

Come Out to Show the Split Subject: Steve Reich, Whiteness, and the Avant–Garde

Siarhei Biareishyk

“Through the effects of speech, the subject always realizes himself more in the Other, but he is already pursuing there more than half of himself. He will simply find his desire ever more divided, pulverized, in the circumscribable metonymy of speech.”

– Jacques Lacan

“I didn’t want to *sound* Balinese or African, I wanted to *think* Balinese or African.”

– Steve Reich

Steve Reich’s *Come Out* (1966) begins with articulated speech—a mere sentence—and in the span of 12 minutes and 54 seconds, by way of looping and phasing, it deteriorates into utter noise. *Come Out* is a tribute to the Harlem Six case (1964) in which six African–American youths were falsely accused of murder. The voice in the composition belongs to one of these six men, Daniel Hamm; the noise at the end is a product of Reich’s experimentation in the development of what was then a new avant–garde technique. Jacques Attali theorizes music as an “organization of noise,” arguing that music is “inscribed between noise and silence, in the space of the social codification” (Attali 11;20). In order to transcend the musical tradition and its own time, many avant–garde composers appeal to this sphere of noise—a sphere identified as the “Other” of music; through the composer’s intervention, such noise becomes the avant–garde’s music. In Reich’s *Come Out*, the composer ostensibly identifies the noise as the signifier in the sphere of technology, namely, in tape recordings; and yet, one must insist on the question, why is the recorded voice that of a black man—of the domain that whiteness constructs as its Other? As I will argue, this sphere of noise, for the avant–garde musician, shares functional equivalence with what Jacques Lacan theorizes as the function of the “big” Other. It is nevertheless necessary to insist that the Lacanian field of the Other is a battery of signifiers; it is the field of the symbolic order that is understood as the Other of being, which is by no means synonymous with racial Otherness. If the Lacanian Other then overlaps with racial Otherness, as I contend it does in the case of Steve Reich’s *Come Out* and the avant–garde music more generally in a greater scope, it is a result of historical contingency and not structural necessity. But this historical contingency is a reason enough to insist relentlessly on the conditions of such historical manifestation; one must question all the more

rigorously: why, in the development of the Western avant-garde music does the field of the Other fall on the voice of racialized Otherness? What is the function of this Other in reconstituting a subjectivity in crisis?

These are just a few of the questions that I address in this essay as I interpret Reich's *Come Out* within a ternary constellation of whiteness studies, theories of the avant-garde, and psychoanalysis. I demonstrate a functional isomorphism between the constitution of the contemporary whiteness subjectivity considered by Wiegman and the subjectivity of the avant-garde (developed through both Bürger and Groys), while locating both cases as a manifestation of an ontological split in the constitution of the subject of secular modernity (Lacan). This homology is most succinctly summarized in the fact that the subjectivity in question—both the avant-garde and that of contemporary whiteness—seeks to transgress its own constitutive condition; in other words, it attempts to negate that which defines it at the most profound level. The psychoanalytic approach furthermore allows one to interrogate the necessity of such a split, yet it also accounts for the contingent and historical dimensions of the split manifested in the subject's transferential investment in racialized Otherness. A close reading of Reich's exemplary text, *Come Out*, demonstrates the function of racial otherness at work both in the development of the avant-garde music, as well as in the reconstitution of contemporary whiteness.

Constructing non-racist white subjectivity, retaining its privilege

In his essay "A Report from Occupied Territory," James Baldwin describes the overwhelming presence of the police as a physical means of control over African Americans and Puerto Ricans in 1964 Harlem—a situation characteristic of other major cities throughout the United States at that time. Baldwin illustrates the function of the law as representing whiteness, whereby the senseless violence against racial minorities serves as a token of power that seeks to subdue and to maintain the dominance of whiteness in the United States. Baldwin insists that the police in Harlem "are present to keep the Negro in his place and to protect white business interests, and they have no other function" (Baldwin 1966). These conditions determine the context for the case known as the Harlem Six, in which six African-American youths were falsely accused of the murder of a Jewish storekeeper. After the arrest, the accused were brutally beaten and forced to confess to the murder; the outcome of the initial trial resulted in life sentences, in which the authorities denied each of the accused independent representation. The actions of the police in arresting the young men in the Harlem Six case and subsequently submitting them to torture explicitly represents the broader

function of the power apparatus of whiteness. Reich composed his *Come Out*—an early work seminal to Reich’s career to be recognized as a major Western composer—as a part of a benefit concert that raised funds so that the youths could afford an independent lawyer. Yet, one is left wondering: Is *Come Out* merely a testament to the legacy of the Harlem Six, or is it much more telling about the developing sound of avant-garde music of the time?

As a result of the benefit show, in which Reich was one of many participants, enough money was raised for a retrial of the accused, this time with independent representation in court. The Harlem Six case was dropped after it came to light that the evidence used in the original trial was fabricated—the case, along with other significant civil rights cases during this period, grew to symbolize the corruption and racial discrimination of the judicial system in New York and the United States (Gopinath 2009:121–128; Reich 2002e: 22). In *Come Out*, Reich chooses a single sentence from hours of recorded interviews with all six of the accused juveniles as the only material for the entire composition. The recorded voice of Daniel Hamm, one of the Harlem Six, says: “I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them.” Whereas Hamm’s voice is directly audible in the utterance, the work also entails the latent voice of the composer—a voice embedded in the structure of the piece, inaudible but nonetheless present in the compositional choices of the author in manipulations of Hamm’s statement. Running parallel to the relation between Hamm’s voice and Reich’s authorial choices in the musical composition is the relation of their respective positions in society. Whereas the Harlem Six find themselves on trial largely judged based on the black identity of the accused, Reich’s compositional choices—not unlike the function of whiteness—remain invisible/inaudible, despite their ubiquitous presence.

