losing the center: the emergent metaphysics of positive and negative distance in troubadour and flamenco lyric

Ben Meyerson

abstract

Subjective mediation is often treated as an epistemological problem, because it denies the thinker unfettered access to things-in-themselves. This article proposes instead that the sociohistorically sedimented qualities of subjective mediation are a window onto the positional juncture at which the subject ends and things-in-themselves begin. When analyzed together, flamenco *letras* and medieval troubadour lyric record an expansive experiential account of movement through the world, producing a portrait of the dynamics by which subjects spatiotemporally locate themselves and therefore showing us the conditions underlying the split between subjectivity and things-in-themselves. In troubadour lyric, subjects rely on untraversed positive distance to position themselves in space and time, while subjects in flamenco *letras* foreground negative distance, which has already been traversed. Exemplars from influential troubadours Guilhem IX of Peitieus and Marcabru elucidate the particularities of positive distance and then illustrate its transition into an uncertainty that bespeaks negativity. Meanwhile, a survey of representative flamenco *letras* uncovers the historicized spatiotemporal precarity of negative distance. The meshwork of relations that arise from the interplay of positive and negative distance demonstrates how the subject's experience of space and time relies on determinate mixtures and separations that both consolidate its positionality and express the material dynamics that have shaped its mediated aperture onto the world.

keywords: troubadours, flamenco, lyric subjectivity, lyric theory, speculative realism, new materialism, metaphysics

https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.61.1.0123
comparative literature studies, vol. 61, no. 1, 2024.
Copyright © 2024. The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

Multiplicity as Method: Mediation, Distance, and Subjectivity

During a typical flamenco performance, musicians and audience members will yell out words of encouragement and approval when a performer has delivered a moment of particular intensity. It is routine to hear shouts of "*¡olé!*" or "*¡vaya!*" punctuate a live recording, and these same exhortations (or *jaleos*) are often to be found in tracks captured in a studio environment. In listening to such recordings, how might we situate our examination of the music? If, for example, we choose to undertake an analysis of a solo guitar performance, we might be tempted to focus on the musician, the guitar, the lone artist's interaction with the music, and how that individual chooses to channel it through the instrument. We might, in other words, comprehend the music as a subject's singular relation with the world around it. But what about those enthusiastic cries from the audience that fill out the recording? Can we ever truly understand the music without also understanding how those raucous calls are locating *other* subjects within the world? Are the exuberant shouts of the audience members not essential to the form that the music takes? In order to become what it is, the solo guitar piece had to involve multiple different subjects who occupy different physical locations in the world and are defined at least in part by the relativity of their positional distribution.

In light of such positional multiplicity, it would seem that we are not really doing our due diligence if we reduce the music to a relation between a singular subject and a world of objects. In this way, the dynamics at play in the musical performance are instructive on a larger scale: there is no reason why the epistemic irreducibility that circumscribes our ability to discuss the ontological totality of the flamenco concert should not be similarly operative in other realms of speculation and figure into all instances that involve a relation between subjects and objects. Indeed, this irreducibility becomes particularly acute in the context of the relation between lyric subjectivity and the world, since the lyric subject is transmitted via textual and oral repetition, and as a result its aperture onto the objects of its observation is inflected by any number of potential inputs: varying readership, shifting trends of exegesis, spatiotemporal movement, and variance in the modes, forms and fidelity of its transmission. If, as Jonathan Culler has asserted, the lyric subject subsists within a "floating now" whose expanse is articulated over and over across time and space, then it must house an indefinite multiplicity of standpoints that all exert

influence over the manner in which it presents itself, speaks, and speculates.[1] It stands to reason, then, to proceed with the conviction that a viable work of speculative philosophy ought to include an understanding of how subjects attain and interact with such multitudinous forms of positionality.

However, many contemporary philosophers who seek to take part in a metaphysical project espouse the sort of reductive approach that would struggle to parse both the experiential fullness of the flamenco performance and the positional multiplicity of lyric subjectivity, limiting the possibility of cognition, the problem of mediation, and any ensuing metaphysical speculation to a singular relation between a lone subject and the world that it observes. I am thinking in particular of the speculative realist movement, and its satellites—philosophers such as Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, and Graham Harman. These theorists understand that the subject (which is treated as a singular entity) is mediated from the world by its need to think, and that by virtue of its reliance on the production of concepts to generate understanding, such mediation either complicates or obstructs the thinking subject's ability to attain any certain knowledge of things-in-themselves—that is, things as they would exist with or without the subject's presence.[2] Their solution is to try to eliminate the mediation of thought from the equation as much as possible (and they think very hard in order to do so). Meillassoux, for instance, develops a principle of absolute unreason to counteract the thinking subject's inability to unequivocally ascertain the fundamental laws governing the physical world as it would exist without the interference of thought and observation: if everything (the thinker, things-in-themselves, all physical laws, etc.) has no reason to be the way it is and is absolutely contingent such that its being rests on the pure-but-unnecessary possibility of its non-being, then nothing is more hidden, revealed, or removed than anything else. Thinkers, thoughts, and things-in-themselves are all equally contingent and, therefore, are all on a level playing field, united by their capacity for non-being or being other than themselves and distinguished only by the precise conditions under which such non-being might be achieved—mediation no longer impedes the subject's desire for undiluted access to the world as it exists in itself.[3] Harman, meanwhile, proposes an ontology in which everything is treated as an object so that all objects and subjects-qua-objects are equally remote from one another, thus extracting the problem of mediation from the realm of cognition and displacing it onto all elements of being from atoms and people to ideas, corporations, and weather formations.[4] In both cases, the theories in question are asking us to think our way out of our awareness that what unlocks the possibility of philosophy is the fact that there is someone thinking.

Such escapist approaches to philosophical speculation insist on the necessity of finding a way remove thought from the epistemological equation; I contend instead that, paradoxically, the only way to get "outside" of the issue of thinking and mediation is to delve deeper into it first, to truly plumb the historically compounding capacity of thought as an ever-altering document of what some would call things-in-themselves and others might term objects. Accordingly, I will propose an alternative method of reading over the course of this essay—one which seeks to delve into the mediation of thought even as it circumvents the way that same cognitive mediation appears to singularize us, to isolate or distance us from direct experience of the subjects and objects around us. Such an analysis would recognize the necessity of undermining the putative singularity of the relation between subject and world, and seek to gather a diverse range of perspectives regarding a particular object or phenomenon. Then, it would "recombine" those perspectives such that they generate a more accurate and complex portrait of the experience in question and the historically or spatiotemporally contingent junctures at which the thinker is capable of meeting what is being thought. In order to enact such a recombinant reading, I will compare treatments of distance as they appear in the corpus of the medieval Occitan troubadour lyric and in the more recent tradition of flamenco *cante* (singing). I have selected these two bodies of work partly due to their contextual similarities: both functioned to varying degrees as oral traditions (flamenco *letras* were learned almost entirely by oral means until the advent of mass audio recording and record sales along with a wave of rigid neo-classical codification midway through the twentieth century, while medieval troubadour lyric seems to have relied on the oral transmission of melody along with variable oral transpositions of the poetry), in which songs were repurposed and interpreted by multiple performers across multiple generations.[5] This intergenerational transmission history is particularly significant because it suggests that the representations of distance in the surviving texts remained relevant or applicable for a long period of time, and, therefore, are more indicative of a widely held perspective. Moreover, both traditions were inflected to varying degrees by foreign cultural influences—in particular, by the Moorish melodic, formal, and thematic approcahes that entered Europe through Al Andalus.[6] Finally, despite their external influences, the formal and musical conversations that occurred within each tradition remained fairly insular in their focus (albeit for vastly different reasons).

I have elected to focus on distance because it is a term that discloses both space and time. As a result of this double-disclosure, a given subject's attitude toward distance can be illustrative of how it is locating itself in the

world in multiple ways all at once—on cultural, historical and material, or metaphysical strata of being. In my reading, I have found that due to the modes of transmission, communication, and preservation that prevail in the corpus of medieval troubadour lyric, the poetic subject in that tradition generally acquires legibility by way of a reliance on positive distance. By positive distance, I mean a spatiotemporal expanse that separates the speaker from someone or something, a gap that the speaker may or may not desire to cross. In this scenario, the person or object that is separated from the speaker exists in some sort of future tense, as an objective yet to be realized. Positive distance, then, indicates an expanse that the speaker has the ability to cross. The speaker's desire is not to undo a past distancing—instead, the speaker sees the distance (and the possibility of its traversal) as an opportunity for a new kind of closeness. Of course, while the troubadour subject might make its presence felt by way of positive distance, this state of affairs does not preclude scenarios in which it runs into a spatiotemporal instability that would yield a more negative relation to distance. Indeed, there are moments in which the structure of positive distance is the very thing that produces the conditions by which the subject registers the precarity of its spatiotemporal position. Conversely, in flamenco, I have noted an equivalent but inverse tendency whereby the subject's emergence rests on or is shaped by negative distance—that is, a separation from a person or object that exists in the speaker's past in some capacity. Perhaps such a distance arises out of estrangement from a lover who has wronged the speaker, or perhaps it is the legacy of a home or way of life that has been taken away. Indeed, the latter theme is a strong feature of *cante* that refers back to the wanderings, forced sedentarization and persecution of the Gitano communities (the Romani population of southern Spain) from which flamenco has emerged. Negative distance is irreversible, since it has already elapsed, and does not represent an opportunity. Instead, it is an act of memory, and often elegiac in its tone. However, by capturing the irrevocability of negative distance and turning it into its own mode of positionality, the flamenco subject is still able to extract the possibility for positive distance from the precarity of its spatiotemporal situation.

