

# MacArthur Foundation Announces 26 ‘Genius’ Grant Winners

This year’s fellows include artists, writers, scientists, urban designers, community activists and others who have demonstrated “extraordinary originality.”



By Jennifer Schuessler

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This has been an emotionally intense year for the poet and fiction writer Ocean Vuong.

In June, his first novel, “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous,” written as a Vietnamese immigrant son’s letter to his illiterate mother, came out to much fanfare. Not long before publication, Mr. Vuong’s own mother learned she had Stage 4 breast cancer.

Then, earlier this month, he was back from his book tour, and looking forward to the steadying routines of teaching at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, when he got a phone call delivering some startling news.

“I had to make sure they had the right person, because you don’t want to cry and then have them say it was a mistake,” he recalled. “But then the tears came.”

Mr. Vuong, 30, is one of 26 people chosen as 2019 fellows of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Known colloquially as the “genius” grant (to the annoyance of the foundation), the fellowship honors “extraordinary originality” and comes with a no-strings-attached grant of \$625,000, to be distributed over five years.

This year’s fellows, announced Wednesday, include people in the arts who have earned increasing recognition, but hardly household-name status, for work that pushes the boundaries of disciplines and genres. Among them are Annie Dorsen, 45, a theater artist who incorporates artificial intelligence into performances; Valeria Luiselli, the author of the recent novel “Lost Children Archive”; and Mary Halvorson, a guitarist and composer working at the intersection of jazz, rock, folk and other styles.



The guitarist and composer Mary Halvorson, performing with the ensemble Thumbscrew at the Village Vanguard in New York in July. Marian Carrasquero/The New York Times

There are also scientists, historians, legal advocates, community activists and others, all chosen at a moment in their careers when the award might make a difference.

“We are looking for people who have demonstrated what I would call big-C creativity,” Cecilia Conrad, a managing director of the foundation and the head of the fellows program, said.

[See the full list of MacArthur grant winners.]

The youngest fellows, at 30, are Mr. Vuong and Cameron Rowland, an artist who has used objects seized in civil forfeiture, or created by prison labor, to expose systems of racialized exploitation.

The oldest is Mel Chin, 67, an artist whose hard-to-categorize work has ranged from stealth conceptual art interventions on the set of the 1990s television show “Melrose Place” to a 2018 mixed-reality installation in Times Square that simulated a view of the area from underneath rising seas, complete with an overhead nautical traffic jam.

Mr. Chin, who lives in Egypt, N.C., said that the call from the foundation had come soon after he got home from trips to Greenland and Miami for a film he is making about climate change, and was feeling rather morose.

“Of course, my disposition changed immediately,” he said with a laugh, before turning serious.

“I don’t want to use the word ‘responsibility,’” he said. “But this felt like an acknowledgment that maybe after a life’s work, you just need to do more.”

Few honors carry the prestige, and the mystique, of the MacArthur. Potential fellows do not apply but are suggested by a network of hundreds of anonymous nominators across the country, in a range of fields, and then selected by an anonymous committee of about a dozen.

The phone calls — and the stunned reaction they cause — have become the stuff of myth. More than one of this year’s fellows described being struck dumb, melting into their chairs, or wondering if it was a hoax.



The cartoonist and graphic novelist Lynda Barry in her studio.  
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

While it can seem like a quasi-divine bolt from the blue, fellows described the gratification of knowing that the world — and especially their peers — has been paying attention.

“It’s the most incredible encouragement to keep going, to stay on your track,” Ms. Dorsen said.

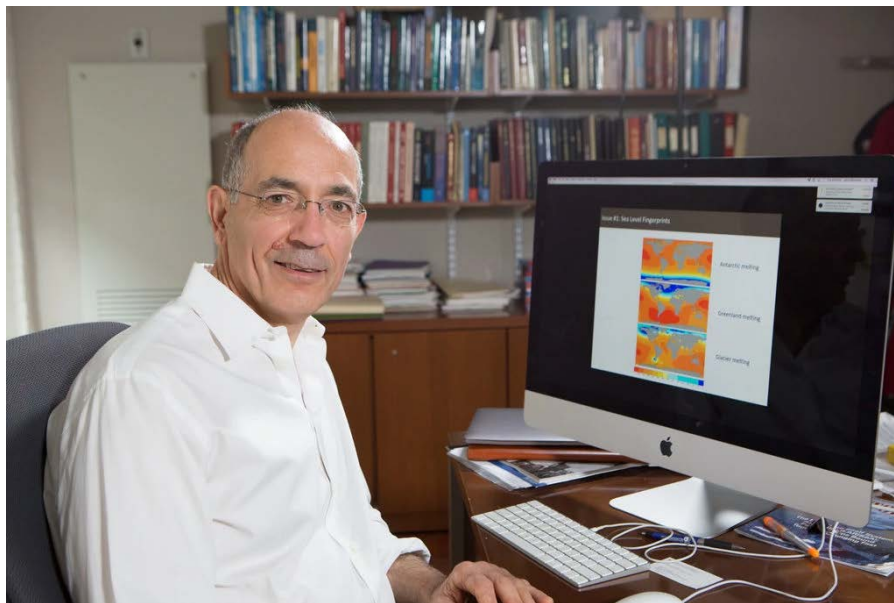
The nature of human creativity and its relationship to technology is a theme of Ms. Dorsen’s work, which she calls “algorithmic theater.” In “Yesterday Tomorrow,” from 2018, singers sight-read along as a computer gradually, in a different pattern each performance, transforms the score of the Beatles’ “Yesterday” into “Tomorrow,” from the musical “Annie.”

