

Curious Intersections, Uncommon Magic: Steve Reich's *It's Gonna Rain*

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1. Methodological Conundrums

1965 was a watershed year in the life of Steve Reich. Following numerous experiments with magnetic tape, he had, while creating his tape piece *It's Gonna Rain*, identified a fascinating process that would serve as the basic compositional tool of his output until about 1971, and as a foundational component of his output thereafter.¹ Reich's preoccupation with process-oriented music in turn helped define a musical trend that shifted the standard historical narrative of twentieth-century concert music away from the reigning high modernist serialism of the 1950s toward minimalism.

Defenders of the new style emphasize the cultural triumph of minimalism. For Susan McClary, minimalism is "perhaps the single most viable extant strand of the Western art-music tradition;" for K. Robert Schwarz, a specialist in this style, minimalism is "a potent force . . . its influence is pervasive and enduring;" and for the composer John Adams, minimalism is "the only really interesting, important stylistic development in the past 30 years" (McClary 2004:289–98; Schwarz 1997:1–17; Adams quoted in Schwarz 1996a:177). These writers often attend to minimalism's programmatic reaction to the perceived structural complexities of high modernism with its ametric rhythms and pervasive intervallic dissonances. In contrast to high modernism, minimalism offered musical structures clearly audible to the listener; its rhythms were pulse-based, often elaborated in the context of extended repetition of short musical figures, and its pitch structures were simple, usually associated with, though not identical to, traditional diatonic constellations. Commentators may differ on the relationship minimalism takes to modernism—McClary argues in terms of a qualified Oedipal "reaction formation" to modernism; Wim Mertens argues in terms of a negative dialectical "final stage" of high modernism—but few commentators fail to situate high modernism as the central referent in describing the emergence of minimalism in music (McClary 2004:292; Mertens 2004:308). Whether the argument hinges on a theory of history beholden to Freud or one beholden to Hegel, modernism under these readings remains minimalism's basic condition of possibility.

Most minimalist composers have themselves been outspoken about their aversion to certain forms of modernism, especially institutionalized

modernism. Reich, for example, describes his early attempts to write twelve-tone music during a three-semester enrollment at Mills College (1962–63) in somewhat sardonic, and ultimately dismissive terms: “I would just repeat the row over and over” (betraying evident indifference to the transformational operations underlying row formation); it was “a very unproductive time” (quoted in Potter 2000:157–58). Reich’s recollection of the institutional musical climate in the late 1950s provides further evidence of his apprehension about modernism. At Mills, Reich claims, “you either went like Cage or you went like Stockhausen, and there was nothing else; otherwise you were on the moon, you were irrelevant” (Schwarz 1996b:12). Reich had written a host of twelve-tone pieces before 1965, including his final piece written at Juilliard, *Music for String Orchestra* (1961), and his graduation piece at Mills, *Four Pieces* (1963). Perhaps it is this kind of engagement with serialism that led commentators like Mertens to conclude that Reich’s project was in fact the apogee of a high-modernist preoccupation with “non-directed [musical] evolution” (Mertens 2004:308).² But the main reason high modernism is granted pride of place (however negatively) in most histories of Steve Reich, and of twentieth-century musical minimalism in general, is more complicated than this line of thinking would suggest.

This paper takes an excursion into the vexing terrain of parallel history-telling. It offers two opposing strands of thought, each with its own inner tensions and convolutions, to articulate the musical and technological conditions as well as the diverse cultural and political contexts that made possible Reich’s landmark work. While these strands are by no means exhaustive, it is hoped that their mostly contradictory elements create antagonistic pressures on historical interpretation.³ Furthermore, the paper simultaneously threads a critical review of the current literature on the subject. Of particular interest will be the task of dismantling false narrative tropes that have become widespread or commonplace in these texts. To this extent, then, the paper concurrently unfolds both a dual historical narrative *and* a critique of current modes of narrativization.

What distinguishes my account from a postmodern reading (such as that proposed by Jann Pasler in her article “Boretzian Discourse and History,” for example) is my desire to bring out facets of the story that are routinely overlooked by contemporaneous debates in musicology (Pasler 2005/2006:177–91). As will become clear in the context of *It’s Gonna Rain*, crucial facets of the work’s story can be obscured by the very impulse to dichotomize and then re-integrate the opposition between the “music itself” and its “social context.” Debates guided by this opposition can mislead the historian as they risk reifying the dichotomy instead of rendering each side negotiable. In other words, juxtapositions of this sort tend to create disin-

terest in the constructedness of the basic poles of the opposition, and thus deflect attention from the embedded ethical commitments that produce them in the first place. The very act of situating the music itself, no less than locating its appropriate social context, is no small task. It involves idealizations at every methodological turn, and even allowing a narrative interaction across the dichotomy does not guarantee its undoing. Let me explain.

How do we situate “the music itself” in *It’s Gonna Rain*? In this work the very concept of music, as constituted in Reich’s emerging aesthetic, partakes of the structural and the historical—of immanence and documentary. *It’s Gonna Rain* is not solely engendered by abstract processes (the utopian minimalist vision of a music referring only to its own production, regenerating itself via phase shifting out of its own resources), it is necessarily qualified by the documentary reality (the impassioned sound of the preacher Brother Walter’s recorded voice and the desperate content of his plea) as well as by a looming historical reality (the raging civil rights movement, the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll, and the Cuban missile crisis).⁴ Likewise, how do we identify the “social context” of *It’s Gonna Rain*? Here too the very concept of context partakes of the historical and the structural. Do we emphasize the work’s particular musical style, for example, in historical context? Do we thematize, as has been done, the constitutive role of modernism for minimalism—the music’s “obsessive repetition” as reaction to strict modernist prohibitions, say, or as the culminating point of an “anti-dialectic movement” that began with Schoenberg—and thus permit a technical musical aspect to insert itself into contextual analysis (McClary 2004:292; Mertens 2004:308)? Or does the technical bias obscure a more complex set of possible contexts?⁵ In fixing a contextual enclosure, then, do we emphasize cultural allegiances, modalities of place, factors of class and race, political developments, economic conditions (local or global), or some combination of these? To paraphrase questions I have raised elsewhere: by what inscription do we isolate music’s salient contexts? And what are the political aspirations entailed by the choice of these borders?⁶

What follows is a brief account of two intersecting but contradictory contexts for understanding *It’s Gonna Rain* as a unique cultural product of its time. These two contexts are distinguished by the size of their respective geographical and historical reach. One may therefore speak of the work’s local context, on the one hand, and its global one, on the other. The work’s local context takes into account the role of the cultural scene in New York City in 1965, particularly developments in the visual arts—a context in which Reich’s early minimalist music found sympathetic resonance. The work’s global context takes into account the role of cultural globalization in 1965, particularly developments in the ethnomusicology of African music

(writings, transcriptions, recordings, etc.)—a source from which Reich drew considerable inspiration. Of course there are many additional ways events and currents of the mid 1960s shaped *It's Gonna Rain*—television footage of the civil rights movement which helped introduce white America to the sound of African American preaching, the political crises engendered by a country on the brink of nuclear war, the broad epistemological shift in the arts away from the aesthetic trends inherited from pre-war Europe, and so on. Instead of offering an exhaustive set of possible contexts, however, I will—for strategic reasons that will become clear—limit the discussion of *It's Gonna Rain* to aspects of the work's contradictory local and global contexts.

These intersecting stories are preceded by a discussion of the work's specifically musical effects. In this section, I will present a gradually intensifying description of the work by circling through layers of paradox and contradiction in the music itself. Finally, instead of merely presenting these contradictory narratives as so many possible avenues toward understanding the work, the argument will ultimately attempt to arbitrate their antagonistic results: an attempt, in Edward Said's terms, to recover “a history hitherto either misrepresented or rendered invisible” (1983:158).⁷

2. Situating the Work

It's Gonna Rain is the piece in which musical minimalism finds one of its first exemplary instances. It introduced to the discourse on minimalism one of its representative *modi operandi*: phase-shifting. This technique, in which two or more identical musical patterns are played simultaneously but at different speeds, came to be closely associated with a new philosophy of music, which, in Reich's lexicon, was called “music as a gradual process” (Reich 2002:34–36). Reich considers *It's Gonna Rain* to be “the purest process piece that [he] ever did” (quoted in Potter 2000:169–70). He is also acutely aware of its unique place in music history: “*It's Gonna Rain* is the first piece ever to use the process of gradually shifting phase relations between two or more identical repeating patterns” (quoted in Alburger 2004:7).⁸ In his essay “Music as a Gradual Process,” Reich laid out the basic conceptual foundation for this kind of music. The essay bears all the marks of the dual relationship to modernism outlined above. On the one hand, Reich begins with a negation, disclaiming a (modernist) preconception we might have about what the title means—“I do not mean processes of composition but rather pieces of music that are, literally, processes”—and goes on explicitly to distance his music from a fundamental fault common to then-dominant strains of modernism: Cage's indeterminacy and European serialism, wherein “the compositional process and the sounding music have no audible connection”

(quoted in Alburger 2004:34, 35).⁹ On the other hand, the tone of Reich's essay, written in short aphoristic paragraphs reflecting the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein, recalls the no-nonsense declarative mode of a modernist manifesto. Furthermore, the essay, first published in the catalogue to the 1969 exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City (featuring the work of Bruce Naumann, Richard Serra, and Michael Snow, amongst others), embraces various key modernist motifs in the visual arts.¹⁰ For example, Reich's effort to create "perceptible processes . . . a compositional practice and a sounding music that are one and the same thing" resonated with the taboo on painterly "illusion" (or representation pointing beyond the texture of the painting's surface) in the work of these visual artists (Potter 2000:34–5).

Modernist musings aside, it is the phase-shifting technique that lay at the heart of the aesthetics outlined in Reich's essay. In his *Steve Reich: A Bio-Biography*, D. J. Hoek accurately calls it an "aesthetic-cum-technique" (2002:6). Reich occasionally describes shifts in his compositional career in terms of dramatic discoveries: major epiphanies that surface almost unexpectedly, "like being in front of a tidal wave" (quoted in Wasserman 1972:48).¹¹ One such moment occurred while working on *It's Gonna Rain*, initially a collection of recordings of Brother Walter preaching in San Francisco's Union Square which Reich intended to mix into some kind of collage-style piece, but which instead led him to discover the phasing process apparently "by accident" (Reich 2002:21). Reich describes how he happened upon this technique:

I had two tape recorders with two loops of him saying "it's gonna rain." Both loops were exactly the same length, and I ran them on two machines at the same speed . . . I noticed that . . . the imperfections in the loops and the small differences in the motor speeds caused a slight change of phase to happen. I let them go and they began gradually to separate; when I heard that, I realized that this was a solution to what a composer thinks of as a problem of musical structure: how to begin someplace and go somewhere else. This struck me as a way of going through a number of different relationships with the same thing, without ever having any transition. It would be a seamless continuous process. (2002:44)

While Reich's recollection of this moment of creation has, like his music, shifted gradually over time (his iterations in interviews, writings, and conversations constantly change points of emphasis and perspective), there is one consistent motif: the fortunate failure of the tape loops to synchronize. It is as if, in the process of re-telling, the aesthetic stakes have gradually shifted away from documentary realism, which formed part of his initial essay on the work, and toward the consequences of infinite circling. For Reich

in 2002, “what’s important about the piece is that this repeating pattern is played against itself, and gradually slips out of sync with itself, and goes out of phase” (quoted in Zuckerman 2002). I will return to this point shortly.

