

What is the significance of the temporary installation of Kara Walker's *Fons Americanus* in Tate Modern and how does it attempt to destabilise colonial structures?

Kara Walker is a contemporary Black American artist who explores issues of race and gender in her artworks. Her installation piece, known by its shorthand title *Fons Americanus*, challenges viewers to question the meaning and value of public colonial-era monuments. The piece is a visual parallel to the Empire-celebrating Victoria Memorial and explores ideas of histories, geography and institutional power. This essay starts by providing a formal description of the artwork, and goes on to consider the narratives and allegories present in the piece, showing how Walker combines them to destabilise colonial power. The second part of this essay will evaluate her success in that aim, by assessing the following three criticisms: does Walker's monument succeed in reaching her intended audience, given where it is situated and its temporary nature? Does the placement of her monument within an institution itself undermine her goal? And moreover, does her use of imperial imagery undermine her goal to forge narratives separate from the coloniser? I conclude that these criticisms do not hold merit and Walker's installation does successfully destabilise structures of colonial power.



(1) Kara Walker's *Fons Americanus* (2019).

Walker's exhibition was displayed from October 2019 to April 2020. It was comprised of two working fountains: *Fons Americanus* (2019), a thirteen-metre-high fountain, and *Shell Grotto* (2019) a smaller adjacent fountain in the form of an open scalloped shell. Along with the two fountains, the full title was painted typographically on a nearby wall. The pieces were commissioned for the exhibition by the multinational corporation Hyundai Motor, in its fifth annual partnership with the Tate, and were designed specifically to be situated within the

Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. The fountains were made from sustainable materials such as cork and soft wood that could be reused when the exhibition ended.

On entering the Tate Modern and descending into the Turbine Hall, visitors would first see the larger fountain from a distance by noticing its crest above the footbridge. They would then approach the smaller fountain, offset to the side of the hall. This fountain is reminiscent of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1486), in which the Roman goddess Venus rises out of a half-open shell. Here, however, she is missing. The fountain appears empty at first, but upon looking inside, a boy's head pokes out above the water. The boy looks scared, and water runs from his eyes down to the pool: he is either drowning or emerging from the depths.

Next, a visitor would reach the larger fountain at the back of the hall. This fountain's structure resembles a scaled down version of the Victoria Memorial, a memorial situated outside the nearby Buckingham Palace that celebrates the British Empire. This fountain has two tiered pools and two further tiers of sculptures, with figures spread throughout. These figures are given names by Walker on the gallery's website and in the exhibition's accompanying text; some notable ones are as follows. *The Pietà of Emmett Till* is a Pietà scene showing a male figure lifting a body with a mangled face, which is a reference to Dana Schutz's controversial artwork based on photographs of Emmett Till's mutilated face.¹ *The Captain* is a composite of Toussaint L'Overture, Marcus Garvey, and Paul Cuffee,² all Black individuals who fought against European colonialism. The *Kneeling Man* is a caricature of the sugar plantation owner Governor Sir William Young, who enslaved labourers; here an alternate history is presented where he is begging and remorseful, in a vulnerable pose. *Queen Vicky* is a voluptuous, joyful woman, captured mid-laughter; crouching beneath her is a crouching personification of melancholy, perhaps her own.³ She stands in stark contrast to the Victoria Memorial's regal *Queen Victoria*, who appears seated in a throne looking "[g]racious, queenly, and womanly of aspect."⁴ Atop Walker's fountain is *Venus*, standing

¹ Mitter 2019.

² Walker 2019: 58.

³ Walker 2019: 58.

⁴ Salaman 1911: 36.

majestically with arms thrown back and breasts bared forward, water flowing out of them and from her neck.

The fountains themselves are inspired by the spectacle and personification of oceans found in fountains such as Bernini's monument *Fountain of the Four Rivers* (1651).⁵ Walker appropriates this and subverts the original narrative intention: the water in *Fons Americanus* is not a symbol of power and domination but instead is something destructive and catastrophic. It becomes "an allegory of the Black Atlantic, laying bare the vast and just narratives of Empire, slavery and transatlantic space."⁶ Walker's work regularly features these mythical waters, which represent the "original sacrificial site" that gives way to "the collective ancestry of Europeans, Africans and Americans."⁷

The aim of Walker's monument is unambiguous. Walker herself writes that "[her] fountain yokes together racist representation and violent expression of power, issues which tend to become romanticized..." all with the aim of "...gently coercing a viewer into some kind of reflection."⁸ And, as Tate Modern director Frances Morris points out, in mirroring the Victoria Memorial, she "raises questions about... who gets memorialised in history"⁹ and "expos[es] the stories laying hidden under the marble surfaces ... of public monuments."¹⁰ This is particularly significant, given that, in recent years, there have been numerous petitions and demonstrations to remove celebrations of colonial histories; in the UK, six months after the Black Lives Matter protests in summer 2020, almost 70 memorials had been removed or renamed.¹¹ And so, Walker presents a dual challenge: to the viewer, to examine histories that have been erased and forgotten; and to colonial structures of power that continue to dominate our lives.

