered the country while underage. Congress has been unable to pass the DREAM Act as of 2021. But **President Obama** implemented many elements of it through the DACA program.

Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 – The Immigration

and Nationality Act of 1965 was a major law that overhauled the U.S. immigration system. It removed the previous quota system, which gave priority to white immigrants from Northern and Western Europe, with the current preference system that gives every country the same number of visas, while favoring skilled workers and family members of citizens. While the Immigration and Nationality Act allowed more migration from Asia to the U.S., it also put legal limits on immigration from Latin America for the first time, which contributed to a rise in undocumented immigration.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) – Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, is a policy that gives work permits and protection from deportation to some undocumented people who immigrated to the U.S. as children. The policy has faced legal challenges ever since the **Obama** administration implemented it in June 2012, just a day after **Jose Antonio Vargas**'s Time magazine cover story on undocumented immigration.

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) – The U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or DHS, is a federal department that focuses primarily on preventing terrorism and controlling immigration. President George W. Bush founded the DHS in 2002, partly in response to the 9/11 attacks.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CITIZENSHIP, BELONGING, AND IDENTITY

Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen is the journalist and filmmaker Jose Antonio Vargas's memoir about his life, work, and activism as an undocumented American. In 1993, at age 12, Vargas left his native Philippines to live with his grandparents (Lolo and Lola) in California. But four years later, he learned that he was undocumented. Nevertheless, he managed to attend college and become a wildly successful journalist: he covered the 2008 election for the *Washington Post*, interviewed Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg for *The New Yorker*, and even won a Pulitzer Prize. But despite this success, he continued to struggle against a paralyzing sense of fear, anxiety, and unbelonging. His career was built on a lie about his immigration status, and he knew that the government could deport him at any time, upending his life forever. In 2011, he decided to publicly come out as undocumented, and ever since, he has been a prominent voice in American immigration politics. But *Dear America* is less about politics than about how undocumented people seek a sense of belonging in a country that rejects them. Vargas argues that the U.S. needs more than just new immigration policies: it also needs "a new language around migration and the meaning of citizenship." While he emphasizes that legal documents still make a life-or-death difference to millions of people, he concludes that true citizenship isn't about a piece of paper. Rather, Vargas argues that real citizenship is about committing and contributing to one's country, no matter one's legal status.

Like many undocumented people, Vargas constantly feels that he doesn't belong in America—which is an agonizing way to live. He felt out of place from the day he arrived in the U.S. He stood out at school, and he couldn't figure out where Filipinos like him fit into the U.S.'s complicated racial hierarchy. At first, he tried to study and imitate American culture through movies, TV, magazines, and music. He hoped to eventually assimilate and be accepted. But when he learned that he was undocumented, he realized that others might never view him as belonging or deserving to be in the U.S. This shows how American attitudes about immigration prevent undocumented people from feeling truly at home in the U.S. Undocumented immigrants like Vargas also feel under siege in the U.S. because they actually are—they face serious legal barriers that prevent them from living free, safe, stable lives. Most importantly, they often live in constant fear of deportation, which threatens to separate them from their families, jobs, and communities—possibly for the rest of their lives. And there's no way for them to escape this threat because there's no process for them to "get legal." Vargas's constant, severe anxiety about his immigration status reveals the U.S. government's message to undocumented people: they are **"illegal,"** they do not belong, and they are not wanted. In particular, political polarization in the U.S. is responsible for dehumanizing undocumented people. For instance, after Vargas came out as undocumented, his life suddenly became a political issue. Conservatives told him that he didn't deserve to be in the U.S. and should be deported (or worse), while progressives attacked him for not being "oppressed enough" to represent the undocumented community. Everyone treated him as a political abstraction—a projection of their own imagination—and not a real human being. Because of the U.S.'s political climate, undocumented people's rights are never fully protected and always up for public debate. Unsurprisingly, this leads many undocumented people to feel like they do not belong in their own country.

But while Americans constantly told Vargas that he didn't belong, he learned that he still could find a sense of belonging in the U.S. by changing his own conception of citizenship. For most of his life, Vargas hoped to "earn" his citizenship—or prove his moral worth to society and receive papers and public acceptance in exchange. But after coming out as undocumented, he realized that he had this backwards: people already assumed that he wasn't morally worthy because of his

immigration status, and he couldn't do anything to change this. If he wanted to feel at home in the U.S., it couldn't be by convincing others to accept him. Instead, Vargas decided that he had to redefine citizenship for *himself*, rather than letting others keep defining it for him. He decided that real citizenship is "citizenship of participation"—or showing up to fight for the interests of his community and the public interest of his country as a whole. At an event, he further clarified his definition by saying, "I define American by the people who have been excluded from the promise of America." In other words, being "American" isn't about having the right papers, but rather striving for inclusion and equity in a diverse, unequal nation. This definition gave Vargas a new sense of identity and purpose, and it demonstrates how undocumented Americans can better find a sense of home and belonging if they redefine citizenship for themselves (instead of letting others do it for them).

Until immigration laws change for the better, Vargas argues, most undocumented Americans will still have to lie, hide, and pass as legal residents to survive. Nevertheless, he argues that they can still address the psychological burden of undocumented life by redefining citizenship for themselves. While Vargas still hasn't gotten formal citizenship documents, he argues that he *has* become a U.S. citizen, because he learned to identify what citizenship truly means to him and embody that definition. (This is why he subtitles his book "Notes of an Undocumented *Citizen*.") In fact, he thinks that undocumented immigrants aren't the only people who have to define citizenship for themselves: so do native-born Americans, who still have to grapple with what belonging in their country truly means. This is why Vargas founded the organization Define American: he wants *all* Americans to question what citizenship really means, regardless of the papers they have.

FAMILY, LOVE, AND INTIMACY

Jose Antonio Vargas starts and ends *Dear America* by emphasizing how immigration fractures families. If they leave the U.S., undocumented migrants can't easily return; meanwhile, their relatives generally can't get visas to visit the U.S. As a result, undocumented people often go decades without seeing their relatives abroad. Vargas hasn't seen his mother or siblings in over 25 years—and he doesn't know if or when they will ever reunite. This separation has been devastating. In fact, Vargas argues that it hasn't just cut him off from his family, but also undermined his very ability to form loving relationships at all. However, it hasn't changed his fundamental human *need* for love. Fortunately, he has managed to surround himself with loving, generous mentors and peers who treat him like family. This, more than any other factor, has allowed him to thrive in the U.S. While Vargas still struggles to love others, then, his mentors have taught him that love is still powerful—and he's still worthy of it. In addition, they have shown him that he can always rebuild his capacity for love in the future. Thus, while Vargas shows how immigrants' experiences often tragically cut off their capacity for intimacy, he argues that they can never fully lose it because the need to love and be loved is universal.

Vargas shows how immigration wounds people by separating them from their loved ones. Most significantly, Vargas's journey to the United States separated him from his mother—who was supposed to follow him to the U.S., but never could. Because of his undocumented status, Vargas can't leave the U.S. and expect to get back in. As a result, Vargas and his mother haven't seen each other since the day Vargas left Manila in 1993. Vargas struggles to capture how deeply this separation has affected him. He often avoids having serious, emotional conversations with his mother because it's just too painful—they have been cut out of one another's lives for too long. But Vargas notes that this is part of a broader cycle: Vargas's mother was also separated from *her* mother (Lola), who also migrated to the U.S. These severed relationships embody the human cost of U.S. immigration policy, which doesn't give undocumented people any realistic hope of seeing their beloved family members again. Vargas sees that others share the same trauma. When the Border Patrol detained him in a Texas immigration jail, he was surrounded by young boys from Central America who migrated alone to seek asylum in the United States. He immediately started wondering what thoughts, feelings, and experiences led their parents to send them on such a treacherous journey. This reminded Vargas of his own mother sending him to the U.S. In this moment, he recognized that undocumented people endure similar trauma, no matter their particular stories or countries of origin.

Next, Vargas shows how the trauma of undocumented life has cut him off from his own emotions. He argues that, for the time being, he is only capable of "distant intimacy." He struggles to get close to people and has never had a long-term relationship because he so strongly associates love with pain and separation. This shows how the trauma of immigration can harm people's ability to make attachments later on in life. Yet, after his close friend Jake Brewer died in a tragic accident, Vargas finally acknowledged and started to address his tendency to run away from intimacy. Thus, while he understands how separation from his family has deeply scarred him, he also believes that he still retains the capacity to love—somewhere, somehow.

But by finding unconditional love from others—like the mentors, colleagues, and activists he meets on his journey—Vargas learns that he will never fully lose his ability to love, even if it is damaged. Most importantly, Vargas recognizes the power of love through the network of mentors he affectionately calls his "white family." They include Pat Hyland, Rich Fischer, Mary Moore, and Jim Strand, among others. When Vargas was in high school, these adults taught him to

drive, set him up with immigration lawyers, and sent him to college. And they continued to support him throughout his journalism career. Vargas fully credits them with his success, and with showing him the value of unconditionally loving relationships. Vargas feels the same way about the friends, immigration lawyers, and activists who have fought alongside him and helped him run Define American over the last decade. For instance, when he realizes that he might get captured by the Border Patrol at the southern border, his friends Alida Garcia and Ryan Eller immediately fly down to help him. Vargas deeply appreciates his friends' love, even if he doesn't feel fully able to repay it. Vargas's thirtieth birthday party clearly captures the bittersweet mix of pain and hope that he associates with love. He had long compartmentalized his life, separating his friends, "white family," and real family. He worried that mixing them would lead to conflict and embarrassment. But when he saw them all mix at his party, he realized that this separation was a mistake. The party clearly showed him that, even if he constantly feels isolated and alone, he truly does belong somewhere, and people really do love him. In other words, his party helped him identify and accept the power of love, but also acknowledge how he spent so many years running away from it.

Thus, Vargas shows how immigration can be emotionally traumatic, but he also shows how immigrants like him can learn to overcome this trauma in the long term. At the end of *Dear America*, he has a long, emotional conversation with his mother for the first time in many years. While he knows that his relationship with her will always be scarred by their separation, and he will always face a tragic choice between being with her and staying in his country, he also ends the book with a sincere faith that he will be able to love again.

IMMIGRATION POLITICS AND POLICY

The U.S. is famously known as a country of immigrants, but Jose Antonio Vargas argues that its immigration system is an "outdated and byzantine" nightmare that meets almost nobody's needs. It ruins countless lives, wastes billions of dollars, and distracts Americans from passing laws that would actually improve their country. At the same time, in another sense, the system isn't broken at all: it's working just as intended. It's the result of the executive branch faithfully implementing leaders' policy choices over the course of decades. This is the paradox at the heart of immigration in the U.S.: the system is absurd and almost nobody is happy with it, but it's also working exactly as designed. While *Dear America* focuses on Vargas's personal experiences with the immigration system, it also explains how and why the system became so broken. Vargas contends that the system doesn't protect Americans and it doesn't help immigrants because, at its base, that's not really what it's designed to do. Immigration, he argues, is now more about *politics* than *policy*. In other words, politicians don't implement new immigration policies to benefit the country, but rather to score points with their constituents—usually by attacking immigrants, who are perceived as enemies. Vargas argues that this dynamic explains why the U.S. immigration system is becoming crueler and more dysfunctional over time.

Vargas argues that the U.S. immigration system is needlessly brutal, unjust, and illogical. First, it's wildly inefficient. For instance, the government spends hundreds of billions of dollars on border enforcement, even though this has scarcely reduced immigration, and unnecessarily imprisons immigrants with minor criminal records, which costs billions more. It wastes resources and uses unnecessary violence against nonviolent immigrants, with no discernible positive effect. Similarly, the immigration system actually damages the U.S. economy, harming even citizens. It costs the U.S. much of its best talent, not to mention billions of dollars. Vargas points out that, if the eleven million undocumented people in the U.S. could get legal work permits, they could contribute far more to the nation than they do today. In fact, his own journalism career proves that undocumented immigrants can achieve great things if they can enter the legal job market. Thus, the U.S. actually hampers itself economically by spending so much time, energy, and money on immigration enforcement. Finally and most importantly, the way the U.S. government treats immigrants is deeply unjust and unethical. For instance, eleven million undocumented people constantly fear deportation and have no clear pathway to citizenship, even though they pay taxes, contribute to Social Security, and keep crucial U.S. industries like agriculture and construction afloat. When they cross the southern border, asylum seekers are arrested, detained, and deported without due process. These are just a few of the numerous injustices that Vargas catalogues throughout *Dear America*, and they are the strongest moral reason why he believes that readers should oppose the current immigration system.

Vargas argues that the immigration system became so dysfunctional because it isn't actually designed to regulate immigration—instead of a *policy* tool to help the nation, over time, it has become a *political* tool that leaders use to score points with their constituents. Vargas notes that the modern U.S. immigration system started during the "tough on crime" era of the 1990s, when President Clinton competed with congressional and state Republicans to see who could pass the harshest immigration laws. Rather than trying to actually regulate immigration, these laws were designed to show the public how much each party was willing to punish immigrants. Vargas argues that this trend has continued: immigrants are seen as "unworthy," so the major parties try to win political support by treating them as cruelly as possible. While Donald Trump's political career is the clearest example of this trend, Vargas notes that President Obama also greatly ramped up deportations in order to fight the allegation that he was too

pro-immigration. This pattern suggests that politicians actually get rewarded for cruelty to immigrants—which is why they make the U.S. immigration system more and more cruel over time.

Finally, Americans' views about immigrants clearly show immigration policy has been divorced from reality. For instance, Vargas points out that most Americans assume that immigrants unfairly draw from social services without contributing, when in reality, it's exactly the opposite: immigrants pay income taxes and support the Social Security system, but can't benefit from them. Even people who pose as immigration experts deny basic facts about the system. For instance, anti-immigration activists, progressive TV hosts, and even immigration lawyers have all told him he should "get in line" for a legal green card, when the government offers literally no process for doing so. These examples show that immigration debates in the U.S. deliberately distort the truth and happen in bad faith. These debates aren't really about how the U.S. can create effective immigration policies, but rather about different groups of citizens, politicians, and commentators trying to punish foreigners in order to win political support.

Ultimately, Vargas argues, the U.S. immigration system functions poorly because it's designed *not* to work. By failing to regulate the flow of immigrants, admit them into the U.S. in a fair and orderly way, and respect people's basic rights, it generates further outrage and enables further cruelty. Because immigration policy is inherently punitive in the U.S., it's little surprise that the U.S.-Mexico border has gotten increasingly militarized, and that undocumented immigrants have gotten increasingly vilified over the last few decades. Reversing this dangerous trend requires changing the way Americans approach immigrants and policy conversations about them in the first place. And while this political mission is far from easy, Vargas believes that he's up to the challenge.

JOURNALISM, STORYTELLING, AND THE POWER OF TRUTH

As soon as Jose Antonio Vargas's high school English teacher introduced him to journalism, he knew that he wanted to be a reporter. When America rejected him, journalism became his "way of writing [him]self into America." By reporting for the school newspaper—and later the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Philadelphia Daily News*, and *Washington Post*—Vargas channeled his sense of fear and confusion into storytelling. At first, while he felt like he couldn't tell the truth about his own life, he knew that he could at least make a living telling other people's truths. Eventually, though, he decided that he needed to tell his own story, too. This is why he came out as undocumented. In part, Vargas chose to do so because he wanted to define the meaning of his own life for himself, rather than letting others define it for him. But he also came to see publishing his story as the right thing to do for others, because it could help humanize undocumented people and educate the public about immigration issues. Vargas uses his own experience to illustrate the power of journalism and storytelling. Writing, he argues, can change the world by empowering the people who do it, humanizing the people it's about, and educating the people who read it.

Vargas first became attracted to writing because he saw how storytelling can empower people who otherwise get ignored or forgotten. Vargas first understood this when he started reading African American writers like Toni Morrison and James Baldwin in middle school. He realized that their insights about power, identity, and exclusion in the United States fit his own experiences better than anything he learned at school. Moreover, he saw that African American writers insisted on defining their own story instead of letting the white establishment do it for them. This is why Vargas says that "Black writers gave me permission to question America." He hoped that, by becoming a writer, he could do the same for others. Vargas applied this lesson to journalism. In everyday life, Vargas felt like he couldn't express his true self—people saw his race, immigration status, and sexuality, but not his real character or talents. But writing allowed him to exist in America on equal footing with other people and tell his own story in his own voice, when everyone around him seemed determined to deny him that right.

Over time, Vargas also learned that writing can contribute to movements for social justice by humanizing the people behind them. In the context of immigrant rights, he believes that storytelling is crucial to help the U.S. public understand the true cost of American immigration policies. He points out that many Americans view undocumented immigrants as faceless laborers—as political symbols, rather than human beings. But he thinks that this is because the public doesn't hear their stories. In turn, this is why he decided to publicly come out as undocumented, start the organization Define American, and write articles like his 2012 **Time magazine cover story** about the lives of young undocumented Americans. He wanted to show that there are diverse kinds of undocumented immigrants and that they all have different experiences, but are united by the harm U.S. immigration policy has done to them. And, while Vargas has faced plenty of ignorance and hatred because of this journalism, he has also connected with many people because of it. In one particularly touching moment, a TSA agent recognized him and, instead of detaining him for being undocumented, asked him to autograph a copy of his *Time* cover story instead. She then explained that her brother-in-law is undocumented. Vargas's article connected with her because it showed her that her brother-in-law's experience wasn't isolated. This shows how storytelling can persuade people by connecting with them on a personal, human level.

Finally, Vargas deeply believes that good writing can change the world (and improve U.S. immigration policy) by informing the

public. Vargas points out that one of the main barriers to change in the U.S. is that most Americans—including even journalists—simply know nothing about the U.S. immigration system. Therefore, they do not understand how uniquely cruel and ineffective it is compared to other countries'. For instance, they assume that the U.S. has always used military force at the southern border, rather than recognizing that this has been a deliberate policy choice since the 1990s. In other words, because they don't know how the system was created, they assume that it's natural—that it has always been that way and will always stay that way. This is why Vargas argues that, if journalists, activists, and educators actually want to change the U.S. immigration system, they have to teach Americans about the reality of it. While most of the media focuses on the polarizing political controversies surrounding immigration, Vargas believes that the key to moving the nation forward is accurately recounting the facts about immigration and empathetically telling people's immigration stories. He concludes that journalists are uniquely poised to do this.

For much of his life, Vargas loved journalism because it allowed him to ask questions and tell stories for a living—but also because it didn't require him to discuss or confront his own identity. Nevertheless, Vargas eventually realized that he needed to tell his own story if he wanted to harness the true power of writing. This is why he publicly came out as undocumented in 2011, founded Define American, and wrote this book. He hopes that, if Americans can understand how the U.S. immigration system actually works, learn about its history, and empathize with his and other immigrants' personal experiences, then they can eventually change the conditions immigrants face.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DRIVER'S LICENSE

Jose Antonio Vargas's Oregon driver's license, long his "only piece of government-issued identification," represents the power of documentation in modern society and the practical hurdles that undocumented immigrants face in order to live dignified lives in the United States. While legal papers are often the only thing separating undocumented immigrants from U.S. citizens and permanent residents, they have far-reaching consequences. Vargas couldn't get a job or internship without lying about his citizenship status, and once he did, he still needed a driver's license. After researching all 50 states' laws, he learned that his only chance was to pretend to live in Oregon, then actually go to Portland for his driver's test. He managed to do it, but it would have been impossible without the help of his "white family," including Pat Hyland, Rich Fischer, and Mary Moore. But years later, when Vargas's license was about to expire, he started wondering if he would even be able to continue working as a journalist without his documents. Thus, while his license granted him a temporary, precarious kind of acceptance in the U.S., it could never substitute for citizenship.

