

## English 10: Landscapes of Self and Other Introductory Texts, Fall 2019



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# The Bird-Dreaming Baobab

By Mia Couto

*Birds, all those who know of no abode on the ground.*

as a place? or physical location is  
metaphorical? mixing of dimension types

That man will always remain in shadow: no memory will be enough to save him from the dark. To be true, his star was not the Sun. Nor did he come from a country called life. Maybe that was why he lived with all the caution of an outsider. The bird seller didn't even have a name to shelter him. They called him the birdman.

Each morning, he would pass through the white folks' neighbourhood carrying his enormous cages. He made those cages himself, from such flimsy materials that they didn't even look like a prison. What they did look like were winged cages, cages that might fly away. Inside them, the birds fluttered around in a twinkle of colour. A cloud of twitters enveloped the bird seller, so loud that they made the windows rattle.

also physical? outer  
identity like siriak

*'Mother, look, here comes the dicky bird man!'*

And the birds would flood the streets. Joyfulness was exchanged: the birds shouted and the children chirped. The man would take out a mouth organ and put sleepy melodies to tune. The whole world was filled with stories.

Behind their curtains, the settlers tut-tutted at such abuses. They sowed suspicions among their children – who did that black think he was? Did anyone know his credentials? Who had authorized those grubby feet to dirty the area? No, no and no again. The black ought to return to his proper place. But the birds, they're so sweet – the children insisted. The parents took on sterner airs; enough said.

But the order was not destined to be greatly respected. One little boy more than all the others disobeyed it, and devoted himself to the mysterious birdman. That was Tiago, a dreamy child, whose only gift was to pursue his fancy. He would wake up early, put his nose to the window pane waiting for the bird seller to come by. The man would come into view and Tiago would rush down the stairs, thirty feet in five jumps. Feet bare, he would go down the street and disappear among the swarm of birds. The sun would sink and there was no sign on the lad. At Tiago's home, people would start to give their worries a polishing:

*'Barefoot, just like them.'*

The father planned his punishment. Only the mother's soft heart brought relief to the little boy's arrival, in the fullness of the night. The father insisted on an explanation, even if it were but the outline of one:

*'Did you go to his house? But does that good-for-nothing have a house?'*

birds as lower  
beings to be caged  
again

immediate change in atmosphere

His dwelling was a baobab, the empty hollow inside its trunk. Tiago told them: it was a sacred tree, God had planted it upside down.

*'See what the black has been filling his head with.'*

The father turned to his wife, heaping blame on her. The lad continued: *'It's true, Mother. That tree is capable of great sadness. The old men say that a baobab can commit suicide in despair by way of fire. Without anyone setting it alight. It's true, Mother.'*

*'What nonsense,' the lady of the house soothed.*

And she would draw her son away from his father's reach. Then the man would decide to go out, and join his rage to that of the other settlers. At the club there was clamour from all: the birdman's visits had to be stopped. Measures could not include death by killing, nor anything that might offend the eyes of women and children. In a word, the cure would have to be brought about.

The following day, the bird seller repeated his joyful invasion. Even the settlers hesitated: after all, that black was bringing with him birds of a beauty never before seen. No one could resist their colours, their chirping. The sight was like nothing else in this true and natural world. The bird seller bowed in nameless modesty, disappearing from himself out of humility.

*'These are truly excellent birds, these ones with their wings all ashore.'*

The Portuguese began to wonder: where in the name of magic did he get such miraculous creatures? Where, if they themselves had already brought the most distant bushland to heel?

The bird seller dissembled, answering with a chuckle. The whites began to fear their own suspicions – might that black have a right to enter a world which was closed to them? But then they set about paring down his merits: the fellow lived in trees, among the birds. They were like creatures of the wild, was the general conclusion.

Whether because of the scorn of the powers that be, or because of the admiration of the meek, the birdman became a topic of conversation in the concrete part of town. His presence began to fill the length of a conversation, unsuspected empty moments. The more people bought from him, the more their houses were filled with sweet song. Such music fell strangely on the settlers' ears, proving that the area they lived in had little in common with the land around them. Could it be that the birds were eroding the residents' sense of self, turning them into foreigners? Or was it the black who was at fault, that son-of-a-bitch who insisted on existing, unaware of the duties of his race? The traders ought to realize that there was no room for his bare feet in those streets. The whites were concerned at such disobedience, blaming it on the times. They yearned jealously for the past, when creatures could be tidied away depending on their appearance. The bird seller, by overstepping himself in such a fashion, was leading the word towards other awareness. Even the children, thanks to his seduction, were forgetting their behaviour. They were becoming more like children of the street than of the home. The birdman had even made inroads into their dreams:

*'Pretend I'm your uncle.'*

And they all joined the family, all became related, relatively speaking.

