

[I was solicited by the editors of AMS Notices to write a 1500 word piece on the significance of the NAM MAD Pages for the Feb 2019 AMS Notices. I submitted this article (w/ minor edits) in Aug 2018. My article was never published. I was told that, “the editor had a different vision [for the piece].” I share it publicly for the sake of two principles: autonomy and the resistance of erasure.]

Among the myriad constellations of mathematical societies, the National Association of Mathematicians is necessarily set apart. NAM was birthed in 1969, a moment after a whirlwind year in the struggle for civil rights, about 100 years after civil war, precisely 50 years ago; NAM is a professional organization of Black mathematicians. The Loadstar which guides NAM is the development of diversity, equity, inclusiveness, and accessibility within the profession of mathematics. This article aims to offer interpretations on one of NAM’s current projects, the inheriting and managing of the “Mathematicians of the African Diaspora Webpages,” now the “NAM MAD Pages.” I thank NAM and The Notices for affording me this great pleasure and privilege.

Mathematics is a human activity. The whole, simultaneously, handed down while propelled forward, one preceding civilization to the next, one preceding generation to the next, et sic deinceps, a dialogue. While mathematics needs freedom and protection to flourish, the discipline offers back stunning application and reach. Indeed, the history of mathematics intimately parallels world history. For these profound reasons, the NAM MAD Pages are an important historical record of Black mathematicians. This representation has resounding significance all by itself, as well as powerful implications for national and world stages. Amongst the forerunners of Black mathematicians, you will find: Benjamin Banneker, Edward Bouchet, Frank Cox, Dudley Woodard, William Claytor, David Blackwell, Martha Lofton-Hynes, Marjorie Lee Brown, J. Earnest Williams Jr., Evelyn Granville, Walter Talbot, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughn, Mary Jackson.

The NAM MAD Pages may also be considered a nontrivial mechanism of autonomy, in the sense of possessing and telling one’s own story. Simply yet profoundly, when you own something you can do what you want with it. For example, within the NAM MAD Pages you will not find diversity as something to market, or to barter. Nor will you find diversity something which exists separate from excellence. These perspectives are not entirely singular. (Francis Su’s engaging MAA President Farewell Address in 2017 comes to my mind.) Nonetheless, the mathematics profession is lacking and wanting for lack of diversity. More blameworthy, is the kind of hagiography of bigoted mathematicians of bygone generations, or the kind of fandom of elitist ideals, which remain in mathematics culture and within mathematics departments. The NAM MAD Pages are no antidote for these afflictions in our profession, but one may find them a kind of cathartic medicine for overcoming such forces. Amongst the founders of NAM, you will find: Scott Williams, Sylvia Bozeman, Robert Bozeman, Abdul Shabazz, Joshua Leslie, Ronald Mickens, Albert Bharuch-Reid, James Donaldson, Johnny Houston, Ralph Brooks Turner.

I am glad to share a bit via personal testimony about the NAM MAD Pages as a living-breathing community. I am a Black mathematician, trained at Howard University. As an undergraduate, while working at the chalkboard with my Calculus professor, Ralph Brooks Turner (RBT), I

asked a potentially revealing question. RBT directed me to put the chalk down and go into the colloquium room to look at the photos on the wall. There were precisely two portraits, one of David Blackwell, the other Albert Frank Cox. (I noticed fondly, one of these photos made an appearance in last year's February Notices.) Returning to RBT's office I was told, "Stand up straight. Don't be lazy. Don't be sloppy." After a pause, with the unquestioning authority and the care of a father directing a child's first steps, I was told, "When I was a student at Howard, Dr. Cox told me the same thing." Immediately, I experienced a sense of connectedness, of place, of physical ground beneath my feet. I was part of a lineage of Black mathematicians, the existence of which, a priori, I was not even aware of. What a discovery!

