

MACARTHUR FELLOWS PROGRAM

Want Geniuses? Welcome Immigrants

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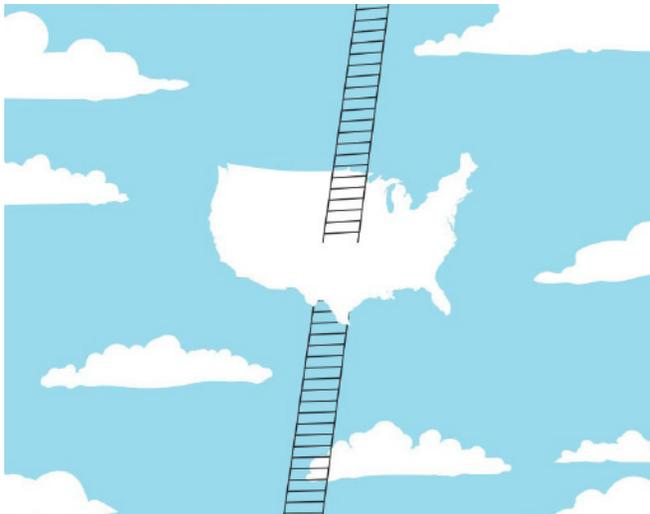
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By Frank Bruni

Maybe “some are rapists,” in Donald Trump’s nasty words. But many are geniuses. Just ask the MacArthur Foundation, which responded to our president’s frequent demonization of immigrants, including that infamous phrase, by doing a little math.

Every year since 1981, the foundation has bestowed so-called genius grants on more than 20 of the country’s most accomplished and promising scientists, scholars, artists and writers. These awards are a huge deal, trumpeted in the media and worn with pride forevermore. And the winners, typically in the middle of their careers, get \$625,000 each.

Of the 965 geniuses (or, more properly, MacArthur fellows) to date, 209 were born outside the United States, according to Cecilia Conrad, who leads the fellowship program. That’s 21.7 percent. The 2010 census determined that less than 13 percent of the American population is foreign-born.



Conrad wondered whether MacArthur fellows are anomalies. They’re not. She looked back over the past three and a half decades — which is the life span of the fellowships — to see who’d received other top honors given only to United States citizens and residents.

She found that immigrants were overrepresented among the winners of the Pulitzer Prize for music, of the National Humanities Medal and especially of the John Bates Clark Medal, which recognizes brilliant American economists under the age of 40. Thirty-five percent of these economists were foreign-born, including people from India, Turkey and Ukraine.

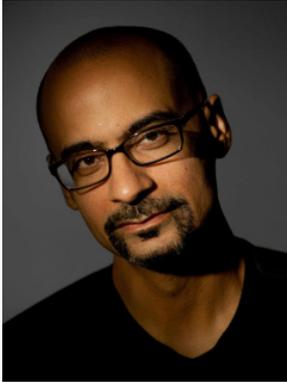


Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie won a MacArthur grant in 2008. George Osodi/Associated Press

The far-right paranoiacs and scaremongers who pressured Trump to end DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) hate to acknowledge what we reality-moored types understand: Many of our country’s finest minds and brightest ideas are forged when dreamers from elsewhere encounter an unfamiliar place with unimagined possibilities. There’s a creative spark in that convergence. It has powered American greatness.

That’s the moral of the MacArthur Foundation’s math, which it shared first with The Times. That’s also the moral of the Nobel Prizes. According to an analysis late last year by Adil Najam, a Boston University professor: “Since its inception in 1901, the Nobel Prizes and the Prize in Economic Sciences have been awarded 579 times to 911 people and organizations. The U.S. alone has had more than 350 Nobel winners. More than 100 of these have been immigrants and individuals born outside of the United States.” If immigrants to the United States were considered their own country, Najam wrote, their tally of Nobels would exceed that of every country but the United States.

