

ESSAY

# I've Got a Testimony: James Baldwin and the Broken Silences of Black Queer Men

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## Abstract

James Baldwin writes within and against the testimonial tradition emerging from the Black Church, challenging the institution's refusal to acknowledge the voices and experiences of black queer men. Baldwin's autobiographical novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, creates a space for Baldwin's testimony to be expressed, and also lays the foundation for a tradition of black queer artists to follow. In the contemporary moment, poet Danez Smith inhabits Baldwin's legacy, offering continuing critiques of the rigidity of conservative Christian ideologies, while publishing and performing poetry that gives voice to their own experiences, and those of the black queer community at large. These testimonies ultimately function as a means of rhetorical resistance, which not only articulates black queer lives and identities, but affirms them.

**Keywords:** black queer men, Church, testimony, silence

Reflecting upon his own trials and triumphs, James Baldwin regularly positions personal introspection as the key to a critical understanding of the world, asserting: "one writes out of one thing only—one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give."<sup>1</sup> Baldwin's experiences as a black queer man in the twentieth century, yielding such sweet and bitter dividends, were framed largely by the spaces in which he came to an awareness of his identity, with the black Pentecostal churches of his youth being particularly influential. Primary sources of his abiding respect for the spiritual and creative impulses of black culture, churches simultaneously repressed an adolescent Baldwin, particularly with regard to his developing sexuality. Baldwin's writing challenges the marginalization of black queer bodies, taking particular issue with fundamentalist Church traditions, undergirded by the most rigidly conservative ideals. In so doing, Baldwin also creates a legacy whereby future artists might do the same.

Baldwin consistently mines the cultural resources of Black Church traditions, which significantly influences his literary aesthetic. This is particularly evident in his debut novel, which will be the central focus of this discussion, the semi-autobiographical *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). Dolan Hubbard notes Baldwin's "incorporation into the very structure of the narrative many sermonic elements associated with the idiom of the black church: the rich oral tradition, the antiphonal call and response, biblical influences and references, vivid imagery, and beautiful metaphors and synonyms."<sup>2</sup> Baldwin's narrative, infused as it is with religious language and expressive styles, offers a necessarily complicated portrait of the protagonist, John Grimes, who struggles with his nascent same-sex desire on his fourteenth birthday, framed through his relationship to a restrictive church. Baldwin employs the figure of John Grimes, emphasizing the resonance with Baldwin's own experiences within the church, in order to both critique the restrictive practices of black churches and to articulate the contours and contexts of his own identity.

Recognizing the broader influence of religious expression on Baldwin's literary aesthetic, this discussion is primarily concerned with Baldwin's engagement with the tradition of "testimony," the public articulation of one's personal journey. Testimony, described by Thomas Hoyt as "one of the most cherished practices of the Black Church,"<sup>3</sup> encompasses far more than simply telling one's story, just as Baldwin is driven by more than the impulse to "write out of one's own experience." As Regina Shands Stoltzfus, former associate pastor at Lee Heights Community Church in Cleveland, OH, explains:

In testimony, the individual speaks about what he or she has experienced and seen, then offers it to the community so that the experience becomes part of the community's experience. The reality is bigger than the individual. It has meaning for the whole. Testimony is more than just telling other people what happened to you; it is a way of announcing your humanity in encountering with the divine. It is a way of edifying and encouraging one another.<sup>4</sup>

As vital as is the relationship of humanity to the divine, Stoltzfus's observations about the interplay between the individual and the community is also of utmost importance. She argues further that "[t]estimonies require the presence of witnesses, people who have also seen or experienced God's work, and who, as they hear another's testimonies, are able to certify or attest to the truth of God's activity in that person's life."<sup>5</sup> When one stands before the altar to deliver their testimony, then, they affirm themselves a part of the community of the faithful. There is an expectation of support rather than judgment, and one's unique experience and individual walk of faith thus becomes part of the congregation's shared reality.

Although the testimony is, ostensibly, the most accessible of the expressive traditions, mandating neither special skills nor standing to be delivered, limitations are indeed set in place by the rigidity of established church doctrine, with communal affirmation of the testimony only being available if the community also approves

of the congregant who delivers it. J. Stephen Kroll-Smith explores this construct in his study of “testimony as performance,” wherein he designates two types of testifiers: one who is “still becoming” and “one who has become.”<sup>6</sup> Significantly, Kroll-Smith focuses on the Holiness Pentecostal Church, the tradition with which Baldwin was affiliated during his time as a child preacher, and with which he took greatest issue through his writing, particularly with regard to issues of sexuality.<sup>7</sup>

The testimony of one who is “still becoming,” for the purpose of this discussion, is best understood as a *testimony of burden*, defined as such for those who seek support in the midst of struggle, desiring forgiveness for sins or deliverance from trials. The recognition that they are “still becoming” compels them to offer a “socially appropriate or ritually competent testimony,” and seek congregational affirmation of their “aspirations for growth in the spirit.”<sup>8</sup> Citing an example of a congregant who “relates a controversy she has in this world” and details “her appeal to the spiritual or other world for its resolution,” Kroll-Smith acknowledges an assistant pastor’s supportive claim that “the young people in this church got a heavy burden to bear. We like to hear their testimonies. It’s like they’re kinda workin’ it out in front of us, God bless ‘em.”<sup>9</sup> This testimony employs the rhetoric of appeal, either through public contrition and requests for forgiveness or through the acknowledgment of despair, and suggests the need for affirmative support for deliverance from their current trials.

Alternatively, those who have overcome their trials, and have reached a place of spiritual sophistication, serve as an example for members of the church community. For these figures, Kroll-Smith suggests the possibility of what might otherwise be termed a “praise testimony,”<sup>10</sup> wherein one has “attained the elevated state, becoming all they can become in this world,” offering a “performance that is thus celebrative in character.”<sup>11</sup> The *testimony of praise* functions to report survival, to declare the goodness of God and divine triumph over one’s proverbial storm. In either case, Kroll-Smith argues, “testimony thus becomes a statement of identity as interpreted through the sect’s belief system.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, whether considering a testimony of burden or a testimony of praise, Kroll-Smith’s emphasis on testimony as a “statement of identity” defined by what is “socially acceptable” proves instructive for our consideration of Baldwin’s approach to the testimonial tradition, and the implications for black queer men.