THE COVER OF TIME MAGAZINE

The cover of *Time* magazine represents journalism's power to change public opinion and policy, as well as Jose Antonio Vargas's success as a reporter. Specifically, it suggests that he succeeded because he gained a public platform and used it to inspire others, just as others had inspired him.

As a teenager, Vargas saw Ellen DeGeneres on the cover of *Time* with the headline "Yep, I'm Gay." He found this profoundly inspirational—not only did she put a face on the queer community, but she also showed Vargas that he could succeed and accept himself despite being gay.

Years later, *Time* magazine ran Vargas's article about undocumented immigration and put 35 young undocumented people on its cover. Vargas's face was front and center. By featuring on the cover of *Time*, Vargas wasn't just reaching an audience of millions—he was also filling the shoes of the people who inspired him as a young, insecure man. Thus, just as Ellen inspired him to accept queer people like Vargas to accept themselves and overcome prejudice, Vargas hoped to inspire other young undocumented people across the U.S. to do the same. Meanwhile, Ellen's *Time* cover taught Vargas how people's stories (and the journalists who cover them) can inspire social change, while Vargas's *Time* cover represents his decision to dedicate his life to changing the politics around immigration through journalism and storytelling.

"ILLEGAL" IMMIGRATION

The use of the term "illegal" (instead of "undocumented") represents the way that government policy and the media work together to foster prejudice and cruelty.

The term "illegal immigrant" is vitriolic and defamatory, but it's also simply incorrect: Jose Antonio Vargas emphasizes that, while *entering* the U.S. without the proper documentation is illegal, *being* in the U.S. without those documents isn't a crime. In fact, most undocumented people living in the U.S. *did* enter the country legally (and just overstayed a visa). Meanwhile, undocumented immigrants also commit crimes at lower rates than the rest of the U.S. population. Thus, calling undocumented people "illegal" is misleading—it primarily serves to paint them as criminal outsider "others" who pose a

threat to Americans' security and wellbeing

However, the term "illegal" was long dominant in newspapers, magazines, and TV news, which shows how the media has—intentionally or otherwise—reinforced the same prejudices that lead to discrimination and anti-immigrant policies. Moreover, the term "illegal" also reflects the way that, while government policy determines which migration is legal and illegal, the public generally puts the blame on migrants themselves. Vargas notes that there was no "illegal immigration" before the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act created limits on immigration from the Western Hemisphere, and undocumented immigrants have only widely been viewed as "illegal" since the 1990s (and especially since the 9/11 attacks). The Clinton and Bush administrations explicitly treated immigration as a security issue, which has encouraged Americans to view immigrants as akin to trespassers, invaders, or even terrorists. Later, this became Donald Trump's primary way of framing the immigration debate. But, according to Vargas, it has nothing to do with how undocumented immigrants behave and everything to do with the way the government treats them.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dey St. Books edition of *Dear America* published in 2018.

Prologue Quotes

I do not know where I will be when you read this book.

As I write this, a set of creased and folded papers sits on my desk, ten pages in all, issued to me by the Department of Homeland Security. "Warrant for Arrest of Alien," reads the top right corner of the first page.

These are my first legal American papers, the first time immigration officers acknowledged my presence after arresting, detaining, then releasing me in the summer of 2014. I've been instructed to carry these documents with me wherever I go.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: xii

Explanation and Analysis

Jose Antonio Vargas opens *Dear America* by explaining how, after living two-thirds of his life undocumented in the U.S., he is finally facing deportation—at least, in theory. He doesn't know if or when it will actually happen, so he essentially has to live in constant fear. But this is typical for undocumented immigrants, whose lives—as Vargas will soon explain—tend to revolve around lying, hiding, and passing as legal residents. Thus, even though they're everywhere, they're also all but invisible in American society.

This is Vargas's first warning that his story doesn't necessarily have a happy ending. *Dear America* isn't about how Vargas "overcame" his undocumented status, got papers, and assimilated into American life. Instead, it's really about what it means for undocumented people like Vargas to live under conditions of extreme uncertainty in the United States. More specifically, Vargas wants to show how people struggle to build lives, careers, and relationships when their place in the U.S. is constantly under threat. His arrest warrant represents that threat: it gives the government the right to essentially take away his entire life at any time and send him to a native country he barely remembers.

This is not a book about the politics of immigration. This book—at its core—is not about immigration at all. 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.

After twenty-five years of living illegally in a country that does not consider me one of its own, this book is the closest thing I have to freedom.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: xiii

Explanation and Analysis

Vargas believes that changing immigration policy is the key to improving undocumented people's lives. Therefore, he explores why immigration politics has become so polarized in the U.S. and dispels many misconceptions about the

immigration system. However, as he explains here, this focus on politics is at best secondary to his book, which is really about the lived experience of being undocumented in the U.S. He views the core of this experience as a kind of spiritual homelessness. Because undocumented people face the constant threat of deportation and can't be honest about their status with others, Vargas explains, they often feel like they don't truly belong in the U.S. They are always mentally preparing to lose everything, so they can never feel totally comfortable and secure in their lives. And even if they never get deported, they still never feel totally free to be themselves.

This is why Vargas concludes his prologue by declaring, "this book is the closest thing I have to freedom." Unlike most undocumented people, he has taken the bold step of declaring his status to the world. (Of course, this is possible in large part because of his privilege as a world-famous journalist.) He isn't free from the ordinary obstacles of undocumented life—the government can deport him at any time, he cannot travel freely, and he still can't legally vote or work. But at least he no longer has to hide, lie, or pass, so he has a certain kind of psychological freedom. By writing his experience in this book, he exercises that freedom to the fullest and ensures that, even if he cannot have his country, he will always keep control over his own voice and story.

Part 1, Chapter 1: Gamblers Quotes

❝ As the Continental Airlines flight left the tarmac, I peeked outside the window. I had heard that my native Philippines, a country of over seven thousand islands, was an archipelago. I didn't really understand what that meant until I saw the clusters of islands down below, surrounded by water. So much water, embracing so many islands, swallowing me up as the airplane soared through the sky.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker), Vargas's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

When Jose Antonio Vargas was 12 years old, his mother sent him from Manila (the capital of the Philippines, where they lived) to California. He was going to meet his grandparents, and his mother intended to follow him. But she never did. His departure was a whirlwind—he was too young and in too much of a hurry to truly understand what was happening. He certainly didn't expect that he would never see his mother or the Philippines ever again.

Vargas only began to understand the significance of his departure after taking off, when he looked down at the islands of the Philippines out the airplane window. Here, he describes his sense that water was swallowing them up—and, in the process, swallowing *him* up too. He suggests that he felt small and powerless compared to the forces that determined his fate—namely, his family's decision to send him to California. At the same time, his last glimpse of his country is also the first time he ever truly understands what it means for it to be made of islands. He sees the only place he knows from a radically new angle and realizes how small it looks compared to the vastness of the ocean, and the parts of the planet he does not know. Therefore, Vargas's metaphor of the water swallowing him up also represents journeying into the unknown. Finally, the Pacific Ocean is also the last thing Vargas notices about the Philippines during his departure and the barrier separating the Philippines from the U.S. Over the course of the book, it comes to represent the emotional distance between Vargas and his mother, which he doesn't know if he will ever be able to bridge.

Part 1, Chapter 2: The Wrong Country Quotes

❝ To Lolo, America was something you wear, something you buy, something you eat, and he wanted to spoil his first and only grandson—me. It was consumption all around.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker), Lolo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

When Vargas arrives in the U.S., his grandfather (or "Lolo" in Tagalog) throws him a fabulous welcome party and then spoils him by buying him ice cream and giving him clothing. For Vargas, this was a level of luxury that he could never have experienced in the Philippines. And to Lolo, this was the great thing about American culture: *consumption*.

Lolo's fondness for American consumerism is a significant moment in *Dear America* because it is one of the first times that someone tells Vargas what Americanness is supposed to *mean*. Throughout his entire life, Vargas has struggled to determine whether he is truly American, or whether he belongs in the U.S. But to answer these questions, he first has to determine what being American would even mean at all. Therefore, he frequently thinks about different

definitions of American identity—and which ones, if any, he can fulfill. Thus, Lolo's definition of America is significant because it emphasizes what living in the U.S. has given him as an immigrant: higher wages and, as a result, a better quality of life. This suggests that people can ultimately learn to define what Americanness means for themselves, and then use these definitions to build a place for themselves in the U.S.

Part 1, Chapter 3: Crittenden Middle School Quotes

❝ What happened to all that love and longing I felt for the family and friends I'd left? Separation not only divides families; separation buries emotion, buries it so far down you can't touch it. I don't think I would ever love Mama again in the childlike, carefree, innocent way I loved her while writing that letter. I don't know where that young boy went.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker), Vargas's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Vargas looks at a letter that he sent to his mother just after migrating to the U.S., and then he comments on how much he has changed since writing it. For him, growing up meant learning to deal with an indefinite separation from his mother and his life in the Philippines. Practically, as he explains here, that meant learning to bury his emotions. And in turn, that meant restricting his very capacity to build close bonds and express love. Thus, moving to the U.S. wounded Vargas deeply and left lasting scars. As he implies here, after burying his love for his mother, he essentially lost the ability to love others innocently and unconditionally—and after losing the person he most loved forever, he could never love anyone else without worrying that he would lose them, too.

Part 1, Chapter 5: Filipinos Quotes

❝ Still, if the Philippines was America's "first real temptation," as Mark Twain wrote, then America, given its imperialist history, also became a temptation for Filipinos eager to escape poverty and provide for their families. After all, if Americans could come and claim the Philippines, why can't Filipinos move to America?

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Americans often think of immigrants as foreigners entering the U.S., but seldom think of those immigrants as citizens of their own countries, choosing to leave. This is significant because it shows that Americans don't actually understand immigration when they make policy to regulate it. They completely skip the key questions of why people are leaving their homes in the first place and whether these reasons are justified. In his chapter on Filipino Americans and the Philippines, Vargas suggests that U.S. colonialism in the Philippines helped make Filipino migration to the U.S. possible. Even if it was cruel and violent, colonialism created enduring personal, economic, and political links between the two countries, and when the U.S. finally opened up to migrants from Asia in the 1960s, countless Filipinos could already qualify for citizenship or residency based on their existing ties.

Thus, Vargas suggests that anyone who views Filipino immigrants coming to the U.S. as unjust should look back to the far greater injustices that the U.S. inflicted on the Philippines during its colonial rule from 1898 until after World War II. Without understanding this historical context—or the history of the U.S.'s immigration laws—Americans are likely to view immigrants as opportunistic invaders, while proposing policy solutions that do not address immigrants' actual motivations and needs. Instead, Vargas argues that educating people about history can help them understand how and why the immigration system needs reform.

❝ But my family is from the *other* Mountain View, which is part of the *other* Silicon Valley. This is the Mountain View of immigrant families who live in cramped houses and apartments, who depend on Univision, Saigon TV News, and the Filipino Channel for news of home, not the homes they're living in but the homes they left behind. This is the Silicon Valley of ethnic grocery stores in nondescript and dilapidated buildings, where sacks of rice and pounds of pork are cheaper, where you hear some Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese before you hear a word of English. This is the *other* Mountain View, in the *other* Silicon Valley, where the American Dream rests on the outdated and byzantine immigration system that requires families to wait for years, if not decades, to be reunited with their loved ones.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker), Lola, Lolo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27-28

Explanation and Analysis

In the 1990s, Vargas didn't just grow up in any ordinary California suburb. He grew up in Mountain View, in the heart of Silicon Valley, which was fast becoming one of the most dynamic and influential regions in the entire world at that time. He knows that his readers might assume that he lived a life of privilege and opportunity, but he clarifies that this wasn't really the case. There are two sides to Mountain View—the wealthy white side dominated by Silicon Valley engineers and entrepreneurs, and the working-class immigrant side, where Vargas grew up. Of course, going to Mountain View High School still gave him some of the privileges that his white counterparts enjoyed, and this helped him make it to college and succeed as a journalist.

But the two sides of Mountain View are more significant because they represent what Vargas sees as the two sides of America. While many people think of the United States as a predominantly white country, this is only half the story. There is also the diverse America of people whose cultures, traditions, and contributions to society are too often erased—including the immigrants on whom Vargas focuses. Actually, the fact that readers are likely to associate Mountain View entirely with Silicon Valley proves Vargas's point: all too often, immigrants are invisible and forgotten in American cities. And because immigrants are invisible, problems with the U.S. immigration system become invisible, too. Vargas's fight to belong in the U.S. is also a fight for his version of American identity to become as valid as the dominant one.

Part 1, Chapter 7: Fake Quotes

❝ *"Peke ba ito?"* I asked in Tagalog. ("Is this fake?") I held out the green card and searched his face as my voice cracked, afraid of what he might say.

Without addressing the question, he got up, swiped the card from my hand, and uttered a sentence that changed the course of my life.

"Huwag mong ipakita yang sa mga tao." ("Don't show it [the card] to people.")

His voice was soft, soaking in shame.

"Hindi ka dapat nandito." ("You are not supposed to be here.")

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas, Lolo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

When Vargas visited the DMV to get his driver's license, he presented his green card as identification—and the woman behind the counter informed him that it was fake. He was shocked and confused. At first, he desperately hoped that this was all a mistake. He returned home to his grandparents and had this conversation with Lolo, whose reaction confirmed his suspicion.

As Vargas points out here, this moment was a crucial turning point in his life: it completely changed his relationship to his new country, and it forced him to grow up fast. He soon realized that, because of his status, he would lack many of the opportunities and privileges that most of the other young people around him took for granted. Ultimately, the difference between having or lacking these opportunities was just one piece of paper. This shows how minor and, in many ways, arbitrary the U.S.'s policies against undocumented immigration truly are. Nothing truly distinguishes undocumented people from ordinary Americans except for the technicalities of citizenship. But in Vargas's view, this makes the way the government treats them totally unjustified. After all, if there were any process for them to gain legal residence, the vast majority of them would do so.

In particular, there is little convincing reason to restrict the rights of children like Vargas—who neither chose to come to the U.S. nor chose to break immigration laws in the process. While the media and public opinion tend to inflate these differences by treating undocumented people as "illegals," in reality, the line between legal and illegal is very fine. Vargas wants his U.S. citizen and legal resident readers to know that undocumented people like him are really no different from them—and should therefore have the same rights and legal protections.

Part 1, Chapter 8: Coming Out Quotes

❝ There are many parts that make each of us whole. Since I didn't know who to talk to, or what to do, or how to think about the "illegal" part of me, embracing the gay part kept me alive. If I had not accepted it as early as I did, I don't know where I would be.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

While Vargas didn't come out as undocumented until he was 30, he came out as gay in high school. He realized early on in his life how much energy and willpower it takes to keep secrets about core parts of one's identity. And while both his sexuality and his immigration status separated him from mainstream society, he also knew that being undocumented was far more dangerous than being gay in the 1990s. Thus he decided that, by coming out about one part of his identity, he could save the energy that he needed to keep the other, more dangerous part a secret. This was also the first time that he learned how liberating it can be to come out. This isn't because coming out eliminates the prejudice and practical obstacles that people with minority identities face, but rather because it allows them to live authentically and align their public and private selves.

Part 2, Chapter 1: Playing a Role Quotes

❝ *Ragtime* connected dots I didn't know existed, allowing me to better understand American history in ways my textbooks didn't fully explain. I would learn that except for Native Americans, whose tribes were already here before the colonists and the Pilgrims landed, and African Americans, who were uprooted from their homes and imported to this country as slaves, everyone was an immigrant. I didn't know what legal papers they had, or if they needed them, or if they were considered "illegals," too, but white people were immigrants, like my family are immigrants.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

As an immigrant teenager in California, Jose Antonio Vargas tried to assimilate to American culture by obsessing over movies, TV, theater, music, magazines, and books. As he explains here, one of the works that most influenced him was the musical *Ragtime*, which is about African Americans, affluent white suburbanites, and Eastern European immigrants coexisting in early 20th century New York. *Ragtime* made an impact on Vargas because it showed him that white Americans—some of whom seemed dedicated to ending immigration now—were once immigrants themselves.

This key principle of American history totally transformed Vargas's view of what the United States was, and what he could be in it. If everyone in the U.S. besides Native Americans was originally from somewhere else, then Vargas didn't have to be a foreigner forever just because he was born in the Philippines. Regardless of whether he got legal papers, he could become just as American in his heart as all of the other immigrants who have shaped American culture and identity over the centuries.

At the same time, *Ragtime* also showed Vargas two critical truths about immigration in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. First, it showed him that the politics of race underlie immigration. He didn't see anyone who looked like him or his immigrant neighbors in *Ragtime*—instead, the immigrants in early 20th century America were white. Of course, this is because U.S. government policy was based on white supremacist ideas and explicitly limited immigration to white people for most of American history. Secondly, *Ragtime* showed Vargas that the debate over legal and "illegal" immigration was also a recent phenomenon. As he explains here, legal papers weren't important in *Ragtime* because, for the longest time, the U.S. effectively had open borders for Europeans. The recent concern about "illegal" immigration, Vargas eventually learned, was largely manufactured by policies that criminalized certain kinds of migration in the 20th century. "Illegal" immigrants were only "illegal" because of these policies—which meant that changing policies could also transform undocumented people's rights and status in the U.S.

❝ I ended up watching Lola watch the movie, wondering how much she had given up to come here, how rarely she got to see her own daughter. At that moment, I realized it wasn't just me who missed my mother—Lola longed for my mama, too. But I was too selfish to want to see it, too absorbed with my own pain.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker), Lola, Vargas's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

The Joy Luck Club, which is about Chinese American mothers and daughters in San Francisco, was one of the only American movies that Vargas ever watched with his grandmother (or "Lola" in Tagalog). Lola's reaction to the movie ended up being far more interesting than the movie itself. The movie reflected back Lola's own pain about her separation from her daughter (Vargas's mother). Because Lola could immigrate to the U.S. but Vargas's mother could not, they had to separate and almost never saw each other. As a result, the fundamental bonds in their family had begun to break down. Like the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, who moved to the United States seeking better opportunities, but then grew culturally and emotionally distant from their daughters, Lola moved to the U.S. to seek a better life for her family, but inadvertently sacrificed her relationship with her family in the process. Then, this cycle repeated when Vargas came to the U.S.

Thus, watching *The Joy Luck Club* showed Vargas that his pain wasn't his alone—Lolo, Lola, and all the other immigrant families around them shared it. This was indirectly liberating, because it meant that he wasn't the only one who felt the way he did. In fact, for Vargas, *The Joy Luck Club* also affirmed storytelling's power to transform people by helping them empathize with others' experiences and broaden their perspectives on the world. In other words, beyond showing him that other immigrants shared his experience, it also showed him how publicly sharing his experience could help others understand, empathize with, and fight for immigrants like him.

