

# Re:Search

## James Baldwin and the Performance of (Something Other Than) Subjectivity

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### ABSTRACT

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“James Baldwin and the Performance of (Something Other Than Subjectivity)” is primarily focused on the intersection of two primary sources, James Baldwin's novel *Another Country*, and Horace Ové's film *Baldwin's Nigger*. It is concerned with the performance of subjectivity, and argues that normative subjectivity is racialized, sexualized, and gendered, predicated on (self) possessive individualism and the regulation of materiality and difference. Rufus Scott, a black jazz drummer and the main character of Baldwin's novel, is unable to survive because the imposition of normative subjectivity is too much to bear, and it interdicts his ability to imagine alternative modes of life. However, prior to his death, Rufus offers an utterance that bears alternative potential in its refusal of the terms of normative subjectivity. This essay focuses on the ways in which that potentiality is taken up by the film as Baldwin and his interlocutors, in thinking through the need to collectively construct a different world, perform something other than subjectivity.

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### KEYWORDS

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James Baldwin, Subjectivity, Blackness, Performance, Possession

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*Never learned to swim  
Can't catch the rhythm of the stroke  
Why should I hold my breath  
Feeling that I might choke...  
With the rhythm it takes to dance to what  
We have to live through  
You can dance underwater and not get wet*

— **Parliament, “Aqua Boogie (A Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadoloop)”**

James Baldwin is concerned with love and futurity, with the possibility of creating a new world with others. Two examples of this, in particular, are given in his 1962 novel *Another Country* and Horace Ové’s film *Baldwin’s Nigger*. The first part of the novel is primarily concerned with Rufus Scott, a black jazz drummer who is continually dealing with the internal and external effects of racism and white supremacy, giving him destructive tendencies and eventually resulting in his suicide. In the film, recorded in London circa 1969, Baldwin and the comedian Dick Gregory make clear the position of colonized people, specifically black people in the world, and the struggle for self-determination that takes place at this time. David Leeming, relaying Baldwin’s comments on *Another Country*, says that in the novel “love is refused at one’s peril” and that “humans are not sinful by nature unless they ignore the call of love, which is to say, of life itself” (200). Thus, Baldwin’s novel can be seen as warning and a way of thinking through how different modes of being with each other construct love as generative and necessary, not limited to its romantic conceptions. *Baldwin’s Nigger* indirectly elaborates and extends the arguments present in *Another Country*, and implicit in both is a critical reconsideration of subjectivity itself. These works deal with the ontological question of whether or not black people are able to enter into the world of subjectivity and how the terms of that subjectivity exclude certain people. Further still, Baldwin calls on us to ask whether an inability to achieve normative subjectivity is a general condition, so that the world as we know it, and in its distinction from the earth, is not all there is. Insofar as subjectivity is a certain way of positioning oneself in relation to others, this is also a question of performance. Both the novel and the film, through the

performativity and performance of Baldwin's words, consider the material traces of the flesh and the body that are repressed through the self-concern of the subject. Baldwin challenges normative notions of subjectivity and reveals the dangerous and corrosive character of (self) possessive and individuated subjecthood, as well as exploring a world borne out of this positionality in relation to the other. By way of this revelation, Baldwin provides an opening through which alternative ways of being with each other can be conceived.

I hope to arrive here through a reading of the first book in *Another Country*, beginning with a recessive moment couched in the text that is brief yet crucial. Rufus, after wandering through the streets of New York—hungry, homeless, and alone—is offered a meal and subsequently solicited for sex by a white male stranger who recognizes his desperation. In response to his proposition, Rufus says, “I don’t have a thing to give you” (Baldwin 44). The “thing,” which we might think of as Rufus himself, is the referent here, but this deceptively simple response raises a host of questions. What does it mean to be a thing, or to think of oneself, or be thought of, as a thing? Baldwin seems to question the parameters of possessive selfhood and what it means, therefore, to possess things and objects, to possess others, and to possess a self. Operative here is the enduring legacy of slavery given in what Saidiya Hartman describes as the “longstanding and intimate affiliation of liberty and bondage,” that she argues “made it impossible to envision freedom independent of constraint or personhood and autonomy separate from the sanctity of property and proprietorial notions of the self,” that is, notions of the self as an owner (115). She goes on to think through what she calls a “burdened individuality” that characterizes life after emancipation, which can be described as the “paradoxical construction of the freed both as self-determining and enormously burdened individuals and as members of a population whose productivity, procreation, and sexual practices were fiercely regulated and policed” (117). For Hartman, the paradoxical and burdened individuality she describes is the result of a nascent “transformation of black subjectivity,” which gives life for black people a particular kind of precariousness (117). In her estimation, this life is precarious not merely because

