

12. Biography.com editors, "Oscar Pistorius Biography," *Biography.com*, March 26, 2021, at <https://www.biography.com/athlete/oscar-pistorius>.
13. Lindemann Nelson, 150.
14. Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
15. Barnes, 169–172.
16. Barnes, 182.
17. Barnes, 183–184.

The Earth King, Ignorance, and Responsibility

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In the "Tales of Ba Sing Se" there is a beautiful depiction of the friendship between Katara and Toph, where they treat themselves to a girls' day out at the Fancy Lady Day Spa. Afterwards, they walk the delightfully manicured paths of the city. The walk is ruined by three older girls who make fun of Toph's makeup, but after dealing expertly with these bullies, the two friends continue their walk. The urban landscape is simply breathtaking, and the city looks clean and peaceful. Everything seems to have its place and function; it seems that one can truly absorb the joys of life there. Ah! What a life it would be to live in Ba Sing Se.

But this seemingly peaceful city is completely removed from the realities of the ongoing conquest. The world is engulfed in a 100-year war, a war in which the Fire Nation has committed a genocide of the Air Nomads and effectively gained control over the Southern Water Tribes and most of the Earth Kingdom. The only bastions left against the Fire Nation are the Northern Water Tribe and, of course, Ba Sing Se, since the city of Omashu has recently fallen. Given this chaotic state of affairs, the serene atmosphere in Ba Sing Se seems surreal. In fact, the Avatar team (Aang, Katara, Sokka, Toph, and Momo) can sense something is wrong as soon as they enter the city.

Toph, an earthbender from a noble and rich family, already seems jaded to the grand spectacle and calls the city "a bunch of walls and rules" ("City of Walls and Secrets"). When the Avatar team first arrive, they are greeted by Joo Dee, their host, who insists that there is no war in Ba Sing Se and that everyone is safe there. If the Avatar and his friends were any other dignitaries and did not have an urgent message to deliver to the King, they might have been quite impressed with how calm and beautiful everything was. But because they are on a mission – one to inform the King of a viable plan to attack the Fire Nation during the upcoming solar eclipse – they uncover exactly how unsafe and vulnerable Ba Sing Se really is. As fans

know, the city eventually falls to the invading Fire Nation armies. So who is responsible for the downfall of the city?

This chapter will make the case that the Earth King of Ba Sing Se, King Kuei, willfully maintained ignorance of the true state of his kingdom so that he could enjoy the privileges that came with his position, while remaining derelict in his duty to his people. The King maintains this ignorance at the expense of his people, both by condoning certain urban designs and by resisting knowledge that upsets his lifestyle.

Walls: Creating Order and . . . Barriers

When the Avatar team first arrive at Ba Sing Se in “City of Walls and Secrets,” Joo Dee tells them that the city has many walls and each wall serves a purpose, but we know there is more to the walls than their utility. After all, one of the ways that governments suppress political expression is through urban space planning; city designs can either give visibility to or cloak social, political, and economic issues.¹ While riding a train, team Avatar get a glimpse of the city from above: it looks magnificent with its long, winding, circular walls, each wall dividing one part of the city from the next. The tallest and widest wall, the Outer Wall, protects the city from outside and contains farmlands. The rest of the walls form rings within the city that divide people by their station in society. The lower ring houses artisans and craftsmen, people who keep the city running. In today’s world, they might be termed essential workers and be paid a low wage. This lower ring is also the space where war refugees and other people displaced by the war reside. The middle ring contains the financial district, shops, restaurants, the Town Hall, and the homes of the middle class. The uppermost ring contains the political elite, such as military leaders, dignitaries, and of course the King’s palace. It is within this ring that the Avatar team is lodged.

