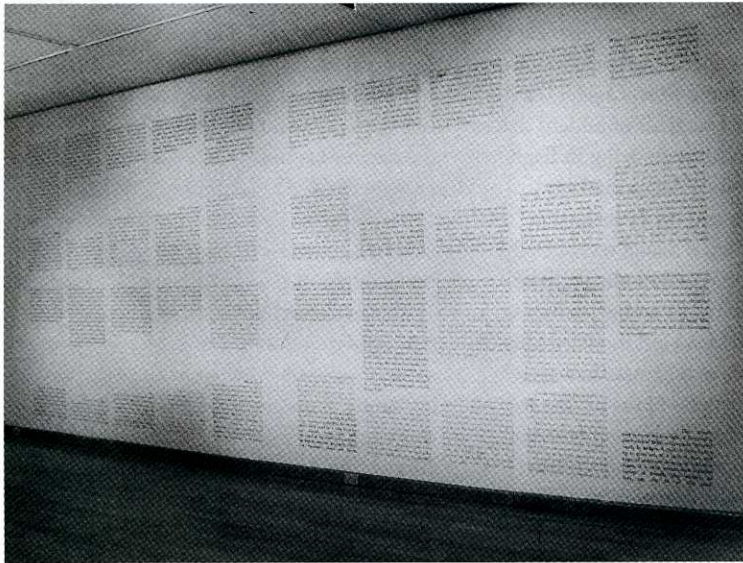


# South- South:

Interrup- Encoun-  
tions & ters



*Allan deSouza, Bombay,  
carbon transfer wall  
text, variable dimensions  
(exhibition dimensions  
366cm x 610cm), 2009.  
Courtesy of the artist.*



# Allan deSouza

Allan deSouza's *Bombay* (2009) combines two narratives of migration, colonial and postcolonial exploration, translation, and renaming. The first story concerns Bombay, an East African slave, who spent time in India during the early to mid-19th century, where he learned some Hindustani. The second narrative focuses on the movements of deSouza's own family, particularly his father's departure from Bombay (the city), his settlement in East Africa, and his family's later departure from Kenya following its independence in 1965. The interwoven presentation of the two narratives—which appeared in the form of a faded and broken Baskerville typescript, almost as if washed out by flooding—invokes the complex relationship between silences in the historical archive and fissures in personal memory. Hand-traced onto the gallery's wall, the text gently cascades over the white, vertical surface.

Released after his master's death, Bombay (the man) was renamed after the city of his residence, and then returned to the African coast. In 1856, two British officers (Richard Burton and John Speke) met in Bombay (the city), sailed to Zanzibar, and then—on the East African mainland—hired a retinue of assistants including Bombay (the man). Given his knowledge of Hindustani, Bombay was able to translate between the two British colonials and the rest of the party, who only spoke African languages. From this period until his death in 1885, Bombay traveled throughout much of Africa and appears—sometimes fleetingly—in the diaries and travelogues of a number of Victorian colonial explorers, including David Livingstone and Henry Stanley. deSouza's text begins with J. A. Grant's description of Bombay (the man) posing before a cameraman in Zanzibar circa 1860.

deSouza's father departed from the port of Bombay for Kenya dressed as an actor, unsure of if or when he would return as a prodigal. In 1980, deSouza reversed sail, traveling to Bombay where he stood at India Gate, looking west toward Kenya and meditating on the many young men who had departed from India's shores. The second narrative (and entire text) culmi-

nates with deSouza looking out an airplane window, unable to distinguish between the highlands of Kenya or the many dales of England until the clouds part and the patchwork fields of England emerge, revealing the "lie of the land." As linguistic aptitude enables Bombay to communicate between the officers and the East Africans of the region, deSouza suggests that his parents strategized the name "Allan" to allow for a sympathetic negotiation between Indian, African, and British cultural milieus. This nomenclature also flows between British colonial frameworks and New World spaces, a transition he marks with the statement: "Now, all I have are fantasies and inventions of the passage from India to Africa. They fabricate genealogy; not a family tree, but a root of familiarity. I swaddle myself within this security blanket of imagined history."

deSouza suffuses the piece as both subject and author. Large blocks of text follow a columnar passage; physical breaks in continuity produce an inter-textual space where the narrative of Bombay (the man) dissolves into the familial narrative of deSouza—intersecting in East Africa, England, and an Indian city that has since been renamed. The text is a haunting meditation on the relationship between geography and identity, on the deceptions of racial and national belonging, and on the impossibility of finding a series of proper names—in short, a language—that adequately expresses the realities of two lives lived in translation.



According to Richard Burton, Bombay had "A high narrow cranium, denoting by arched and rounded crown, fuyant brow and broad base with full development of the moral region, deficiency of the reflectives, fine perceptive, and abundant animality."

John Hanning Speke declared, "I must say I never saw any black man so thoroughly honest and conscientious as Bombay was, added to which his generosity was unbounded."

According to David Livingstone's diaries, Bombay had "lifted Speke out of the disagreeable position of being a silent onlooker... Speke naturally felt very grateful to him. Before getting him, Speke sat on his bottom only." Not only did Speke become translatable, but he was given—by this renamed man—the ability his name suggested, the power of his own voice.

He strides to the prow of the ship, now disdainful of those left behind. No one before him has ever returned; he has no intention of being the first. Even though many families have lost their sons to Overseas, they suffer the loss proudly and with visible material compensations. With the money sent back, these families rebuild or extend their houses in anticipation of their sons' triumphant returns. As the years pass with no sign of the prodigals, blue airmail envelopes with colorful stamps are instead ceremonially withdrawn from glass cabinets and passed around as proof of distant loyalty.

All I have are fantasies and inventions of the passage from India to Africa. They fabricate a genealogy; not a family tree, but a root of familiarity. I swaddle myself within this security blanket of imagined history. A re-collection of possibilities, of memory-threads cast to the winds, drawn back and re-cast in different directions.