of the prior categorization of blacks as non-human and as property, but precisely because they were brought “into the fold” and given access to a liberal (self) possessive individualism which served to intensify “the responsibilities and afflictions of the newly emancipated” (117).

I am interested in this paradox of subjectivity—wherein the self is thought of as both liberated agent and property, discrete and individuated—and the responsibility, through regulation, to maintain the subject as the proper manifestation of personhood. Fred Moten argues that, in one sense, “subjectivity is defined by the subject’s possession of itself and its objects”; however, on the other side of that formulation, “it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses” (*In the Break* 1). Through the course of his exchange with the man, Rufus struggles with the sense that he does not, and cannot, own himself, let alone anything else. However, he desperately tries, claiming after being touched by the man that he doesn’t “want no more hands on me, no more, no more,” suggesting resistance to being held, insofar as being held compromises the integrity of a supposedly discrete and volitional self (Baldwin 43).

In light of this response, I argue that the man’s proposition, in one sense, marks an attempted entrance into an alternative marketplace where Rufus’s body is the commodity for sale, as his property with his assumed consent. In another sense, this proposition is also an interpellation, a call to enter into the system of relations that describes (inter-) subjectivity. At issue here is the power differential that exists between the man and Rufus. For Rufus, being abject and penniless at this point, survival makes propositions like this a life or death situation. Also at issue is the historical precedent of the black body figured as a commodified object and the baggage this encounter carries. The desire to be a volitional subject burdens Rufus with a responsibility to uphold and maintain his self as subject, individuated and alone and in possession of himself and his objects. However, this responsibility takes a material toll on his body, in the flesh, and self-preservation makes the preservation of life untenable. Following this, the recessive moment in which Rufus remarks, “I don’t have a thing to give you,” can be seen as a chance.

Rufus's utterance constitutes a non-answer to that call, disturbing the ground upon which the man's address is possible and shedding light on the potential for another mode of life. "I don't have a thing to give you" detaches a normative notion of the self—as property given in liberal individualism and subjectivity—from life, and Rufus's remark brings the precariousness of this mode of personhood into relief.

The man's proposition and the failure of his address, instantiated by Rufus's utterance, can be considered on terms which Judith Butler lays out in her book, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, where she writes:

The structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails. More emphatically, however, what binds us morally has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid; this impingement by the other's address constitutes us first and foremost against our will or, perhaps put more appropriately, prior to the formation of our will. So if we think that moral authority is about finding one's will and standing by it, stamping one's name upon one's will, it may be that we miss the very mode by which moral demands are relayed. That is we miss the situation of being addressed, the demand that comes from elsewhere, sometimes a nameless elsewhere, by which our obligations are articulated and pressed upon us. (130)

In this sense, we can see the constitutive power of language given in our addressability. Rufus's very existence is thrown into question by the terms on which their exchange is initiated, terms which are not his own. The intensity of the threat to the stability of his own self in this moment is so great that he comes close to blacking out while merely conversing with the man and knowing where this conversation will lead. It is so great that it induces nausea, and the food he is eating at the bar is "threatening to come up" (Baldwin 43). In the midst of the man's advances, Rufus says, "I'm not the boy you want, mister" (44). The exchange proceeds: "'How do you mean, you're not the boy I want?' the man tried to laugh. 'Shouldn't I be the judge of that?'" (44). The man's response is an

attempt to assert the presence of his own will, and for Rufus, this response is “the demand that comes from elsewhere” bringing him into existence, as defined within the parameters of subjectivity and the structure of address as Butler outlines it (130).