Allegories and pieces of symbolism are scattered throughout Walker's two fountains. Here I want to focus in on one in detail, namely the figure of Venus, to show specifically how

⁵ Kim 2019: 108.

⁶ Morris 2019: 27.

⁷ Raymond 2007: 355.

⁸ Walker 2019: 56.

⁹ Morris 2019: 27.

¹⁰ Kim 2019: 118.

¹¹ Mohdin and Storer 2021.

Walker's challenge is made. In the parallel monument, the Victoria Memorial, the topmost figure depicts the personified form of Victory, who appears in gilded bronze, flanked by the two ideal female figures of Courage and Constancy. The figure is winged and holds a palm branch, both symbols of victory. Salaman explains that this symbolism "is intended to be emblematic of the consummation of Victoria's long and glorious reign,"¹² and the monument's designer, Sir Thomas Brock, wrote that it represented the "the maritime greatness of the Empire."¹³ Celebrations of colonial triumphs like these are pervasive, especially in London, the former capital of the British Empire. As Tim Edensor writes, the "ubiquitous presence of these statues ensures that they are rarely subject to any critical scrutiny" and they "form the backdrop of the everyday..."¹⁴

In contrast to *Winged Victory*, placed atop Walker's fountain is the figure of Venus. Venus is a Roman deity who has been pictured in a multitude of forms throughout classical and modern art. However, here, Walker is reinterpreting a particular depiction of the figure: that of the 19th century engraving *The voyage of the Sable Venus* (1793) by the British illustrator Thomas Stothard. The print was published in a book called *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (1801), a propaganda text that promoted transatlantic slavery in the British colonies.¹⁵ The illustration shows a sexualised, manacled Black woman, stepping out of a half shell surrounded by cherubs. She is guided by God of the sea Triton, who holds a British flag, after a supposed heavenly transatlantic voyage. As Vanina Géré points out, this propaganda reminds us that "specifically in the case of women, [the] exploitation was sexualized [as a way to] legitimize systemic rape on plantations."¹⁶

Walker here reclaims the image of the Sable Venus. She retains the grotesque imagery of the original, emphasising it in places: water comes out of the figure's neck, implying suicide; water comes out of her breasts, implying lactation, which reminds us that enslaved Black women were forced to nurse white children; her hands are splayed out, implying restraint or rape. However, the figure is also a personification of abundance. Walker posits her as a

¹² Salaman 1911: 37.

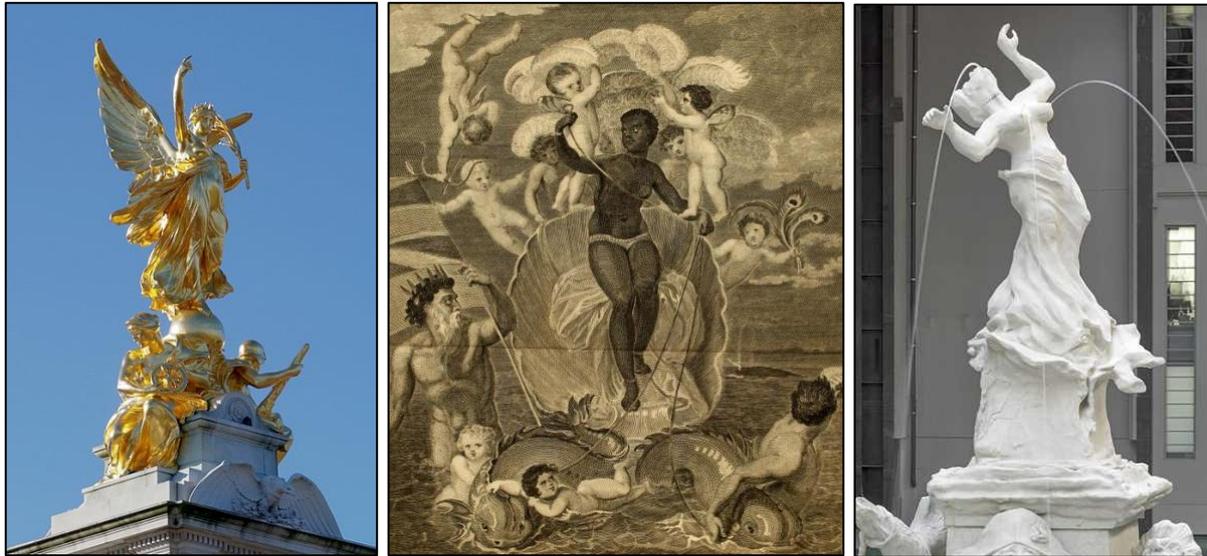
¹³ Kim 2019: 105.