This sort of city planning all but ensures segregation between the socioeconomic classes and prevents any organization of community-based resistance. The walls maintain order, but they also shield the people in the middle and upper rings from the harsh reality of the lives of the people in the lower ring. Even Zuko, the Fire Nation prince, who is seeking refuge in Ba Sing Se’s lower ring remarks that “This city is a prison. I don’t want to make a life here” (“City of Walls and Secrets”). Zuko, who grew up as a prince and now is living as a refugee, comprehends the depth of disparity between the elite and the poor. For him, the city is far from serene and welcoming. It is constricting and overpopulated, and providing little access to the amenities we see at the beginning of “Tales of Ba Sing Se.” But a person doesn’t need to live in the lower ring to realize that the city is structured in a way that marginalizes essential workers, the poor, and the refugees, and that it keeps these people out of sight for the elite.

The way that the city is built allows the King and other members of the elite to be willfully shielded from the actual state of affairs of the war outside the outer walls and the poverty within the lower ring. The walls promote artificial social homogeneity and prevent cross-economic and cultural socialization. Sarah Schindler, a contemporary legal scholar, writes that man-made physical structures are often built in ways to block off access to certain regions for poor people and people of color.² Examples include an absence of sidewalks and crosswalks, low-hanging bridges that restrict movement from predominantly Black neighborhoods to predominantly white neighborhoods. Schindler illuminates how elite classes live detached from lower and middle classes by design. Barriers are often made to appear as the natural order of things – for instance, missing sidewalks – and/or “aesthetically pleasing” design features of a physical space – such as the winding walls of Ba Sing Se, or the “attractive” covered bridges in the US that are too low for public transport to pass through. But they are anything but natural. These elements that may seem beautiful to the privileged are actually imprisoning for the vulnerable.

One could argue that often there is no malicious intent behind these design features and that it is quite possible that the primary purpose of lower ring wall was not to shield the Earth Kings from the realities of war and poverty. However, it is not intent that is important here, but rather the impact of retaining this urban planning. The walls allow the elite to live their lives in luxury without ever seeing the refugees and the poor.

Katara voices this very concern as she takes the monorail to the uppermost ring of the city, when she remarks: “Why do they have all these poor people blocked off in one part of the city?” Aang responds, “This is why I never came here before. I always heard it was so different from the way the monks taught us to live.” Here, Aang is presumably referring to the way that Air Nomad monks generally lived a life of simplicity. For example, in “The Guru,” Guru Pathik teaches that we live in world of illusion of separation, and that we are actually all one. Thus, the airbenders would not condone the segregation of the city dwellers. The Earth King purposefully lives in an environment that allows him to stay oblivious to everything around him and live comfortably in affluence. The walls are built in a way to maintain his privilege through stratification between people who hold varying degrees of privilege. Furthermore, the refugees in the lower ring cannot revolt because that could mean expulsion back into the war zone. And those who are brave enough to protest are detained and brainwashed by the secret police, the Dai Li. For example, after Jet was arrested for creating a ruckus about Iroh and Zuko being firebenders, he was sent to the Dai Li base underneath Lake Laogai and consequently brainwashed into believing that there is no war in Ba Sing Se (“City of Walls and Secrets”).

In “The Earth King” we see that in order for team Avatar to convince him of the war outside the walls, the King has to take the monorail to the

edge of the outer walls. At this point, we learn that the King has never stepped foot in a train, been outside of his palace, or even walked among his people. The Earth King has maintained a life that is completely isolated from the everyday people he rules.

Must Resist Knowing Any Different

In "The Earth King," the Avatar team is finally able to break into the palace to tell the King about the devastating war with the Fire Nation. But understandably, he does not believe the kids right away, until they show him the remains of a drill that the Fire Nation used to attempt breaking the outer wall of Ba Sing Se. At that moment, he says: "I can't believe I never knew." While we, as the audience, breathe a sigh of relief, we may also feel bewildered at the King's statement. The philosophical concept of "epistemic ignorance" provides an excellent explanation of what allowed the King to remain unknowing about the war, even in the face of overwhelming evidence. Generally, when we think of ignorance, we think of absence of knowledge, something that can be rectified by simply learning more about the facts of the matter. For example, if someone was asked to name the capital of Nepal and they did not know it, we might say that this person simply does not know this particular fact and that they can rectify this ignorance by looking it up (it is Kathmandu). But there is more to epistemic ignorance than an absence of rectifiable knowledge. Epistemology is the study of figuring out how one knows something. So *epistemic ignorance* is the study of how or why we do not know certain things. Contemporary philosophers, such as Charles Mills, Miranda Fricker, and Jose Medina, have argued that we do not know certain facts about the world we live in by design.³ Purposely remaining ignorant of certain facts helps the King of Ba Sing Se maintain his privilege.

