



‘I’d rather see a sermon than hear one...’: Africa/Heaven and Women of the Diaspora in Creating Global Futures and Transformation¹

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Abstract

This article focuses on the case of the Rastafari, a grassroots, male-dominated pan-African religio-political movement, which for almost a century has driven the Caribbean Diaspora to dialogue and action on issues of repair and redevelopment of the continent. Though often criticized as patriarchal, since the mid-1970s the Rastafari has increasingly seen women emerging, playing a leading role in globally coordinated initiatives. Indeed, it could be argued that relative to the wider society Rastafari has made more significant advances with regard to gender parity and the advancement of women, as this is facilitated by the ongoing dialogical and grounded processes of ‘reasoning’ that provide ventilation and strategic solutions for contending ideas. Women within the Movement are therefore ironically over-represented relative to their numbers in positions of international leadership and the general administration of the community. This phenomenon has grown especially over the past two generations, as the role of the Rastafari Empress, or the lioness as she is sometime referred to, has evolved to situate itself seated among the lions as a primary component within the ‘works’ of Rastafari. The article seeks to develop a historiography of the evolution of the Rastafari family and its construction of a global politics that offers the potential for black women’s empowerment ; a point recognized by *womanist*-oriented females who take on leadership within the Movement.

Résumé

Le présent article est consacré au cas du Rastafari, un mouvement populaire religio-politique panafricain, dominé par les hommes, qui depuis près d’un siècle a incité la diaspora des Caraïbes au dialogue et à l’action sur les questions de réparation et de relance du continent. Bien que souvent critiqué comme patriarcal, depuis le milieu des années 1970, le mouvement Rastafari a de

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plus en plus vu les femmes émerger, jouer un rôle de premier plan dans des initiatives mondialement coordonnées. En effet, on pourrait avancer que, par rapport à la société dans son ensemble, le mouvement Rastafari a fait des progrès plus significatifs en ce qui concerne la parité des sexes et le progrès des femmes, ce qui est facilité par les processus dialogiques et fondés de « raisonnement » qui fournissent un cadre de confrontation d'idées pour trouver des solutions stratégiques. Les femmes au sein du Mouvement sont donc ironiquement surreprésentées par rapport à leur nombre dans les postes de direction au niveau international et de l'administration générale de la communauté. Ce phénomène s'est développé surtout au cours des deux dernières générations, puisque le rôle de l'impératrice rastafari, ou de la lionne comme on l'appelle parfois, a évolué pour figurer parmi les lions en tant que composante principale dans les « œuvres » rastafari. Le présent article cherche à élaborer une historiographie de l'évolution de la famille rastafari et de sa construction d'une politique globale, afin de déterminer les leçons à tirer de diverses approches au cours des quatre dernières décennies relatives aux initiatives ciblant l'Afrique et visant un impact sur les objectifs durables ainsi que les besoins de développement du continent.

Introduction: 'I'd rather see a sermon than hear one...'

*I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I'd rather one would walk with me than merely tell the way.
The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear,
Fine counsel is confusing, but example's always clear;
And the best of all the preachers are the men who live their creeds,
For to see good put in action is what everybody needs.*

(lines from Mama Blossom, a Nyahbinghi matriarch inspired
by Edgar A. Guest's poem "Sermons we see")

The Rastafari movement has been viewed as an acephalous organization driven by 'leading administrators' but lacking centralized leadership figures. The Movement also offers varied *praxis* and philosophical cohesion; however, it is unified around the veneration of the last Emperor of Ethiopia, His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, who especially after his November 1930 coronation became viewed as the fulfilment of a messianic vision for African redemption. Notwithstanding its marginal, anti-social and for some myopic¹ rhetoric, the Movement has grown and is now recognized as an African-centred worldview with religio-politico undertones having made key contributions to the process of the Columbian African-American post-colonial reconstruction. Rastafari has been described as millenarian and holds repatriation to Africa as a central part of the ultimate objectives for its dispersed community. Critical

is the issue of the Rastafari operational approach in a fast-changing world particularly given the *nativist* leanings that have shaped the core philosophy of the worldview. Described as a word-driven faith (Homiak 1998; Pollard 1994; Chevannes 2006), the Rastafari movement is by virtue of cosmology, ontology and epistemology a 'travelling culture' (Yawney 1995) fashioned out of various displacements with a central narrative of 'relocation' or return to an original homeland – the mythic or real Africa/Zion, imagined as Heaven relative to the Caribbean, the latter rendered by some as the pits of hell (Howell 1935). It is also increasingly the 'travelling community' of priests and attendants who are negotiating the global development of the central vision and orthodoxy of the worldview. Further, as the Rastafari community has grown and matured it has provided an organic understanding of the inner logic of religious community/communion fabrication. Through the Rastafari emergence, the elaboration of the principles and signifiers of religio-political catharsis can also be put under the microscope, to observe the construction and fulfilment of a type of distributive justice through this redemptive narrative centred on returning to Africa. Emerging from a state of nature fashioned in colonialism, Rastafari is able to reinvent freedom, but this freedom is also located in the exegesis of the Christian Bible as it is also firmly located in the persistence of traditional Africa played out for example through the mischief of the trickster, West African folklore hero Anansi (Chevannes 2006), and a religio-naturopathic approach to healing. Rastafari emerges as an African-Jamaican hybrid worldview that mimics and builds on the meta-narrative of Christianity, African/*myaalist*² tradition, and Hindu culture as well as embraces aspects of the modern; thus availing itself a springboard, or what has been described as 'a quantum leap', from which to advance its contemporary reparatory campaign. To this extent Rastafari is a reflection of, as well as a critique of, the colonial Jamaican society and its own Judeo-Christian patriarchal biases. However, the demographics of the Movement place women in a grim minority with numbers well below twenty per cent (20%) of the membership in Jamaica.³ With regard to gender, Rastafari curiously enough offers the potential for Black women's empowerment, a point recognized by *womanist*-oriented females who take on leadership within the Movement. We are reminded by the womanists that the Black woman was always equal to her male counterpart in the toil that was expected of her as she was also in the sugarcane field and exposed to the same conditions of labour (Montague FUSE November/December 1982).

