

The poet at work: with a new book of nonfiction, bunk, to add to his ten acclaimed poetry collections, a new job as director of a leading research center on black culture

leading research center on black culture, and a new role as poetry editor of the New Yorker, Kevin Young is fully engaged in a personal program of moving multitudes

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THE Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is located at the intersection of 135th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard in Harlem. It is eight blocks from Langston Hughes's famous brownstone, seven blocks from where James Baldwin once attended high school, and a three-minute walk from Zora Neale Hurston's former artist-collective residence. It sits directly across from the Harlem Hospital Center and is surrounded by an array of delis, bodegas, and brownstones--quintessential emblems of Harlem that drape the neighborhood's landscape.

After stepping off the subway, I walk fifteen feet to the right and purchase a chicken-and-rice meal from the shawarma cart that is parked near the sidewalk in front of the center each day. I sit on one of the benches in front of the building as cars glide down Malcolm X Boulevard, their music thumping with enough bass to shake the street.

Mid-chew I look up and see Barry Jenkins, director of the Academy Award-winning film *Moonlight*, surveying a table of used books. The moment is almost too prototypically Harlem to be true. Here is one of the preeminent black artists of our time--and one of the most critically acclaimed directors in Hollywood--quietly perusing used books on Malcolm X Boulevard as passersby bustle along without saying a word to him, as if he were simply a fixture of the Harlem ecosystem. The Schomburg Center is, in many ways, the central home to the culture that Jenkins embodies, and its new director, the poet Kevin Young, sits at the nexus of participant and purveyor.

When I step inside the Schomburg, I am escorted to meet Young in a small conference room with a dozen chairs, two square tables pushed against each other, and three rectangular windows that overlook a small courtyard. Young walks into the room with a stack of papers and several books with innumerable dog-eared pages. He moves with a sense of self-assuredness that one would expect from someone with his resume, but counterbalances it with a disarming sense of humor.

Today he is wearing a light-blue oxford shirt with its sleeves rolled up to just below his elbows. The screen of his watch flickers as he moves his hand during the conversation. The ID at the end of his black lanyard is tucked into his left shirt pocket as if he didn't want you to know that he is the director of the leading research center for black culture in the country. His thick, black beard is flecked with subtle streaks of gray, and he often runs his fingers through it while his other hand rests on the opposite arm. His hair is closely cropped on the sides, but the top of his head abounds with tightly coiled black curls that sprout up along his scalp. His glasses are round and thick and black and slide from the bridge of his nose when he laughs, which he does often, in a way that invites you into the conversation. I'm here to talk to him not only about...

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This he added with some apprehension. "Of course I can get away. We're not so businesslike as all that in Tahiti." He called out to a Chinese who was standing behind the opposite counter. Edward slipped on a coat and, putting on his hat, accompanied Bateman out of the store. Bateman attempted to put the matter facetiously. "I didn't expect to find you selling three and a half yards of rotten cotton to a greasy nigger," he laughed. He walked with a new jauntiness; there was a carelessness in his demeanour, a gaiety about nothing in particular, which Bateman could not precisely blame, but which exceedingly puzzled him. "I'm blest if I can see what he's got to be so darned cheerful about," he said to himself. They arrived at the hotel and sat on the terrace. The introduction to a new biography of Gannibal by the author. Alexander Pushkin was not only Russia's greatest poet, but he was also the great-grandson of an African slave. The slave, whose godfather was Peter the Great, claimed to have royal blood of his own. Certainly his Russian descendants believed that he was an African prince. Pushkin told the story of his black ancestor in "The Negro of Peter the Great", but this biography tells a different version. The main difference is between fact and fiction. The Russian poet hoped to discover a biographical truth by sticking to the facts, only to discover that facts are slippery and not always true. His biography turned into a novel. Even then, it was left unfinished after six and a half chapters. Five poets emerged as the main constituents of this movement – William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Gordon Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. The strength of their works lies undoubtedly in the power of their imagination. Indeed, imagination was the most critical attribute of the Romantic poets. Each poet had the ability to portray remarkable images and visions, although differing to a certain degree in their intensity and presentation. Nature, mythology and emotion were of great importance and were used to explore the feelings of the poet himself. The lives of the poet...