The condemnation of queer sexuality and its designation as socially unacceptable has indeed established strict limitations on the ability of black queer men to participate in the testimonial tradition. As E. Patrick Johnson articulates, the “pathologizing of homosexuality as ‘unnatural’ and ‘ungodly’ creates a hostile, oppressive, and homophobic environment for gays and lesbians—an environment that is, according to Christian doctrine, supposed to foster community and acceptance through Christ.”<sup>13</sup> Significantly, this does not necessarily prevent black queer men from involvement in the Church, but it severely limits the capacity in which their presence is valued. With regard to testimony, the sharing of personal details of one’s spiritual journey is circumscribed in the most stringent of ways. As Johnson articulates,

Even though they comprise a large majority of those who hold positions in the church—from usher to preacher—African American gays are not afforded the same latitude in terms of expressing their sexuality (or spirituality) as their heterosexual counterparts. Though they might express ‘femininity’—a gender role stereotypically associated with gayness, but nonetheless tolerated by church members—African American gay men are rarely if ever out of the closet. Such a blatant expression of one’s sexuality would be an affront to the fundamentalist conventions of the church, even though this attitude embodies a double standard in terms of who can and cannot express sexual agency within the black church.<sup>14</sup>

Relegated to “the closet,” black queer men are thus unable to fulfill a central expectation of the testimony. As Hoyt explains, “a community expects to hear the truth spoken. Witnesses—those making the testimony—must speak the truth as they have seen, heard, and experienced it.”<sup>15</sup> Black queer men, then, are unable to embrace the “elevated state,” whereby they and their testimony of praise are celebrated in truth. Recognizing the potential for testimony of burden, Johnson explains, “in those instances where one’s homosexuality is known, the church embraces that member only if he is willing to ‘exorcise’ his gayness. This kind of backhanded acceptance maintains the hegemony of heterosexuality as Christ-like and reinforces the notion of homosexuality as an abomination.”<sup>16</sup> For those black queer men who see their sexuality as neither sin nor struggle, silence is the only option and their personal narratives remain untold.

Baldwin challenges the limited ways in which restrictive church spaces are prepared to accept his voice, thereby resisting institutionally defined parameters around his existence. Baldwin begins this process with *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which was a necessary act for him at the outset of his career, acknowledging his debut novel as “the book I had to write if I was ever going to write anything else,” because “I had to deal with what hurt me most.”<sup>17</sup> As Matt Brim notes in *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*, “a special relationship exists beyond Baldwin’s fiction and acts of self-creation . . . because he understood it as allowing for a kind of radical re-viewing of the self.”<sup>18</sup> Brim argues further that the novel “represents Baldwin’s first sustained effort at ‘deciding’ who he was,” and suggests that “[b]ecause the novel also appears to be his most autobiographical,” it functions “as a mode of inquiry by which he addressed the incessant question of identity for himself and *in the presence of the public*.”<sup>19</sup> For his part, although Baldwin resisted the label of “that phenomenon we call gay” for much of his life and career, he does recognize “special responsibility because I would have to be a witness to it” and acknowledges that, through his writing, “I made a public announcement that we’re private, if you see what I mean.”<sup>20</sup> Writing within and against the testimonial tradition, Baldwin demands the right to define his own identity, thereby laying the foundation for a legacy in which others might do the same.

Baldwin’s writing consequently establishes a framework for examining twenty-first-century texts and artists who similarly endeavor to give voice to the experience of black queer men in restrictive church spaces. Baldwin’s significance in this regard is established powerfully by Brim, who describes Baldwin’s complicated

“queer utility” as one who “has become uniquely necessary as a reference who makes other artists’ own raced homoerotic desires imaginable.”<sup>21</sup> Marlon R. Moore likewise begins her study on homoerotic spirituality in African-American literature with a reflection upon Baldwin’s centrality to “any discussion of homosexuality because his debut novel . . . is transitional in the canon in that it places same-sex desire squarely within black religious experience.”<sup>22</sup> Acknowledging the growing breadth of black queer testimony, this discussion will focus on Danez Smith, an accomplished poet who describes herself<sup>23</sup> as “a young artist walking and writing in the footsteps of Baldwin and Hughes” who “seeks to continue to be a voice for hushed choir boys, the walking shadows, the joy, hurt, and journey of the black, queer men.”<sup>24</sup> Although Smith’s published work has garnered great acclaim—their debut collection, *[insert] Boy* (2014), was honored with a Lambda Literary Award and the Kate Tufts Discovery Award—this discussion is primarily concerned with Smith’s spoken word poetry performances, which have been recorded and shared broadly via social media platforms. In particular, Smith’s “Genesis” engages similar questions to Baldwin, with regard to the necessary process of “self-creation” for black queer men, which itself functions at the core of testimony.

That a work of autobiographical fiction should be presented alongside spoken word poetry mirrors the diversity through which testimonies are delivered. Any given Sunday, services incorporate testimonies as formally crafted sermons, impromptu songs, ecstatic shouts, and emotionally cathartic communal prayers.<sup>25</sup> Smith and Baldwin are linked by the creative process, but also by the personal truths that infuse their work. Smith also acknowledges a shared cultural and religious legacy, referring to “testimony and preaching” as “the first poetry I ever encountered. And so it’s what comes most naturally for me, I think, seeing people testify and the beauty in the language and the rawness of that. I think that manifests itself a lot in my poetics.”<sup>26</sup> The testimonial tradition, then, operates at the core of each of their writing, as Smith thoughtfully inhabits the legacy that Baldwin has left behind.

Despite the similarities between the poetic reimagining of Smith’s experiences and the focused consideration of Baldwin’s novel, the distinctions between the two artists exemplify the diversity of black queer men’s experiences. As a reminder that no one narrative can serve as *the definitive* experience, Smith recognizes that “it’s very dangerous to try to speak for a community,” adding, “but I do feel an urgency to talk about things that relate to black and queer and trans communities, because of those communities in which my body exists.”<sup>27</sup> This is the beauty and complexity of the testimonial: it may be collectively shared and communally resonant, yet it remains individual in nature and by design. Moreover, a “definitive” experience is impossible not only because of the diversity of the testifying men, but also the diversity of “the Black Church.”

