



A Section for Women: Journalism and Gendered Promises of Anti-Colonial Progress in Interwar Panama

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Abstract: In 1929 the Panamanian newsweekly, the *Panama Tribune*, inaugurated its “Of Interest to Women” section. Through an examination of the work of the first editor of this section, Amy Denniston, this article highlights the gendered nature of progress work in interwar Panama, and the double standard placed on women to brilliantly serve while also remaining at the background of communal change. The article likewise explores how women like Denniston used active self-making to challenge confining definitions of womanhood while also presenting women as full actors in the intellectual and visionary work required in promoting a vibrant isthmian community. The difficulty of advancing this work, even in mediums created to promote communal solidarity, is at the core of this article.

Keywords: International black press; black women; women editors; xenophobia; imperialism

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On January 20, 1929, the *Panama Tribune* debuted its first installment of the “Of Interest to Women” section. Included in this first issue was a brief biography of the section’s editor, Amy Denniston, as well as her first editorial contribution. Her piece, entitled, “Finding Time,” described women as “naturally progressive and adaptable” and offered counsel on how women could carry out various “duties so necessary to happiness and well-being” while also fulfilling their desires. Denniston described this balance as akin to playing a game where the ultimate prize included doing “those things which keep our hearts alive and our minds active.”² Denniston would undertake this very task during her eighteen-month tenure as section editor. Through an examination of Denniston’s editorials, this article illuminates her optimism and caution at the idea of a paper that sought to reach out to its female readers and the difficulty of embracing this agenda given fixed assumptions regarding “women’s work” and “men’s work” in race-conscious visions of anti-colonial communal progress.

In assessing Denniston’s editorials, I herein do not offer a biographical account of Denniston’s life, but instead, focus on the full complexity of her words. This decision is partly based on limits in the available biographical information, but is also rooted in my interest in Denniston as someone involved in active self-making. Denniston was the sole female editor employed by the *Tribune*. Her words, purposefully and subconsciously, opened up debates about the extent to which women could “become conscious subject[s] through narration,” and the manner in which their subjecthood would inform anti-colonial progress (Carby 2009, 630). Through her editorial work, Denniston indeed sought to affirm the role of black women as knowledgeable community members who had the capacity to educate and lead precisely due to their “progressive” attitudes and “adaptability.”

Promoting specific visions of “adaptability” and anti-colonial communal progress had particular significance in late 1920s Panama. Those reading and writing for the *Tribune*, largely Afro-Caribbean Panamanians with ancestry in the Anglophone West Indies, formed part of a migrant descendant community that was increasingly under attack. Most were the descendants of the Panama

Canal builders (as well as those employed in related economies), and by the first three decades of the twentieth century numbered over fifty-thousand, making them the largest migrant descendant group in the country (Conniff 1985). They furthermore represented sizable parts of the population in two of the Republic's largest and most economically viable provinces, Colón and Panamá. By 1930, they formed the majority in Colón (Corinealdi 2011). More so than in any other country in Central and South America, Afro-Caribbean migrants and their descendants demographically transformed Panama.³ These very numbers, however, made white and light-skinned mestizo Panamanian officials and intellectuals wary of an *antillano* or Afro-Caribbean takeover and spurred the creation of immigration and citizenship laws that sought to stop Afro-Caribbean migration and curtail citizenship access among their descendants (Conniff 1987; O'Reggio 2007).

Such laws, in effect, represented a form of internal colonialism aimed at taking back key areas of the country by pushing out or marginalizing a supposedly incompatible or "undesirable" population. Repatriation discourse, unfair housing practices and discrimination in public and private establishments all added to the symbolic and material powers of these laws (Westerman 1980). The *Tribune*, located in the Republic's capital, Panamá, and headed by an all Afro-Caribbean Panamanian leadership and writing staff, challenged this colonizing impetus. The newsweekly likewise pointed to communal progress, as manifested through its pages, as the best means to challenge ongoing threats and limits to Afro-Caribbean Panamanian rights on the isthmus.

