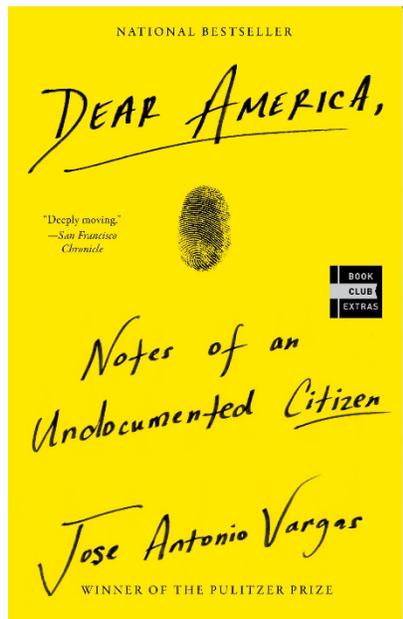


Common Text Reading Guide, Fall 2021
Jose Antonio Vargas, *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen*



Welcome to Seattle University! Here at SU, a key part of our mission is “empowering leaders for a just and humane world.” An important part of that preparation is engaging in deep and critical conversations about important issues related to justice, ethics, and meaning. Each year, the university selects a text or texts to launch the academic year, with related events to continue the discussion throughout the year.

Two years ago, incoming students read Ijeoma Oluo’s book *So You Want to Talk About Race*. In Fall 2020, students engaged with a suite of digital readings to help us to further understand this historic moment, where renewed calls for racial justice and the protection of Black lives were happening in the midst of a global pandemic. They also anticipated the conversation we will begin this Fall on the meaning of U.S. citizenship, starting with Jose Antonio Vargas’s book, *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen*.

Jose Antonio Vargas is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, documentary filmmaker, and one of the founders of the nonprofit media and culture organization, Define American. He was born in the Philippines and immigrated to the United States at the age of 12. At 16, when he went to apply for a driver's permit, he learned that his grandparents had brought him to the U.S. using fake papers. *Dear America* is a memoir that tells the story of that discovery, how he navigated systems of employment and government, of the family he built along the way, and what happened when, in 2011, he publicly declared his status as an undocumented citizen.

But, he says, "this is not a book about the politics of immigration . . . This book is about homelessness, not in a traditional sense, but the unsettled, unmoored, psychological state that undocumented immigrants like me find ourselves in . . . 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" (*Dear America*, xiii).

To help you get started, we have provided some background on recent immigration policy and the situation at the southern border of the United States. A brief article and short videos from Define American will demonstrate the range of immigrant experience, documented and undocumented. Finally, Jose Antonio Vargas invites us to consider three questions on citizenship in his 2020 TED Talk. These materials can be found on the [The Common Text](#) webpage or as part of your Orientation course on Canvas.

We hope these texts offer new perspectives, prompt difficult but necessary conversations, and perhaps even inspire action. Please take the time to read, listen, and watch. Then look for Common Text and partner events throughout the year that will provide you with multiple ways to engage these ideas.



Initial Questions to Consider:

- America has often been described as (and described itself as) a "nation of immigrants." How has the national view of immigrants and immigration changed over time, and how would you describe it today? Do you believe that America is still a nation of immigrants? Why or why not?
- What is the power of language in describing the eleven million undocumented people in our society? How have you heard immigrants, documented or undocumented, described in the media, by politicians, or in your communities? How might that influence our ideas about immigration and our empathy for immigrants?
- Vargas notes that "race, class, and immigration are intertwined, utterly inseparable," and that unlike previous generations, when large numbers of immigrants came from European countries, "most of today's immigrants hail from Asia and Latin America" due to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (p. 132). How might the current calls for racial justice intersect with calls to reform our immigration policies?
- What does it mean to be an American? What makes an individual a citizen? And who should get to choose who is and isn't allowed to become an American and live here? (Note: Vargas provides one response to these questions on pp. 199-200 of his book.)

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