While the privilege of whiteness and racism are not to be thought apart, considering the relation between Reich and Hamm’s voice shifts the question to the privilege of whiteness and the construction of non-racist white subjectivity. Robyn Wiegman locates the desire for non-racist white subjectivity as predominant in contemporary whiteness and, furthermore, articulates this problem in the context of whiteness studies in the academy as the limit case of contemporary whiteness. Because the main critique lodged against whiteness has localized its privilege in its assumption of invisibility and universality, Wiegman locates the predominant strategy of whiteness studies in the construction of a non-racist white subject in that it seeks to expose whiteness as particularity, thereby denying its status of an empty category. Yet Wiegman also points to the fact that this desire is in part complicit in the perpetuation of white privilege, insofar as it is a component in the structural constitution of contemporary white subjectivity. Wiegman describes this

contemporary white subjectivity as split “between disaffiliation from white supremacist practices and disavowal of the ongoing reformation of white power and one’s benefit from it” (120). She then proceeds to demonstrate that the two sides of the split—the first, non-racist particularity, and the second, universal privilege of whiteness—are codependent. As Wiegman points out, “the political project for the study of whiteness entails not simply rendering whiteness particular but engaging with the ways that being particular will not divest whiteness of its universal epistemological power” (150). Thus, the mission of contemporary whiteness studies to diffuse racism may surface as yet another manifestation of an attempt to construct contemporary non-racist whiteness, whereby even in rendering whiteness as particularity it unwittingly reconstitutes whiteness as a category of privilege. In all this, it is crucial to note the formal paradox underlying contemporary whiteness: the construction of a non-racist white subjectivity seeks to disavow the very condition (racism and white privilege) that constitutes this subjectivity.

Theorizing the avant-garde

The structure of the split in contemporary whiteness that Wiegman describes can be further located, in a subtler way, in Reich’s *Come Out*. While it is also true that Reich does share the sentiment of contemporary whiteness that seeks to construct a non-racist white subject, more importantly, the parallel between Reich’s composition and contemporary whiteness is one of functional equivalence, rather than of composer identity. This functional equivalence becomes evident if *Come Out* is considered in the context of developments in twentieth-century Western classical music belonging to the avant-garde tradition. Reich’s work is usually discussed as pivotal to the development of the American minimalist music emerging in the 1960s (incidentally, the very period to which Wiegman traces the advent of the phenomenon of contemporary whiteness in question); along with the music of La Monte Young, Terry Riley, and Philip Glass, Reich’s work belongs to a greater tradition of radical aesthetic practice going back to the historical European avant-garde. Peter Bürger, in his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, characterizes “avant-garde” not according to a certain style, but rather as an attack on the function of art as an institution which guarantees “apartness of the work of art from the praxis of life” (25). A double paradoxical objective outlines the avant-garde’s ambition to destroy the art institution: that art become integrated in the praxis of life and at the same time that it escape the means-ends rationality of the social order (1984:49). Paradoxical, because the means-ends rationality altogether defines the social life praxis of the bourgeois world: the injunction to introduce art in the praxis of life signals

the contradiction of the original demand that art remain outside means–ends rationality. This is but one manifestation of an irreducible split—one, I argue, that is the formal condition of avant–garde subjectivity.

While Bürger claims that his analysis only applies to the historical avant–garde movements and their failure (in particular, Dadaism, early Surrealism, and Russian avant–garde), the post–World War II “neo–avant–gardes” nonetheless inherit avant–gardiste gestures by the token of similarity in their constitutive structure (109). It is unclear whether the task of the avant–garde in the music scene of 1960s New York can be said to be the same as that of the historical avant–garde—whether, indeed, the main emphasis lies in integrating art in the praxis of life; the fact that *Come Out* was produced as a part of the benefit concert for social justice would certainly point this way.¹ One thing, however, remains clear: Reich’s work shares the ambition of overstepping the limits of its own immediate context, and the disparateness of “institutionalized art” and “life” is merely one aspect of this context, even if it is not central to Reich’s work. I argue therefore that it is not despite the failure of the historical avant–garde (as Bürger would have it) that post–WWII experimental music shares its gestures, but *because* of the failure to integrate art and life praxis. As the consequence of this failure the two spheres still remained radically separated in the post–WWII aesthetic terrain. More importantly, however, avant–garde music in 1960s New York still shares a formal split present in the historical avant–garde, and therein lies the structural homology with contemporary whiteness: much like contemporary white subjectivity, avant–garde seeks to transgress the constitutive condition of its own subjectivity.

In his essay “Weak Universalism,” Boris Groys claims that characteristic of the avant–garde is an attempt to transcend its own time by means of destruction and reduction. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben and Walter Benjamin, Groys aptly points toward the avant–garde’s similarity to messianic knowledge—“knowledge of the coming end of the world as we know it” (4). While Groys insists on the centrality of “contracting time,” and its use in avant–gardiste strategies, what this conception reaffirms is that what Bürger calls the attack on the art institution can be understood as the avant–garde’s self–annihilating gesture—the end of its own world as it knows it. No doubt, Reich’s *Come Out* shares this discourse of “weak signs” of messianic knowledge that “impoverishes, empties all our cultural signs and activities” (ibid). The aforementioned split of the avant–garde is reflected in its dual position of belonging and not belonging to its historical moment: the avant–garde attempts to transcend its own time, but nonetheless appears in the context of its time, thereby, as Groys argues, engendering both clarification and confusion with regard to its own temporal/spacial location. “Clarification,” Groys

writes, “because it revealed repetitive image patterns behind the changes in historical styles and trends; but also confusion, because avant-garde art was exhibited alongside other art production in a way that allowed it to be (mis)understood as a specific historical style” (2010:9). The avant-garde must repeat its self-annihilating gesture as a response to the necessary institutionalization of its practices (for instance, its exhibition in a museum alongside other historically specific art); it must perpetually renew itself by means of negating its immediate context. Although Bürger heralds the end of the avant-garde with its initial failure, the same structure necessarily resurfaces. As Groys notes, “weak, transcendental artistic gesture could not be produced once and for all time,” it must be repeated in a different manner (ibid). I maintain that Reich’s *Come Out* must be understood precisely as one of these avant-gardiste repetitions, as an attempt to interrogate and annihilate the conditions of its own historical embeddedness.