Between the troubadour poems and the flamenco *letras* (lyrics), we can access a recombinant portrait of distance that is figuratively expressed from both directions, and, in doing so, we can begin to reconstruct how space and time within the unmediated world have imprinted themselves upon the ontology of the thinking subject. An understanding of this relation between subjectivity and distance, I will argue, can help us to uncover the precise parameters by which the unmediated world and the subject meet and act upon one another.

Toward Transmissibility: Positive Distance and the Troubadour Subject

The existing corpus of medieval troubadour lyric spans multiple generations. For the purpose of this analysis, I will make the case for a tendency toward positive distance in a set of compositions by two of the tradition's foundational figures: Marcabru (active between 1130 and 1150) and Guilhem IX de Peitieus (1071–1127). In Guilhem's *Farai un vers de dreyt nien* ("I will compose a song about nothing outright"), we see the concept of positive distance writ large; in Marcabru's *estornel* ("starling") poems, we find that same positive distance embodied, and witness the potential consequences of such an embodiment. Medieval Occitan troubadour lyric was produced primarily in the southern part of France in the period between 1100 and 1300, before that area came under the control of the North. The troubadours and their verse spread south into Catalonia and Aragon, and even ventured into the courts of northern Italy. The roving nature of these poets and their work was such that certain of the troubadours joined the Crusades and journeyed to the Middle East.[7] Distance, then, is a significant concern for the courtly songwriters of Occitania. To frame my analysis, I will recapitulate and repurpose an element of Sarah Kay's argument about how the subject can be located within troubadour poetry. Once I have done that, I will be able to more effectively examine how Guilhem and Marcabru position distance relative to the poetic subject in their work.

Kay quite rightly recognizes that the project of proving the subjectivity of the lover within any given troubadour song is a doomed one, due to the manner in which the relation between the amorous troubadour and the possible *domna* ("lady") resists legibility—there is often a great deal of opacity between the words and the relationship between the two people in question, and the poet who plays the role of the lover may either be lying or twisting the truth for any number of reasons. Instead, Kay presents an alternative mode by which subjectivity shows itself in the troubadour oeuvre, one that she characterizes as "an interplay of mutually ironizing perspectives" in which "traces of the interaction of competing voices would nonetheless have to form part of any account of 'subjectivity' in these lyrics [. . .] Abstruseness of meaning in the lyric seems, on this account, to be inseparable from a complex view of the subject."[8] Kay, here, is recognizing that the subject in troubadour lyric is not legible unless we consider the cacophony that grounds it—the other voices to which it might be responding, and the avowed teleology (be it an aesthetic position, a moralizing position, a politics, etc.) that shapes and conditions the poem. Whether the poem arises from a moment of

intersubjectivity, a teleological standpoint, or some combination of both, the fact remains that such standpoints exist both *outside* of the poem and in opposition to or agreement with other comparable standpoints.

To illustrate this dynamic, Kay gestures toward Marcabru's propensity for denouncing the hypocrisy of courtly poetry and Bernart de Ventadorn's cultivation of a noticeably enigmatic aesthetic, which is his "hallmark."[9] Marcabru, then, is critiquing *another* telos of writing, while Bernart de Ventadorn is espousing a distinctive aesthetic—meaning that it is distinctive *relative* to other coexisting aesthetics. In all cases, the standpoint of the poetic subject is reliant upon that which is not its own lyric, and so must first exist outside of it. Moreover, since it is the poetic subject that determines the way the text "organizes" itself, it must act as the necessary condition for the lyric's production (i.e., it lays out the conditions by which the lyric is able to emerge). Finally, it manifests itself within the lyric as a kind of illegibility, since its particulars are entirely inaccessible to the contemporary reader due to the incompleteness of the historical record, the lack of precise information about its musical performance and our faulty insight into the troubadour's intentionality as a creator. In other words, we know that the poem cannot be separated from its ground (another word for "necessary condition"), and we know that the ground is what goes about presencing the subject, but we do not know the ground in and of itself, due to the slippery history of troubadour poetry's transmission, in which the composition is often sent out to be performed by jongleurs and then disseminated repeatedly over the years based on oral transpositions, a practice that has led to significant discrepancies between the various songbooks.[10] Thus, what remains of the ground is largely undecidable. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner frames this problem succinctly, stating, "our power to discern between the real and the not real may be left suspended or force us to grapple with the ramifications of both A and not A."[11]

How, then, can we refigure the problem so that the illegibility of the present-but-absent subject becomes useful to us in and of itself? The most intuitive way of thinking about such a simultaneity of presence and absence is to consider what might ground it. If the subject is at once present and absent within the lyric, then we must concede that the poem alone is not a sufficient ground for it, despite the fact that, for those of us who are receiving a given poem on this end of history, the poem itself is the only conceivable vessel for the conveyance of a poetic subject. Indeed, insisting on the poem's inability to ground the poetic subject is the easiest way to reword Bruckner's assertion regarding the simultaneity of A and not A. The problem, in this formulation,

is that although the poetic subject must exist relative to (and therefore *outside*) the lyric, the poem is all we have: both A, and a lack of A. If the poem is all we have, then we must attempt to locate the subject's exteriority to the poem from within the poem, which is a contradiction in terms.

There is, however, another way. If the poetic subject must possess some sort of exteriority in relation to the poem, then we can locate both the poetic subject *and* the poem by establishing a circumstance or set of circumstances that ground both the poem and its subject. We have already seen that there is an insurmountable temporal (and cultural) rift separating us from the particulars of what might ground the poetic subject's differentiation from the lyric's formal *topoi*. Therefore, the only remaining move is to determine the necessary condition for any and *all* poems, because that which grounds *all* poems must also have played a major role in grounding the troubadour poems and their subjects.

What are the basic circumstances that allow any given poem to exist? To begin with, poems require time. As objects, they possess a duration both in the process of their composition and in the process of their reception. Without time, a poem would not have the opportunity to come into being, and reading it (or hearing it) would be impossible. Space, too, becomes necessary for much the same reason. A poem takes up space, both on the page and in the vehicles that are delivering it, whether it is the body of the troubadour, the body of the jongleur, the folio in which it has been preserved, or the bodies of those who are receiving it. Bodies, poetic or otherwise, only exist if there is space that they are able to occupy. Without space, there can be no subject, and there can be no voice. The poem, then, is grounded in a spatiotemporal opening-up, such that it takes up space and elapses in time. But in order to understand how the poetic subject is located in time and space relative to the lyric, we must first consider the manner in which space–time becomes comprehensible to it. This is a simple matter, since we are not interrogating the nature of either time or space in themselves—we are merely interested in a concept that bundles them together within the realm of subjective (or even quotidian) experience. The only term that I can think of that indexes both an expanse of space and an expanse of time is *distance*. The subject's experience of distance is its experience of space-as-time and time-as-space.

Distance, however, need not be a dead end—we still have room to be more specific. If time and space ground the poem, it is because they render it possible by existing positively. The poem *takes up space.* The space is an opening that the poem then fills. Similarly, the poem *spans time.* Its transmission requires a movement toward a futurity, because transmission entails the movement from a source to a recipient—a movement that is extremely

common in the *tornadas* (final shortened stanzas) of troubadour songs, wherein the composer *sends* the lyric in some capacity to someone else. We can claim with confidence, then, that there is something of the subject in the poem's need to occupy unfilled space and to span unelapsed time.[12] This sort of unfilled space–time is what I have termed *positive distance*. Since the poem is the only remaining vessel that we have for the troubadour subject, and since positive distance is what the poem needs in order to take up space and be transmitted, we can conclude that positive distance is necessary for the subject to have a hope of being legible.[13] Without that hope for legibility, it would be impossible to locate subjectivity within the lyric. I should note, though, that I do not intend to claim that *negative distance*—distance that has already been traversed or is located in the past—does not play a role in troubadour lyric. Instead, I am simply asserting that it is impossible to reliably locate the subject within negative distance, because, as we have seen, it is only the positive distance that can reliably ground the poem. Negative distance is altogether too uncertain, because it opens up the possibility of an absencing, of the subject's annihilation in the face of a distance that has already been traversed, a distance that the poem and its grounding subject might not be able to fill. Negative distance is space that has already closed up, and time that has already elapsed; the poem requires open space, and a present that can be extrapolated into a future. Within the context of troubadour lyric, we cannot depend upon finding the subject in negative distance simply because we have so few coordinates by which we are able to locate subjectivity. In negative distance, there is a chance that the subject is absent; in positive distance, the subject *must* be present. To this end, we will focus our analysis on the tendency in troubadour lyric to constitute the poetic subject within the opening up of positive distance.

