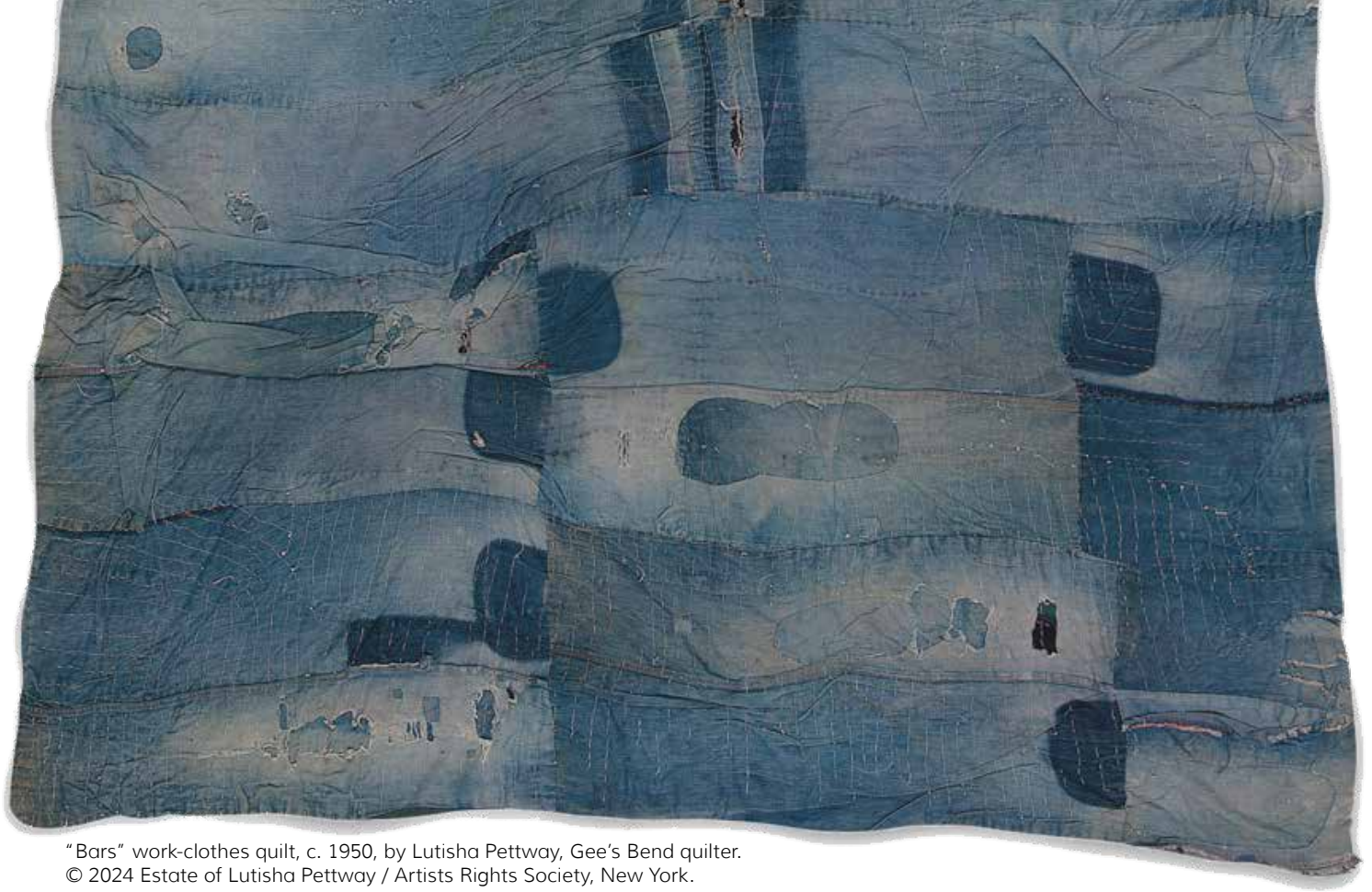




"Bars" work-clothes quilt, c. 1950, by Lutisha Pettway, Gee's Bend quilter.
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Humanities in 'Everyday Use'

On the power of learning from, and with, each other

by Zanice Bond

Author's note: This title is a nod to Alice Walker's short story, "Everyday Use," first published in Harper's Magazine (April 1973), and well worth a read today.

Sometimes, usually around midterms, when my undergraduate students at Tuskegee University are getting tired and need a break — or start to wonder how relevant the humanities are to their lives — I ask them to imagine that they have been invited to the governor's mansion for dinner. I ask them to envision the rooms, the art on the walls, the people, the food, the music, the books on the shelves, and the conversations they might encounter. As they enter this imaginary space, I ask if they would recognize the Gee's Bend quilt hanging on the wall or that Chester Higgins photograph — yes, the one he took in Brazil that's on the cover of the Geneva Smitherman book we read in class.

