Reflections on Spades
An Interview with Amina S. McIntyre

At work on a PhD in Religion from Vanderbilt University concentrating on religion, psychology, and culture, Amina S. McIntyre holds a BA in Anthropology from Colby College, an MA in African American and African Diaspora Studies from Indiana University, an MFA in Playwriting from Spalding University, and an MTS from Emory University. She is a playwright from the Atlanta, Georgia, area who has worked with the Actor's Express, the Atlanta History Museum, the Out of Hand Theatre, Oakland Cemetery, and the Vanguard Repertory Theatre. An Elder in Full Connection with the CME Church, she is also a cofounder of the Hush Harbor Lab—a new play development company in Atlanta—and an avid Spades player. She discusses here the intersections of her interests—of her work and play, of drama and religion, of card games and African American culture—and their implications. **Key words**: Black joy; card games; hush harbor; Spades; storytelling, trash talking

***American Journal of Play*:** When you recall your childhood memories, do you remember playing traditional board and card games or more imaginative, pretend play?

Amina McIntyre: A mix of both. In my early childhood, my two brothers and I spent time playing Monopoly, Sorry, checkers, Election Day (this random game that taught about electoral votes), and wari, a Senegalese game with pebbles. My Baba and Mama were both preachers' children, so they did not play cards outside of Uno and Go Fish; instead, we picked up card games like gin rummy, speed, and Spades at school and at Camp Best Friends, a summer program in Atlanta, Georgia. While we received a Nintendo around the second year it came out (we started with the customary *Super Mario Bros., Duck Hunt,* and *Donkey Kong*), we still played outside quite a bit. We made up games like balloon volleyball, and the living room version of floor is lava and *Legends of the Hidden Temple*. We played hide-and-seek,

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find the switch (hide-and-seek with a switch), freeze tag, pick-up football and baseball and even dodgeball if we could get the community kids over to play. My parents owned a vacant lot beside our house, so it was normal for the neighborhood to come play.

***AJP*:** How does play influence your creative process as a playwright?

McIntyre: Theatre encourages creativity. You learn pretty early that even within a structure, there is spontaneity, innovation, and individuality. No matter the story, there are basic questions: Why today? What does a character want? What are they willing to do to get what they want? What are their obstacles? Do they get what they want? No matter what happens, these questions will be answered. Knowing the boundaries, there are unlimited possibilities in the creative process, even bending and testing the guidelines of the questions and structure. The same, I believe, shows up in play. We set the guidelines, then bend them to help our efforts. What becomes difficult, often, is when the rules change, but the subversive can happen there. More than anything, play invites me to imagine beyond what I see and engage in what could be possible, even if it does not yet exist.

***AJP*:** Let's dive into a specific play experience: what is Spades?

McIntyre: Spades is a four-player card game where the objective is to gain the most books (tricks) between the teams or at least the number of books they set out to make through a bid. There are two players per team, two teams per game. Similar to Hearts, the trump card (highest weight cards) in Spades is the spades suite. In *Win at Spades: Advanced Play and Strategy* (1999), Joseph Andrews notes the game is largely played in the United States, though Alfred Schademan links Spades to English whist from the 1700s, providing a scale and a map to mark the evolution and time. The game is won by the team who has won the most rounds or the first team to acquire the most points. It is similar also to a game called Bid Whist, played with four players, ideally two sets of partners, where bidding and achieving the most books is the goal. The trump card can change based on the deal. Bid Whist is often considered the father of Spades.

In a Black American context, the rules are a hybrid of Bid Whist and Spades. Important to note here is that other people of the African diaspora, especially African and Caribbean, will learn how to play Spades with African Americans. I refer to African American and Black American interchangeably, the Black American label does extend to those of African descent who enter the play space.