The avant-garde’s anti-institutional stance, emphasized in Bürger’s account, thus can be understood in a broad sense, if “institution” connotes the material conditions defining art at a given historical moment. Consequently, institutionalization is a process, one which divests the avant-garde’s reductive gesture of its negating force by incorporating a radical practice as a norm belonging to the history of art—as Groys would have it, “every . . . discovery of the unoriginal was understood as an original discovery” (7). In this respect, institutionalization once again necessitates the avant-garde’s renewed “weak sign” that would signal the annihilation of the world (i.e., institution) as we know it. But in this formal characterization of the avant-garde, one must specify that this discourse centers on the practice of Western art, and that the avant-garde composer seeks to transgress the institutionalization of what has historically been designated as traditionally Western, whose producers have been not only white but also predominantly male. Western classical music has come to occupy the position of universal epistemological power—often implicitly determining what counted as music and what counts as noise. Richard Dyer would call this a position of whiteness. What is at stake is not simplification of nominalistic arguments about positive entities (e.g., avant-garde, whiteness, experimental music), but rather the elucidation of the relational functions of institutionalization, transgression, transcendence, and self-annihilation. With the advent of the avant-garde, the historical manifestation of these relational functions gain racial specificity, and, as becomes evident in Reich’s work, occupy a central role in its constitution. Hence the central question: what role does racial otherness play in negotiating the split constitutive of avant-garde subjectivity?

Ontological split and the subject of secular modernity

The split that Wiegman identifies in the contemporary white subject and the one that defines Western avant-garde subjectivity are just two instances of the manifestation of the ontological split that, according to Jacques Lacan,

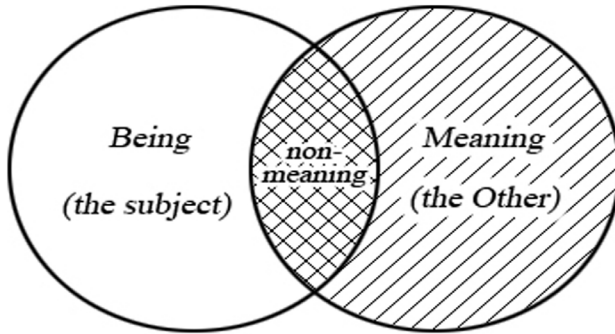


Figure 1: Lacan 211.

characterizes the subject of secular modernity. This split is produced by the movement Lacan calls alienation, which results from a forced, losing choice that can be formalized as possibilities inscribed into two overlapping sets (Figure 1). These two sets are joined by the token of having at least one common element—the common element being a necessary condition to the totality of each set. Thus, because of the forced choice, the common element is necessarily lost upon the decision, meaning that the choice “has as its consequence neither one, nor the other [set]” (Lacan 211; emphasis in the original). The split emerges as the vacillation of the subject between being and meaning—constituting two overlapping sets—due to the introduction of the signifier. Lacan stresses the point that the signifier is “that which represents a subject,” not for another subject, but “for another signifier” (207). The signifier that represents the subject emerges in the field of the Other, in language, wherein meaning can be located.² Consequently, “if we choose being, the subject disappears, it eludes us, it falls into non-meaning” (Lacan 211). If, on the other hand, we choose meaning, because there is something in being that always eludes language, “it is of the nature of this meaning,” Lacan says, “to be eclipsed by the disappearance of being” (211).

The split in the subject of the Western avant-garde musician can be mapped out in the opposition of the Western musical tradition and the avant-garde as realized in the field of the Other (Figure 2). The avant-garde musician must maintain the split as both a Western composer, and as the one who transcends traditional Western musical norms. When choosing

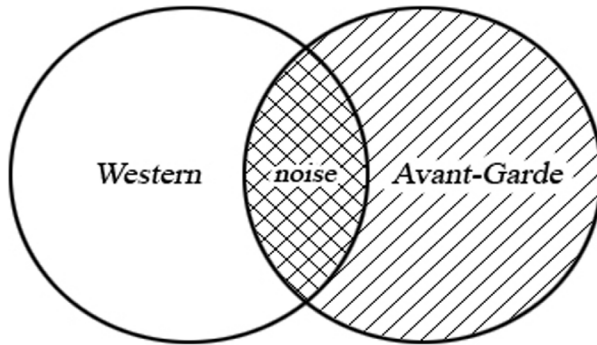


Figure 2: My adaptation of Lacan's diagram.

the avant-garde as otherness, as the transgression of the Western tradition, the subject loses its constitutive part as a Western musician. Hence, because the Western tradition has defined the composer on the most profound level, choosing the avant-garde triggers the disappearance of the subject's being as a musician. The other choice—the side of the Western tradition—leaves the avant-garde composer eclipsed, losing the desire for innovation imperative for avant-garde tradition. In this way, whatever the choice, the Western avant-garde musician remains doubly lacking: neither a Western musician (since the musician in question must transcend the present conditions of art), nor avant-garde musician (since avant-garde positions itself outside of what Western canon defines as “music”). This disappearance occurs with the introduction of a signifier that represents a subject; Lacan emphasizes that the emergence of this signifier, insofar as it represents the subject for another signifier, devoid of meaning in itself, functions in its signification only to “reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject” (207). The question then arises, in the scheme that I outline: what is the signifier that represents the avant-garde musician as subject, which calls it to speak, to compose, and at the same time marks the subject's own fading?