It is perhaps at the level of leading *praxis* that Rastafari seemingly offers women potential because of its openness and lack of central leadership. One Rastafari woman contextualizes the potential as follows:

...it is not just a Rasta problem, but a human problem. People like to throw off the responsibility for self and community unto another person. And that is why leaders have existed.... and why you will have them in the future. One of the things that I really check for in Rasta is that too much emphasis is not on leaders and with the exception of the 'Twelve Tribes' and a few up-and-coming people. *Anybody with initiative can do what they think should be done – just move forward* (my emphasis). (Yard Roots April/May 1981 – Interview: Rastawoman as Equal!)

In this regard Rastafari might also be seen as a route towards the liberation of women from the ubiquitous effects of white patriarchy which limits their engagement to primarily domestic affairs. This potential for female liberation is somehow ignored by much of the critiques of Rastafari but is underscored by Sis. Ilaloo, and by extension females who see the Movement as a potential for revolutionary pan-African liberation (Harris 1982).

Rastafari operates explicitly on the principle of gender separation and has likewise centred its work and administration, ritual and domestic practice largely in this way. This paper outlines in brief the major tenets of the Rastafari faith identifying the rationale of its gender representation and its day-to-day utility within the faith. I then account the traditional approach to leadership through a patriarchal system that used to dictate that the way for females, described by some Rastafari as the 'weaker vessel' (Homiak 1986), to this faith was through the tutelage of the guiding 'king-man', her 'groom' so to speak, within conventions of Christianity; and the king-man was thus the source of the Movement's agenda setting, inner logic and objectives, and the management and globalization of the same (Yawney 2001). I seek to address an ongoing debate within the Rastafari movement about its politics as it relates to its *modus operandi* as a religious community in the face of a fast-changing world. It plays on an implicit tension within the Movement about thought and practice and the idea that the 'lion', the king-man is engrossed in ritualized thought through reasoning, while the lioness, empress or 'dwata', contends with the practice of managing the arduous struggles before the now global family. The paper brings into focus the idea of *epistemic performance*⁵ brought to light through issues of ritual practice and gender taboo, as it examines the key modalities of organization explored by the administrators of the Movement. These issues are of greater significance as Rastafari seeks to consolidate its now global culture and community within an African diasporic bid held towards achieving repatriation to Africa, explicitly philosophized by the Movement over the past fifty years. Through a focus on specific international events from the 1980s to the present, I attempt to review the impact and specific achievement of these ventures particularly as related to the African programmatic agenda for development.

This research is derived from twenty years of field work examining leadership within Rastafari and the materialization of the Movement as a global pan-African community.

The Nyahbinghi Ritual of Redemption

The manifestation of salvation or the path to unburdening and renewing the 'soul-case' that embodied slavery in the Caribbean has seen many intentions played out as ritual words and deeds to provide catharsis and rejuvenation for the crippled beings that inhabit these spaces. The Haitian Revolution has narratives recounting the use of oathing rituals as preparation for action. Consistently, the actions of the change-makers have been inspired by rituals developed by the leaders to raise levels of confidence and commitment. For Rastafari the Nyahbinghi,⁶ an adaptation of an Eastern African religio-militia resistance medium, is the key collective ritual, but this is also buttressed by Judeo-Christian influences such as Sabbath keeping, fasting, chanting, praying, also chalice smoking, dancing and silence/meditation, as well as supplication of the flesh through various abstentions within a system of understanding directed at manifesting visions attributed to divine inspiration. It is within the administration of the Nyahbinghi ritual that there is the most evidence of organizational structure. With this ritual comes stringent and the widest community application of the separation aspects of the organization and this is somewhat universal within the various permutations of the Movement, that is the various 'tribes' or 'mansions' as the multiplicity of Rastafari doctrinal congregations are described. To this extent one might say that the ontological criteria or leadership norms of ritual solidarity all militate against female influence. Further, it could be argued that an analysis of the preoccupation with enforcing codes of separation can be employed to Rastafari in determining the position along a continuum that variously demonstrates the strategic location within each mansion as it relates to Christianity and modernity, Western cultural influences, and the application of the Bible mores.⁷

For the purpose of the Nyahbinghi ceremony, menstruating females are barred access to this space in principle until they are beyond the eight to fourteenth day (or in some instances twenty-first day) of their cycle. In congregations the language of 'free' or 'not-free'⁸ is often used for women who have been separated or returned to the congregation (or in some instances family). Specifically, the separation is considered important for 'priests' and males post-adolescence, and in the case of the Ethiopia Africa Black International Congress (EABIC) or Bobo Shanti, it involves up to twenty-one days of separate dwelling. Females who visit this community before they are

afforded access are required to undergo an interview conducted by an empress (a Bobo female) at times with the aid of a calendar to determine if they may be permitted into the camp. Noteworthy too in the Bobo congregations is that even when women are 'free', separation is still maintained in relation to seating, as well as there is generally non-gendered avoidance of touching (hand-shaking, hugging/embracing etc.); in its stead salutations are usually accompanied by lowering of the head and torso in a bow often with a dipping of the knees. There are also other gendered norms as related to aesthetic features regarding covering of the head, shoulders and the length and fit of dresses. Further, women are routinely not allowed to wear trousers or play ritual drums, and originally could only sing, dance, and play shakers and tambourines at ceremonial occasions, that chiefly being the Nyahbinghi. They were not allowed to bring 'the word', pray or read/interpret the word or 'Bible'. Some of these traditions are changing as is the sentiment of woman as a 'Delilah' with the ironic capacity To 'cut your nature' or to sap a man's strength. Generally there is resistance to changing the taboo regarding contact with the drum for women in rituals and in some instances completely after puberty.⁹ In response to questions from women directed at the elders as to why couldn't they play drums, a leading elder Bongo Twaney said, 'From I have been coming to Binghi I've never seen that!' To this extent the idea still seems to be unthinkable by the elders of the faith. For some the 'purpose' of the Nyahbinghi ceremony necessitated that its essence should not be tampered with. An elder female, supportive of the tradition, responded that the drum embodies the female and that the magic and harmony of this ritual required the playing of 'her', the drum, by males for its mystical purpose to be fulfilled.¹⁰ Particularly because the Nyahbinghi is performed continuously over several nights, from one to as many as twenty-one, these grounds become carefully structured whether permanently or through makeshift arrangements into celebration space generally referred to as the Tabernacle with fire-key. 'Man' and 'daughters' dormitory facilities are separate (the male in close proximity to the grounds of the ceremony) with a collective kitchen and bathrooms (Homiak 1994). The tabernacle is the key ritual portal for the duration of the Nyahbinghi ceremony and generally circulation within this space between males and females flows freely, while observing the taboo regarding the drums. The tabernacle serves as the ultimate threshold for separation of the desirable and the undesirable within the ritual space, and the latter are wittingly and unwittingly told that there will be consequences for breaking the taboos and they will be judged by the mystic omniscient Power. 'Death to oppressors – black and white', 'know thyself', and 'truths and rights' are among the chants voiced while the congregation percussively beats along with the drums' 'do good, do good, do good' heart-beat rhythm stamping away the evil and elevating righteousness.