Part 2, Chapter 2: Mountain View High School Quotes

❝ I didn't realize it then, but the more stories I reported on, the more people I interviewed, the more I realized that writing was the freest thing I could do, unencumbered by borders and legal documents and largely dependent on my skills and talent. Reporting, interviewing, and writing felt like the safest, surest place in my everyday reality. 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. In the beginning, writing was only a way of passing as an American. I never expected it to be an identity. Above all else, I write to exist, to make myself visible.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Vargas got hooked on journalism in high school because it seemed like an antidote to all of his troubles with immigration. Paradoxically, writing let him both show himself to the world and hide himself from it. He got to put his words, ideas, and voice out into the world. But he also got to hide most of the things that outed him as an immigrant: his appearance, his accent, and his story. If the world could know him through his writing, then it would judge him on his talent, not on his immigration status (like it did in his school and everyday life).

It's important to recognize that, while Vargas eventually came to view writing as a way to influence others and change the world, he actually started writing because he wanted freedom and a place in America for himself. While he knew that he would lack so many other freedoms in the U.S. because of his immigration status, nobody could take away his most fundamental freedom of all: his unique voice. And as soon as people listened to this voice, he was present in the U.S. and participating in its public life—even if, as an undocumented person, he was really supposed to be invisible.

Part 2, Chapter 3: An Adopted Family Quotes

❝ Without realizing it, I replaced Mama, to whom I barely spoke at the time, with Pat, Sheri, Mary, and Gail. I couldn't talk to my own mother while I was collecting mother figures.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker), Vargas's Mother, Pat Hyland, Mary Moore, Rich Fischer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64-65

Explanation and Analysis

In high school, Vargas felt distant from his Lolo, Lola, and mother (who was thousands of miles away in the Philippines). He felt like he had little adult guidance, so he began to seek the company and mentorship of the adults at his school. He befriended the principal, Pat Hyland, the superintendent, Rich Fischer, and his assistant, Mary Moore. He also found parental figures in people like Rich's

wife Sheri and his best friend's mother, Gail Wade.

While he may not have realized it at the time, Vargas explains here, he was clearly replacing his own absent parents—the mother he dearly loved and the father he barely knew—with these parent figures. Whereas replacing his father was more about finding a source of advice and stability, though, replacing his mother was also about filling his unsatisfied need for affection and emotional intimacy. In other words, when the trauma of separation made staying close to his mother too painful, Vargas took on new mother figures instead. This helped him survive high school and stay focused on his future—in fact, as he notes over and over throughout *Dear America*, he probably would not have made it to college or succeeded as a journalist if it weren't for these adults.

Part 2, Chapter 4: Breaking the Law Quotes

❝ What would you have done? Work under the table? Stay under the radar? Not work at all?

Which box would you check?

What have you done to earn your box?

Besides being born at a certain place in a certain time, did you have to do anything?

Anything at all?

If you wanted to have a career, if you wanted to have a life, if you wanted to exist as a human being, what would you have done?

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71-72

Explanation and Analysis

Vargas launched his journalism career by taking a low-level office job at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. But, as he admits in this short chapter, he had to lie about his citizenship to get the job. This was the first of many lies that ultimately both launched him to journalistic fame and tore him apart emotionally. While it is easy to say that breaking the law is wrong and people should suffer the consequences for doing so, Vargas faced a much less black-and-white situation. He only broke the law because doing so was necessary for his career—if he had chosen to follow the law, he would have never been able to work as a reporter, change the national conversation around undocumented immigration, or write this book.

This is why Vargas encourages his readers to imagine themselves in his place. Public debates about undocumented immigration in the U.S. are usually framed from citizens' perspectives—and almost never from undocumented people's. By asking citizens what they did to deserve their citizenship, Vargas points out that they are already in the privileged position, and their privilege blinds them to the complexity of undocumented people's decisions, which usually involve choosing the lesser of two evils. Vargas asks his readers whether, if they were undocumented, they would sincerely sacrifice their entire careers just to avoid lying on an employment form. He doubts it. It's possible to recognize that breaking the law is wrong, but also believe that breaking an unjust lie is a lesser evil than totally giving up on one's life and career goals. If Vargas's questions successfully show his readers the injustices built into the U.S. immigration system, then he has proven his idea that empathizing with undocumented people is the key to changing the policies that impede them.

Part 2, Chapter 5: The Master Narrative Quotes

❝ To pass as an American, I always had to question the law. Not just break it, not just circumvent it, but question it. I had to interrogate how laws are created, how illegality must be seen through the prism of who is defining what is legal for whom. I had to realize that throughout American history, legality has forever been a construct of power.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Growing up as an undocumented immigrant gave Vargas a unique perspective on the U.S.'s laws and legal system. Many native-born Americans assume that the law treats everyone fairly—or is at least designed to do so, even if it sometimes strays due to bias. But Vargas and other marginalized people like him see how inequity and prejudice are actually the foundation of the law, baked into it by design. This doesn't mean that every single law is biased, or that the legal system will always be unfair—instead, it means that the system needs reform if it is to become a force for good.

Specifically, Vargas saw that the U.S.'s laws create an

unequal, stratified society because of who made them and to whom they apply. Because he was always excluded from the law, he clearly saw how the law only protected citizens, while creating draconian conditions for immigrants and especially undocumented people. Similarly, by learning about U.S. history, he also saw how powerful white men have consistently used the law to maintain and increase their own power at the expense of other groups. This is why he emphasizes "who is defining what is legal for whom." The central inequity in immigration law is that citizens make laws that only apply to immigrants, and not to themselves. Most of these citizen lawmakers became Americans when older laws were in force—and these laws were at once more permissive and more exclusionary. They let virtually any white person from Northern or Western Europe become a U.S. citizen, while banning nearly everyone else. Now, the beneficiaries of these laws are creating new immigration laws that their own ancestors wouldn't have even qualified for.

❝ The master narrative is whatever ideological script that is being imposed by the people in authority on everybody else. The master fiction. History. It has a certain point of view. So, when these little girls see that the most prized gift that they can get at Christmastime is this little white doll, that's the master narrative speaking. "*This is beautiful, this is lovely, and you're not it.*"... She [Pecola Breedlove] is so needful, so completely needful, has so little, needs so much, she becomes the perfect victim.

Related Characters: Toni Morrison (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

The novelist Toni Morrison was one of Vargas's most important idols and inspirations as a teenager. Perhaps more than anyone else, Morrison showed Vargas that there were multiple valid American stories, perspectives, and histories—she helped him understand that he could be an American even if mainstream white America rejected him. Vargas particularly loved her novel *The Bluest Eye*, which focuses on a young Black woman, Pecola Breedlove, who believes that blue eyes will make her beautiful and free her from her abusive family. Vargas remembers watching the journalist Bill Moyers interview Morrison about *The Bluest Eye*, and he includes an excerpt from their conversation in *Dear America*.

During the interview, Morrison explained how she made her protagonist Pecola Breedlove "the perfect victim." She fully bought into "the master narrative," or the story that powerful people and institutions told about the world. This is why she aspired to a version of beauty that she could never achieve—whiteness—instead of identifying and appreciating her own inherent beauty. In more general terms, she accepted a worldview that was designed to oppress her because she didn't realize that she had the power to build her own worldview.

Morrison's comments about master narratives and ideology resonated strongly with Vargas. They showed him that he didn't need to define himself through the mainstream culture's negative perceptions and stereotypes about undocumented people. In other words, Morrison taught Vargas that he had the power to define his own story—or to figure out what being American meant to him.

Part 2, Chapter 6: Ambition Quotes

❝ As we walked down Montgomery Street, looking for his parked car, Rich broke the silence.

"You're not going anywhere. You're already here," Rich said. "Put this problem on a shelf. Compartmentalize it. Keep going."

I'm not sure where my life would have gone without those words. I pocketed and referenced them whenever any kind of doubt surfaced. *Put this problem on a shelf. Compartmentalize it. Keep going.*

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas, Rich Fischer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

While Vargas was in college, he struggled to get journalism internships because of his undocumented status. His high school district superintendent and mentor Rich Fischer tried to help out by setting him up with an immigration lawyer. But the lawyer revealed that Vargas didn't have any good legal options—the only thing he could do was return to the Philippines for ten years, and then try to find a legal route to U.S. residency (which is extremely difficult). While Vargas strongly considered this option, Rich Fischer told him that it wasn't a realistic possibility. This advice became Vargas's mantra whenever he considered giving up on his life in the U.S.

Of course, Fischer's advice shows how Vargas's mentors

were instrumental to his success, but it also illustrates how the U.S. immigration system leaves undocumented people with no recourse but to bury their feelings and anxieties. In fact, the U.S.'s strict laws increase the undocumented population by giving them strong reasons *not* to return to their countries of origin and thereby preventing them from ever getting legal status.

Part 2, Chapter 7: White People Quotes

Recently, after meeting some members of my "white family," which is what I call the folks from Mountain View High School, a Mexican American friend asked me why I think all those white people helped me. Was it "white guilt"? The "white savior" thing? I laughed out loud. It's neither of those. I told him that even though I know that they're all white—physically, that is—I didn't think of them as white people when I was growing up. I associated white people with people who make you feel inferior, people who condescend to you, people who question why you are the way you are without acknowledging that you, too, are a human being with the same needs and wants.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker), Rich Fischer, Pat Hyland, Mary Moore

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86-87

Explanation and Analysis

Vargas's mentors from Mountain View High School are practically like family to him. After all, they looked out for him, agreed to keep his immigration status secret, and helped him succeed despite it—just like his own family. But, as he explains here, this was all out of genuine love, and not some more complex self-centered emotion like "white guilt." They didn't view him as a charity case or an opportunity to balance out their own privilege: they viewed him as a promising young person who desperately needed help in order to face the obstacles that the U.S. government was putting in front of him. This is why Vargas says that his "white family" isn't really "white"—by which he means that they treat him as an equal.

When he analyzes his white family's generosity, Vargas also offers important insights about anti-immigrant prejudice and racial inequality in the U.S. more broadly. While he recognizes that many white Americans treat their nonwhite counterparts as less than fully human, he suggests that this is out of ignorance, not malice. Once white people actually get to know people like him, he suggests, they tend to empathize with them and see their humanity. In other words, familiarity breeds understanding, which breeds social conscience. This strongly supports Vargas's belief that exposing the public to undocumented people's stories and voices is the best way to build a movement that can genuinely change U.S. immigration policy for the better.

Part 2, Chapter 10: Bylines Quotes

Since the beginning of my journalism career, there was no escaping the fact that I was lying about myself so I could survive in a profession dependent on truth-telling.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

As his journalism career advanced, so did Vargas's sense of guilt and anxiety about his undocumented status. As he explains here, his career was dedicated to the value of the truth, and yet it was also based on a lie. Therefore, his public and private personas became more and more incompatible. The more popular and influential his work became, the more he had to uphold a reputation for truthfulness—so the more he stood to lose if his immigration status were revealed publicly. Ironically, then, he felt more worried and faced greater risks the more successful he became. It started to seem like he had only two options: sacrifice the truth for the sake of his career, or sacrifice his career—and possibly his safety—for the sake of the truth.

Part 2, Chapter 12: Purgatory Quotes

In a way, winning a part of the prize was the beginning of the end. The lies had gotten so big that they swallowed everything up, including all the good things. The lies, I remember thinking that day, had to stop. I didn't exactly know how to stop them or when to stop them or what I would do after I stopped them. I just knew that they had to stop.

Passing was purgatory. It was exhausting, always looking over your shoulder, waiting to get found out, always wondering if you're not passing enough. Paranoia was like some viral disease that infected my whole body. Stress was oxygen.

I couldn't be present for my own life. Even—no, especially—on a day like this.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

When he won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on the 2007 mass shooting at Virginia Tech, Vargas's first reaction wasn't joy or celebration—it was terror. The public wouldn't just be looking at his work anymore: it would also be dissecting the journalist behind it. And this made it far more likely that someone would reveal his immigration status. Even if nobody did, the Pulitzer still meant that Vargas's already-unsustainable paranoia and anxiety would only get worse. Thus, winning the Pulitzer Prize was a turning point in Vargas's career not only because it represented his success as a journalist, but also because it was the moment when he realized that lying about his status was no longer sustainable. Just like when he decided that he had to come out about his sexuality in order to make it through the end of high school, he concluded that he couldn't truly enjoy his life or succeed on his own terms unless he eliminated the gap between his private and public lives. In other words, living authentically on his own terms became more important than protecting his career or possibly even avoiding deportation.

Part 2, Chapter 13: Thirty Quotes

❝ Journalism was a way of separating what I do from who I am, a way of justifying my compromised, unlawful existence to myself: *My name may be at the top of this story, I may have done all the reporting and the writing, but I'm not even supposed to be here, so I'm not really here.*

Since I began writing, the three most dangerous words in the English language for me have been "I," "me," and "my."

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109-110

Explanation and Analysis

When he finally admitted that the pressure of hiding his status and passing as a citizen was unbearable, Vargas had to give up one of his favorite parts about journalism: it had always let him say what he wanted while also hiding who he was. Because he wrote other people's stories for a living, he got to speak important truths and make a real impact on American public opinion without exposing anything about himself but his name.

Vargas loved fading into the background because it protected his secret—that he was undocumented—and because it allowed him to avoid truly confronting how that secret had taken over his life. After all, he believed that he had no right to speak out publicly in the U.S.—he felt guilty about taking up public space in a country that didn't accept him. And if he never had to write about himself, then he would never have to deal with the feelings of confusion, loss, and alienation that clouded his mind ever since he arrived in the U.S. Thus, journalism both protected Vargas from public scrutiny and enabled him to avoid confronting his own demons. But this all changed after he won the Pulitzer Prize and realized that it would actually be harder *not* to tell his story.

Part 2, Chapter 14: Facing Myself Quotes

❝ There comes a moment in each of our lives when we must confront the central truth in order for life to go on.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

After winning the Pulitzer Prize and landing an assignment to interview Mark Zuckerberg, Vargas started to seriously question whether he could go on as a journalist without publicly revealing his immigration status. He eventually decided that he couldn't: he had been running away from "the central truth" in his life for his entire career, and this truth was starting to destroy him from the inside out. As his public and private lives began drifting further and further apart, coming out started to look like the only way to hold them together.

Vargas recognized that this would be difficult: telling his story would require figuring out his authentic voice and sorting through his conflicted feelings about the past for the first time. But he also saw how it could be a healing process, the only thing that would allow his "life to go on." He knew that, by sorting through his feelings, he could resolve them and figure out what he really felt. And by figuring out what his authentic voice was, he would bridge the gap between his public and private personas. In short, writing his life story would be an agonizingly difficult process, but it was also likely to be one of the most important and empowering things he ever did.

Part 2, Chapter 16: Second Coming Out Quotes

❝ As people mingled with each other through the buffet dinner of chicken curry, samosas, biryani, and naan, I realized that I had made a mistake by keeping everyone apart all these years. I was afraid that they wouldn't have anything to talk about. It was not until my family life, my school life, and my work life all converged in that Indian restaurant that I discovered that they indeed had something in common: their generosity to me.

And to be seen by so many people, so many good people, meant that I was here, and maybe even that I was supposed to be here.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker), Lola, Uncle Rolan, Pat Hyland, Jim Strand, Rich Fischer, Mary Moore, Teresa Moore

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118-119

Explanation and Analysis

After deciding to come out to the world as undocumented, Vargas threw himself a 30th birthday party and, for the first time, brought together his four social circles: his family, his "white family" of high school mentors, his friends, and his journalist colleagues. In the past, he had always kept these groups separate. He worried that they wouldn't get along, or that the wrong people might find out about his immigration status. Indeed, he felt as though he could minimize his odds of losing the people in his life by compartmentalizing them, so that everyone only knew part of him.

But this also meant that nobody knew Vargas in his entirety, and therefore nobody truly got the opportunity to love or accept the real, whole him. This created a vicious cycle. Because he felt alienated and afraid about his immigration status, Vargas compartmentalized the different groups of people in his life. But because he compartmentalized them, he started to feel even more alienated and afraid.

When he finally brought everyone together, Vargas was overjoyed. For the first time in his life, all of the people he loved and who loved him were in one place—except, of course, for his mother and other family in the Philippines. With everyone together, Vargas no longer had to hide anything. He could know for sure that the people who loved him loved the *whole* him, and he affirmed that he truly did belong somewhere.

Part 2, Chapter 17: Outlaw Quotes

❝ "Jose, are you going to print that you've done things that are 'unlawful'? In the *New York Times*?"

"Yes. It's in the essay."

"Jose, the moment you publish that, we cannot help you."

"Jose, are you there?"

She took a big breath.

Telling the truth—admitting that I had lied on government forms to get jobs—meant that "getting legal" would be nearly impossible.

I took a big breath.

"If I can't admit that, then why am I doing this?"

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas, An Immigration Lawyer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

After Vargas drafted his essay "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant," he sent copies to friends and colleagues—including several immigration lawyers. One called him to tell him that, if he admitted to breaking the law in his essay, he might ruin his already-slim chances of "getting legal" at some time in the future. This conversation presented Vargas with the same dilemma that he had faced repeatedly since he first learned he was undocumented at age sixteen: should he prioritize his safety or the truth?

In the past, Vargas had always chosen his safety. But the entire motivation behind his essay was his strong conviction that telling the truth would do more good than harm—both for him personally and for other undocumented people and their loved ones. According to this principle, he decided that admitting to breaking the law was still worth it. While he could have just cut out the relevant parts of his essay, he felt that it was crucial to tell the *whole* truth. Ultimately, he decided that he was even ready to sacrifice his place in the U.S. for the sake of his peace of mind and service to the public.

A longtime journalist who edited immigration for a regional news outlet told me: "Even when we report facts about undocumented immigrants, the readers either don't care or don't want to believe it. That's how successful the right-wing sites have been."

The overall result?

Immigrants are seen as mere labor, our physical bodies judged by perceptions of what we contribute, or what we take. Our existence is as broadly criminalized as it is commodified. I don't how many times I've explained to a fellow journalist that even though it is an illegal act to enter the country without documents, it is not illegal for a person to be in the country without documents. That is a clear and crucial distinction. I am not a criminal. This is not a crime.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas, An Immigration Journalist (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

In addition to coming clean about his own experience, Vargas's other main goal in his essay for *The New York Times Magazine* was to simply inform his readers about the reality of undocumented migration in the U.S. He knew that most Americans didn't know these facts, in part because conversations about immigration in the U.S. media generally focus on its consequences for U.S. citizens, but never for immigrants themselves. Journalists tend to play up sensationalized anecdotes, and as Vargas points out here, many of them don't even know the basic facts about immigration. And as his journalist friend admits, readers don't even particularly care about those facts. But without getting people to agree on them, it's impossible to have serious conversations about how to actually improve immigration policy.

Thus, Vargas's great challenge in his essay was to present the truth in a way that actually made readers care about immigrants. His solution to this challenge was to hook his readers with a compelling personal story—his own. Then, once he got readers to care about undocumented people's experiences and fully recognize their humanity, he could provide facts and figures. By humanizing immigrants first, he could help his readers fully understand current U.S. immigration policies, their disastrous effects, and the way Americans can fix them.

When will we connect the dots?

When will we fully face what's in front of us?

Who gets to exercise their rights as U.S. citizens, and why?