Attali's insight that music must be understood as an “organization of noise” proves useful in answering this question. Prior to the moment that music is to emerge as organized noise, however, comes the noise—not yet music, but a signifier that simply points to more meaningless signifiers. Attali writes: “music localizes and specifies power, because it marks and regiments the rare noises that cultures, in their normalization of behavior, see fit to authorize” (21). In other words, music, as the organization of noise, is the process of conjuring meaning in the proliferation of the signifiers in

the field of the Other—the meaning that arises at the cost of certain repression, normalization, and constitution or assumption of authority. It must be ascribed to the task of the Western music institution, understood in the broadest sense possible, to bestow value on musical organization, designating certain sounds as appropriate for the musical canon while marginalizing and devaluing other sounds as non-music. Hence, the Western music institution must be understood as a totality of everything that is considered music—a totality constituted by the exclusion of everything deemed to be noise. Although this division is simplified, the duality of inside and outside must be in place for the avant-garde to appeal to noise in order to transcend the musical formations of its own time. In this sense, this emergence of music from noise does point to Lacan's field of the Other. It is possible now to return to the question posed in the introduction: if the Lacanian Other has nothing to do with racialized otherness, why do the functions of the two overlap in the case of the avant-garde music? Thus, the hypothesis: it is because the Western classical music institution prior and to the point of 1960s (and at least until the 1990s) was heavily driven by white males that the noise in the Other may be thought to be located in non-Western or racially specific music. It is by way of noise that the latter becomes the signifier for which the subject (the white Western classical composer) is represented to another signifier (more noise)—the very signifier that calls the subject to compose as an avant-garde musician and at the same time splits the subject, triggering its disappearance as a musician.

Split in the process of alienation, the subject recovers its being through desire, in the movement subsequent to alienation, which Lacan designates as separation. In its disappearance, the subject is lacking (being), which marks a point at which desire emerges. For in addition to the lack of its own eclipsed being, the subject locates a lack in the field of the Other—this gap in the Other is the lacking meaning, the fact that the signifier representing the subject has no fixed signified. Lacan illustrates the lack of the Other in the subject's reaction to the message that it receives from the Other: "*He is saying this to me, but what does he want?*" (214). He is saying to me "I like the way your stuff sounds," but what does he want (me to be)? It is clear, therefore, that the desire that emerges in the subject is the desire of the Other, but only as an unknown, as lacking. The separation then proceeds as a superimposition of the two lacks: "the subject . . . brings the answer of the previous lack, of his own disappearance, which he situates here at the point of lack perceived in the Other" (214). Confusing its own lack for the lack in the Other, the subject is able to imagine the Other's desire as its own. In order to find its own desire in the field of the Other, however, the subject has to make a leap: the meaning and the certainty that the subject has to posit is

essentially ungrounded. The lack of ground in the formation of subjectivity must be repressed—repression in the domain of the unconscious. The sense in the field of the Other, therefore, comes with the cutting off of the original non-sense, which splits the subject in the first place. By analogy, in order for music to emerge, the noise as non-sense that is the original signifier has to be repressed, for what we designate as music is noise with meaning attached to it. From the point of this leap, of this repression, having given up the non-sense, the subject emerges as the subject of the unconscious.

Subject looking for his certainty: singularity, transference, racial otherness

In this light, “Steve Reich” transpires as a text—as a subject of the unconscious—defined by the network of signifiers that determine him as a Western avant-garde composer from the outside. Because the unconscious emerges as a result of the leap in the subject’s relation to the signifier, to the symbolic order, Lacan says that “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other . . . it is *outside*” (131). “The unconscious,” Lacan continues to argue, “has already in its formations . . . proceeded by interpretation” (130). Although the signifiers in the world determine the subject on the most profound level, because the interpretation of these signifiers is not objectively predetermined, the subject arises as a singularity, which precludes complete immersion in a single symbolic order. In other words, although the signifier that is outside determines the subjectivity of the composer, the latter is not reduced to the outside that determines him; in the formation of the unconscious the composer already provides a singular interpretation of the constellation of signifiers that determine him. “Singularity,” Kojin Karatani writes, “has nothing to do with bourgeois individualism; paradoxically enough, singularity is inseparable from society, from being ‘in between’ communities” (152). That is precisely the position that avant-garde subjectivity attempts to occupy and sustain—a position of both, belonging and not-belonging, of the transcendence of immediate present and the necessity of belonging to this present. Although Reich belongs to a community as a Western composer—community understood as “a space enclosed within a certain system of rules”—the traditional values of Western music no longer can fill the split in his subjectivity (1995:133).

Whether Reich’s attempt to transgress the space of his community can be judged successful or not, what is undeniable is the persistence of the desire to navigate the space “in between” communities—whether by the use of jazz, African music, or new technology in classical composition, or by means of Daniel Hamm’s voice. What defines the singularity of Reich’s

own composition—what he called “music as a gradual process”—is the influence Reich derived from the field of the racialized Other. During his college years in the mid-1950s Reich had already begun studying African music at Cornell University while completing his masters in jazz. This influence persisted through his early works and resulted in a trip to Ghana in the summer of 1970 to study drumming with musicians from the Ewe tribe. In addition to taking drumming lessons, Reich recorded the lessons and transcribed the rhythmic patterns of Ewe drumming, which he later incorporated into his own scores. Reich also studied Balinese Gamelan in 1974 and 1975 in order to explore the rhythmic structures inherent in this music. In his article “Steve Reich and Discourse on Non-Western Music” Sumanth Gopinath demonstrates that Reich’s interest in non-Western music was by no means an exception in his social milieu; in fact, other pioneering minimalist composers of the time, such as Glass, Riley, and La Monte Young, showed deep interest in non-Western music. Gopinath further notes that Reich’s immediate context was instrumental to a shift that occurred in his music during the 1970s, marked by the composition *Drumming* (1970): “The historical moment is also central to Reich’s career, redirecting his enduring preoccupation with (and possible self-definition through) The Other, from an ‘internal other’ (African Americans) in his pieces of the early to mid-1960s to an ‘external other’ (West Africans) in *Drumming* and beyond” (Gopinath 2001:141). What is significant is the sheer persistence in Reich’s search for otherness as a means to negate the community that constitutes him as a composer. While Reich is just one such case among others, I treat him as exemplary in demonstrating this movement in the formation and development of avant-garde subjectivity in negotiating and sustaining its own split. But it is not enough to demonstrate mere appeal to the sphere of otherness, it is important to ask: how, and by what means does the formation of avant-garde subjectivity proceed? What types of mechanisms are at work in this movement toward racialized otherness in the formation of Western avant-garde music and in the work of Reich in particular?