Some will notice Imani Perry and Joy Harjo on the shelves or Joey Brackner on the coffee table. Others will admire the assemblage art — then recall their

presentation at the Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art and how they connected Langston Hughes's "Christ in Alabama" to Lonnie Holley's "Pressure from the Burn." A few will hear conversations that include Zora Neale Hurston or Booker T. Washington. I ask if they would be able to contribute to those conversations — to speak of Hurston, a Notasulga native, as a dynamic Harlem Renaissance writer and a folklorist. Would they mention the brilliant women who worked tirelessly with Washington or note how his collaborations with philanthropist Julius Rosenwald changed the educational landscape for Blacks in the South?

We soon return to the four walls of our classroom — that safe space to think critically, write, and prepare ourselves to engage with our respective communities and the world. We agree that opportunities to share

what we have studied in the classroom, whether K-12 or university, may appear anytime — over dinner, during a hike, after a visit to a museum. To teach is a dynamic, communal experience, for teachers are always learning.

Teachers are students are teachers. . . .

For fifty years, the Alabama Humanities Alliance has provided important programs that enrich learning for teachers and students alike. I am most familiar with AHA's teacher workshops that support K-12 educators who seek to expand both their knowledge and their curricula. Their students may end up in a literature class with me or in another humanities program across the globe. Of course, information from these workshops could help teachers to inspire a future mechanic who reads novels, a plumber who recites poetry, an Uber driver who frequents the theater. Either way, the aim is to help make a more humane and literate society of people willing to learn from, and grow with, each other.

Through the years, I've been fortunate to serve as a project scholar for AHA's teacher workshops. The first one I led focused on *The Wives of Booker T.*, an unpublished play by Dyann Robinson, Broadway dancer-turned-playwright who documents, on the stage of the Tuskegee Repertory Theatre, the lives and experiences of Black Alabamians, among others.

Guest scholars from Alabama State University, Auburn University, and Tuskegee University designed segments for the day that examined, for example, Margaret Murray Washington, the third wife of Booker T. Washington, who was an active club woman and educational reformer. We also studied Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Of course, it was a privilege to have Robinson discuss her creative process and meticulous archival research, as well.

This play was especially important because it amplified voices and ideas of women who often remained in the shadows of a powerful husband. After a working lunch with several cast members from the play, the workshop ended with a visit to the graves of Fannie Norton Smith Washington, Olivia Davidson Washington, and Margaret Murray Washington. We celebrated these women's lives, Robinson's work, and the future of the students who would study these women and be inspired by them.

In 2022, Ashley M. Jones became Alabama's youngest and first African American poet laureate. It was thrilling to think students could be a part of this historic moment — especially with someone like Jones who draws from history, music, even gardening to help readers understand and appreciate the world around them.

So, I proposed "All Y'all Really From Alabama: Examining the Poetry of Ashley M. Jones." On June 28, 2022, AHA hosted this teacher workshop at the Alabama Department of History and Archives in Montgomery. Again, scholars and writers from around the state contributed to the experience — discussing selected poems, examining the history referenced in Jones's work, and creating writing prompts for poems and personal narratives. We ended the workshop drinking hibiscus tea and talking shop with our poet laureate.

Then, last year, AHA embarked on a five-city series on "Yaa Gyasi, *Homegoing*, and the Power of Knowing Our Roots" that began in Huntsville and ended in Mobile. Gyasi and her family, originally from Ghana, made Huntsville home when she was a child. This series brought local scholars, community historians, and genealogists together with workshop participants who included teachers as well as community members.

Gyasi's novel covers the experiences of eight generations of a family with roots in West Africa. Trafficking, the transatlantic slave trade, and movement across generations brought descendants to other destinations, including Alabama. Scholars with roots in India, Puerto Rico, and Ghana led excellent presentations that provided historical context, new teaching methods, and literary analysis for educators to share in their classrooms — and for anyone else to share in book clubs or community-centered discussions. The *Homegoing* series also offered me a full-circle moment as one of my former Tuskegee students — a newly-minted Ph.D., now teaching at the University of Montevallo — served as one of our guest scholars.

The series has had a lasting impact on those who joined in. Just last week, Nancy, a participant from the Huntsville workshop, contacted me. She and her sister Phyllis had just returned from their first trip to Ghana. Before their departure, Nancy purchased a copy of *Homegoing* for her sister. Phyllis took it with them and read it during long bus rides across the country. Their conversations about the book piqued the interest of other passengers, and the novel soon became a kind of common read. In fact, after finishing the book, one group member exclaimed, "This book changed my life!"

How profoundly grateful we are not only to have the humanities in our lives but for the freedom to put them to everyday use.

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