For this white man, the question of Rufus’s position as subject/object is not up to Rufus, and here, one is reminded of Hortense Spillers’ claim to “describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth” (65). The man has an investment in Rufus as an object. On one hand, this investment is material in that he has literally spent money on food in order to obtain Rufus for an implicitly sexual encounter. On the other hand, the man is invested in himself as subject in relation to Rufus as object. Insofar as Rufus can be identified linguistically, like Spillers, through a myriad of names/identities/signifiers, Rufus’s self is not his own. Again, like Spillers, Rufus as object is necessary for the white man’s conception of himself, because, as Frantz Fanon argues, “The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” (90). What is occurring, then, in the man’s uneasy laughter and disbelief following Rufus’s refusal? Rufus’s claim to not “have a thing to give” constitutes a rupture in the man’s conception of self as well. But rather than attempting to exert his own will in contradistinction to that of the man, Rufus withdraws, recessively refusing to enter into that relationality, throwing it into disarray.

In Rufus’s everyday performances in his world, the imposition of subjectivity manifests itself as a desire for that impossible ideal, a desire for that relationality that he refuses. Rufus lingers in a space between subjectivity and a life always already outside of that, which is non-existence in his estimation. The effects of this doubled state are destructive, leading Rufus to severely mistreat the people with whom he associates, women in particular. Shortly after meeting each other, Rufus and Leona, a poor white woman from the south, initiate a sexual encounter while attending a party hosted by friends of Rufus. He is verbally and physically coercive; he pulls “her to him as roughly as he could” and shortly thereafter “he forced her beneath him and he entered her” (Baldwin 20-21).

However, while he tries to assert his superiority, “her tongue burned his neck and his chest” and “she moved beneath him” (21). Further, she “carried him, as the sea will carry a boat: with a slow, rocking and rising and falling motion, barely suggestive of the violence of the deep” (21). Leona’s materiality disturbs Rufus, whose brutality in the interest of holding Leona as his object is to no avail, and it holds and carries him rather than the other way around. His exploitation of Leona’s vulnerability highlights his own, and points to the impossibility of complete control, in the same way that a boat is limited in its ability to protect its passengers from the vast expanse of the sea. In this encounter, he teeters between the violent exertion of a presumed right to possess and feelings of “tenderness for Leona, which he had not expected to feel” (21).

In order to achieve subjectivity, Rufus feels he must refuse that tenderness for Leona, but she exerts a dispossessive force akin to that which Moten describes in his formulation regarding the subject/object relation (*In the Break* 1). “Each labored to reach a harbor” is simultaneously a chance for collective being and a struggle for power in which “there could be no rest until this motion became unbearably accelerated by the power that was rising in them both” (Baldwin 21). However, the line between these positions is unclear and becomes more smeared as the two become further entangled. Baldwin emphasizes the continual blurring movement of their bodies in this scene by suspending the use of commas in his description of their haptic and fleshly entanglement.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the text engages in a kind of performance of its own, blurring verbs as Rufus and Leona blur the distinction between subject and object. However, this struggle is not even-handed. This encounter is portrayed through the ecstatic perspective of Rufus, for whom “everything he did he watched himself doing,” and this encounter ends violently, described as a beating. Rufus’s presence wins out, and it seems as if he is able to temporarily reach subjectivity for himself in relation to Leona, evidenced in how her presence is reduced to a “cry” (22). This suggests male privilege, which is also proposed in the fact that Rufus’s perspective and voice are foregrounded throughout this scene. At the same time, Rufus feels the influence of white supremacy through Leona, which manifests in a pressure to conquer her, as

“shortly, nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor the lynch mob arriving on wings” (Baldwin 22). However, the specter of retribution for their miscegenation is always already there, implying the incommensurability the oppressions each of them face—oppressions that have mental, emotional, social, and economic effects and can be thought of as what Spillers would call “high crimes against the flesh” (67).