In addition to the structural clarity and unity offered by the phasing technique, Reich was also drawn to the unintended effects created by two recordings of the same music drifting further and further apart. These are the constantly evolving “psychoacoustic fragments” that each listener “organizes in different ways” to produce radically different emotional results (Reich 2002:21). In “Music as a Gradual Process,” Reich places a high premium on these mysterious moments:

Even when all the cards are on the table and everyone hears what is gradually happening in a musical process, there are still enough mysteries to satisfy all. These mysteries are the personal, unintended, psychoacoustic by-products of the intended process. These might include submelodies heard within repeated melodic patterns, stereophonic effects due to listener location, slight irregularities of performance, harmonics, difference tones, and so on. (2002:35)

Herein lies one of the many paradoxes of Reich’s key aesthetic tenets: the curious co-habitation of structural clarity with inexorable ambiguity. On the one hand, we are presented with a straightforward musical process, apparently lacking all “secrets of structure,” and, on the other, we find the unguessed-at “mysteries” that lie at the core of the music’s aesthetic appeal (2002:35).

In his chapter on Reich, “Secrets of Structure,” Richard Taruskin plausibly argues against the possibility of creating musical structures without secrets, and thus against Reich’s aspiration toward this goal: “nothing, it turns out, not even a minimalist structure, is ever devoid of ambiguity” (2005, 5:374). Taruskin associates the mysterious/ambiguous aspect with the music’s non-retrogradable large-scale structure, of which, he thinks, Reich was likely not aware.¹² Not surprisingly, Taruskin goes on to subtly associate Reich’s structures with modernist ones:

Of course, the last three words of the maxim [“I don’t know of any secrets of structure that you can’t hear”] are another escape clause, since—as Milton Babbitt has always argued—once anything has been pointed out and conceptualized, it *can* be heard. (emphasis in the original, 2005, 5:374)¹³

From the precise context of his *Writings*, however, Reich’s reference to the music’s mysteries is attuned *not* to the macro-palindrome produced by the process (about which, ironically, Reich seems rather viscerally aware, as

evidenced by his description of *It's Gonna Rain*), but to the symptomatic “submelodies” and “irregularities” that emerge in its micro-details.¹⁴ These are the very musical results that cannot readily be “pointed out and conceptualized” (à la Babbitt); they emerge as if in *excess* of the structural process. It is important here to de-dichotomize the terms encouraged by Taruskin. The unintended moments in Reich’s music are mysterious precisely because they *depend* upon the apparent audibility of the structures producing them. What seems plain and clear is suddenly filled with mysterious design; the music issues tricks and chimera that mark a liminal crossing from the obvious to the obscure. This, for Reich, is a component of the music’s “uncommon magic” (Reich 2002:21).

Where Reich’s self-description does call for qualification is in connection with the idea that the process and the sounding music “*are one and the same thing*” (emphasis added, Reich 2002:35). Here Reich misrepresents the fundamental mechanism of the phasing process. Far from the alignment between them, it is the *mismatch* between the motor process and the sounding forms that grants the music its remarkable aesthetic power. For at the center of his phasing pieces (and especially in *It's Gonna Rain*) lies the epiphany of a phenomenological reversal: the paradoxical moment of transition not only from the *interpretation* of musical content (attending to its signs) to the *experience* of musical content (attainment of the power to listen to the signs as vibrantly patterned sound alone) but also a transition from one form of consciousness (referential, directed, transparent) to another (autotelic, immediate, visceral).¹⁵ Inherent melodies emerge as the words submerge and then emerge again. One might at the very least speak of a shift from the phonemic to the phonetic to the phonic (or from text to texture) and back again. The orientation of this music is thus directed less toward whatever messages the text is able to engender from its circling combinations and more toward an intriguing phenomenology of circling as such, whose regularly patterned displacement yields acoustic byproducts that are not quite real and never quite predictable.

For the listener, the music comes not as a dialectical journey of full dramatic closure, but as passing moments of slippery rhythmic repetition punctuated by shifting instants and intensities. Paradoxically, it is not until the listener submits her/himself to the looping process itself that her/his unique psychological reaction can materialize—a reaction, says Reich, that will “vary from person to person” (Reich 2002:21). Thus the final effect of *It's Gonna Rain* is to qualify the impression left by Walter’s pleading report of Noah warning that rain will consume the earth. Herein lies another paradox of Reich’s aesthetics of phase-shifting in the context of taped speech: on the one hand, by relinquishing one’s hold on Walter’s lexical meaning and sub-

mitting to the process itself (in Reich's terms, "shift[ing] attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outward toward *it*"), we witness the dissolution of the preacher's basic message (Reich 2002:36).¹⁶ On the other hand, Reich also acknowledges that he "wanted people to hear the words," carefully distinguishing his work from the modernist practitioners of *musique concrète*, who seemed intent on disguising the original sound source (Reich 2002:21). Thus, in his account of *It's Gonna Rain*, Reich calls special attention to the uniquely sonorous qualities of Walter's preaching: "Pentecostal preaching," he states, "hovers between speaking and singing" (2002:21).

Reich is also unafraid to connect the meaning of the work to the apocalyptic mood of the day: "I recorded Brother Walter in 1964; this was in San Francisco shortly after the Cuban missile crisis, and I thought we might be going up in so much radioactive smoke" (2002:21). The composer even comments on his own personal circumstances to explain its emotional tone: "personally, at that time, I was going through a divorce, and the piece is expressive of an extremely dark mood" (2002:21).¹⁷ In short, the piece is rich with intertextual and contextual meaning. Historians and commentators have expanded on the music's extra-musical and contextual significance, calling attention not only to local personal and political themes but to global and philosophical ones as well. Locally speaking, for example, Reich's work is plausibly construed as engaging racial stereotypes via a vivid confrontation with the musical intricacies of the African American voice. Globally speaking, Reich's work has been construed, with a nod to historian Francis Fukuyama, as a kind of emblem of the "mythical ending of history" that characterizes our age (Mertens 2004:311).¹⁸

Does *It's Gonna Rain* musicalize Walter's testimony or does it testimonialize Reich's music? Or does it oscillate precariously between these alternatives? Reich himself sustains a paradoxical shuttling between music and extra-music in his own statements and writings about the work, but this is, finally, a lopsided back-and-forth. For despite distinctive nods toward the music's documentary articulation with racial politics as well as the cold war, Reich gives the non-musical resonance less rhetorical attention than the purely musical dimension (the impersonal process mechanism in particular). He frequently qualifies references to personal and socio-cultural dimensions with a proviso: "I never would have thought [of myself as politically engaged at that time] . . . *But* remember, *It's Gonna Rain* is 1965 and I was living in San Francisco in 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis" (emphasis added, quoted in Alburger 2004:7). In contrast, music-technical aspects are elaborated in painstaking detail, and in the end are granted fundamental aesthetic significance: "I realized [the shifting relationships were] . . . more interesting than any one particular relationship, because it was the process (of gradually passing through all the canonic relationships) making an entire

piece, and not just a moment in time” (Reich 2002:21).¹⁹ By the time Reich published “Music as a Gradual Process” in 1968, socio-political motifs have all but disappeared from Reich’s commentaries.

And yet, the “added emotional layer” that comes with the music’s verism cannot quite be spirited away from an interpretation of *It’s Gonna Rain* (quoted in Potter 2000:162). The clash of the technological/technical and the factual/real is one of the curious intersections within the work itself. At the time of its conception Reich wanted it both ways. Yet, already here, there is something unexplained about this desire. In his essay on the piece, Reich simply states: “the incessant repetition intensified [the words’] meaning *and* their melody at one and the same time” (emphasis added, Reich 2002:19).²⁰ This is the only sentiment in the essay that is repeated twice, almost verbatim, as if to insist on what seems to resist interpretation, or, at the least, what calls for further comment. How can we account for this dual intensification?

It is probably easier to comprehend how the “melody” (rather than the “meaning”) is intensified by repetitive looping in *It’s Gonna Rain*: the way subtle quasi-metric shifts illusionistically take hold as emergent phonemes—sometimes by literal accent, sometimes by melodic crest, constantly jostling for downbeat formation (especially in Part One), or the way embedded speech patterns gradually merge into trembling inner-voice melodies (especially in Part Two). Walter’s peculiar exertion on the word “rain” produces a lunging effect in the loop of Part One that, after a while, can become marked as a downbeat on a kind of F#. The words “it’s gonna” (or, more accurately, “it’s gon”), in contrast, then seem to soften the esophagal strain on F#’s “rain” by way of two diatonic steps downward to a tonic-like D. Is this a farewell motif? Similarly, the phasing process of the surreal verbal passage (built on shreds strung together from a longer passage) in Part Two with the lyrics

Glory to God
God
had been sealed
couldn’t open a door
say: ohh, Noah
They cried
would you just open the door
couldn’t open the door
But, shorenuf
haleluya

gradually produces the sound of a lengthy inner voice, somewhere between the sound of a siren of an emergency vehicle and the distant call of a bird,

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when we connect the inherent pattern borne out of words with similar vowel content—"door, ohh, Noah, etc."²¹

But how does Walter's *meaning* intensify through the technique of repetitive looping? Does the phasing effect obliterate the text, substituting, in Mark Alburger's words, "cacophony, no longer heard as discrete words" (2004:6)? Perhaps the original texts for the music provide the clue to this puzzle. Walter himself frames the words "It's Gonna Rain" by a repetition of a different fragment: the words "after a while" appear before and after the statement about the coming rain. Reverberations of this sort are characteristic of such evangelical speech. Consider the internal repetitions of the spoken material for Part One as a whole:

He began to warn the people. He said:
After a while, **it's gonna rain**
After a while.
For forty days and
For forty nights.
And the people didn't believe him.
And they began to laugh at him.
And they begin to mock him.
And they begin to say: It ain't gonna rain!

For Reich, the recording of a person's spoken voice, its rhythmic inflections and its rising and falling cadences, is as much a personification of that person as a photograph: "when other people listen to that [voice] they feel a persona present. When the persona begins to spread and multiply and come apart, as it does in *It's Gonna Rain*, there's a very strong identification of a human being going through this uncommon magic" (Reich 2002:21).²² What distinguishes Reich's literal repetition from the characteristic repetitions of the preacher, however, is that the latter usually repeats the same string of words to bring to them a different cadential inflection. Walter's first "after a while," for instance, sweeps upward (accenting the last syllable in the manner of "it's gonna rain" to follow) and then swoops downward, back to its starting point, a rise-and-fall contour (echoed in the sentences "And they began to laugh at him / And they begin to mock him") to unify the flow. This is repetition of a different psychological order. Where Walter alters the music of his repetitions, Reich offers blunt literalism. Far from providing poetic intensification through sing-song repetition, then, the lingering sense of the words in Reich's work gives way to a phenomenological study of their sound-content alone: under these conditions *It's Gonna Rain* becomes aestheticized phonology. Perhaps, after all, text has been effaced, or even replaced by texture.

