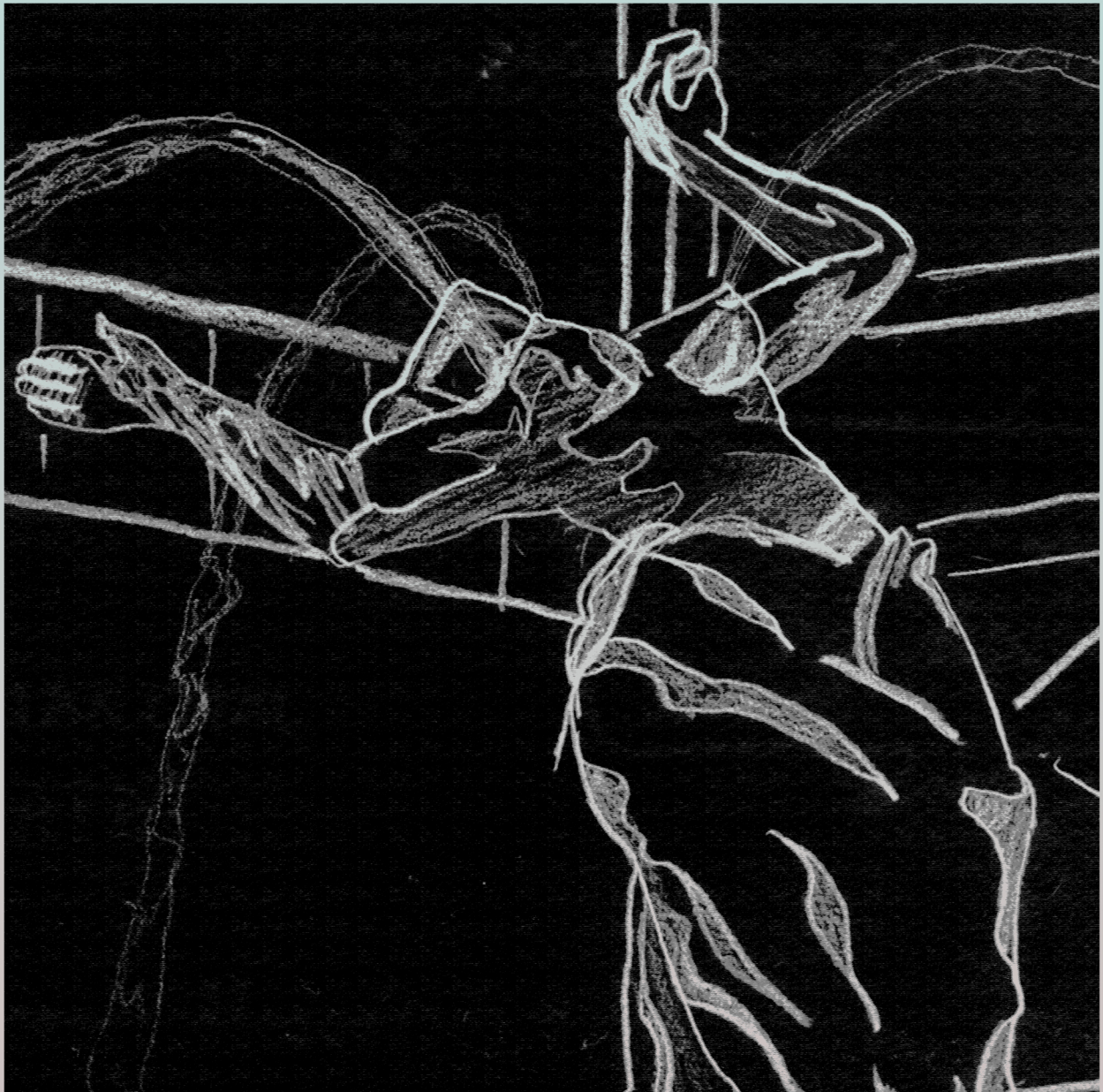


***Fons Americanus by Kara Walker
at the Tate Modern***

***Responses by MA Gender Media and
Culture Students***



Designed and edited by Katharine Davies Herbst

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Introduction

***Fons Americanus* and *A Subtlety* in the Tate Turbine Hall, London: In the Wake of Speculative Futures?**

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It is almost as if Kara Walker has lifted the Victoria Memorial in front of Buckingham Palace, surrounded by armed guards in bearskin hats held in place with gold-coloured chin straps, watched by hordes of tourists, taken the figures out of the fountain and re-routed the erasure of the violence of Empire, into the Turbine Hall at the Tate in London. Here the bodies of those whose histories are marginalised and placed in the shadows of art institutions are put on display for serious contemplation, urging viewers to face the systematic denial of exploitation and suffering. Colonial routes are of course repeatedly and matter of factly erased, with the commonwealth placed in a royalist patrilineal nationalistic story; a communal mythical global familial story of mother country, kin and infantilisation; complete with handshakes, flags and garlands. Kara Walker turns the shiny glorious making of global Empire over to her hands, sculpting the understory of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney signal as *The Undercommons* (2013) and fugivity, across Britannia's waves. Stories which are, as Christina Sharpe puts it, caught up *In the Wake* (2016), with the wake referring both to the waves created by the hull of a vessel in the water, as well as the processes of communal mourning.

The water of the fountain draws us to transatlantic migrations, historic and contemporary deaths, becoming material matter itself, as debris across the oceans, from over-thrown or drowning bodies, sedimenting over time in the wake of vessels today. Children are especially drawn to wanting to play with the water in the bottom of the fountain of *Fons Americanus*. Playful, perversive performativity is a key feature of Walker's interruptions. There are multiple historical, art history and literary references in the sculpted figures and objects. Bloated figures