The trace of the flesh becomes foregrounded for Rufus following his exchange in the bar, where his relinquishment of desire for the world of subjectivity leaves him without hope. On Rufus’s last night, he takes a train uptown, observing the “many white people and many black people, chained together in time and in space, and by history, and all of them in a hurry. In a hurry to get away from each other” (Baldwin 86). He listens as the train “groaned, lurched, [as] the wheels seemed to scrape the track making a tearing sound...as though protesting its heavier burden, as though protesting the proximity of white buttock to black knee” (86). Rufus laments—despite the physical closeness of the people on the train, and the closeness they might feel if the severed genealogies instantiated by slavery were considered—an intense and debilitating sense of separation. Within the train, people are individuated and alone, and all connections beyond spatio-temporal proximity are nonexistent. Shortly after, as they reach a tunnel, “the train rushed into the blackness with a phallic abandon, into the blackness which opened to receive it, opened, opened, the whole world shook with their coupling” (86).

This scene reproduces, in an augmented fashion, the kind of racialized and gendered violence present in all scenes of interracial and inter-gender interactions in this book. The train wields an implicitly destructive force with “phallic abandon,” and blackness itself is represented by the tunnel, sexualized as female and vulnerable in its openness (Baldwin 173). However, in the meeting of the two, blackness can also be seen as maternal, bearing a sense of infinite possibility that is appositional to the sense of consuming destruction that Rufus feels. Rufus understands this, but he also realizes that he is unable to get to a space of possibility alone, and the hustle of people unconcerned with him and with each



other takes a devastating toll on him. Without others and unable to fashion himself into a proper subject, life is impossible for Rufus, and he “knew that he was never going home any more” (86). He eventually gets off the train and heads to the Washington Bridge. Looking at the water before meeting his end, Rufus, unable to bear the weight and pressure of normative subjectivity, notes that “he was black and the water was black” before jumping (87).

If we think through Rufus’s leap, taking George Clinton and Parliament’s lead, what if blackness, on the outer edge of subjectivity, is not synonymous with death? What is there in claiming blackness and giving up the desire to float above water using “the rhythm of the stroke,” that Sir Nose D’Voidoffunk, in his proper refusal to join Starchild in dance, is so committed to? What would it mean to claim that black life and refuse the regulatory, singular, and exclusionary notion of life proffered by the subject, which only leads Rufus to his death? The song begins with an introduction from Sir Nose who promptly declares: “I can’t swim, I never could swim, I never will swim” and he desperately petitions against the Parliament crew’s attempts to drag him into the water (“Aqua Boogie”). His petitions are accented by birdlike squawks (the cover depicts Sir Nose about to be consumed by a gigantic beaked bird) that register as noise, the improper and unkempt form sound takes. After his introduction, the music crescendos and the Parliament ensemble responds with the lyrics given in the epigraph, and it is revealed that swimming was never the goal. Their desire is to give up “the rhythm of the stroke” because “with the rhythm it takes to dance to what we have to live through, you can dance underwater and not get wet.” Their aim is dance and the refusal of the proper stroke of subjectivity, because for them, life is improperly irreducible to that mode. This is a life they live together, and a life which Rufus, precisely because of his isolation, is unable to sustain.

In *Baldwin’s Nigger*, Baldwin takes the “stroke” of subjectivity to task, and over the course of the lecture documented in the film, Baldwin thinks through the general relation of black people to the world. What is interesting about Baldwin’s lecture is what is given not merely in his language, but also in the

transmission of that language. Moten, in response to J.L. Austin's theories regarding the character of speech acts, offers useful advice on thinking through this:

I would follow Austin and Cavell, then, in acknowledging the importance of the circumstances of the speech act, but I would also point to the need for a more detailed and expansive engagement with that which we could think about, using Austin's designation, as the accompaniments of the utterance: not only winks, pointings, gestures, frowns, and other such visible markers but tones of horror and, beyond and before that, certain cut augmentations of voice (meaning, a certain look or style or make-up tied to a performance that visualizes, thereby mut(at)ing, sound; interesting, though, to think the effects of sound looking like a black woman) by way of multiple self-accompaniment. (Moten 296)