It is fitting that Guilhem IX of Peiteius, who was likely the first great "troubadour," is the one who provides an abstract template for positive distance as it might have manifested itself within the Occitan tradition. Among the most prominent noblemen of his time, Guilhem was the Duke of Aquitaine and the Count of Poitou, and was able to contrive a poetic persona that was largely separate from his political identity.[14] Even so, his extensive experience of travel and his time spent living in the frontier territories bordering Muslim Spain as well as his tenure in the Holy Land in the wake of the First Crusade surely inflected his verse in important ways.[15] For instance, in his famous *Farai un vers de dreyt nien*, Guilhem displays a marked attunement to distance, declaring that he will "compose a song about nothing outright," and then proceeds to explain the mechanics of such a task from the perspective of someone who has done so while asleep on horseback—someone who

is likely in the middle of a lengthy journey from one place to another. The piece becomes a depiction of the relation between the speaker's volition, his possible object of attention, and space, illustrating the way the three concerns seem to tug at one another such that the speaker feels attachment, sickness, and ambivalence, among other things.

As we approach this poem, we ought, first, to pause on its opening declaration: the speaker's claim that he will "compose a song about nothing outright" ("*farai un vers de dreyt nien*"), and in particular, the phrase "de dreyt nien." The preposition "de" here might mean "about," but it also might mean "from." There is the sense that the verse itself is both coming *from* a kind of total nothingness and is ultimately referring to nothing in particular. This sense is bolstered by the similarly elastic definition of "dreyt"—if we translate it as "exactly" (from "well," "correct," "accurately"), then we are confronted with the notion of nothing *in particular*. "Exactly" suggests a brand of wholeness that particularizes what it modifies, a form of completion that compartmentalizes its object so that it is not mistaken for something else. It is not a positive modifier in and of itself—its meaning is closer to "not anything else" than it is to "total." "Exactly" is an adjective that shields against its opposite rather than asserting any kind of totality in and of itself. On the other hand, "dreyt" might also mean "outright," which serves to totalize the nothingness far more than a word like "exactly" would be able to do.[16] A verse about exactly nothing is a verse that is making sure that it is about nothing rather than something. A verse *from* or *based on* exactly nothing suggests a nearly *Seinfeld*-esque state of affairs in which the speaker is writing a poem whose subject matter is nothing—just as Jerry Seinfeld proposes a show about nothing (i.e., whose content possesses no topic). Nothing, in such a scenario, is simply a lack of content. However, if we translate "dreyt nien" as "nothing outright" or "absolute nothing," things become more complex. If the poem is *about* absolute nothing, then the speaker is interested in making a metaphysical claim—a claim that likely possesses theological undertones. In particular, such an appeal to the act of making something about or from nothing bespeaks the discourse surrounding Plato's *Timaeus,* which was important to theologians of Guilhem's time—they looked to the *Timaeus* as a model for the process and structural components endemic to God's act of creation in the opening passages of Genesis. Nothingness, according to many twelfth-century readings of Plato, was really *hyle* (or *silva,* which was the term's Latin rendering), a primordial, unformed material from which God produces matter by imposing intelligible form onto it. The influential fourth-century commentator Calcidius describes *silva* as that which precedes form and materiality, yet also contains their possibility,

"a bodiless body, potentially a body but not actually and really a body."[17] Meanwhile, Bernardus Silvestris (mid-twelfth century), in his *Cosmographia,* treats *silva* as a character possessed of an embodied materiality, even as he asserts that "her birth preceded all creation."[18] To contemplate nothingness as if it might simultaneously possess the seed of materiality, then, is a very platonic gesture, and is not out of place in the intellectual climate of Guilhem's Europe.[19] And if we interpret "de dreyt nien" to be suggesting that Guilhem is making his verse *out of absolute nothing*, then we might understand him to be enacting the journey that Plato describes in *Timaeus*, or perhaps the one that is depicted far more mythically in Silvestris' *Cosmographia*. Guilhem's act of fashioning verse, then, is *creatio ex nihilo*.

We can, moreover, complicate things even further: there are two possible interpretations that we can attach to a translation of "de" as "from" or "out of." On the one hand, "from" might indicate an emergence, as it would in the sentence, "I came from the desert." On the other hand, "from" can suggest a process of composition, as in, "the boy molded a bird from clay." In this second interpretation, making a verse out of absolute nothing treats nothingness as a font of bodiless material potential that the subject might manipulate by way of the mind's capacity to impose form.

Within the multiplicity of possible readings for this line, we are confronted with several permutations of distance. To begin with, there is the distance that the verse must traverse in order to emerge from absolute nothing and become itself—which is to say, a verse that refers to (i.e., is *about*) both exactly nothing and absolute nothingness. Such a distance may not be measurable, and yet it manifests as distance because it represents a temporal expanse by which a poetic object moves from taking up no space to fulfilling some kind of spatial role in a world of things as that which is separate in some way from nothingness. There is also, though, the question of the subject's part in making the verse. In order to treat the absolute nothing as if it is a material from which the verse might be fashioned, the subject is obliged to enact some kind of distance between itself and the nothing, in the same way that a painter must be operating at some relative distance away from his or her paints, such that he or she might reach out and use them. Thus, the distance between the subject and the absolute nothing is a necessary condition for the distance that the poem traverses in its journey from nothing into something—the latter cannot exist without the former. If we extrapolate such a relation and make it a rule, we would assert that distance between a subject that is in a position to observe objects is a necessary condition for that subject's ability to either intervene in existing distance or create a new expanse. To be positioned is to be mediated, since

occupying a position implies a categorical differentiation between one's location and that which surrounds it—mediation is a form of distance that allows the subject to determine how its surroundings are in turn arranged in distance. I will put it another way: the subject must be distanced from objects in order to either conceive of or participate in the distance that contains those objects. The subject, therefore, must first be mediated by distance in order for distance to become a force that is operative in its own experience of the world. Distance, in this scenario, is self-reflexive. The thinking subject must be positioned relative to the world in order for distance to be expressible in its ontology, but it is impossible to position oneself if one is not already within distance. Thus, any form of expressible distance must comment on itself—the experience of any sort of expanse in the world refers back to the distance that mediates the subject from that world, and the existence of any sort of mediating distance between the subject and the world is only possible if the correlation between subject and world is already unfolding within time and space (i.e., within distance).

Throughout the remainder of *Farai un vers de dreyt nien*, Guilhem figuratively demonstrates this same relation between mediating distance and distance that separates objects from one another. Over the course of the poem, we are consistently presented with a disjunction between the speaker's location and the location from which the *vers* has emerged, even though it is understood that it is the speaker who has acted as the composer. When Guilhem declares of the *vers* that "*fo trobatz en durmen* (it was found in sleep)," we become aware that on the one hand, the speaker is bragging about his ability to casually compose a lyric, while on the other hand, the speaker is distancing himself (or at least his current self) from the composition process. The precarity of such a phrase forcibly reminds us that the distance attendant upon the emergence of the poem is contingent on the distance that accompanies the subject's positioning relative to the moment in which the poem emerges. Indeed, Guilhem further emphasizes the dislocation of the subject's current mediated position with respect to the distance that the *vers* is occupying, making the following statements:

> No sai en qual hora.m fuy natz:
> No suy alegres ni iratz,
> No sui estrayns ni sui privatz,
> Ni no.n puesc au,
> Qu'enaissi fuy de nueitz fadatz,
> Sobr' un pueg au.[20]

(I do not know the hour in which I was born,
I am neither happy nor sad,
I am not removed, nor am I isolated,
Nor am I able to do anything,
Because I was so bewitched one night on a hill.)

By claiming ignorance of his birth hour, the speaker admits that his spatiotemporal position is arbitrary, and given to him by the world that contains him. Under these circumstances, then, a given subject cannot control or be fully certain of its positionality, having been born into a particular historical context, a particular culture and a particular family even as it does not know the specifics of that situation. While the speaker is aware of the world around him, he cannot truly relate to the objects therein until he can locate himself precisely within a distance—while he is neither removed nor isolated from the world in which the *vers* participates, he cannot take up a real attitude ("neither happy nor sad") relative to it. Having an attitude or disposition toward the world presupposes that one is aware of one's location relative to its contents, such that they make one happy or make one sad. If one's location relative to a world of objects is elided, it becomes impossible to conceptualize how the objects therein might affect one's internal state. In turn, it must be impossible to act upon that world of objects—hence the speaker's inability to do anything. The only explanation, then, is that the speaker was bewitched into occupying a position ("on a high hill") and entering a distance that he is not able to understand. Since the speaker was unaware of the manner in which the bewitchment might have initiated the *vers*, he is correspondingly ignorant of both the distance that the *vers* now traverses and the cognitive distance (i.e., the thinking) that mediates him from the span of distance belonging to the *vers*. Without establishing a knowledge of that mediating distance, he has no hope of acquiring knowledge either of the *vers* or of the spatiotemporal conditions that ground it.