Consider this scenario: suppose Ted, an older white cis man runs a successful talk show. During his run as the late-night host, he makes numerous misogynist comments to his guests – particularly to the women on his show – and his daily monologue contains sexist quips. Now suppose some feminists explain to him how his remarks uphold patriarchy in our society. In this example, it would be in Ted's interest to remain ignorant of feminist worldviews because acknowledging feminist insights might mean losing some or much of the privilege that comes from being an older white cis male who generates his wealth making these tired jokes. In fact, to keep up his ignorance, Ted may even insist that he cannot be sexist because he hires women all the time. What epistemic ignorance teaches us is that Ted will fully refuse to understand feminist perspectives. While he may genuinely believe that his jokes are mere jokes and that he is simply bantering with his guests, he actually displays willful ignorance by resisting knowing anything that would upend his affluent life by being accountable for the harm caused

by his ignorance. But, at the same time, Ted can effortlessly recall plenty of evidence that would confirm the "knowledge" that he is not sexist.

Earth King Kuei is like Ted. Not only does he live in a way that physically shields him from actually knowing his people, he also does not care enough to know the affairs of his kingdom. In our scenario, the feminists are the Avatar team, who tell the King that his kingdom is in danger, but he finds the claim ridiculous. He clings to Long Feng (the Grand Secretariat, who is the head of the Dai Li) as a means of disproving the Avatar's assertions ("The Earth King"). Kuei expresses no genuine interest in his duties and spends most of his time entertaining his pet bear, Bosco, who enjoys the best of foods and even has a party thrown in his honor ("City of Walls and Secrets"). In fact, the King is so taken by his pet that the only reason he is even willing to hear the Avatar's message about the war is that Bosco has shown an interest in the Avatar. Throughout Book Two, we realize that it is not simply that the king is ignorant of the things going on in his magnificent city. Rather, even when he is shown evidence he cannot deny – much like the feminists who explain to Ted why his sexist "banter" is harmful to women – Kuei does not recognize the danger his city is in. Even when he sees the remnants of the Fire Nation drill on the outer walls, he chooses to delegate all that he can so that he can maintain his affluent lifestyle ("The Earth King").

Philosopher Shannon Sullivan explains that people who are in power or who carry certain privileges (such as being able-bodied, male, white, etc.) have their sense of knowledge shaped by ignorance.⁴ This knowledge/ignorance is constructed in our heads via what we are taught – such as the lie that Ba Sing Se is serene and secure – and what we are not taught – such as no information about the 100-year war raging outside the city. Knowledge and ignorance are thus intertwined to form what we consider "knowledge." The Dai Li, the secret police of Ba Sing Se, are even more extreme in their attempt to maintain ignorance as they brainwash anyone who resists into "knowing" that there is no war in Ba Sing Se – as was the case with Joo Dee in "City of Walls and Secrets" and in "Lake Laogai." In this sense, there is a collective denial of the war, especially within the middle and upper rings. And this collective denial is relatively easy to maintain as the ignorance is actively fostered by the state.⁵ There are many examples of this in our day-to-day life as well. For example, in our school systems, we are taught a particular version of history, generally one that has the approval of the state. In fact, some nation-states actively ban teaching the history of minorities in their country. In the case of Ba Sing Se, this knowledge/ignorance is just more actively maintained by brainwashing anyone who directs too much attention toward the war. And this actively produced knowledge/ignorance ("there is no war in Ba Sing Se") helps maintain the knowledge/ignorance of the Earth King. Because he is so powerful and lives a life of leisure, he has no need to work to undo that ignorance. For Kuei, the facade of peace is maintained via a violent police state and through class segregation. More importantly, he maintains his epistemic state quite willfully because it is to his benefit.