Moten draws particular attention to the way language is sounded, and the way sound is then visualized or felt, making the deceptively simple argument that there is more to what is said than the words themselves. Approximately 3½ minutes into the film, Baldwin remarks, "whether I like it or not, I am an American. Now...I am not Lyndon Johnson; I am not saying that as, you know... 'I am an American!'" Here, gearing up to say "I am an American" a second time, Baldwin grabs his lapels, straightening his back in exaggeration, his head completing a kind of curve toward his back side with his chin and eyebrows raised, eyes squinted. Baldwin's posture, along with his invocation of Lyndon Johnson, mocks the pride normatively associated with such a statement. He does this by embodying a positionality and stance associated with that phrase. He suggests with his stiffness a kind of uneasy need to convey pride, emphasized by his squinted eyes and raised eyebrows, which register, through Baldwin's conveyance, a critical distrust of the other. Simultaneously, this posture is self-questioning, as if the need to vigorously convey pride only reveals a deeper self-doubt.

Baldwin's speech is animated by this dramatization, and his performance of American pride reveals the underside of a certain construction of subjectivity. André Lepecki's analysis of the crawls of William Pope.L is appropriate here in that both "propose a kinetic critique of verticality, of verticality's association with

phallic erectility and its intimate association with the ‘brutality of political power, of the means of constraint: police, army, bureaucracy’” (93). In this sense, the rigid verticality of Baldwin’s performance shows how normative western subjectivity acts as a standard, its terms understood by everyone in the room, such that Baldwin incurs laughter through his parody of it. However, the laughter and widespread understanding implies the commonness of its imposition. This imposition is manifested as a constraint on the body, given and parodied in Baldwin’s stiff posturing, which, when read through Lepecki’s analysis of verticality, can also be seen as representative of the regulatory force of the government and suggested in Baldwin’s invocation of Lyndon Johnson. The force of this regulation is enacted upon those who do not or cannot fit the (racialized, sexualized, and gendered) bill. Spillers’ notion of being “a meeting ground of investments and privations” for the nation comes back to us in normativity’s existential investment in the regulation of difference through the imposition of subjectivity (203).

Subsequently, Baldwin gives this formulation on the positionality of black people in this system: “When you try to stand up and look the world in the face, like you had a right to be here. When you do that—without knowing that this is the result of it—you have attacked the entire power structure of the western world.... And by the attempt to walk from here to there, you have begun to frighten the white world” (*Baldwin’s Nigger*). For Baldwin, the acts of standing and looking, erecting and envisaging, being vertical and beholding, are markers of proper subjectivity, given in the ability to take an assertive position towards the world. Baldwin argues that the black person’s attempt to do this is antagonistic to “the entire power structure of the western world,” which, on one hand, suggests the racialization of normative subjectivity that is constitutive of black exclusion (*Baldwin’s Nigger*). On the other hand, what is given in this antagonism? In returning to Fanon, by way of André Lepecki’s analysis, it can be argued that, if “colonialism has no outside, since there is no society in a relation of exteriority to the process of colonization and the violence of racism, then ontology remains that open sore in philosophy’s body” (89). In this sense, Baldwin’s claim is that

blackness bears a force that is disruptive of ontology, calling its stability into question. Implicit here is a call for the release of the forms of constraint that the embodiment of the subject requires.

Insofar as blackness can be considered disruptive of the current order, Baldwin moves in another direction and beckons us to follow. During Q & A, a woman calls on Baldwin to predict the future, asking “how do you envisage the black man’s personality in, say, fifty years?” Baldwin responds:

It seems to me that the black personality, then, has a kind of vigor, a kind of vitality, and...a sense of life, something which does not come from here, but comes from much deeper regions. I think the African personality is not so compartmentalized. I think that Europeans, the European personality, in the main—and this implies a very severe judgement of Christianity...if not an indictment—...are terribly worried about the flesh, the senses. I think they live in checks and balances which are really very nearly pathological, and you see them in relief in America, because...I, precisely, am the flesh, which the Christians must mortify. Now, according to me, and what I hope for in the future: the flesh is all you have. If you mortify that, there is no hope for you—everything you find out, you find out through your senses. Everything awful that happens to you and everything marvelous...happens to you in this frame, this tenement, this mortal envelope. Which should be—instead of beating it with chains, and hammering nails through it and hanging it on crosses—it should be, the celebration! Your life, your body. And if that concept comes back into the world, it will come back only through the black people that have been submerged so long; and that will change not only the black personality, but that will change the world. (*Baldwin’s Nigger*)