This discussion establishes a necessarily refined scope, considering traditionally conservative religious ideologies, particularly with regard to sexuality. This focus is, in many ways, shaped by Baldwin’s own experience within the strictures of the Holiness sect of the Pentecostal Church. Douglas Field argues that a “more

productive” analysis of Baldwin’s work must consider “how his work diverges from, and resonates with, aspects of Pentecostalism, rather than simply labeling Baldwin as secular or irreligious.”<sup>28</sup> While Baldwin takes the Pentecostal Church of his youth to task for a number of offenses, this discussion focuses on a tradition that Kelly Brown Douglas describes as “Platonized Christianity,”<sup>29</sup> whereby the split between the sacred and the secular often results in an enforced fissure between body and spirit. Douglas portrays this split, wherein the flesh is denigrated as inherently sinful, as harmful to those who subscribe to it, ultimately because it destroys the capacity for healthy relationships to the body, and to sexual expression. This sentiment is likewise expressed by Baldwin, who argued that “the discovery of one’s sexual preference doesn’t have to be a trauma. It’s a trauma because it’s such a traumatized society,” suggesting that the trauma lay in “terror of the flesh” which was itself rooted in America’s “very biblical culture.”<sup>30</sup> In response, Douglas suggests the development of a “black sexual discourse of resistance,”<sup>31</sup> which addresses the injustice of homophobia, but also corrects damage done by restrictive sexual politics to the black community at large.

Smith, like Baldwin, advances this discourse of resistance through the use of testimony, similarly addressing a restrictive view of religion and sexuality, which persists into the contemporary moment. Speaking of their own upbringing, Smith challenges the practice of a “strict, devout, unquestioning relationship with God,” and rejects the harmful ideologies presented by “extremists of every religion.”<sup>32</sup> Smith also recognizes a complex relationship with “black Pentecostal and COGIC and Baptist traditions,” acknowledging that “being queer I think of church as a very nurturing but also violent space in my own personal history,” which “is definitely a safer space for a particular kind of blackness and black bodies, but it’s also brought me much fear and confusion and sadness and depression and anguish during my life as well.”<sup>33</sup> Smith concludes, pointedly, “it’s more of an abusive relationship than anything, my relationship to the church and to religion.”<sup>34</sup> Smith, like Baldwin, must negotiate the institution that both sustained and suffocated them, which represents both an affirmation of their blackness and an affront to their queerness.

Smith’s work offers evidence of the potentially liberating impact of a sexual discourse of resistance, which allows a queered subject to refute charges of inferiority or sinfulness, often rooted in the power of their personal testimony. Much like Baldwin before them, Smith’s conflict with restrictive church spaces in his youth yielded to an important self-conception and self-articulation in adulthood, which allows for an engagement with spirituality and sexuality as part of a cohesive identity. As Smith expressed it in a 2015 interview with *Lambda Literary*:

Today, being black and gay is an armor, a gospel I love dearly. I love black queers. I love who and how we are. It’s taught me a lot of love; how it can surprise you with its leaps and failures. It’s taught me a lot about masks; where they reign and where they crumble. It feels so good to finally be me, after so many years of denying that, trying to pray what was god given away.<sup>35</sup>

Subsequently, the negotiation of a multifaceted identity, within a fundamentalist framework that bars such a layered approach, emerges as a primary concern of Smith's works. The necessity of this layered approach is illuminated not only by the analysis of such theologians as Kelly Brown Douglas, but most certainly through the work of James Baldwin, who explores the costs to his young protagonist, who must reach an understanding of self in the absence of liberating frameworks such as those suggested by Douglas and enacted by Baldwin and Smith.

The struggle to suppress the sexual dimensions of one's humanity, by separating "sacred" from "secular" desires, becomes apparent from the first few pages of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. John Grimes, who has been raised with an intense pressure for purity and moral perfection, is introduced with the burden of tremendous expectations that he be a model citizen for the congregation of The Temple of the Fire Baptized, where Gabriel—whom he believes to be his father—serves as a deacon. The novel's opening line, "everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father,"<sup>36</sup> establishes a central conflict from the outset. Indeed, following John's quest to articulate himself, and foregrounding Brim's analysis of Baldwin's novels as works of "self-creation," Baldwin evokes the Christian Creation narrative by naming the first section of his three-part novel, "The Seventh Day." Struggling with his own developing sexuality at the onset of puberty, John is particularly vulnerable to the fundamentalist rhetoric that decries the flesh as weak and sinful. This is further magnified by his nascent same-sex desire, which is condemned as abomination and unspeakable perversity. For John, then, the development of his sexual identity is framed as an ongoing struggle, indicated by his continual search for deliverance, and the impulse to repent for his unspoken sin.

The novel's first treatment of John's sexuality occurs in flashback, in the act of masturbation. Utilizing the language of sinfulness, Baldwin writes:

He had sinned. In spite of the saints, his mother and his father, the warnings he had heard from his earliest beginnings, he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak. (pp. 18–19)

In addition to the language of sin, the shame, and the desire for forgiveness that shapes John's recollection, Baldwin has framed all of this within the space of the school bathroom, by definition a site of cleansing, which is desperately desired by John in this moment. As a matter of practicality, the lavatory also functions as a space where waste is quite literally expelled—represented by John's phallic concentration on urine—emphasizing his desire to rid his body of that which is seen as an unwanted contaminant.

John's desire for cleanliness, suggesting an implicit belief in the impurity of sexual exploration, is clearly framed in relationship to the church space. In the midst of John's emotional and psychological response to the masturbatory

moment, he imagines “the darkness of [his] sin” to be “like the darkness of the church on Saturday evenings; like the silence of the church while he was there alone” and “like his thoughts as he moved about the tabernacle in which his life had been spent” (p. 19). Refracting John’s actions through the worship space suggests that institutional policy and doctrine are the primary catalysts for his guilt. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the empty church and an act of sexual self-exploration occurring absent of physical contact with another person positions John as an isolated figure in the midst of a community that ignores the totality of his identity. This mirrors Baldwin’s own autobiography, as he describes his own understanding of sexuality at fourteen, when “I didn’t really understand any of what I felt except I knew I loved one boy . . . I must say I felt very, very much alone. But I was alone on so many levels and this was one more aspect of it.”<sup>37</sup> Moreover, understanding the importance of an affirmative community for the act of testimony heightens the significance of this aloneness for John, who is left unable to bear witness to his pubescent transformation, and the subsequent development of his sexuality.

