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MacArthur Foundation Announces 2016 'Genius' Grant Winners

By JENNIFER SCHUESSLER | SEPT. 22, 2016



Branden Jacobs-Jenkins
Credit John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Getting a phone call from an unidentified number in Chicago in late summer is a fantasy many artists, scientists and other creative people have entertained. But that doesn't mean it seems real when it actually happens.

"I thought I was having a psychotic breakdown," the playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins said of his reaction to learning several weeks ago that he was among the 23 people selected as 2016 fellows of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. "I went out on the street, and ran into a friend," Mr. Jacobs-Jenkins continued. "I had him look at my cellphone, just to confirm that the call had been real."

This year's winners of the MacArthur fellowships, awarded for exceptional "originality, insight and potential," and publicly announced on Thursday, include writers, visual artists, scientists, nonprofit organization leaders and others, who are chosen at a moment when the recognition and money — a no-strings-attached grant of \$625,000

distributed over five years — will make a difference.



Maggie Nelson

Credit John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

“We want to give people new wind against their sails,” said Cecilia A. Conrad, a managing director of the foundation and the leader of the fellows program.

The honorees include relatively well-known figures in the arts like the poet Claudia Rankine, 53, whose book “Citizen,” (2014) which explored racism in everyday life, won numerous awards and made the New York Times best-seller list; the essayist Maggie Nelson, 43, who won the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism for “The Argonauts,” a hard-to-classify exploration of gender, motherhood and identity; and Gene Luen Yang, 43, who in January became the first graphic novelist named national ambassador for children’s literature by the Library of Congress.

The youngest fellow is Mr. Jacobs-Jenkins, 31, known for plays, like “An Octoroon” and “Neighbors,” that address race, class and history, sometimes through the remixing of charged stereotypes. The oldest is Joyce J. Scott, 67, a Baltimore-based artist whose work includes performance art and large-scale sculptural pieces that incorporate traditional beadwork into pointed commentaries on American culture, the black female body and other subjects.

If there’s a detectable theme to the group, it might be a willingness to cross borders and to work in the cracks among existing genres, disciplines and institutions.



Gene Luen Yang, a graphic novelist.
Credit John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

“A lot of the work I do has been in the in-between spots,” said Josh Kun, 45, a cultural historian at the University of Southern California, who was cited by the foundation for public humanities projects like “Songs in the Key of L.A.,” which explored the diverse cultural roots of the sheet music in the collection of the Los Angeles Public Library. The MacArthur Fellowship, awarded since 1981, is one of the most prestigious prizes in the United States. Potential fellows are nominated by a shifting group of anonymous experts in various fields, then further winnowed by a committee of about 12 people, whose names are not released. The award has come to be known as the “genius” grant, a term that tends to provoke annoyance at the foundation.

“What we’re really focused on is creativity,” Ms. Conrad said. “Genius is a state, but creativity is an activity: It’s stuff you’re doing.”

The new fellows also include people working outside the spotlight, in fields that barely existed when they were starting out.



The artist Joyce J. Scott.
Credit John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Anne Basting, 51, a professor of theater at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, recalled that when she wanted to write her doctoral dissertation about the social performance of aging, her advisers tried to talk her out of it. She has since created performance pieces derived from stories generated by seniors with dementia, like “The Penelope Project,” based on “The Odyssey.” She also founded TimeSlips, an organization dedicated to using storytelling techniques to help cognitive-impaired seniors draw on imagination, rather than memory, to communicate and connect.

“My whole career, it’s always been, ‘What is the next, biggest question?’” Dr. Basting said. “With this fellowship, I can ask, ‘What’s the 15th question?’”

Winners in the sciences include those who do pure research, as well as those focused on applied work. Bill Thies, 38, a computer scientist at Microsoft Research India in Bangalore, works with local organizations to devise basic cellphone interfaces that help people in low-income rural areas gain better access to medical treatment, social media networks and other social goods.

“In technology, we tend to think of creativity as meaning futuristic, large, expensive things,” Dr. Thies said. “With my work, it’s the other way around.”



The poet Claudia Rankine.

Credit John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Coincidentally, the fellows also include two close colleagues at the California Institute of Technology: Dianne Newman, 44, a microbiologist who studies the co-evolution of microbial metabolism and environmental chemistry, in both the ancient Earth and the human body; and Victoria Orphan, 44, a geobiologist whose work on micro-organisms in deep-sea beds sheds light on their role in determining climate.

“We’re very good friends,” Dr. Newman said. “They told me before she knew. I had to exercise patience not to spill the beans.” (The fellows, who are each allowed to tell only one person ahead of the official announcement, are not informed who the other recipients are, though the rule was bent in this case, the foundation said.)

Dr. Newman said she hoped to use some of the money to encourage talented people to go into science. Others spoke of paying down mortgages, saving for children’s college or just buying themselves uninterrupted time.

But most said the simple validation of their work, and of the often unsung collaborators who make it possible, meant as much as any financial windfall.

José A. Quiñonez, 45, the founder of the Mission Asset Fund, a nonprofit group in San Francisco that helps people build credit history based on informal lending circles common in immigrant communities and among others without access to bank loans, said he saw the award as a boost for the people he serves.

“Our laws and our policies tend to be really ignorant of the beautiful ways that people are helping each other,” he said.