Guilhem recycles the same metaphorical structure at the beginning of the next strophe when he tells us that he cannot distinguish wakefulness from sleep unless "someone has told" him.[21] The act of putting-to-words is what grants him knowledge of the state of consciousness that determines the nature of his relation to the world from one moment to the next. If his state of consciousness is not present within language, it is not cognizable to him. Put differently, it is words that reveal the distance mediating the speaker's subjectivity from the world (i.e., his position relative to the world as a subject who must form thoughts about it), and, as a result, he can know things about the distance that the *vers* occupies—in this case, he would learn about the point at which the distance is initiated, and whether it is enfolded

in a state of sleep or a state of wakefulness. Without the words that form the *vers*, it is impossible for the speaker to separate himself from it, since it is the delivery of the words that establishes the speaker's distance from the spatiotemporal conditions of the poem as it emerges. If the speaker's knowledge of the poem's distance (i.e., its spatiotemporal opening-up) is only activated once the poem's words are delivered, then he is forced to remain ignorant of his own mediating distance as a thinking subject until the poem has been crafted. We can recapitulate our logical process as follows:

1. If words are the material that establishes the speaker's ability to know the poem, his own position relative to the poem and the circumstances surrounding the opening-up of the poem's distance;
2. If knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the initiation of the poem's distance constitutes knowledge of the distance itself;
3. If either sleep or wakefulness is a condition of the poem's genesis (which is the initiation of its distance);
4. Then the speaker loses the ability to distinguish between sleep and wakefulness until the words of the *vers* allow for such a recognition.

This process of reasoning allows for a kind of slippage in the speaker's location. On the one hand, the speaker is the maker of the *vers*, and on the other hand, the *vers* subsumes the speaker's ability to know the distance that mediates him from it, which causes the speaker to locate himself *within* it. It is for this reason that Guilhem then shows how the rupture inherent in the poem's departure from its point of genesis toward the indeterminable figure of a lover "nearly splits his heart," (*"Per pauc no m'es lo cor partitz"*)[22] causes sickness, and then has the speaker imagining all the ways in which his imaginary lover does *not* appear to him—the departure of the *vers* creates an absence, a split, and a malaise that is manifest within the speaker's body. Indeed, Charlotte Gross believes that the speaker's pendulous motion from a position external to the *canso* to an embodiment within it is a theme that both serves as a categorical division running through a great deal of troubadour lyric and reflects a particular cosmology, since it concerns the manner in which the poem understands its own coming-into-being. In some cases, such a genesis involves the speaker locating both itself and the song by invoking the time of year or the season, while in other cases, it is a depiction of the poem being composed. Gross expounds:

> [. . .] any general statement about poetic craft is sufficient to generate the "bona comensansa" of the *canso* [. . .] But if the poetics opening

> makes a forceful beginning by linking the poet to the first Artificer, the better-known seasons opening duplicates the cosmogonic moment itself. Here the poet steps outside his fiction, the creative center of the lyric cosmos shifts to the lady, and poetic beginning is marked by the simultaneous inception of season, love, and song. As the philosophers hold that time and the world were created together, so the first purpose of the seasons opening is to establish the temporality of the lyric "I."[23]

In this passage, Gross claims that a large portion of early troubadour lyric can be divided between poems that begin with a declaration from the speaker about how he or she is making the poem (as in our Guilhem *canso*) and poems that open with the temporal location of the subject within a season. For the former set, the poet takes on the role of the prime mover, whose active declaration of presence within the copula ("*farai*") ignites the possibility of distance within the poem. For the latter, the speaker only exists within a distance that has already been established, since the temporality of the season creates space for the speaker's own inception into time. Guilhem's *Farai un vers de dreyt nien*, however, manages both of these cosmological movements at once. The speaker begins outside of the poem, but his positionality is only ever actualized once he locates himself within the poem and becomes an embodiment of its contents. In Guilhem's poem, then, we bear witness to the cosmological simultaneity of two different axes of distance (the distance mediating the subject from the world outside of himself and the emergent distance of the poem), and gain insight into the process through which such a simultaneity might be enacted.

Marcabru's pair of *estornel* (or "starling") poems take this conception of distance a step further, clarifying the potential risks that the troubadour subject undertakes in order to move toward a spatiotemporal location, and in doing so warning us of the pitfalls that might accompany uncurtailed positivity with respect to distance. Unlike Guilhem IX, Marcabru was of humble birth and, as someone who likely received clerical training, stood against the moral excesses of his aristocratic colleagues' work.[24] In his *estornel* series, he delivers a farcical spin on courtly attraction and the "love from afar" trope, depicting a poet who sends out a starling bearing his composition across a distance to a female recipient on the other end, a transaction that results in a number of distortions and misunderstandings. In these pieces, it is significant that the starling plays the role of the song or of the voice as it traverses time and space, thereby directly embodying the very forms of distance that Guilhem elaborates in his *Farai un vers de dreyt nien.* By

analyzing the embodied depiction that Marcabru provides in his extended starling metaphor, we can learn more about the abstract spatiotemporal mechanics that inform its structure. In particular, I want to examine how Marcabru's *estornel* poems demonstrate the manner in which the traversal of positive distance conditions the possibility for loss or for material decay.

In the first starling poem, *estornel, cueill ta volada* ("Starling/poem, take your flight"), Marcabru gives the starling its instructions, but by the third strophe, the poem is delivered both from the mouth of the poet and from the beak of the starling. In that third strophe, the poem begins to comment on its own delivery, as if the starling is engaging in a kind of side commentary on the message that it has been sent to deliver:

> Ai com es encablada
> La falsa razos dorada[25]
>
> (Ah, how persuasive
> The gilded argument can be!)

These two lines might be referring to the woman's allure, but they could also be a commentary on Marcabru's intent to write a poem that will convince her to sleep with him. In the first case, the couplet is clearly from Marcabru's perspective; in the second case, we must conclude that the starling is delivering the poem separately from Marcabru, and with some divergence from the message that he might have originally intended.

These two possible readings continue to coexist throughout the first *estornel* poem. It is routinely unclear as to whether it is Marcabru himself speaking or whether the starling is impersonating a caricatured version of the poet, a "marionette" of sorts. Bruckner expands on this idea in her analysis of the *estornel* poems:

> Low-down sex talk mixed in with the language of *fin'amor* suggests that Marcabru is ventriloquizing the kind of figure he typically criticizes: the fictional dummy would be the target of his polemical satire, as in *L'autrier jost' una sebissa* (XXX). The signal that might clinch the impersonation but ends up complicating our recognition is Marcabru's proper name inserted in the sixth stanza of *Estornel [cueill ta volada]*.[26]

Bruckner is suggesting, then, that while the attitude that the poem projects might ape that of the kind of lecherous subject that Marcabru lambasts

elsewhere in his corpus, the use of his proper name in the sixth stanza places that potential satirical reading on unsure ground. Could the phrase "*Marcabrus ditz*" be indicating that Marcabru is speaking of himself in the third person?[27] Certainly. But it could just as easily be read as the starling distancing itself from what it believes to be the attitude of the speaker whose message it is carrying. It is entirely unclear whose voice is delivering that line.

All this uncertainty opens up onto the same difficulties with distance that we encountered in Guilhem's *Farai un vers de dreyt nien*. In order to understand all that is going on, we will need to trace all the different sorts of distance that are unfolding throughout this first *estornel* poem. To begin with, we are confronted with the distance that the starling must travel to deliver Marcabru's message to the woman whose favor he is (apparently) trying to win. Although we are not provided with a measurement, this distance is, in theory, a measurable span. The problem, though, is that we are seldom certain if it is the starling or Marcabru speaking at a given moment. On the one hand, Marcabru's delivery of the poem is located at the outset of the starling's journey, before it has traversed the measurable span separating the poet from the woman to whom the poet is writing. After all, it is Marcabru's persona that states his intention to relay *his* message to the starling. On the other hand, the starling's delivery of the poem can only be located once the bird is given license to speak—that is, once it arrives on the other end of that measurable distance and repeats the message to the lady. As readers, then, we do not know how the speaker is positioned in relation to the enveloping physical distance that conditions the poem's transmission. Thus, the character of the physical distance that allows for the poem to come into being is unknowable. If Marcabru is the speaker, then the distance includes the time and space necessary for the poem's composition, transmission, delivery, and repetition to the lady. If the starling is the speaker, then the nature of that distance shifts. To begin with, the processes of composition, transmission, and delivery become negative distance (i.e., distance that has already been traversed) relative to the position of the starling. Moreover, we must add a new process of composition that immediately precedes the process of repetition, since what we are encountering on the page is not Marcabru's composition, but is instead the starling's recollection of that composition: the starling, in repeating the poem, is piecing it back together and likely, based on its interjections, misremembering it or changing it somewhat. Once this process of secondhand composition is complete, so too may the repetition be voiced. In this way, the location of the speaker has the ability to significantly alter the nature of the physical distance that conditions the poem.