¹⁴ Edensor 2019: 54.

¹⁵ Tate [n.d.]

¹⁶ Géré 2019.

Candomblé/Macumba/Santeria priestess,¹⁷ which are all religions developed by enslaved Africans to disguise traditional religious rituals after being forced to convert to European religions. In Walker's own words, she "transmits the wishes ... of deities from an ancient pantheon..." and transforms "amniotic fluid... into mother's milk and lifeblood."¹⁸



From left to right: (2) Sir Thomas Brock, *Winged Victory* atop the *Victoria Memorial* (1911); (3) Thomas Stothard's illustrated *Sable Venus* (1793); (4) Kara Walker's *Venus* atop *Fons Americanus* (2019).

The figure of Venus makes clear how Walker's dual-challenge works. Her artwork challenges viewers to notice the prevalence of memorials celebrating colonial power, by presenting a counter-memorial that reclaims racist imagery and builds in new symbolism. This is particularly apparent in geographical centres of colonial significance such as London, which, while not a port city, was the symbolic centre of the British Empire and represented England's dominion throughout the globe. In challenging its viewers, the artwork challenges structures of power themselves, questioning their dominance and continued pervasiveness.

Having demonstrated this example of Walker's challenge, I will now evaluate how successful she is in her goal. I start by looking at the relevance that the commissioning institution has. Museums are "among the most complex, powerful, and successful of modern socio-political institutions"¹⁹ that exist today. They adjudicate on what counts as art through a process of

¹⁷ Walker 2019: 58.

¹⁸ Walker 2019: 58.

¹⁹ Berlo and others 1995: 13.

collection and curation. Objects and images gain (or are stripped of) meaning and value based on their being included in or excluded from an institutional context.²⁰ Unlike the majority of works in art museums, which typically are bought by or bequeathed to a museum, Walker's work was commissioned to be placed in the Tate Modern, a museum which opened in May 2000 and receives between 4 to 6 million visitors a year.²¹ This leads to interesting questions: did the work have value before it was created, or even, before the artist knew what she would create? And if so, does that value come from the physical space of the Turbine Hall, which has hosted some of the world's most significant pieces of contemporary installation art?²² Or from the artist herself, and her legacy of previous works? However, instead of delving too deeply into ideas of value, here I want to explore the implications that the institution has specifically on Walker's goal.

For the artwork to pose a challenge, it first must reach viewers. One could argue that *Fons Americanus*'s placement in the Tate Modern prevents this from happening, as many of the visitors are not critically engaged. This challenge draws from Marxist theorists, notably Baudrillard, who argues that commodified culture under a capitalist system is inauthentic. This applies particularly to visiting art museums; Baudrillard describes visitors to the Centre Pompidou in Paris as being "like fomented locusts devouring a crop — seeing everything, eating everything, touching everything,"²³ which he argues leads to a collapse of high culture. One may also challenge the length of the exhibition's display: the exhibition only lasted six months, from October 2019 to March 2020, closing three weeks early due to the coronavirus pandemic.²⁴ Despite high critical praise and commercial success, the monuments were dismantled and destroyed following the exhibition's closure,²⁵ meaning viewers had to visit London to see it during a limited time period. It could even be argued that this is a recurrent trend of "exhibition venues for Black artists [being limited to]

²⁰ Clifford 1988: 220.

²¹ Excludes 2021 figures due to the coronavirus pandemic. 'Number of Visitors to the Tate Modern in London 2007-2020' [n.d.].

²² Tate [n.d.-b].

²³ Prior 2003: 55.

²⁴ Tate [n.d.-a].

²⁵ McGrath 2020.

informal and temporary spaces,”²⁶ as happened throughout much of the last century as documented by Bridget Cooks.