*'Uncle? Have you ever heard of a black being called uncle?'*

The parents were determined to arrest their dreams, their tiny boundless souls. The command was issued: the street is out of bounds, you can't go out any more. Curtains were drawn, the houses shut their eyelids.

Order seemed to rule once again. That's when things began to happen. Doors and windows opened by themselves, furniture appeared turns back to front, drawers were swapped round.

At the Silvas' house:

*'Who opened this cupboard?'*

No one, no one had. Old man Silva got angry: everyone in the house knew that firearms were kept there. With no sign of having been forced, who could the burglar have been? Such was the indignant plaintiff's doubt.

At the Peixotos' house:

*'Who scattered grass seed among my papers?'*

No one, nothing, not anyone, came the reply. The Peixotos supremo warned: you know very well what type of documents I keep in that drawer. He listed their secret functions, their confidential matters. Let the spreader of grass seed own up. Bloody birds, he mumbled.

At the mayor's residence:

*'Who let the birds in?'*

Nobody had. The governor was unable to govern his temper: he had come across a bird inside a cupboard. Solemn municipal discussion papers covered in bird droppings.

*'Just look at this one: bird shit in the middle of the official seal.'*

In the wake of all of these occurrences, a general uproar gripped the area. The settlers held a meeting in order to try and reach a decision. They assembled at the home of Tiago's father. The lad slipped out of bed and stood at the door listening to their grim threats. He didn't even wait for the sentence to be passed. He rushed off through the bush in the direction of the baobab. There, he found the old man settling himself by the warmth of the fire.

*'They're coming to get you.'*

Tiago was gasping for breath. The bird seller was not put out: he knew, he was waiting for them. The little boy tried harder, for never before has the man meant so much to him.

*'Run away, there's still time.'* settlers get stressed, "in danger" is relaxed. bird man never talks, isn't given a name

But the bird seller set himself at ease, in sleepy languor. He stepped serenely in the trunk and there he tarried. When he came out, he was wearing a tie and a white man's suit. Once again he sat down, cleaning the sand underfoot. Then he paced up and down, surveying the horizon.

*'Run along, boy. It's night time.'*

*Speaks!*

doesn't use his name though.

"civilized"  
become  
contradictory

Tiago lingered. He glanced at the birdman, awaiting his gesture. If only the old man were like the river: still but moving. But he wasn't. The bird seller belonged more to legend than to reality.

*'And why did you put on a suit?'*

He explained: he was the natural offspring of the land. It was his duty to know how to receive visitors. It was for him to show respect, the duties of a host.

*'As for you, go, go back home.'*

Tiago got up, reluctant to leave. He looked up at the huge tree, as if he were asking it for protection.

*'Can you see that flower?'* asked the old man.

And he recalled the legend. The flower was where the spirits dwell. Whoever harmed the baobab would be persecuted for the rest of his life.

The settlers began their noisy arrival. They surrounded the place. The little boy fled, hid, and watched. He saw the birdman get up and greet the visitors. The beating started straightaway, with cudgels and kicks. The old man didn't even appear to be suffering, a vegetable were it not for the blood. They bound his wrists and pushed him up the dark road. The settlers followed behind, leaving the boy alone in the night. The child hesitated, now stepping forward now back. Then it happened: the flowers of the baobab fell, like stars of felt. Their white petals turned red on the ground.

respect -> degradation

Suddenly, the boy made up his mind. He dashed off through the bush after the procession. He tailed their voices and learned that they were taking the birdman to gaol. When it became pitch black behind the wall next to the prison, Tiago began to suffocate. Was it any use praying? If the world around him had stripped itself of beauty. And in the heavens, just as in the baobab, no star glittered with pride any more.

The birdman's voice reached him from beyond the prison bars. Now he could see his friend's face, and all the blood which covered it. Interrogate the fellow, squeeze him hard. That was the order which the settlers left behind them as they withdrew. The guard saluted obediently. But he didn't even know what secrets he was supposed to drag out of the old man. What madness could they prove against the old street hawker? And now, standing there all alone, the figure of the prisoner seemed free of all suspicion.

*'May I have permission to play? It's a tune from your part of the world, boss.'*

The birdman put the harmonica to his lips and tried to blow. But he recoiled from the effort with a wince.

*'They beat me a lot around the mouth. It's a pity, otherwise I'd play.'*

The policeman became suspicious. The harmonica was hurled out of the window, and it fell near where Tiago was hiding. He picked the instrument up, and struck its pieces together