

## Who Is the #EmergingUS?

Jose Antonio Vargas

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Jose Antonio Vargas is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Emmy-nominated filmmaker, and Tony-nominated producer. A leading voice for the human rights of immigrants, he founded Define American, a nonprofit that uses stories to shift the narrative on immigrants. His memoir, *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen*, was published in 2018.

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Along with many others, I share a mission to document America's demographic earthquake, and it is an earthquake that we are all living through. All of us use the same tools of storytelling, and we share a vision of a changing and emerging America that is truly inclusive. We are the stories we tell. Yet when it comes to the stories that the media tells about us, when it comes to the art that should reflect the reality of our daily lives, there is a tremendous and unacceptable imbalance. The emerging US is more multiethnic, more immigrant, more colorful, than ever before. Although East Coast media people seem to think that America is mostly Black and white, the emerging US is also Latino, it's Asian, it's Native American, it's Middle Eastern, it's mixed race. *In the next fifty years, Latinos and Asians will make up 88 percent of total US population growth.* This emerging US is more intertwined than ever. Our lives and the issues that we live with—immigrant rights, LGBTQ rights, women's rights, #BlackLivesMatter, income inequality among all races—they all intersect with one another, resisting being categorized and simplified into one box.

We can't talk about immigration and not talk about race. We can't talk about race and not talk about what's happening in our own communities—the anti-Blackness that is pervasive in the Asian and the Latino communities in this country. So how do we have all of these conversations at once?

The reality is that this country is only going to get gayer, Blacker, browner, more Asian. Women of all ethnic and racial backgrounds will continue to break every possible barrier there is to break. So what's left? Straight white men.

Prior to the 2020 election, somebody asked me what I thought was at stake. I argued that what was at stake was the soul of white heterosexual men. How much change could they handle? Were they willing to give up space? Were they willing to actually realize that the very people that created the laws and founded the institutions now have to make room for a truly inclusive emerging America that is not going to go backward? That is the question that still faces the arts; it's a question that absolutely faces journalism; it is a question that faces all forms of media. The reality is that the emerging US is here, and we are the ones who make this country great. Not only that, the emerging US are the ones who will insist that this country lives up to its promise of a more perfect union.

We are living at a time (James Baldwin is probably smiling up there) in this country in which the Other, the Other in America, is now all of us. Because white people feel that they are Othered. They feel under attack; not all white people (younger ones seem more willing than previous generations to address racial issues and colonization in both the past and present), but many white people. And what's fascinating is, white people, for the first time, are an emerging racial minority across the country. In 2014, for the first time in American K-12 public schools, white students were in the minority.

When we talk about diversity, how do we include white people in the conversation? People of color talk about white people behind their backs. How do we do that now in front of them? How do we now insist on more uncomfortable conversations about race and privilege and class in this country?

Moreover, we can't talk about America being a nation of immigrants without acknowledging the struggle of Black Americans and Native Americans in this country. We cannot emphasize our commonality without first confronting what makes our experiences different. What laws were created that made them different? (There is a whole branch of federal law, for example, about inventing papers that subjugate American Indians.)<sup>1</sup> The survival of this emerging America requires that we see each other more fully and more humanely.

Some years ago, I made a film called *Documented*. We had a screening at the University of Minnesota, and this African American law student got up and said, "Jose, I'm really conflicted about this. Of course I want you to be a US citizen. You've been working really hard to get citizenship. I feel

conflicted because I'm born here. My ancestors are from here. We helped build this country, but sometimes I don't feel like I'm treated as a citizen because I'm Black." Then, a month later at a screening in South Carolina, this elderly Black woman came to me (she saw me on Rachel Maddow's show) and she said, "I just thought it was really interesting that you say that your life is subjected and limited by pieces of papers, because my great-great-great-grandmother got here, and when she landed in South Carolina, she was given a piece of paper, it's called the Bill of Sales, saying that she's a slave. So can you connect the papers that you can't seem to get to the papers that she was given?"

And here we are stuck talking about walls. And talking about Mexico as if Mexico didn't used to own parts of the United States. Talking about all these very simplistic issues that the media just runs with. At such a political and partisan and divided time, we need more than ever artists, writers, journalists, poets. We need all of the artists, all of our artists, to do something that has never been done in this country: to tell the fuller story of America. Politicians are not going to do that. They're too busy trying to get elected, to divide us. The only people who will do that are artists. Artists always lead the way to where we are going, transcending politics and speaking to people.

## Note

1. Many thanks to Emmy (Lorna) Her Many Horses (Sicangu and Oglala Lakota) for directing us to learn about Certificate Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB), which led us to readings including Paul Spruhan, "CDIB: The Role of the Certificate of Indian Blood in Defining Native American Legal Identity," *American Indian Law Journal* 6, no. 2 (2018): article 4, <https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/ailj/vol6/iss2/4>.