Baldwin provides a potential point of human connection in the character of Elisha, the pastor’s 17-year-old preacher nephew and John’s Sunday School teacher. John’s gaze emphasizes “the leanness, and grace, and strength, and darkness of Elisha in his Sunday suit” leaving John to wonder “if he would ever be holy as Elisha was holy” (p. 13). John’s sexual attraction is clearly addressed, yet subtly drawn, and is rooted in the same impulse that drove him to “sin” with his hands as he thought of the older boys, whose strength and developing masculinity aroused him. Yet Elisha is introduced as a religious teacher, to whose “holiness” John aspires, and whose body is draped in a “Sunday suit.” Marlon Moore, addressing *Mountain* as well as Baldwin’s short story “The Outing” (1950), further suggests that “Elisha represents [John’s] failings as a son, a heterosexual, and as a Christian. So John’s state of mind is affected by overlapping and conflicting desires.”<sup>38</sup> Elisha exists, then, as an aspirational figure, who is also the embodiment of John’s spiritual and sexual desires, and his very presence challenges the church-constructed binary between flesh and spirit.

John’s overwhelming desire for Elisha highlights the same voicelessness that John experiences during the masturbation scene. While “he would never dare to speak” of his sexual self-gratification in isolation, he is similarly unable to give utterance to his desires in Elisha’s presence. In addition to Elisha’s physical beauty and spiritual standing, John also finds himself “admiring the timber of Elisha’s voice, much deeper and manlier than his own” (p. 13). The fullness and maturity of Elisha’s voice mirrors John’s shy silence: “when, sometimes, Elisha paused to ask John a question, John was ashamed and confused, feeling the palms of his hands become wet and his heart pound like a hammer” (p. 13). John is tellingly unable to conjure words when confronted with Elisha, who sits at the intersection of John’s desire to be holy and live the “righteous life,” and the need to come to terms with his sexuality.

Unfortunately for John, the idyllic image of Elisha as the fulfillment of John’s



warring desires is quickly disturbed. Elisha must stand before the altar alongside Ella Mae, a young woman from the church with whom he had been “uncovered” and seen “walking disorderly” (p. 16). The teens are presented before the entire congregation, highlighting the weight of the communal condemnation of their potential sin, as Father James acknowledges that “sin was not in their minds—not yet; *yet sin was in the flesh*,” and declares that “should they continue with their walking out alone together, their secrets and laughter, and touching of hands, they would surely sin a sin beyond all forgiveness” (p. 17, emphasis added). This event serves to establish the congregation’s belief that human sexuality is something lurking in the blood, flesh, and genes of humanity, presumably from original sin.

The mediation of this public shaming through John’s gaze allows the pulpitic condemnation to become a part of his own testimony, shaping his understanding of the religious world in which he struggles to exist. The repudiation of John’s presumably heterosexual spiritual mentor suggests the danger of John’s own desires being revealed in a similarly public fashion. The shame, as John understands, would certainly be magnified by his same-sex desire. This scene illuminates the institution in which Baldwin’s characters exist, but also clarifies the conflicted state of John’s ever-developing consciousness, as he is taught that his sexuality and his spirituality cannot peacefully coexist.

John’s congregation demands sexual purity, enforcing his desire for cleansing. Much like Elisha, before he can stand in the pulpit, he must stand contrite before the altar and seek the congregation’s forgiveness for his sinful nature. Fearful of the repercussions from this confession, John instead remains silent. Peter Kerry Powers notes the implications of this silence, arguing that “Baldwin’s hope for the efficacy of confession—and his broad reliance on the confessional mode generally in his work—springs from his understanding of the psychology of shame, the role of silence in domination, and an ambitious, if only partially successful, re-reading of the practices of confession in Christianity,” and that “Baldwin understood that the power through which social norms induce self-containment depends on the fear of exposure. To confirm the suspicions of the social gaze, then, is to liberate oneself from fear, if from nothing else.”<sup>39</sup> Powers is not incorrect in his assertion, yet I would argue that John’s silence is better understood through the lens of *testimony* than *confession*.

The key distinction is that confession suggests a degree of guilt on the part of the speaker, and the recognition that they have sinned and seek forgiveness. While this is certainly where John finds himself in the confusion of adolescence, I would argue that Baldwin is more concerned with John’s *testimony*. For John to offer a testimony of praise, rather than a confession of his burden, would be to indict not himself, but the institution, thereby embracing a key component of Douglas’s “black sexual discourse of resistance,” which suggests the necessity of declaring that “it is not homosexuality but homophobia that is sinful.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, as Regina Stoltzfus explains testimony in distinction to confession: “testimony has an easily detected personal dimension, a confessional aspect. Yet testimony also has a public dimension, as critique and naming of what needs to be corrected and

changed. Thus, the trauma story becomes a new story, a story no longer about shame and humiliation but about dignity and virtue.<sup>41</sup> A testimony of praise, for John and for other black queer men, rejects the rhetoric of personal unworthiness, instead shaming the congregation with their shattered silence. The testimony holds its greatest value not in the unburdening of John's guilty conscience, but in the indictment of the community that subjects black queer men to consistent trauma.

To further clarify the culpability of the church community, Baldwin also explores John's silence in the midst of his constructed struggle in much the same way as his silence in the face of confession. While John's crippling feelings of guilt and self-doubt follow him throughout the events of the novel, Baldwin strategically locates moments of physical struggle within the space of the church. In each instance, John's physical struggle is drawn in relationship to Elisha, and Baldwin continues to emphasize the erotic yearning that John experiences, in direct relationship to physical interaction. Clarence Hardy addresses the importance of Baldwin's use of erotic language in physical description, and the manner by which he "found kinship between religious pursuits and sexual play," acknowledging that Baldwin's erotic languaging of the body "undid the very category of religion by describing as sacred what had been seen as dirty and profane."<sup>42</sup> Significantly, each of these physically heightened moments is also situated in proximity to the altar at the church, in recognition of that which must come before John can "ascend" into the consecrated space of the pulpit.

The first of these moments occurs when the two young men meet at the church to clean the sanctuary in preparation for the Saturday evening services. This moment, which climaxes in an erotically drawn wrestling match, recalls John's earlier reflection on the sin of his masturbation in relationship to "the darkness of the church on Saturday evenings." Yet Baldwin has purposefully presented a scenario where John is not alone, but is joined in the church by the object of his religious and romantic idealization. In this moment, where the church is literally at its dirtiest, prior to its weekly cleaning, Baldwin also builds upon the thematic intertwining of dirtiness and cleanliness that has resonated throughout the novel, beginning with the selection of "Grimes" for his protagonist's surname.