Just as in Guilhem's piece, it is impossible to conceptualize physical distance unless the subject's position in relation to that distance is clarified. It bears repeating that to be positioned relative to a world of objects is also to be mediated from that world, and that to be mediated is to be located at a distance from other objects. If we do not know whether the poem's speaker is Marcabru or the starling, we cannot know how the subject is positioned within the distance that conditions the poem's activity in the world. If we cannot know the subject's position in distance, then we are correspondingly unable to establish the subject's mediating distance that allows it to conceptualize the arrangement of time, space, and objects in which it is located. We arrive, therefore, at the same cosmological conclusion as we did in Guilhem's poem: that the axis of mediating subjective distance and the axis of distance that conditions the poem's physical emergence and persistent presence must activate one another. One cannot exist without the other.

However, due to the manner in which the *estornel* poems embody this simultaneity between two distances, we are able to perceive complications that are not apparent in Guilhem's far more abstracted account. To begin with, we must contend with the decay of the message as it is traverses distance. In the second *estornel* poem, in which the lady sends her reply to Marcabru, we see an example of such decay on a smaller scale. The lady relays her decision to the bird, who then relays a somewhat different version of that decision to Marcabru. Even after declaring her desire and affection for her abbot, the lady decides the following:

> Vai e di
> Qu'el mati
> Si.aisi,
> Que sotz pi
> Farem fi,
> Sotz lui mi,
> D'esta malvolensa.[28]
>
> (Go and tell him
> That we will end
> This enmity
> Here
> In the morning
> Under a pine tree
> With me beneath him.)

The lady, then, quite clearly accepts Marcabru's advances, and desires to set up a time for them to meet, despite her involvement with the abbot. The starling, however, distorts the message. Instead of mentioning the abbot, the bird inflates (or at least alters) the potential conflict that complicates the tryst, declaring that the lady has "fed" (*pagutz*) a thousand suitors, and has done so without "false seed" (*falsa semensa*). Here, we can detect an inflation of the numbers involved, since the lady is in reality torn between *two* suitors, and not a thousand. Moreover, we see the starling converting the terms of sexual exchange into ones that it understands—seed is the closest thing to currency that birds deal in, and it is also the substance that the lady's suitors, to put it bluntly, want to put inside of her. And then, when the starling conveys the lady's agreement, it rephrases her acquiescence as something more ambiguous:

> Qu'el ardi
> Del jardi
> E que.us mat e.us vensa![29]
>
> (That in the boldness
> Of the garden
> She will checkmate you and conquer you!)

The starling imparts a valence of combativeness (and even a sense that the "checkmate" is just as likely to be a consequence as it is a reward), which, if present, is far more toned down in the lady's original statement of her willingness to be "beneath" Marcabru. Yet again, the starling distorts its message.

Such distortion forces us to question the entire enterprise that has taken place in both of the *estornel* poems. Since there is such uncertainty as to whether the speaker is located as Marcabru or as the starling in the first piece, it becomes impossible to know how close or far away the poem that we end up reading might be to the song that Marcabru composed for the bird to deliver to the lady. As the message traverses its positive distance, it encounters the complications of transmission, and decays as a result. In turn, such decay renders the position of the speaker—which is already in question—even more unknowable. This problem of decay opens up onto a larger epistemological problem: can we ever know if an object or a language event is as it *was*? If I launch a tennis ball through the air, how can I assess whether or not it is precisely the same tennis ball when I go and pick it up from where it landed? Perhaps the air resistance caused by its flight velocity removed a certain amount of its outer coating. Perhaps the impact of its landing slightly

altered its shape. I can say the same thing about the face of a friend from one day to the next, or the voice of a singer that I am accustomed to hearing on the radio. I can also say that about a poem, given that the context in which it might be interpreted adjusts minutely (or drastically) day by day, year by year, and country by country.

Marcabru, then, exposes a point of failure in positive distance—a precipice of decay or distortion which, once crossed, drops off into a suspended state of illegibility wherein the positivity of spatiotemporal expansion is inverted, and becomes a negativity. I will now take a moment to elucidate how the distortion and decay in the *estornel* poems mark such a transformation from positivity to negativity. To begin with, the subject is no longer able to establish firm coordinates relative to the world exterior to it—everything is changing or decaying all at once, with none of the mooring necessary for a locatable mediating position. In particular, the speaker's voice, which is the only thing that affirms the subject's presence, is distorted, undecidable, and unattributable. Moreover, since the presence of the subject at any given point is no longer guaranteed, it must, in order to stave off the possibility of its absence or its annihilation, splay itself ever outward so that it can be said to have always-already traversed every bit of the distance in which it is thrown. We must recall that negative distance, as per our previous definition, is distance that has already been traversed. Within such an expanse, any untraversed bit of distance presents the possibility that the subject might not exist at all, and is understood as a failure of memory, a lacuna, an exile, the possibility of both physical and affective erasure. Put in other words, the distortion and transformation that Marcabru demonstrates acts as a stretching, a distension, and tugs hard enough at the subject that it is forced to spread the possibility of its footing all across the expanse that contains it in order to maintain itself against the threat of oblivion. Where once the subject would, at any given moment, be positioned at a particular and singular location from which it might be mediated from its surroundings, the subject in negative distance possesses no sure coordinates, and, in order to secure its continued existence, allows itself to be pulled apart so that it can occupy all possible coordinates of the poem's distance all at once. Any unoccupied (i.e., untraversed) coordinate allows for uncertainty as to whether the subject is present or absent, or whether the subject is occupying a position at all, thereby compelling both reader and speaker to contemplate the possibility that the subject simply might not exist. Suddenly, the subject's epistemological need to mediate itself from the world around it (and so to affirm its own existence) becomes an obligation that yields great strain, since it is forced to stretch

that mediation across the entire spatiotemporal expanse that conditions its existence in the world. The subject, in sum, is obliged to contend with its entire world *all at once*.

Displacement and Re-Embodiment: Flamenco's Inversion of Negative Distance

While Marcabru's *estornel* poems lead us toward negative distance, they do not begin there. In order to examine a mode of lyric subjectivity that emerges from the kind of spatiotemporal negativity in which all distance must always-already be traversed, we will examine a selection of traditional flamenco *letras.* The verses in question depict a generalized subject[30] as it contemplates various elements of its own displacement and its experience of absence. Such *letras* tend to fall under the umbrella of what is often called *cante jondo*, which translates to "deep song." *Cante jondo* is a term that came into usage in the early twentieth century to refer to a subset of musical forms that have traditionally been attributed at least partly to Gitano (Romani) origins. In many of the earliest recordings of flamenco performers, *cante jondo* is very well represented, partly because many of the people who worked to record and compile those artists believed that the Gitano forms were the heart of the genre, and partly because many of the *palos* (i.e., musical forms) associated with *cante jondo* have possessed a cultural significance for Gitanos, appearing at social gatherings, at work, at funerals, or at weddings. Beyond and among its uniquely Gitano expressive and linguistic features, flamenco as a whole brings a host of influences under its umbrella—song forms based on the Andalusian *sevillanas* are widely performed, as are the *cantes de ida y vuelta*, which are styles conditioned by fusions between the New World and the Iberian Peninsula. Melodically, flamenco has been said to bear the influence of *música andalusí*, which consists of the mixture between Sephardic Jewish and Muslim musical practices that developed in the south of Spain in the centuries preceding the Capitulation of Granada in 1492.[31] Even the *seguiriya*—one of flamenco's most identifiably Gitano forms—was often referred to as the *seguidilla gitana*, despite bearing little to no relation to the *seguidilla*, which was an eighteenth-century Spanish folk dance.[32] As Cristina Cruces Roldán explains in detail, there are strong resonances between the Mozarabic *jarchas* and certain lyrical structures in flamenco, even if the influence is indirect.[33]

Despite these richly cosmopolitan origins, however, flamenco as a consolidated musical practice developed within a distinctly Gitano cultural milieu, which, as Antonio Mandly Robles attests, functioned at various points between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries as a space of *mestizaje* in which others took part in and contributed to the musical practices that pertained to or were adjacent to *gitanidad*[34]—even notable *payo* (i.e., non-Gitano) nineteenth-century contributors to the tradition such as Silverio Franconetti, Antonio Chacón, and Manuel Vallejo spent their entire lives alongside or in dialogue with Gitano communities. While Gerhard Steingress, for instance, distances flamenco's origins from *gitanidad* and prefers a class-reductionist analysis whereby the genre is understood as a working-class mode of expression whose character is not inflected by the ethnic particularities of *gitanidad* so much as by a performative Gitanophilia, such a treatment is a dangerously absolutist one.[35] As Richard Pym affirms in his comprehensive history of the Gitanos in Early Modern Spain, the tendency to flatten the particularities of *gitanidad* into an amorphous lower class identity has been around since the sixteenth century as a form of political rhetoric meant to suppress Gitano cultural practices—the argument, according to Pym, is that the Gitanos, "far from being ethnically distinct, were in fact nothing more than a domestic underclass, recalcitrantly delinquent, to be sure, but emphatically home-grown."[36] This misconception was widely held over the course of the following centuries, and still figures heavily in many discourses surrounding flamenco today. Moreover, K. Meira Goldberg points out that while we can and should do away with the stereotyping and quasi-minstrelsy that come along with Gitanophilia, there is a problematic trend among certain flamenco theorists in which such an impulse results in the erasure of *gitanidad* from the history of flamenco. In such studies, this erasure often results in claims that the genre ought to be attributed entirely to a broader Andalusian folk culture.[37]

In the interest of side-stepping an engagement with the long and contentious debate surrounding flamenco's broader cultural origins, I will simply note that the intergenerationally transmitted *letras* are attributed overwhelmingly (though not universally) to Gitano sources: El Planeta, La Serneta, El Fillo, Enrique el Mellizo, Joaquín de la Paula, Agustín Talega, Paco la Luz, Francisco la Perla, El Viejo de la Isla, and so on. The content of the *letras* frequently makes reference to Gitano cultural practice and the words themselves are most often sung by Gitanos. Accordingly, while we should not go so far as to suggest that flamenco as a whole is inherently of Gitano character (indeed, certain *payo* cantaores such as Pepe Marchena were notable for having a markedly *non*-Gitano style of singing), we can

say that its lyrical content—particularly the material transmitted within the *soleares-seguiriyas* family tree, which extends all the way back to the microtonally ornate, unaccompanied vocal song forms such as *tonás* and *martinetes* (both of which survive in limited form to this day)—speaks to or is compatible with either Gitano historical memory or concerns that possess a continued significance for Gitano performers.