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

After providing a general outline of how debates over immigration look in the U.S. media today—and explaining how they tend to stray from the facts—Vargas cuts to the chase and explains what they are really about: American identity. Even though anti-immigration journalists, TV presenters, and activists often claim to be concerned about wages, security, or fairness, none of these factors actually explains the policies they advocate. After all, giving undocumented immigrants legal status would solve all three of these problems—but Congress still hasn't been able to do it, after trying for decades, and conservatives in the media still warn about the dangers of what they call "amnesty."

Instead, Vargas argues, immigration politics is a way for Americans to weigh in on who they believe should and shouldn't get to belong in their country. Thus, debates about immigration are really about who deserves citizenship and, more fundamentally, what it means to be an American citizen. Many conservatives implicitly tie citizenship to whiteness. They want the government to use immigration policy to maintain (or even strengthen) white people's traditional domination over American political, economic, social, and cultural life. In contrast, people who favor greater immigration, like Vargas, often see diversity and inclusion as central to the U.S.'s identity and promise. Since immigration policy is really just a proxy for this debate over identity, Vargas concludes, Americans must learn to have this debate openly, honestly, and respectfully. He hopes that his journalism and this book can be solid first steps.

Part 2, Chapter 18: Who Am I? Quotes

Migration is the most natural thing people do, the root of how civilizations, nation-states, and countries were established. The difference, however, is that when white people move, then and now, it's seen as courageous and necessary, celebrated in history books. Yet when people of color move, legally or illegally, the migration itself is subjected to question of legality. Is it a crime? Will they assimilate? When will they stop? [...] Yes, we are here because we believe in the promise of the American Dream—the search for a better life, the challenge of dreaming big. But we are also here because you were there—the cost of American imperialism and globalization, the impact of economic policies and political decisions. During this volatile time in the U.S. and around the world, we need a new language around migration and the meaning of citizenship. Our survival depends on the creation and understanding of this new language.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140-141

Explanation and Analysis

After he published his essay "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant" in *The New York Times Magazine*, Vargas suddenly became a major public figure. And unsurprisingly, he also became controversial—not because of what he said, but because of what his existence represented. He points out that white people and white-dominated mainstream news organizations tend to treat people of color as inherently political. This is doubly true of immigrants. When people of color occupy places of power or have public platforms, they are seen as inherently challenging dominant stories about history, society, and identity. Thus, after coming out as undocumented, Vargas could no longer be seen as a neutral journalist—instead, he was seen as always biased and untrustworthy because of his identity.

Vargas compares these views about journalists and public figures to the way Americans view migrants. Americans celebrate the Europeans who "discovered" North America, the pilgrims who settled in New England, and even the settlers who expanded U.S. territory westward by unsettling and exterminating native people. Nobody asks if any of this was legal, because legality doesn't determine whether or not it was worth celebrating. However, when people of color migrate to the U.S.—without trying to kill or replace anybody— they are viewed as an existential threat to the country, and the government passes laws to make them "illegal."

This story about migration, Vargas maintains, is clearly really about race; it's a story written by and for the U.S.'s historical white majority. In this story, white people are the protagonists of American history and nonwhite people are the antagonists. But this story is what Toni Morrison would call a "master narrative": it's written by people with power and designed to help them keep that power. It's no more or less true than the opposite story: that America's greatness depends on its ever-increasing diversity and ever-expanding immigrant population. Americans can choose for themselves which story to follow, and this is why Vargas argues that they must develop a new story—or "a new language around migration and the meaning of citizenship"—if they want to build successful and humane immigration policies in the 21st century.

Part 2, Chapter 19: Inside Fox News Quotes

I wanted to keep repeating: there is no line.

I wanted to scream, over and over again: THERE IS NO LINE! THERE IS NO LINE! THERE IS NO LINE!

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

Vargas made a fateful decision to appear on Fox News—he believed that the opportunity to persuade even a few Fox viewers was worth the threats, lies, and racist abuse that he would likely have to face. When he appeared on Megyn Kelly's show, he learned at the last minute that he would be debating the anti-immigrant activist Laura Wilkerson, who started to speak out against "illegal" immigration after an undocumented immigrant murdered her son. Wilkerson tells Vargas that he should "get in line" to receive citizenship so that he can undergo government security screening and live in the U.S. legally. Of course, her point is deeply ironic: Vargas would be delighted to "get in line" if there were a line to get in. The process that Wilkerson describes doesn't exist—and Vargas's goal as an immigration activist is to get the government to create it. He is furious to see her lie to the Fox audience and to have no chance to respond.

Ultimately, Wilkerson cites a progressive policy that doesn't exist yet, all in order to justify other, more draconian policies that would do the exact opposite (and make "getting in line" harder, not easier). By pretending that a solution already exists, she gets away with blaming the system's problems on

immigrants—and justifies making the system even more cruel, militarized, and wasteful.

Part 2, Chapter 21: Progress Quotes

❝ I wish I could say that being a global citizen is enough, but I haven't been able to see the world, and I'm still trying to figure out what citizenship, from any country, means to me. I wish I could say that being a human being is enough, but there are times I don't feel like a human being.

I feel like a thing. A thing to be explained and understood, tolerated and accepted. A thing that spends too much time educating people so it doesn't have to educate itself on what it has become. I feel like a thing that can't just be.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

Once upon a time, Vargas thought that he could overcome his anxiety and distress about his immigration status by publicly coming out as undocumented. But in reality, when he came out, he just started feeling anxious and distressed about other things. Instead of constantly worrying about keeping his status a secret, he started to worry about how others would treat him. In fact, by coming out as undocumented, he has lost the benefit of the doubt—many people now treat him not as an individual, but as a stereotype, a political spectacle, or even a representative for the entire undocumented community. Thus, while coming out has brought his public persona in line with his private truth, it has also traded his private anguish for public anguish.

The public's attitude toward Vargas demonstrates exactly why he thinks that good immigration policy requires humanizing immigrants and telling their stories. Even though Vargas's career now focuses on giving immigrants a voice, politicians, activists, and the public seem more interested in defining him and turning him into a political pawn than actually listening to him. (This is even more unfortunate because, as Vargas has repeatedly pointed out, these people actually know very little about immigration policy.) Immigration policy is not designed to help immigrants succeed or flourish—instead, it's designed to turn them into a political tool.

Part 3, Chapter 5: Staying Quotes

❝ I refuse to let a presidency scare me from my own country. I refuse to live a life of fear defined by a government that doesn't even know why it fears what it fears. Because I am not a citizen by law or by birth, I've had to create and hold on to a different kind of citizenship. Not exactly what President Shepard described as "advanced citizenship"—I don't know what that meant—but something more akin to what I call citizenship of participation. 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. Citizenship is resilience.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199-200

Explanation and Analysis

After Donald Trump's election, Vargas decided to leave his apartment and start moving around the U.S. at random in order to protect himself from possible deportation. But, in this passage, he explains why Trump's election wouldn't stop him from visiting D.C. to protest. In fact, by making this trip, he finally found the answer to a question that he had been asking himself for many years: the definition of true citizenship.

Ever since he learned that he was undocumented, Vargas knew that he could not get legal citizenship in the U.S., but asked himself if there was some other way he could truly become an American. Through his activism, he decided that the key to real citizenship is participation—or consistently using one's time, energy, and abilities to fight for the greater good. In other words, being an American is wanting and advocating for what is best for the country as a whole. Vargas certainly meets this definition, and while this won't necessarily save him from deportation, it can finally resolve his longstanding doubts about whether he will ever truly belong in the U.S. Yes, he will. Indeed, this is why he subtitles his book "Notes of an Undocumented *Citizen*."

Part 3, Chapter 6: Detained Quotes

If I spoke Spanish, I could have told the boys about Ellis Island. About how the very first person in line on the opening day of America's first immigration station—an unaccompanied minor named Annie Moore who traveled on a steamship from Ireland—was someone just like them. Except she was white, before she knew she was white.

If I spoke Spanish, I could have told the boys that none of this was their fault. I could have made sure they understood—even if most Americans do not—that people like us come to America because America was in our countries.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

After the Border Control arrested Vargas in McAllen, Texas, it threw him in a small jail cell with about two dozen young boys from Central America. Although they came to the United States as refugees seeking asylum, the U.S. detained them, as though they were criminals. Worse still, the government then deported many of them without due process (which violates international laws for the treatment of refugees).

Vargas is distraught to see the boys, obviously traumatized and suffering, trying to make sense of their situation. He's also disappointed that he doesn't speak Spanish, because if he did, then he could tell them that they are not alien to America, like so many Americans want them to believe. Instead, Vargas would point out that theirs is a quintessential American story: immigrating in search of a better life, meeting adversity and prejudice, and persevering anyway. (Indeed, one of the most American stories of all may be future Americans fleeing disasters caused by the U.S. government—whether colonialism in the Philippines, war in Vietnam and the Middle East, or U.S.-sponsored state violence and corruption in Central America.) If all non-indigenous Americans are immigrants, Vargas tells his readers, then criminalizing immigration is tantamount to cutting the heart out of America.

Vargas's new perspective demonstrates that he has managed to redefine Americanness, immigration, and citizenship for himself. His burning desire to share his ideas with the boys shows how this change in perspective can help free undocumented people from the sense of guilt, shame, and alienation that their status causes them. After all, through his new perspective, Vargas has finally, wholeheartedly accepted that he belongs in America—whether or not he has the right papers.

Part 3, Chapter 8: National Security Threat Quotes

At the Texas border, "border security" is an inescapable daily reality, a physical and existential reminder of where you cannot go, what your limitations are. "Border security" means running random checkpoints anywhere within one hundred miles of the U.S.-Mexico border, a Constitution-free zone in which agents can stop your car, inspect your belongings, and ask for your papers, regardless of your immigration status. (The Fourth Amendment does not allow for citizens to be subjected to random search and seizures, but in the interest of "national security," the Fourth Amendment does not apply within a hundred miles of the border.) For residents of the Rio Grande Valley who are undocumented, or who are U.S. citizens but live with parents or siblings who are undocumented, "border security" means knowing you can't drive for more than half an hour south, no more than an hour and a half east, and no more than two hours north.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

When he went to McAllen, Texas for an immigration protest, Vargas had no idea that he was going to encounter so much "border security." After all, the conservative media frequently argues that the border is practically unguarded—and they use this claim to justify calling for more Border Patrol officers, jails, and even soldiers to keep "illegal" immigrants out. But in reality, the border is already so heavily militarized that ordinary U.S. laws simply don't apply there.

For Vargas, the situation in McAllen shows how deeply the U.S.'s polarized, sensationalistic debates about immigration have affected the way Americans actually live. Specifically, immigration politics has threatened many of the key rights, freedoms, and privileges that Americans view as fundamental to their national identity. In the name of these same freedoms, Americans have subjected the border region to the Border Patrol's martial law. In the name of security, they have suspended the Constitution. In other words, the immigration system delivers Americans the exact opposite of what they're promised—and yet they keep pushing to expand it. This again demonstrates how political

debates about immigration are completely disconnected from the on-the-ground reality of it. And it also supports Vargas's thesis that Americans need to learn about this reality before they can hope to make serious positive changes to their immigration system.

Part 3, Chapter 9: Alone Quotes

❝ Sitting alone in that cell, I concluded that none of this was an accident. None of it. You know how politicians and the news media that cover them like to say that we have a "broken immigration system"? Inside that cell I came to the conclusion that we do not have a broken immigration system. We don't. [...] This immigration system is set up to do exactly what it does.

Dear America, is this what you really want? Do you even know what is happening in your name?

I don't know what else you want from us.

I don't know what else you need us to do.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221-222

Explanation and Analysis

As he sits in the Border Patrol detention facility, reflecting on his life as an immigrant, journalist, and activist, Vargas concludes that there's a glaring contradiction at the heart of the U.S. immigration system. Lots of Americans consider it "broken"—whether they think it unfairly keeps immigrants out or lets in too many, they tend to agree that it doesn't work as it should. At the same time, the immigration system is a remarkably complex collection of policies, courts, and law enforcement agencies that all fulfill specific functions with a remarkable degree of precision.

Vargas asks how both of these things can be true at the same time: how can the system produce such undesirable outcomes, but also clearly do exactly what it was intended to do? In other words, why have Americans carefully worked together to designed an intricate, well-funded immigration system that doesn't actually help people immigrate, doesn't improve citizens' lives, and wastes billions of dollars every year? Why would the U.S. *choose* such a cruel, useless system?

This is why Vargas asks what America really wants—after all, the American people don't seem to have it figured out. And until they do, people like Vargas will continue suffering and waiting for an answer. Similarly, this is also why he asks if America even knows what its immigration system actually does—as he has already pointed out several times, most Americans don't know basic facts about the system, and political debates about it are disturbingly disconnected from the reality of what immigrants actually experience. While Vargas doesn't directly answer his questions, his analysis does suggest a clear answer: the immigration system is not designed to regulate immigration, but rather to show voters that the government is cracking down on people they view as enemies. When voters view immigrants as unworthy, threatening, and subhuman, politicians can win votes by promising public displays of violence and cruelty against them. Unfortunately, this has become the real purpose of the U.S. immigration system, and fixing it must begin with fighting back against the cruelty that lies at its foundation.

Part 3, Chapter 11: Cycle of Loss Quotes

❝ Sitting on the floor, staring at the boys in the cell, I kept thinking of their parents, the fear they must have felt knowing that they needed to do what they needed to do. I also kept thinking of my mother, wondering as I had so many times over all these years what she told herself as she said good-bye to me at that airport twenty-five years ago.

Related Characters: Jose Antonio Vargas (speaker), Vargas's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

In immigration detention, Vargas reflects on how so many immigrants—and especially undocumented immigrants—share the trauma of being separated from their homelands and their families. The boys who share his cell, child refugees from Central America, made a journey just like his own: they went to the U.S. alone in search of a better life, leaving their parents behind. Therefore, Vargas sees his own younger self in the boys, and he sees his own mother in the boys' mothers, who must have made a similarly agonizing decision to send them north.

Vargas's thoughts demonstrate why the U.S.'s mistreatment of undocumented people causes a "cycle of loss." Because it prevents undocumented people from returning home and prevents their relatives from legally visiting the U.S. unless they are also willing to make a dangerous border crossing, the U.S. immigration system separates people from their loved ones indefinitely. Sometimes, parents and children do

not see each other for decades—like Vargas and his mother, who have not met since the day he left Manila. Thus, U.S. immigration policy is responsible for a pattern of profound emotional and developmental trauma that can haunt people (and especially young undocumented people) for the rest of their lives. This is why immigration reform is so urgent today.

Part 3, Chapter 12: Truth Quotes

"Maybe," Mama said, her voice growing fainter for a moment, "maybe it's time to come home."

Related Characters: Vargas's Mother (speaker), Jose Antonio Vargas

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of *Dear America*, Vargas explains how he reconnected with his mother while writing the book. While they consistently stayed in touch, they had long avoided deep emotional conversations, as it was just too painful for them to get close again after being forced apart for so long. But writing this book forced Vargas to ask his mother about his childhood, and it also made him sincerely confront his own past for the first time in many years. While this was a painful process, it helped him process his enduring emotional trauma and understand his relationship with his mother. And it allowed them to have longer, more sincere conversations than ever before.

Therefore, it's very significant that Vargas ends his book with this line from his mother. Her feelings—which he probably shares—are extremely unusual in stories about immigration. Perhaps immigrating was a mistake, she suggests, and maybe Vargas never should have gone in the first place. Or perhaps living in the U.S. simply wasn't worth it anymore, now that Vargas was already a famous journalist. In other words, maybe he should return home to the Philippines.

While returning home would allow Vargas to finally rebuild a relationship with his mother and stop worrying about deportation, it is by no means the obvious choice. Besides his mother and siblings, his entire life is in the U.S.—and if he leaves, he may never be able to return. Does it make sense for him to sacrifice his life, career, and country for his mother's love? In fact, this is a version of the same question that has confronted him throughout the entire book—and which he believes that all immigrants confront, in one way or another. Vargas leaves the reader wondering: does he have a "home" to go back to in the Philippines anymore, or is the U.S. his real home now?

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

"I do not know where I will be when you read this book," writes Jose Antonio Vargas. He has a "Notice to Appear" from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This means the government can start proceedings to deport him at any time.

Vargas begins by describing the danger, fear, and uncertainty that undocumented immigrants like him face in the U.S. He has lived his whole adult life in the U.S. and, by any measure, it is his home. But because of a legal technicality—he lacks other papers that most Americans have—the government can order him to leave.

Vargas argues that Donald Trump's presidency is the worst time for immigrants in the modern history of the U.S. Trump is publicly demonizing refugees, "Dreamers," and undocumented immigrants. The U.S. is deporting anyone it can—even cancer patients when they go to hospitals for treatment. It's also separating children from their families at the border and breaking international asylum law.

While many Americans might experience Trump's threats as distasteful or offensive, for many undocumented immigrants, they can literally make a life-or-death difference. Trump's policies and rhetoric are an example of how the U.S. tends to dehumanize undocumented immigrants, which enables the government to direct violent, unnecessarily cruel policies at them. In contrast, Vargas's aim in his journalism, his documentaries, and this book is to put a human face on undocumented immigration.

In his years as an activist, Vargas has spoken about immigration all across the U.S., and he has learned that most Americans know nothing about the immigration system. But his book isn't about politics: it's about being undocumented in the U.S. and not having a home or true freedom.

Vargas emphasizes that scholars and journalists have to inform the public about the reality of immigration if they want public policy to ever change. However, facts and statistics only matter because of the deeper human reality that they represent. Thus, compelling storytelling and informative reporting must go hand-in-hand.

In a "Note to Readers," Vargas notes that there are about eleven million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. All have unique stories and experiences, but they share three common experiences: "Lying, Passing, and Hiding." These are the titles of his book's three sections.

While Vargas does not want to overshadow other undocumented people's stories, he also has to give his readers a general template for thinking about the kinds of experiences and challenges they live with. They have to lie *about their immigration status, try to* pass *as citizens or legal residents, and* hide *from authorities, institutions, and often even friends and acquaintances. Vargas wants to show why each of these choices is at once* painful, unnecessary, *and* relatable. *He wants his readers to empathize with undocumented people's suffering, recognize that it can easily be eliminated through policy, and also realize that they might make the same decisions if they were undocumented, too.*

PART 1, CHAPTER 1: GAMBLERS

Vargas's family is full of gamblers—and they gambled on his future by sending him from the Philippines to the U.S. His mother was supposed to follow him. And they were inseparable: she dedicated all her time to raising him. She took him to the airport early in the morning, sent him with a man she called his uncle, and gave him a jacket in case the U.S. was cold. From the airplane window, Vargas saw how water swallowed up the islands of his country. In the U.S., Vargas never goes into the water—not even at the beach. Ever since he left home in 1993, at 12 years old, water has separated him from his mother.

As a child, Vargas was too young to understand the significance of leaving the Philippines. But in retrospect, his nostalgia and sense of loss are clear. Migration cut him off from his mother and native country, against his will and with no prior warning. But it has also given him benefits, which is why it's a gamble. In fact, he returns to this idea at the end of the book, when he again questions whether migrating to the U.S. was worth it at all. Water has come to represent his loss, and the vast Pacific Ocean swallowing up the Philippines represents the way that his journey overwhelmed him.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2: THE WRONG COUNTRY

After watching so many American movies and beauty pageants, Jose Antonio Vargas was surprised to see a diverse, multilingual crowd when he landed at the Los Angeles airport. In California, he got used to dressing for the cold nights, and he went to live with his grandparents (Lolo and Lola in Tagalog) and his uncle Rolan. Lolo and Lola had been in the U.S. for almost a decade and recently received citizenship. Rolan had arrived just two years before Jose.