And yet this is not entirely the case, for the music's words become more than texture. They become other things, too. Toward the beginning of Part One, for example, Reich subjects the three words of the title to "a kind of monophonic sampling," by which he means a phasing process in which one single voice is heard at a time (quoted in Potter 2000:169). The music is controlled by flipping a preamplifier switch at a different rate to the sample. Reich explains that the loops are stereophonically divided,

exactly 180 degrees out of phase, so that the word "it's" falls on top of "rain" . . . Sampling each channel in synchronization with the voice rhythm will give you "It's gonna, it's gonna . . ." over and over again. Speed up the sampling rate, however, and the result will move from "it's gonna", inching into the "r" of "rain" then into "ain", "nnn", and finally back into "It's gonna." (quoted in Potter 2000:169)

As the tapes go out of phase, then, one half of a repeated fragment gradually morphs into the other: to be precise, "it's gon'" progressively yields into "rain."²³ Interestingly, the transformation takes place in the reverse direction—Reich's description of the passage, while conceptually accurate, is in error: "it's gon'" becomes "nnn it's g" and then "ain it's," and so on.

This is one of those moments where the creeping encroachment of "nnn" suddenly sounds alarming, exerting pressure to reinterpret Walter's voice as radically Other. As disturbing as it is vivid, we hear the sound of what can only be described as an animal or an anxious bird. Along with the muffled drumming produced by a real bird flapping its wings and the brief offbeat coo of a dove or pigeon, Walter's voice (now a feverishly inspired duck-squawk) becomes a desperate plea in the face of impending catastrophe. This is music becoming animal: through recapitulation, Reich's musical texture intensifies the drama of the text. Message and medium, initially at odds, yield to one another. Walter's warning, at first neutralized by the loop, eventually becomes the musical embodiment of a desperate scene, filled with the harsh shudders of creatures confronting catastrophic environmental disaster. This is where Reich's extra-musical thinking and his aesthetics are able to come together in *It's Gonna Rain*.

What is at stake ideologically when a process, whereby a white composer gradually transforms the voice of a black man into animal sound, is read as modern compositional technique? Reich's descriptions of Brother Walter's role in the making of *It's Gonna Rain* are disarmingly technical. Walter's voice is either drafted into a narrative about the phasing process itself or, to the extent that he addresses the actual characteristics of his voice, into a generalization about verbal vocalization. In a 1999 radio interview on National Public Radio, for example, he explains the principles he was working with in *It's Gonna Rain* thus:

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Well, I guess the reality, the bottom line principle, was that sometimes when people speak they almost sing. And there's no better example of that than a black Pentecostal preacher, who is really—it's impossible to say if they are singing or speaking—it's hovering between the two of them. (Gross [1999] 2001)

Reich then goes on to describe the “technical level” of *It's Gonna Rain* in the predictable context of tape loops subjected to the phasing technique. The first point about Reich's formulation is that Brother Walter, about whom Reich seems to know very little, stands in for two compositional principles—a *limen liminus* between speech and song, on the one hand, and a mechanical process, on the other. Walter's voice becomes an instrumental abstraction in service of new musical subject matter and compositional technique. Walter's own field of referents and coordinates is thereby set adrift, if not banished, and the disruptive interrogations that Walter's sermon potentially pose, as well as the historical conditions of discrimination, inequality, and poverty (within which Reich, probably without permission, is able to amplify and transform the voice of a black street preacher), are thereby disavowed.

The second point is that, according to Reich, the threshold point between speech and song is best exemplified by “black” voices. To the extent that he is granted specificity then, Walter stands as an emblem for a *topos*, as arbitrary as it is generalizing, about those racialized as “black.” African American vocalization is here sent up into the service of an age-old preoccupation with the originary unity of speech and song, a site of what Hal Foster calls “symbolic plenitude” and “natural vitality,” all too often associated with the “primitive” Other (Foster 1985:58). Not only is Walter's voice evacuated as it is elevated in the name of musicality, but the tonal quality of that musicality—the inarticulate animalistic frenzy produced by an assault of mechanical repetition—risks recapitulating commonplace stereotypes of blacks as wild and savage. The Western fascination with the nexus between speech and song, the modern articulation of which dates back to the essays of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, associates the inarticulate, song-like voicing of language with natural anthropological man (Rousseau 1998). Under this reading, black America is thus cast as primal man, with a special endowment toward natural vocalization.

At this point it is important to acknowledge that my own verbal description of *It's Gonna Rain* necessarily compresses the music's elusive meanings into the very object of my critique. This is because language inevitably limits music's equivocal hermeneutic field. Furthermore, the contextualist rebuke, precariously premised on Brother Walter's cultural difference, deflects attention from the ideas that such decontextualization might produce in *It's Gonna Rain*.²⁴ How, for example, might Walter's voice be thought of as disruptive

(instead of recuperative) of ossified musical ideas, historical narratives, and so on? Unfortunately, Reich's descriptions of his early music offer no clues to this question as they tend toward processes of technical manipulation alone, often portrayed as intentionally anti-psychological and anti-expressive. And yet, the sonic effects of Walter's circling vocal fragments are anything but anti-expressive, issuing instead a vivid portrait of psychological trauma—intrinsically expressive, and even expressionistic.

Arguably, Reich's specific manipulations of Brother Walter's sermon turn what Foster describes as "the 'trauma' of the Other" into "an 'epiphany' of the same" (Foster 1985:56). In Foster's terms, one might argue that Reich's intervention in music history seems to disrupt the reigning ideology of modernism but only so as to reaffirm it; the transgressive Other is recognized only to be again extracted. That is to say, the aesthetic elevation and exhibition of Walter's voice (buttressed by Reich's pronouncements of apparent praise about its song-like aspect) is ultimately deflated, if not silenced outright. Walter's agency is characterized only in technical musical terms—his voice embodies an ahistorical process that jumbles his specific operational referents—and is thereby assimilated into, what one might call (following Michel Foucault), a "historical-transcendental" musical tradition.²⁵ The ideological effect is to incorporate the Other into tradition—first causing a rupture with tradition and then overcoming it—which ultimately serves the interests of a progressive music history, characterized by a quasi-deductive logical line of formal innovations.²⁶

How, in the specific case of *It's Gonna Rain*, does the technical musical narrative congeal into this kind of progressive history?

3. Situating a Local Context

It seems that Reich was not yet fully aware of the aesthetic stakes of *It's Gonna Rain* at the time of its conception in San Francisco. When Reich completed the work he initially thought, "that's the end of phasing. The first part is from unison back into unison and the second part goes out of phase as much as possible; I've done it all; the process is completed. That's the end of that" (quoted in Suzuki 1991:447). But an exciting new discourse on art, which received its first major theorization in 1965, awaited Reich's return to New York City in that same year. This discourse in the visual arts was gradually shifting between the labels "systemic painting," "one-image painting," "unitary forms," "reductive forms," and so on, ultimately settling with "minimalism."²⁷ The minimalist artist Donald Judd laid out the first extended theoretical formulation for this movement in an article aptly titled "Specific Objects," which appeared in *Arts Yearbook* in 1965. With reference

to Frank Stella's striped canvases (dating back to 1961), Judd pointed the way toward a new three-dimensional art-form that lay beyond the inevitable "illusionism" created by traditional easel painting. "Three dimensions are real space . . . That gets rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colors" (quoted in Foster, Kraus, Bois, and Buchloh 2004:493). For Judd, the conventions of painterly illusion were a product of an outmoded rationalist philosophy ("based on systems built beforehand, a priori systems") associated with European art (quoted in Foster et al. 2004:493). Stella's work, in contrast, had a unitary quality (a single all-over shape) crafted with a minimum of the *composed* manipulation normally aimed at achieving compositional proportion, balance, and so on. The formal reduction of elements in service of a unitary whole canceled both the hierarchical arrangement of elements associated with traditional composition as well as the authorial intentions or feelings that were said to underpin it.

In his "Notes on Sculpture" from 1966, Robert Morris honored such anti-illusionism with reference to the minimalist work's Gestalt, beyond or behind which nothing lay: "one does not seek the Gestalt of the Gestalt" (quoted in Foster et al. 2004:493). The new art created the conditions for a new kind of viewing experience. In Morris's terms, by taking

relationships out of the work, [the new art] makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision . . . even [the work's] most patently unalterable property, shape, does not remain constant, for it is the viewer who changes the shape constantly by his change in position relative to the work. (quoted in Foster et al. 2004:493)

Morris's *Untitled (Three L-Beams)* of 1965–66 dramatizes the point. In this work, the same huge L shape is repeated three times and placed in three different positions on the gallery floor. The arrangement makes it impossible to view the objects as identical because, in the words of art historian Hal Foster, "the effect of *real space* means each shape takes on a different meaning according to the way a sense of gravitational pull or luminous release affects our experience of the actual thickness and weight of the different 'arms'" (Foster et al. 2004:494). Judd's "specific" objects (also dubbed "literalist" by the critic Michael Fried) were likewise experienced in what Foster describes as a kind of "*real time* within which its existence unfolds—a 'just one thing after another' that is temporal as well as spatial" (Foster et al. 2004:495). The transparency of construction in these works (as in works by Frank Stella, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, and others) opened into an experience of space without a hint of traditional forms or figures.

The affinities between minimalism in the visual arts and Reich's early music (especially his pronouncements about it) appear obvious. Reich, for

example, like the minimalists, placed a high premium on transparency of construction where “compositional process” precisely recapitulates “sounding form,” opening into an experience of temporal process (in analogous *real time*) without a hint of traditional form (Reich 2002:35). Technically speaking, the patterned uniformity stressing repetition of identical units in the works of Stella, Andre, and Morris resembles the patterned repetition of identical loops in *It’s Gonna Rain* (as well as in works like *Come Out*, *Piano Phase*, *Violin Phase*, and others). Moreover, the phenomenological consequences of the viewing/listening experience of these works and the subtle perspectival shifts of emphasis produced in the context of repetitions are analogous. Conceptually too, the resonance between minimalist art and Reich’s music is evident. As with Judd’s rejection of “a priori systems” or Morris’s emphasis on a unitary Gestalt without hidden ideas, there are, for Reich, no “secrets of structure” (Reich 2002:35). The minimalist artists emphasized the impersonal quality in generating their work, and sought to downplay the position of authorial intentions and feelings. Likewise, Reich emphasized the term “process” over “composition” in describing his music. On impersonality, he writes,

I began to see [my phase pieces] as processes as opposed to compositions. I saw that my methods did not involve moving from one note to the next, in terms of each note in the piece representing the composer’s taste working itself out bit by bit. My music was more of an impersonal process. (2002: 32)²⁸

On canceling expression, he writes, “so the attention . . . [that] mechanical playing asks for is something we could do more of, and the ‘human expressive quality’ that is assumed to be innately human is what we could [do] with less of right now” (2002:54). Reich associates non-expression with a particular mode of playing:

A performance for us is a situation where all the musicians, including myself, attempt to set aside our individual thoughts and feelings of the moment, and try to focus our minds and bodies clearly on the realization of one continuous musical process. (2002:81–82)

Strikingly, Reich’s emphasis on the “uncommon magic” of process music, its “mysteries” and its ability to “put all within listening range into a state of ecstasy” (2002:21, 35, 82), though seemingly at odds with the matter-of-fact immediacy of minimalism, also resonates with the moment of illumination and transcendence Michael Fried identifies in the work of minimalist artworks in 1966. “Presentness,” Fried poignantly declares at the end of his essay, “is grace” (quoted in Foster et al. 2004:21, 35, 81).²⁹ Even Reich’s

study of the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein at Cornell University in the 1950s seems relevant in the context of the emerging aesthetic of minimalism. Hal Foster argues that the introduction of Wittgenstein's model of meaning in the United States of the mid 1960s, which "seemed utterly to alter the parameters of aesthetic experience," was a fundamental underpinning for minimalism (2004:493). Art critic Barbara Rose's 1965 discussion of minimalism in "ABC Art" (Rose 2000) stresses the relevance of Wittgenstein's notion that language is irreducibly contextual (that its meanings are dependent on "use" and to some degree escapes and exceeds its speakers' intentions), for a full understanding of works by the minimalists Morris and Judd. With such common ground, it is no wonder Reich found a receptive audience in the galleries of New York City in the late 1960s.