***AJP*:** How do you play?

McIntyre: Let's start with the basics. First, the table is set by players declaring their turn and the deck being prepared for play. Players choose a partner and their seats; partners must sit across from one another and cannot see each other's hands. There is a discussion often here about the rules of the game, the number to reach that is the end of the game (often 250, 300, or 500) or three out of five books (this is dependent on how much time people have to play). A dealer is designated—each person at the table will deal the cards over the course of the game. Often, the first dealer is determined by which person pulls the first spade off the top of a turned down deck. Afterwards, the dealer position is passed clockwise. To ensure fairness in a shuffle, the opposing member team to the right of the dealer (counter-clockwise) is allowed to cut the cards, conducting a soft reshuffle (either moving a few cards or half the deck from the top of the cards to the bottom or another location within the deck) with hopes of adjusting the potential hand to be dealt.

Once the cards are dealt and the partners see their own cards, a bid is entered. This is the only time the partners can discuss what is in their hands to any degree, but only in relationship to how many books can potentially be obtained. This is an indication also of how many spades, face cards, or high cards a player might have in the hand. There are many strategies around how a bid number actually forms. Once it is entered, the goal is to acquire at least the books entered and try to stop the other team from making their books. The minimum allowed to bid is four (unless they bid nil, which is zero). A book is one play in a game where each of the players have thrown out one card; the highest weighted card wins the hand. Players receive points if the books bid are made.

From here, each player throws out a card. The player to the left of the dealer throws down the first card and play proceeds clockwise; afterwards, whoever wins the book throws out the first card. Spades most often are introduced with a cut during play, when a player no longer has a suit and a spade is introduced, after which a spade can lead the book.

***AJP*:** Are there variations of this game play?

McIntyre: Yes. In Spades, there are incorporated rules or printed rules; in Black American households there are inscribed rules—informal, customized rules—which might include wild cards (where the Ace of Spades is not the highest card), not playing a spade until a cut has occurred, or other

general understandings. Clarifying rules at the beginning of the game is most important here; communal rules and decorum are often known and clarified before approaching the table. There are some rules you will not see in a Black American game, specifically that nil is not an option. The first hand might bid itself where the first round is the best of the cards. Partners might be able to go up one more book in the bidding process if the bidding seems low.

The house rules are set by naming how the cards are weighted (trump cards and their order), and how the game will be calculated (such as by bags, the total score to reach, what determines an automatic ending of the game). Other house rules might include what counts as fair play (once your hand is off the card, you cannot pick it back up or you may or may not be forced to play the hand or sit it out) and deciding who deals the cards.

If the first-hand bids itself, this is an opportunity for players to see how the cards have fallen and a way to get a blind advantage (also a way to gauge skill, flow of game, and impact scoring). The caveat is if someone runs a Boston (at least ten books won), it is considered an automatic game win on the first hand. In subsequent rounds, the team that did not deal bids first. Each team must bid at least board (four books). In some places, a team can elect to go blind if they are behind one hundred points. They must bid for half of the points, to get double the points (if the group wants to get five books, they will go blind one hundred). Some play the game so that you cannot go blind more than the points you are behind. If a team wants to go blind seven, it has to be down at least 140 points.

No matter the variation of the rules, the one cardinal sin of any Spades hand is reneging. Similar to Hearts and Bid Whist, in Spades, only particular cards can be played at a time. If you are leading the round, you throw out what you have and you must play that suit. If you do not have that suit, there is an option to play off. If a spade is in the hand, it is ideal to play the spade, unless your partner is winning the hand (has an Ace but you are cutting that suit, so instead of a spade, you might throw out a heart or something that will work in your favor). If you have thrown out a card off suit and then reveal you still have it, the opposing team can call renege. To renege costs you three books or one hundred points if you are caught (the challenger would have to choose the right book and prove the renege happened). To renege is a form of cheating.

For scoring, in the first hand, a player writes simply the number of

books made and adds a zero behind the number. Once bidding starts, the number of books is written under as an addition ledger, with each team's scores, listed side by side. If the books are made, points are added, if not, subtracted. If the team is counting bags, the number over the books bidded is placed beside the original bid number in which case the score could be 128–35. Often, people count only the bidded numbers. The team that reaches the number first wins the game.

