

MacArthur Foundation Announces 25 New ‘Genius’ Grant Winners

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The 2022 MacArthur fellows include a sociologist working to understand what drives people to own guns; an astrodynamacist trying to manage “space traffic” and ensure that satellites don’t crash into each other in Earth’s orbit; and a lawyer seeking to expose inequities in the patent system that stifle access to affordable medications.

The 25 winners of the fellowship, announced on Wednesday, study things as small as molecular materials and as vast as outer space. They are esteemed in their fields, if not yet all household names. And now, in addition to being publicly celebrated for their work, they will have more funding to keep it going.

Known colloquially as the “genius” award — to the sometime annoyance of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation — the MacArthur Fellowship comes with a no-strings-attached grant of \$800,000 to be awarded over five years. (Program officials noted that the size of the stipend has increased for the new group of fellows, from \$625,000.)

The class includes scholars tackling some particularly timely topics. [Jennifer Carlson](#), 40, investigates the motivations and assumptions that shape gun culture in America. The longtime activist [Loretta J. Ross](#) teaches a class that works to combat so-called cancel

culture. And some of Yejin Choi's work involves using computational linguistics to help detect everything from fake consumer reviews to fake news.

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"I didn't think much of myself," said Professor Choi, 45. "I thought this award was supposed to be for other people out there — not ever for me."

"Being an immigrant, being a woman — I had to overcome a lot," she said. "I had impostor syndrome."

The fellowship is meant for those who "show exceptional creativity in their work and the prospect for still more in the future," according to the foundation.

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The purpose "has always been to provide recipients with unrestricted financial support so that they might further their creative work and their creative inclinations with as much freedom as flexibility as possible," said Marlies Carruth, director of the MacArthur Fellows program.

Few honors carry the prestige — and mystique — of the MacArthurs. Potential fellows cannot apply but are suggested by a network of hundreds of anonymous nominators from across the country and narrowed down by a committee of about a dozen people, whose names are not released.

Professor Ross said she was driving when she got a call from the foundation. She assumed, at first, that someone wanted an employment reference: "I told them, kind of rudely, 'I'm driving right now, I've got to teach today, call me back at 4:15.'"

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She did not give the caller time to explain. "I don't drive and talk," she said.

The foundation called back at 4:15 p.m., as instructed.

"I felt honored and I felt a little bewildered," Professor Ross said. "The hardest part is that they told me a month ago and I had to keep it all to myself."

Much of the winners' work feels urgent. Jenna Jambeck, an environmental engineer, investigates the scale and pathways of plastic pollution and is among the researchers who provided the first estimate of the amount of plastic waste entering the ocean annually (eight million metric tons).

Moriba Jah, 51, the astrodynamist, is an advocate for a different kind of environmentalism: space environmentalism, which calls for treating Earth's orbit, which now contains almost 30,000 human-made objects, as a finite natural resource.

Priti Krishtel, 44, the lawyer, is trying to change the patent system so that pharmaceutical companies can no longer file multiple patents on small changes to existing drugs — a move aimed at increasing access to affordable medications.

In some cases, the urgent work is the study of the past. The literary historian P. Gabrielle Foreman founded the Colored Conventions Project, a digital initiative that documents Black organizing efforts between 1830 and the 1890s.

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“We know about white-led movements for social change in a way that has a tendency, in the public square, to overshadow Black brilliance, Black leadership and Black organizational capacity,” Professor Foreman said.

“Why don't we know about Black-led movements? One reason is because they are saying the same thing we are saying today,” she continued, noting that the conventions dealt not just with ending slavery but also with issues like equal pay, labor rights, voting rights and other issues that remain pressing almost two centuries later.

There are multiple artists in the class as well. Among them is Amanda Williams, whose “Embodied Sensations” installation was at the Museum of Modern Art in 2021. There are also musicians like Ikue Mori, who, over five decades, transformed the use of percussion in improvised music, and the jazz cellist and composer Tomeka Reid.

The youngest fellow is Steven Prohira, 35, a physicist engineering new tools to detect subatomic particles. The oldest, at age 69, are Professor Ross and Robin Wall Kimmerer, a plant ecologist known for environmental stewardship that is grounded in both scientific research and the body of knowledge cultivated by Indigenous peoples.

Steven Ruggles, 67, is also among this class of fellows. A historical demographer, he built the world's largest publicly available database of population statistics.

“I'm not the most obvious candidate for something like this,” he said, noting that he is older and has already procured considerable grant money. Still, he, conceded, “It's a humbling thing.”

This year's fellows also include: the artists Paul Chan, Sky Hopinka and Tavares Strachan; the mathematicians June Huh and Melanie Matchett Wood; the historian Monica Kim; the writer Kiese Laymon; Danna Freedman, a synthetic inorganic chemist; Martha Gonzalez, a

musician and scholar; Joseph Drew Lanham, an ornithologist and naturalist; Reuben Jonathan Miller, a sociologist, criminologist and social worker; and Emily Wang, a primary-care physician and researcher.

Professor Choi, a computer scientist with expertise in what is known as natural language processing, has focused much of her recent research on common sense knowledge and reasoning — and developing artificial intelligence systems that can reason with that common sense.

“People really looked down on me,” she said, recalling that someone had once chased her down at a conference to convince her that attempting to study common sense was a fool’s errand.

Getting a MacArthur, she said, has been “enabling” — both financially and mentally, Professor Choi said. The same person who had sought her out at the conference asked her years later to recommend reading for a class the person wanted to teach, she said. The topic of the class? Common sense.

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