

Roots between Waters: Beyond Goa in the Canvas of Karishma D’Souza’s Inter-Oceanic Worlds  
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*Ocean Words*  
Karishma D’Souza (2018)  
Oil on Canvas, 120 x 150 cm



*Rooting-1*  
Karishma D’Souza (2018)  
Oil on Canvas, 120 x 150 cm

No place is only ever itself. Our contribution to this volume looks at two oil paintings by Karishma D’Souza, both of which locate Goa within a nexus of Indian and Atlantic Oceanic world histories, as well as the lusocentric pluricontinental heritages of Asia, Europe, and Africa. In our engagement of art as a record of the transcontinental, we consider placemaking as a product of historical encounters that may be obscured by, and yet undergird, the present. D’Souza’s *Ocean Words* and *Rooting-1* were both produced in 2018, and, as their titles suggest, take inspiration from processes of mobility and stasis as the artist later explains. Transregional cultures additionally inform the making of these works. Accordingly, what these canvases allow for is an enquiry into the linkages between places, not only through time and ecological

connections, but also in the movement of people and objects. Thus, we seek to comprehend how art can register and simultaneously bring to the surface interconnected legacies across oceanic worlds.

In their assessment of what can be chronicled by art, Julia Verne and Markus Verne relate Indian Ocean regional aesthetics to an “account[ing of] the historical and spatial imaginations of those we try to understand” (2017, 316). They go on to explain that “aesthetic spaces . . . [and] historical processes” have a reciprocal relationship, “and it is these imagined spaces that actually matter to those who live them . . . They are meaningful in relation to their everyday lives” (Verne and Verne 2017, 318). Yet, Verne and Verne appear to distance themselves from the aesthetics they investigate, defining the productive possibilities of this kind of research as being at a remove from their self-conscious positionalities as researchers from the Global North. In so doing, they are only able to express their interest in this seemingly distant world region by categorizing it as an “elsewhere”, as if it had no bearing on histories and places beyond its moment and geography (and certainly no bearing upon the location of the researchers themselves). As we aim to demonstrate, art that relates to, is produced from, and says something about a place is not constrained by the spatio-temporality of its own geography or contemporaneity. D’Souza’s works therefore serve as an atlas of intertwined geographical heritages. In their rendition of personal and familial displacements, regional histories, and ecological motifs, these paintings reference their own moment, but they also signal the past as an ongoing presence.

### **Inter-Oceanic Legacies**

The water swirls in D’Souza’s *Ocean Words*, while the littoral is gestured at in *Rooting-1*. Trees populate both works. The natural world in these paired paintings evokes a global ecology of

oceans, land, botanical life, and moving air. Nevertheless, they are hardly a portrait of the geographical present; the symbiosis of these natural elements depicts a historical register of tidal movements, mercantile forays, contraband, and kidnapped bodies that have crossed multiple territories between the seas. What eludes us, these paintings enquire, when our vantage point is the delimited “now”? In their imbrication of Goa, the canvases urge us to understand the region’s involvement in inter-oceanic history-making, not least because of its coastal location and its participation in transcontinental early modern global economies.

Despite the annexation of once-Portuguese Goa by post-British India in 1961, a political move that often obscures the enclave’s pre-Indian Union specific regional and transcontinental history, studies of the Indian Ocean world underscore Goa’s post/colonial connections to Africa (Frenz 2008; Gupta 2016). However, as the early modern capital of *Estado da Índia*, Goa’s lusophonic connections entrenched it in political and economic networks that extended trans-oceanically and trans-continentially from the shores of the European metropole, across Africa, and into the peripheries of Asia. Hence, Goa and Goans not only participated in intra-Indian Oceanic circuits, but also mediated between these and the networks of the Atlantic Ocean world.

Certainly, colonial-era commercial interactions between the oceanic worlds were not relegated only to the lusosphere and its colonies. While a review of scholarship concerned with such entanglements brings to the fore the complexity of their history, they simultaneously reveal the peculiarities of Portuguese colonial involvements. Although Richard Allen begins by examining the historiography of Indian Ocean slavery to “raise questions about how we view the relationship between the ‘worlds’ of the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (2008, 48), he also queries the undermining of the role played by colonial

Indian Ocean slave-trading centres in inter-oceanic trade during the early modern period (70).