When the Gitanos came to Andalusia (the first recorded instance of Romani migration into Spain was in 1425), they carried with them a long history of displacement, having journeyed from northwest India to Iran, only to travel and scatter across countries like Greece, Turkey, Hungary, and Romania. Upon arriving in southern Spain, groups of them were compelled by royal edicts and the threat of incarceration to exchange their customary itinerancy for a more sedentary lifestyle in cities like Cadiz, Seville, and Granada. In many cases, they filled the occupations once held by converted Muslims, most of whom were expelled by the early seventeenth century. As a result, Gitanos and Moors were often confused in the public imagination. Gitanos became blacksmiths, basket weavers, and musicians (among other occupations), and were beholden to the necessity of traveling from town to town in order to sell their wares. Moreover, the Spanish government took to imposing strict regulations on such travel, and often monitored the Gitano population.[38] Flamenco arose from this environment of cultural mixture and anxiety, shared among a group of interrelated families that spanned the breadth of Andalusia. Many of the genre's greatest performers today are still descended from those families.[39] However, while the familial ethos remains strong within flamenco, there has been debate for the last century as to the viability of recovering any kind of legible "pure" tradition, due to the radical cultural mixtures that threw Gitanos and other Andalusians together for hundreds of years.[40]

From the outset, flamenco was attuned to absence, to how cultures displace one another and how they both lose and gain histories. There are still thematic and formal traces of *romances fronterizos*—poems written by Christians in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that romanticized the Muslim legacy in and exit from Spain—in traditional forms of *cante*. Foremost among the flamenco styles typically designated as *cante jondo* are two formal families: *seguiriyas* and *soleares*.[41] Bernard Leblon provides an example of an *alboreá* (a wedding song in the *soleares* family) sung by Agujetas el Viejo, who was a great exponent of the Jerez style:

> El rey moro con la paz
> ¡qué bien ha queao!

toíta tu gente t'han coronao,
pues dile que entre, se calentará
porque en esta tierra no hay cariá.

(The Moorish king with peace
How lucky he is!
Your whole family has crowned you.
Well, tell him to come in; let him warm himself
For in this country there is no charity.)[42]

It is worth noting that flamenco lyrics are commonly transcribed based on their pronunciation—"quedado" becomes "queao," for example, and "caridad" becomes "cariá." In this verse, we can see evidence of both cultural mixture—an engagement with the history of Andalusia—and cultural anxiety, a recognition that the Gitanos are just as hard done by as the Muslims were. The directive in the last couplet of the verse is to allow the Moorish king to warm himself by the fire, for the speaker is aware that he will not be offered such charity elsewhere in the country—and he knows it because he has experienced such callousness himself. The Muslim's only option is to sit by *the speaker's fire*, since it is the speaker and his people who are the only charitable ones. In this way, the verse serves both as a moment of deep engagement with the sociohistorical role into which the Gitanos have been absorbed in Spain (that of the Jews and then of the Muslims) and as an affirmation of the goodness of Gitano culture as it stands in opposition to the larger culture present in Andalusia and in the rest of the country. It is this confusion of roles that leads to the subject's location within negative distance, stretched and distended across histories that both are and are not its own, across spans whose traversal cannot be revoked.

Indeed, it is through verses that deal with the expulsion or absence of other cultures that we can detect the degree to which flamenco music has emerged out of a comprehension of negative distance. We encounter, for example, themes regarding the Jews—who were expelled from Spain in 1492—in the *palo* known as *peteneras*, which is associated with a host of superstitions and, as a result, has been performed relatively rarely throughout the twentieth century.[43] Blanco Garza, Rodríguez Ojeda, and Robles Rodríguez attribute its performance to La Niña de los Peines, but it is elsewhere credited to Rafael Gallina:[44]

-¿Dónde vas, bella judía,
tan compuesta y a deshora?

-Voy en busca de Rebeco
que está en una sinagoga.[45]

(Where do you go, pretty Jewess,
so composed and untimely?
-I go in search of Jacob,
who is in a synagogue.)

I must emphasize the context in which these words are being delivered—*peteneras* is a musical form that nearly always contains themes of death and is considered to be bad luck by many traditional flamenco performers.[46] This is true to such a degree that there exists a folk tale from the late nineteenth century of a *boda gitana* (a Romani wedding celebration) that ended in disaster when the revelers accidentally heard a neighborhood woman singing a *petenera*.[47] The pall of death and bad luck that has surrounded the *peteneras* palo, then, has been persuasive in flamenco culture—particularly among the Gitanos, who form the core of the art's practitioners—and we must take this into account in our interpretation of the *letra* above. Given the usage of "deshora" (untimely) to describe the Jewish woman's journey, we can only conclude that she is going to her death, and that Jacob will meet her once she arrives in the Jewish version of the afterlife (as embodied by the synagogue). However, we must also consider the overarching significance of the Jewish figure in light of the expulsion in 1492. The Jewish woman's exit is composed, yes, but it is also untimely—as if she is being forced out of wherever she is before the time is right. Moreover, there is geographical concretion at play: the woman is looking to find a synagogue in Spain, a country whose remaining synagogues are no longer places of worship. The fact that the woman goes, that she leaves where she is in order to find something (a synagogue) that is absent and a prophet (Jacob) who is no longer alive is poignantly bound up with the simultaneous reality that she is going to die. To be a subject whose mediating position is cathected to a particular geographical and cultural milieu, and then to be dislocated, to be cast into a negative distance relative to one's home, is synonymous with that subject's annihilation—it is death. The Gitanos understood the power and menace of negative distance, how it sets out to stretch, hurt, or even put an end to the subject. In making their music, they sought to forge a new positive distance atop the negativity. They knew what was at stake, both from their own history of displacement, and from the veritable cocktail of cultural absences and expulsions that imprinted the province in which they had settled.

Within the art of flamenco, such a mixture of cultural legacies and resonances has profoundly influenced some of the more traditional lyrics, which showcase an intense desire in the subject to stretch itself so that it might compensate or account for all the histories (and, therefore, the distances) that fall under its purview on both a cultural and a personal scale. An excellent example of such an outward casting is in this verse, attributed to a nineteenth-century *cantaora* named La Serneta, and sung famously as a *soleá* by La Niña de Los Peines:

> Fui pie[d]ra y perdí mi centro
> Y me arrojaron al mar
> Y a fuerza de tanto tiempo
> Mi centro vine a encontrar.[48]
>
> (I was a stone and I lost my center
> And they threw me in the sea
> And by the force of so much time
> I came to find my center again.)

In a 2000 feature article detailing the life of David Serva, who was one of the few successful American flamenco guitarists, Arnold Nagin claims that this verse memorializes the journey of the Gitanos through India, Central Europe, Egypt, Northern Africa, and Spain during their period of itinerancy.[49] This is one way of interpreting the lyric, to be sure. However, it is equally valid to view it as a memorialization of the numerous Gitanos who went to war for Spain in Flanders, who toiled on ships in lieu of other work, or who were forced from their homes for reasons ranging from mass incarcerations throughout the 1740s to governmentally sanctioned relocations during the twentieth century.[50] Moreover, the verse could easily be doing the same thing as Agujetas' *alboreá*: an identification with the cultures whose presence shaped the spaces that the Gitanos came to occupy in Andalusia. It is important to remember that the Jews, Muslims, and Moriscos (converted Muslims) fled in large numbers across the sea to Africa and the Middle East.

The reason for such interpretive elasticity is clear: the verse is not specific enough to be pinned down to a single context. It is for this reason that it has been paired with a rotating cast of verses in various renditions. It functions as an abstract, overarching representation of negative distance, and is, therefore, applicable to all possible forms of distance that might be encompassed within its negativity. In the four lines, we encounter a three-fold loss. First, there is a loss of the center. Second, there is a loss of stability

or of any firm positioning, since the subject has been thrown into the sea. Finally, there is a loss of the present, since the subject is adrift and has lost itself even as time passes, even as it spans interminable distance. It is only by losing, losing, and losing again that the subject discovers who it is, and its new center must be rooted in that negativity, since it is only by the force of time and the accompanying accumulation of loss that it reveals itself.