The young men's banter begins playfully, whereupon the challenging of one another's strength yields to a wrestling match. Readers quickly understand this to have been enacted many times before, just as John has been wrestling with his own ideas about his body and the sense of purity and cleanliness that he desires. Troubling these categories with his description of John and Elisha's wrestling match, Baldwin deliberately parallels physical exertion with John's ongoing spiritual effort:

Elisha let fall the stiff gray mop and rushed at John . . . John pushed and pounded against the shoulders and biceps of Elisha, and tried to thrust with his knees against Elisha's belly . . . Elisha was so much bigger and stronger . . . John was filled with determination not to be conquered . . . with all the strength that was in him he fought

against Elisha . . . He kicked, pounded, twisted, pushed, using his lack of size to confound and exasperate Elisha . . . the odor of Elisha's sweat was heavy in John's nostrils. He saw the veins rise on Elisha's forehead and in his neck. (pp. 52–3)

The clear eroticism of this scene is enhanced by the description of, "John, watching these manifestations of his power," being "filled with a wild delight" (p. 53). Yet the conditions of the church space are also significant in this moment; it is neither empty as John had imagined it earlier, nor is it filled with a congregation gathered in collective judgment. The private communion between these two young men suggests a certain intimacy, granting John ironic pleasure within the church walls, despite being in the throes of a physically exhausting wrestling match.

This is a fleeting moment, unfortunately, as John and Elisha prepare for the congregation's intrusion into their semi-private space. The substance of their exchange shifts from physical strength—during which John was full of bluster and bravado, in both goading his mentor into a wrestling match and reveling in his display of maturity—to spiritual fortitude, and John loses his resolve along with his voice. Before opining about the distinction between having "Adam's mind" and finding "no greater joy than you find in the service of the Lord," Elisha questions, "ain't it time you was thinking about your soul?" (p. 54). As Elisha speaks, John is consistently muted, offering only brief responses, and described as possessing "a quietness that terrified him," saying "nothing," and staring "in a dull paralysis of terror at the body of Elisha" (p. 54). Recalling his masturbatory moment of silence, John is unable to give utterance to his thoughts and his desires, fearful of speaking them aloud even to himself. Again, Baldwin crafts John's struggle as one of silence, unable to offer his testimony, and unable to find power over his voice.

Elisha's voice does dominate in this moment, however, reinforcing the very same dichotomy between spirituality and sexuality that produced his moment of shame before the congregation. Elisha acknowledges of his relationship with Ella Mae, "we didn't have nothing on our minds at all," yet he concedes to the charges of the church elders, "but look like the devil is everywhere" (p. 55). Elisha has not only accepted the condemnation of the church, but he has gone so far as to pass that lesson along to the young man who so clearly looks to him as a role model, advising the necessity of continued prayer to be delivered from sinful urges. Here, Baldwin reveals precisely why the "sexuality-as-sinful" rhetoric is so pervasive and long-standing. Elisha and John have each experienced shame over their sexual impulses. Encouraged to feel as though their desires will certainly come at a cost—whether the loss of their Christian community or their eternal communion with Christ—these young men cling to the hope for purity and cleanliness, because the alternative is simply too frightening for them to imagine. Elisha and John, like the elder members of their church community, are called upon to be co-conspirators in their own shaming and degradation, framed within a language of righteousness.

Baldwin highlights how damaging this line of thought is, yet provides John with precisely what he's been longing for: deliverance as defined by the church. In the climactic final scenes, and under the watchful eye of the congregation, John "finds

religion.” As he lays on the floor before the altar, in the midst of the congregation, “something moved in John’s body which was not John” and moves through him as though it “had opened him up; had cracked him open, as wood beneath the axe cracks down the middle, as rocks break up; had ripped him and felled him in a moment” (p. 193). This balanced interplay between the spiritual and physical dimensions of John’s religious experience stands in stark contradistinction to religious rhetoric that requires the repudiation of the flesh. Whereas the body becomes a site of weakness in narratives such as those that condemned Elisha and Ella Mae, John’s physical presence in this moment is very much a part of what lends the threshing floor its power.

Moreover, the convergence of John’s physical and spiritual desires comes through in the presence of Elisha, whose voice calls out to John as he moves through various states of consciousness. “In his heart there was a sudden yearning tenderness for holy Elisha; desire, sharp and awful as a reflecting knife, to usurp the body of Elisha, and lie where Elisha lay; to speak in tongues, as Elisha spoke” (pp. 194–5). John, again, seeks intimacy with Elisha’s body and spirit, but most notably with his voice, seeking the same spirit-driven language that currently calls him on the threshing floor. In this moment, the guilt and shame that John felt regarding his body, and his desire for Elisha, are not the driving forces. Rather, the body is integrated with the spirit as John lies on the threshing floor, and the multiple dimensions of his humanity are vital to the experience of coming through.

John’s “coming through,” and the subsequent immersion into his community, however, is best understood as a temporary triumph on the threshing floor, and not as an actual deliverance from his struggle. The reality of John’s sexuality remains hidden from the view of the congregation, whose practice of accepting members only under particular conditions of conformity still renders John speechless. In yet another moment of unexpressed desire, “John, staring at Elisha, struggled to tell him something more—struggled to say—all that could never be said” (p. 220). As such, we see not only that John’s sexual yearnings remain hidden from the community, whose conditional acceptance is predicated upon his silence, but that, in many ways, he continues to practice self-denial, unable to speak of his transformation. Baldwin, then, invites his readers to conceptualize alternative methods of deliverance, including his own decision to leave the Church and reject an institution that he felt had already rejected him.

Baldwin’s own testimony is profoundly influenced by the decision to separate from the Church, and he often intimates that this departure was indeed what allowed him to have a testimony at all, in the form of a prolific writing career. By abandoning the pulpit, Baldwin argues that he was able to embrace his own voice, rather than being bound by a fundamentalist doctrine in which he no longer believed. In conversation with his stepfather, Baldwin ultimately realizes that he must leave the Church in order to truly fulfill his life’s purpose. After David Baldwin asks him “abruptly, ‘You’d rather write than preach, wouldn’t you?’” the younger Baldwin, “astonished at his question,” replies with a simple “Yes.”<sup>43</sup> Upon liberating himself from a religious doctrine that held him in constant restraint,

however, Baldwin is not content to simply allow himself to be free. As is the case with any good testimony, he suggests his audience might find similar relief in being “delivered.” In what is perhaps his strongest condemnation of the Church, Baldwin writes in “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in my Mind,” published in *The Fire Next Time* in 1963,

It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being . . . must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of him.<sup>44</sup>

The condemnation that he levies here, ten years after the publication of *Mountain*, is clearly framed within his belief that the institution must not be preserved at the cost of its people. John Grimes struggles to reconcile his sexuality with the institutional demands of his church, and thereby attempts to suppress a substantial part of his humanity in order to remain a silenced member of the congregation. For Baldwin, as exemplified by the life he lived, a radical act of bravery required sacrificing the relationship with the communion of saints in order to preserve his humanity in a comprehensive way.