The difference between Vargas's expectations of Los Angeles and the multicultural reality that he encountered reflects the tension between two visions of the United States: one as a racially and ethnically homogeneous nation (which it has never been) and one as a diverse, inclusive country. This is the tension at stake in contemporary debates about immigration. The fact that Lola and Lolo were U.S. citizens challenges the common misconception that everyone in a family shares the same immigration status. This shows how arbitrary and unnecessary the line between citizens, legal immigrants, and undocumented immigrants really is.

At his welcome party, Jose met Lolo's siblings, Florie, Rosie, and David. Jose also met Florie's husband, Bernie, and their kids, Bernie Jr. and Gilbert, who barely spoke Tagalog. He also met his Uncle Conrad, a former rice farmer who became a U.S. Navy officer. Over the following weeks, Lolo spoiled Jose: he gave him as much ice cream as he wanted, wrote his name on all his clothing, and became the father figure he never had.

Vargas's welcome party shows that he has a loving extended family in the U.S., but it also reveals how his family has been split by immigration. For instance, Bernie Jr. and Gilbert's lack of Tagalog suggests that they have lost an important part of Filipino culture and cannot communicate with other parts of their family.

PART 1, CHAPTER 3: CRITTENDEN MIDDLE SCHOOL

When he got to middle school, Vargas thought that the national anthem started, "Oh, Jose, can you see?" Needless to say, he stood out from his peers. He didn't speak English, and everyone noticed his strong, sharp Tagalog accent. They noticed his unusual lunch food and the way he ran the wrong way during flag football. Once, he even told his classmates about Rambo, his favorite dog at home—before explaining how Rambo got turned into stew for his mother's birthday.

Vargas's struggle to fit in at school bothered him because it reminded him that he was a foreigner and suggested that he didn't belong in the United States. While the wide gap between Filipino and American culture was often a source of humor, he learned that the best way to fit in was by distancing himself from his native culture and imitating the American students who surrounded him instead.

Vargas didn't understand much about America, but he was excited to learn. He wrote letters to his Mama as often as he could, showing off his new American slang and explaining his school schedule. They missed each other, and he wanted to do well in school to make her proud (and blend in). But now, rereading his letters more than twenty years later, Vargas doesn't recognize his childhood self. When they are separated, families learn to bury their emotions and lose the ability to love each other in the same innocent way as they used to.

Vargas still hadn't faced the full trauma of his move to the U.S.: he still thought that his mother would be following him to the U.S., and he didn't yet know he was undocumented. Thus, his love for his mother looks tragic in retrospect, because the reader knows that he still has not been able to see her, more than two decades after writing these letters. Writing in the present, Vargas suggests that the pain of this separation has challenged his ability to fully feel and process his emotions at all. But he will also point out that it doesn't have *to be this way—the U.S. government has chosen to enact immigration policies that needlessly keep people apart.*

PART 1, CHAPTER 4: NOT BLACK, NOT WHITE

In middle school, a Filipina classmate told Vargas that he didn't look Filipino. Vargas explains that his middle school reflected California's changing demographics in the 1990s: it was a third Latinx, a third Asian, and the rest Black and white. In the Philippines, Vargas never learned about the difference between Black and white Americans. But in America, it suddenly mattered. Still, he didn't understand race: where did the categories Black, white, Asian, and Latinx come from? He remembers how the O.J. Simpson verdict divided the white and Black kids at his school, but the Latinx and Asian kids didn't know which side to join. In fact, he had no idea where Filipinos fit into America, which was always polarized between Black and white people.

Vargas's uncertainty about his race contributed to his sense that he didn't fit into the U.S. As an immigrant, Vargas had an outsider's view of race and racism in the U.S. Thus, while native-born Americans might take racial hierarchies for granted, Vargas clearly saw how they are arbitrary, counterproductive, and yet central to American life. His high school's demographics reflect the way immigration has changed and challenged these hierarchies since the 1960s. Indeed, as he notes later, contemporary immigration policy is largely driven by conflicts over who and what gets to count as American. At base, this is about race—or, more specifically, about white Americans' desire to hold onto political, cultural, and economic dominance.

PART 1, CHAPTER 5: FILIPINOS

Vargas describes Filipinos as an invisible population in the U.S. There are 105 million people in the Philippines and 3.5 million Filipinos in the U.S. But in the U.S., many Filipinos don't consider themselves Asian, and Filipino culture isn't as visible as other Asian cultures. Even though Filipinos do all sorts of jobs, Americans generally think of them as domestic workers. The Philippine islands were a Spanish colony for 370 years and then an American one for 50, which helps explain why so many Filipinos have moved to the U.S. But they have also long faced xenophobia, racism, and discrimination there.

Vargas suggests that Filipinos are invisible in part because they don't fit into the U.S.'s narrow racial categories and in part because they are stereotyped as low-wage workers. He tries to combat this stereotype by showing how Filipinos' place in the U.S. is really the result of a specific colonial history. Their collective experience of unbelonging in the U.S. parallels his specific feeling of unbelonging as an undocumented immigrant.

Vargas's father was from a well-to-do Manila family, while his mother came from a working-class rural family. When her aunt Florie fell in love with an American Marine, Florie moved to the U.S. with him and then petitioned for Mama's father, Lolo, to join her. After a decade-long wait, Lolo and Lola moved to California in 1984.

Vargas's family's path to the U.S. reflects many important features of the current U.S. immigration system. First, Florie's marriage to a Marine shows how U.S. colonialism and militarism shaped the Philippines and became the foundation for migration between the two countries in the 20th century. Second, Lola and Lolo's path to immigration shows how the U.S. prioritizes family migration—but only in certain narrow circumstances. Finally, Lolo and Lola's long wait shows how slow and inefficient the system can be.

After Vargas's father abandoned him and his Mama, Lola and Lolo started sending them money from the U.S. Therefore, as a child, Vargas always thought of Lola and Lolo as rich. But in reality, they barely scraped by working as a food server and security guard, renting a house from Florie, and sending what they could to Mama. When he joined Lolo and Lola in California, Vargas tried to help them out by doing household chores. Meanwhile, his Mama and her long-term boyfriend Jimmy had two more children, and Jimmy also went to work abroad and sent her what money he could.

The difference between Vargas's perception of Lola and Lolo and the reality of their lives reflects the profound inequality between the U.S. and the Philippines. On the one hand, migration physically and emotionally split Vargas's family. But on the other, they actually migrated precisely in order to take care of their family. Lola and Lolo went to the U.S. (and Jimmy also left the Philippines) not only to seek better lives for themselves, but also to support their loved ones.

Like most immigrant families, Lolo and Lola kept their traditions alive at home. They ate Filipino food, kept up with Filipino news, and stayed in touch with Filipino relatives. While one part of Mountain View is now home to major tech companies like Apple, Vargas lived in "the *other* Mountain View," full of immigrants who struggled to survive and waited for the broken U.S. immigration system to reunite them with their families.

Unlike their grandson, Lolo and Lola didn't feel a need to assimilate into American culture—after all, they migrated as adults and already had a clear sense of their identity. The two halves of Mountain View also reflect the two halves of America: the native-born citizens who do not have to deal with the immigration system, on the one hand, and the immigrants who get stuck in the system and are perpetually viewed as foreigners, on the other.

PART 1, CHAPTER 6: MEXICAN JOSÉ AND FILIPINO JOSE

In middle school, a Mexican student named José showed Vargas his green card and asked if he had one, too. Vargas had seen TV ads about a ballot measure to block **"illegal immigrants"** from using government services, but he thought that "illegals" were always Latinx. He surely didn't know about the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which allowed his family members to come to the U.S. but also created the category of "illegal immigrants" for the first time. Mexican José concluded that Vargas (Filipino Jose) must not need a green card.

As a young man, Vargas knew that he was an immigrant and could tell that immigration was an important and contentious issue, but he didn't know what any of this meant for him. He emphasizes how negative the public messaging about immigrants was—and how little he knew about the history of immigration in the U.S.—in order to show what kinds of information and stories were lacking in the media. Specifically, immigration policy's history and immigrants' actual stories were completely invisible. If Vargas had access to this information as a child, he suggests now, perhaps he would have thought very differently about his place in U.S. society.

PART 1, CHAPTER 7: FAKE

At age 16, Vargas went to get his **driver's license**, but he didn't tell Lola or Lolo. He brought his green card and school ID to the DMV and filled out an application. But the woman behind the counter told him to leave: his green card was fake. Vargas left, and on his way home, he started to wonder whether the woman was telling the truth. At home, he ran to Lolo and asked about his green card. Lolo told him not to show it to anyone and revealed that he wasn't supposed to be in the U.S. Vargas was shocked, then confused, then furious, and then frightened. In the following weeks, he felt that "something within [him] hardened" emotionally.

Vargas learned about his immigration status by running into one of the numerous, arbitrary legal barriers that undocumented people face in the U.S. When Lolo confirmed his fears, Vargas's view of himself and his place in his new country changed. Specifically, this news destroyed his hope that he would eventually feel at home in the U.S. because it suggested that no amount of assimilation would ever make him truly American. His emotional "harden[ing]" shows how having to hide his status made it difficult for him to be open or vulnerable to other people.

Vargas thought about returning to the Philippines. But then he learned that his passport was fake—it had a different middle name. In fact, the man he met at the Manila airport was a smuggler. And this was just the last in a much longer series of lies. When Lolo got to America, he petitioned for Rolan and Vargas's Mama to join him. But he falsely listed Mama as single, then started to worry that his lie would be discovered and withdrew her petition. Mama decided to send Jose to the U.S. first, but then she couldn't find a way to follow him. Lolo and Lola hoped that Jose could find an informal job and then eventually marry a U.S. citizen. A few days later, Vargas learned that he was a "TNT" ("*tago ng tago*," which means "hiding and hiding")—an **"illegal" immigrant**.

The long story behind Vargas's fake papers reflects the U.S. immigration system's complex, often seemingly arbitrary rules. Most significantly, the U.S. government gives a strong preference to U.S. citizens' unmarried children, but not their married children. Because Vargas's mother *couldn't easily get residency,* he *couldn't go legally either. As a result, Lolo and Lola used the only option they believed was available to them: sending him to the U.S. illegally.*

PART 1, CHAPTER 8: COMING OUT

Vargas didn't want to marry a woman for citizenship because, as his grandparents soon figured out, he's gay. He learned about his sexuality as a teenager through online chatrooms, where he pretended to be 21 and chatted with older men. Embracing his sexuality helped him cope; he didn't know what to do with his **"illegal"** identity, but he knew what it meant to be gay. He remembers seeing Ellen DeGeneres on **the cover of Time magazine**, but also learning about Matthew Shepard's murder in Wyoming. He constantly told himself, "*There's nothing wrong with being gay.*"

There's a clear parallel between Vargas's struggle with his sexuality and his struggle with his immigration status. Both represent how his identity divides him from the people around him and threatens to alienate him from society in general. However, where he lacked positive media representations of undocumented people, he had a clear gay role model in Ellen DeGeneres. This shows how journalism can make a significant difference in young people's ability to accept themselves, and it helps explain why Vargas is so intent on telling positive stories about undocumented people today.

Vargas came out as gay in U.S. history class, right before watching a documentary about Harvey Milk. But Lola and Lolo were devout Catholics—and still wanted him to "get legal" by marrying a woman. Lolo wasn't willing to put up with a gay grandson, so he kicked Vargas out. Vargas went to stay with one of the men he met online.

The prejudice Vargas faced from Lolo for being gay, much like the prejudice against undocumented immigrants that he saw all around him, left him feeling isolated and unloved. In fact, Vargas lost his only support network in the U.S. Of course, Lola and Lolo's frustration at Vargas's inability to get citizenship through marriage also shows how U.S. laws used to disadvantage queer immigrants. Before same-sex marriage was legal, same-sex couples could not gain immigration benefits.

PART 2, CHAPTER 1: PLAYING A ROLE

After learning that he was undocumented, Vargas started doing everything he could to act American. It often felt like a theater production. He learned about American culture by borrowing CDs, VCR tapes, and magazines from the library. After watching figure skating on TV, he started borrowing classical music from the library. Then, he moved on to hip hop and country music. Through movies, he learned about New York City—and Meryl Streep's versatility as an actress. He learned English slang from shows like *Full House*; *The Oprah Winfrey Show* taught him about writers like Toni Morrison, while *The Rosie O'Donnell Show* taught him about Broadway.

Learning about American culture was still a way for Vargas to assimilate, but after learning he was undocumented, assimilation took on a different meaning: it was no longer about becoming a genuine American, but rather about hiding the fact that he wasn't *one. This reflects how closely citizenship is tied up with identity: Vargas assumed that being truly American meant having citizenship. But eventually, he came to realize that cultural identity and political participation can be just as important as citizenship. His youthful interest in television, movies, music, and theatre also shows how entertainment media—and the stories it tells—play an important role in shaping young people's sense of themselves and their place in the world.*

Rosie O'Donnell hosted the 1998 Tony Awards, so Vargas decided to watch it. The awards featured a scene from the musical *Ragtime*, which depicted three groups—white suburbanites, Black Harlemites, and immigrants from Europe—coming together to dance to ragtime. Vargas rewatched the song over and over: it showed him that there were white immigrants, too. In fact, he realized that everyone in the U.S., besides Native Americans, has an immigrant background. But he also wondered where the immigrants that *he* knew fit into the picture.

Ragtime *challenged Vargas's preconceived idea of what the United States could be. It showed him that mainstream white culture was not the only truly American culture. Rather, when the different groups come together to dance ragtime, it symbolizes how the U.S. always has been a diverse melting pot. But Vargas also noted that this melting pot narrative about American identity hadn't yet begun to include undocumented people or people who couldn't easily immigrate to the U.S. until the 1960s (including Filipinos).*

Lola and Lolo only watched Filipino TV at home. After coming out, Vargas spent a month away, then moved back in with them. One day, he picked up a copy of *The Joy Luck Club* from the video store, because it was the only movie that he'd ever come across about Asian Americans. He watched it with Lola, who broke down in tears during the movie. He realized how much she sacrificed to come to the U.S., and how much she also missed his mother. He concludes that "passing as American" was his way to take some control in his life, when his immigration status made him feel like he had none.

The Joy Luck Club is about Chinese immigrant women living in San Francisco and their relationships with their Chinese American daughters. Clearly, Vargas and Lola saw an element of their own experiences in the movie: immigration also strained their family by creating geographical and cultural distance between them. This vignette also reflects storytelling's power to humanize immigrants by authentically representing their stories. By seeing people like them represented onscreen, Vargas and Lola began to see immigration as a collective experience and source of identity in the U.S., not just as an individual burden of silent suffering.

PART 2, CHAPTER 2: MOUNTAIN VIEW HIGH SCHOOL

Vargas got into journalism when his high school English teacher and newspaper adviser, Mrs. Dewar, pointed out that he "ask[ed] too many annoying questions." She recommended he attend a free summer journalism camp for minority students at San Francisco State University. Vargas saw journalism as a way to rebel against his grandparents, get his voice out into the world, and contribute to society. He calls it "my way of writing myself into America."

Vargas's insatiable curiosity might have been "annoying" at school, but it was a great asset for a journalist. If he could feel at home in journalism, then he had a rightful place somewhere in the U.S.—which could give him another way to belong (or achieve metaphorical citizenship) in his country. But crucially, this wasn't possible without recognition, support, and guidance from others—like Mrs. Dewar and the journalism summer camp.

Vargas quickly decided that he wanted to become a reporter, and he put all his other ambitions aside. After attending the summer camp, he got an unpaid internship at a local newspaper. One day, the editor sent Vargas to cover a house fire on his street, and his article ended up on the front page. Lolo was furious when he saw the story, but Vargas didn't care.

Vargas's motivation, journalistic talent, and desire to contribute to society were clear from the start. But Lolo's anger shows how, even if visibility and fame give journalists power, they can also be very dangerous for undocumented people. This suggests that U.S. immigration policies want undocumented people to be hidden and powerless.

To avoid spending time at home, Vargas signed up for numerous other activities—like choir, speech and debate, theater, and student government. He also befriended many of the adults at and around the school. Pat Hyland, the principal, used to give him rides home. They would stop at the Starbucks on El Camino Real, the road dividing the working-class side of Mountain View (where Vargas lived) with the wealthy side (where most of his classmates lived). Vargas remarks that he was lucky to go to such a privileged school. He also befriended and frequently had lunch with the district superintendent, Rich Fischer, and his secretary, Mary Moore. He explains that the adults he met constantly fought to give him opportunities throughout his life.

Vargas joined school activities to escape his lack of emotional connection at home. However unintentionally, these activities also brought him new relationships that filled his need for connection and parental guidance. By taking Vargas under their wing, Pat Hyland, Rich Fischer, and Mary Moore gave him opportunities that most undocumented students would be unlikely to have. They helped him bridge the gap between the two versions of America that he saw in Mountain View, and they affirmed that he did and could belong in his new country.

PART 2, CHAPTER 3: AN ADOPTED FAMILY

Pat Hyland was shocked when Vargas told her that he wasn't applying to college. He already had a job offer at the local newspaper, and because he was undocumented, he couldn't receive financial aid. The choir teacher, Mrs. Denny, was the only person who knew about his status—he told her after she planned a class trip to Japan. (She rescheduled it for Hawaii instead.) He eventually explained his status to Pat, Rich Fischer, Mary Moore, and his best friend's mom, Gail Wade. They didn't know what to do, but they looked for solutions, like adoption or marriage. They learned that Lolo and Lola could have adopted Vargas and gotten him papers before he turned sixteen—but they never knew. It was already too late.

Vargas's secrecy about being undocumented reflects his deep fear that even the people who loved and cared for him could conceivably turn against him if they found out about his status. But again, Vargas's mentors went out of their way to help him. In contrast to the public discourse about immigration in the U.S., they put people before politics. While Vargas was understandably frustrated to learn that Lolo and Lola could have gotten him legal papers by adopting him, this also shows how confusing and opaque the U.S. immigration system often is to the people who go through it.

However, Vargas's mentors did find him a scholarship to college. He met the scholarship's funder, Jim Strand, who confirmed that his immigration status didn't matter. Years later, Strand has sent hundreds of first-generation students to college, and Vargas now serves on his program's advisory board.

Strand's generosity—like Hyland, Fischer, and Moore's—ended up being a crucial turning point in Vargas's life. In other words, where the government failed to provide Vargas with the same opportunities as other Americans, private individuals stepped in to help. But most undocumented people aren't so lucky—their status often prevents them from getting higher education. Combined with their inability to work legally, they end up at a significant, lifelong disadvantage on the job market.

PART 2, CHAPTER 4: BREAKING THE LAW

During Vargas's last semester of high school, Teresa Moore, a journalist who had edited his writing, convinced him to apply for a job at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The job application form asked whether he was a U.S. citizen, lawful permanent resident, or alien with work authorization. He was none of those, but he needed that job, so he checked the box next to "citizen." He promised himself that he would "*earn this box*." But now, he doesn't understand why people should have to "earn" their citizenship at all. He knew he was breaking the law. But he asks the reader what they would have done—and what they did to "earn" their citizenship.