of colonialism as well as emaciated suffering children and adults wrap around, cling to and hang on the monument. Monuments by the state and the powerful can, as pointed out by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1974/1991), transpose conflict into a consensual beauty, with repression metamorphosed into exaltation, thus rendering consensus practical and concrete. *Fons Americanus* is an anti-monument to the regular monumentalisation of national/global stories.

The violent stories in *Fons Americanus* are difficult to understand and digest in one visit; they require multiple visits to comprehend even a fraction of what is called up, just as a cemetery beckons so many layers of loss that can't be fathomed in one visit. The piece is a marvel for thinking with and dwelling on, and uncovering the production of global routes and national stories through sculptural form. Becoming a sign-post for readings in the library, as well as for re-thinking the numerous monuments en route, in the vicinity of London. We were sorry that it was no longer going to be a site to go to for contemplation in the Turbine Hall, after November 2020. Covid-19 lockdown rules in November 2020 stopped our class of MA Gender, Media and Culture students, in tandem with our session on gender, race, space and the nation, from attending *Fons Americanus*. We have thus put this collection of responses together, from visits we took individually in lockdown or pre-lockdown.

Walker has been bringing figures from the shadows of history into the light through cut-out silhouette shapes for at least 30 years, zooming in and reversing popular cultural forms, with a particular adeptness for large scale installations. At the top of *Fons Americanus*, a stretched out Venus has liquid spritely pouring out of her nipples, with a slashed throat. The negress is a regular figure in Walker's formations, as is the technique of using tragic-comedic scripts. As one stands in front and walks around the fountain in the Turbine Hall, the traces of another large scale sculptural piece by Walker may layer our vision too. Expanding and subverting stereotypes of black figures, especially women, a thirty five foot sugar coated "mammy" of a sphinx, with exposed breasts and genitalia, challenged the site of installation, a sugar processing factory in Brooklyn, New York, by channelling the infrastructural routes of sugar exploitation. Titled: *A Subtlety, or the Marvellous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on*