The consequences of the technical, conceptual, philosophical, and especially institutional affiliations between Reich and the minimalists have been enormous for music history. Less a historical description of an artistic ethos than a conceptual apparatus through which history becomes possible, the myth of minimalism has practically eclipsed empirically-grounded historical accounts that lie outside of its logical and conceptual reach. Musical minimalism likes to celebrate its uncompromising immediacy as well as its lack of hidden structural devices and narratives. It is as if the discourse of music's *unhidden* structural workings (which ostensibly present material processes free of authorial interference) almost by definition hides the complex intertextual material history of its sounding forms. If, as Philip Glass maintains, "music must be listened to as pure sound-event, an act without dramatic structure," then this music's extramusical references, cultural meanings, and historical and geographical origins seem aesthetically off limits (quoted in Suzuki 1991:52). This sentiment is echoed in the musical literature. It is as if the widespread historical narrative of musical minimalism emphasizing stylistic traits like authorial non-interference, non-representation, anti-illusionism, flattening of surface, the prevalence of all-over pattern, repetitive structures, and the like, becomes the very authorial interference writ large of a discourse about the meanings of minimalism that, through sheer force of repetition, effaces a broader set of the music's enabling social conditions and thereby also effaces the possibility of writing an authentic history.

The myth of minimalism flourished on the basis of tacit contracts between visual artists, critics, historians, and musicians about how a new movement in the arts of the mid-to-late 1960s might be represented. Not infrequently one can see writers trying, with only partial success, to bend the story of specific works of minimalist music to fit a scriptural pattern of ostensible stylistic characteristics. With its origins in the artistic production of various visual artists (such as Sol le Witt, Frank Stella, Michael Snow, and Richard Serra) as well as the writings of contemporary critics (such as

Barbara Rose, Michael Fried, Richard Wollheim, Tom Johnson and Michael Nyman), the public discourse on minimalism in music has tended to emphasize features associated with minimalism in the *visual* arts of the 1960s. These features include severity of means, clarity of form and simplicity of structure and texture. Like its counterpart in the visual arts, minimalist music was said to be produced with a minimum of compositional maneuvering, which, in turn, resonated with the emerging post-structuralist skepticism towards regulative concept-metaphors like “authorship,” “subjectivity,” “expression,” and “originality” no less than did new modes of criticism valuing formal analysis over what Susan Sontag in her 1964 essay “Against Interpretation” called the “rough grip of interpretation” (Sontag 1966).³⁰ Sontag’s appraisal of the new art involves a polemic against the legacy of mimetic theories of art, which—by way of a condition of “dissatisfaction” which desires something *else* in the artwork—tend to “deplete” the world of the work into a “mental scheme of categories” (Sontag 1966:10). In contrast to this two-fold hermeneutic conception of art, Sontag advocates an “erotics of art” that is acutely attuned to the “pure untranslatable, sensuous immediacy of [the artwork] itself” (1966:14). This kind of thinking is carried over into musical discourse on minimalism with modernism as its contrast case. Thus, minimalism asserts an absence of hidden mathematical “structures” behind its surface (characteristic of modernists like Boulez, Babbitt, and even Cage), and claims instead to issue forth various clearly audible *depersonalized* perceptual processes, which thereby deflect attention away from the composing self toward the living context of music’s sensuous “happening.”³¹ In Reich’s words, “while performing and listening to gradual musical processes, one can participate in a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual” (2002:36).

This last statement was made in the context of Reich’s essay, “Music as a Gradual Process,” first published, as mentioned, alongside Sol LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (LeWitt 1967). In the 1960s, Reich as well as Phillip Glass and LaMonte Young established close contacts with visual artists associated with minimalism in New York City. This contact involved personal friendships, shared exhibition/performance spaces (both Reich and Glass gave concerts at the Whitney), intellectual and artistic exchanges, and even mutual financial support. Reich’s first major concerts in New York were given in March 1967 at the Park Place Gallery operated by Paula Cooper, one of the most important galleries exhibiting minimal art at the time. His next major concert was at the Whitney, while *Drumming* was given its world premiere at The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).³²

Reich, who attempts to preserve a distinction between his own artistic output and that of his contemporaries in the visual arts, admits a kinship between the two domains: “there is,” he tells Emily Wasserman in 1972 “some

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relationship between my music and any Minimal art” (quoted in Suzuki 1991:150). Of the connection between Serra’s sculptures specifically and his early work, Reich says,

The analogy I saw with Serra’s sculptures . . . was that his works and mine are both more about materials and process than they are about psychology. I spent some time with Serra just preceding the time he started working with lead, so I was around when he did the first pieces of the lead sheet on the wall being propped up by the pole. Now, again analogies between sculpture and music are hard to make, but he could have had a pole cast from lead. But he didn’t, he chose to take the same material and roll it up—which is very difficult to do—so there was a kind of deadpan working out of a process: lead holding up lead. This also had a very powerful effect I hope my early pieces had. They too were the deadpan working out of process . . . (quoted in Suzuki:183–84)

Thus, the material and media may have differed (making analogies difficult because of the minimalist interest in the specifics of artistic “material”), but Reich acknowledged the affinities his early music shared with the aesthetic aims and technical procedures used by Serra. In a 1984 interview with Dean Suzuki, Reich further acknowledged the creative debt he owed to the “art world context” of New York City: “Music as a Gradual Process’ might not have been in the shape that [it was] in had it not been for the kind of community I was in at that period of time” (quoted in Suzuki 1991:198).

Grounded in these often guarded statements by the composer, writings emphasizing minimalist motifs drawn from the visual arts have proliferated. Dean Suzuki devotes a 100-page chapter to the connection between minimalism in music and the visual arts. Suzuki describes how “minimal music was derived . . . from Minimal Art, with which it shares numerous aesthetic and technical characteristics” (1991:122). For example, comparing Reich’s music with the work of LeWitt, Suzuki offers an argument framed by the evident similarity of the artists’ respective statements as well as the procedural and experiential parallels between their various works. Suzuki quotes Reich: “at the time I was writing in 1968 much of the stress in new music was on chance and free improvisation and I was trying to separate myself from that and to show that one could work in a more impersonal way” (1991:163). He then offers a similar comment by Sol LeWitt in which the artist offers an analogously dismissive attitude towards traditional understandings of the creative process: “if the artist wishes to explore his idea thoroughly, then arbitrary or chance decisions would be kept to a minimum, while caprice, taste and other whimsies would be eliminated from the making of the art. To work with a plan that is preset is one way of avoiding subjectivity” (1991:163). Suzuki demonstrates these shared preoccupations in the context of actual works. For example, LeWitt’s *Arcs, Circles, and Grids* is sectional, as is *Piano Phase*.

Both use a single, gradually unfolding process. Both processes are easily understood and perceived, and both yield very rich and unexpected results which become focal points, conforming, at least in part, to statements made by LeWitt. The “side effects” which “may be used in new works,” mentioned by LeWitt in “Sentence 28” of his “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” can, for Suzuki, “be likened to Reich’s discovery of resulting patterns. The resulting patterns were a by-product of the phasing process and became important, indeed [they became] focal points, in the works such as *Violin Phase* and *Drumming*” (1991:169).³³

The key categories of Suzuki’s argument are widespread in the literature on minimalism. Edward Strickland’s 1993 book exploring the origins of minimalism is practically predicated on the shared concerns of visual artists and musicians active in the 1960s and 1970s. Likewise, Keith Potter launches his account of minimalism in music with reference to Sol LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” and, in his discussion of Reich, devotes a section to the composer’s connections to minimalist artists (Potter 2000:1, 171–76). Even where the visual arts are not overtly mentioned, the central argumentative tenets still cohere around motifs drawn from the artworld. Noting that “it is not surprising that Reich mixed with a like-minded group of minimalist painters and sculptors who also nurtured Young and, later, Glass,” K. Robert Schwarz, in his 1996 book *Minimalists*, describes Reich’s works in overtly minimalist metaphors. *Drumming*, for example, involves performers who “soberly carry out the musical process. Playing from memory, they are asked to sacrifice individual spontaneity” (Schwarz 1996a:75). Schwarz goes on to explain that the use of ensembles of identical instruments “allowed the phasing process to emerge more clearly and preserved a minimalist unity of timbre,” claiming that, despite broadened instrumental resources in it, *Drumming* “remains a minimalist work, for it is harmonically and rhythmically static” (1996a:75).

At this point it is worth mentioning how a minimalist motif falsifies an aesthetic experience of the musical work; how, whatever else might be said of it, *Drumming* simply cannot be construed as a *rhythmically static* piece. With the gradually expanding and contracting rhythmic configurations, the constantly changing relationships between parts, the irrational rhythms produced when one player speeds up against the fixed tempo of another player, the irregular resultant patterns produced by the interaction of parts when they lock back into a shared pulse, and the constantly shifting sense of downbeat, *Drumming* counts as one of the most, if not *the* most vibrant explorations of rhythmic complexity in the history of Western music.

