

# Kevin Young, Poet and Author, Is Named to Lead African American Museum

The poetry editor of The New Yorker will retain that position while undertaking his new role.



By **Graham Bowley**

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The Smithsonian on Wednesday named Kevin Young, a poet, archivist, author and editor, as the new director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Mr. Young, 49, is currently director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a division of the New York Public Library, and poetry editor at The New Yorker magazine. He starts his new role in January.

He succeeds the museum's founding director, Lonnie G. Bunch III, who in 2019 became the secretary of the Smithsonian, its most senior position.

The museum, which opened in 2016, was built to tell the African- American story for all Americans.

Like other Smithsonian museums, it closed temporarily in March because of the pandemic. It opened again earlier this month in a somewhat altered America after the nationwide eruption of social justice protests addressing racism and police violence that will inevitably give the museum a new chapter in its narrative.

Mr. Young said he will be cognizant of the current moment. The museum's role, he said, is to place it in a broader global and historical context.

"We are definitely at the center of that conversation," he said in an interview. "What I am struck with is how the museum tells the story of the long civil rights struggle, which didn't start this summer, and provides that context."

"People want to understand how we got there," he added.

Mr. Young said he wanted to explore new areas of African-American culture, such as how Black music is performed online, as well as expanding online access to the museum itself.

“The museum is such a beacon of thinking about the way that African-American culture is at the center of the American experience, and you can’t tell the story of America without the story of African-Americans,” he said.

Mr. Bunch said a search committee had considered “numerous” candidates and had recommended “two or three” to him. He made the final choice.

Mr. Bunch said Mr. Young brought both scholarship and technological savvy to the role.

“Kevin is someone who is steeped in African-American culture and history,” he said in an interview. “He is someone who is passionate about making that history accessible.”

He said he hoped his successor would take the museum in new directions and added that it would be exciting to see how Mr. Young would apply his talents as a poet.

“It gives him a good place to do what he does best,” Mr. Bunch said.

Mr. Young said he would continue as poetry editor of *The New Yorker* in addition to his new role at the museum.

Before his time at the Schomburg Center, Mr. Young spent 11 years as a professor of creative writing and English at Emory University in Atlanta, where he also curated its poetry and literary collection.

He directed the Schomburg Center, in Harlem, for four years.

During that time, he made some high-profile acquisitions, bringing to the center’s landmark building on Malcolm X Boulevard the personal archives of Harry Belafonte, James Baldwin and others.

He raised \$10 million in grants and donations, conceived and developed a literary festival and increased attendance by 40 percent to about 300,000 a year.

Ken Chenault, chair of the museum’s council, said, “At this moment in our nation’s history, the National Museum of African American History and Culture is exactly what America needs.” He added, “Since opening, the museum has been a place for people to come together, find inspiration and foster reconciliation. Kevin’s reputation as an innovative leader makes him the ideal person to lead the museum into its next chapter and help us grapple with our racial history.”

In preparation for telling the story of the last several months, curators at the National Museum of African American History and Culture have begun collecting photographs, as well as some of the art and signs, that proliferated during the protests this year, including items from demonstrators at

Lafayette Square near the White House.

The museum already offers some online initiatives that deal with recent events. An online project, “Voices of Resistance and Hope,” encourages people to share their responses to the Black Lives Matter movement and their experiences in coping with the coronavirus pandemic.