Fire is a most important aspect of performing the Nyahbinghi, as there is a requirement for a purging flame to burn unceasingly for its duration. Drumming usually occurs mostly at night-time and is maintained without interruption until daylight. By way of its logic and execution the Nyahbinghi sermon compliments the practice of a patriarchal modality, both explicitly and implicitly by way of the subtle taboos and administrative practices. Women are arguably invisible structurally and even in relation to conventional ideas of meal preparation and overall nutrition; these matters are completely dominated by male operatives.

The logic for this adherence to separation is centred on a philosophy that eschews the 'carnal' and particularly sexual activities in the ritual space. Leonard Howell, the man reputed to have brought the knowledge of Rastafari in the early 1930s to Jamaica, had been preparing the followers to elevate themselves from the level of animals and to see the women as more than bitches (Howell 1935) and further constructs a theory about carnal indulgence and perversions as a reason for the decadent state of the world and especially the black body/ and the Black male, now completely diminished into a stud against knowing himself as the 'father-provider', leader and patriarch. One view as far as revealing the logic of eschewing carnal indulgences is that in the 'wait' or anticipation of 'Zion' through repatriation, there can be no undue focus on the flesh. This is the primary purpose for which this, the oldest formally incorporated Rastafari mansion, was designed by its founder, King Edward Charles Emmanuel in 1958. Hence as elaborated within the Bobo Ashanti, allegedly the most acetic of the mansions, there is a requirement for twenty-one days of physical separation between couples from the start of the woman's menstrual flow, thereby reducing the incident of pregnancy and keeping the population increase to a minimum (that is, given the normal fertility period usually at or around fourteen days in the menstrual cycle).

This population control interest is not universally practiced and the converse philosophy with a strong 'pro-life' and a procreation ethos also pervades within the Movement. The pro-life or creation principle is vested in nature, a contest of the natural logic of the coming together of 'alpha' (man) and 'omega' (woman) to create the sons, male and female. The king should thus seek after the queenly, even as she is embodied in the character of the virtuous woman, not swayed by material things and vanity, but who through her faith and her modest devotion becomes a personification of the mother of creation, performing accordingly with the natural cycle. The patriarch of the Movement, Leonard Howell, gave them this example as well as he advised them of the virtuous Queen Omega as the Balming Mistress, alluding that she too was an important factor in the process for redemption (Howell 1935).

Howell preached that the African exemplar had emerged and he directed his congregation to focus their attention on him, the King of Kings. The Emperor at his coronation in 1930 demonstrates a new regard for the feminine principle, as he departed from the tradition of separate coronation ceremonies to crown his Empress within the same ceremony. This was to depict a balancing of the scales of power and responsibilities. Subsequently Empress Manen undertook to engage with her stately functions, pioneering women's socio-economic advancement supporting various charities and building schools and churches across the country in seeking to bring development to the people, especially the women of Ethiopia. This model of the female complement to the King-man was the direction that Howell sought to guide his followers. Howell taught that King Alpha and Queen Omega provided 'the healing plough of the repository transplanted' and 'rebuilds our very soul and body without fail' (Howell 1935). Consecrated men and women were thus necessary; this could be achieved through the balm-yard, endowed with power that they command and handle to deal with the infirmities of the nations. In this regard Howell was interested in the restoration of the human – male and females – 'as vessels of divine honour' (ibid). This is performed with a rhythm that views children as blessings, natural gifts, the fruits of man and woman loving interaction. The location of female within this design is somewhat complex and often inconsistent. Nurture and care-giving though the domain of females is variously shared between males and females. Women largely appear in traditional domestic roles; however, often through better education and jobs/employment opportunities they are more gainfully occupied away from the home than their male counterparts, and the latter are thus seen, more often than in the general population, in role reversal and serving as the primary care-giver, and generally responsible for nature and many of the domestic chores (Nettleford 2013).

It is noteworthy too that in the mid-1970s and towards the 1980s the 'womanist' movement emerged in the Caribbean led by a progressive, liberal pan-African oriented set of women. These individuals largely sought to insert female leaders/leadership and their agenda more clearly within the Rastafari movement. Sister Ilaloo explains:

I don't think the traditional Rastaman coping very well with this. They probably don't fully understand what is happening. But as the woman dem come into their own, in terms of one of the most outstanding thing that I see really happening to the Rasta culture is the arrival of the Rasta woman. In the sense that you never use to have a Rastawoman; you use to have a Rastaman woman... (ibid:6)

The Queen Omega energy as females are often described has been in an uphill battle to assert itself and Planno, one of the central post-independence leaders, takes credit for helping to break down some of the traditional barriers. As a young Planno took on the day-to-day care of his offspring bringing within his circles and nursing with a bottle his young, months-old daughter in the early 1960s was one such step. Planno as a leader always appeared unconventional, he admits that his own intellectual transformation as to the equality of women came, when he dismissed his wife Rosaline's 'vision' or dream of him (Planno) playing a central role at the time of the visit of the Emperor several years later. He had been told by her of a dream wherein the Emperor had called on Planno. She had effectively foreseen the Emperor's visit and his calling on Planno to assist with restoring peace to the multitude which became frenzied upon his plane's landing in Kingston. Although Planno originally dismissed her vision, he understood it to have been fulfilled on 21 April 1966, and he admits that after this he better accepted the abilities of females to be equally divinely inspired to contribute to this work of Rastafari. It was Planno who a few years later was to further push the taboo when he entertained and developed strong linkages with white female researcher Carole Yawney, then a hyperbole of contradictions. He brought her into the inner sanctums of urban Rastafari hardcore leader sanctuaries. She was effectively the first female 'outsider' to be initiated and was a part of the male ritual chalice circle space.¹¹