In “Non-Western Music and the Western Composer” (1988) and other articles and interviews, Reich continuously emphasizes that his interest in studying non-Western music does not lead him to absorb a non-Western sound.³ He writes, “I didn’t want to *sound* Balinese or African, I wanted to *think* Balinese or African” (Reich 2002b:148). In making this distinction, Reich outlines his usage of what he learned through non-Western music: he refuses to absorb the non-Western scales or instruments, but by studying the structure of non-Western music he finds new venues for a contemporary Western sound to develop. “The structure remains,” says Reich regarding the rhythmic patterns in African drumming and Balinese Gamelan that he

chooses to borrow and use in his composition, “but the sound is (hopefully) new and expressive of the times and place the composer lives in” (Reich 2002b:149).

The influence of non-Western music illustrates Reich’s relationship to the racialized Other, and locates Reich in what psychoanalysis calls transference [*Übertragung*] with this Other. Transference emerges as means to resolve the split induced in alienation; Lacan emphasizes that “[t]ransference is established with the emergence of the subject who is supposed to know” (232). Transference must be understood as an intersubjective formation emerging with an appearance of the desired (and imagined) knowledge in the Other; it is through this sphere, Lacan emphasizes, that the subject seeks to derive its certainty in filling the split induced by the signifier. It must be noted that transference is both the cause and the effect of the unconscious formations. Hence, if this peculiar position of the subject of the unconscious is to be articulated, it is in the analysis of transference. As Lacan argues, it is only through the encounter with the Other who is supposed to know, in the phenomenon of transference that the unconscious becomes accessible: “this primary position of the unconscious that is articulated as constituted by the indetermination of the subject—it is to this that transference gives us access” (129). Because the subject is determined from the outside, according to signifiers in the world, the famous Lacanian formula follows: “*the unconscious is structured like a language*” (Lacan 20; emphasis in the original). Thus, the telling of the subject’s unconscious as singularity through transference is also telling of political and ideological structures of the signifiers that determine the subject. Consequently, insofar as Reich as a singularity is subject of and to contemporary Western classical music and, on a broader scale, the subject of and to whiteness, his unconscious is telling of these structures. It is these structures that I will try to explore in the manifestations of transference in Reich’s music.

Come Out belongs to a formative stage of Reich’s compositional development. Today this piece is marketed in a collection under the title of “Early Works,” just as the scholarly literature on Reich places it in the “early” stage of Reich’s composition, characterizing the piece as a precondition to his more complex and influential work. The late 1960s, therefore, is a period that illustrates Reich’s pursuit for a style, which would determine him as a Western avant-garde composer; this period in Reich’s life can be said to coincide with what Lacan terms as “a subject looking for his certainty”—that is, the process by which the subject learns to negotiate the split in his subjectivity. The early pieces more than any others, therefore, show how the subject is able to deal with the alienation induced by the necessity to transgress the tradition that defines that subject—the necessity present in both, the split

of the avant-garde as well as the subjectivity of contemporary whiteness.

Indeed, through the tape loops, particularly in *Come Out* and *It's Gonna Rain*—the latter of which is another tape piece recorded a year earlier that features the voice of Brother Walter, a black preacher—Reich discovers the process of repetition with complex rhythmic patterns that he would later adapt to acoustic instruments, incorporating them into his scores. Reich writes, “What tape did for me basically was on the one hand to realize certain musical ideas that at first just had to come out of machines, and on the other to make some instrumental music possible that I never would have got to by looking at any Western or non-Western music” (Reich 2002c:54). Whereas it is true that phasing in tape loops allowed Reich to adapt the same technique to acoustic instruments, it is also significant that in order for Reich to *recognize* new musical patterns in his tape pieces rather than mere noise, he already had to have studied and recognized the patterns in West African drumming. Although Reich’s intensified engagement with Ewe music and his trip to Ghana with the purpose of learning West African drumming date to 1970 (several years after the composition of *Come Out*), his engagement with non-Western music prior to this time is well documented.⁴ West African drumming makes use of the downbeats that do not coincide, a possibility previously not explored in Western classical music. This is, incidentally, the innovative structure that Reich achieved through phasing in tape loops—the divergent speeds at which Reich plays two tape loops simultaneously creates the effect of non-coinciding downbeats constitutive of West African drumming. In other words, Reich’s technique that innovates or transgresses the tradition that defines him emerges by means of implicit interiorization of otherness: first, identification with the signifier that belongs to the field of the Other (“noise” of the racialized Other); second, recognition of the structure of this noise (either in tape loops or in study of drumming); finally, incorporation of this structure in the sphere of Western classical music as means to innovation.⁵

One of the traces of this dynamic between the internalized otherness and innovation in Western canon is evident in the tension between the impersonal nature of Reich’s composition and the necessity of the authorial function of the composer. In his tape pieces, Reich emphasizes that the technique he employs, which the composer designates as “a gradual process,” develops independently from its author. Reich writes that the “experience of that musical process is, above all else, impersonal; *it just goes its way*” (Reich 2002d: 20, emphasis in the original). This is yet another example of an attempt to negate the legacy of Western music characterized by the bourgeois individualism that romanticizes the achievement of a single composer as the author. Reich proceeds to compare the impersonal nature of his gradual process to the non-Western music, making his transference

in accepting the racialized Other as the subject who is supposed to know apparent; “[i]n African drumming,” he writes, “all the musicians have fixed parts, with the exception of the master drummer, who improvises on traditional patterns” (Reich 2002: 69). In the discourse on non-Western music—in the case of Reich, Balinese Gamelan and West African drumming—indeed, an impersonal character persists in the production of the music, and rather than the name of the author, a geographical region or the historical context of its production is used to identify the sound (the classification that is already a part of the production of Western knowledge); in Reich’s own discourse on non-Western music, the name of the tribe is the limit of the particular. In case of the Western composer, however, the name of the individual author clings to the piece as a necessary structural component even at the point when the composer tries to diminish his or her own significance; Reich certainly puts his name on the record and collects the royalties. What is at stake, however, is not to criticize Reich or to point out some kind of hypocrisy and contradiction inherent in his method and persona, neither is the point to defend him.⁶ On the contrary, I insist that this apparent contradiction is a manifestation of necessary precondition to materialization of the avant-garde subjectivity; this paradoxical duality inherent in Reich’s musical composition is yet another manifestation of the split induced in alienation in encountering the Other. This split manifests itself in the transference with the racialized Other in the insistence of the impersonal (non-bourgeois sphere of West African drumming), on the one hand, and the necessity of the “complete control” that belongs to the authorial “I” (bourgeois individualism of the Western musician) on the other.

