

# OPINION

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## Citizenship Beyond Birthright or Privilege

### Recognizing the undocumented in a new way

BY ANDREW MOSS

When Jose Antonio Vargas was 16 years old, he discovered that his green card was a fake. Unbeknownst to the grandparents with whom he was living in Mountain View, Calif., the young Filipino immigrant took himself to the Department of Motor Vehicles for a driver's license, only to be told by the clerk that his card was fraudulent: "This is fake. Don't come back here again."

Vargas, who had been sent to the U.S. by his mother at the age of 12 (with the misplaced hope that she'd be able to follow him) was stunned and disoriented. He soon learned that the "uncle" who accompanied him on the flight from Manila was a smuggler hired by his grandfather, and he found himself as a teenager questioning all his relationships and his capacity for trust. Yet he persevered as one of the more than 11



million undocumented immigrants in the U.S., succeeding in school and in college, and ultimately finding his way as a journalist, all the while engaging in what he called the common moves of undocumented people: "lying, passing, and hiding."

Recently Vargas came out with a new book, "Dear America: Notes from an Undocumented Citizen," and in it he bears witness to the "homelessness" that he and others experience: not a traditional kind of homelessness, "but the unsettled, unmoored psychological state that undocumented immigrants like me find ourselves in."

Vargas argues that if the politics of immigration are ever to change, the "culture in which immigrants are seen" has to change, and to this end he has dedicated his writing, his documentary-making, and his public appearances to storytelling that can help change the image of immigrants and the understanding of immigration in American life.

Vargas writes compellingly, not from a place of abstract ideals but from deeply felt personal experience.

When, as a young man, he was awarded an internship at the Washington Post, he felt an old anxiety creep up: "I always thought I was taking someone else's spot. I had internalized this anxiety from years of hearing the they're-taking-our-jobs narrative about 'illegals'." Years later, after finding out that he and colleagues from the Post had been awarded a 2008 Pulitzer Prize for breaking news coverage of the 2007 Virginia Tech mass shootings, he found it unbearable to continue hiding his undocumented status, and eventually he came out in 2011 in a confessional essay he wrote for the New York Times Magazine: "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant." Coming out as undocumented presented Vargas with new opportunities and challenges, and, overcoming some initial reluctance, he agreed to accept an increasingly public role.

Vargas's stories from this phase of his life highlight the depersonalizing ways in which undocumented people are often seen and represented. He tells of appearing on a Fox News show with Megyn Kelly, not knowing in advance that another guest would be interviewed along

with him: a woman named Laura Wilkerson, whose son Josh had been killed by an undocumented immigrant. In describing the interview later, Vargas writes compassionately about Wilkerson, but he doesn't withhold comment about the way she sought to pigeonhole him. She said, "I think if you're not a United States citizen, you don't have a seat at the table regardless, especially where you're making laws." Vargas comments, "But I was seated next to her. We were sharing a table."

In writing Dear America, Vargas composed his own story about what it means to be undocumented. Drawing on the immediacy of personal experience, he was able to write with authority about larger issues at stake, including America's responsibility for helping create many of the political and economic circumstances that continue to drive so many migrants to our borders.

But it's the focus on language itself that I believe constitutes one of Vargas' most significant contributions. At a time when dehumanizing speech and writing help propel much of the violence behind our current immigration policies, whether those policies result in the caging of chil-

dren or the teargassing of families, Vargas points to the need for a new language that can help us understand migration and migrants with compassion and discernment.

There are, of course, existing ironies: The way, for example, that phrases like "removable alien," "undocumented person," and "Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist" all currently apply to Vargas himself. But there's also a new language in formation, a language symbolized by the seemingly contradictory phrase, "undocumented citizen."

In using that phrase, Vargas takes the idea of citizenship beyond birthright or privilege and associates it with a higher concept of participation. He invites us to recognize the 11 million undocumented citizens among us as people who contribute and participate in countless ways. Vargas is one of these 11 million, telling stories that help change the language, thereby helping change our understandings of ourselves.

