



By Ayushi Jain  
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### “Dear America”

Sonder is the realization that every individual has a vivid and complex life, with their own memories, hardships, ambitions, cares, routines, stories. In my life, I am the main character, but in others’ lives, I could be a secondary character, a background character, or not even be there at all. There are billions of people in this world that I will never know, and they will never know me.

*Dear America* is a way to see Jose Antonio Vargas as the main character of a story besides your own. It is a perspective on his own life, memories, hardships, and stories. By constantly questioning America and Americans, Vargas wants to show his readers that there are many types of people in the world with varying levels of awareness about undocumented immigrants, and he wants to teach his readers that as a community, it is their responsibility to question the world around them, view others through a more humanistic lens, and use their voice to help those in need.

Vargas begins his memoir with an anxious, frantic tone, directly putting the reader in his mind and shoes while he prepares to leave for America with no knowledge of why or how. Shortly after, he writes a letter to his mother brimming with American slang, desperate to assimilate to American culture. From the start of his odyssey, he gives up bits of his Filipino culture to embrace the American culture as his own to prove that he is American. He ends up feeling as though he is everywhere and nowhere at all.

**“What I always remember is hearing people say that people like me should ‘earn’ our citizenship...What would you have done?”**

What does it mean to earn citizenship? Personally, I did not know about undocumented Asians surpassing undocumented Mexicans. I usually feel like Asians are always on the outside of historical topics and current issues, but this part specifically talked about Asians, and I thought back to when my parents were trying to become citizens. I distinctly remember my mother buying a CD and flashcards with questions and answers about America’s history. I remember asking if that was what it meant and all it took to be American — answering who was the 16th president of the United States.

**“As far as I could tell, ‘white’ was not a country ... Are people ‘Asian’ and ‘Hispanic’ because Americans started labeling people ‘black’ and ‘white’? Did America make all of this up?”**

Just as he immersed himself in American culture, Vargas questioned the basis of the nation. By questioning the concept of “white” and “American” throughout the book, Vargas forces the reader to think about the same questions, even if the answers are unknown. And this is

the core of the book — educating oneself, asking questions, and challenging one’s surroundings. Far too often, everyone is expected to take sides on everything, but it is crucial to acknowledge that taking sides and not having an opinion are okay — ignorance is not.

**“If Americans could come and claim the Philippines, why can’t Filipinos move to America?”**

I wondered why we did not learn more about other cultures in history class; the last time I learned about my Indian culture in school was in sixth grade. Meanwhile, American history takes up two years’ worth of classes at my high school. For a country that celebrates acceptance, we dismiss and reject the bigotry that has infiltrated our world. For a country that prides itself on being the melting pot of the world, we tend to invade the center stage and treat other countries as if they are out of focus.

Inevitably, no one can fully comprehend what someone else goes through. But, it is worth a try to pause and try to understand what Vargas and many people like him have gone through. No one will ever feel what he felt, see what he saw, or hear what he heard. Everything we have gone through has made us who we are, and no one has quite lived the lives that we have. This concept, sonder, that everyone has his own life, and it can be as complicated or as vivid as my own, is phenomenal.

*(Ayushi is a biology major from Princeton, New Jersey.)*