The 1960s saw the opening up of the Movement beyond its then primarily urban margins; with this came increased participation from the middle classes and brown mixed populations. As the Movement moved out of its strict grassroots and 'Dungle' (the urban garbage dump) wastelands in the 1970s, the current of Black Power found favour in Rastafari and increasingly women of educated middle class orientation also started to cleave to the Movement. And with these surprises in the way the Movement was expanding and crossing boundaries came paradoxes. As the 1970s unfolded, Miss World, the acme of the pro-British establishment's aesthetics of beauty and comeuppance, clashed in a love saga with the 'beast',¹² the top Rastafari warrior priest Bob Marley. Bob Marley a boy from rural Jamaica of African and European ancestry who went to live in Trench Town had grown to become one of the first superstars from the Third World as reggae king, and the leading Rastafari emissary. The Movement by the mid-1970s had become an international African liberation fraternity, reflecting the journey Rastafari and some of its leading adherents in intersecting the society at multiple levels. Miss World and Bob Marley in 1976 signalled the peaking of the Rastafari penetration and for some a reflection of a double standard, the leading Pan-African vocalist arm-in-arm

with an iconic symbol of the system he sought to fight against. Marley had seemingly reversed the proclivity for colour, class and gender separation through this move. The 1970s was a mushrooming of Rastafari in Jamaica and its politico-economic diversity: reggae music rising, free education as a state-supported, democratic socialist gift for all students up to tertiary level, and a thriving informal ganja economy resonating locally. These provided discursive media when converged within Jamaica's history and facilitated by the University of the West Indies as a regional institution, in the analysis of some the Rastafari revolution was in full flight.

Also the period reflects the absorption of Afro-feminist debates with increasingly women challenging the stereotypes regarding their coming into the faith and asserting their capacity, right even, to 'sight' (or spiritually discern and embrace) Rastafari and move to the faith without the need for induction through a male (or having been 'grown'/trained as a 'daughter', the traditional language to account for the process of initiation, socialization and grooming at the hands of males). This also in reality meant that some women would come to the faith and, in rejecting the masculine stereotypes, simply just choose to avoid associating explicitly with any mansion (or organised congregations). A Rastafari female pioneer provides the following insights:

...I remember like '71 and so.... [t]here was no such thing as a Rastawoman. There were cultural daughters and sisters primarily. Then all of a sudden about '72 or '73 all the little West Indian daughters in the high schools start wrapping up dem head and chant Rasta an militantly a seh Rasta fi demselves, and independently of any man. I have to confess though that it was motivated by the large amount of young males in the school system that was turning Rasta. It was...just like wearing the clothing which would get you what you want kind a thing....

But from there it really moved into a situation where the daughters were checking out what is this Rasta thing and quite independent of any attempt to get a man. It was getting into the belief system and finding out what was in it that made sense and could make sense for them. And after a while woman started making commitment to Rasta independent of man. (Yard Roots April/May 1981 – Interview: Rastawoman as Equal!)

This space arguably created a basis for female-led Rastafari associations such as the Queen Omega Foundation (a highly visible professional association within the past twenty years) to tackle issues that fall outside the cracks of male-centred ritualistic community activities (many of which restricted the participation/fullticipation of women). The Rastawoman as opposed to the Rastaman's woman had now arrived. Effectively it took four decades for the Rastafari woman to emerge from the rib of the King-man and within a

decade of her separation she stood on her own in the faith and started to make her indelible contribution, arguably her prowling priority the global family imperatives.

The ritualistic celebration of Nyahbinghi is primarily a Theocracy Reign Order of the Nyahbinghi (TRON) venture and its hosting is the fullest convention of the community group, which mobilizes its dispersed family across the landscape, individuals engaged in various sectors but largely self-employed, under- or unemployed. The Nyahbinghi organization is the largest single community and its membership is indeterminate because of their loose administration. What this means however is that for the organization, Nyahbinghi TRON, to effectively function it requires the modality of committee, councils, associations, conferences, as key insertions for effective international community administration. EABIC and the Twelve Tribes of Israel (TTI),¹³ the other two dominant mansions, tend to operate more effectively through the central mansion's administration which exercises higher levels of command over the membership's initiatives embarked on in the name or identity of the organization. Among the established mansions of Rastafari the EABIC has taken a less aggressive global agenda where projects and activities in relation to its global and African interests are concerned. Notwithstanding this it has managed to be one of the most visible global representations of the faith, with members in North & South America, Asia and Africa all established with measures of directions from Jamaica.

The Nyahbinghi Abroad: Defender of the Rastafari Faith (1982 – 2014)

By far the most globally dispersed administratively is the TRON and perhaps resulting from this there has been a greater orientation toward refining its global administration, image and operations. In fact, as the Movement globalizes the proclivity for establishing organizations within the mansions is best maintained by the Nyahbinghi which self-appoints/self-identifies as the de facto ecumenical Rastafari mansion (Montague 1984 & Homiak 1994). This has been systematically developed over the last four to five decades resulting in what is now a global community with transcontinental management systems. Though the TRON has been routinely described as the loosest in its administration, it has spawned highly elaborate systems of patriarchal leadership, within an acephalous context, and cohorts of elders/patriarch have emerged within this congregation since the 1950s, as a result of which the mansion singularly brags having the largest concentration of elders, generally and especially of males who have been within the faith for over fifty years. Among these are individuals spanning three to four generations of leaders with globally revered names such

as: Bongo Porro, Shadrak, Meshak and Abednego, Bongo Twaney, Bongo Watto, Bongo Rocki, and Bongo Shephan. The list goes on of who are described within Rastafari lore as 'ancients', many of whom were formally illiterate, but nonetheless were the pillars around whose thoughts the doctrine and philosophy of the faith was constructed. These individuals were joined by a vibrant set of urban youth, individuals such as Mortimo Planno, Sam brown, Bongo Tyme, situated across the inner-city terrain, teaching Rastafari faith and constructing significance around a system that argued itself as a representation of the return of a prophesied Messiah to establish a 'theocratic' government. Within this team of leaders, the Nyahbinghi immediately cleaved into various communities of interest, the theocratic as the dominant association pooled the 'preacher' leader interest whereas the political and advocacy activism tending towards the 'teacher' leader. Crudely, this divide resulted in the establishment of liturgical constancy within the ceremony of Nyahbinghi whereas the advocacy/political work seems to have been fodder for the development of a critical thought, a meta narrative exemplified in reggae music but also pervasive within the overall *conscientization* process meted out on the society through its pro-Rastafari vernacular/idiom and critical consciousness. This has made the Nyahbinghi, perhaps in the widest sense, the most socially interactive and engaged Rastafari grouping, resulting from the acephalous leadership system and its 'unfocussed' mission regarding how to approach its repatriational objectives. Nyahbinghi adherents in this regard were conforming to what Gayatri Spivak describes as 'strategic essentialism', to refer to presenting themselves while pursuing and negotiating strong differences with collaborators while amongst themselves engaging in continuous debates towards agreements on 'essentialize' terms and conditions.¹⁴