The severity of such descriptive errors tends to increase with the amount of emphasis on the music’s supposed connection to the visual arts. Even the titles of various books and articles on the subject betray the attachment to

this connection. The title of the edited volume *Perceptible Processes: Minimalism and the Baroque* (Swan 1997), for example, is taken from a statement Reich makes in "Music as a Gradual Process."³⁴ Schwarz, who contributed the first essay for the book, writes that "although it was meant to apply only to his music, it conveys the dogmatism of Minimalism at its purest" (Schwartz 1997:5). Consider also Simon Shaw-Miller's *Visible Deeds of Music* (2002), which similarly describes minimalist music in the metaphors of "Work-As-Process." In a section entitled "The Emphasis on Surface," Shaw-Miller demonstrates how Stella attempted to "eliminate the illusion of space by using a regulated surface pattern . . . arrived at by following the form of the edge of the canvas" and thus, in Stella's *Six Mile Bottom* (1960), for example, "there is no background, all is foreground without interiority" (Shaw-Miller 2002:197). Shaw-Miller preserves this interest in the anti-illusionism of all-over pattern (emphasizing horizontal surface instead of vertical depth) in his discussion of minimalist music. He therefore praises the concern with "melodic rather than harmonic manipulation, with horizontal rather than vertical development" in the early works of Glass and Reich. Using Reich's *Piano Phase* of 1967 and Glass's *Two Pages* of 1969 as representative examples, Shaw-Miller notes how through the use of limited rhythmic values, pitch spaces and instrumentation, these works "produce an effect of musical surface" (2002:200). Shaw-Miller also notes that,

As Stella used manufactured paint, so the aural, and sometimes textual, impression of much musical minimalism is likewise "premanufactured," a quasi-industrial process of familiar musical units "bolted" together. The feeling of surface is also invoked through the constant pulse and repetition of much minimalist music, which sets up a screen of expectation while placing in the foreground only limited change, giving a sense of "flatness"—continuity in time as the music "unfolds," as there is continuity in space with minimal art. (2002:200)

The emphasis on motifs from the visual arts leaves Shaw-Miller's actual hearing of a work like *Piano Phase* impoverished. His emphasis on anti-illusionistic flatness of the "musical surface," for example, no less than his emphasis on "only limited change," is amply discredited by the sound of *Piano Phase*. In reality, with the startling and sudden perceptual re-orientations, which impel shifting one's very modality of hearing every time the music locks into a new phasing relationship (sometimes we hear hocketing motives, sometimes contrapuntal weaving, sometimes homophony, and so on) replete with hidden inherent patterns and other aural riddles, *Piano Phase* is far from "anti-illusionistic." In fact, *Piano Phase* is practically a study in patterned illusionism.

For all of their attempts to resist the “rough grip” of interpretation by focusing the perceiver on the “pure untranslatable, sensuous immediacy” of these works, minimalist metaphors drawn from the visual arts, when applied to the musical counterparts, in fact seem to deflect our hearing from what is really going on in the music *qua* music. To paraphrase Frank Stella, what we hear in *Piano Phase*, for example, is in fact not quite what we hear. Whether the inherited conceptual apparatus from the visual arts fails to capture the purely musical aspects of *It’s Gonna Rain* (to the extent that these can be identified) remains an open question; that the apparatus fails to capture both the textual concretions and the contextual accretions of *It’s Gonna Rain* should, by now, be beyond doubt. This failure is surprising in the context of Reich’s claim that *It’s Gonna Rain* is “the purest process piece” he ever wrote. Notwithstanding the interwoven textual and contextual texture of its signifying practice, *It’s Gonna Rain*, in fact, uses a *variety* of musical techniques.

Part One begins with an unmodified presentation of Walter’s text, followed by a non-phasing loop on the words “it’s gonna rain.” This loop is repeated twenty-eight times before yielding to the aforementioned “monophonic sampling” section. Only then does Reich present a full cycle of two taped loops of the same words in a pure gradual phasing process. But Part One ends suddenly with the unforeseen appearance of the words “after a while.” These words jolt us back to the textual matter at hand. It is as if the phasing process itself thereby brings us to experience *as inexorable* the temporal passage (“a while”) before the flood to which Walter’s Noah refers. The abrupt return of the initial documentary presentation of Walter’s words yanks the listener away from the by now well-established automatic mode (“run[ning] by itself”) of the formal phasing process (Reich 2002:34). Walter’s untreated final words in Part One reposition the role of repetition in *It’s Gonna Rain*, offering a new detail of content, or what Roland Barthes in the context of photography might call a *punctum*, “a floating flash.” On the *punctum*, Barthes writes, “it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there . . . It is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence” (quoted in Foster et al. 2004:494–95). Likewise, in *It’s Gonna Rain*, Walter’s suddenly added though already heard “after a while” acutely if briefly ruptures the structural norm of the piece, obliging us to revisit the real content of his mechanically patterned speech. This return creates the paradox of a music that is both referential and simulacral, connected and disconnected, critical and complacent, affective and affectless.

Perhaps, to the extent that an analogy is warranted, this places Reich’s *It’s Gonna Rain* (as well as *Come Out*) in closer proximity to the repetitions found in Andy Warhol than to those found in the work of the minimalists

proper (Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and so on). Warhol's compulsion to repeat traumatic images (a police dog attacking a black man, a burning white car with a man impaled on a telephone pole, Jackie Kennedy in a state of mourning), which are not unlike the fragments chosen by Reich (Brother Walter's vision of an apocalypse, Daniel Hamm's account of his attempt to make himself bleed after being arrested by police), puts into play a simultaneous draining of significance and denial of affect that nonetheless cannot be reduced to mere simulation or pure image.³⁵ These are repetitions that wear down their distressing representations in order to invigorate them. They register the social shock they absorb. Similarly, Part Two of *It's Gonna Rain*, while presenting straightforward phasing relationships, is itself comprised of a mishmash arrangement of Walter's text, another case of surreal, compulsively repeating, traumatic realism. In short, the compositional processes in *It's Gonna Rain* are not as pure as Reich's hindsight assessment would have us believe, nor are Reich's connections to the minimalist visual artists as self-evident as might first appear.³⁶ How can we expand the work's possible contexts?

4. Situating a Global Context

There is a conspicuously anomalous moment in Reich's essay "Music as a Gradual Process." After making a point about the naturalized connection between artistic technique and current technologies, Reich declares: "All music turns out to be ethnic music" (2002:35). In the context of an essay otherwise preoccupied with impersonality and structuralist processes, this idea seems curiously off-topic and tacked-on as an afterthought. And yet its figuration of musical processes discernibly shifts rhetorical emphasis from autogenous production to cultural production. By organically linking musical processes to the peculiarities of a specific brand of electromechanical equipment, Reich draws attention to the historically and geographically localized conditions for such a discovery. Despite its potential for referencing non-Western culture, the word "ethnic" is here applied to a particular North Atlantic context. As such, Reich deftly relativizes any claims of Western cultural superiority. But what is the question to which this conceptual linkage between context and technique seems to respond? It is a question about origins, about where the music might come from, and so, finally, about the mechanism of inspiration. This, Reich seems to claim (in language that intriguingly blends determinism and chance), is music borne out of a homespun preoccupation with available technology. This is not, one is encouraged to conclude, music derived from resources outside of that context.³⁷

Reich's statement is strikingly resonant with then-current themes in the emergent field of ethnomusicology. Taruskin, for example, points

out the correspondence between Reich's claim, "All music turns out to be ethnic music," and that of John Blacking, "All music is folk music" (Blacking 1973:4).³⁸ Indeed, Taruskin reads Reich's words as polemical critique of Western musical practice and its overly elitist and individualistic value systems—a critique inspired by Reich's own acquaintance with African and Asian music. Taruskin contrasts Reich's description of his own performance with Blacking's description of Venda performance, quoting Reich's words, "The pleasure I get from playing is not the pleasure of expressing myself but of subjugating myself to the music and experiencing the ecstasy that comes from being part of it," alongside Blacking's words,

Rhythms such as these cannot be performed correctly unless the players are their own conductors and yet at the same time submit to the rhythm of an invisible conductor. This is the kind of shared experience which the Venda seek and express in their music making.

Taruskin proposes a speculative analogy between these trains of thought: "[Blacking] could just as well have been describing Reich's *Drumming*" and concludes that "Reich sought not to express concepts found in other features of his own culture, or other types of 'urban European art music' . . . , but to propose an alternative to them that implied both a musical contrast and a social critique." In Taruskin's assessment, this critique ultimately "produced historical change" (Taruskin 2005, 5:383). Even if it is clear from the context of Reich's statement (condensing all music into "ethnic music") that he was in fact pointing precisely to "features of his own culture" (a local technological milieu instead of a foreign one), Taruskin effectively connects Reich's association with non-Western music to a critique of established institutions and social relations in the West.³⁹

Most historians of minimalism comment upon the multicultural elements of Reich's music and, in particular, upon his exposure to African music. The non-Western sources of Reich's music, however, are often mentioned in a cursory and mostly belated way, conforming to Reich's claim that his exposure to African music in 1970 counted as mere "confirmation" for what he had been doing all along: "The question often arises as to what influence my visit to Africa in the summer of 1970 had on *Drumming*? The answer is *confirmation*" (2002:67). The question that does not seem to arise often is how Reich's music was influenced by African music before his visit to Africa in 1970. A cursory survey of texts mapping Reich's development as a composer reveals a patterned chronology consistently disinterested in this question. Reich's output, the story goes, was essentially homegrown until he traveled to Africa in 1970, where, in the words of Schwarz, "Reich discovered that the structure of West African music was *not that different*

from his own” (emphasis added, Schwarz 1996a:72). Likewise, in Hoek’s retelling of Reich’s compositional trajectory, we read:

As Reich was already aware, the patterns he was studying [in Africa] were closely related to his own compositions. “The trip to Africa was very instructive, not really for new information . . . , but as *confirmation and encouragement*” . . . [Reich’s] time in Africa . . . *reinforced his predilection* with repetition, polyrhythms, and slowly changing processes and motivated Reich to create his first large-scale work. (emphasis added in external quote, Hoek 2002:9)⁴⁰

African music, it seems, was curiously related to Reich’s pre-1970 work, yet most commentators fail to ask why this might be so; his contact with music in Africa merely appears to have established Reich’s already-present proclivities and achievements more firmly (it “confirmed,” “reinforced,” “encouraged,” but it did not produce).

Reich himself advances this interpretation when he writes in 1988, “the influence of my trip to Africa on my composition was more in the nature of encouragement than change of direction. Since I had composed the formative works in my style (*It’s Gonna Rain, Come Out, Piano Phase, Violin Phase*, etc.) in the 1960s prior to going to Ghana in 1970, my trip there basically confirmed the direction I was already going in” (2002:149).⁴¹ With reference to the *trip* to Ghana alone, this statement may be accurate, but it remains misleading about the *general* influence on these early works of African music culled from books, journals, conversations, lessons, transcriptions, etc. long before the trip to Africa. Thus, an increasingly entrenched narrative pattern—a period of early invention followed by later confirmation in Ghana—has led to a limited assessment of African music’s place in the Reichian *oeuvre*. Mertens, for example, writes,

Another possible line of investigation would have been to draw attention to the open influence of non-European, so-called primitive music . . . Steve Reich had adopted certain rhythmic principles from the music of Ghana and the Ivory Coast . . . But this use of non-European techniques should not be regarded as the foundation of [his] work . . . (2004:308)

Likewise, in a checklist of eleven key categories of minimalism (“ideas, devices, and techniques through which early minimalist music found expression”), Kyle Gann lists the “influence of non-Western music” *after* everything else. Furthermore, this influence, writes Gann, “is far from a universal component of minimalism, nor a necessary one . . .” (Gann 2004:302). More dramatically, Suzuki, in a dissertation covering over 700 pages, barely mentions the African influence on Reich, reserving mention of Africa for a

single sentence informing the compositional context of *Drumming*.⁴² Even Taruskin's laudable excursion into African musical practice as it relates to Reich's aesthetic project bears the marks of the same narrative pattern: first, the relationship is raised in the predictable context of *Drumming* (whence Reich's "style underwent a change"), and second, the relationship largely hinges on a speculative resonance noted in statements made by both the composer and John Blacking (Taruskin 2005, 5:379–80). For all its insightfulness, Taruskin's account of the "social meaning [on the occasion of a performance of *Drumming*] that arose directly from its African antecedents," ultimately remains in Taruskin's words "*implied* (or *metaphorical*)" (emphasis added, 2005, 5:379). Beyond the metaphorical shift in the context of performance, Taruskin does not, for example, list any shared technical features, quotations, or precise appropriations by which we could properly assess the degree of influence African music had on *Drumming*.

