“Fons Americanus” as a conceptual remix of “The Queen Victoria Memorial”

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"Fons Americanus" is a sculpture by Kara Walker that reinterprets the Queen Victoria Memorial in London's Trafalgar Square. The Queen Victoria Memorial is a monumental marble structure that was erected in 1911 to commemorate the late Queen Victoria and serves as a tribute to and a symbol of the British Empire's reach and influence. By remixing this iconic sculpture, Walker critiques colonialism and re-centers the narrative of history to shed light on the ongoing struggles for social justice and equality. Walker flips the story of the “burden of the white man” by portraying, in a compositionally similar way, the tragedies imposed by the British colonial power.

“Fons Americanus” was part of the fifth annual Hyundai Commission at the Tate Modern. The 13 meter tall working fountain is three tiered with water coming out of the top sculpture, this references the "Fons Vitae," or fountain of life, which is a symbol of renewal and rejuvenation. In this context, the fountain serves as a symbol of hope for communities that have been marginalized and oppressed by colonialism. The water is also symbolic of the transatlantic slave trade and the interconnected histories of Africa, America, and Europe.

A powerful conceptual remix, it transforms the Queen Victoria Memorial into a symbol of resistance and critique. By incorporating elements of African and Afro-Caribbean cultures, the sculpture also pays homage to the cultural richness and diversity of these communities and their ongoing resistance against colonialism. The interplay of light and water creates a dynamic and immersive experience that underscores the fluidity of cultural exchange and the ongoing struggle for justice and equality.

This work of art subverts the public expectation by using visual vocabulary traditionally associated with white colonial supremacy and rendering it as an engaged and inclusive rhetoric. The fountain and sculptures themselves are made using reusable

cork, metal, and wood, and are coated with non-toxic acrylic and cement composite.[1] This gives the look of the marble that was used in the Queen Victoria Memorial without the harmful and non-recyclable properties. Even the name of the work itself is signed "Kara Walker, NTY" or "Not Titled Yet", a play on the British honor awards like "OBE" or "Order of the British Empire".[2] The identifier, "Fons Americanus" that we use is a part of her introduction, which was printed on the wall next to the fountain.

This fountain plays with our idea of monuments by directly bringing attention to the history of violence against Black people of Africa that made the British Empire what it is today. Walker extends the metaphor of the Black Atlantic, "an art term that describes the fusion of black cultures with other cultures from around the Atlantic"[3], which argues that the culture in and around the Atlantic is profoundly shaped by the slave trade it perpetuated.

On the lower basin of the fountain is a fishing boat that was sprung a leak, and is on the verge of sinking, here the reference is to paintings like by Winslow Homer, "The Gulf Stream" which shows a black sailor in a small boat with no sail and there are sharks surrounding the boat to show that the man is in immediate danger, Joseph Turner, "Slave Ship", and John Copley, "Watson and the Shark". This tier of the fountain repeated shows sharks and drowning figures to emphasize the dangers of the transatlantic journey. This is what the slaves who were forced to make the journey across the Atlantic went through. This section of the fountain is named "The Physical Impossibility of Blackness in the Mind of Someone White", as a play on Damien Hirst's "The Physical Impossibility of Death in

[1] Takac , B. (2020) Examining Fons Americanus by Kara Walker In The Age of Toppled Monuments, Wudiwalls. Available at: https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/kara-walker-fons-americanus-tate-modern (Accessed: February 2023).
[2]Takac , B. (2020) Examining Fons Americanus by Kara Walker In The Age of Toppled Monuments, Wudiwalls. Available at: https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/kara-walker-fons-americanus-tate-modern (Accessed: February 2023).
[3] Philip-Ewen, I. (2023) Masterpiece Story: Fons Americanus by Kara Walker, Daily Art Magazine. Available at: https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/kara-walker-fons-americanus/ (Accessed: February 2023).

the Mind of Someone Living", which is a tiger shark preserved in a clear box filled with formaldehyde solution.

Walker has used figures which were famous subjects in western art, like Venus in two ways in this sculpture. Firstly, the scalloped shell that carried Venus to the island of Cyprus in Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus", usually associated with fertility and love is shown in front of the fountain, encasing a drowning, crying boy who fills the shell with his tears. This sculpture, named *Shell Grotto,* references a colonial fortress on Bunce Island in Sierra Leone where Black people were taken captive and sold into slavery.[4] Thus, turning a symbol of beauty, grace, and in some culture's even salvation, into a representation of the enslavement of a people, the loss of hope and autonomy.