Vargas challenges the reader to empathize with his decision to break the law—he suggests that most people would have done the same thing if it were necessary for them in order to follow their dreams. But most of his readers are likely U.S. citizens, who can take the opportunity to work in the U.S. for granted. Unlike Vargas, they didn't have to prove their worth to "earn" their citizenship. Vargas therefore asks why some people are born citizens and others have to "earn" citizenship. In fact, he used to believe in this idea—that native-born Americans are inherently worthy of the advantages of living and working in the U.S., but immigrants are not. But now, he sees that it is really a myth that, when repeated in the public, encourages Americans to view immigrants as inferior and unworthy.

PART 2, CHAPTER 5: THE MASTER NARRATIVE

Vargas explains that the law never protected him, so he always questioned it. He learned how the law has always enabled some people to control others. The darkest chapters in U.S. history were all legal, like lynching, Jim Crow, Chinese exclusion, and the mass deportations of Operation Wetback. For much of its history, U.S. law restricted citizenship to "free white person[s]," while protecting the enslavement of Black people. Vargas was fascinated by how this binary of Black and white shaped U.S. history.

Many Americans—especially native-born white Americans—view their nation's laws as a neutral, fair system to uphold justice. But Vargas shows how this kind of view (or master narrative) is only possible because of an ignorance about the history of U.S. immigration policy—which has long been designed to sustain white dominance over nonwhite (especially Black and indigenous) people. Thus, instead of viewing politics as a process of making laws to benefit all Americans, he views it as a system that some groups have captured to assert power over others. As a result, while many Americans associate the law with morality—for instance, they think that undocumented immigration is wrong because *it's illegal—Vargas shows that, actually, the law has long been used for immoral ends.*

In eighth grade, Vargas's afterschool book club read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. He was captivated. Morrison's protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, yearned for blue eyes because she had been lied to about what was beautiful. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Morrison explained that Pecola "surrendered completely to the so-called master narrative"—the story about what is beautiful, worthy, and right that people in power impose on the world.

Morrison's work influenced Vargas so deeply because it gave him another perspective on the "master narrative" of America. It showed that people who don't have power—including people of color, women, queer people, and undocumented people—can choose to either reject or buy into the stories that those in power tell them, which are designed to keep them subservient.

Vargas didn't want to be a "perfect victim," like Pecola Breedlove. He saw that there was a master narrative for **illegality**, and that it was also created as an exception to the norm of whiteness. He resolved not to fit into it. He concludes that "Black writers gave me permission to question America," and this led him into other writers of color. They taught him how to create his own narrative for his life.

Just as Pecola Breedlove yearned for blue eyes (which represented whiteness and beauty), Vargas yearned for legal citizenship—which, for him, represented truly becoming American and belonging in the U.S. But writers like Toni Morrison showed him that, by challenging his assumptions about what real citizenship meant, he could free himself from the psychological burden of feeling out of place as an undocumented person in the U.S.

PART 2, CHAPTER 6: AMBITION

As he advanced as a reporter, Vargas started having to tell more lies and break more laws. As a summer intern for the *Philadelphia Daily News*, he pretended to have a **driver's license** and then secretly traveled by taxi and subway. The next summer, in 2002, he got a similar internship at the *Seattle Times*. But the paper required him to prove his citizenship, and when he admitted that he was undocumented, it rescinded the job offer. He went to Seattle to meet the recruiter, but he doesn't even remember what they talked about.

Because of his undocumented status, Vargas faced numerous challenges that his U.S. citizen colleagues didn't. Not only did he struggle to find work and get a driver's license, but he also had to hide his status from his employers, because he wasn't technically eligible to work for them. As this chapter's title suggests, then, he constantly had to weigh his journalistic ambitions against these risks.

Back in California, Rich Fischer and Jim Strand set him up with an immigration lawyer, who explained that his only option was leaving the U.S. for ten years and then trying to return legally. He considered it, but Rich told him to "compartmentalize it [and] keep going." The next summer, he landed an internship at the *Washington Post*. But he needed to get a **driver's license** for the job.

If he left the U.S. for ten years, Vargas wouldn't even have a guaranteed path to return. Therefore, this wasn't a serious possibility for him—and his legal options were effectively up. Rich Fischer's advice to "compartmentalize it" shows how the only realistic way for many undocumented people to survive in the U.S. is by shutting out their deepest fears and uncertainties about their status. Thus, it's little surprise that Vargas found being undocumented so emotionally challenging.

PART 2, CHAPTER 7: WHITE PEOPLE

Vargas needed a **driver's license**, and Oregon was the only state that would give him one without a passport or green card. His former co-worker's father-in-law lived in Portland and agreed to let Vargas receive mail at his address, for a proof of residency. Rich, Pat, and Mary sent Vargas letters to his former co-worker's father-in-law's address in Portland. Then, Mary's son drove him up to Portland for his test. Rich had already taught him to drive. When Vargas passed his driving test, he got his first official document: an Oregon license valid for eight years. His "white family" never asked if they were doing something wrong by helping him out. They were nothing like the other white people he would meet in D.C.

Again, Vargas only managed to successfully navigate institutional bureaucracy because of support from his "white family." But the complicated process that he had to follow to get his Oregon driver's license shows how the government makes it unnecessarily difficult for undocumented people to access basic services. Vargas finds it striking that his friends never doubted the ethics of their actions—they always knew that helping and protecting other people was more important than following the letter of the law. Of course, this points to the important ethical question that underlies much of Vargas's story: what should people do about unethical laws? Is it justified to break them, or only to protest against them?

PART 2, CHAPTER 8: THE WASHINGTON POST

After his *Washington Post* summer internship, Vargas landed a longer two-year internship at the *Post* after college. Pat, Rich, Mary, and Jim encouraged him to go, but Lolo thought it was too risky. Still, Vargas went. He knew that he had to be careful—he wanted to succeed, but not reveal his immigration status. During his first months, he was paranoid and paralyzed with anxiety. He decided that he needed to either leave or tell someone about his situation. He thought about immigrating to Canada. But instead, he decided to tell everything to his professional mentor, the veteran reporter Peter Perl. To Vargas's surprise, Perl agreed to keep his secret. It turned out that strangers were generous even in Washington.

Vargas could not stand the dissonance between his job in D.C.—which largely revolved around U.S. politics—and his undocumented status, which could have made him a social and political pariah if he went public. Meanwhile, Peter Perl's decision to keep Vargas's secret again shows that, even if political discourse demonizes undocumented people in the United States, individual Americans are still overwhelmingly sympathetic and caring. Vargas's experience suggests that the difference is whether people personally know undocumented people and therefore realize that they're worthy of the same dignity and respect as anyone else.

PART 2, CHAPTER 9: STRANGERS

"There is no passing alone," writes Vargas. At every key moment in his life, strangers saved him. The woman at the DMV told him about his fake green card, but didn't call immigration. The Mountain View High School staff helped him get financial aid. The *Seattle Times* recruiter didn't report him, while the *Washington Post* staff didn't get him fired. He points out that, if every undocumented immigrant received help from five people, then 66 million Americans would be affected by undocumented immigration.

Vargas emphasizes both the personal and collective significance of his reliance on strangers. Personally, he only managed to succeed because others fought for and cared about him. Collectively, the fact that all undocumented people rely on others—whether friends, family members, or strangers—means that undocumented immigration is a much larger and more significant political issue than it might appear at first. Many Americans view undocumented people as faceless, criminal "others" who are totally separate from the community of U.S. citizens. But in reality, most U.S. citizens probably coexist with and depend on undocumented people, whether they know it or not. Those who do know tend to carry this burden privately—but if they worked together publicly, Vargas suggests, these tens of millions of Americans could form a powerful political bloc.

PART 2, CHAPTER 10: BYLINES

Vargas explains that journalism became not just his job, but his "entire identity." His life started revolving around deadlines. While he continued lying about his immigration status, he was meticulous about telling the truth in his writing. And he cared about being original—for instance, when the *San Francisco Chronicle* assigned him to write about "diversity issues," he interviewed white students at majority-minority high schools.

Just as Vargas viewed journalism as a way to counteract his legal exclusion from U.S. citizenship, he viewed telling the truth in his reporting as a way to counterbalance the lies he had to tell in order to get his job. However, fully immersing himself in his work was also a way for him to avoid confronting the deeper trauma of feeling alienated and out of place in the U.S.

In D.C., Vargas spent virtually all his time working. He particularly struggled to improve his writing in English. At first, he reported on video games and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. When a senior editor offered him an assignment in Baghdad, however, he had to turn it down—he couldn't travel. The editor offered to move him to the politics desk instead. He enthusiastically agreed.

Journalism exposed Vargas to a wide range of issues and perspectives, but it also presented him with a series of unique challenges that other reporters didn't face. While he couldn't go to Baghdad due to his undocumented status, the fact that his boss offered him a position there shows that he was clearly standing out as a reporter.

When he started covering politics, Vargas was younger and more tech-savvy than the other reporters, so he began making videos. He sent the *Post*'s top editors a memo about the increasing importance of technology in politics, and they put him on the team covering the 2008 presidential campaign. Vargas admits that this was unfair to the other editors—in retrospect, he sees that "my ambition far outweighed my skills." Fortunately, many senior Post staffers, like Lynne Duke, guided and mentored him.

Vargas recognizes that his success at the Post *partially depended on being in the right place at the right time and having dedicated mentors. His success proves that undocumented people are just as capable of succeeding at high levels if they have the right resources—but it also shows how difficult those resources are to come by. Thus, while Vargas's story might be able to inspire young undocumented people to pursue their dreams, Vargas shouldn't be construed as arguing that this is* all *they need to do to succeed. (Instead, they also need policy changes to put them on a level social and economic playing field with citizens.)*

PART 2, CHAPTER 11: CAMPAIGN 2008

In March 2008, in Texas, a sheriff pulled Vargas over on the highway for speeding. He was in a rush because he was covering the Democratic primary election between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, and he had a tight deadline. Worrying that the sheriff would find out about his immigration status, he peed his pants. Fortunately, the sheriff let him go. Throughout 2007 and 2008, Vargas drove all around the country to cover the campaign. But he always felt like, even though he was covering history, he didn't belong there. He was always worried, even when everything seemed to be going in his favor.

This experience highlights how Vargas's immigration status forced him to live a double life. Publicly, he was a star reporter with significant power to shape the country's view of important political events. But privately, his place in the U.S. was still constantly under threat. As Vargas's career advanced, the distance between his two selves became ever greater—and so did his anxiety about being outed as undocumented. Since he had no legal path to citizenship, it seemed like nothing could ever truly guarantee his place in the U.S.

PART 2, CHAPTER 12: PURGATORY

When the *Post* editor Kevin Merida called Vargas to congratulate him on winning the Pulitzer Prize, Vargas's first response was fear: "What if anybody finds out?" News spread fast, even to the Philippines. And Lola called him, frightened. Vargas hung up on her, ran to the office bathroom, and cried. He realized that lying about his status was ruining his life—even his successes. He had to stop, but he didn't know how. He was so, so tired of passing.

Fame makes hiding, passing, and lying much more difficult—which explains Vargas's counterintuitive reaction to winning the Pulitzer and Lola's panicked phone call. Meanwhile, Vargas's sense of anxiety and despair shows that he was wrong to expect that working hard and contributing to his society would "earn" him his citizenship and make him feel at home in the U.S. He needed to find another way to resolve his sense of unbelonging and open up about his status.

PART 2, CHAPTER 13: THIRTY

Vargas always felt like *The New Yorker* was too sophisticated for him, but he knew that he had to write for it if he wanted to become "a serious writer." That's how he ended up interviewing Mark Zuckerberg. Facebook chose Vargas over many "more experienced and, frankly, better writers" because he actually knew how to use Facebook, and because he promised to be fair. He was about to turn thirty, and he was frightened and depressed—but he couldn't tell anyone why. It was because his **driver's license** was about to expire.

Vargas's career continued to exceed even his own highest hopes, as his profile could fundamentally shift the way the American public perceived Zuckerberg. But again, despite wielding significant power in the public, Vargas was still fearful and depressed in private—and these feelings were only aggravated by his need to hide them. The fact that success threatened Vargas's safety shows how U.S. immigration policy is designed to keep undocumented people invisible and voiceless.

When Zuckerberg asked Vargas where he was from, he said Mountain View. As usual, he never gave a complete answer. Despite his success as a journalist, he was afraid of the words "'I,' 'me,' and 'my.'" He thought he hadn't "earned" the right to write about himself yet, just as he hadn't "earned" his citizenship. He was afraid of confronting his own feeling of confusion and loss, and he avoided getting close to people. He never felt like anywhere was home, so he spent his life on the move, in airports like the one where his whole story began.

Vargas realized that, while he deeply believed in stories' power to persuade and change the world, he was also telling other people's stories in order to avoid truly confronting his own. He suggests that, because his undocumented status constantly threatened his place in the U.S., it also destabilized his own sense of personal identity. In turn, this also seriously affected his ability to form deep personal relationships.

PART 2, CHAPTER 14: FACING MYSELF

Vargas's secrets and lies shaped his relationships. He made up excuses for why he couldn't travel—but the real reason was that he wouldn't be able to get back into the U.S. He never put up photos of his family, and sometimes he even said that his parents were dead. While he fought to get bylines in the newspaper, he also wanted to make himself invisible.

By keeping his undocumented status a secret, Vargas cut a core part of his identity out of his relationships. Because he lived in constant fear of being outed as undocumented, he couldn't integrate his personal and professional lives at all. The more famous he became as a journalist, the further these two lives drifted apart and the more acute his pain became.

During their interview, Mark Zuckerberg struggled to talk openly about his past. But Vargas knew that he wouldn't have been able to open up either. He remembered all the stories of young undocumented activists who were fighting for the DREAM Act, like Maria Gabriela Pacheco, or Gaby, who marched from Miami to Washington, D.C. in protest. Vargas wondered why he wasn't as brave as Gaby. He realized that everyone has to "confront the central truth" of their lives in order to keep living. And for him, this meant writing his own life story.

The Zuckerberg interview and Gaby Pacheco's activism both showed Vargas how keeping his immigration status secret was ultimately hypocritical. First, even though his job was to make people open up during interviews, he couldn't do the same in his own life. Second, while he knew that he should have used his power and platform as a journalist to advocate on behalf of undocumented people, he couldn't do so until he publicly acknowledged his status. Ultimately, by choosing to write his own story, Vargas decided to put his personal integrity and mental health above his safety and career. That said, his coming out would nevertheless propel him to even greater fame.

PART 2, CHAPTER 15: LAWYERS

Vargas consulted with more than ten lawyers, and all of them recommended against publicly telling his story. One argued that he wouldn't be able to find a job, and another recommended that he return to publish his story from the Philippines. A third suggested he ask Congress to protect him through a private bill. But Vargas knew that he wanted to help others, too. He had made it so far thanks to the sacrifices of his family and mentors, so it was his responsibility to give back by making a sacrifice for others.

These lawyers' suggestions underline how dangerous it would be for Vargas to publicly reveal his undocumented status. But clearly, he was willing to take this risk. He saw three great advantages to telling his story. First, by taking control of his own life story, he could close the gap between his private and public lives—and no longer have to fear being exposed. Second, by telling his story, he would fulfill his duty to others. And third, it would enable him to use his story to change the public conversation around immigration.

PART 2, CHAPTER 16: SECOND COMING OUT

"Coming out," Vargas writes, is really "more about letting people in." For years, he kept his biological family, his family of white mentors, and his friends totally separate. He decided to bring everyone together at his thirtieth birthday party, at an Indian restaurant in San Francisco. Thirty people attended. Lola, Uncle Rolan, and many other relatives were there. So were Pat Hyland, Jim Strand, Rich Fischer and his wife Sheri, and Mary Moore and her daughter Daisy. And so were his friends and editors, including Teresa Moore and his *Washington Post* editor Marcia Davis.

When Vargas came out as undocumented to the people in his personal life, he was finally able to bring them all together for the first time. His birthday celebration made it clear that, even if he tended to feel isolated and unloved in the past, he really did have a community of people who loved him. When he decided to stop lying, passing, and hiding around these people, he could finally be open and authentic with them again.

At the party, Vargas realized that compartmentalizing his life was a mistake. When he saw his guests all together, he realized that he did belong somewhere. Unfortunately, some people were missing. Lolo had died four months before, but he and Vargas reconciled before his death. Vargas's father was also dying of cancer in Manila. Relatives he didn't know called to ask for money for the funeral expenses. Vargas was angry, but he knew that it was right to help out.

While Vargas had spent years trying to belong in the U.S. by filling other people's expectations, at his party he realized that he would only truly belong in his community when he simply decided to be himself. But even as he understood how valuable his relationships and community were, he also recognized that he could never fully reverse the more fundamental damage of his severed ties with his family in the Philippines.

PART 2, CHAPTER 17: OUTLAW

Vargas believed that he was about to throw away his career when he published the 4,300 word essay "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant" in June 2011. Around the same time, he started the nonprofit Define American, which tries to change the stories told about undocumented immigrants in the U.S.

Vargas's essay and Define American's mission both reveal Vargas's deep faith in the power of stories. Specifically, he hoped that, by exposing the public to different, more positive representations of undocumented people, he could help change immigration politics (and eventually immigration policy).

While Vargas was proofreading his essay, one of his immigration lawyers called him and explained that he would probably never get legal status if he admitted to breaking the law in his essay. But after spending a decade lying about who he was, Vargas knew that it was time to tell the truth. He thought that his essay's benefits to the public would be worth whatever personal risks it posed to him. He carefully included key details that other journalists could use to study "the 'why' and 'how'" of undocumented immigration.

By choosing to tell the truth about breaking the law, Vargas elected to prioritize his principles over self-preservation. Setting the record straight in his essay meant telling the full truth—this would be the only way for him to fully close the gap between his personal and professional lives. In his essay, beyond just presenting his own individual story, he also tried to address journalists' general ignorance about immigration policy and undocumented people's experiences, which he views as a key factor contributing to the U.S.'s failed immigration policies.

Vargas explains that undocumented immigrants pay billions in income taxes and to Social Security, either through fake Social Security numbers or legal Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers. But the news media often fails to report this information, which would help fight the myth that undocumented immigrants take *away* from social services and U.S. citizens. Because of this poor media coverage, many U.S. citizens see immigrants as mere laborers, but not real people. When Vargas publicized his story, many people started accusing him of having a biased "agenda." He knew that people would respond to his writing, but not in such a politicized way. He asks why journalists pretend that it's "objective" to treat people's lives as just one of a story's two sides.

Vargas gives an important, detailed example of how the media fuels misunderstandings about the U.S. immigration system, which fuel prejudice against immigrants. The common misconception that immigrants can *access social services and* don't *pay taxes—when it's really the other way around—leads Americans to view immigrants as detracting from the U.S. economy (when they really contribute to it). In other words, reasonable ordinary people turn against immigrants because they are misinformed. This is only possible because U.S. citizens' pro- and anti-immigration arguments are considered equally valid—regardless of whether they actually have a basis in fact. In contrast, actual immigrants' arguments and experiences are viewed as too biased to warrant real consideration. Thus, the media locks immigrants out of the conversations that determine their fate.*

The New Yorker wasn't interested in publishing Vargas's story, so he turned to the *Washington Post* instead. For three months, he worked with the perceptive, diligent editor Carlos Lozada to perfect his piece—and then the *Post* killed the story. The top editor didn't even answer Vargas's emails. So Vargas called up one of his old colleagues and got his essay into the *New York Times* instead.