Some recent musicological work has genuinely attempted to address this problem by bringing non-Western discourse into explicit conversation with Reich's work. Sumanth Gopinath, for example, quotes Reich's experience of Ewe music at the University of Accra as "overwhelming," "like being in front of a tidal wave," and "the result—a year after his return—was *Drumming*" (Gopinath 2004:1). While Gopinath is not concerned with empirically excavating the African musical influence in Reich's *oeuvre*, we nonetheless find the trope that Reich's African experience "resulted" in *Drumming*. Gopinath intensifies the narrative *topos* of the composer's compositional career, arguing that *Drumming* marked Reich's conscious "shift to a non-Western based musical aesthetic," one that could "match the 'cultural capital' of electronic technology" which Reich would now leave behind (2004:3). Gopinath lists a range of factors (the black liberation movement, the Immigration Act of 1965, and so on) to show how Reich may have come to value "the idea of a genuine musical-cultural fusion" over "electronic-based composition," which had hitherto "played a significant role in the composer's output" (2004:3).

To demonstrate the limited scope of Reich's purposeful ethnographic turn in *Drumming*, Gopinath emphasizes the "constructed" nature of this effort. Unlike Ewe drumming, Reich's use of vocalized "nonsense syllables" is not "to communicate linguistically, but rather to imitate the sounds of instruments" (2004:9).⁴³ Reich's imitations are related to "the various resulting patterns that arise out of the phasing process;" they are not, as in Africa, used "in the transmission of language" (2004:10). For Gopinath, this is a "completely inverted use of vocality" and Reich's *Drumming* has more to do with his own past—"the music sounds quite similar to his earlier pieces *Piano Phase* (1967) or *Violin Phase* (1967)"—than with his African encounter (2004:11). In the final analysis, "one might view *Drumming* as

an ethnographic fantasy of self-validation, in which the narrative subject transcribes and analyzes the ‘music’ in question only to ‘find’ (i.e. construct) himself—perhaps playing his own music in a vaguely ‘exotic’ context” (2004:11). Although Gopinath suggestively connects the ethnographic aura of Reich’s work to the music industry and its niche markets, the fundamental story about the composer’s path remains the same.⁴⁴ As with the commentary of others, we find here a perceived African ethnographic turn around the time of *Drumming* (though not before), which might bestow a certain ritual enchantment on its performance context but is ultimately non-essential (in this case *imagined*) to Reich’s aesthetic paradigm.⁴⁵

What these interpretative and historical accounts overlook are the overt African elements in Reich’s output before his trip to Accra in 1970. Reich’s early works, *Piano Phase* (for two pianos, 1967), *Violin Phase* (for four violins, or violin and three channels of tape, 1967), *Pulse Music* (for the phase shifting pulse gate, an electronic device constructed by the composer with help from Larry Owens that permitted performers to play together at different speeds, 1969), and *Phase Patterns* (for four electric organs, 1970), all draw to some extent on distinctly African compositional principles traceable to specific local communities in Africa ranging from Ghana to Mozambique.⁴⁶ This is not the place to give a full account of the African sources for these early works. For the purposes of this essay, it suffices to note that Reich’s own descriptions of these early pieces explicitly reference ideas and motifs extracted from then-circulating ethnographic writing on these music traditions. For example, Reich’s concept of “resultant pattern”—coined to describe the “psychoacoustic by-products of the repetition and phase-shifting” in his early work—is in fact an undisguised appropriation of terminology describing African music, then circulating in the ethnomusicological literature under the label “inherent rhythm” (2002:26).⁴⁷ Ironically, it is just the fact of Reich’s pursuit of resultant patterns (instead of patterns used to “communicate linguistically”) in *Drumming* that leads Gopinath, apparently unaware that the concept is indigenously African, to conclude that Reich’s piece was an invented “ethnographic fantasy,” his ensemble a “pseudo-ethnic” one (Gopinath 2004:9, 10).

Not surprisingly, “Some Optimistic Predictions (1970) About the Future of Music,” the essay that forms the bridge in *Writings on Music* between discussions of Reich’s early works and the trip to Africa explicitly and insightfully thematizes the new importance of non-Western music for the future of Western music:

Non-Western music in general and African, Indonesian, and Indian music in particular will serve as new structural models for Western musicians. Not as new models of sound. (That’s the old exoticism trip.) Those of us

who love the sounds will hopefully just go and learn how to play these musics. Music schools will be resurrected through offering instruction in the practice and theory of all the world's music. Young composer/performers will form all sorts of new ensembles growing out of one or several of the world's musical traditions. (Reich 2002:51)⁴⁸

Close inspection of Reich's various descriptions, writings, and interviews of his pre-1970 period in fact reveals considerably more interest in African music than the aforementioned narrative *topos* implies. In his essay on "Slow Motion Sound" (1967), for example, Reich relates the story of an African girl learning English by rote: "Since African languages are generally tonal, and learning the correct speech melody is as necessary for understanding as is the correct word, this was simply carried over into the teaching of English" (2002:29). Years later Reich would explore and expand upon this kind of intimate relationship between language and music in an essay on the subject and in a host of compositions (*Tehillim*, 1981; *Different Trains*, 1988; *The Cave*, 1993; and others). Still, it is clear that his interest in the importance of African speech patterns became a guiding compositional idea in his very first tape pieces: "Since the early 1960s I have been interested in speech melody. That is the melody that all of us unconsciously create while speaking . . . This relationship between spoken language and folk music . . . has been written about . . . by the ethnomusicologists A. M. Jones and Simha Arom in their studies of African music" (2002:194–95). A vivid presentation of the unique rhythms and cadences of human speech was clearly one of Reich's primary quests in *It's Gonna Rain*: "Using the voice of individual speakers is not like setting a text—it's setting a human being," he writes in 1965. "A human being is personified by his or her voice" (2004:21). With an African American voice as raw material, Reich's idea to explore the unique signature inflections of that voice in *It's Gonna Rain* came from his studies of African music.

As Alburger explains, William Austin (then teaching at Cornell University) likely introduced Reich to African music as early as the 1950s (Alburger 2004:1).⁴⁹ Reich's interest in West African music specifically dated back to at least 1962 (three years before *It's Gonna Rain*) when he encountered A. M. Jones's two-volume *Studies in African Music* (1959) upon the recommendation of Gunther Schuller during a seminar in California. In contrast to the common historical account, Reich acknowledges this chronology: "My first discovery of non-Western music was at the time when I was working with tape loops for the first time in 1962–63" (2002:3).⁵⁰ On encountering Jones's *Studies*, Reich recalls, "I had heard African music but . . . I didn't know how it was put together. So to see in notation overlapping rhythmic patterns put together so their down-beats do not coincide showed me a radical new way

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of making music” (quoted in Ford 1993:63). “This, in simplified miniature,” Reich declares in his *Writings*, “is the essence of African rhythmic structure: several repeating patterns of the same or related lengths and each with its own separate downbeat” (2002:57). Reich is referring here to what Jones identifies as a trans-continental characteristic of African music in his *Studies*.

On comparing the drumming styles of the Ewe people in West Africa with the Lala people of Central Africa, for example, Jones finds a fundamental consistency between them *vis à vis* the phasing relationships set forth by different drummers of an ensemble. The following description of the behavior of the *Icibitiku* drum in the *Icila* dance is typical:

When he introduces his variant in bar 29 he slips one quaver, thereby making a permanent cross-rhythm with *Gankogui*. Not only is this typical of Ewe practice [the contrast case] but the cross-rhythm he sets up is the exact counterpart of that made by the Ewe small drum *Kagan*. There are two ways of crossing two similar triple times: you can slip one quaver or you can slip two. (Jones 1959,1:199)

Jones goes on to demonstrate the phasing relationships in this situation with a diagram of a short $\frac{3}{8}$ pattern, lined up against itself, in all three possible positions. For Jones, setting a pattern against itself at a staggered time interval so that its downbeats do not coincide is a staple of African music. Indeed, Jones’s transcription of the *Icila* dance in the second volume of *Studies in African Music* reveals phased rhythmic relationships between various sets of drums.

Herein lay the origins of Reich’s idea to line up the spoken material from Brother Walter’s address in Union Square in an out-of-phase relationship with itself. Seduced by the happy chance of the tapes’ running at different tempi, however, nearly all commentators on Reich’s early tape pieces do not notice the fact that Reich specifically aimed to set up the tape loops in *It’s Gonna Rain* in a particular Africanized phase relationship. Following Jones’s account of drumming from West and Central Africa, Reich writes, “My first thought was to play one loop *against itself* in some particular relationship, since some of my previous pieces had dealt with two or more identical instruments playing the same notes against each other” (2002:20). Reich clarifies what he means later in the same essay: “I had intended to make a specific relationship: ‘It’s gonna’ on one loop against ‘rain’ on the other. Instead, the two machines happened to be lined up in unison and one of them gradually started to get ahead of the other” (2002:21). After 1971 Reich would return to this more precisely African compositional practice, employing notched rather than sliding phase relationships in the context of quoted fragments of African music in *Clapping Music* (1972), *Music for Pieces of Wood* (1973), and *Six Pianos* (1972).

Reich can be vague about the precise details of his discovery of African rhythmic phasing relationships. In the introduction to his *Writings on Music*, he suggests that his work with tape coincided with his discovery of Jones's book:

[*Studies in African Music*] was like looking at the blueprint for something completely unknown. Here was a music with repeating patterns (similar to the tape loop material I was beginning to fool around with), which were superimposed so that the downbeats did not coincide . . . I began listening to what happens rhythmically when you make shorter and shorter loops—and this was right at about the time when I discovered A. M. Jones's book on African music. I was fascinated by what I was hearing in the tape loops and the African use of independent repetition of simultaneous patterns (2002:10).