Allen points to

[t]he presence of European slavers in the Indian Ocean during the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, [and especially] the [French-colonized] Mascarenes' status as a commercial center from which slaving voyages to the Americas were mounted ... [This] raises further questions about how we think about the 'world' of the Atlantic ... [and] the assumption that once ships sailed eastward past the Cape of Good Hope, they entered a realm separate and removed from whence they had come. (2008, 70)

Inasmuch as Allen's interest is largely in the French colonial Indian Ocean and its links with other regions, he also draws attention to the "supremacy of Asian over metropolitan merchants in Portugal's eastern empire between 1770 and 1850 ... Indian merchant capital underwrote the exportation of 90,000 Mozambican slaves to the Mascarenes and the Americas before 1811, and another 386,000 Mozambican bondmen and women to the New World after 1811" (2008, 71). Therein, Allen illustrates the commercial interconnections betwixt colonial systems, across oceanic geographies and economies, as well as the collusion between metropolitan and colonial businesspeople.

J. Bohorquez (2020) similarly traces the complex grid of inter-oceanic business relationships between multiple parties, but more specifically apprehends Goa's involvement in these networks. For instance, Bohorquez cites the participation of, among other foreign investors in Portuguese ventures, "a Goa-based Indian merchant, Goinda Naique" (2020, 27). The merchant helped finance a ship that set sail from Calcutta in 1785, but "was swept out to the Île de France (Mauritius)" where it needed to be replaced "to make the remaining part of the Atlantic journey" (ibid). "Capital and goods from India both flowed westward," Bohorquez goes on to say, giving the example of Henrique Loureiro, "a Portuguese merchant of Surat," who, in 1817, "travelled to Rio de Janeiro" with the intention of "export[ing] textiles from Goa to Brazil" (2020, 33).

Notably, it was not only the Portuguese who were involved in such globalized trades across the oceans of the lusosphere,

indigenous Indian merchants [also intervening] in this web of multidirectional capital [flow] ... The Hindu merchant Venquia Xete Coloso profited from the arrival of the *Balsemão* in Goa to consign nine bales of textiles to Francisco José Colf, who was on board as supercargo, and who in turn drew a bill on a merchant named Camotino. Once the *Balsemão* arrived in Bahia, Brazil, the consignee embarked for Lisbon, leaving Venquia Xete's commodities in the hands of António José de Chagas, who was tasked with sales and payment ... Asia-based merchants [additionally] consigned cargoes directly to merchants in Lisbon. On 6 May 1801, Manuel da Silva Ferreira and his partners wrote a letter to Babu Venkatesha Naique, a merchant in Goa, assuring him that they had received the cargo that he had consigned to them. (Bohorquez 2020, 34)

By citing examples of commercial interactions between Portuguese and South Asian merchants, Bohorquez argues that these transcontinental projects were not centred solely on the sale of textiles. Instead, the “global uncoordinated investment cycles made the slave trade possible,” demonstrating that the forced removal of African people from the continent was not exclusively “a ‘national’ enterprise of rich Lisbon-based merchants, [for] Asian ventures ... [constituted] a much more diverse and larger pool of investors ... who also profited” (Bohorquez 2020, 37-38). These beginnings of globalized capitalism pin the forced removal of Black bodies to “a new historical framework that ... inaugurated Atlantic modernity,” claims Luiz Felipe de Alencastro (2017, 34), echoing Paul Gilroy's observation in *The Black Atlantic* that slavery's ties to capitalism are “internal to modernity and intrinsically modern” (1993, 220). Even so, when we focus on “the South Atlantic, the lesser known arena – ‘South’ in more ways than one,” as Isabel Hofmyer (2017, 82) characterizes it – what emerges of the making of the modern world from the South-South interactions across lusospheric inter-oceanic exchanges? D'Souza's *Ocean Words* and *Rooting-1* encompass this “lesser known area,” illustrating its submerged legacies.

### **D'Souza on Process**

“No place is only ever itself,” to quote the opening words of this essay. Nowhere is this truer than in the case of post/colonial states, as was signalled to me by the strange act of consciously recovering something that was never really absent: my right as a Goan to Portuguese citizenship. Since 1867 (Dias 2021, 6), long before the Indian republic woke at midnight between 14 and 15 August in 1947 to see the end of British colonialism in South Asia, Goans had citizenship rights, even as colonial subjects. A right granted to Goans prior to the creation of the democracy of India, the annexation of formerly Portuguese Goa by post-British India in 1961 ironically curtailed the ability of Goans to exercise their pre-existing birthright as citizens of Portugal. The resumption of diplomatic ties between Portugal and India in 1974 once again allowed for the recognition of the right of Goans to Portuguese citizenship, giving me the recent opportunity to retrieve my family’s citizenship paperwork and to make the decision to take up Portuguese nationality.

In February of 2018, I left Goa to live in Lisbon for a year, in order to understand aspects of Goa and Goans from the vantage point of present-day Portugal. Due to Goa’s Portuguese colonial past, I was seeking a clearer understanding of Goan culture as it might be viewed as having been formed beyond India, especially aspects of its past which live on into the present. In Lisbon, I began thinking of the India that never was, in terms of the idealistic and homogenizing propaganda of a nation-state that ascribed all things to itself. This was an impossibility, of course, as can be seen in Goa, a place that was and still is constituted by and in its people. This insight came to me as I began to understand the difference between Portugal, the nation, and Portugal, a country that is the product of its people and histories from beyond its shores.