Let us unpack the movements through which the subject loses and regains its center. Embodied by the stone, the subject is adrift in the sea, having been removed from that which once centered it. Its displacement has forced it to shed all sure knowledge of its position within distance: to be rooted, or to have a center, is to possess a surety of where one is, of who one is relative to the rest of the world. To lose one's center is to lose a precise knowledge of the kinds of contextual mediation that separate one's subjectivity from a world of objects—it is to be unable to find oneself with any surety in a set of cultural traditions or linguistic patterns that one can call one's own.[51] It is this sort of contextual mediation that both discloses the world to a subject and determines the subject's separation (or distance) from that world. While the subject is always mediated from the world regardless of any cultural or linguistic displacement, the kinds of heavily contextualized mediation that emerge from cultural or linguistic communities provide a far more particularized and positionally grounded aperture onto its sphere of being than the simple and universal form of access provided by faculties such as the senses. To be connected to solid and knowable forms of contextual mediation is to possess a locatable subjective standpoint; to lose that connection by way of dislocation, cultural erasure, or social death is to be unable to locate or characterize one's subjective standpoint (or at least to be unable to do so in the present tense) with the kind of positivity that interprets the initial opening-up of distance as that which simply stretches out from the firm coordinates of one's current position, waiting to be traversed.

As a result of its loss of center, the subject is adrift. As the speaker of the verse asserts, the subject is *thrown*, is constantly wrapped up in a motion away from whatever might root it to a position. This state of affairs leads to a rather uncomfortable simultaneity: at any given moment, the subject is at once positioned in time and space and moving inexorably away from the locus at which it has positioned itself. Every time the subject finds its footing and asserts a positionality from which it might be mediated from the world, it also continues to be thrown due to the aporias inherent in its history of transit and erasure, and so moves on. The only corrective for such a process is for the subject to stretch out its faculties of mediation so that they encompass the entirety of the distance across which it has been thrown at any given moment.

As time passes, then, the distance over which the subject is thrown increases, and the subject must stretch its mediation a corresponding amount. Time, in this scenario, is quite literally a force that tugs the subject apart at the seams.

How, then, can time's force allow the subject to regain its center? If the subject's mediating faculties are stretched across the entire negative distance of its loss, then its only choice is to turn that negativity into a position in and of itself, and to structure layers of cultural and linguistic mediation that rely upon the distance of loss as their ground. It is in this way that negative distance, through the force of time, can become the necessary condition for the positioning of a subject, poetic or otherwise. Within negative distance, the loss intensifies over time to a breaking point where the subject must choose between annihilation and positioning itself atop the negative distance of the loss. The stone loses its center, and keeps on losing until it finds a new center within the loss.

Distance and Recombination: Subjects and Speculative Possibility in Space and Time

If we graft our analyses of positive and negative distance together, we can conclude that space and time, as they manifest themselves to the thinking subject, are reducible to a problem of simultaneity. In the case of positive distance, the subject's very existence is grounded within physical distance, within the opening-up of space and time. At the same time, however, the subjective, mediating distance imposed by the subject's need to conceptualize and locate itself relative to the world is what grounds any given permutation of physical distance as a thinkable entity for it. For the world that is given to the subject, then, the mediating distance necessitated by thought and physical distance ground one another simultaneously. But this simultaneity introduces problems of mixture whereby the subject loses its footing and is consumed by the physical distance, or perhaps the physical distance becomes indistinguishable with the subject's perception of its own movement within that same expanse. The subject's mediating distance might, for example, distort or obscure the physical distance that it is traversing. Meanwhile, the subject, being mediated, is able to perceive the possibility of change across physical distance, and, in accepting the uncertainty inherent in the awareness of such discontinuities, destabilizes its sense of its own spatiotemporal positionality. Such undecidable mixing between mediating distance and physical distance ensures that the subject cannot construct a concept of the manner in

which the physical distance relates to it with any sort of surety or certainty. In turn, this uncertainty engenders the possibility of unforeseen distortion or material decay, since the subject cannot *know* the amount of decay or change that might afflict a material body as it moves from one undecidable position to another. In certain situations, the subject may be able to predict the scale of the change or decay that an object might suffer across distance, but it can never be completely sure.

When the possibility for decay is magnified enough, positive distance becomes negative distance, and the subject is stretched across the expanse of its loss, thrown outward from what was once its mediating position. Anytime it attempts to establish a position, it must simultaneously give up the locus upon which that position has been established, because it is still moving, still being thrown. Finally, the subject is compelled to make a choice between annihilation and allowing the negative distance to ground its positional mediation. From there, it enters into a new iteration of positive distance that opens up atop the negativity and the process begins anew.

The best way to describe the manner in which the subject encounters space and time, then, is that it is spatiotemporally displaced to varying degrees due to a simultaneity between the distance that it requires to take a mediating position and the distance that renders such positioning physically possible. In order to make sense of this simultaneity, it is necessary to take a step backward and consider the forces that structure it. We can accomplish such a task by returning to the spatiotemporal model that we have recovered through our analysis of troubadour and flamenco lyric, and then extrapolating it into a series of abstract movements. In other words, we need to consider how the interaction between the subject's mediating distance and the physical distance that contains it would appear were it generalized to the point of irreducibility. The fluctuation of positive and negative distance is largely related to two factors: the subject's position relative to the physical distance and the necessary simultaneity between subjective mediation (i.e., the ways in which a subject's need to think and produce concepts separates itself from the immediacy of the world around it) and the spatiotemporal arrangement of the world exterior to the subject. When the subject's positionality within physical distance is firm, the simultaneity results in a separation between the subject and the physical distance in which it exists. When the subject's positionality becomes uncertain, then the separation becomes correspondingly unclear until, at a certain point, positive distance becomes negative. Within negative distance, the subject has a great deal of trouble establishing a position, and so the separation between subject and physical distance becomes so fleeting

that the spatiotemporal negativity of the latter threatens to consume the former. As a result, the subject is forced to position itself atop the negative distance in order to avoid being annihilated by it. Once the subject regains its positionality, it is able to reestablish its separation from the world exterior to it, and so enters a new phase of positive distance.

We can, then, divide the interaction between the subject and space–time into two interlocking movements: mixture and separation. Positive distance correlates with separation, while negative distance correlates with mixture. Since positive distance eventually becomes negative distance, and since negative distance can become the locus for positive distance, we must conclude that the subject's relation with space–time must be grounded by a fluctuation between mixture and separation. At this point, we have managed to use troubadour poetry and the flamenco lyrics to show that the experience of distance consists of fluctuations in which physical bodies cyclically mix with and separate from one another. It must be these cycles of mixture and separation between physical bodies that ground the subject's ability to experience both space–time and the particularities of its own history. For instance, we have seen in our analysis of the transitions back and forth between positive and negative distance that a given entity in a state of separation is always moving toward mixture, searching for an untraversed distance, and encountering the possibility of decay or change therein. By the same token, an entity caught in a state of mixture is always moving toward a state of affairs in which it can ground itself enough to establish boundaries and enact determinate separations. A given text that has attuned itself to the experience, memory, or imagination of transit might register varying intensities of mixture and separation depending on the specificities of its cultural and individual contexts. However, if what we have seen in both the troubadour lyric and the flamenco *letras* is any indication, such a text is unfailingly caught up in the tension between those two movements, constantly parsing space and time according to principles of mixture and separation. Counter to the aims of certain contemporary philosophers, this formulation does not provide an unimpeded view of a world of objects as it exists uncluttered by the mediation or interference of human thought, and it does not allow any singular subject to circumvent itself in order to encounter things-in-themselves. However, a conception of being in space and time as a navigation of mixture and separation does give us a stronger sense of the nature of the subject's aperture onto the world of objects. It leaves us with a way to probe the points at which a given subject's spatiotemporal position renders it sensitive to material movements. When we position ourselves within space and time as subjects, we generate these mixtures and separations simply by virtue of being where we are, and then,

as we think or write, we represent them—and even so, we are at their mercy, because they are beyond us. This is where the border between the mediated world of our thinking and the unmediated world of objects and movements is to be found, and we cannot understand it if we do not foreground the historical particularity of every given subject's spatiotemporal positioning in our consideration, be it the diasporic negativity of flamenco *letras,* the unstable positivity of troubadour lyric, or engagements with distance emerging from any other set of exemplars. Rather than attempting to cleanly excise the mediation of thought from our relation to the material world, we need to broaden its scope and understand it as an essentially plural enterprise whose multiplicity and manifold particularity allows us to better understand not only ourselves, but also what is not us: the places at which our cognition ends while the rest of the world begins, and the shapes, properties, and characteristics of those limits.

BEN MEYERSON is a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto. His work focuses on philosophies of material flow and oral poetries of the Iberian Peninsula. He holds an MFA in poetry from the University of Minnesota and an MA in philosophy from the Universidad de Sevilla. He has authored a poetry collection entitled *Seguiriyas* (Black Ocean, 2023) and five chapbooks, including *Near Enough* (Seven Kitchens Press, 2023) and *An Ecology of the Void* (Above/Ground Press, 2019). He has recently published articles about ineffability in flamenco performance practice and infinitude in the philosophies of Quentin Meillassoux and Hermann Levin Goldschmidt.