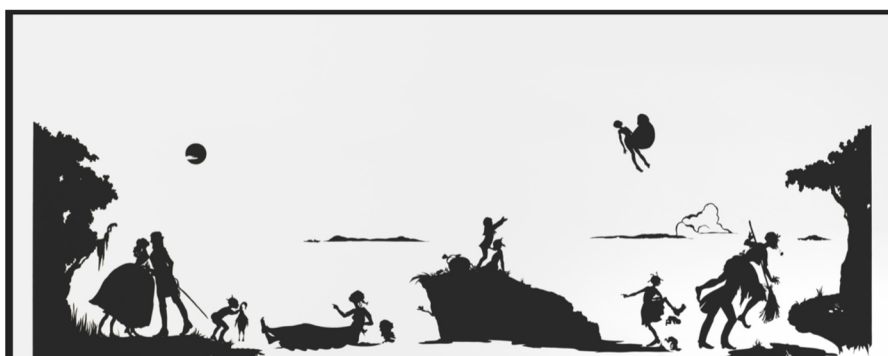
the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant, the sphinx rose in white, granulated form from the ground and dust of the site, effected by an underlying turbulence. Her sexualised and domesticated servile regality, shaped her as a figure that was also deviant, bearing a hand gesture that was dismissive of her audience. Further riffing on stereotypical characters, the 'mammy' figure sat, in scale, in contrast to the three small sugar boys, who surrounded her, made from resin and covered in molasses. Interestingly, on the theme of partial visibility and materiality, whilst Walker made many more of the sugar boys, they kept collapsing.

It is well known that Henry Tate was part owner of the sugar company Tate & Lyle, and funder of the first Tate gallery at the end of the 19th century. Rather fittingly, Walker would have relished and indeed had suggested bringing the sugar coated sphinx to the Turbine Hall, but she was told by an ex-director of the Tate that they only commissioned new works. The site-specific encounter would have been new, generating new situations, through its very contact zones with the sugar industry and the waters of the Thames, located in spitting distance from the gallery. The sphinx could potentially, powerfully unleash new probes and directions for undoing national mythologies that pervade the world of art too. Speculatively speaking, a meeting with Walker's sphinx in the Turbine Hall still could be a possibility. Guiding us to face what is denied, and yet right before us, on the very ground we stand on.




'My work has always been a time machine looking backwards across decades and centuries to arrive at some understanding of my "place" in the contemporary moment.' - Kara Walker

I first came across Kara Walker's work in my undergraduate when studying *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994). I marvelled at the work's ability to convey violence and pain through the shadows and black outlines of the 2D silhouettes. Walker's work tells the stories of darker narratives in a powerful and beautiful way, using a monochromatic schema to shed light on stories of darkness, questioning which tales are kept out of the light. *Fons Americanus* (2019) is momentous in the converse of *Gone*, it is 3D and enormous, and carved entirely in white, yet its power in the creating and highlighting of shadows confronts the viewer with the same tale. Whilst in *Gone* the racial stereotypes of violence and sexuality are highlighted through shadow, in *Fons Americanus* the black figures of transatlantic slavery are given a majestic agency in these shadows, a command and a grace, and are made the powerful subject of their own narratives. The culmination of this piece surely being the figure of the black woman who stands majestic atop it all, the water flowing through her as though all life stems from her alone.



Words by Charlie Evans-Flagg

Featured works by Kara Walker top to bottom:
"Fons Americanus" (©Tate) and "Gone" (©MOMA)



My experience with Kara Walker's *Fons Americanus* was a quick walk past it during a Tate visit before starting this course. Reversely from Walker's description of statues (I forgot the Victoria Memorial promptly as one does with monuments and memorials. I think there is this very peculiar quality that they have of being completely invisible. The larger they are, in fact, the more they sink into the background), it was the immensity of the piece that made me stop and take it in for a moment. Additionally, it was not what was in my line of sight which I looked towards, but rather, the female figure above it all.