By the mid to late 1970s the Nyahbinghi had grown beyond the shores of Jamaica into an international community directed largely by implementing the learnt 'orthodox' modalities of the Jamaican congregations from visits, recordings, texts as well as through their own parochial idiosyncrasies, mystically and independently guided. Regionally the University West Indies (UWI) tertiary schooling system facilitated the exchange of students, workers and goods including literature, music and ganja, considered by some of the key regional Rastafari leaders as an important step in the process of transfer of the faith into the wider English-speaking Caribbean. Earlier, after the end of the Second World War, migrants from Jamaica had taken the ideology of the Rastafari into the United Kingdom, establishing connected branches of the faith in London, Manchester and Birmingham. A decade later similar movements saw thousands of Jamaicans moving into cities along the eastern seaboard of the United States. Later in the 1970s and 1980s, Europe, Japan and Africa became connected to the consciousness of the Movement through mostly the message of the faith depicted in reggae music. The globalization of

the Rastafari faith resulted in the need for a global ministry and subsequently a global administration and agenda. It is in this space that I will situate the remainder of this paper, examining the development of international work and the modality for achieving the same mindfulness of the issues of separation and patriarchy as two implicit operational features.

The impulse for embarking on international proselytizing 'missions' and 'trods' became necessary initially to provide correction to the bad publicity the community was receiving through Hollywood and other sensational media accounts (Homiak 1994). At the same time members of the emerging Rastafari diaspora had made inroads into and confronted obstacles within their new societies and in this regard, like the highly visible British based Jamaican born scholar Stuart Hall the intellectual cannon on 'representation',¹⁵ individuals began to organize and engage in conversations about strategies to correct and consolidate the globalizing Jamaican/Rastafari image.¹⁶ At the same time the consolidation recognized the increased responsibility of the Nyahbinghi family to pioneer global Rastafari management in general.

The 1980s presented an international crossroads or what Yawney (1998:59) describes as a 'critical density' on the global stage for Rastafari and in particular the Nyahbinghi emissaries. This was occasioned by the void left when Thatcherism took root, eliminating radical currents in the West, and Bob Marley's passing which, while seemingly achieving the victory of awakening the minds of the formerly enslaved was coupled by the decline of the two best managed Rastafari mansions TTI and the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church, allegedly infiltrated and destabilized. This counter revolution to cultural awakening and *conscientisation* emanating from the region, by some accounts deliberately removed Bob Marley¹⁷, Maurice Bishop and Walter Rodney, contemporaries who together had been shaking the Caribbean Basin, ultimately necessitating overt actions such as the 1983 United States of America led invasion of Grenada, as a reminder of whose backyard the Caribbean is considered.¹⁸ Across the Caribbean political landscape the 'window of vulnerability' which stood in the region was partially that of the ascension of the Rastafari identity, and epistemology, in the face of deliberate campaigns to criminalize the image of the Movement being styled, cultic, urban drug cartels and savage gun touting gangsters.¹⁹ Rowe (2012) also reminds us that the year 1980 was the Golden Jubilee of the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie I, and during the reflections/reasonings of this celebration the role and place of the female in the trod became central within the discourse in the Movement, 'as daughters began asking more what they could do for Rastafari' (Rowe:188), suggesting a critical moment for activation of a collective consciousness practice in the faith. By the 1980s in Jamaica Rastafari had, despite social prejudices, established itself as a genuine spiritual

movement which eschewed violence in favour of its salutations of 'peace and love'. There was an established orthodoxy within the Rastafari by now, thus a group of Nyahbinghi elders were facilitated on touring missions to the United States, England, Canada and the Caribbean region, and eventually these missions began to be drawn into Africa through the emergent congregation: South Africa, Ethiopia, Malawi and elsewhere on the continent. This was deliberately undertaken within efforts to raise the profile of affirmative black cultural expressions that were being vilified in the media, and wittingly or unwittingly this served to consolidate the international Rastafari community and strengthened networking.

Missions were variously facilitated by women, the earliest (1982) completely initiated and executed by women administrators, tapping into institutional agencies such as York University in Canada. These missions evolved within a context of showcasing the core spiritual values of the Movement by having the elders of the faith participate in exhibitions and lectures. This recognized first assembly of international Rastafari spawned the need to include Jamaica as the site for a follow-up assembly. This Jamaican meeting (1983) saw participants from the Caribbean-wide region, North America and the United Kingdom, and resulted in the consolidation of the Jamaican eldership and the resultant priesthood that had emerged before an international assembly. This assembly also produced one of the first comprehensive assessments of the central concerns which faced the community internationally while affirming the importance of advocating for reparation, and specifically repatriation to Africa. Immediately following this conference this cadre of Nyahbinghi officials made journeys across the Caribbean and beyond, sharing their testimonies and delineating the faith. Between 1984 and 1988, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States saw various high-level Rastafari elders' delegations facilitating globally coordinated proselytizing ventures designed as extended trods, festivals, and cultural exhibitions. A new international women's executive was being established as a global network, and among the names were Mansani Montague, Nanna Farika Birhan, Desta Meghoo, Eleanor Wint, Rita Marley, and more latterly, Queen Mother Moses, Ijahnya Christian. Collaborators were varied; for example, what Tafari Ama (2012) identifies as the 'new age Rasta', that is, outspoken and radically-minded males such as Ras Junior Manning (Ama 2012) and Ras I-Ration-I both of whom championed the advancement of respect for female voices to receiving a hearing within the Rastafari assemblies and even to take leading roles (usually, if and when called on). Such brethren help to foster a new tendency especially among younger males to 'acknowledge the validity of woman power rather than previous practices of silencing' all females. Key links also developed in the person of Carole Yawney and Jake Homiak (both