These are rules I have played and observed at house parties, private invitations, and Meetup group games and have heard in interviews and conversations I've shared them with persons who regularly partner. Black digital writers Awesomely Luuvie and Damon Young of *Very Smart Brothas* website have explored Spades in feature-length articles, both explaining that learning the rules—including the game's significance, terminology, how to play—is a rite of passage and necessary as a cultural epistemology. Spades is an invited space requiring both an understanding of communal conduct requirements and the game rules.

***AJP*:** Where did you learn how to play Spades?

McIntyre: In the cafeteria at Southwest, now Jean Childs Young Middle School in Atlanta, Georgia. In the morning, if you arrived before homeroom, you would sit in the cafeteria. Students would pull out cards and start playing. At lunch, they would eat or pullout cards while waiting their turn in line. My brothers and I, with our friends, would perfect our skills at home or on the weekends. I'm not sure that I ever saw rules to the game written down until I started researching for a class.

AJP: What can you tell us about the role of performance and embodiment in playing Spades? Does the game require a certain level of bluffing or body movement?

McIntyre: For me the performance and embodiment are in the site of the game as well as in how partners act or read the table. The location of the game is often in a secluded area, at a house or a place accessed only by word of mouth. The game creates a subversive space where the players participating are allowed to be themselves. One person I interviewed spoke of how such a gathering involved cooking dinner with friends and catching up on the highlights of life, politics, and just being in each other's presence.

Performance and embodiment also show up in the pregame conversation, where there are improvisations and dialects to the rules. The language of the play space must be established for clarity, even if it is based on

previously incorporated rules. How someone holds and organizes their cards. How they bid. How they engage with their partner and the rest of the players. How they sit at the table and what seat they prefer. How the score is kept (I can't tell you how many times I've seen a score card that is "Us versus Them," with the assumption that Us will be the winner). How the cards are shuffled and how they are dealt.

Even the kinds of cards used (think the Martin cards based on the characters from the television show *Martin* or the waterproof decks made by The Black Pack company) can give a certain aesthetic and insight into a player's personality. Of course, trash talking is also a part of the performance as well as dealing. It's all about strategy and about flexing skill. Take shuffling, for example. When the dealer shuffles, the opposite team has the first card advantage, so the goal is to fairly set the cards that are not in their favor. Skill level is determined if someone knows how to shuffle traditionally (as a riffle or splitting the cards evenly and braiding the cards together) or if they have to do an overhand (pulling repeatedly from the middle and placing the cards on top or bottom). Almost any time I've seen an overhand shuffle, there are groans or comments made at the table about lack of skill. The same comes from the opposing teams' cut. It seems, for example, more risky or more challenging to move a single card from the bottom to the top than to pick half the deck up and put the cards at the bottom. If someone brings out a French cut, in which the deck is broken into four piles, a card is turned over and given to each before reassembling the deck, it might signal a person's strategy as well. With dealing it's all about style, how someone holds the cards (if they use their whole hand to throw the cards or just two fingers), if they decide to break the clockwise formation to manipulate the shuffle even more. This last part is tricky though—being a show-off can gain respect if the cards fall right or show judgment if there's a misdeal (where not everyone gets their thirteen cards).

No matter the skill of the persons playing, there is the luck of the cards, the skill of the players, and anticipating what is in their hands. This creates a space for improvisation, camaraderie, and unique expression. This also lends not only to bragging rights but also trash talking centered on the display of skill, strategy, and finesse (the style of the players and their partners' compatibility).

AJP: How is trash talking part of the performance?

McIntyre: Trash talking is very much a part of game strategy. When I inter-

viewed a few people about this for a project, one person spoke of how it was used to gauge the skill and also to throw people off their strategy. Since partners cannot table talk to their partners, trash talking or conversations about their game, their partners' successes, and other bluffs will come up in many ways.