The New Yorker *and the* Post*'s reactions to Vargas's article support Vargas's hypothesis that news media organizations don't take immigration seriously enough or treat undocumented people with the same humanity that they extend to citizens. Vargas clearly connects this to the power dynamics of media organizations, which are usually run by people with little serious personal or emotional investment in immigration.*

Vargas explains that journalists, like most Americans, simply don't understand immigration. Moreover, there are very few Latinx journalists in the U.S., and TV journalism tends to omit key context. TV hosts like Erin Burnett and Bill Maher have asked Vargas why he can't just get legal status—they don't know that, under the current system, this is impossible. When NBC anchor Chuck Todd was about to interview Donald Trump about immigration, Vargas called Todd to inform him that Asian immigrants are the fastest growing undocumented population. Still, many Americans assume that all undocumented immigrants are Latinx.

Vargas points out a key paradox in the media coverage of immigration: the media constantly talks about immigration, but these conversations are almost never about concrete facts or actual policies. Rather, they're about whether people who are already citizens are willing to extend the privileges of citizenship to others. But Vargas thinks this is the wrong question to ask and the wrong perspective to assume. He argues that citizens haven't done anything special to deserve the privileges of U.S. citizenship, so they aren't morally superior to immigrants and don't have an inherent right to judge different immigrants' worthiness. And he argues that, if the media didn't assume a citizen's perspective as its default, then it would take the needs and interests of immigrants themselves into account, instead of just asking whether immigration is good or bad for the white majority. He hopes that giving immigrants and minority groups more power in the media can help resolve both of these issues.

Overall, the media hasn't helped Americans understand the millions of immigrants, documented and undocumented, who live in the U.S. Most Americans don't know that most of these immigrants are now Asian and Latinx because of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which the civil rights movement made possible. Unsurprisingly, Trump yearns to return to the 1950s, when Black Americans didn't have civil rights and nonwhite people couldn't immigrate to the U.S.

By focusing too narrowly on current political debates, the media forgets the facts, context, and history that are necessary to truly understand immigration. This is why Vargas emphasizes the way specific policy decisions in the past have shaped the present breakdown of immigration in the U.S. In turn, this shows that the U.S. has the power to either fix or worsen the policies that cause undocumented people so much suffering today. Indeed, by taking history into account, the stakes of Trump's politics become much clearer: Vargas argues that Trump wants to reinforce white racial domination by reversing policies that have allowed nonwhite people to make the U.S. their home.

In his book *A Nation of Immigrants*, President John F. Kennedy pointed out that 42 million immigrants had come to the U.S. by 1958. Vargas notes that another 43 million came in the following five decades. This has radically transformed the U.S., but most newsrooms are run by and filled with white journalists who don't challenge racism (even when it comes from President Trump). Vargas asks when the American public will finally confront the question of who does and doesn't have rights in the U.S.

Kennedy's book and Vargas's statistics show that immigration is a driving force in American life and politics. By transforming the U.S.'s demographics, immigration also inevitably transforms American identity—which is why political debates over immigration are almost always really about which racial and ethnic groups get to control social, cultural, economic, and political power in the U.S. In turn, this is why Vargas wants the media to start treating immigration and xenophobia seriously, as core issues in U.S. politics, and stop compartmentalizing them as identity issues.

Immigrants aren't the only people excluded from full rights in the U.S. Vargas remembers visiting the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota and meeting an old Black woman in North Carolina who still had her great-great-grandmother's bill of sale. After Hurricane Maria, a young man from Puerto Rico wrote Vargas to say that his citizenship wasn't enough to save him. Vargas points out that the U.S. seized Puerto Rico and the Philippines in the same year—it just never let Puerto Rico go.

Vargas explicitly connects the undocumented experience to the experiences of other marginalized groups in the U.S. By doing so, he shows that these groups share common political interests and suggests that taking immigration seriously can be a jumping-off point for journalists and political movements to take other Americans' needs seriously, too. He also further supports his thesis that immigration is not a fringe identity issue that only affects certain groups, but rather one of the most important issues shaping American identity in the 21st century.

PART 2, CHAPTER 18: WHO AM I?

After Vargas published his essay in *The New York Times Magazine*, the Slate media critic Jack Shafer wrote a column criticizing him for lying about his immigration status. Vargas understood Shafer's reaction, but he also wondered how much privacy journalists are supposed to have. He wondered how Shafer would have acted in his situation, and he nearly called Shafer, but then he remembered his journalist mentors' advice: "toughen up."

Shafer's reaction suggests that he didn't appreciate the full significance of Vargas's decision to lie on his application forms. This was quite literally Vargas's only route to building a career in journalism. Vargas suggests that any aspiring journalist in his position, including Shafer, would have done the same. But even if they likely would have made the same decision, journalists often struggle to empathize with it. Shafer's reaction shows how most U.S. journalists who write about immigration write from citizens' perspectives (not immigrants') rather than empathizing with that of immigrants themselves.

Vargas explains that career journalists generally view it as unprofessional to combine their work with advocacy. But women, queer people, and people of color are often labeled "advocacy journalists" if they write about anything related to their identities. For instance, one of Vargas's straight, white male editors warned him that, as a gay reporter, he wouldn't succeed if he kept writing about AIDS.

By labeling non-white male journalists' work as "advocacy," Vargas suggests, media organizations protect the racist tradition of defining straight, white, male, citizen voices as the neutral standard or measure of objective truth. Paradoxically, according to this ideology, a straight white citizen male's perspective on other groups of people is always more objective and trustworthy than those other people's perspectives on themselves—and yet these other groups' perspectives on straight white citizen males are not *seen as more objective.*

Still, Vargas didn't know how to adapt to his new role: he wasn't just a journalist anymore, but also a political figure. He argues that many Americans don't know how to talk about the realities of immigration—who moves where and why—and forget that it's the foundation of their country. In particular, Americans fail to see how the U.S. government and U.S. multinational corporations have created the conditions that push so many people to migrate. History books celebrate white people's migration, but treat it as a crime when people of color migrate—even when they go to the countries that colonized them. Vargas argues that migration is a human right, and to fulfill this right, the world needs to build "a new language around migration and the meaning of citizenship."

The media and U.S. public often regard sources who acknowledge how their identities have shaped their lives as biased. Therefore, it's no surprise that many Americans no longer saw Vargas as credible once he came out as undocumented. Similarly, many Americans immediately dismiss the perspectives of migrants, noncitizens, and nonwhite people as too subjective. This even happens when their perspectives are based on actual history, while more powerful white citizens' views are sometimes based on lies and omissions about the past. As a result, the American public and media are only capable of understanding "migration and the meaning of citizenship" from one perspective: that of non-migrant citizens watching non-citizen migrants move to the U.S. Most Americans, he argues, have learned not to empathize with immigrants or view them as moral equals with true human rights (which Vargas's "new language" about migration and citizenship would seek to do).

After publishing his essay, Vargas started wondering why the government hadn't deported him. He wrote a story for *Time* magazine to answer this question and explore many of the other contradictions in U.S. immigration politics. He also interviewed Gaby Pacheco, who explained why coming out as undocumented allowed her to help others. While *Time* wanted a photo of Vargas on **the cover**, he and Gaby convinced them to use a photo of thirty-five undocumented young people instead. In collaboration with the organization America's Voice, Vargas and Gaby helped fly these young people to New York and organized a photo shoot. He remembered how seeing Ellen DeGeneres on *Time* inspired him as a child.

Vargas's Time *story and cover photo were extremely significant. They meant that Vargas attained the same platform as the people who inspired him in his childhood, like Ellen DeGeneres. Of course, even more importantly, it meant that his message would spread just as widely as Ellen's and, ideally, get taken seriously by much of the U.S. population. Finally, Vargas's article signaled a profound shift in the way news organizations covered undocumented people—they were suddenly allowed to tell their own stories instead of being spoken for by others.*

The day after Vargas's cover story, President Obama announced the DACA program, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which gave 850,000 young undocumented people some rights, including work permits and protection from deportation. While DACA was a positive step, its recipients had to reapply and pay $500 every two years for temporary protection. Six of the thirty-five young people on **the Time cover** couldn't apply for DACA—including Vargas, who was a few months above the thirty-year age cutoff. This devastated Lola. A few weeks later, Vargas was going through airport security when a T.S.A. agent recognized him. He started to worry—but then she told him her brother-in-law was undocumented. Then, she pulled a copy of *Time* out of her bag and asked for a signature.

Vargas's article certainly didn't cause the passage of DACA, and the DACA program really just included watered-down provisions from the DREAM Act (which could not pass through Congress). Still, DACA proves that immigration policy change is possible, and it shows how profoundly this kind of policy change can improve people's lives. Therefore, DACA validated Vargas's belief that coming out as undocumented and fighting for policy reform were worthwhile forms of public service. So did his encounter with the T.S.A. agent, which affirmed his belief in storytelling's power to humanize marginalized and invisible people.

PART 2, CHAPTER 19: INSIDE FOX NEWS

Seconds before interviewing Vargas on his show, Fox News host Tucker Carlson said, "I should have called ICE. […] That would have been good TV." This made Vargas nervous—but that was the point. Fox News has shaped immigration, Vargas argues, more than any news channel has shaped any political issue. As the most-watched cable channel in the U.S., it shapes how Americans view immigrants, and it normalizes far-right anti-immigrant organizations. In particular, it demonizes undocumented immigrants.

Vargas argues that Fox News's influence on the American public is one of the primary reasons that U.S. immigration politics tends to be so hostile and dehumanizing. Carlson's rhetoric specifically illustrates this. When he proposes that deporting Vargas would be "good TV," he suggests that he values creating a spectacle for his viewers above Vargas's life and livelihood. Specifically, he wants his viewers to see harm come to someone they view as an "enemy." But he advocates for cruelty against Vargas because he doesn't think Vargas shares the same rights that he does. Thus, Carlson's stance on immigration seems to be that the government should deliberately attack immigrants in order for white people to enjoy themselves and feel powerful. He's not talking about policies that will improve the country for everyone; rather, he's talking about revenge for an imaginary crime.

Vargas didn't know if he should go on Fox News. But his friend and Define American cofounder Jehmu Greene (who appears on Fox herself) convinced him that was the only way to speak to people who didn't already agree with him. When he goes on Fox, he always has to be careful not to lose his cool. This can be difficult—one time, the host Bill O'Reilly told him on air that he didn't deserve to be in the U.S. This conversation bothered him for months. Another time, he appeared on Megyn Kelly's show with Laura Wilkerson, who became an anti-immigration activist after an undocumented immigrant killed her son. Wilkerson repeatedly told Vargas that he should "get in line" to become a citizen—even though there simply isn't a line. Vargas wanted to scream.

Vargas views going on Fox News as akin to taking a beating for the sake of the greater good. While the abuse he faces echoes the sense of guilt and unbelonging that he grew up with, he believes that this is worth the chance to persuade some people by putting a face on undocumented immigration. Meanwhile, his argument with Laura Wilkerson again shows how opposition to immigration in the U.S. isn't really about facts or policy, but instead about different factions trying to hold onto power. When Wilkerson said she wanted Vargas to "get in line," she wasn't proposing any specific legal process for him to follow. She also didn't propose improvements to make the U.S. immigration system fairer. Rather, she was expressing a generalized anger towards immigrants, and she viewed the immigration system as a way to restrain their power.

PART 2, CHAPTER 20: PUBLIC PERSON, PRIVATE SELF

Vargas never thought of himself as an activist—but he ended up being seen as one, whether he liked it or not. People across the political spectrum constantly attack him on social media, especially by calling for his deportation. He tries not to take these personally, but it can be difficult. Sometimes, he gets positive messages, even from conservatives. Often, people recognize him in airports and coffee shops—most, but not all, are supportive.

For the first 30 years of his life, Vargas carried the private *burden of feeling like he didn't belong in the U.S., while passing as a citizen in his* public *life. But now, the dynamic is flipped: while he can finally be his authentic self in* private, *his right to exist in the U.S. is now always up for debate in* public. *Unsurprisingly, this dynamic reflects the way undocumented people are viewed in the U.S. in general—while everyone else is seen as automatically deserving of basic rights and legal protections, undocumented people's rights are constantly subject to debate—and therefore their very humanity is, too.*

In fact, Vargas spends most of his time traveling, doing events. He often gets flight upgrades. Once, a man recognized him at the gate, then saw him in first class and commented, "I didn't know **illegals** fly first class." Vargas wondered what the man was thinking, and why he said what he did. But when he landed in New Jersey, he talked with the man, Eric. Vargas explained that he got the upgrade for free, and that he wanted to get legal status but had no way to. Eric admitted that he had just gotten laid off and divorced. Vargas gave Eric his email address and a link to the Define American facts page.

Eric's comments perfectly embody the common, dehumanizing prejudices that undocumented people face. Eric argues that, because Vargas belongs to (what he sees as) a lower class of American, he deserves to be in a lower class on the airplane. Meanwhile, the fact that Vargas isn't *in this lower class suggests that he is somehow taking advantage of the system. This fits into the stereotype that undocumented people get unfair* advantages *in the U.S. Stereotypes like this persist when people are ignorant of how undocumented people actually live. Vargas's conversation with Eric shows that, once people are forced to see their undocumented fellow Americans as normal people, they can challenge their prejudiced beliefs. This is what keeps Vargas optimistic about his campaign's chances of transforming policy and public opinion.*

Vargas hasn't just gotten attacked by Fox News viewers. When he served on a panel at an MIT conference on children's mental health, during the Q&A section, a South Asian woman yelled that he was offending her by grouping "legal and **illegal**" immigrants together and not getting amnesty (which was last offered seven years before Vargas came to the U.S.). After the conference, Vargas talked to her. Astonishingly, she turned out to be an immigration lawyer. But she didn't even know the history of U.S. immigration law. Struggling to respond with compassion, Vargas gave her a business card and left.

Like many Americans, the immigration lawyer seems to confuse what is legal with what is just. She assumes that she deserves to be in the U.S., but Vargas doesn't (even though he never even chose to enter the country). But the reality might simply be that the system unfairly advantages people like her and unfairly disadvantages people like Vargas. Her surprising ignorance about basic features of U.S. immigration law also supports Vargas's theory that educating people about history and policy is a key first step to changing the language Americans use around migration and citizenship.

PART 2, CHAPTER 21: PROGRESS

On top of dealing with "blatant ignorance and naked hatred" from the right, Vargas also has to deal with unrealistic expectations from the left, who think he's never progressive enough, or in the right way. Vargas explains that there are really two immigrants' rights movements in the U.S.: one in Washington, D.C., and one everywhere else. Vargas was focused on writing and making the documentary *Documented*—and not organizing—but he still got into conflicts with many activists.

Vargas constantly gets attacked from every side because people view him as a political symbol, not a complex and imperfect person. These activists don't give Vargas the sympathy or benefit of the doubt that they would likely extend to their friends, their relatives, and themselves. Thus, they dehumanize him in a different way from the conservatives. And this is all the more reason to focus on humanizing people by telling their individual stories.

One major D.C. organizer said he couldn't work with Vargas because he admitted to breaking the law, and another questioned whether Vargas only came out as undocumented to further his career. Actually, Vargas thought he was *sacrificing* his career by going public. In fact, nine months after his *New York Times* piece, he only had $300 left in his bank account and had to start borrowing money from friends. Older activists criticized Vargas for being too privileged, too successful, or not Mexican. Younger activists didn't like that he chose to pass as a citizen and build a career as a journalist, instead of organizing for the DREAM Act, like them.

While Vargas tends to face the same kinds of criticisms over and over again from the right, he faces a wide variety of different, sometimes contradictory criticisms from the left. Every progressive activist seemingly expects him to embody their own personal idea of the "perfect" undocumented activist. They seem to forget that political movements are led by real people, not ideal, imaginary heroes. Few seem willing to actually listen to his story—which, surely, is part of why he wrote this book.

To try and deal with all this criticism from progressives, Vargas started calling himself "the most privileged undocumented immigrant in America." He argues that fighting the U.S. immigration system is so difficult that the people who do it constantly try to one-up each other, especially on social media. But because of how other people have helped him, Vargas wants to bring different kinds of people together.

Vargas's comments on privilege are a clear example of how progressive activists fight each other instead of their real enemies. Vargas suggests that many progressives confuse privilege with a personal moral failing—regardless of what people choose to do with and about their privilege. But in reality, Vargas's privilege is part of what allows him to be such an effective activist. Vargas emphasizes that true political mobilization requires tolerating disagreement and diversity instead.

Vargas spent three months traveling across the U.S. to direct an MTV documentary called *White People*. He learned that most white Americans simply don't interact with immigrants or people of color on a daily basis, and many believe that they face discrimination for being white. But most people of color are just as separated from white people and tend to view them as an oppressive mass, not as individuals. He realized that "everyone feels excluded from America," and he started to wonder whether inclusive politics is really possible in the U.S. In 2015, he started predicting that Trump would win the 2016 election.

Vargas's curiosity and openness to disagreement contrast strongly with the attitudes of the people he interviews, on both the left and the right. Most people seem to believe that they, alone, have the absolutely right answer—few people are genuinely curious about those who disagree with them. But Vargas is an exception. His curiosity comes specifically from his strong belief that most hatred is rooted in ignorance and alienation. This means that people actually can change their beliefs and start to cooperate if they learn about the world and connect with other people's stories.

Just after Donald Trump won the 2016 election, Vargas gave a speech at a racial justice conference in Atlanta. The audience was tense, confused, and pessimistic. When a young man heckled Vargas, saying that he didn't want to be American, Vargas replied that he "define[s] American by the people who have been excluded from the promise of America" and quoted James Baldwin, who said he only criticized America because he loved it. Vargas understands why citizenship isn't enough to protect many Black and indigenous people, and why many people with green cards choose not to get citizenship, even though they can. Vargas explains that he still doesn't know what citizenship means to him. He feels that many people treat him like an object, not a person.

Vargas's definition of "American" shows how, after a lifetime of feeling like he will never belong, he learned that he could find a sense of belonging by changing his own mindset about what Americanness and citizenship really mean. (However, he clarifies that he still isn't all the way there.) Meanwhile, Vargas argues that the young man who heckled him is stuck on someone else's definition of America. He hates this definition, but he doesn't realize that he can replace it with a different one that is worth fighting for. Therefore, he gets caught up in the U.S.'s downsides—like its history of exclusion, brutal inequality, and widespread racism—but he doesn't decide what positive traits he wants to foster in their place. In contrast, Vargas decides that fulfilling the U.S.'s true promise means fighting for equity and inclusion.

PART 3, CHAPTER 1: MY GOVERNMENT, MYSELF

Vargas has tried to live with "radical transparency" ever since he came out as undocumented. Some people dislike what he does; others think he doesn't do enough. After coming out, he knew that he could be arrested and deported anywhere, anytime. In fact, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was deporting 400,000 people per year. Tired of waiting, Vargas decided to call them in May 2012. The agent on the other end of the line was confused.

