

Day #1 Session #3: Poem and Questions

We Should Make a Documentary About Spades

By Terrance Hayes

- (1) And here is all we'll need: a card deck, quartets of sun people
Of the sort found in black college dormitories, some vintage
Music, indiscriminate spirits, fried chicken, some paper,
- (2) A writing utensil, and a bottomless Saturday. We should explore
The origins of a derogatory word like *spade* as well as the word
For feeling alone in polite company. And also the implications
Of calling someone who is not your brother or sister,
- (3) Brother or Sister. So little is known of our past, we can imagine
Damn near anything. When I say maybe slaves held Spades
Tournaments on the anti-cruise ships bound for the Colonies,
You say when our ancestors were cooped on those ships
- (4) They were not yet slaves. Our groundbreaking film should begin
With a low-lit den in the Deep South and the deep fried voice
Of somebody's grandmother holding smoke in her mouth
As she says, "The two of Diamonds trumps the two of Spades
- (5) In my house." And at some point someone should tell the story
Where Jesus and the devil are Spades partners traveling
The juke joints of the 1930s. We could interview my uncle Junior
And definitely your skinny cousin Mary and any black man
- (6) Sitting at a card table wearing shades. Who do you suppose
Would win if Booker T and MLK were matched against Du Bois
And Malcolm X in a game of Spades? You say don't talk
Across the table. Pay attention to the suits being played.
- (7) The object of the game is to communicate invisibly
With your teammate. I should concentrate. Do you suppose
We are here because we are lonely in some acute diasporafied
Way? This should be explored in our film about Spades.
- (8) Because it is one of the ways I am still learning what it is
To be black, tonight I am ready to master Spades. Four players
Bid a number of books. Each team adds the bids
Of the two partners, and the total is the number of books
- (9) That team must try to win. Is that not right? This is a game
That tests the boundary between mathematics and magic,
If you ask me. A bid must be intuitive like the itchiness
Of your upper lip before you sip strange whiskey.
- (10) My mother did not drink, which is how I knew something
Was wrong with her, but she held a dry spot at the table

When couples came to play. It's a scene from my history,
But this probably should not be mentioned in our documentary

(11) About Spades. *Renegade* is akin to the word for the shame
You feel watching someone else's humiliation. Slapping
A card down must be as dramatic as hitting the face of a drum
With your palm, not hitting the face of a drum with a drumstick.

(12) You say there may be the sort of outrage induced
By liquor, trash talk, and poor strategy, but it will fade
The way a watermark left on a table by a cold glass fades.
I suspect winning this sort of game makes you feel godly.

(13) I'm good and ready for who ever we're playing
Against tonight. I am trying to imagine our enemy.
I know you are not my enemy. You say there are no enemies
In Spades. Spades is a game our enemies do not play.

1. In this poem, Hayes presents us with a monolog of a speaker who is reviewing the rules for the card game of Spades while proposing to make a documentary about African American history. These are two lines of thought that overlap and get tangled. As the monolog goes along can you follow each line of thought from beginning to end? By the end, do the two lines merge into one? Why?
2. Focusing on the proposed documentary, what does the speaker have to say about African American history? The overt theme of African American history seems to fade from the monolog by the end of verse 11. Yet, could the last two verses also be about the history of Blacks in America, especially from a Black perspective? How could you read the last two verses in this way?
3. From the title onwards, Hayes uses the word "spade" in as an increasingly tense and loaded word, starting with its meaning as an insulting word for Black. Why use this word these ways? What impact does it have on you? Do its uses change as the poem goes on?
4. Here are other interesting, difficult, or puzzling word choices. What do you make of these:
Verse 1: sun people; Indiscriminate
Verse 2: utensil
Verse 4 - 5: "The two of Diamonds trumps the two of Spades/In my house."
Verse 6: "Suits being played
Verse 7: disporafied
Verse 8: books (instead of tricks or bags?)
Verse 9: magic
Verse 10: "dry spot"
Verse 11: *Renegade* (and why in italics?)
Verse 12: godly
Verse 13: you, You, ours
5. What's going on in the last verse? Has the speaker's mood changed as he spoke this monolog? From what mood to what mood? Has he learned how to play the game – which game? Who are the enemies and why don't they play Spades?
6. This poem touches on an amazing number of aspects of the African American experience. What aspects do you see included?