

WEEKEND CONFIDENTIAL

# A Museum Director and Poet Bears Witness to a ‘Long History of Struggle’

Kevin Young, the new director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, sees its tale as central to the American story

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Kevin Young, the new director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., was 13 when he first felt the “secret thrill” of writing poetry. In a summer workshop in Topeka, Kan., where his family moved when he was 10, his teacher typed up and passed around student poems that held promise but kept the authors anonymous (to train the class’s attention on the words, not the writer). Mr. Young still remembers the day the teacher handed out a poem of his. As his peers discussed his work, he began thinking, “Maybe there’s something there. Maybe I could write something else, something better,” he recalls. “I just kept at it.”

“Stones,” Mr. Young’s 12th book of poetry, will be published this fall. Like his other collections, this one often looks backward—at his father, an ophthalmologist who died suddenly more than 15 years ago; at his ancestors, who are buried mostly in Louisiana (he and his son wander among the stones of their graves); and at his own childhood, with its mix of pleasures and prejudice.

“A poem is the most efficient form of time travel,” observes Mr. Young, 50, who is also poetry editor of the *New Yorker*. His writing, he says, is often guided by an impulse to preserve the past by recording it, archiving the stories and feelings that might otherwise be lost to time. In this way, he says, “the power of poetry is much like the power of a museum”: Both can evoke a time and place by bearing witness to

history.

Lonnie G. Bunch III, the secretary of the Smithsonian and the founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, handpicked his successor, praising Mr. Young's scholarship and technological savvy. Mr. Young began the job in January after moving with his wife and son from the New York area, where he was director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a research division of the New York Public Library. "I'm finally in the land of good barbecue again," he says over Zoom from his office, which looks out on to the Washington Monument.



The National Museum of African American History and Culture opened its doors in 2016.

PHOTO: JARED SISKIN/GETTY IMAGES

The museum, which opened its doors in 2016, has done "an amazing job" of "telling the story of African-Americans, and how central it is to the American story," says Mr. Young. When he first visited with his son two years ago, he says, he was struck by the "soaring space," which guides visitors on a chronological journey that begins with the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the bowels of the building, 70 feet underground, and rises to reach the Black Lives Matter protests of today. Many of the thousands of artifacts on display, which include an auction block for buying and selling slaves, a Ku Klux Klan hood, the first-known photo of Harriet Tubman and Chuck Berry's red Cadillac, were donated by ordinary people.

One of the most moving moments of that inaugural visit, says Mr. Young, was the wait to see the glass-topped casket that once held Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy who was lynched in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman. "We were lining up like people did in 1955 to see his body, that his mother, Mamie Till, insisted be shown," he says. Mr. Young's concerns that his own son, who is now Till's age, may be similarly killed by vigilantes or a police officer is something he has probed in his poetry. In "Triptych for Trayvon Martin" in his book "Brown" (2018), he writes: "A finger/ is a gun—/ a

wallet/ is a gun, skin/ a shiny pistol,/ a demon, a barrel/ already ready  
—/ *hands up/ don't shoot*—.”

The museum presents “the long history of struggle and survival” of African-Americans in a way that feels both edifying and inspiring, says Mr. Young. But the pandemic, which has temporarily closed all of the Smithsonian’s museums and galleries, has necessitated more digital programming. “Our job is to bring the museum to people,” he says. The museum recently held its first virtual symposium and is curating exhibitions online.

The museum “has a responsibility” to both reflect and respond to the current moment, says Mr. Young. Curators have been collecting handmade signs and other artifacts from the protests against police brutality last summer. An exhibition about the Reconstruction era planned for the fall will touch on recent efforts to curb access to the vote.

A particular strength of the museum, says Mr. Young, is the way that it highlights not only the lives of famous figures—exhibits include Frederick Douglass’s cane, Rosa Parks’s dress from the day of her arrest and Muhammad Ali’s terry-cloth robe—but also the stories of “everyday folks, everyday lives.” Visitors can see signs from segregated bus and train stations, bentwood chairs from Southern churches, and the pillowcase a slave named Rose gave to her daughter when the girl was sold, which the girl’s granddaughter embroidered with this story.

Mr. Young’s fascination with the poetic ingenuity of ordinary Black Americans has long animated his career as both a poet and curator. In his nonfiction book “The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness” (2012), he describes this impulse to preserve the stories of regular African-Americans as a desire “to save what we didn’t even know needed saving.”

He dates this instinct to the summer before his freshman year at Harvard University, when he first read “Thomas and Beulah,” Rita Dove’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book of poems about her African-American grandparents. Mr. Young says he was “blown away” by the way the poems found “the miraculous in the everyday.” The book helped him to see that “poetry was not something far off and abstract. It was really about the mud and the dirt.” Eager to see “the struggles and the silences” of his own parents and grandparents in poems, he wrote about his family in Louisiana, which became his first book, “Most Way Home.” He continues to mine this landscape in his work.



Mr. Young says the museum highlights not only famous figures like Frederick Douglass and Rosa Parks but also the stories of ‘everyday folks, everyday lives.’

PHOTO: NATE PALMER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The appeal of poetry, says Mr. Young, is in its “way of turning life into myth.” The form also bridges the divide between reader and writer: “Every ‘I’ in a poem can become ‘you.’”

The African-American tradition of chronicling life in published poetry spans 250 years and is often itself a “form of protest” for the way it elevates the “song and struggle” of Black life, Mr. Young writes in a recently published Library of America anthology that he edited. In preserving and presenting “the range and scope and depth of Black poetry,” he sets the stage for the poets who are working today, whom he believes are “in the midst of a renaissance in Black culture” in everything from film to music.

Mr. Young sees too many parallels between his own childhood and his son’s to believe that the country has truly reckoned with the sins of its racial past. But, he says, “I always have hope.” The museum, like his poetry, may be a chronicle of injustice, but it is also a celebration of art and music and the big and small pleasures of African-American life. “Joy,” says Mr. Young, quoting the poet Toi Derricotte, “is an act of resistance.”

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