Andrew Moss, syndicated by PeaceVoice, is an emeritus professor at the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, where he taught a course, "War and Peace in Literature," for 10 years.

## Unjust Treatment and Border Militarization

### Standing up for the vulnerable

BY PEDRO RIOS

Last month, I stood at the U.S.-Mexico border alongside hundreds of faith leaders to protest the cruel and unjust treatment of migrants and the militarization of our border communities. As I watched Border Patrol agents arrest reverends, imams, rabbis, Quakers, and other people of faith, I thought back to what I witnessed a few



weeks earlier.

I was near the San Diego border crossing when I saw Border Patrol agents fire tear gas canisters and flash bang grenades into a crowd of migrants gathered nearby. I saw a low-flying Customs and Border Protection helicopter use its rotors to push plumes of tear gas into a canal where many migrants had gathered. Even though I have been working to support and protect migrants and border communities for many years, I continue to be disturbed and horrified by these clear and egregious violations of people's dignity and human rights.

These aggressive actions by federal agents were clearly intend-

ed to debilitate migrants, including children. But they also are part of a manufactured crisis the Trump administration is peddling - a false narrative that border communities are out of control that's being used to justify more money for a needless border wall and deadly detention and deportation measures.

The consequences of this political posturing are devastating and dangerous, for migrants, for those of us who live in border communities and for all residents of this country whose tax dollars are being diverted from programs that sustain communities to a militarized border that serves no one.

Border communities are feeling these impacts. According to the San Ysidro Chamber of Commerce, in the five hours that the cross-border traffic was stopped, more than \$5.3 million were lost in revenue, just in San Ysidro.

Over the past four decades, policies under every presidential administration have systematically militarized southern border communities, criminalizing millions of immigrants and creating repressive conditions from California to Texas and beyond.

Just a week before the Border Patrol tear gassed migrants at the border, a Border Patrol agent was found not guilty for shooting and killing 16-year-old Jose Antonio Elena Rodríguez through the No-

gales border fence in 2012, solidifying a message that Border Patrol agents can operate with impunity. And just days ago, a 7-year old girl from Guatemala died in Border Patrol custody from dehydration and shock.

The escalation of these policies - and the demand for billions of dollars to expand them - could lead to more disturbing cases like that of Jose Antonio Elena Rodríguez and Jackeline Caal.

This increased militarization coincides with dramatic efforts by the Trump Administration to restrict people's ability to access asylum and curtail other forms of immigration. These artificially created bottlenecks in the asylum process are creating a humanitarian crisis. In Tijuana alone, there are more than 7,000 people waiting to present themselves at a port of entry, many of whom are vulnerable to safety issues.

People fleeing violence in Central America and elsewhere should be able to present themselves to immigration authorities to express their fears - not illegally turned away or criminalized for entering between ports of entry to seek refuge and asylum.

And deploying law enforcement or military personnel to the southern border - or giving additional spending authority to these agencies - endangers the rights of migrants and residents of border communities,

wastes taxpayer dollars, and does nothing to make us safer.

This political posturing by the Trump Administration is dangerous because it sets a precedent that suggests militarization is an appropriate response to people seeking sanctuary. By influencing public opinion and normalizing the idea that is acceptable to criminalize migrants, real humanitarian needs are going unmet and lives and livelihoods are being destroyed on both sides of the border wall.

We don't have to accept this reality. It is critically important that we confront the immorality of gassing and denying passage to the most vulnerable with principled action of our own. We can offer support and solidarity with those facing persecution. And we can demand that Congress take a stand by cutting funding for Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection.

More than 400 people of faith traveled with me to the border and put their bodies on the line to lift up the message that love knows no borders. But our efforts must not stop there. Upholding the dignity of border communities and those seeking sanctuary depends on everyone's bold and courageous actions.

Pedro Rios is the director of the American Friends Service Committee's U.S.-Mexico Border Program, based in San Diego.

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