Baldwin’s powerful rebuke of fundamentalist conservatism, in the effort to secure his own salvation, continues to resonate in the contemporary moment with young black queer men who likewise seek spaces to speak life to their circumstances, and offer testimony without shame, fear, or condemnation. Danez Smith, an emerging creative voice, continues to publish and perform poetry that blends individual testimony with collective empowerment, and consistently challenges dominant narratives that employ conservative Christian rhetoric for the purpose of limiting queer bodies. In so doing, Smith voices queer subjectivity through spiritual validation, and through the affirmation of queer testimonies, eschewing the limitations that characterized the condition of Baldwin’s protagonist.

Smith regularly acknowledges the influence of their literary predecessors—Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Joseph Beam, and Jericho Brown, among others—recognizing their voices as Smith advances their personal testimony throughout a body of work in a way much like Baldwin. One untitled poem, performed at the 2014 National Poetry Slam, begins with the allusive epigraph, “if the concept of God has any use . . . if not, then it is time we got rid of him.” Smith embraces Baldwin’s directive from *The Fire Next Time*, declaring, “don’t play no gospel at my funeral. / Gospel has only brought me the blues. / Play the Blues at my funeral. / Tell God not to come.”<sup>45</sup> Smith describes this poem as “really just a free write that I performed for one time,”<sup>46</sup> thereby situating it firmly within the testimonial tradition, as they acknowledge the unrestrained creative impulse that burst forth from personal experience. In this unfiltered “free write,” Smith refers to an HIV diagnosis as “this expensive mistake of ghosts waiting by a troubled blood river” and mourns as “boys hang inside their garages / nooses made from jump

ropes their fathers cringed while buying.”<sup>47</sup> Smith’s testimony claims power over personal narrative, intentionally doing so beyond the walls of any church, as the audience becomes a congregation, and the stage and the microphone are claimed as a poetic pulpit.

In the midst of a growing body of work, Smith’s “Genesissy,”<sup>48</sup> a poem in three parts, offers a powerful glimpse into the spiritual and societal struggle of those who are subjected to vilification as well as violence in response to the expression of queer identities. Smith first queers the Creation narrative through a re-telling of Genesis—hence, the poem’s title. Part two of the poem articulates a progression wherein harmful ideologies yield to violent acts, employing the term “begat” repeatedly in order to allude to biblical constructions of lineage. Smith’s poem then segues into a stilted song, employing silence and vocal breaks to transform the meaning of the traditional hymn, “I am on the Battlefield for My Lord.” Smith intentionally engages the body as a site of spiritual, sexual, and gendered expression, while deliberately exploring the power of voice and the pain of silence. Most importantly, Smith engages in a “black sexual discourse of resistance” by explicitly addressing the responsibility of fundamentalist religious views, and the churches that advance them, for the destruction of the poem’s queer subject.

Although the title “Genesissy” suggests an emphasis on a feminized queer male identity, the poem itself is not limited in this regard. Rather, “Genesissy” engages black gay male identity—both literally and figuratively—while also addressing gender identity and expression through a direct address to trans\* figures. Smith begins the poem with an invocation to the fallen: “for Dwayne ‘Gully Queen’ Jones<sup>49</sup> and Islan Nettles,<sup>50</sup> two black transgender women who lost their lives at the hands of their own communities, ‘Genesissy.’”<sup>51</sup> Smith immediately presses the audience to examine those who exist at the margins, even within the doubly marginalized black queer community. The emphasis on black trans\* women, often unseen and disregarded, and statistically at greatest risk of anti-queer violence, also offers a necessarily inclusive articulation of queerness. Moreover, Smith’s effort to address the conditions of trans\* women is well situated within the testimonial tradition. As Smith reflects upon the inclusion of autobiographical elements in their work, “even more of the third party stuff I think about as self-sourced. So even if it’s not necessarily my story that I’m testifying on, it’s still testifying the act of witness . . . I think witness can be a kind of testimony.”<sup>52</sup> Again, refusing to speak for others, Smith still recognizes that the incorporation of multiple realities into their own testimony functions in vital service to the queer community.

Echoing Baldwin’s use of biblical narratives and figures, as well as his emphasis on creation, Smith thoughtfully reframes biblical text in order to speak to contemporary political realities. Both writers strategically offer correctives to church-based communities by revisiting the supposed source of their beliefs and condemnations. “Genesissy” creates an original atmosphere of queerness by introducing a world with “the first snap” as “the hand’s humble attempt at thunder,” and where “the trees leaned in for gossip, the water went wild with tea, the air tight with shade.”<sup>53</sup> Smith queers God’s language, with His first words being “let there be

fierce,” and prominently and emphatically incorporates dialogue such as “guuuur-llll.” The framing of the Creator’s speech through queer colloquialisms bears significant power, particularly given the revision of a narrative where God speaks the world into being with the command, “Let there be light.” As such, Smith also shares Baldwin’s emphasis on origins, by revisiting the root of the creative power of utterance and the foundation of testimony itself.

Beyond the speech acts, Smith also provides physical manifestations of queerness within a reimagined Garden of Eden. Smith describes the moment when “God dressed in a blood-red body suit, dropped it low, called it a sunset,” and also troubles the potentially hetero-normative pairing of Adam and Eve by queering both figures. Encouraged by the divine directive, “God said, ‘Bitch, werk,’” Smith’s “Adam learned to duck walk, dip, pose, death drop” and “Eve became the fruit herself, looked a lion in the eye and dared the king to bite.” Both Adam and Eve are emboldened to follow the ostentatiously queer example of their creator in His blood-red body suit. Adam moves with theatrical pride, and Eve no longer succumbs to temptation, but fiercely embodies it. The emphasis on queer bodies also prefigures the threat these bodies face later within the poem.

