

In this essay, Wang investigates the problem—and importance—of paying attention to other people. The essay’s structure enacts that asymptotic goal, illuminating the question with surprisingly different examples in order to give readers the experience of trying to see beyond their own perspective.

(Instructor: Laren McClung)

WRESTLING BLIND: GROPING AN ELEPHANT IN THREE ACTS

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1.

The elephant stands like a big, bloated blob amongst a gaggle of blind men. You can tell they’re blind because their cartoonishly expressive eyes hang pupil-less above their gaping mouths in a look of absolute dumbfoundedness. There are a dozen of them, at least, with maybe more hidden behind the towering elephant. They are groping the trunk, hugging the leg, hanging from the tusks—some men have even managed to make their way on top of the beast by way of an absurdly tall ladder. What makes this painted scene even more amusing is the very serious Edo Period watercolor style renowned nineteenth-century artist Ohara Donshu used to render this otherwise ridiculous work entitled *Blind Men Appraising an Elephant*.

I know it’s wrong to laugh at the blind, but these men approach their elephant examination with such dedication and absolute conviction. Donshu even painted in a few sighted passersby, pointing and sniggering, as if to say “it’s *okay* to laugh.” Even the elephant has an air of ridiculing amusement about his squinted eyes and toothy, upturned mouth.

The tale of the sightless men and the elephant is a traditional folk story well-circulated in India and East Asia. In fact, I can distinctly remember this story being a staple of my own mother’s pre-bedtime moral enhancement suite. As the story goes, some blind men had

learned there would be an elephant passing through town with a circus. These men, unfamiliar with the animal, set off to figure out just what exactly this whole elephant business was about. Upon reaching the beast, each of them stumble upon a different appendage and declare that they alone understand exactly what an elephant is. One hugs a leg and proclaims that the elephant is like a tree. Another fondles the trunk and says something along the lines of: "What are you on about, you faff, the elephant is like a snake!" Another grabs an ear and says: "You're both idiots, the elephant is like a fan." And so on and so forth until the whole scene ends in a big blind fight, complete with light obscenities and silly sound effects. At least, that's the way my mother told it. This story, in one incarnation or another, has circulated everywhere from Donshu's homeland of Japan to the folktale compendiums of Western Europe. Its immense geographic reach is, no doubt, at least partially due to its resonant moral value. Each blind man only 'sees' a small portion of the elephant, yet stubbornly believes he has the whole story and dismisses any counterargument as wholly false. It is in their inability to understand the complexity of the whole, through the views of others, that these men are truly blind.

It's easy to laugh when the elephant is literal—we know what an elephant is, so we know these men are wrong. Viewing the scene as an omniscient outsider allows for a disconnect between art and spectator. It's a lot harder to see the blind men's fallacies when we ourselves are the blind ones and the elephant represents something far more complex and ungraspable than a big grey mammal with pointy tusks. I'm reminded of David Foster Wallace's 2005 Kenyon College commencement address "This is Water," in which Wallace condemns the mentality that allows individuals to "[operate] on the automatic, unconscious belief that [they are] the center of the world" (5). He lays out a binary for being: you are either "aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and . . . how you construct meaning from experience," or you are "unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default-setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone, day in and day out" (3). Wallace would see the blind men as unconscious, unaware men living shallowly in the fallacy provoked by the fact that "everything in [their] own immediate experience supports

[the] deep belief that [they are] the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence” (2).

There is an unofficial word for the moment of cathartic change, the moment when a mind shifts from unconsciousness to awareness. The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows is a compendium created by writer John Koenig in an attempt to give names to as yet undefined neologisms. The project coined this term:

Sonder

n. the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you’ll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk.
(Koenig)

Sonder is the moment when I think about the guy who cut me off in traffic. He might have fallen in love, lost friends, changed careers, taken up writing. Yet, in that singular moment when he cut me off, he was just a “stupid and cow-like and dead-eyed and nonhuman” being who, it seemed, existed solely for the purpose of getting “in my way” (Wallace 5). Without sonder, we see the ‘others’ of our lives, the strangers that exist beyond our immediate acquaintance, as extras in our movie—one dimensional and expendable. Sonder is the switch that turns on between unconsciousness and awareness. So then, how can sonder be encouraged to grow in the modern world? How do we solve the epidemic of unconsciousness?