Baldwin argues that Christian morality is racialized, but he also uncovers an abstraction that occurs in the imposition of this particular morality. This uncovering is followed and extended by Spillers, who makes a distinction between the “body” and the “flesh” that is implicit in Baldwin’s response (67). For Spillers, the “body” refers to a conception of people as whole and singular beings. This formulation is problematic in Spillers’ estimation because it ignores the corporeal material that makes up the body, which is the flesh. She argues that “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization

that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography” (66).

Baldwin also exposes this discourse through his refusal to accept a morality and belief system for which blackness is precisely the sinful “flesh” that Jesus takes on and pays for through death on the cross, a credit that, through the pervasiveness of white supremacy, only accrues to white people in order to make them (w)hole. Blackness is the flesh that must be brutally regulated and destroyed in slavery in a kind of continuation of that holy repression. Thus, Baldwin and Spillers draw attention to what is repressed in normative conceptions of humanity: the flesh, which is material, and therefore *matters*. Insofar as the flesh is the “zero degree of social conceptualization” for Spillers, it is therefore irreducible and must be paid attention to because it represents a chance that it cannot be snuffed out by the imposition of purportedly universal subjectivity and its (w)hole body (345). As Baldwin says, “the flesh is all you have,” and, following Spillers, in the flesh there is “wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, ‘counted’/’accounted,’ or differentiated” (72). Baldwin, then, is interested in those who, in being continually reduced to the flesh, are closest to its potential. He is interested in those who are not, as Moten would say, “poor in world but who are, to be more precise, poor-in-the-world” (“Blackness and Nothingness” 776). He is interested in the flesh that suffers due to the imposition of normative subjectivity and therefore must be loved. He is interested in the flesh that, in its irreducibility, bears the possibility of another country, of another world.

Moten, thinking through the relation between blackness and subjectivity, says, “on the one hand, blackness and ontology are unavailable for each other; on the other hand, blackness must free itself from ontological expectation, must refuse subjection to ontology’s sanction against the very idea of black subjectivity” (“Blackness and Nothingness” 749). A refusal of subjection is a refusal of the world, *this* world. Moten shows us that “blackness,” named because of its position outside of (white heterosexual male) subjectivity, is what subjectivity responds to. Blackness, in its relegation to that outside, disrupts the logic of an inside that subjectivity hopes to grasp. In this way, blackness is what

reveals the impossibility of that mode of being. Rufus's identification with the blackness of the water could function, in part, as an invocation of the middle passage and the way it was, in a sense, constitutive of slavery as a global institution, and more specifically, constitutive of black people in America. In a sense, Rufus, in his blackness, sees no way to *be* in the world, and so he takes his life. In doing so, Rufus, at the intersection of Moten, Spillers, and Frank Wilderson III, chooses to remain "in the hold" of the ship, and, for him, that space is death.<sup>2</sup> For Moten, Spillers, and Parliament, the hold is where the flesh resides in its "wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility*" (Spillers 72). George Clinton and Starchild dance on the mothership—an astral hold, as it were—underwater, together in the flesh, refusing to float. At the same time, they continually fight so that Sir Nose might understand. Baldwin understands. *Another Country* and *Baldwin's Nigger* are works through which Baldwin attempts to make clear the ways in which the imposition of normative subjectivity is a refusal of the flesh, which is also a refusal of life, if life can be understood as the proliferation of difference rather than a universal experience. Getting to *that* world requires an investment in life, which is also to say, in love of blackness in the flesh.

## NOTES

[1] For example, “His lips and his teeth touched her ears and her neck and he told her” (Baldwin 21).

[2] See also Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness”: “There are flights of fantasy in the hold of the ship” (743); and “In the hold, blackness and imagination, in and as consent not to be a single being, are (more and less than) one” (752).

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