outsiders working closely with the community) providing access for Rastafari to Canadian and American ports, while community members arranged the supportive travel and accommodation logistics. In the UK the Movement had grown its own partners from within and these were able to incorporate official government assistance in staging a major festival called 'Rastafari Focus'. The leap forward in the visibility of women, especially within the international context was supported by the new demographics of North American and British socialization and citizenship where women were in some cases the pioneers and in greater numbers in the inward migration from the Caribbean, and further were now situated in environments where they had often secured more latitude socially and in some instances, stood better chances than their Rastafari male counterparts of being incorporated into the formal job market. The traditional social position of women in these locations changed somewhat especially in relation to their male counterparts and this also affects the ideas as to what was orthodox for females. In some cases women jettisoned the conventions of long-dresses, even the idea of personal aesthetic idiosyncrasies concerning covering of head and wearing of make-up, as well as thinking which frowned on trousers wearing, often incorporating them with longer skirts to bolster their resistance especially to cold weather (Ama 2012). This also meant a less strict adherence to some other ideas about separation, use of technology and the general idea of dealing with the 'Babylon system' of codes and regulations. Women were generally more prepared to become key facilitators in these new spaces. Eventually this resulted in two key North Atlantic nodules for international Rastafari administration, Washington DC/Atlanta and London/Manchester.

Visitations from large groups of Nyahbinghi elders from Jamaica in some instances were akin to the meeting of different worlds, often with clashes of culture, and thus tactically the community sought to convene the most rounded delegation. The need for high levels of representation, with respect for the faith's canons, clarity of message, conceivable with the real epistemic competence and performance now needed to be balanced with the ability to document and initiate and follow-up correspondence; in total the capacity of the team often meant inclusion of a secretary/scribe/translator on missions and most often these role was assigned to the better educated female congregants. Arguably this vantage point placed women largely within central aspects of communication recording, continuity and ultimately the initiation of actions as far as international communication was concerned. Since the early 1980s there have been three to four major international conventions of Rastafari each decade, with this tendency increasing significantly since the dawn of the twenty-first century with international gatherings occurring several times per year and incorporating wider locations such as Central and South America,

the eastern Caribbean and Africa. This has resulted from the Movement's growth and transcultural migration as well as its indigenization in its various locales including its spread to Africa, where in counties such as Kenya and Tanzania²⁰ it expressed the youth antisocial pensions and in South Africa and Zimbabwe it bolstered the fight to liberate the society from apartheid. Rastafari therefore by the dawn of the twenty-first century had become localized and a reference point within a black (increasingly human) index for articulating resistance. With these developments have come set agendas which now are focused beyond merely the proselytization mission and are oriented at the issues related to governance particularly as relates to repatriation to Africa as well as dealing with the challenges of settlement and development of the continent among other things.

The centenary of the birth of the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I (23 July 1992) was one such occasion where Rastafari in the diaspora used this as momentum for achieving a systematic focus, especially within the TRON, on repatriation to Ethiopia. The 1992 Centenary Trod to Ethiopia as it was called marked the first International Assembly of Rastafari in Ethiopia, coordinated by a committee for Rastafari based in London. This saw the participation of large delegations from the Americas and Europe converging on the Ethiopian Highlands in celebration of an event made more possible by the fall of the Derge regime, the administration that had removed the Emperor almost two decades previously. This trod saw the participation of a substantial contingent from Jamaica and the United Kingdom and resulted in the deepening of the TRON-related activities in Ethiopia, ultimately facilitating the commencement of building and settlement projects under the coordination of teams of Nyahbinghi members around the globe. This afforded that mansion the framework to fundraise for building one of its largest Rastafari tabernacles in Shashamane and the development of the related infrastructure to facilitate the repatriation of members of its congregation²¹. Various Rastafari women, particularly in the United Kingdom and United States, have been inspired to mobilize their talents in nursing and general healthcare, teaching and social work to begin active service on the ground in Ethiopia in their field of training and expertise. Out of such efforts medical clinics, specialist hospices for the critically ill, water-harvesting facilities and schoolrooms have been constructed in Shashamane.

Perhaps the most ambitious iteration of this broad objective of Rastafari towards reparatory development for Africa and its diaspora was developed by the Bob Marley Foundation in 2005 when it staged an Africa Unite concert in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The Foundation was established in 1986 by Marley's widow, Rita Marley and managed by a largely female international network, as a protracted expression of Bob's life purpose designed as a means

of supporting at-risk communities and their youths in social and cultural development. It used the opportunity of Marley's sixtieth birthday to set before more than half a million spectators a themed concert in Addis Ababa meant to inspire African youth into greater solidarity and higher levels of cooperation for achievement. Appended to the concert were a series of workshops and outreach projects related to health and homeless children, projects which initiated more permanent work through the agents of the Bob Marley Foundation now based in Ethiopia. Effectively the concert ramped up the administrative capacity of the Movement in Ethiopia and established a path for the future coordination of Rastafari activities in that region. Perhaps not surprisingly the thrust of the Marley coordination in Ethiopia was a TRON or Nyahbinghi-supported and administered venture, that is: the key players identify as such, even though admittedly the Bob Marley Foundation has ecumenical appeal and is an ardent supporter of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the latter was largely ceremonially engaged in the activities during the Addis concert. Since then there have been yearly activities in celebration of Bob Marley's birthday which see Marley-branded activities taking place across the continent, straddling the role of social worker and edutainment provider with regular and key activities in Ethiopia, Ghana and South Africa. In this regard the Bob Marley Foundation demonstrates the core desire of the Rastafari movement which is to be enabled to return to the continent to make worthwhile contributions towards its future development. Before the Bob Marley Foundation, the Rastafari history of such developmental ventures saw the membership of the Ethiopian World Federation performing similarly from as early as the 1960s, with the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the most active branch of the Federation which eventually became autonomous, anchored and actively working in Ethiopia since the early 1970s; see Niaah (2012) for more regarding this period.