From transference to interpretation

If Reich as the avant-garde composer thus embraces the split constitutive of the avant-garde subject, thereby triggering the necessity of transference, it becomes increasingly clear that the composer finds the point of transference in the very material of his composition—namely, in Daniel Hamm’s voice. In contrast to Hamm’s voice, Reich’s position of whiteness is evident: since it was the racial motivation that drove the Harlem Six case, the privilege of whiteness would not have allowed Reich to be in the position of Hamm. It is more than obvious to say that Reich and Hamm occupy a different position in the society; but it is also significant to point out that the two occupy different subjective positions, if the subjectivity is constituted by the material conditions and the position of embeddedness in the world. Although perhaps it is not a position to be desired, Hamm’s subjective embeddedness in the world is radically inaccessible to that of the privileged position of whiteness,

not merely by choice—e.g., it is not enough to assume an anti-racist stance to change one's subjective position—but by historical contingency. Indeed, while Hamm is the victim of police violence and social injustice, he nevertheless possess a desirable quality: Hamm holds certain knowledge inaccessible to Reich, insofar as he finds himself in the world under a gaze different from that of a privileged position of whiteness—the subjective position that Reich cannot obtain. If avant-garde's self-annihilating imperative is to transcend the constitutive conditions of its subjectivity, the sphere of what whiteness constructs as the Other becomes the desirable sphere of knowledge.

In this light, the sentence that Reich utilizes in *Come Out* lends itself to musical as well as to semantic interpretation. Having transcribed Hamm's voice, Gopinath points out that it fits Western tonality and scale and, therefore, “in excerpting the testimony in a particular way according to his aesthetic preferences—and not due to some ‘essential’ musicality of black voices—Reich rendered Hamm's recorded voice in an abstracted, ‘musical’ way” (Gopinath 2009:129). The content of the excerpt, however, is no less powerful for the composer. The piece repeats the excerpt in its entirety—“I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them”—only three times; after the initial repetition, it then proceeds to loop only the last part of the phrase: “come out to show them.” This statement gives a promise “to show.” To show whom?—the police, the representatives of the apparatus of whiteness par excellence. To show what? That is precisely what Steve Reich is after in his manipulation of Hamm's voice—hence, the transference.

Although Reich excerpts Hamm's sentence from the interview in which Hamm describes the cruelty inflicted on him by the police, the action of the police is present in the excerpted sentence only indirectly. The reason that Hamm has to “open his bruise up” is that the police were only taking those with open wounds to the hospital; Hamm points out that puncturing his own skin becomes the only way for him to receive much needed medical attention. The entire project of *Come Out* was initiated by Truman Nelson, a white novelist and anti-racist activist, who provided the recordings of the interviews to the composer. In addition to creating *Come Out*, Reich also produced a dramatic sound collage out of the interviews, as was originally suggested by Nelson. In producing *Come Out*, however, Reich insisted on having a full freedom in using these interviews, despite Nelson's initial disagreement (Gopinath 2009:127). Certainly, Reich's sympathies lie with Hamm in condemnation of the action by the police, which is consistent with Wiegman's articulation of contemporary whiteness as disavowing white supremacy. The question however arises, out of hours of interviews describing the beating by the police, why does Reich choose the point at

which the victim is hurting his own body? This choice may be further telling of the transference relation between Reich and the Other. While the broader context of the Harlem Six shows the violence done by the system in an attempt to subjugate the youths and situate them in a passive position, in the excerpt that Reich chooses, Hamm, although hurting himself, is the one who is in the position of action. Because the description of the police brutality in the narrative of *Come Out* would turn Hamm into an *object* of violence, this portrayal would preclude the transference with Hamm's voice as the *subject* who is supposed to know. While this distinction is not a structural one, it nevertheless further points to the imaginary function central in transference. It primarily shows that the composer, although addressing the issue of institutionalized injustice and racism inherent in the symbolic order, primarily takes interest in his own split. That is, Reich's *Come Out*, rather than reflecting the narrative of the Harlem Six, first and foremost points to the composer's own vacillation as an avant-garde musician.

Reich's composition produces the split of Hamm's voice through playing the recording on two different channels, at first in unison and then at slightly different speeds. This phasing technique—originally developed in *It's Gonna Rain*, also in manipulation of a black male voice—at first creates an effect of a voice echoing itself, but soon enough, the interval between two channels becomes significantly greater and the split becomes perceptible. This point marks the introduction of the non-Western patterns in the piece; Gopinath notes that the repetition in *Come Out* shifts from “discursive repetition (repetition of phrases or sections, characteristic of many European-derived musics of the West) to musematic repetition (immediate repetition of short riff or units, particularly common in African-diasporic musics)” (Gopinath 2009:29). In this change of repetitive patterns, the vacillation of subject between Western and non-Western sides of the split becomes apparent in the sound produced (thus, also vacillating between “noise” and “music”). In manipulating Hamm's voice Reich exploits the split to its limit: looping the recording once again to create a repetition of four voices, and then with another loop dividing the recording into eight voices, at which point the voice can no longer be heard, vanishing into utter noise. What is the function of this noise? How can this disintegration of the voice into complete chaos be interpreted?

It is in this last part of the piece, when Hamm's voice becomes completely incomprehensible, that Lloyd Whitesell locates the function of whiteness. Whitesell says: “The music moves toward an abstract, metaphorical whiteness, mesmerizing in its unfathomable remoteness from the material black vocalicity of the opening” (177). Whitesell's critique is predicated on Dyer's claim that in its invisibility, whiteness assumes the position of universality. He

says, At the level of racial representation . . . whites are not of a certain race, they are just human race” (Dyer 3). Whitesell sees the trend of self-erasure in avant-garde movement as a whole; he writes, “in these quests for the irreducible background we can see the ideals of ‘art without history’ and ‘man without qualities’ converging under the sign of racial identity. That is, the blank page comes to serve as a medium of white self-representation” (175). By the mere token of sounding like background noise, Whitesell seems to imply that the music disappears—and by being invisible occupies the position of whiteness.