Smith ultimately centers the queer community within the Creation narrative in such a way that the Creator is invested in their existence, and their continued survival. By first beginning the poem “on the eighth day,” Smith posits the introduction of queerness as the true fulfillment of God’s initial mission to create, suggesting the Lord’s work had not yet been completed after the first seven days, or with the creation of human beings. The poem’s opening section concludes on “the twelfth day” as “Jesus wept in the mirror, mourning how his sons would shame his sons for walking a daughter’s stride, for how his children would learn to hate the kids.” While Smith continues to present all of humanity as God’s children, the distinctions drawn between sons and daughters, as well as the children and “the kids,” reveals a God betrayed by His creation. The image of Jesus weeping in the mirror reflects the vision of a fractured community that have turned their backs on each other, and therefore turned their backs on Him.

This sadness gives way to the moment when the Creator’s movements cease, not for rest as in the traditional narrative, but out of a sense of exhaustion. Tellingly, it is on “the thirteenth day”—the poem’s respective sixth, rather than seventh, day—that “God barely moved” as “He sat around dreaming of glitter; happy with the shine of it, but sad so many of his children would come home covered in it, the parades cancelled due to rain of fist & insults & rope & bullets.” Here, it presumably takes humans even fewer days to destroy the world than it took the Creator to set it into motion. In Smith’s vision, the fourteenth day presents an utterly broken-hearted deity who “just didn’t know what to do with himself,” disappointed by His children’s destructive exercise of free will. As the first section of the poem concludes, the queer body is unashamed and instead glorifies in color and shine, nor is there a sense of queer voices silenced out of fear of confession. Rather, the deity is left broken-hearted by those “children” who refuse to accept their queer siblings as their own.

Furthering the indictment of any church-based community that would prefer its queer voices silent, the second stanza moves beyond the moment of creation to explore the evolution of biblical narrative, and along with it biblically justified condemnation. Appropriating the biblical language of lineage, Smith reimagines genealogy:

the lord begat man  
 man begat sin  
 sin begat a new joy  
 a new joy begat Leviticus  
 Leviticus begat Sista Rosa  
 Sista Rosa begat that ugly rumor  
 that ugly rumor begat the truth.

Within this progression, it is clear that man is responsible for the creation of sin, and therefore bears responsibility for the consequences of that which is deemed sinful. Subsequently, Smith argues that Sista Rosa's judgment, supposedly rooted in Leviticus, must be recognized as having more mundane origins. This is key, again for understanding the necessary distinction between *confession* and *testimony*. In Smith's rendering, confession is not necessary to dismiss rumor or to confirm the truth of one's queerness. There is no need to confess the sinfulness of one's flesh in order to gain access to the joy of the Lord here, as both sin and joy are constructed not by God but by people. As such, Smith once again advances the necessity of testimony as part of a "black sexual discourse of resistance."

By rewriting the narrative of guilt and responsibility, Smith not only challenges the expectation for confession that silenced John Grimes, but also the narrative of struggle, and once again asks the audience to reimagine the role that silence plays within it. Smith then introduces acts of violence interspersed with acts of worship, presented through prayers as well as hymns. As Smith's own voice speaks with a heightened level of urgency and grief, the lineage continues:

the truth begat the need to pray or run  
 the need to pray or run begat the knees  
 (& that's a kind of praying too)  
 the knees begat the mouth splattered  
 all over the him-colored dirt road  
 the mouth splattered all over the him-colored dirt road still begat a song  
 the song begat a hymn at the sweet 'boy's' funeral.

Paralleling acts of supplication with homophobic and transphobic violence, the poem begs its audience to question the relationship between hateful actions and the systems of belief driving them, to challenge fundamentalist ideologies, and instead venerate the "sweet" children whose lives are sacrificed on the altar of religious belief. Smith's presentation of voice, through prayer as well as song, continues to feature prominently, mirroring the violence that destroys the queer subject's



mouth, effectively silencing them. Having been beaten down first by rumors and disapproval, they are then subjected to a total disavowal of their humanity, funeralized as a “boy” rather than in the girl’s identity they had claimed as their own.

The emphasis Smith places on the subject’s broken body is also telling as this section of the poem reaches its conclusion. The family’s rejection of the deceased’s gender identity is made manifest through “his aunt’s disgusted head shake” which “begat the world that killed / the girl child / & stole her favorite dress / off her cold shimmering body.” The broken-ness of Smith’s queer subject is complete, as they are left both mouthless and abjected by their nudity. The damage to the body and the denial of voice parallels the multi-layered queering of the divine Creator in part one, yet the gender fluidity here is key. Whereas Smith presents God as male through the use of pronouns, that masculinity is disrupted by the introduction of traditionally feminized speech, and by cloaking God in a blood-red body suit. Here, as part two draws to its close, the “sweet ‘boy’” is articulated as a “girl-child” and referred to by feminine pronouns only after the dirt road is splattered with the remnants of the mouth that belonged to “him” and only after “her favorite dress” had been stolen off of her body, which still shimmered, perhaps even with the same glitter that had so captivated God in part one. In this chilling final moment, the body is fully reduced to spectacle in the stillness of death, with Smith’s skillful use of “cold shimmering” imagery, rather than the “cold shivering” movement of a body still alive.

As the audience is confronted with the imagery of her broken, though still brilliantly shining, body, Smith concludes with the interrogative, “and that can’t come from God, right?” Smith’s question, posed in tearful exasperation, is thoughtfully framed in reference not to the body of the girl-child. To do so would run the risk of echoing the condemnation of restrictive church communities, which far too frequently dismiss queer bodies as abominations and aberrations of the will of God. Rather, Smith’s “that” which couldn’t possibly come from God refers back to the last object that has been “begotten” within the poem’s lineage: “the world that killed / the girl child.” By so doing, Smith is deliberate in suggesting that, though the girl-child lost her life in the previous stanza’s struggle, it is “the world”—a phrasing that, in and of itself, challenges a Church that sees itself as sacredly and dichotomously opposed to the secular trappings of “the world”—that requires deliverance in order to return to the path of righteousness and the favor of God.

As Smith concludes “Genesisy,” part three combines the poem’s interests in queer identity alongside depictions of voice, silence, and song. Smith reclaims the voice of the silenced queer subject while echoing the interrogation of gender binaries by presenting a “not hymn for her,” a reimagining of the traditional hymn, “I am on the Battlefield for my Lord.” Through musical pauses and lyrical gaps, the traditional refrain morphs, adding new meaning for the queer voices represented:

I am on the Battlefield for my Lord, for my Lord  
I am

the battlefield  
 my Lord  
 and I promise him that I  
 I  
 I die  
 I  
 battle  
 my Lord.

