“Your Love to Me Was More Wonderful Than the Love of Women”: Queer Affect and Black Sacred Space in James Baldwin’s “The Outing”

At the end of a long section depicting a church’s worship service in James Baldwin’s 1951 short story, “The Outing,” Johnnie, a queer adolescent, in the congregation, can see and feel only the power of David, the boy that he loves. In effect, for Johnnie, God quickly becomes inconsequential for the scene, replaced by the image of David in a blasphemous gesture. This moment of desire is fleeting, only consisting of a single paragraph, but it is revelatory in showing how crucial a queer adolescent’s homosexuality can be in these sacred spaces that are supposed to foreclose those “perverse” thoughts, feelings and ideas. In this paper, I will argue that because Baldwin was unable to negotiate the tensions between spirituality and (homo)sexuality into an amicable separation early on in his career, not only do the gay adolescents of “The Outing” turn to sexuality instead of religion for the power to construct selfhood, Christianity and the rhetoric of that movement provide them with the tools necessary for both covering and uncovering the sexual maturation that was supposed to be suppressed. Published before Baldwin’s first novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, “The Outing” takes queer black youths from the space of the threshing floor and into the wilderness in order to work through the dense affective terrain of black sacred spaces. Deftly utilizing the form of the short story, Baldwin takes affect on its own terms, unattached to the deeper character development that we get in his later novel, in order to better account for that which makes black sacred spaces fruitful sites for queer development.