Wallace proposes that it is possible to “[learn] how to exercise some control over how and what you think” through education and self-reflection (3). Of course, Wallace’s entire argument for living with awareness was that “it [was] about making it to . . . 50 without wanting to shoot yourself in the head” (8). He gave up on that endgame when he hung himself from a patio two years after giving the speech—he was 46 years old. Perhaps the danger of Wallace’s mantra was the strict binary nature of consciousness and unconscious-

ness. To him, there were two distinct states of being, and one was right, while the other was wrong. Maybe the key to understanding lies not within the binary of being aware or unconscious that switches on in a single moment of *sonder*, but rather a gradual transition into understanding and seeing humanity in the ‘other.’

2.

In late summer of 2013, when American xenophobia and debates on race relations were reinvigorated by the Boston Marathon bombings and the Zimmerman trial, a little known indie game developer named Lucas Pope released a video game that dared to challenge the tribalistic rhetoric of a divided nation. A black screen greets you, accompanied by the low rumblings of a single tuba. It blasts a low, two-note alternation, a stern and impassive march which is soon accompanied by a shrewd crooning balalaika. The title crawls slowly up the screen to the rhythm of the march: *Papers, Please*.

Papers, Please is a document inspection simulator game. The player assumes the role of an inspection agent at an immigration checkpoint for the fictional communist-era Eastern-Bloc-style country of Arstotzka. At the beginning of each day, the player reports to the inspection booth where instructions are given for who to admit into the country. Entrants must produce all the necessary paperwork, and every document is to be inspected for errors indicating possible forgery. At first the rules are simple—entry is granted to anyone with a valid passport. But as immigrants carry out terrorist attacks and international relations become strained, the Arstotzkan Ministry of Admissions becomes more immoderate in their document requirements and more draconian in their punishment for failure of compliance. This goes so far as to confront the player with moral dilemmas. A woman pleads for her expired passport to be approved—returning home means certain death at the hands of her government. In these moments, the player has the agency to decide whether to comply with the rules set by the game’s world, and, indeed, the rules set by the game itself, denying the woman entry, or doing the morally consequential act of admitting her against those rules. The decision is made harder by the government’s deducting a considerable chunk of your

daily salary for every wrongly admitted entrant—money that would have gone towards the rent of your apartment, food for your family, and medicine for your sick son. A lack of sufficient funds means sacrificing household amenities, which may lead to the deterioration and death of your family. The game is over when your entire family is dead. Because of the unique system of incentives set up by the game's world and rules, the player, although given full agency to admit or decline anyone he'd like, is forced to make difficult decisions regarding how to prioritize his morality and his duty.

Dr. Terry Schenold of the University of Washington's Critical Gaming Project observes that, in contrast to most games which occupy a homogeneously "action-based medium," [*Papers, Please*] is primarily about human judgment." The game subverts the pervasive single-minded and unconscious trope of the "male power [fantasy]" within the medium (Schenold). When "[p]laying as Mario (or most 'heroes' in games, for that matter) one only has to think about the problem in front of you, the explicit task at hand," but in *Papers, Please*, the player is forced to grapple with the ambiguous agency of "judgment enacted, as form of player action, [and] also judgment perceived" (Schenold).

What's most profound about the game is its intentional decision to cast the player not only as a layman with a day job, but also as a representation of the 'other.' To the non-playable characters in the world of the game, the player is just a man in a glass box who stands in the way of immigrants seeking their personal goals. When they get denied, they call you names, and some ask how you could be so cruel. These characters are focused on the dilemmas of their personal narratives and thus reject any notion of a narrative for the player. They are 'unconscious' to the complexities of the man in the booth.

In this way, the game allows the player to see the other side—what happens when the man in the booth goes home and has to worry about having enough money to afford medicine for his sick son. So often when we encounter these men and women, the people who seem to exist for the sole purpose of getting in the way, we see them as obstacles, 'others' who could never possibly share the dimensionality of a regular human being. *Papers, Please* is a game that "judges us,

for in asking us to judge others through its designs we are given an indirect opportunity *to see ourselves*" (Schenold).

This game is the elephant applied to the real world—of politics, race, and economics. Lucas Pope illuminates the human inability to grasp the 'other' as part of the same whole as the rest of us. The immigrants in line are the blind men. Each makes a decision about the player based solely on the single interaction at the passport check-point. And so one man who is rejected concludes that you are an "imbecile," while another man who is separated from his son concludes that you are "heartless" (*Papers, Please*). Only the player, the elephant in the glass booth, understands the whole picture, but unlike the elephant in Donshu's painting, it is difficult to hold on to any smugness in your omnipotence among these particular blind men.

3.