By the start of the new millennium, Rastafari had somewhat of a critical mass on the African continent and at this juncture a mode of operating was discernible, whereby Rastafari, a chiliastic worldview as they have been described, had travelled over 'land and sea' in seeking to actualize its words, reparation and repatriation. It had however done this by carrying the word 'Rastafari' as signifier of change and repair, as the elders used to sing: 'Telling out King Rastafari doctrine across the whole world (Planno 1996)'. In 2014, the Rastafari through its Ethiopian anchor coordinated the first international gathering around exhibiting the life of the last Emperor, the first of its kind, entitled 'Ras Tafari, the Majesty and the Movement', at the Ethiopian National Museum in Addis Ababa. In this instance the world had come to the home of the king to have these 'strange'²² Rastafari people teach of this significant king by way of an exhibition. Appended to this exhibition were

symposia and outreach particularly in Shashamane, the site of a multinational settlement (with over 20 different nationalities) constituting of a repatriated Rastafari community. These programmes have been spearheaded largely by females working closely with Mrs. Rita Marley as well as Ethiopian officials and members of the local Rastafari community in Ethiopia.

Conclusion: 'A Roaring Lion Kills No Prey'

Today Rastafari stands as a known pan-African champion and a worldview that has crossed boundaries to now have a global presence. It has moved from a merely male-dominated patriarchal frontier to now exist as a global community often identified as the Rastafari global family. The intention of this article was not to ignore the issues of gender contestation and disquiet as they exist within the Rastafari, but instead to view the evolution of the practice of the faith and the reality of gender in action over the past thirty years, even despite the norms espoused. Over the past three to five decades the community has globalized clinging to the cosmological foundations, but with seemingly greater sensibilities towards the role of the Rastawoman.

Dispersal of Rastafari has not eliminated Africa from the meta-narrative, rather it has made Africa central, envisioned as rebirth and renewal, the present and the future and anticipated as the core direction within the organization practice. Given the seminal role played by Jamaica in constructing this faith there has been a universal link which keeps the Movement connected to the Jamaican Rastafari community. From this community cohorts of elders, 'ancients', priests, administrators/coordinators/facilitators and *de facto* leaders have emerged to steer the family, as the congregation became multiplied, scattered and the doctrine dispersed far and wide around the world. In the public domain the Rastafari are collectively labelled and perceived, and even though in actuality it is composed of various often disparate mansions, internationally one key mansion, the TRON, has responded to issues of Rastafari representation thus taking on the mandate of defending the 'faith' in various international fora over the past thirty years. This has been melded through a process of outward migration of individuals and the doctrine that has seen the rise of the Lioness or Rastawoman, within a movement that circumvented her on grounds of gender particularly as it related to issues of leadership and theocratic doctrine. Notwithstanding this, the Lioness has emerged as a key facilitator, interlocutor even, within the international rise of Rastafari. Perhaps within the construct of securing the homeland and pinning down the repatriational vision, Rastafari women had to have been highly visible as key operatives within the reality of resettlement of families in Africa. The Movement, I would here suggest, is operationally very much within the

construct of its totemic symbol, the all-pervasive symbolic conquering lion, preachers and teacher males roaring theocracy as the lioness learnt silence, patience and stillness while manoeuvring in Babylon hunting, in search of prey. The story is often told of how Bob Marley had to take unto himself three women, the now famed I-Threes, and depart from the company of the 'Wailers', the two founding male band members, in order to take the Rastafari message to the world through international reggae music concerts. The other founding males (Peter Tosh and Neville 'Bunny Wailer' Livingston) were reluctant to take on the strategic essentials that North American and European touring often entailed²³. In truth Bob Marley had pioneered a system of Rastafari ministries, and by his passing in 1981 the awakening to the Rastafari message was well advanced and now the elders could move forward to preach and teach and bring their unique testimonies. They were enabled by the dialogical pension ritualized in the form of 'reasoning', a process which facilitates the ventilation and contestation of contending ideas; women within this ritual though marginalized with respect to the degree to which and as to when they may be present have been consistently negotiating boundaries beyond their ritual participation and have been key in international agenda development and execution. Partially whereas this participation of women might be linked to educational attainment, employment capacity and connections, increasingly their participation is recognized as being best suited in total at the level of *epistemic performance*, and in such instances gender become only a plus as increasingly the community's leadership seeks to assert the example of Emperor Haile Selassie appearing with Empress Manen demonstrating of the importance of balance and the need for sharing the tasks and administration, including international representation. There is also the fact that after more than eight decades there are a few generations of women who come from within the Movement being born to Rastafari families without the need for a groom as an adult in the way of the earlier years before the rise of the Rastafari woman. That being the case, some women now stood within the community who had more experience in the Rastafari faith than some older males who were just entering the Movement as adults. The additional impact of Marley's death, but more so the rise of his widow Mrs. Rita Marley as controller of the Marley enterprises, Reggae Queen (Queen Mother Nanna Rita), in her own right and heiress to a significant legacy, provided the capacity for her to be her own exemplar and this provided additional thrust for female-coordinated and administered initiatives, as she has been connected to most of the international assemblage ventures since 1982.

The period 1980-1992 coincides with that period of strong political repression in the fizzling out of the Cold War politics and saw the commencement of international conversation within the Rastafari community about forward strategies for global objective; since 1992 and more so since the 2007 Ethiopian millennium there has been more heightened and systematic planning with regard to approaching repatriation to Africa as well as the engagement of programmatic development within the continent.

Rastafari women have had to systematically negotiate their contribution; the push and pull of outward migration from Jamaica into North America and Europe has also buttressed the pace of the incorporation of women's contribution, often located within small associations formed among themselves to pursue specific issues and concerns. This has privileged networks of women who have demonstrated great resourcefulness and skills in moving the global project forward often without explicit budgets. Over the past three years the Jamaican Rastafari community has gone one step further as it has appointed for the first time in its existence a female chairperson over the relatively newly established ecumenical/umbrella Rastafari organization, the Rastafari Millennium Council, as well as the administrative chairperson over one of the oldest and certainty patriarchal TRON. Both these developments may have been unheard of a decade ago and certainly even five years ago could not have been anticipated. These developments critically position Rastafari as a rejuvenating liberatory framework with seemingly an enduring vision for Africa, its ultimate frontier, for the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. The quoted line in the title is taken from the poem delivered by a Nyahbinghi matriarch Mama Blossom at a celebration of Rastafari martyrs, considered by me to represent a pithy summary of different strategic approaches to ritual engagement as voiced by women versus the way of the males.
2. Some such as Horace Campbell hold this view, suggesting that Rastafari because of its failure to strengthen in strategic and politico-economic terms has suffered a type of anachronism (offered in personal conversation August 2013); also see Campbell (1984).
3. *Myaal* is considered to be the genesis of Afro-Jamaican syncretic religious tradition thought to have emerged in the mid-18th century.
4. The 2011 Jamaican census places the number at approximately 15%, however I would argue that the demographics may be more balanced in certain locations across the Rastafari Diaspora, for example in Trinidad and Tobago and the United Kingdom for example where I have observed ratios suggesting it ranges between 20-30%.
5. This comes from Spivak and gets to the heart of the convergence of issues at play in this patriarchal knowledge system which I have argued elsewhere is a male facility

towards delivering Ethiopian-centred pedagogy. Further it triggers the sense of gnosis or the interiority of the knowledge of life or the place from which 'livity', the core essence of the Rastafari culture, is performed.