The Buck Stops Here

Initially, when one watches Book Two, one may think that the “real” evil character is Grand Secretariat Long Feng, who seems to be the mastermind behind the “foolish” King. He makes a concerted effort to keep the King out of the day-to-day affairs of Ba Sing Se. For example, during the King our Bosco, Long Feng throws a wrench in team Avatar’s plan to alert the King about the war with the Fire Nation. Instead, he pulls Aang and his friends aside into a private meeting to intimidate them. We learn from this meeting that the King is merely a figurehead and Long Feng is not only the Grand Secretariat but also the head of the secret police, the Dai Li. He then explicitly threatens Aang and his friends and lets them know that any attempt to inform the King of the true events will result in expulsion from the city, which would make their search for Appa more difficult. Furthermore, the Dai Li, under the leadership of Long Feng, brainwash anyone who mentions the war or attempts to raise awareness about the plight of the refugees.

Given this, it is easy to villainize Long Feng and consider the King a “mere” fool. This desire to place blame on an all-nefarious character plays into an archetype where there is supposedly a more evil, sinister person behind the person who appears to wield the power. This desire to villainize secondary players in politics leads to a failure to demand accountability of those in power. It lets us pretend that the King is one of the good guys.

But the truth is that the Earth King *does* wield power. It is true that Kuei became a ruler at a very young age, but he had many years to reform and make himself a king worthy of his people. Instead, he buried himself in his pleasures and did everything he could to maintain his physical and epistemic distance from the state of affairs of the Earth Nation. Even when Long Feng is finally exposed – no credit to the King here – for betraying the political interest of the Earth Kingdom, the King still does not step up to his responsibilities, but rather delegates the real work of planning to the Council of Five. After learning of such a massive betrayal, the Earth King yet again places his trust in who he erroneously believes to be Kyoshi Warriors (“The Earth King”). He fails to realize that they are actually the Fire Nation Princess and her friends in disguise. He not only accidentally reveals to them the plans of invasion of the Fire Nation, he also eventually flees the city, leaving Azula in control of Ba Sing Se.

So, although the King is portrayed as childlike, absorbed in himself, and incapable of making decisions without the direction of others, he *is* an adult with a great deal of privilege. Simply because we cannot attach a malicious intent to him, does not absolve him of his responsibilities as a ruler. In fact, it is precisely the privileges attached to being a rich king that compel the audience to give him the benefit of the doubt. A similar level of charity – judgment – for example, viewing someone as having childlike innocence – would not be afforded to a common soldier or a peasant from the lower

ring who had committed a crime. The King actively causes a lot of harm to the Earth Kingdom and the world at large. The greatest villainy then lies not in Long Feng’s conniving, but in the King’s success in maintaining his power and privilege through urban barriers and willful ignorance.

Ultimately, we have to pay attention to architectural and epistemic barriers that keep the elite, including the King, secluded from the lower and middle classes, from poverty, from dissent, and shielded from a 100-year war that threatens the city. The King’s willful ignorance about the state of affairs in his kingdom requires accountability. If such abuse of power and privilege is not held accountable, no real change can occur. For in the end, the King remains the same self-absorbed monarch and the walls that divide fellow humans by class remain intact; even the Dai Li survive the war.

Notes

1. Jeffrey Hou and Sabine Knierbein, “Shrinking Democracy and Urban Resistance: Toward an Emancipatory Politics of Public Space,” in Jeffrey Hou and Sabine Knierbein eds., *City Unsilenced: Urban Resistance and Public Space in the Age of Shrinking Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3–15.
2. Sarah Schneider, “Architectural Exclusion: Discrimination and Segregation Through Physical Design of the Built Environment,” *The Yale Law Journal* 124 (2015), 1934–2024.
3. Charles Mills, “White Ignorance,” in Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana eds., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 13–38; Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
4. Shannon Sullivan, “White Ignorance and Colonial Oppression: or, Why I Know So Little of Puerto Rico,” in Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana eds., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 153–172.
5. For more on this, see Chapter 14: “There Is No Truth in Ba Sing Se.”