However, more problematically than the limited reach in viewers caused by its placement in the gallery is the role of the institution itself. As stated above, museums are powerful institutions that, according to Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, are “successful because they are good business investments.”²⁷ Museums and other public institutions are trying to reposition themselves in relation to their audiences, by reflecting on their own role as an institution and consulting with their visitors or ‘customers.’²⁸ A cynic could argue that the Tate, together with Hyundai, only commissioned a Black artist to create a piece about race in order to promote their own aims of appearing in touch with contemporary issues around social justice.

Indeed, Rianna Jade Parker condemns Walker for “[doing] nothing to wrestle with the history of [sugar merchant] Sir Henry Tate,”²⁹ whose fortune directly led to the founding of the Tate galleries. She points out that the Tate website attempts to detach itself from his links to slavery, but there will always be “generational consequences of centuries of sugar production by enslaved Africans owned as property.”³⁰ Parker also questions why a Black American artist was chosen for the commission, claiming that the focus on New World slavery ignores the horrors of the Empire and Britain’s role, and that a “collaborative process involving Black British artists [could] have resulted in something more nuanced.”³¹ Thus, an argument can be made that, in failing to engage with this legacy, Walker’s goal is undermined.

Addressing these challenges in turn, I concede to the mass-culture theorist that not all visitors to Walker’s monument were critically engaged. When I visited the exhibition in November 2019, people mingled nearby with their friends, children played in the pools of water; some people ignored the work entirely, walking past it to other parts of the gallery.

²⁶ Cooks 2011: 94.

²⁷ Preziosi and Farago 2004:2-3.

²⁸ Wainwright 2021: Block 4, 1.5.4.

²⁹ Parker 2020.

³⁰ Parker 2020.

³¹ Parker 2020.

However, this is to be expected. As Nicholas Prior argues, the Tate Modern, like other contemporary museums, is allotropic: it can exist in multiple states. He writes: “[s]cholars can study, hedonistic tourists can ‘do’ the blockbuster exhibitions at speed, ‘informed’ visitors can ... tackle the intricacies of the permanent collection...”³² Thoroughly studying the monument and analysing its symbolism is not a prerequisite for Walker’s challenge; that it was commissioned and displayed at all allows for some viewers to rediscover hidden histories and hence start to challenge structures of power. And, despite closing prematurely, the exhibition still managed to garner a lot of press and become one of the most visited installations in the Turbine Hall’s history.³³

Moreover, the notion of visiting a white cube gallery and silently contemplating art is itself an imperialistic ideal. The Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall has always presented installations that challenge visitors to reconsider what art can be (consider Olafur Eliasson’s *The Weather Project* (2003) and Doris Salcedo’s *Shibboleth* (2003))³⁴, and Walker’s counter-memorial is no different. David Osa Amadasun’s small ethnographic study on galleries as places of racial exclusion highlights an uncomfortable and “...unspoken norm: it is natural/normal for Black people not to participate in mainstream art galleries [and] to not use these spaces.”³⁵ Providing a space in which all people can talk, laugh, play, and be loud is itself a way of breaking down a system of power. Visitors to the *Fons Americanus* exhibition being joyful, rather than stoic or sincere, mirrors the joyful nature of Walker’s figures, and again highlights a contrast to the solemnity of the colonial statues that are being parodied.

A similar response can be made regarding the ephemerality of the installation, particularly in terms of it being destroyed after being exhibited. The notion of an artwork being sold to collectors (i.e., those with purchasing power) or institutions at the end of an exhibition is a power structure in itself. As the White Cube points out, “[c]ontemporary artists whose work is involved in these processes don’t get rental fees/royalties like musicians and authors; the work acquires value without them and the people who benefit most from that rising value

³² Prior 2003: 64.

³³ McGrath 2020.