6. Nyahbinghi is a term that has been appropriated by Jamaican Rastafari since the late 1930s/early 1940s derived from the Eastern African name of the spirit medium Queen Nyahbinghi who was a major force in the resistance against British colonialism in Uganda at the turn of the twentieth century. In the Jamaican context it grew to refer to the largest and in some accounts the oldest congregation of the Rastafari movement, somewhat of an ephemeral community, convened around 'holy-days': sacred or significant pan-African celebration (i.e. African Liberation Day, 25 May, HIM Emperor Haile Selassie I's coronation and birthday on 2 November 2 and 23 July respectively). They constituted 3 to 4 generations of Rastafari cohered around the divinity of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I with the dominant ethos of never bowing to white supremacy (Jake Homiak personal communication 21 August 2014). For discussions about the African connection and origins of the Nyahbinghi see Hopkins, E. (1970) 'The Nyahbinghi Cult of Southern Uganda' in R.I. Rotberg (ed.) *Protest & Power in Black Africa*, Oxford University Press.
7. This sentiment was shared by Homiak in August 2014 in personal communications. To this extent the liberal, more Western positioning within the faith such as seen in the Twelve Tribes of Israel are sometimes regarded as a compromise based on greater levels of incorporation by Babylon; the Nyahbinghi and the Bobo Ashanti are seen to be at the other end of the spectrum as more African-oriented.
8. There is also the use of the term 'polluted' or 'unpolluted' for the same context – however perhaps because of the implicit offensive suggestions the more popular term I have heard is 'free'.
9. Recently an informant (August 2014) told me that Ma Shanti, a female Nyahbinghi elder, used to play the drums in the official ceremony. There are younger voices challenging the denial of women, in this way. Rastafari Village in Montego Bay, a Rastafari-owned and inspired eco-tourism resort in St James affords ones the freedom to break this taboo.
10. Information gathered from field notes/Nyahbinghi Global Consultation, Scots Pass, July 2008.
11. See Homiak (2013) for more about Yawney's link to Rastafari.
12. This was the argument presented by former Miss World Cindy Breakspeare, at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Institute of Caribbean Studies' 18th annual Bob Marley Lecture, February 2014 UWI, Mona Campus.
13. The TTI and its administration have been on a progressive and consistent agenda from the late 1960s for African repatriation. Through strong charismatic male leadership, complex committees were developed to administer this agenda over the last forty years, the executive and active organizational membership reflecting more so than any other mansion the demographic shifts of the 1960/70s with a large congregation of women, brown, educated elite youth joining the ranks. Administration within TTI was made to reflect the logic of astrology with the convergence around the number twelve as represented by the twelve months of the year and expressed through the selection

of twelve men and women to reflect this expression of mind/body completion; determined by an individual's time of birth, gender as well as entitlement through years of membership. The members were socialized towards leading their lives in preparation for repatriation to Africa and so some have designated this as their retirement objective. From 1972 to 1981 this was actively pursued through exploring missions, sponsored settlements and various other initiatives resulting in the resettlement of several scores of its membership at a crucial time, thus paving the way for future settlers which has continued. These initiatives had active participation from committees reflecting mixtures of different skills and interests and ages, which by far seem to be the most constructive and systematic planning and implementation. The achievement of the TTI include a significant settlement in Ethiopia, in some instances spanning three generations, and also notably a school in Shashamane that has been operational for almost twenty years (Niaah 2012).

14. The latest manifestation of this has been the recently concluded 'Rastafari Rootz Festival/High Times World Cannabis Cup 2015, where an internationally recognized white cannabis advocacy syndicate partnered with key leaders of the Nyahbinghi community to host an annual ganja celebration event. See: <http://www.billboard.com/articles/business/6730953/high-times-inaugural-cannabis-cup-rastafari-rootz-jamaica-exclusive>.
15. See Niaah (2014) for a discussion of Hall and this connection.
16. Advancing individual rights, for example the right for their children to wear their hair in locks while attending school.
17. Yawney among others offers this suggestion; see Yawney (1984) 'Who Killed Bob Marley? Review of Bob Marley: Reggae King of the World' by M.L. Whitney, in *Canadian Forum*, December 1984, Toronto: Williams-Wallace publishers, pp. 29-31.
18. At the 1980 celebrations for the independence of Zimbabwe, Rodney and Marley were among the specially invited guests, given their global stature as pan-African revolutionaries.
19. Rastafari was targeted, it is believed, as a radical and violent international drug trading community, a part of that 'window of vulnerability' which took hold of the Third World in the 1970s under the 'softer' Carter administration.
20. In the case of Tanzania this indigenous community made serious linkages with their Jamaican counterparts; in 1985 for example, the Universal Rastafari Improvement Association of Tanzania sent a 'fact-finding' mission to Jamaica, 29 December 1985 to 28 January 1986.
21. Most recently a second Tabernacle has been developed in Shashamane under the initiative of a matriarch Mother Earth, and the site is named appropriately Mother Earth's Taba where she indirectly presides over weekly celebrations. Thanks to Ijahnya Christian for providing this updated information.
22. See E. Macleod (2014) *Visions of Zion: Ethiopians and Rastafari in the Search for the Promised Land*, NYU Press for a discussion of the reactions of Ethiopians to the presence of Rastafari culture in Ethiopia.
23. The Wailers as they were called evolved away from this position and developed international reputations and subsequently individual touring engagements.

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