Although the opponent of black queer subjectivity has often been presented as God himself, Smith complicates this throughout the poem, troubling this construction through the exploration of the community that “begat” life-claiming violence based in supposed faith in God. Here, in the poem’s final lines, the “I” might be imagined to be at battle with “my Lord,” yet the unanswered question at the end of part two lingers. If, indeed, “that can’t come from God, right?” then the question of who, and what, is truly at the heart of this battle continues, even as Smith steps quietly away from the microphone.

This ongoing battle, wherein black queer subjects are asked to nurture their spirituality in silence, is undeniably rooted in church spaces that hold to restrictive views of their rigidly defined faith. Yet artists in the tradition of James Baldwin, and now Danez Smith, endeavor to establish spaces where black queer voices, narratives, and lives receive both attention and affirmation. Refuting the desire of any institution to render them voiceless, marginalized, or contained within narrowly defined representations of their identities, black queer testimonies shatter the silence that would otherwise cost them their lives. These artists collectively give voice to their humanity, while simultaneously confirming the reality of their communities, in all of their nuanced complexity, with their trials and triumphs, beauty and flaws. In so doing, the act of testimony brings forth the reclamation of self and spirit that ensures their survival, making it possible for those who follow in their footsteps to do the same.

## Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, “Autobiographical Notes,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 8.
- 2 Dolan Hubbard, *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (Columbia, MO, University of Missouri Press, 1994), p. 95.
- 3 Thomas Hoyt, Jr., “Testimony,” in Dorothy Bass (ed.), *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2nd ed., 2010), p. 89.
- 4 Regina Stoltzfus, “‘Couldn’t Keep It to Myself’: Testimony in the Black Church Tradition,” *Vision: a Journal for Church and Theology* 10:2 (2009), p. 43.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 6 J. Stephen Kroll-Smith, “The Testimony as Performance: The Relationship of an Expressive Event to the Belief System of a Holiness Sect,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19:1 (1980), pp. 16–25.

- 7 For extensive discussion, see Clarence Hardy III, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* (Knoxville, TN, University of Tennessee Press, 2003).
- 8 Kroll-Smith, "Testimony as Performance," p. 22.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 22.
- 10 Hoyt, "Testimony," p. 92.
- 11 Kroll-Smith, "Testimony as Performance," p. 22.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 13 E. Patrick Johnson, "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding the Notions of the Sacred in the African American Gay Community," *Callaloo* 21:2 (1998), p. 405.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 15 Hoyt, "Testimony," p. 90.
- 16 Johnson, "Feeling the Spirit," p. 107.
- 17 Leslie Bennetts, "James Baldwin Reflects on 'Go Tell It' PBS Film," <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/01/10/books/james-baldwin-reflects-on-go-tell-it-pbs-film.html> (accessed 8 September 2016).
- 18 Matt Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2014), p. 43.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Richard Goldstein, "Go the Way Your Blood Beats': An Interview with Richard Goldstein," in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (New York, Melville House Printing, 2014), p. 61.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 22 Marlon Moore, *In the Life and In the Spirit: Homoerotic Spirituality in African American Literature* (Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 1.
- 23 Danez Smith prefers the gender-neutral pronoun, "they." This discussion will honor that choice, while recognizing that Smith has not always chosen the gender-neutral pronoun. Consequently, some direct quotations will utilize masculine pronouns.
- 24 Danez Smith, "Biography," [www.danezsmith.com/p/bio.html](http://www.danezsmith.com/p/bio.html) (accessed 8 September 2016).
- 25 See Hoyt, "Testimony," for discussion of testimony in multiple forms (i.e. prayer, sermon, song, action).
- 26 Danez Smith, interview with the author, 3 December 2015.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 85.
- 29 Kelly Brown Douglas, "The Black Church and the Politics of Sexuality," in Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (eds.), *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 347–62.
- 30 Goldstein, "Interview," pp. 63–4.
- 31 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis, 2002), p. 106.
- 32 Smith, interview with the author.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 Candice Iloh, "Danez Smith: On His New Poetry Collection, Writing About Gay Sex, and the Power of Blackness," *Lambda Literary*, 26 January 2015, <http://www.lambdaliterary.com>

- org/features/01/26/danez-smith-on-his-new-poetry-collection-writing-about-gay-sex-and-the-power-of-blackness/ (accessed 8 September 2016).
- 36 James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York, Laurel, 1995), p. 11. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers are given in parentheses in the text.
- 37 Goldstein, "Interview," p. 60.
- 38 Moore, *In the Life*, p. 48.
- 39 Peter Kerry Powers, "The Treacherous Body: Isolation, Confession, and Community in James Baldwin," *American Literature* 77:4 (2005), pp. 795–6.
- 40 Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, pp. 126–7.
- 41 Stoltzfus, "Couldn't Keep It," p. 47.
- 42 Clarence Hardy III, "James Baldwin as Religious Writer: The Burdens and Gifts of Black Evangelism," in Douglas Field (ed.), *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 69–70.
- 43 James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 80.
- 44 James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross: Letter From a Region in My Mind," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 314.
- 45 Danez Smith, "Untitled," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QJ89XU\\_nXc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QJ89XU_nXc) (accessed 8 September 2016).
- 46 Smith, interview with the author.
- 47 Smith, "Untitled."
- 48 Smith's "Genesissy" has been performed in multiple venues, with multiple recordings in existence, and was also published in their 2014 collection, *[insert] Boy*. For the purposes of this discussion, I will be focusing on a lyrical transcription of a September 2013 performance at the Soap Boxing Poetry Slam, uploaded to the Button Poetry YouTube channel on 20 October 2013 ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEJ\\_ahg7x48](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEJ_ahg7x48)). Where appropriate, the punctuation and spelling from the printed version will be recognized.
- 49 Dwayne "Gully Queen" Jones was killed on 21 July 2013, at the age of 16, by a mob in Montego Bay, Jamaica. No arrests have been made or charges filed. Jones's family, who had evicted her from their home two years previously, refused to claim the body.
- 50 Islan Nettles was killed on 17 August 2013, at the age of 21, during a fight with a group of young men near her home in Harlem. No arrests were made until March of 2015, when a man was charged with manslaughter and assault.
- 51 Smith, "Genesissy."
- 52 Smith, interview with the author.
- 53 Smith, "Genesissy." Subsequent quotations from this work are given without citation.

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