Notes

1. Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 294.

2. Grant Hamilton, *The World of Failing Machines* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2016), 3–7; Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 10–18.

3. Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 60–66; Peter Hallward, "Anything Is Possible: A Reading of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 132–33; Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 83–87.

4. Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 11–12, 34–58.

5. Elizabeth Aubrey, "Literacy, Orality, and the Preservation of French and Occitan Medieval Courtly Songs," *Revista de Musicología,* 16, no. 4 (1993): 2–7; Peter Manuel, "Composition, Authorship, and Ownership in Flamenco, Past and Present," *Ethnomusicology,* 54, no. 1 (2010): 109–117.

6. Cristina Cruces Roldán, *El flamenco y la música andalusí: Argumentos para un encuentro* (Barcelona: Ediciones Carena, 2003), 80–87; John Haines, "The Arabic Style of Performing Medieval Music," *Early Music* 29, no. 3 (2001): 370; D. E. Pohren, *The Art of Flamenco* (Westport:

The Bold Strummer, 1962), 40; Jonathan Shull, "Locating the Past in the Present: Living Traditions and the Performance of Early Music," *Ethnomusicology Forums* 15, no. 1 (2006): 98–99.

7. Ruth Harvey, "Courtly Culture in Medieval Occitania," in "The Early Troubadours: Guilhen IX to Bernart de Ventadorn," in *The Troubadours: An Introduction*, eds. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 9–11.

8. Sarah Kay, *Subjectivity in Troubadour Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 37.

9. Kay, *Subjectivity in Troubadour Poetry*, 37.

10. Amelia E. Van Vleck, *Memory and Re-Creation in Troubadour Lyric* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 71–77.

11. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "Mathematical Bodies and Fuzzy Logic in the Couplings of Troubadour Lyric," *Tenso* 14, no. 2 (1999): 14.

12. Sarah Spence notes something similar when she claims that Guilhem's *Farai un vers de dreyt nien* represents a decentering from cosmological order, which manifests itself as a spatial dimension whose opening-up conditions the emergence of both the text and the subject's love. See: Sarah Spence, *Texts and the Self in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 92.

13. Since the poetic subject's legibility relies on a spatiotemporal opening-up as a condition for *all* poetry, the centrality of positive distance to the emergence of lyric subjectivity within troubadour lyric would subtend any generic or formal distinctions within the tradition. In other words, *cansos, sirventes, pastorelas, tensos, partimens*, and even *planhz* would all require an initial extension of positive distance in order to offer up a legibly transmissible lyric subjectivity.

14. William D. Paden and Frances Freeman Paden, *Troubadour Poems from the South of France* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), 21.

15. María Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History* (Philadelphia, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 32.

16. Daniel Heller-Roazen translates "dreyt" as "absolutely." See: Daniel Heller-Roazen, "The Matter of Language: Guilhem de Peitieus and the Platonic Tradition," *MLN* 113, no. 4 (1998): 869.

17. Ittai Weinryb, "Living Matter: Materiality, Maker and Ornament in the Middle Ages," *Gesta* 52, no. 2 (2013): 129–30.

18. Bernardus Silvestris, *Cosmographia*, trans. Winthrop Wetherbee (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 68.

19. Charlotte Gross, "The Cosmology of Rhetoric in the Early Troubadour Lyric," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 9, no. 1 (1991): 41–42; Daniel Heller-Roazen, "The Matter of Language: Guilhem de Peitieus and the Platonic Tradition," *MLN* 113, no. 4 (1998): 855–57.

20. Gerald A. Bond, *The Poetry of William VII, Count of Poitiers, IX Duke of Aquitaine* (London: Garland Publishing Co, 1982), 14.

21. *No sai quora.m suy endurmitz/Ni quora.m velh, s'om no m'o ditz* (see: Bond, *The Poetry of William VII, Count of Poitiers, IX Duke of Aquitaine*, 14).

22. Bond, *The Poetry of William VII*, 14.

23. Gross, "The Cosmology of Rhetoric in the Early Troubadour Lyric," 45.

24. Stephen G. Nichols, "The Early Troubadours: Guilhen IX to Bernart de Ventadorn," in *The Troubadours: An Introduction*, eds. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 67; Ruth Harvey, "The Troubadour Marcabru and His Public," *Reading Medieval Studies* 14 (1988), 49-50.

25. Gaunt, Simon, Ruth Harvey, and Linda Paterson, *Marcabru: A Critical Edition* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 346.

26. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "Marcabru's *Estornel*: On Ventriloquists, or, the Art of Putting Words in Your Belly," *French Studies* 68, no. 4 (2014): 455.

27. The full phrase is *Marcabrus/Ditz que l'us/Non es clus* ("Marcabru says that the door is not closed"). See: Simon Gaunt, Ruth Harvey, and Linda Paterson, *Marcabru: A Critical Edition*, 346.

28. Gaunt, Harvey, and Paterson, *Marcabru*, 358.
29. Gaunt, Harvey, and Paterson, *Marcabru*, 358.
30. Since the authorship of many flamenco *letras* is either unattributed or unstable (it is often based on the say-so of performers from later generations) and the *letras* themselves are often sung in different orders or in different combinations, we are instead left with a performance history, whereby we associate the verses with those who most famously delivered them. As a result, the subject in flamenco lyric is representative of a collective, and so can be detected within negative distance as an account of how a plurality of participants within that culture night react to such displacement.
31. Roldán, *El flamenco y la música andalusí: Argumentos para un encuentro*, 10.
32. Ángel Álvarez Caballero, *Historia del cante flamenco* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1981), 47.
33. Roldán, *El flamenco y la música andalusí: Argumentos para un encuentro*, 49.
34. Antonio Mandly Robles, *Los caminos del flamenco: Etnografía, cultura y comunicación en Andalucía* (Seville: Signatura Ediciones de Andalucía, 2010), 31–32.
35. Gerhard Steingress, *Sobre flamenco y flamencología: Escritos escogidos, 1988–1998* (Seville: Signatura Ediciones de Andalucía, 1998), 43.
36. Richard J. Pym, *The Gypsies of Early Modern Spain, 1425–1783* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 30.
37. K. Meira Goldberg, *Sonidos Negros: On the Blackness of Flamenco* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 17–18.
38. See Richard Pym's *The Gypsies of Early Modern Spain* for an exhaustive account of the ordinances leveled by the Spanish crown against the Gitanos between 1499 and 1783.
39. Bernard Leblon, *Gypsies and Flamenco: The Emergence of the Art of Flamenco in Andalusia* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1994), 32–46; Pym, *The Gypsies of Early Modern Spain, 1425–1783*, 24–30.
40. William Washabaugh, "Ironies in the History of Flamenco," *Theory, Culture & Society* 12 (1995): 145–47.
41. Alen W. Philips and Kathleen N. March, "Cante Jondo," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* eds. Alex Preminger and T.F.V. Brogan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1383.
42. Leblon, *Gypsies and Flamenco: The Emergence of the Art of Flamenco in Andalusia*, 50.
43. José Cenizo Jiménez, *La Alboreá y la Petenera: dos enigmas del Flamenco* (Seville: Signatura Ediciones, 2011), 101.
44. Diputación de Cádiz, *Letras de peteneras.* (Cádiz: Diputación de Cádiz, 2003), 23.
45. José Luis Blanco Garza, José Luis Rodríguez Ojeda, and Francisco Robles Rodríguez, *Las letras del cante flamenco* (Seville: Signatura Ediciones, 2009), 152.
46. A popular theory regarding the *petenera* holds that it is based on an old Sephardic Jewish melody. This claim was originally forwarded by the flamencologist Hipólito Rossy in *La Teoría del Cante Jondo* (see: Pohren, *The Art of Flamenco*, 133). There are several more likely origin stories for the p*alo,* as Ángel Álvarez Caballero explains (see: Caballero, *Historia del cante flamenco*, 67–73). Nevertheless, the fact remains that the *petenera,* in its reception and its lyrical content, has been persistently associated with the afterlife of Judaism in Spain and death.
47. Jiménez, *La Alboreá y la Petenera: dos enigmas del Flamenco,* 101.
48. "Fonoteca de Soleares," *Canteytoque*, May 15, 2021, http://canteytoque.es/solearec.htm#sernetar; "Fui piedra y perdí mi centro," *Tomaflamenco*, May 15, 2021, http://tomaflamenco.com/es/tracks/7607.
49. Carl Nagin, "The Ballad of Gypsy Davy," *The East Bay Express* 22, no. 22 (March 10, 2000).
50. Pym, *The Gypsies of Early Modern Spain, 1425–1783*, 146–65.
51. In the case of the Andalusian Gitanos, this inability or loss has just as much to do with a history of involuntary displacement as it does to do with the waves of forced sedentarization imposed by the Spanish government as a mode of suppressing the traditional itinerancy of their cultural practices and the spread of their language (See Pym's *The Gypsies of Early Modern Spain, 1425–1783* for further reading on the subject).