Does this claim, however, not presuppose and perpetuate the division of “music” and “non-music” established by the Western classical (read: white) hegemony? Does the minimalist music in its silence and repetition indeed disappear? Rather than disguise and disappear, the minimalist aesthetic and a piece like *Come Out* especially, on the contrary, in its conspicuous harshness, if anything, renders whiteness particular—even if, as Wiegman points out, it does not automatically dislodge it from the privileged position. While Whitesell correctly points toward the self-annihilating and reductive tendency of the avant-garde, I think that he does not account for the ambiguity inherent in this self-erasure—an ambiguity that I have characterized as a split in the avant-garde subjectivity. As Groys points out, the reductive tendency of the avant-garde art “produces transcendental images, in the Kantian sense of the term—images that manifest the conditions for the emergence and contemplation of any other image” (6). The avant-garde produces transcendental sound in the reduction of its music to noise, in order to demonstrate that, as Attali would have it, music is nothing but ordered noise and presupposes the exclusion of unordered noise in the first place. The avant-garde does not erase itself, but produces self-annihilating gestures that remain ever present. In this respect, Reich’s *Come Out* articulates the transcendental conditions of music, and does this within the context of a benefit show; or, as Groys aptly puts it: “the avant-garde places the empirical and transcendental on the same level” (7). In other words, what is at stake is not a process of assuming a position of universality, but a method of investigating the conditions that make any universality possible (transcendental), and rendering these condition as part of the social practice (empirical). If the avant-garde’s functional equivalence with whiteness is to be admitted, I argue, it does not consist in self-erasure of avant-garde. For this self-erasure is of a different order, leaving its own traces in the empirical. The structural homology that emerges is to be sought in the transference with the racialized Other in order to fill the split of its own subjectivity. It is furthermore possible to argue that therein lies the most significant difference between whiteness and avant-garde: while whiteness perpetuates

its privilege by means of disguising the unquestioned presuppositions of its privilege in assuming an anti-racist stance, avant-garde first and foremost investigates and interrogates its own split, therefore sustaining rather than erasing this split. Consequently, while whiteness is at bottom a conservative force, avant-garde (while also conservative in respect of perpetuation of Western sound) aims at a certain productive surplus evident in its aesthetic innovation.

I would like to insist on a different interpretation of *Come Out*, one that stresses the transferential relationship between Reich and Hamm's statement: through repetition, Reich reenacts the movement of alienation in the split of the Western avant-garde composer. At the point of transference, the subject seeks its desire in the field of the Other who is supposed to know. But precisely because the Other's knowledge is imagined, Lacan points out, the subject "will simply find his desire ever more divided, pulverized, in the circumscribable metonymy of speech" (188). In other words, just because the subject finds signifiers in the Other, these signifiers do not concretely outline what the subject must desire. Reich's studying West African drumming or encountering Hamm's utterance does not clearly define new possibilities in music or in the reconstitution of racial subjectivity. Insofar as *Come Out* belongs to Reich's early work in which he attempts to establish himself as an avant-garde composer, his own uncertainty in the face of disappearance as a musician is reflected in the choices of the composition. The noise of *Come Out*, which in turn is retroactively to become music, is not characteristic of the erasure of whiteness or presence of the Western composer, but of their reconstitution in the moment of crisis by means of detour through the racialized Other.

If the split in the avant-garde subjectivity occurs upon the identification with the non-sense signifier (noise), this signifier renders the Western canon as not-all-encompassing; consequently, Hamm's voice, standing for the constructed otherness to whiteness (thus also projected onto non-Western music) is mutilated by the Western composer: it departs, taking a piece of the totality of Western music with it. This split is evident in Reich's treatment of the voice, which he redoubles through phasing—the effect that surfaces by means of repetition. Lacan notes that "the endless repetition that is in question"—referring to the repetition during transference that acts out the gap induced in alienation—"reveals the radical vacillation of the subject" (239). This vacillation persists throughout the composition. By the end of the first section (at about 2:58 into composition), the words "come out" break away from "to show them." This split does not yet get to the bottom of the matter—Reich then takes the split even further by looping the entire thing; in this second part, the duality is manifested in a different way, between

“come ma–ma–ma” and “to sh–sh–show them” (evident after 4:00). Even when the composer redoubles the voices once more, taking Hamm’s enunciation to radical reduction, thereby rendering it incomprehensible (at 8:37), the split endures as an opposition of two phonemes that sound something like “tsh” and “c–ma.” This finding illustrates what Lacan designates as the function of interpretation; interpretation in transference, Lacan says, “is not open to any meaning,” but rather the “effect of interpretation is to isolate in the subject a kernel . . . of *non-sense*” (250). The interpretation targets the non-meaning that lies at the root of the emergence of the unconscious—it is the cut off signifier that splits the subject in alienation. In *Come Out*, having pursued the signifier in the field of the Other, Reich arrives at noise and silence—two phonemes, “tsh” and “c–ma,” and the momentary silence that separates them—denoting the movement of the subject between sense and impeding non-sense.

