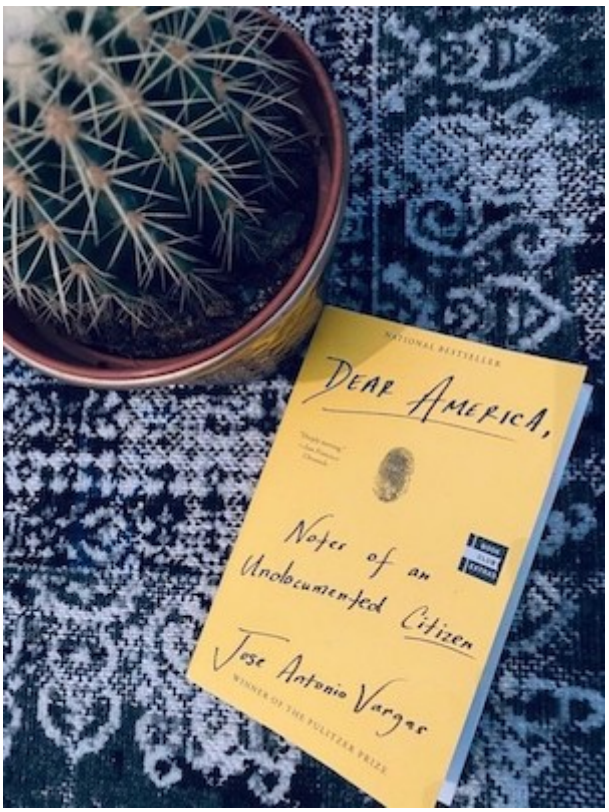
REVIEW

On Home and Belonging — A Review of "Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen"

by Dagmar Wallenstorfer



Tint Journal, www.tintjournal.com

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

Jose Antonio Vargas, in his memoir *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen,* brings to light the daily struggles of illegal immigrants in the USA, urging his audience to closely examine the real-life traumas caused by US foreign policy.

> **"There comes a moment in each of our lives when we must confront the central truth in order for life to go on."** (Vargas 112)

What is the central truth of our lives? The central fact, around which our lives develop and which influences every step?



© Dagmar Wallenstorfer

For Jose Antonio Vargas, the central truth of his life is that he is illegal. He realized this when he tried to get his driving license as a teenager, only to discover that his Green Card was fake. This moment forced him to confront his family and ask for the truth about his immigration to the USA.

Vargas was born in the Philippines, and part of his family immigrated to the USA legally. When he was a kid, his mother brought him to the airport one day, handed him over to a man she claimed was his uncle, and promised to join him soon. In the USA, the boy lived with his grandparents and waited for his mother, who never joined him. Years later, while trying to get his driving license, Jose discovered the truth: His "uncle" was a smuggler, his Green Card a fake, his mother unable to join him. This initial lie that his family told him forced him to live his life based on more lies.

His only option to become a US citizen was to marry an American woman. This posed a severe challenge to him since he is gay and he did and does not want to betray his identity. He yearns to live an ordinary American life like his friends: to go to college, get a job, buy a house, but it seems to be out of reach. His friends and family advised him to live below the radar: finish school, get a job to get by, but nothing that might draw attention and make people ask questions. However, Jose refused to live his life in fear.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

> **“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?”**(Vargas 72)

So, Vargas did the exact opposite of what his friends and family advised him to do. He became a journalist, a man with his name and stories out there: “Above else, I write to exist, to make myself visible.” (Vargas 58) Over the years, he has become a successful journalist, but he has remained haunted by his undocumented status. The more successful he gets, the more anxious he grows, scared that someone will find out the truth and get him deported. Vargas describes his inner struggle of following his passion and his dream of becoming a famous journalist, all while trying to hide his secret.

Throughout his book *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen*, Vargas asks fundamental questions about identity and belonging, and citizenship. We see him struggling with his identity, with the life he is forced to live, and the word that hangs above him like a shadow: illegal. He crafts a story that shows a man's life striving to prove himself worthy of belonging. Yet, he is denied the right to a lawful home, to have a permanent home instead of moving between hotels and friends' guest rooms, always hiding.

> **“I couldn't stay legally. I couldn´t leave legally, either. I was trapped. A legal no-boy's land.”** (Vargas 35)

As US immigration policies tighten, Vargas is unable to change his status. He finds himself in a dilemma. If he stays, he will never be able to live a normal life. If he leaves, he will have to leave forever, going back to a country he barely knows and in which he has no family or friends. He finally decides to 'come out,' as he calls it, shouting out to the world and 'his country' that he is undocumented, urging his country to react.



Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

Jose Antonio Vargas © Gerald Salva Cruz

Waiting to be deported after his announcement, Vargas is both relieved and anxious. As his drastic 'coming-out' becomes the talk of the nation, his fame skyrockets, and he gets invited to interviews and talk shows. However, concerned authorities never reacted. His fame and success gave him a safety net, leaving the authorities tight-lipped and unable to take any action. After all, the backlash from deporting a successful and famous journalist will be damning. Until today, Jose Antonio Vargas lives in the USA without changing his immigration status. But what about other undocumented immigrants who — unlike him — are voiceless and helpless?

In this book, Vargas accurately depicts the daily struggles of illegal immigrants, urging his audience to closely examine the real-life traumas caused by US foreign policy. *Dear America* is a book about politics and policies and the central questions of belonging in times of globalization. "Why did I have to lie? How does someone become 'illegal'?" (Vargas 123) asks Vargas, opening an array of question marks. Home, belonging, legal — What do these words really mean? Vargas' book does not give all the answers, but it provokes a discourse, a conversation that ultimately could lead to change.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.