An article about immigrants in The Atlantic just a few years ago noted that the four United States-based physicists who



Junot Díaz, a writer born in the Dominican Republic, won a MacArthur grant in 2012. Jeffrey Henson Scales/The New York Times

sounded the 1939 warning about nuclear weapons that led to the Manhattan Project were born outside the United States. The article went on to point out that “immigrants or the children of immigrants have founded or co-founded nearly every legendary American technology company, including Google, Intel, Facebook, and of course Apple (you knew that Steve Jobs’s father was named Abdulfattah Jandali, right?).”

And Jennifer Hunt, a professor of economics at Rutgers University, has done research showing that among graduates of American colleges, immigrants are twice as likely to receive patents as native-born Americans. Her research further suggests that this doesn’t come at the expense of native-born Americans but in fact stimulates their innovation, too. “You’re bouncing ideas off each other,” Hunt told me.



Edwidge Danticat, a writer born in Haiti, was a MacArthur grant winner in 2009. Barbara P. Fernandez for The New York Times

Her findings speak to the oft-charted success of American immigrants in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields. The MacArthur grants cover the humanities, too; the past decade’s winners include such celebrated writers as Junot Díaz, born in the Dominican Republic; Edwidge Danticat, born in Haiti; and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the author of “Americanah,” born in Nigeria.

José Quiñonez, named a genius last year for his pioneering work in financial services, was born in Mexico, the country vilified in Trump’s “rapists” remark. He told me that he and his siblings immigrated illegally in 1980, after their mother died, to live with relatives in San Jose, Calif. He was 9.

He studied hard and got a master’s degree from Princeton. He said that his four siblings, like him, have good jobs, two as high school teachers. Long before Trump’s campaign, he heard and cringed at complaints that Mexican immigrants were criminals, freeloaders. “Especially early

on, I began to believe: Maybe I was lazy, maybe I was broken?” said Quiñonez, 46, who now lives in Oakland, Calif. “But there was something in our family that helped us reject that narrative. We fought back against that narrative. I never allowed it to seep into my soul.”

It’s possible that the bounty of immigrants who’ve won MacArthur grants demonstrates some predisposition among foundation executives toward certain life stories and a desire to promote people who have been overlooked and underappreciated. Some critics of the foundation have asserted that.



José Quiñonez won a MacArthur grant in 2016. John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

But it’s worth noting that if the foundation took into account children of immigrants as well as immigrants themselves, the percentage of its geniuses that reflects the benefits of immigration would be higher than 21.7. It’s also worth noting that for most of the grant’s history, foreign-born people constituted less than 10 percent of the United States population.

The immigrants who’ve won MacArthur grants include refugees, and I spoke with one, An-My Lê, 57, who fled Saigon as a teenager at the end of the Vietnam War. She finished high school in Sacramento, went to college at Stanford, got graduate degrees there and at Yale, and drew acclaim for photography with war and military themes. Her work has been exhibited at the country’s most prominent museums. She lives in Brooklyn and teaches at Bard College in upstate New York.



An-My Lê, a photographer who won a MacArthur grant in 2012. Matt Carr/John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, via Associated Press

I asked her what she made of immigrants’ prevalence among MacArthur geniuses. “I think most of us feel very lucky to be here, so we work extremely hard,” she said. “I think maybe trauma is part of what drives us.” She added that in terms of innovation, “Having the different perspectives, having the different life experiences, makes you see things differently.” Fresh ideas and great art are often born that way.

Conrad, the MacArthur Foundation executive, said that in all the debate lately about how many immigrants our country needs for jobs of varying skill levels, she hears too little about the ambient impact of immigrants on America's creative climate. "They have certain attributes," she told me. "They are risk takers." And their thinking and discoveries are nourished by "the experience of dislocation, of navigating a new culture and a new set of norms," she said.

They come with a sort of hunger and a kind of gaze that don't subtract from what those of us already here have but, instead, add to it. They give us insights, inventions, art. Embracing their genius is the genius of America.