Trash talking is a version of playing the dozens—a spoken-word insult game—yet it's imperative things do not overly insult the group. The competition is to be good natured but not meant to hurt. The goal is to distract, not to isolate or damage, a person. I've spoken with one partner group that would play only within a vetted circle of friends for this reason. Otherwise, whatever you bring to the table—clothes (if they are distracting), people, food, or drink, is fair game. People often agree that trash talking can be a means of catharsis, so long as it is in fun and has the right spirit about it. Effective trash talking is also a skill, much like playing the cards, because it can get someone to second guess their instincts. For players who need to concentrate, who get tied up in the talk, this can cause them not to pay attention to the cards. Winning over the mind can be just as important as winning the books.

AJP: In addition to your own play experiences, are there specific scholars or theories that inform your conception of the relationship between Black joy and Spades?

McIntyre: In the past five years, greater attention has been placed on Black joy with the emergence of hashtags such as #blackjoy, #blackboyjoy, and #blackgirlmagic. Scholars like Jessica Lu, Catherine Knight Steele, Brittany Packett Cunningham, Chante Joseph, and even Kleaver Cruz's The Black Joy Project via Instagram, along with Adreinne Waheed's *Black Joy and Resistance* and its pictures of protest and joy and Keno Evol's *A Garden of Black Joy: Global Poetry from the Edges of Liberation and Living* have all started offering definitions of Black joy. Before getting to Black joy, I want to offer a definition of joy as an emotion emitted in response to exciting activity, encouraging spaces, and simple satisfaction. Beyond the emotion, Black joy also encompasses the cultural experiences of people of the African diaspora.

Our experiences are informed by societal and cultural memories including the impact of colonialism and the slave trades (trans-Atlantic and others), the attempted reduction of Black lives to labor and chattel, the revolution and independence of nations and people, and the continued

resistance interwoven into the fabric of Black culture. There is a rich history starting with W. E. B. Du Bois discussing what our souls encompass and how black people can be seen as whole. But it's not until much later that Gina Dent intentionally connects the cultural considerations that must be taken into account around Black joy and pleasure. Black joy is universal and subversive; it crosses language and historical and cultural boundaries and can be found especially in the arts and in play spaces. What is most important here is to consider that Spades is a play space where Black joy occurs and can be a way to move participants toward liberation. With the need to promote and protect Black joy, a Spades play space could be seen as a different kind of resistance and a call for restoration.

***AJP*:** Where do you see Spades in a larger discussion of the history of Black leisure and recreation?

McIntyre: That's a great question because we do not often chronicle the importance of leisure and recreation. Even Du Bois and most conversations of Black joy center around resistance, activism, work (especially accomplishments), and fighting. Black joy is absolutely in these spaces. Yet, in these reflections, we must be willing to see all Black bodies as both worthy of and engaging in leisure and play activities, not just as labor. Even in play, I don't mean the sports industry, which has also become a form of labor, but genuine play such as Spades, laughter, and cathartic release, outside of a policed, watchful eye, which we often leave out of our narratives. These skills learned from our experiences are brought into play. Chance and calculation are prominent in African American recreational life, especially in African diasporic traditional storytelling featuring Br'er Rabbit, High John the Conqueror, and John Henry. Each of these characters have strength, quick wit, and an ability to outthink their opponents. These skills may not be known to the opponent, but they are recognized and encouraged within the Black community and when playing Spades.

This leads me to think about Karl Groos's definition of recreation theory as the application of surplus energy to an activity that brings restoration and rest for adults after work. Doris Bergen further details how adults instinctually need to play, a need different from that of children, who are given more access to play. However, while Groos discusses games of adults and actually mentions the Spades predecessor whist in *The Play of Man,* he does not include a specific cultural hybrid. His discussion of dominoes, for example, does not explore what can be considered "dialect" or

"creolized." Nor does Groos or Bergen discuss the potential sociopolitical impact of groups for whom recreation creates a subversive play space. However, Stephanie Camp's work on chattel slavery tells us about the banned parties of the enslaved that include dancing, music, and other events, specifically the need for pleasure that was forbidden and prohibited. There is a need for unpoliced, vibrant spaces for Black Americans to reclaim their leisure and designate a space to be what is needed for the group at the time the space is created.