Ralph Brooks Turner was the grandson of a sharecropper, the son of a tobacco farmer. He went to a one room "Colored School" in Prince George's County, Maryland outside of Washington, DC. A three-year-old RBT was admitted entrance to school at the time of a younger sister's birth, and with the presence of five pairs of older, more competent, hands belonging to his older brothers, already on the family farm. —This early initiation was undoubtedly related to the fact that the school's only teacher rented a house on his father's farm! In any event, RBT finished primary school early, entered Howard University, graduated in 1949 at 18 with a BS in mathematics. He stayed another year earning a Masters, then went away South to teach at Southern University. He was hired back at Howard University two years later by David Blackwell, who was then chair of the Howard mathematics department. (Blackwell subsequently left for a professorship at Berkeley before RBT returned to Howard.) At that time RBT was not allowed to enroll at University of Maryland. He therefore left academia for IBM and worked as an applied mathematician, programming IBM's first computers. IBM sponsored his Ph.D. studies, whereby RBT eventually earned a PhD from Brown University in 1967. After a thirty-year career at IBM, RBT retired. He moved back to his native 'Maryland, My Maryland,' and resumed teaching at Howard, where we met in 1997. RBT retired for the second time, in 1998, but came back to teach at Howard whenever asked. In fact, he was teaching and tutoring at Howard until a year before his death in September 2016.

Ralph Brooks Turner was a lifetime member of NAM, friend of the founders, and student of many of the forerunners of Black mathematicians. To me, he was a beloved friend, mentor and father figure. By sharing a bit of him I share a bit of myself. By so doing, I intend to emphasize: in the same way mathematics is dialogue, we cannot share what is not part of us. — Perhaps of all RBT shared with me, the notion that we reproduce as researchers and teachers who we are, not what we know, touches me the most. RBT was not famous, still he had style and swagger which I marvel at. People would often come over to his table and comment on his deep voice and manner of speaking. At one restaurant in DC, he was approached by a waiter who leaned near him and whispered, "Senator so-and-so is over there." RBT's response was, "Tell him we are over here." (God! He was brilliant, fun, and a teller of great stories, often with song! Once RBT fell asleep in Dr. Cox's class, the two of them alone in a sweltering classroom. Dr. Cox woke RBT up, requiring him to splash water on his face, while carrying on lecturing. Blackwell was an amazing teacher according to RBT. Blackwell encouraged students at the beginning of a term to decipher the meaning of the mathematics they were learning, like they would a poem: whereby he wrote out, 'The Jabberwocky' on the blackboard!

"Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
did gyre and gimble in the wabe;

All mimsy were the borogroves.
And the mome raths outgrabe.”

I submit that the NAM MAD Pages offer glimpses of all these (much needed) perspectives, and even more, of living-breathing community.

If I were asked, “What are the NAM MAD Pages?” I would answer, “There are levels to it.” The mathematics community as a whole must gain, by embracing and celebrating the collective narrative offered within them. Mathematics students may find in the MAD Pages, an understanding that there is no need to separate from one’s culture to be included in the mathematics community. Mathematics researchers may find new collaboration; one nice thing about mathematics research being that you can choose who you do mathematics with. For the sheer fun of speaking wonderful people’s names, the reader might find among many in NAM MAD Pages: Donald King, Tepper Gill, Jim Gates, Fern Hunt, Kevin Corlette, Arlie Peters, Duane Cooper, Terrence Blackman, Edray Goings, Alfred Noel, William Massey, Toka Diagana, Ryan Hyne, Ulrica Wilson, Mel Currie, Earl Barnes, Shelby Wilson, Ilesanmi Adeboye, Chelsea Walton, Candice Price, Robin Wilson, Piper Harron, Shea Burns, Kevin Mugo, Jonathan Mboyu Esole, Ron Buckmire, Mohamed Omar, Ericka Walker, Trechet Jackson, Emille Davie-Lawrence, Roselyn Williams, Leon Woodson, Talitha Washington, Talisha Williams, Omayra Ortega, Cory Colbert, Monica Jackson, Kimberly Weems, Tasha Innis, Sherry Scott, Asamoah Nkwanta, Kimberly Flag-Sellers, Kasso Okonkwo, Erica Graham, Dawn Lott, David James..

I offer a special thank you to Scott Williams, for his pioneering work creating and maintaining the original MAD Pages. Since part of our job as mathematicians is to search, we may hope to find inspiration while searching the NAM MAD Pages; even more, we may hope to continue discovering, perpetually expanding senses of the magnificent beauty, unity (and reciprocal humility), which mathematics affects within all who engage in this most noble and venerable discipline. Ultimately, the development of the NAM MAD Pages is an ongoing project. Like the spirit of NAM’s mission and vision, the NAM MAD Pages project may be understood as an open invitation to join in the work of reproducing more of the brilliance contained within them.