



Photo by Hemi Staff.

Assemblage, Rasanblaj: The Making of *Sable International*

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Abstract

A description and analysis of the process, inspirations, and circumstances that resulted in the 2014 public performance art work *Sable International*, performed at the *Encuentro* Performance Art Festival in Montreal, Canada. An exploration of context is also included, specifically, the Haitian origins of the movement vocabulary used and the symbolism of the costume, make-up, and other elements. The performance travelled through Old Montreal, and the significance of the location and route—which passed by public commemorations of colonialism and unmarked sites of slavery and execution—are also discussed.

Sable International was planned as a travelling performance for the 2014 *Encuentro* performance art festival in Montreal, Canada. It would form a diptych with [Crossings](#), a walking/dancing mourning meditation performed in Accra, Ghana, as part of *Yari Yari Ntoaso: Continuing the Dialogue*, an international symposium of women writers and artists of African

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descent that took place in 2013.

For *Crossings*, I slowly danced from the *Yari Yari Ntoaso* venue in Accra to the ocean, inviting observers to follow me. I was dressed completely in white, including a simple flowing *boubou* and a head-tie. I danced only movements associated with Ellegua/Legba, the Yoruba god of the crossroads (between the living and the dead, between earth and the spirit world) found in Santería, Voudoun, Orisha, and other Yoruba-based religions. As I danced, I scattered handfuls of ash; *Crossings* was performed in honor of my grandmother, Syneta E. King, and my mentor, Jayne Cortez, both of whom had recently passed away.



Still image from *Sable International* (2013) by Rosamond S. King.

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I envisioned *Sable International* as having a similar structure, but with a broader intention. I wanted to present a performance that commented on the struggles of immigration in general, and specifically that of immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa to the USA and Canada. I would dress in white again—this time in a nurse's uniform, symbolizing the thousands of immigrants who work in the health sector—with accents of red. The red of my bags and on my face represents the warrior, and gestures again towards Legba/Ellegua, god of the crossroads, as well as Shango, god of thunder, lightning, war, music, and dancing. In Montreal I would dance the Haitian warrior dance Nago through the streets, scattering sand instead of ash to represent the Caribbean and Africa, the places from which so many immigrants to Canada and the USA come. I was drawn to the warrior spirit of Nago and to the color red because there are so many battles to fight in the diaspora. For *Sable International*, I committed to using Nago movement and focusing on the idea of fighting the battles of poverty, racism, xenophobia, and depression that affect so many immigrants. This much I planned months before the Encuentro. But as a site-specific performance, *Sable International* did not fully cohere until I was in Montreal. During the process of creating my vision, the piece became an *assemblage* as well as a *rasanblaj* of dance, spirit, and history.

The signs were everywhere. First, one of my primary dance teachers, Richard Gonzalez,

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returned from an extended absence and began focusing on Cuban Ogun and Haitian Nago—the latter a dance I had been learning for years from Pat Hall. My training began in these classes. Then, in Montreal a week before our performances ([Wura Natasha-Ogunji](#), [Gabrielle Civil](#), and I had planned unconnected but sequential performances) and several days before the Encuentro started, producer Shauna (pronounced Shona, like one of the Zimbabwean ethnic groups) showed us a large gravel pit at the edge of Old Montreal and the Place d'Youville. They had requested and received official permission from the city to use the pit, only to be notified later that the city does not actually own that property.

Then Shauna led us to another place not even a block away, behind the Centre d'Histoire de Montreal ([Montreal History Center](#)) and still on the Place d'Youville. This area was smaller, but both more beautiful and more charged with energy; it contained a crossroads and several monuments. *This was the place to begin [Sable International](#).*

As I walked potential routes for the performance through Old Montreal, I noticed a number of references to customs and trade. As I stood in a square in Place Royale, in front of the “Old Customs House” (built in 1836), I could almost see the water beyond the pedestrian promenade.

“There must have been a slave market here,” I thought, listening to the water one cannot see.

So I did some research—more than I've done for any other performance, in fact. While it was easy to find information about the history of Montreal, it was harder to find information about slavery there. (On both sides of the North American border, people have swallowed the lie that there was never slavery in Canada.) Not only was there a slave market in front of the Old Customs Building, but it was also the site of several public executions (see “[What Lies Beneath: Oppression and Erasure at Place Royal, Montreal](#)” by Jessa Alston-O'Connor).

Alston-O'Connor's essay also told me more about Old Montreal's monuments. In the Place d'Youville area where *Sable International* would start, one end holds an obelisk—phallic, stone, and pale, commemorating the first French settlers in the area. At the other end, near the contemporary cross sculpture *Le Peur (The Fear)* by Gilles Mihalcean, are two smaller, square monuments, both commemorating the peace established between the leaders of more than 30 First Nations peoples and the French in 1701.

With confirmation of the violent history of the area, I incorporated into my mostly improvised choreography a series of rebukes—aggressive warrior movements directly targeting the obelisk commemorating French arrival in the area, the Old Customs House, and a building called the World Trade Center. I also incorporated salutes—movements that acknowledged the four cardinal directions, the plaques that commemorate the Great Peace at the Place d'Youville, and the symbols representing First Nations leaders in front of the Customs House.

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Unsigned public artwork (2013). Photo by Rosamond S. King.



Still image from *Sable International* (2013) by Rosamond S. King.

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There were so many other signs over the next few days and during the dozens of times I walked and danced the route, including: the (Orisha?) beads in a sewer cover along the route, the cross ring I found at Old Navy (representing both Christianity and the crossroads), and the poster of an indigenous warrior at Place d'Youville we noticed on the day of the performance.

And then there was the symbol none of us at first recognized: the rain. We had talked through plans B and C, but kept holding out for a clear day. Wura and I even went out to pray; she asked for “the skies to open,” and I said, “That’s not what we want!”

But that was what we got. The skies opened and the rain fell. We had each responsibly made back-up plans, but the four black women performing outside on 24 June 2014: Wura, Gabrielle, dancer [Paloma McGregor](#), and myself all separately decided to perform in the rain. We each had our elements—sand, dirt, shell, salt—but the water united us, and we all felt

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the current that passed through it.

The rain cleared both the air and the anger of the rebukes—not because the anger should disappear, but because everything is part of a cycle, and even the warrior must rest before she fights again.

I acknowledge and thank my long-time teachers of Nago and other Afro-Caribbean dances, Pat Hall and Baba Richard Gonzales for their generous sharing of their knowledge.

Sable International Route



Map of Old Montreal. By Google Maps.

1. START: Place d'Youville, near the cross sculpture *Le Peur*
2. Towards obelisk
3. In street to the left to Rue de la Commune, turn left to the Old Commerce Building.
4. Up steps to building; pause at plaque. Down steps and to left up Place Royale and left on to Saint Paul.
5. Right onto Saint Francois Xavier
6. Left onto Saint Sacrement
7. Right onto Saint Jean
8. Enter square from Rue Saint-Jean and Rue Notre Dame

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