In the context of a lasting antagonism between Reich and Terry Riley about who first discovered tape loops, however, Reich is more emphatic about his very early connection to African compositional practice: "I ordered [*Studies in African Music*] from Oxford University Press, which was a big commitment in those days. Basically what I saw was repeating patterns in $\frac{12}{8}$ or subdivisions of $\frac{12}{8}$ superimposed so that their downbeats do not coincide. This was *before* I met Terry. I had the ingredients: African music, Coltrane, tape loops, and Jr. Walker" (quoted in Alburger 2004:3). Furthermore, *In C* (ostensibly one of Riley's works that prompted Reich to experiment with tape loops) was itself indebted to African music, a point Reich himself occasionally asserts.⁵¹

As with his explorations of tonal inflection, it is evident that the particular brand of patterned displacement in *It's Gonna Rain* was derived from Reich's studies in African music. In 1988 he finally writes, "[African music] was clearly a radically different way of making music. It also suggested the multiple simultaneous tape loops I was beginning to experiment with at the time" (Reich 2002:148). Here Reich patently acknowledges the music's radical *difference* (presumably from what he was accustomed to at that time), his exposure to it before composing *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out*, and its evident influence on those works. Most important, for Reich, were the music's structural procedures: "repeating patterns (often in what we would call a $\frac{12}{8}$ meter) superimposed on each other so that their individual downbeats did not coincide" (Reich 2002:148). "Structural" borrowing, in Reich's lexicon, is associated with ideological neutrality. Unlike the use of non-Western "models of *sound*," which Reich dismisses as "the old exoticism trip," African and other non-Western "structural models" are considered acceptable and desirable by the composer (emphasis added, 2002:51). Aware that some forms of appropriation can "seem like a kind of musical rape,"

Reich is careful to distinguish inappropriate from appropriate borrowings. The ideological distinction turns on the musical one between *sound* and *structure*: “my interest was in the rhythmic structure of the music. I didn’t want to *sound* . . . African, I wanted to *think* . . . African” (2002:148). Thus, for Reich, “structural,” “technical,” or “formal” phenomena are unsullied in the context of cross-cultural transactions: “That information, it seems to me, travels more easily through customs, as it were. Because, in a sense, it’s completely neutral information” (quoted in Zuckerman 2002:13).⁵²

Leaving aside the question of whether “structural” borrowing is in fact less ideologically charged than is “sonic” borrowing, or whether Reich’s particular brand of borrowing from African music is in fact “structural” at all (even as this is understood by the composer), it is worth noting how the emphasis on “structure” in his discussions of the African presence in his own work (a necessary emphasis for shielding the composer from “musical rape”) contradicts one of the basic aesthetic dicta in “Music as a Gradual Process:” resistance to the very dichotomy between structure and sound. Thus, Reich’s writings convey a more equivocal presentation of the music’s philosophical import, which sometimes will vividly *conflate* “compositional process” and “sounding music” and other times must vividly *oppose* them, than the tersely logical run of ideas suggests. *It’s Gonna Rain*, at least, bears the marks of this contradiction.

For the purposes of this essay, what seems certain is that Reich’s programmatic statements in “Music as a Gradual Process” and elsewhere can thus conspire to deflect attention from the African models to which his earliest works were deeply beholden. For it is the structural properties of African music laid out in Jones’s book that were at issue in the creation of *It’s Gonna Rain*. In the words of Reich, “[Jones’s transcriptions were] a very potent piece of information, especially for someone fooling around with tape loops, *which I began to view as little mechanized Africans*” (emphasis added, quoted in Alburger 2004:3). Reich’s dehumanizing attitude toward Africans in this quote reveals the way African compositional ideas are viewed as found objects, abstracted from their own field of referents, to be freely used as formal elements in musical composition. Here it suffices to point out that, Reich’s self-generating ambitions notwithstanding, African music is one of *It’s Gonna Rain’s* basic conditions of possibility. Likewise, for all its aspiration toward pure processes, Reich’s uncommonly magical *oeuvre*, produced in a curious set of intersecting contexts, is deeply beholden to African music from the start. Today, in an age of expansive globalization, it is an ethical duty to recover this multicultural heritage. Perhaps it is not surprising that an artistic vision thriving on depersonalized artistic processes presented so triumphantly in 1968 should grow muted by the end of the century.

5. Afterword

The diminished role of African music in most accounts of Reich's overall output, and the complete silence about its role in the context of *It's Gonna Rain*, is understandable given the self-generative focus of Reich's articulated aesthetics. But historians attuned to contextual factors and who wish to link these aesthetics to broader social forces, may be equally distracted by examining Reich's institutional, philosophical, and personal involvement with a particular cultural moment in a local American context. Here one might speak of the way one kind of cultural and historical analysis obscures the genuine cultural historical contexts at play in Reich's work, or, more specifically, how descriptive frameworks and associations from the visual arts obscured the truth in music history. In the specific context of *It's Gonna Rain*, one might say that while the African American aspect (Walter's voice) is perhaps the most obvious content and source material of the piece, minimalism in the visual arts is the most talked about of the music's cultural contexts. In contrast, African music, while foundational, is largely ignored and written-out of the music's cultural contexts. Although it values multiple lines of inquiry, the "methodological doubleness" to which I referred at the outset of this essay is mediated here by an ethical commitment, which arbitrates antagonisms arising in telling different versions of the same story. This is a commitment to the genuine integration of non-Western musical lineages with the history of Western music history.

In this writing, I have thus attempted to address a political predicament weighing upon twenty-first-century writings on music in general, namely the problem of the excluded non-West in forging a genuinely global history. In order to offer a more even-handed and inclusive account of Western music's hybrid sources and compositional techniques, this article points toward a fuller integration of non-Western culture in this history than has so far been possible in the literature on minimalism. In particular, this argument emphasizes the African elements that had taken up continued residency in Reich's compositional practice from the very beginning of his remarkable output. Ultimately, this essay forms part of an attempt to elevate the role played by the African continent in shaping the evolution of Western music history. This is not an attempt to discredit the forces shaping Reich's output (the civil rights movement, the political crises of the mid-1960s, the changing aesthetic trends in the United States, and so on), nor to dismiss the multiple lines of influence on Reich's output (Igor Stravinsky, J. S. Bach, John Coltrane, Terry Riley, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Frank Stella, Sol LeWitt, to name a few), nor to discount the growing literature on Reich and the minimalists;

it merely joins the struggle for clarification of one of the twentieth century's most significant musical styles.

Notes

1. Although it is Reich's first major work, *It's Gonna Rain* was issued along with *Violin Phase* by Columbia Masterworks only in 1969, two years after *Come Out* (1966) was released on Odyssey's anthology *New Sounds in Electronic Music* (1967). The work has subsequently been reissued by Elektra Nonesuch as part of *Steve Reich: Early Works* (1987) and then as part of the retrospective CD set *Steve Reich: Works, 1965–1995* (1997) by Nonesuch.

2. Musically speaking, Reich's connection to the conventions of high modernism is slight. Potter recognizes an interest in static harmony and repetition already in Reich's experiments with twelve-tone procedures, although he is quick to qualify the connection between Reich's music and serialism with reference to the jazz idioms of John Coltrane and Gunther Schuller (Potter 2000:158–59).

3. This kind of historical “doubleness” shares with new historicism a non-teleological inclination as well as a suspicion of grand narratives, opting instead for what Jann Pasler calls “question-spaces.” Pasler describes these spaces thus: “The pleasure of using question-spaces to write history comes from holding many diverse elements in one's mind at once and from watching connections emerge and concurrent stories unfold . . .” (Pasler 2005/2006:184). The respect both for immanent and historical aspects of musical production is a crucial ingredient of Pasler's doubleness. (Pasler encourages responsibility for both “thought *in* music” as well as “reflective output,” quoting Benjamin Boretz.) I aim to respect these dueling aspects as well.

4. Reich's recordings of Walter preaching in Union Square in San Francisco are the musical building blocks for *It's Gonna Rain*. The absence of biographical information about Brother Walter is striking. Although he refers to Walter frequently in his extensive writings and interviews, Reich does not offer any concrete details about him. We do not know whether Reich knew the preacher personally, whether Walter was his real name, whether Reich asked for permission to record him, or, if so, what agreements might have been reached regarding the use of the material. Brother Walter is simply described as “a black Pentecostal preacher” of whom Reich became aware in late 1964.

5. McClary's analysis of minimalism in context gestures toward an “overdetermined” methodology, whereby many “possible explanations jostle for our attention” (2004:289–296). She situates minimalism's particular preoccupation with repetition as part of a broad *Zeitgeist*, in which “cyclic repetition” typifies the “structures of rhythm” that characterize much twentieth-century music (2004:287, 296). While this kind of global overview must quickly encounter its limit, McClary's open-ended method allows her to raise to particular prominence the colonial rupture that transformed the Western musical landscape in the twentieth century. This forms a central preoccupation of my argument to follow. Mertens also suggests the “open influence of non-European, so-called primitive music” on the minimalists as a possible line of inquiry in describing minimalism, albeit with much less enthusiasm than McClary. Ultimately, for Mertens, “non-European techniques should not be regarded as the foundation of [the minimalists'] work . . .,” a position I attempt to refute in the argument to follow (2004:308).

6. See, for example, Scherzinger (2001).

7. Not all possible interpretive strands capture the empirical realities of a unique cultural moment with equal validity. It therefore becomes necessary to weigh their respective rel-

evance. Nor do all possible interpretive strands articulate equally with dominant narratives. Thus it is necessary to pay special attention to those readings that do not readily fit within the limits of materialized elite discourse with its own inertial forces. It is true that gaps and silences in the dominant discourse, especially those involving alterity, speak more loudly today than they did in the 1960s. Following the post-structuralist turn in America in the late twentieth century our sensibilities are finely attuned to what is written out of discourse. Our craft today involves excavating from cultural phenomena the absences, the veilings, the Other. At the same time, like all triumphant subversion, such reading is also always in danger of becoming the dominant in turn. This essay attempts to be vigilant about these methodological conundrums.

8. Terry Riley contests Reich's view that he introduced the technique into music history: "When two identical modules are played simultaneously by either tape machines or live performers, imperfections in speed or pitch result in 'phasing.' I introduced the process into music composition; Steve correctly labeled it" (quoted in Alburger 2004:5).

9. The idea that minimalism differs from modernism, and especially from serialism, by virtue of its straightforward rendition of structures is often echoed in the popular literature. See, for example, Gann (1987:76).

10. "Music as a Gradual Process" was re-published in *Source* magazine (1972) and as the accompanying notes to the *Deutsche Grammophon* recording of *Drumming, Six Pianos and Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ* (1974), and, most recently, in Reich's *Writings on Music* (2002). See Potter (2000:352).

11. The reference to the tidal wave is made in connection with Reich's discovery of African music.

12. Citing Reich's reference to "mysteries," Taruskin writes, "And indeed, there is a mysterious corollary to this or any other strict phase process: as a moment's reflection will confirm, its second half is (and must be) automatically the retrograde of the first half, with the relationship between the two players reversed" (2005, 5:374).

13. There is a tension between the idea that palindromic structures need to be pointed out to be heard (as Taruskin maintains, in the manner of Babbitt) and that they are simply confirmed in a "moment's reflection" (as Taruskin also maintains) (2005, 5:374).

14. On the effect of listening to the two increasingly unaligned tape recordings, Reich writes: "the sensation I had in my head was that the sound moved over to my left ear, down to my left shoulder, down my left arm, down my leg, out across the floor to the left, and finally began to reverberate and shake and become the sound I was looking for—"It's gonna/It's gonna rain/rain"—and then it started going the other way and came back together in the center of my head" (Reich 2002:21).

15. Quoting Ivanka Stoianova's term "iterative monadism," Mertens effectively describes the latter mode thus: "what matters is not what the sound may stand for but its physiological intensity" (Mertens 2004:310).

16. Reich repeats this formulation of a suitably impersonal mode of concentration in various contexts. See, for example, his first interview with Michael Nyman (Reich 2002:55).

17. Given his evident interest in the music's local historical resonance, it is not surprising then that Reich initially seemed to construe the work as a dedication piece to Terry Riley. Its original title was to be *It's Gonna Rain; or Meet Brother Walter in Union Square after Listening to Terry Riley*.