In my first three months in Portugal, I lived in Damaia, amidst a sizable community of ethnically Angolan and Cabo Verdean people. I had come to Lisbon to understand Portugal, and was

seeing the larger lusophone world, with the immigration of former Portugal colonial subjects to the metropole. Three months after my arrival in Lisbon, I began working on *Ocean Words* and *Rooting-1* in *Atelier Concorde*, a studio founded by a collective of artists. As I worked on these canvasses, the city that was my new place of residence, and its history, imbued my work as did my own past.

Much before my move to Portugal, I had sailed with my family for four years, intermittently, till I was ten years old. My father worked on bulk carriers, as Goans have done for many generations. My first home was Mumbai; my second, the ship. Aside from the engine room, the personal cabins, a few spaces without firm railings, and tightened restrictions in storms or while at port, I was able to roam freely during my time on board. The ships were sturdy, emergency drills were held monthly, the crew numbered about thirty men, and there were enough emergency life-boats and life-jackets for everyone. Communications from the ship to other vessels, or to the shipping company itself, were efficient, with a radio officer in charge. The radio room was always beeping. On the bridge was a radar unit that tracked other ships as comforting red dots on a dark screen of concentric circles. The ocean seemed isolating, but technology visibly and audibly said that it was not. Sometimes, flying fish leapt on deck. Once, a whale was seen in the distance. Although I was sailing on the same seas, this was a different experience from the travels of those forced to seek refuge or of enslaved people that made empire possible. Unlike them, I was cocooned, firstly in a layer of family, and, secondly, by the crew, the ship, the life-boats, and a safety plan in case of an emergency. Besides, my father's fixed contract ensured a date of return.

There were storms at the Cape of Good Hope, and I overheard conversations alluding to crossing into another part of the world, mirroring Richard Allen's observation "about how ... once ships

sailed eastward past the Cape of Good Hope, [it was thought] they entered a realm separate and removed from whence they had come” (2008, 70). As a child, I asked questions like, “What is a cape? Why are there storms? What is ‘hope’?” Years later, on solid ground in Goa, I would stare in awe at the beautiful floor-to-ceiling set of five azulejo murals at the entrance to the *Instituto Menezes Bragança* (site of the old Goa State Central Library). One of them is a depiction of the Cape, personified as a turbulent giant extending his arms to the sea and dwarfing ships trying to keep course. As those murals indicate, the stories of the sea haunt the land and are never far away.

Even now, I remember the names of small ports, some of them recounted to me by my father in his recollections of past travels: Réunion, Port Louis, Tamatave. These are places from another time, and yet they are also ports still used by commercial shipping routes today. I can now see them, not as stories of disparate, disconnected islands, quaint accidental stopovers, but as important, crucial, points that join the dots of empires over centuries. From my own travels and the histories that preceded them, these links between the waters found their way into my art.

From the novel *Skin* by Margaret Mascarenhas (2001), I learned a little more about the history that links Portuguese Africa and Goa, and about “black bodies ... beyond the Atlantic realm” (Ferrão 2014, 28), a history that connects the Indian and Atlantic oceans. There is much mixed blood in Goa, and in my family as well – conceivably a connection to Africa and to Europe, too. A friend tells me there is Arab blood in Goa, as well. I heard a few years back, for the first time, that some Goan families dealt in the Portuguese slave trade directly. It is just not spoken about much. These were some of the thoughts that were behind these paintings, which I see as part of an ongoing work about community and legacies that continue to this day.

### **The Artist on Symbols**



*AncesTrees: Ocean Words* depicts what I refer to as “blood trees” of ancestry, which flank the painting. Accompanying these trees are blue rectangles that emerge out of the ocean. The blood-red tree columns and blue tiles represent my parents; the trees look outward to the Atlantic Ocean from Lisbon. *Rooting-1* is very much an “away from home” painting. It features a transference of imagery and landscapes from an earlier painting titled *Stitcher* (2011), now remembered and re-painted in Lisbon.



*Stitcher*  
Karishma D'Souza (2011)  
Oil on Canvas, 61 x 91.5 cm

Soil and trees in the form of younger saplings with roots trailing are carried over from *Stitcher* into *Rooting-1*. The ledge like watch-point of laterite stone and earth that my mother sits on is also from *Stitcher*, appearing again in the distance in the top segment of *Rooting-1*. The blue rectangular portraits of my parents in *Ocean Words* are also symbolically the painting's eyes: family and history as watchful guardians, or the painting as witness.