It is significant to note that *Come Out* was Reich’s last tape piece through which he discovered new ways of manipulating scores for acoustic Western instruments—it allowed him to navigate the split of the avant-garde subjectivity, finally emerging a successful Western classical composer. To attach a concrete meaning to the noise that lies behind Reich’s discovery would be a mistake and an inconsistency in my argument. Instead, this analysis reveals the mechanism by means of which Western music reconstitutes itself in the face of its own fading. Rather than a single meaning, the compulsive repetition outlines the movement of the subject: first, split with the signifier that emerges in the field of the Other; then, concerning itself with the noise of otherness; finally, having internalized the Other—injecting noise with meaning—it comes back to itself in a new form. This mechanism manifest in *Come Out* also heralds the development of white subjectivity after the 1960s, which turns to non-whites in order to sustain the imaginary of itself as anti-racist white subjectivity. This noise as non-sense in *Come Out*, however, does not remain outside of music for long; on the contrary, it becomes institutionalized at the point when the composer attaches his name to it. Meaning, then, emerges retroactively. For instance, viewed in the light of whiteness studies, Whitesell sees the piece as a manifestation of white privilege in its disappearance. Gopinath, on the other hand, produces a multitude of interpretations made possible by historical contextualization of the piece; he maintains that the sound in *Come Out*, among others, may be interpreted as broader violence and paranoia (whether white, black, left or Jewish) of the historical period, the aftermath of a riot, interpellation of a listener as a “cop fighter,” sexualization of black masculinity, or, superimposed onto contemporary issues, a composition outlining the “prison-industrial complex” (Gopinath 2009:134–9). All of the above interpretations stand

contingent on the gaze of the interpreter, making the multitude of interpretations possible and by no means false—but what is important to point out is that these interpretations emerge only after a fundamental suppression of what Reich produces as non-sense, after the institutionalization of noise as music. While taking interest in racialized Other, the avant-garde subject first and foremost betrays the crisis of its own subjectivity, seeking a way to reconstitute it. With the arrival of the avant-garde Western composer, the lack of ground behind the emerging subjectivity manifested in a gesture to negate all such ground becomes the locus of its meanings and serves as the condition that grants it the power of fluidity and flexibility.

Notes

1. The same politically charged and democratic, if not utopian vision rings true in the closing words of Reich's famous essay "Music as a Gradual Process": "While performing and listening to gradual music one can participate in a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from he and she and me outwards towards it" (306). Reich gestures toward the potential of music as a transformative force, as a force that either changes the material conditions of the everyday (benefit concert) or reforms the conditions of perception. In his book *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, while discussing Cage's 4'33" as exemplary to what he calls "experimental music" (a tradition in which he places Reich), Michael Nyman further indicates the prevailing attempt of this tradition to align experimental practices in music with life rather than with art, or at least to point toward the subversion of this duality: "Henceforward sounds ('for music, like silence, does not exist' [citing Cage]) would get closer to introducing us to Life, rather than Art, which is something separate from Life" (26). While perhaps not the dominant trait of 1960s New York avant-garde scene, the discussion of the collapse of "art" and "life" nevertheless remains a major topic.

2. It is necessary to insist that Lacanian field of the Other is a battery of signifiers; it is the field of the symbolic order—language, law, cultural codes and so on. Hence, it must be understood as the Other of being. The Lacanian Other is therefore not synonymous with racial Otherness; but if the Lacanian Other overlaps with racial Otherness, as we shall see can be the case, it is due to functional equivalence and is a result of historical contingency and not structural necessity.

3. See, for instance, "Interview with Michael Nyman (1970)" or "Postscript to a Brief Study of Balinese and African Music (1973)."

4. See, for instance, Gopinath "Steve Reich and Discourse on Non-Western Music." In this article, Gopinath suggests that Reich's knowledge of these patterns may be traced back to A.M. Jones's Studies.

5. The temporality of these events must be understood in terms of logical causality, and not linear causality. In other words, although I point to certain steps as logical presuppositions to one another, it does not mean that they must be understood diachronically, that is, happening one after another in a temporal order; rather, the

temporality is one of synchrony. For this reason it is justified to claim, as Gopinath argues, that in transcribing West African drumming, Reich “constructed” and not merely “discovered” the aforementioned rhythmical structures (see “Steve Reich and Discourse on Non–Western Music”). Nevertheless, I maintain, that all the aforementioned steps are logical necessities, which exemplify the constitution of the avant–garde subjectivity.

6. Furthermore, Reich himself is more than ready to acknowledge the tension of the authorial and the impersonal; in his “Music as a Gradual Process,” Reich writes: “Musical processes can give one a direct contact with the impersonal and also a kind of complete control . . . I completely control all the results, but also . . . I accept all that result without changes” (305). It is clear that one must not be logically consistent in order to produce music.

References

- Attali, Jacques. 2004. Listening. *Hearing History: A Reader*. ed. Smith, Mark M. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Baldwin, James. 1966. A Report from Occupied Territory. *The Nation* (11 July).
- Bürger, Peter. 1984. *Theory of the Avant–Garde. Theory and history of literature*. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White*. London: Routledge.
- Gopinath, Sumanth. 2009. The Problem of the Political in Steve Reich’s *Come Out*. In *Sound Commitments: avant–garde Music and the Sixties*. ed. Adlington, Robert. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 2001. Steve Reich and Discourse on Non–Western Music. *Glendora Review*. (3,3,4): 134–145.
- Groys, Boris. 2010. The Weak Universalism. *E–Flux Journal*. 15. <<http://www.e-flux.com/>>.
- Karatani, Kojin. 1995. Architecture As Metaphor: Language, Number, Money. In *Writing Architecture*. Michael Speaks, ed. Trans. Sabu Kohso.. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1981. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho–Analysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton.
- Nyman, Michael. 1999. *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reich, Steve. 2002a. First Interview with Michael Nyman (1970). *Writings on Music, 1965–2000*. ed. Hillier, Paul. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 2004. Music as a Gradual Process. *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. ed. Cox, Christoph, and Daniel Warner. New York: Continuum.
- _____. 2002b. Non–Wesetern Music and the Western Composer (1988). *Writings on Music, 1965–2000*. ed. Hillier, Paul. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 2002c. Postscript to a Brief Study of Balinese and African Music (1973). *Writings on Music, 1965–2000*. ed. Hillier, Paul. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 2002d. It’s Gonna Rain. *Writings on Music*,. ed. Hillier, Paul. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 2002e. It’s Gonna Rain. *Writings on Music, 1965–2000*. ed. Hillier, Paul. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Whitesell, Lloyd. 2001. White Noise: Race and Erasure in the Cultural Avant–Garde. *American Music* (19, 2): 168–189.
- Wiegman, Robyn. 1999. Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity. *boundary 2*, 26, no. 3 (Fall): 115–150.