This brings to mind both the creation and uses of "hush harbors." Some scholars like Thomas Webber write about them also being places for black markets and leisure gathering in addition to settings for ritual and worship. Spades ties in here for me as a location of being—the intersection of the natural, human need for people to have recreational time and the ways Black people go about making the space for recreation to occur.

AJP: How important is the space in which people play Spades?

McIntyre: For the Black community, Spades is not just a game; it is a hush harbor, a site of joy, and a play space. Miguel Sicart writes of play spaces being where play can occur, yet there is the space for, like, theatre, spontaneity, innovation, and individuality (I'd change "individuality" to "communality" in larger spaces). They are organic and malleable to the needs of those utilizing the environment, lending themselves to both structure and improvisation. Playing Spades supports Black cultural expressions and cultivates Black joy by creating a free, unjudged environment. There is opportunity here also for people not to have to code switch, a place where their true selves can be shown without repercussion.

For Black people, I argue that seclusion and reclusion (even temporary) is necessary for a site of joy, ruling persons out by whether they know how to play and the rules. Even if someone does not know how to play, understanding its importance makes it an inclusive environment.

This idea of Spades as a setting and a protected communal gathering is historically reminiscent of hush harbors, created by and for people of African descent in the Americas. Hush harbors were spaces often in the brush and out of sight of overseers and enslavers where the enslaved Africans met to practice spirituality, ritual, and live-in community, deriving from maroon societies. Garth Baker-Fletcher, Albert Raboteau, and Thomas L. Webber write specifically about these secluded, illegal spaces where rituals could be performed in the open. Characteristics of hush harbors include

seclusion—often by invitation only (through word of mouth) and attended by persons with similar demographics. They centered on traditional African beliefs and values and cultural habits. They offered different places to eat, drink, and relax. In hush harbors, Black people did not have to put on the act required of them by white culture. Hush harbors were protected spaces in which they could bring their African cultural memory, places where Blackness and Black identity was formed.

Spades is not the only modern hush harbor; even in an age of social media and the freedom for Black people to live, not all things are shared in an effort to protect Black joy. This is similar to how barbershops and beauty shops put Black culture in plain sight, but they operate within their own rules. Fraternities, sororities, HBCUs, Black culture centers at predominantly white institutions, Black Hamptons, the Chittlin' Circuit, the Negro League Baseball teams (and Negro League Little League Teams at local recreation centers), Pink Robe Chronicles, The Nap Ministry, even Congressional Black Caucus, are all examples of spaces that house a safe, cultural environment. This is different from a liminal space; this is not a new created space, but a space that has no physical home, a space where participants engage in practices based on retained generational knowledge. Moreover, Spades as a play space and hush harbor has multiple purposes and covers all the needs, emotional and spiritual.

AJP: What do you think the card game and its play can reveal about Black adult play and intergenerational community building?

McIntyre: Studying Spades offers a counternarrative to the mainstream Black stories focusing primarily on the trauma inflicted through violence and communal resistance. Normalizing adult play in which joy is resistance can be an integral part of recognizing Black social development. There is a sacredness of play spaces—particularly how they can be a source of joy, how the knowledge is passed down, and how the game is preserved. The game of Spades operates as a modern hush harbor space, protecting the culture, making sure one is worthy enough to attend to the table and finding the right partner (even if your partner is the person on the couch who doesn't play the game). Those are only a few elements of the larger community this space provides for people to embody joy and creations. It's just one example of satisfying the need for cultivated spaces where Black joy can be freely embodied and liberation consists of joy, laughter, and communal camaraderie.