Francisco Cantú had just graduated from college when he made the decision to join the U.S. border patrol: the real-life equivalent of the agent in the glass booth. In a passage from *The Line Becomes a River*, the yet-unpublished memoir of his experiences, he recounts Robles, his training officer, decreeing that "your body is a tool" (qtd. in *Glass*). Robles then told the story of two men, one whose life he took when he "kicked him over the edge of [a] canal into the water," and one whom he "battled to keep . . . afloat" in the rushing Colorado River (qtd. in *Glass*). Both men were illegal immigrants who were backed into a corner. One chose to fight while the other chose to jump. While both ended up in the water, Robles made drastically different decisions based on his unique position and his sense of morality and duty. As Robles told his story, Cantú "wondered if [Robles] thought of his body as a tool for destruction, or one for keeping people safe" (qtd. in *Glass*).

The liberal opinion of the border patrol, and thus the opinion that we often see reflected in art and the media, seems to be one of dehumanization. Officers are the obstacles, the draconian 'paramilitary' in the way of poor immigrants seeking peaceful asylum in the U.S. They are the faceless others whose bodies are "tools" to be wielded by the amalgamous mass of social xenophobia. But Cantú, the college edu-

cated son of an illegal immigrant, “had his reasons for stepping up,” as did his classmates at the academy, “nearly half [of whom were] Hispanic.” (Glass; qtd. in Glass). He told his mother, “I’m not going to become someone else.” He was going to retain his humanity, even if others refused to see it. He bluntly testified that the agents would “slash [border-crossers’] bottles and drain their water into the dry earth [and] dump their backpacks and pile their food and clothes to be crushed and pissed on and stepped over, strewn across the desert floor and set ablaze” (qtd. in Glass). He did not deny the severe and seemingly unhumanitarian tactics of the CBP, but he paints the whole picture, the rest of the elephant that the mainstream narrative often refuses to acknowledge: “The idea is that when they come out from their hiding places . . . they’ll realize their situation . . . That it’s hopeless to continue. And they’ll quit right then and there” (qtd. in Glass).

Michael Warner might explain this social inability to see the ‘other’ as the disconnect between “personal identity” and the “public” (415). In his essay “Publics and Counterpublics,” he asserts that “personal identity does not in itself make one part of a public,” but rather that “[p]ublics differ from nations, races, professions, or any other groups that . . . saturate identity” (415). In other words, although our identities are not dictated by the publics we are a part of, we are nevertheless colored, at least in the eyes of others, by the publics we choose to associate with. Because “we navigate a world of corporate agents that do not respond or act as people do,” we then assign those inhuman qualities to the people who subscribe to those publics—in this case, the agents of the border patrol (415).

Warner also warned that it is easy to forget that the “public [is] capable of comprehension or action,” and that continued denial of “people in minor or marginal positions . . . [will result in] a blockage in activity and optimism, a disintegration of politics toward isolation, frustration, anomie, forgetfulness” (415). Sound familiar? This philosophy is directly in line with that of Wallace, right down to the consequences of willed ignorance. The only difference is that, while Wallace calls for an exhaustive and perpetual understanding of every human that we interact with, Warner believes in the importance of keeping some people at the level of strangers. To him, “strangerhood

is the necessary medium of commonality,” because “the modern social imaginary does not make sense without strangers” (417). In response to Wallace’s awareness, which demands the recognition of every minor character that protrudes into our lives, Warner would counter that “a nation or public . . . in which everyone could be known personally would be no nation or public . . . at all” (417). Without strangers, we can find no commonality in contrast. So, then, maybe the key is to find the ‘other’ and simply acknowledge that we see it as the ‘other.’ Maybe we don’t need to exhaust ourselves with seeing the whole elephant; we only need to acknowledge that other parts of the elephant exist beyond the appendage currently being groped.

Cantú didn’t join the border patrol out of a sense of patriotism or duty, or any binary sense of right and wrong. He had “spent four years studying about the border” in college and joined the CBP because he wasn’t satisfied with the part of the elephant he was groping. He “[wanted] to see the realities of the border, day in and day out” in a way beyond what any books could tell him. And it was that pursuit that broke him. He began having “nightmares, visions of [men] staggering through the desert . . . and [he] was powerless to help them, powerless to keep them from straying through the night” (qtd. in Glass). Cantú joined the patrol to pursue a Wallacian awareness, only to come out trembling at the realization that he “hadn’t learned anything” (qtd. in Glass). The elephant proved to be far too big for one blind man to grasp.

[epilogue]

Blindness is generally irremediable, just as unconsciousness is inexorable. There will always be strangers in our way, amalgamous and looming. Ungraspable. Our minds are far too small to see everything with awareness, so we do the best we can. We grope. We argue. We grope some more. Maybe it’s inelegant—crude, even—but it’s life. And it makes for a hell of an entertaining story.

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