*TransPlants*: The branches that appear in the black triangle in *Rooting-1* (besides the likeness of the kinds of stairs one sees all around Lisbon) is a reference to the sense of wonder I felt while walking under the trees that shade the city's pavements. Some of these trees were very familiar

and evoked sweet childhood memories, while others were completely new to me. Together, these unfamiliar and familiar trees from Portugal's colonial heritage, recall for me the discussions and discoveries in the book *Conversations on the Simples and Drugs of India by Garcia da Orta* (Markham 1913), for whom the Jardim Garcia da Orta, a municipal park in Goa's capital, Panjim, is named. Established in 1855, the park "[dates] back to the Portuguese colonial era ... while commemorating [da Orta], whose very name in Latin means 'garden'" (Ferrão 2017a, 42). Chronicler of indigenous plant life in Goa, da Orta's contribution to early modern botany has been obscured; although he was a Jewish converso from Portugal, "his legacy is a conspicuously Goan one" (Ferrão 2017a, 39).

In *Rooting-1* the desert in the band at the top of the painting is a symbol of a traversable wilderness with a stream running through it. The lower band with the jagged and exposed laterite rock hills and nearly invisible trees is a memory of landscapes in Goa denuded by mining; the scene appears to float on water, like the contents of a barge used to carry iron ore to ships waiting at anchorage to load up the export.

The Baobab trees in this red landscape reference the memory of a feeling of sacredness that was shared with other attendees at a child's naming ceremony. It was a ritual conducted for the daughter of a neighbour, Hartman de Souza, a Goan writer returned from Kenya. The event was held under a Baobab tree that grew outside the gates of the Governor's Palace in Dona Paula. The tree grew on the edge of a hill that sloped down to Miramar Beach and the mouth of the Mandovi river. It overlooked the Aguada Fort and the lighthouse above the Arabian Sea. This Baobab is one of only a handful known to exist in Goa, carried from their native origins in Africa and over the seas, centuries ago, by the Portuguese (The Goan Network 2018). With the

inclusion of the historic and the sacred in my work, I have begun looking at some of my paintings as prayers.

*Sand in the Mirror*: The large format of the paintings helped ground me in a new place.

Conceived of as mirrored works, these canvasses helped me reflect on Lisbon, on other places I had been, and on locations I had painted a decade earlier so as to memorialize the sense of peace they brought me. *Ocean Words* and *Rooting-1* look outward over the Atlantic, while viewing Africa moving inwards into the metropole. In *Rooting-1*, a portrait of Lisbon, sand colours the city, swept into it by the wind from the Sahara. Carried over the ocean from Africa, the fine dust falls over Lisbon in summer, a reminder of my new city's geographical location and old history, as well as the wind currents that connect it to other places. The three horizontal bands in the painting are time-based. At the bottom, the past: colours and the lake refer to a landscape from the aforementioned *Stitcher*. The middle-left is the contemporary moment of the painting – Lisbon: stairs connecting areas in the city, connoting movement in multiple directions. And above, a bit of a possible dream of another place on the other shore across the Sahara, not so distant yet a world apart. I was also thinking of the biblical parable of seeds travelling and finding a place in faraway but fertile soil; I also thought of the plants that travelled with people on the oceanic trade routes and currents.

*The Ocean*: In *Ocean Words*, the water visible through the trees is the Atlantic, and the leaves of the large red trees are transparent like stained glass, their roots connected beneath the water, holding the world of the painting together. The colour of the sky and the depths below the water's surface are interchangeable. A possibly ambigramic painting, it references the poet-saint Kabir's use of imagery in his poems of a world turned on its head (Hess and Singh 2002, 14).

The dislocation this suggests invites viewers of my art to think about how we (mis)conceive of places, their making actually influenced by multiple histories that flow into one another.

### **Painted Waters**

No place is only every itself. Using Karishma D’Souza’s art, we have sought to show how Indian and Atlantic oceanic worlds commingle in the history that swirls around Goa, its connections to other global sites, and even its contemporary moment. Goan art history bears other evidence of such encounters. This is borne witness to in the oeuvre of Vamona Navelcar (1929-2021), which is suffused by his exilic life in Goa, Portugal, and Mozambique, where “place is as much family as kin – its loss felt as strongly as that of a loved one” (Ferrão 2017b, 14). Work by Goans artists whose canvasses map the links between oceanic histories “[test] conceptions of culture as being bounded by time, geography, and nation” (Ferrão 2017b, 11). Likewise, D’Souza conceives of art as “[b]elonging to multiple homes, ... [m]ap-like” (2017, 45). Viewing Goa through the painted waters of canvasses like *Ocean Words* and *Rooting-1* makes visible history’s unruly flows beyond the alleged confines of oceanic world limits, while also instructing us in how to see its present currents.

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