Drawing (pencil on paper) superimposed onto image
by Katharine Davies Herbst



I first saw the piece before the pandemic, in a very different affective space to the room as it sits now. The flutterings of conversations and abrupt silences haunt some place in the back of my mind, the imprints of a gallery which will no longer exist in quite the same way. A sublime intervention. An excellent piece. One to hear tales of throughout the land. A majestic, hyperbolic caricature of british grandeur which gets to the core of colonialism's mythology, the nation's continuous constitution through the false stories we tell, and the truths it reveals about us.

This has been a year of essential conversations and liberatory reckonings, many happening both figuratively and literally under the tower of *Fons Americanus*. White parents will have had to answer their children: Why are there people in the water? Why haven't I learnt about this at school? Why is that man crying?

I hope the structure acts as an uncomfortable reminder to the Tate itself, in a year where curators have been exposed as racists and it has made redundant a mass of its most vulnerable staff, predominantly people of colour. All these thoughts and sounds coalesce in a politics and poetics of fluidity around the tower, soaking in the rising tides and sinking through the murky depths.

It took me two visits to get as close as possible to your sculpture.

During the first one, both intimidated and pressed for time, I kept my distance. I was nevertheless able to observe its grandeur, but especially the smallness of the visitors, their stunned gazes and their frustration as they tried to capture your sculpture with a simple snapshot.

During the second one, a day before lockdown, I walked over, walked around and touched the basin of the fountain with my own hands. I was finally able to observe the detail of the characters, their faces, expressions, and movements, both frozen in time and space and yet so expressive. I tried to guess their stories, I don't know if I succeeded but I will remember them for a long time.



Words and photograph
by Rose Patard

The photo below was taken during my first visit to the Tate Modern last year. At that time I accidentally photographed two people sitting beside Kara Walker's installation, I didn't know their relationship or what they were going through. I just saw one person leaning sadly against her companion who was comforting her

Recently, when I was looking at this photo again, I had a new thought about this sculpture, along with the great issues of history; race, power, etc. I thought about each of us ordinary, vulnerable, fragile, oppressed, helpless individuals.

Life is a vast ocean. In the ebb and flow, we will inevitably hit a reef and run aground; we will fall into a treacherous whirlpool; we will be chased by a shark with sharp teeth; we will be trapped in a maze of caves; we will be stuck on the stinging grains of sand No matter how unbearable, please tell yourself: I am the clam with a pearl.





My physical body is thousands of miles away from the works, but I feel I am with the figures in the composition. The black woman's figure at the top of the large fountain is a big shock to me. I feel some unnamed pain, when seeing the fluid coming out of her breast and mouth. Is that milk, blood, tear or vomitus? I don't know. I think it is some part of her body flowing out without her control. It seems to be extracted by some unknown force that wants to drain her. It should be painful, but she opens her arm, standing highly as if a goddess about to be worshiped. I think she is forced to be there, and she is crying for help. She is after all not a goddess because a classic goddess should be graceful and elegant. She is like a jezebel. She is a prisoner tortured by putting on an exotic goddess's dress, or, more exactly, is devoured by exotic gods and goddesses for fun. And her body will be left somewhere as trash after she is finally drained.



Every time I walk into the cold and enormous Turbine Hall I feel really small and unimportant, but now it feels like I am swimming into the immensity of the deep ocean. These four walls hold the waters of a sinking, the sinking of the unheard voices; tears and mourning that once disappeared into the ocean during the colonial years, that are now being represented at Kara Walker's installation. Here I find myself feeling little again and shocked about what is going around me, unavoidably I feel guilt. I had never stopped and thought before about all the sculptures and memorials that surround us in every city, all of them celebrating the 'heroes' of the empires... They were never really heroes, and there was nothing to be celebrated. Why are they still up there? Why can I not find the 'other side' of the story anywhere else?

Words by Esther Chica

Photograph by Katharine Davies Herbst

But did you see the shadow she left?
But did you see the shadow she
But did you see the shadow
But did you see the
But did you see
But did you
But did
But

But... Sometimes it feels like we try to
forget our history