"Radical transparency" is Vargas's version of authenticity—or living in line with his own values, rather than blindly following someone else's. He refused to lie, hide, or pass anymore because he believed that nobody should have to lie, hide, or pass to live in a free society. While bold and possibly foolish, calling ICE is a logical extension of this idea. He refuses to live passively in fear, which amounts to accepting a subservient place in American society. Instead, he prefers to take matters into his own hands.

Then, in 2013, Vargas testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Lola, his Uncle Conrad, his Aunt Aida, Pat Hyland, Rich Fischer, and Jim Strand all came to Washington, D.C. Vargas was terrified of breaking down during his testimony. He told the senators about how he and other undocumented immigrants were treated as political abstractions, not real people, and he thanked his family and mentors for their generosity. He also pulled out President Kennedy's book, *A Nation of Immigrants*. Then, he started asking the committee questions: "What do you want to do with us? […] How do you define 'American'?" When he finished, Senator Sessions asked him a basic question; the other Republicans asked nothing.

In his Senate testimony, Vargas honed in on the central question at the heart of immigration politics: what is "America" and who gets to claim it? This question is at the heart of most activists' beliefs about the immigration system (on both sides of the political aisle). Why do people whose ancestors immigrated to the U.S. earlier count—when immigration was explicitly limited to white people—and later immigrants face more barriers? Why do native-born Americans deserve more rights and privileges than people like Vargas, who have spent the vast majority of their lives contributing to the U.S.? What moral difference makes Vargas worthy of being undocumented, while Lolo and Lola deserve to be citizens? However, the senators' disappointing response suggests that they weren't willing to grapple with this question directly—probably because their answer to it doesn't determine the course of their lives, like it does for Vargas.

Despite appearing in front of Congress, Vargas still wasn't known to ICE because he hadn't been arrested. When he called ICE on the phone, the agent ultimately told him, "No comment."

The ICE agent's uncertainty and confusion on the phone serves as a metaphor for the unpredictable, disorganized, and often random way the U.S. immigration system works in general. This is arguably the scariest part about being undocumented for Vargas: there doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to the system that holds almost total control over his life.

PART 3, CHAPTER 2: HOME

Stuck in traffic on the way back to his Los Angeles apartment, Vargas started looking through his emails on his phone. One said, "Ready to buy a home?" He wondered if it was a joke. It was a spam email from Bank of America, and he decided to call the bank and tell them that he couldn't get a loan because he was undocumented. The customer service representative was confused, then asked, "Are you an **illegal**?" Vargas comments that he can't vote, travel internationally, or use public healthcare. He doesn't have to hide anymore, but he feels more lost and isolated the older he gets.

The housing email reminds Vargas that the U.S. isn't built for people like him. Not only does he lack many of the opportunities that U.S. citizens take for granted, but other people forget that people like him even exist. This is because, while undocumented people are everywhere, they're expected to make themselves invisible by lying, passing, and hiding. They're certainly not expected to announce their status to customer service. But Vargas insists that he will no longer accept second-class status by lying, passing, and hiding in situations where other Americans get to be their genuine selves.

PART 3, CHAPTER 3: DISTANT INTIMACY

A friend once complimented Vargas on his talent at "distant intimacy." He explains that he creates separation in all of his relationships, because he's "a complicated problem with no easy solution." He can't handle serious romantic relationships. He left one relationship as soon as his boyfriend said, "I love you." When another gave him thoughtful Valentine's Day gifts, he couldn't handle it and left. He used to think that coming out as undocumented would fix this fear, because he wouldn't need to pass anymore. But actually, it has only gotten worse. He's even growing distant from his friends.

Vargas makes it clear that his immigration-related traumas—especially his separation from his mother and his constant fear of deportation—are responsible for his pattern of "distant intimacy." After losing his mother, he has learned to expect love and emotional intimacy to be followed by pain and loss. Because he is constantly preparing to suddenly lose his country, getting too attached to anything or anyone means risking losing them, too.

For many years, Vargas's closest friend was Jake Brewer, a sympathetic, charming, well-connected Tennessean who worked in nonprofits. Jake helped Vargas start up Define American and hire key staffers like the campaign director Ryan Eller. Jake always believed in Vargas, even when Vargas didn't believe in himself. But he also told that Vargas that he'd eventually have to learn to open up to people. In 2015, a car hit Jake during a charity bike ride, killing him. Vargas was devastated. But he couldn't break his pattern of distant intimacy. When his close friend Christina had a baby boy, Vargas was afraid to visit and meet him. Christina sent him a beautiful email, which led him to wonder why he keeps running away from people, and whether he can learn to stop.

Vargas's friendship with Jake shows how, even if Vargas's experiences have hurt his capacity for emotional intimacy, he can still recognize and appreciate others' love and kindness toward him. He isn't a misanthropist who hates love and intimacy. Rather, he deeply wants love and intimacy, but is afraid of pursuing them and then suffering another devastating loss. While tragic, Jake's death also showed him why he needs to change his pattern. Vargas didn't regret getting close to Jake—he regretted not getting closer. Jake's death demonstrates that all *love always carries the possibility of loss. Thus, for Vargas to learn to truly love again, he has to learn to* cope *with uncertainty, and not necessarily to eliminate it from his life.*

PART 3, CHAPTER 4: LEAVING

Just before President Trump's inauguration, Vargas's doorman and one of his lawyer friends suggested he think about moving out, so that he wouldn't be so easy to find. Other lawyer friends suggested he avoid flying, and one even suggested he move to Canada. He seriously considered it—he looked for apartments in Toronto, made plans to run Define American from abroad, and told his beloved Aunt Gladys. His family also knew that he wouldn't be safe in the Philippines, where President Rodrigo Duterte was persecuting journalists.

Trump's election shows that Vargas's future in the U.S. is never secure (and likely never will be). His life became far riskier overnight. Of course, it's symbolically significant that he had to literally give up his home in order to stay in the U.S. On one level, this parallels the way he gave up the Philippines and his mother to go to the U.S. But more importantly, it also represents the way he has felt about the U.S. during his entire life there: in order to stay in the country for now, he has to sacrifice the certainty and stability that he would need in order to build a home and community in the long term.

Just after he turned 36, Vargas got an email from House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi's office, inviting him to Congress. His lawyer friends told him not to go—one, Alida Garcia, even wrote him a long email listing all the dangers he would face.

Pelosi's invitation again forced Vargas to weigh his personal safety against his sense of obligation to others and his nation. He had to ask himself if the chance to speak the truth in a public forum and possibly influence legislation would be worth the risk of being arrested and deported on the Capitol grounds.

PART 3, CHAPTER 5: STAYING

When Vargas received Nancy Pelosi's invitation and his friend Alida's email, he realized that he wouldn't let Donald Trump scare him into leaving his country. While he doesn't have legal papers, he has his own kind of citizenship: "citizenship of participation." He agreed to go to the Capitol, and he even wrote an article about this for the *Washington Post*. He wrote about how immigrants show up, even when they face challenges and dangers, because they love their families and their country. Then, after going to D.C., he left his L.A. apartment and started moving around, without keeping a permanent address.

Vargas again chose public service over private safety. He claims a right to civic pride by redefining "citizen," just like he claimed a right to being American by redefining "American" in a positive way in line with his values. While redefining "citizen" in his own mind won't give Vargas legal papers, it does enable him to overcome his longstanding doubt and anxiety about whether he deserves *citizenship. He knows that, in reality, citizenship doesn't go to people based on who deserves it. But he has also decided that, in a fair world where citizenship* did *go to those who truly belonged to their country, he certainly would deserve it. In this way, then, Vargas feels that he has a kind of moral U.S. citizenship. The U.S. will always be his country and his home, even if he doesn't have the right papers.*

PART 3, CHAPTER 6: DETAINED

Vargas never imagined that he'd end up in a Texas jail cell, surrounded by about 25 young boys. One was crying, and others played with metallic blankets. An agent called Vargas's name, said that they were going to move him, and shut the door. One of the boys kept saying "*miedo*." But Vargas doesn't speak Spanish. He wished he could tell the boys not to be afraid, and that almost everyone in America is descended from immigrants just like them. He would have explained why U.S. foreign policy led them to migrate from Mexico and Central America, and how this connected to U.S. imperialism in the Philippines. Instead, all he could say was, "*No hablo español* […] *Soy filipino*." He repeated his Filipino nickname to himself: *Pepeton*. He spent his whole life running away from this name, but he couldn't anymore.

Vargas's worst fear was realized: he got caught up in the U.S.'s immigration detention system. While the government treats the boys in his cell harshly, or even cruelly, Vargas clearly sees that they are innocent and harmless. He encourages the reader to ask how their government began treating innocent people fleeing violence and poverty as criminal outsiders. Worst of all, Vargas emphasizes that he and the young boys are really no different from anyone else in the U.S. Almost all Americans also came as immigrants, then assimilated and brought their own cultures to their new home. If the government can treat Vargas and the boys this way just because they have the wrong papers, Vargas implies, then nobody's rights are truly safe.

PART 3, CHAPTER 7: THE MACHINE

Vargas ended up in jail because the U.S.'s complex immigration enforcement apparatus swept him up. After 9/11, the Bush administration publicly linked immigration to terrorism, founded the DHS, and ramped up border security. But the modern era of border enforcement really started in the mid-1990s, as part of the "tough on crime" policies pushed by state Republicans and President Clinton.

Many Americans view border security as a natural and inevitable part of U.S. politics. In other words, they know that border security exists, but they don't question why it exists, where it came from, or whether it ought to exist at all. In this brief chapter, Vargas covers the recent history of border security in order to answer all these questions. He aims to show his readers that the U.S. is actively choosing to cause pain, suffering, and death at the border—and can also actively choose to stop it.

In 1996, President Clinton signed two key bills that transformed the immigration system: the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act and the **Illegal Immigration** Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. These bills expanded the number of immigrants eligible for deportation, eliminated the process that let undocumented people legalize their status, and created an "expedited removal" process that let agents deport immigrants without due process. These acts also prevented many undocumented people from getting green cards through legal means, like marriage, and barred undocumented immigrants from reentering the country for many years after they leave.

These bipartisan bills are largely responsible for the cruel, punitive immigration system in the United States today. (That said, they were just two in a longer series of similar bills since the 1960s.) The underlying motive behind this legislation was the same anti-immigrant sentiment that Vargas remembers seeing all around him in the mid-1990s. Thus, the U.S.'s closed-off, militarized immigration system is actually a very recent invention—many Americans can remember a time before it was normal for the government to deport people without due process. Contrary to what conservative media claims, activists like Vargas don't want to open the border to an unprecedented flood of new immigrants—instead, the system they are proposing is very similar to ones that have already existed in the past.

Since the 1990s, the government has also ramped up immigration detention, including for asylum seekers and immigrants formerly convicted of very minor offenses. They are often held in for-profit facilities, and the Obama administration has even put a minimum quota on the number of immigrants who must be detained. In fact, Obama also ramped up deportations to a high of 400,000 per year, seven times as many as during the 1990s. This has cost more than a hundred billion dollars just since 9/11, and it has turned Customs and Border Protection (CBP) into the U.S.'s largest police agency. Vargas asks what this is all for: who are they protecting Americans from?

Clinton and Obama's immigration policies show that Democratic politicians don't necessarily serve immigrants' best interests, even though the Democrats are generally considered the pro-immigration party in the U.S.'s highly polarized system. While noting how both parties race to ramp up immigration enforcement, which they treat as a security issue, Vargas also points out that there's no obvious need for this enforcement in the first place. If immigrants aren't actually a security threat to the U.S., then why do they get treated that way? Whose interests does this serve? While Vargas doesn't answer this question outright, he strongly implies that anti-immigration policy isn't really about protecting Americans' safety—but rather about white Americans trying to maintain cultural dominance.

PART 3, CHAPTER 8: NATIONAL SECURITY THREAT

In summer 2014, Central American refugees—most of them children—began crossing the border in droves. The immigrants rights activist Cristina Jiménez invited Vargas to McAllen, Texas, where she was hosting a vigil to welcome these children to the U.S. While the right-wing media blamed DACA for the "crisis," President Obama refused to give the children refugee status.

The media's cruel, paranoid response to child refugees shows how inhumane and destructive immigration politics has become in the U.S. Meanwhile, Obama refuses to treat immigrant children humanely, seemingly because it would harm his political image among immigration opponents. Thus, U.S. immigration policy turns into a game of needless cruelty and violence against innocent children.

Vargas ultimately decided to go to McAllen, but when he arrived, he was surprised to see Border Patrol agents and immigration officers everywhere. A lawyer friend and an undocumented youth activist both asked Vargas how he was going to get through the immigration checkpoints all around the region. When Cristina Jiménez realized that Vargas didn't have protection through DACA, she panicked and started helping him plan how to leave. Ryan Eller and Alida Garcia flew in to join him, and he wrote and published an essay about his experience. Eventually, everyone agreed that flying was Vargas's best chance to safely leave McAllen. But the Border Patrol was checking visas at the airport, and Vargas got caught.

This time, Vargas's decision to risk his safety for the greater good backfired. The border was so militarized that it exceeded even his expectations as an immigration activist. This shows that the reality of immigration enforcement is totally decoupled from the way most Americans think about it. Indeed, most public discussions treat immigration as an abstraction or an idea, while ignoring the concrete realities on the ground in places like McAllen. While Vargas's friends and colleagues didn't manage to save him from the border patrol, they nevertheless helped him confront his fate with dignity and support. So did writing, which let him again channel his personal suffering into a public service. This shows that both writing and relationships are key tools that allow Vargas to deal with the stress of undocumented life.

PART 3, CHAPTER 9: ALONE

In the McAllen Border Patrol Station, the agents kept moving Vargas around to different cells. A couple hours later, he was on the news, and an agent asked if he was famous. When he arrived and the agents took all of his possessions, he realized that immigration detention was clearly about power and control. In his cell, everything was quiet—for the first time, he had nothing to do and no deadline to fill. He reflected on never having had a real home and decided that he was in an abusive relationship with the United States. But then, he realized that the U.S. immigration system isn't broken: it does exactly what it was designed for. But he wonders if this design is really what America wants for him.

Vargas's experience at the immigration jail, where his treatment seemed both cruel and totally arbitrary, affirmed his longstanding belief that immigration policy isn't really about serving the national interest. The system doesn't clearly benefit anyone, and yet politicians specifically designed it this way. It attacks people who aren't a threat in order to protect people who aren't in danger. Vargas thinks that the immigration system really dominates and abuses citizens because this is how politicians can please constituents who know nothing about immigration. This is how political solutions to immigration became so disconnected from the actual problem: it became a question of politics, not policy. Thus, certain politicians will always call for more immigration enforcement in order to rally their supporters—regardless of whether more enforcement is needed, or whether immigration is really creating problems at all.

PART 3, CHAPTER 10: INTERVIEW

Six hours after he entered the detention center, Vargas went to an interview with a young Border Patrol agent named Mario. (All of the agents were of Mexican descent.) Mario asked when Vargas crossed the border and was surprised to hear that he was from the Philippines. Mario also put an accent on "José," but Vargas explained that Filipinos write "Jose" without the accent. Mario asked who Vargas arrived to the U.S. with and why he became a journalist. Vargas vaguely said that he wanted to see his name in the paper. Soon, the agents told him that he was getting released—but not why. They also said that there was a crowd of reporters outside. On his way out, Vargas asked them what "*miedo*" means—it's "fear."

This interview was Vargas's only real human contact with the law. And it was relatively cold and impersonal. Mario and the other border patrol agents weren't anti-immigration radicals, but the children and family members of immigrants. They didn't hate Vargas; they were just doing their jobs. And they clearly weren't the ones deciding whether he would be deported or released. In other words, the people behind the Border Patrol were as nameless and faceless to Vargas as immigrants are to the majority of Americans. Indeed, because of the language barrier, the young boys in Vargas's cell were anonymous strangers to him, too. The one word he captured, "miedo," offers a glimpse of the profound suffering that U.S. immigration policy was inflicting on them.

PART 3, CHAPTER 11: CYCLE OF LOSS

When he was in the jail cell with all the boys, Vargas wondered what their parents were thinking when they sent their children away. He also wondered what his own mother was thinking when she sent him to the U.S. It's something they've never found the courage to discuss. In fact, Mama also lost her mother: she has only seen Lola a handful of times since 1984, and their relationship revolves around sending money and goods from the U.S. to the Philippines. Vargas wonders whether his Mama would have made the same decision back in 1993 if, back then, she knew everything that she knows today.

Vargas connects his personal immigration trauma to his mother's, his grandmother's, and that of millions of other immigrants and families. In doing so, he again underlines how policy choices create patterns of profound human suffering across the U.S. and the world. In the case of immigration, U.S. policy forces people to choose between their families and their livelihood—but it doesn't have to be this way. Different policies could let immigrants choose both. Despite succeeding in the U.S., Vargas still wonders if sacrificing his family was worth it.

PART 3, CHAPTER 12: TRUTH

Since 2014, Vargas has avoided investigating what led the Border Patrol to free him in McAllen. Why did he get released in eight hours, while most undocumented immigrants get deported with no due process? He never wanted to know, but he eventually found out. Well-connected friends contacted the Philippine Embassy, White House, and DHS. The DHS was deporting people from Texas straight to Mexico, so presumably it didn't know what to do with Vargas. And the Border Patrol kept moving Vargas from cell to cell because journalists and photographers were visiting that day.

Vargas's privilege clearly saved him from deportation. At the same time, he didn't want to find out exactly what happened because he could not stand the thought that so many people who lack these same privileges get treated far worse in the U.S. immigration and prison systems. While he was released this *time, this doesn't necessarily mean that he will avoid deportation in the* future*—so he still cannot feel safe in his country. Finally, it's deeply ironic that the guards constantly moved Vargas around to hide him from journalists—this actually confirms his deep-held belief that journalism can change public opinion by exposing how the immigration system really works.*

While writing this book, Vargas called his mother, and they had their longest conversation ever. He told her about how writing this book gave him the space and time to really reflect on his feelings for the first time. He was staying in a hotel—he still didn't have a permanent address. Mama replied, "maybe it's time to come home."

Vargas's experiences while writing this book have helped him confront the trauma of his past and rebuild some of the emotional intimacy with his mother that he had lost. In this sense, he is healing his own psychological wounds and slowly learning to overcome the pattern he calls "distant intimacy." Nevertheless, his mother's suggestion that maybe he should "come home" shows that he will always have to face an uncertain, precarious status in the U.S. Of course, it also shows that she genuinely doubts whether it was right to send him to the U.S. at all. He clearly shares this doubt, as he wonders whether saving his relationship with his mother would have been worth foregoing the great material advantages of living in the U.S. Finally, Vargas's Mama's comment raises an important question for the reader: where is the "home" for Vargas to go back to, really?

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Jennings, Rohan. "*Dear America.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 16 Aug 2021. Web. 16 Aug 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Jennings, Rohan. "*Dear America.*" LitCharts LLC, August 16, 2021. Retrieved August 16, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/dear-america.

To cite any of the quotes from *Dear America* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Vargas, Jose Antonio. Dear America. Dey St. Books. 2018.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Vargas, Jose Antonio. Dear America. New York: Dey St. Books. 2018.