18. The former reading might tally with themes raised by Sumanth Gopinath in a talk on

Reich's satirical tape collage piece *Oh dem Watermelons!* at a Princeton University composers' symposium in the fall of 2005; the latter view is held by Mertens.

19. In his *Writings on Music*, Reich does not offer an essay on *Oh dem Watermelons!* even though it postdates *It's Gonna Rain* by a few months. Written in collaboration with the overtly political San Francisco Mime Troupe, the production explores and then deconstructs racial commonplaces across the terrain of two Stephen Foster songs ("Massa's in the cold, cold ground" and "Oh dem Watermelons"). In *Oh dem Watermelons!* the phasing technique, while present, plays a diminished role while political parody takes center stage. Perhaps this is why the increasingly structuralist composer did not offer an essay on the work.

20. The repetition of this sentence appears almost verbatim one page later *with* the italicized conjunctive.

21. The effect is of course enhanced by the internal repetition of words in the initial loop. (Spelling is according to Reich's transcription of the longer passage.)

22. Alburger calls this kind of phasing process "ontology in motion" (2004:6).

23. Potter incorrectly notates the fragment (which is approximately comprised of two eighth notes and a quarter on E, D, and F# respectively) as being in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. Perhaps in deference to Reich's spelling of the word, he adds an extra eighth note on the "na" of "gonna," when an accurate representation would render the word simply as "gon"—a syllable approximately as long as "it's". Hence, the fragment should be notated in $\frac{3}{4}$ (2000:169).

24. The problem with inscribing notions of authentic difference (rooted in the illusion of a biological idea of "race" at odds with the goal of integration, and incompatible with the liberal ideas of American democracy), must be weighed against the aspiration towards political solidarity (the commitment to defeating racism, eliminating racial inequality, etc.) in the context of the civil rights movement.

25. Foucault describes the impulse toward the "historical-transcendental" thus: "an attempt to find, beyond all historical manifestation and historical origin, a primary foundation, the opening of an inexhaustible horizon, a plan which would move backward in time in relation to every event, and which would maintain throughout history the constantly unwinding plan of an unending unity" (Foucault 1972:227).

26. Here I am indebted to Hal Foster's analysis of the MoMA exhibition-cum-book "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, which he describes in terms of a "fetishistic recognition-and-disavowal of the primitive difference" (Foster 1985:65).

27. For a list of names applied to this new art, see Strickland (1993:17).

28. Elsewhere Reich writes, "one hardly needs to seek out personality as it can never be avoided" (2002:81).

29. Compare also Fried's juxtaposition of depersonalized directness and transcendence with Reich's description of performances of process music: "the pleasure I get from playing is not the pleasure of expressing myself, but of subjugating myself to the music and experiencing the ecstasy that comes from being a part of it" (Reich 2002:82).

30. Regarding the new skepticism toward the notion of "authorship," it should not come as a surprise that Roland Barthes's influential essay "The Death of the Author" was brought into the American intellectual discourse in 1968 by Brian O'Doherty, a second-generation minimalist (and critic for the *New York Times*).

31. The term "happening" is used by Michael Nyman in his various descriptions of experimental music (Nyman 1974).

32. The personal interactions between Reich and this generation of minimalist artists were generally supportive: Sol LeWitt bought various manuscript scores and a sketch from Reich, the proceeds from which Reich used to buy instruments for the first performance of *Drumming*. Reich also exchanged the manuscript of *Pendulum Music* for Richard Serra's *Candle Piece* (1967–68), one of Serra's first process sculptures See Suzuki (1991:152, 183).

33. Suzuki demonstrates a host of insightful affinities between Reich's music and the work of other minimalist artists, notably Richard Serra and Michael Snow. He also describes Reich's own output as a visual artist, including the etchings Reich made of his scores for *Clapping Music* and *Pendulum Music* to be sold as artworks, as well as Reich's drawings on four sheets of paper with two different watermarks for Crown Point Press in 1978. The resulting works, *Four Freehand Watermark Tracings* (1978) are generated by a characteristically simple process, which nonetheless produces unexpected patterns. Revealingly, Reich encourages an analogy between the visual arts and his music here. Of his *Tracings*, he claims "I thought to myself this might, in fact, work better than the essay I had been working on" (quoted in Suzuki 1991:201). If the visual demonstration of the simple (but never quite predictable) process in his *Tracings* better represent his musical aesthetic than do words, then Reich thereby acknowledges an aesthetic congruity between musical and visual minimalism—a resonance that is underscored by the overt likeness between the *Tracings* and LeWitt's drawings, such as *Six Thousand Two Hundred and Fifty-Five Lines* (1970).

34. Reich's statement reads: "I am interested in perceptible processes . . . I want to be able to hear the processes happening throughout the sounding music." These sentences from "Music as a Gradual Process" are quoted in Swan (1997:5).

35. *Come Out* (1966), which employs the voice of Daniel Hamm, one of six African American men convicted of murdering a Jewish store owner during the Harlem riots in 1964, was composed for a benefit to support the retrial of these men (known as the Harlem Six). After being beaten by police, the convicted men were told that only those bleeding would be taken to the hospital. In Hamm's words, "I had to, like, open the bruise up, and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them."

36. Perhaps because, while much discussed, the work is not much listened to, analytic descriptions of *It's Gonna Rain* in the literature on minimalism can be remarkably slipshod. Taruskin, for example, writes, "*It's Gonna Rain* . . . was based on just the three titular words, spliced out of a recording of a gospel sermon delivered by Brother Walter . . ." (Taruskin 2005, 5:369); likewise, K. Robert Schwarz describes *It's Gonna Rain* as "a landmark of musical minimalism, for the entire seventeen-minute composition is based on that single, melodious three-word fragment" (Schwarz 1996a:61). Only Part One, about eight minutes long, employs the three-word fragment (but not exclusively), and Part Two, about ten minutes long, does not employ the fragment. Even discussions of Part Two can be oddly inaccurate. In his book *Minimal-music: Entwicklung, Komponisten, Werke*, Fabian R. Lovisa transcribes the text fragments of Part Two as "Knocking upon the door / let's showing up / Alleluia / God / I didn't see you" (Lovisa 1996:67)—a verbal constellation bearing almost no resemblance to the actual textual fragments in the music, which are "Glory to God / God / had been sealed / couldn't open a door / say: Ohh, Noah, they cried / would you just open the door / couldn't open the door / but, shorenuf / Haleluya."

37. Reich underscores this reading of the quotation in a later essay on *Piano Phase*: "Looking back on the tape pieces that preceded *Piano Phase*," he writes, "I see that they were, on the one hand, realizations of an idea that was *indigenous to machines*, and, on the other hand, the gateway to some instrumental music that I would never have come to by listening to any other Western, or for that matter *non-Western music*" (emphasis added, Reich 2002:24).

38. Blacking's ethnomusicological research took place amongst the Venda people of South Africa. In his book *How Musical is Man?* (1973), an argument about the value of music in human culture, Blacking makes universal claims: "If some music can be analyzed and understood as tonal expressions of human experience in the context of different kinds of social and cultural organization," the first chapter concludes, "I see no reason why all music should not be analyzed in the same way" (quoted in Taruskin 2005, 5:381).

39. Reich's comment about "ethnic music" was made in 1968, a fact that puts strain on reading its meaning in tandem with a performance of *Drumming*, composed only in 1971. This is not to say that Taruskin's reading is therefore wrong. First, Reich's early writings are surely not as systematic as the phenomena they describe aspire to be. Second, the features Taruskin highlights in the performance of *Drumming* are arguably present in Reich's earlier works as well.

40. Lovisa likewise only mentions Reich's contact with African music (itself "relativized" by the fact of his past experience as a drummer) solely in connection with the work *Drumming* (Lovisa 1996:74).

41. Reich goes on to drive home the fact of his own invention: "My basic insight into change of phase between two repeating patterns was made by observing two tape loops on two tape recorders. However, seeing the book of African transcriptions by A. M. Jones [1959] undoubtedly helped prepare me to take a strong interest in the phasing process when I discovered it" (2002:149). Careful reading of the second sentence, however, reveals that Reich was actually attuned to Jones's transcriptions *before* he discovered the tape loop phasing.

42. The sentence reads: "With Reich's experience of studying African drumming fresh in his memory, the next logical step was work for drums and other percussion instruments. The resulting work was *Drumming* . . ." (Suzuki 1991:487).

43. Gopinath relies on an account of Ewe drumming from John Miller Chernoff (1979) and, with qualification, from David Locke (1987).

44. Gopinath writes, "When we recall that Reich's music both directly inspired ambient and New Age musicians *and* generated a market for itself, one begins to realize the important links between ethnomusicology and the music industry, which were realized in more ways than simply the creation of a nascent 'world music' market" (2004:11).

45. Gopinath writes, "The fact that *Drumming* begins with the 'transcription' moment, suggests to me a state of ethnographic discovery, in which the music is 'put together' by the ethnomusicologist-composer protagonist. However the music that is 'discovered' is not Ewe music (or any non-Western music) but rather the music of the composer (Steve Reich) himself . . ." (2004:10). Of course, Gopinath seems to be primarily interested in elaborating a reception context for *Drumming*, rather than mapping the actual African presence in Reich's work. In this respect, his insight that *Drumming* is no more African than the works predating it is an astute revision.

46. Significantly, one phasing piece not derived from an African model, *Reed Phase* (for any reed instruments and two-channel tape), completed a year before *Piano Phase* (1966), was withdrawn by the composer: the phase relationships created by the non-African ten-note module were not musically effective. This is because the African rhythmic modules employed by Reich in his early works tend to exhibit specific rhythmic and metric ambiguities whereby all pulse points in the pattern are equal candidates for downbeat formation. The maximally ambiguous metric situations associated with African rhythmic patterns are not found in Reich's ten-note module.

47. See, for example, Kubik (1962).

48. Reich repeats the sentiment in his “Postscript to a Brief Study of Balinese and African Music (1973)” two years after his trip to Ghana: “I studied Balinese and African music because I love them, and also because I believe that non-Western music is presently the single most important source of new ideas for Western composers and musicians” (Reich 2002:69).
49. Reich acknowledges his early exposure to African music: “I first heard African music on recordings while I was at Cornell University in the mid-1950s” (Reich 2004:147).
50. Reich, as mentioned, also corresponded with Jones and studied with the Ewe master drummer, Alfred Ladzepko, in New York City before embarking on his trip to Ghana.
51. See, for example, Reich’s statement in Alburger’s article: “*In C* took these various strands—tape loops, *African music*, John Coltrane—and it tied them all together” (emphasis added, Alburger 2004:5). Riley had frequently traveled to Morocco, where he became fascinated by the dynamic music produced by short repeated modules elaborated in staggered rhythmic relationships. On Riley’s visits to Morocco, see, for example, Potter (2000:103).
52. Interestingly, structuralism is not the only site of “neutrality” in the Reichian text. In the specific context of *It’s Gonna Rain*, he sometimes even regards its three recycled words as just such neutral information: “It just comes along for the ride. It’s just, ‘It’s gonna rain’” (quoted in Zuckerman 2002:17).

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