Creativity itself is also a preoccupation of another fellow, the cartoonist Lynda Barry, though she explores it with more low-tech means.

Best known for the alternative comic “Ernie Pook’s Comeek” and graphic novels like “Cruddy,” Ms. Barry, 63, has also spent decades leading workshops for non-writers, including one pairing students at the University of Wisconsin, where she teaches, with 4-year-olds.

“I’m really interested in what happens when writing splits off from drawing, which is a vestigial language,” she said. “I think both suffer.”

While the fellowship program has no set themes, this year’s group includes a number of fellows doing work in areas heavily supported by the foundation, including climate change and criminal justice reform.



The theoretical geophysicist Jerry X. Mitrovica, whose work predicts the way seas will rise unevenly around the world as glaciers melt, because of differences in the earth’s crust and mantle. John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation



The historian Kelly Lytle Hernandez, who has drawn on suppressed or scattered records to write histories of the United States Border Patrol and the Los Angeles County prison system. John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Jerry X. Mitrovica, 58, a theoretical geophysicist at Harvard, uses statistical models to show how melting glaciers will cause uneven rises in sea levels around the globe, because of differences in the Earth's underlying crust and mantle. Kelly Lytle Hernandez, 45, is a historian at U.C.L.A. who has written about the evolution of the Los Angeles County prison system.

Dr. Lytle Hernandez, who is also the author of what the foundation calls the first significant scholarly history of the United States Border Patrol, said the prize was a validation of the growing body of work by activist historians studying incarceration and immigration detention, which often draws on suppressed or scattered records.

“I hope the fellowship provides an even larger umbrella for myself and other scholars who are doing this kind of movement-driven scholarship to have more flexibility, to have more — you almost want to say credentials,” she said.

Ms. Halvorson, the guitarist and composer, also spoke of the collective nature of her work, and the hope that the fellowship would help build the audience for her genre-crossing music, which she called “not easy listening.”

“When I started playing this kind of music, I never thought there would be that big of an audience for it,” she said. “If anything, I hope I can shine a light on this whole scene.”

As for the financial windfall, some fellows spoke of paying off student loans, saving for family emergencies, plowing it back into their organizations, or just buying themselves space and time.

Sujatha Baliga, 48, the director of the Restorative Justice Project, received the fellowship for her work developing a non-punitive alternative to the criminal justice system that brings survivors and those who have caused them harm together.

It's an approach she learned about only in her late 20s, after work as a public defender and death-penalty appellate lawyer left her feeling like a cog in a machine. She said she hoped to use the money to write a book, as well as to work on a curriculum that can be used in law schools, to help open the pathway to others.

“This kind of funding, with no strings, means I can just sit down and imagine, ‘What does the next generation of lawyers need to know to help restorative justice flourish?’” she said.



Emmanuel Pratt, the co-founder of the Sweet Water Foundation, which has transformed abandoned buildings and vacant lots on the South Side of Chicago into a sustainable farm and community hub. John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Emmanuel Pratt, 42, the co-founder and executive director of the Sweet Water Foundation, a community organization on the South Side of Chicago that has transformed abandoned buildings and vacant lots into a sustainable farm and cultural center, said he would use the fellowship to cover salaries and to help the group's planned expansion into housing.

During the call with the foundation, he walked out into a field of sunflowers at Sweet Water's 2-acre farm. "It was surreal," he said.

Even beyond the money, he said, the MacArthur is a validation of the idea that there are alternatives to the kind of development-as-gentrification that reigns in Chicago and beyond.

"I don't do the work to get recognition," he said. "I do it because it's a way of life. It's proving that it's not just possible, but that another way is already happening. It's right here."

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Jennifer Schuessler is a culture reporter covering intellectual life and the world of ideas. She is based in New York. @jennyschuessler

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