Secondly, at the top of the fountain, there is a striking black Venus who Walker has in the form of a priestess from the Afro-Brazilian and Caribbean religions. Here Walker is referencing an image titled, "The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies" by Thomas Stothard. In the image, Venus is portrayed as an African woman standing on an opened half shell surrounded by cherubs. They are being accompanied by the sea god Triton who carries the British flag and guides this procession across the Atlantic waters. This image was used as propaganda to promote transatlantic slave trade.[5] As Acuff and Kletchka said, "Black women have historically been and are continually defined in ways that deny their humanity"[6] (18). Black Venus in the Stothard's picture is being led across the Atlantic to be sold to slavery, she is stripped of her humanity and made a placeholder for every black person who had the same fate as her.

[4] Bunch Island History (2005) Yale Macmillan Center. Yale University. Available at: https://glc.yale.edu/lectures/evening-lectures/past-lectures/20042005/bunce-island/bunce-island-history (Accessed: February 2023).
[5] Takac , B. (2020) *Examining Fons Americanus by Kara Walker In The Age of Toppled Monuments*, *Wudiwalls*. Available at: https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/kara-walker-fons-americanus-tate-modern (Accessed: February 2023).
[6] Acuff, Joni, and Dana Carlisle Kletchka. 2020. "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité: A Black Feminist Analysis of Beyoncé Performing "APESHIT" in the Louvre." *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* 13 (1): 13-36. doi:10.18848/1835-2014/CGP/v13i01/13-36

On the contrary, Walker's Venus is mid motion, possibly falling backward as water spouts out of her slit throat and breasts. "The amniotic fluid at the beginning of this journey is now transformed into mother's milk and lifeblood." says Walker. This is Walker reclaiming the image of Venus, which she named, the *Daughter of the Waters*. With her at the pinnacle of the fountain, the water that used to represent danger and death becomes a "mother's milk and lifeblood".

The second tier of the fountain features four sculptures that each represent a different facet of the enslavement of the people. The first is called *Queen Vicky*, Walker has her looking ecstatic and caught mid-laugh, crouched at her feet is a human personification of deep sadness, Melancholy, who has his head bowed down to her. On the other side is the *Kneeling Man*, a caricature of the West Indies Governor Sir William Young. As the owner of several sugar plantations, Young enslaved many laborers, he is a representing the men who owned and abused slaves. Walker has portrayed him in a position of remorse and vulnerability, supposedly he is at the mercy of the slaves who rebelled against the system. There are also direct examples of her addressing this violence that has been erased from history by showing a tree with a noose hanging from the branch. This brings back the memory of the many lynching's of African-Americans at the hands of white supremacists in the late 19th century. Next to *The Tree*, at the front of the fountain, there is *The Captain*. He is the embodiment of every important black individual who championed the rebellion against the European colonial empire. This includes people like Francois-Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture who pioneered the Haitian Revolution leading to the abolition of slavery and establishment of the sovereign state of Haiti[7] and Marcus Garvey who authored "The Declaration of Rights of the Negro

[7] *Bunch Island History* (2005) *Yale Macmillan Center*. Yale University. Available at: https://glc.yale.edu/lectures/evening-lectures/past-lectures/20042005/bunce-island/bunce-island-history (Accessed: February 2023).

Peoples of the World". This statue represents Walkers will to further the fight against colonialism.

With the erection of monuments and statues like the Memorial comes the implication that Britain is proud of their colonial past, and Walker contesting this historical narrative with her sculpture fountain is increasing awareness and questioning this celebration of traumatic histories.

The fight against erasing the monstrous colonial past of Britain is an ongoing one. Be it with India finally revising their middle and high school textbooks to shed light on the truth of their freedom struggle against the British less than a century ago, or Kara Walker blatantly laying bare what the British were trying to hide and forget. It is acts like these that incite conversation about the things that really matter. Healing a national and cultural identity is a process that is going to take many rebirths, several people charged with purpose, and a consideration for everyone that we lost in the process of acquiring our freedom.