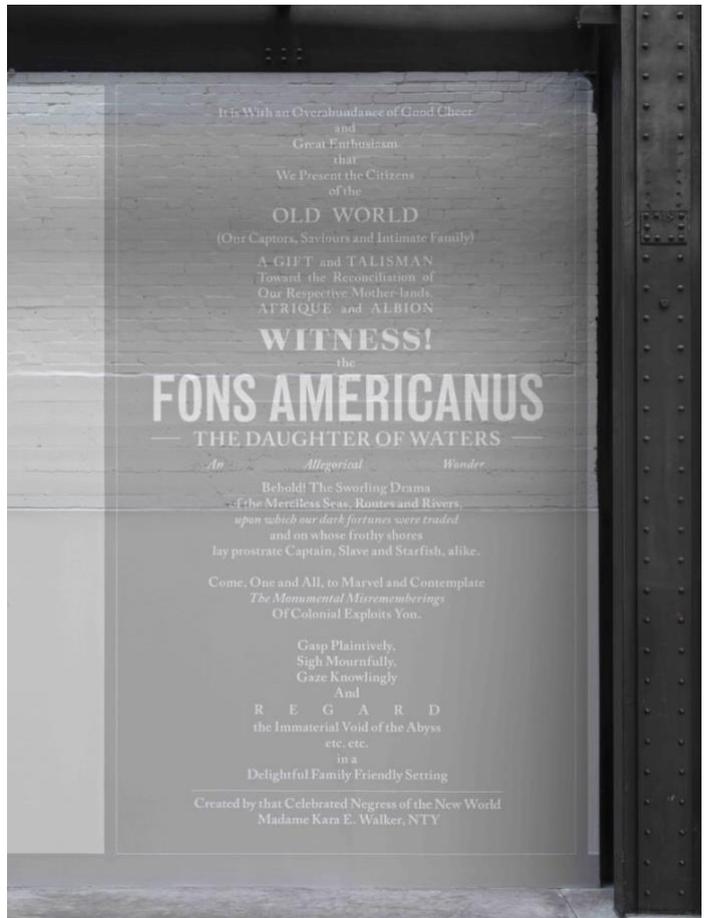
³⁴ Tate.[n.d.-b].

³⁵ Amadasun 2013.

are, ofc [sic], the billionaire club collectors.”³⁶ By not engaging in this process, and emphasising a sustainable outcome for the raw materials involved, the Tate and Walker are together destabilising this system.

In response to the monument being placed in a problematic institution itself, I argue, following Lewis Hodder, that contrary to Parker’s claim, Walker’s monument *does* engage with its site and context. He writes that “adding another monument into the public... which still fails to address basic inequality would have rung hollow, [making Walker’s fountain] not a ‘counter’ memorial but a *negative* memorial, a memorial to that failure and unfulfilled promise.”³⁷ Walker’s monument is a parody and it playfully subverts expectations of what a monument should look like and how it should function.

Additionally, Walker’s monument *does* engage with Britain’s colonial past. The geography that it centres on London, given it specifically parodying a London-based monument, and references racist representations from both America and the UK. Walker’s use of the term “the Black Atlantic,” which comes from the title of Paul Gilroy’s book, signals the existence of a shared culture which transcends ethnicities. The title of the piece also reveals an awareness of geographies; it reads: “We Present the Citizens of the Old World / ... A GIFT and TALISMAN / ... Created by that Celebrated Negress of the New World / Madame Kara E. Walker, NTY”³⁸ Here, Walker again uses parody and humour to



(5) The full title of *Fons Americanus*.

³⁶ de la Puente 2019.

³⁷ Hodder 2020.

³⁸ From the full title of the artwork, seen in Kim 2019: 17, 121 and 124 and in Figure 5.

subvert expectations: she describes her monument as a gift; describes herself using the racially charged term 'negress;' and plays on the British honours system which awards people Orders of the British Empire (OBEs) by dubbing herself NTY (Not Titled Yet). Hence, rather than refusing to engage with Britain's links to slavery, *Fons Americanus* "is a monument against this novelty of the British attitude towards slavery."³⁹

The first part of this essay explored how Walker combined imagery, allegory and parody in *Fons Americanus* with the aim of destabilising structures of colonial power. The second part of this essay evaluated how successful she was, looking at criticisms that claimed her goal was undermined due to the artwork's limited reach, its placement in an institution and its usage of imperial imagery. I showed that, despite these criticisms, Walker's monument does succeed in challenging norms, in inciting viewers to examine forgotten histories, and hence in destabilising structures of colonial power.

³⁹ Hodder 2020.

List of visual examples

1. Kara Walker, *Fons Americanus*, 2019, high-density steam-baked cork, softwood, plywood, jesmonite, steel reinforcements, pumping and filtering equipment, height 13.5 metres, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London (now destroyed). Photo: Matt Greenwood for Tate Photography, 2019.
2. Sir Thomas Brock, Victoria Memorial, The Mall, London, built 1906-24. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, 2012.
3. Thomas Stothard (artist) and W. Grainger (engraver), *The voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies*, 1793 etching, 22 x 16.5 cm, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. Unknown photographer; photo: Tate Website.
4. Detail of *Fons Americanus*. Photo: Matt Greenwood for Tate Photography, 2019.
5. Title of *Fons Americanus*, painted on wall of Turbine Hall. Photo: Matt Greenwood for Tate Photography, 2019.

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