In using the press to defend against exclusionism and racist attacks, those writing for the *Tribune*, which by 1929 had a circulation of over twenty-four hundred copies⁴, joined a vibrant black internationalist press desirous to celebrate black thoughts and achievements around the world. Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and the United States represented key hubs in the Americas, with cities like Paris, London and Cape Town also buttressing the readership and geographical scope of this press (Edmondson 2009; Edwards 2003; Gregg 2007; Putnam 2016). One commonality shared across these newspapers and spaces was the rarity of

women as editors, staff writers or newspaper owners. This did not mean that women readers were not envisioned; in fact, catering to a female audience led to the creation of select “lady columns” and “women pages,” but thinking of women as actual authors and press leaders remained a rarity (Edmondson 2009; Taylor 2002).

As an editor for the *Panama Tribune*, Denniston joined the ranks of a small group of other women in the interwar period, including Amy Jacques Garvey (the *Negro World*), Jessie Fauset (the *Crisis*), Una Marson (*Cosmopolitan*), Pauline Nardal (founder, *La Revue du monde noir*) and Maymie Leona Turpeau de Mena (founder, *The World Echo*) who also held leadership positions in the black international press.⁵ Each in key ways embraced this responsibility while also juggling internal and external fixations about the mode and goal of their contributions. These fixations included a focus on maternalism as racial progress, explicit and unconscious assumptions about “women’s work,” the role of structure versus nature and balancing “respectability,” “professionalism,” and the promises of a modern age (Adler 1992; Cooper 2017; Edwards 2003; Edmondson 2009; Morris 2016; Reddock 1990; Taylor 2002).

Amy Denniston, born in Jamaica and raised in Panama, and the select other Afro-Caribbean Panamanian women who contributed to the *Tribune*, I argue, like so many of their upwardly mobile female peers in the interwar Caribbean, held both optimism and caution regarding the work of gender-inclusive communal progress. Indeed, they shared the desire for female-led professional training in commercial and administrative fields that emanated from the pages of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, and to an extent, like Una Marson, also debated the role of “proper vocations” and “respectability” in the pursuit of professional goals (Altink 2011; Edmondson 2009; Jarrett-Macauley 2010). They did not, however, like Amy Jacques Garvey and other Pan-Africanist women, view a return to Africa as the kind of anti-colonialism that would best work in the Panamanian context, although they too embraced a race-conscious discourse (Taylor 2002). Instead, for most Afro-Caribbean Panamanian women, the isthmus

served as the grounds for enacting modernity and progress through, at least in theory, the vision and writing of men and women alike.

Advocating for a kind of anti-colonial progress that would recognize the opportunity to start fully anew, outside of the restrictions of patriarchal order and against growing exclusionist mandates, nonetheless remained a challenge for women writing for and reading the *Tribune*. In her study of Garveyism in early twentieth-century Costa Rica, historian Asia Leeds documents the inordinate pressure placed on women in the enclave of Limón to properly represent the progress of Afro-Caribbean communities (Leeds 2013). This kind of policing likewise happened on the isthmus, but because Afro-Caribbean Panamanians lived in central parts of the Republic, highlighting the presence of an already evolved group of women proved more imperative.

Denniston through her editorial leadership thus, was to convey the seniority and richness of the community. She was to join her male peers in advocating for and celebrating a community with deep roots in the Panamanian isthmus. As the only female editor in the newspaper, and through the “Of Interest to Women” section, moreover, her voice alone would need to advocate for women while also expressing clear solidarity with journalistic and communal agendas largely led by men. In this way, Denniston faced the expectation of serving as a model, partial guide and educator of half of the community, all without taking or expecting credit for this work. This all happened as she, and other pioneering Afro-Caribbean Panamanian women, also sought out models for the active self-making and inclusive anti-colonial progress they hoped to engender.

In what follows, I assess the salience of “progress” narratives in the creation of the *Panama Tribune*, including in the inauguration of the newsweekly’s women’s section. I then explore the mandate of the “Of Interest to Women” page and the dualities found in Amy Denniston’s first editorials regarding the section’s supposed focus on women speaking to and for women, and the proverbial shadow of men and their interests in these discussions. The article next focuses on Denniston’s approach to self-making, paying particular attention to how she

outlined the role of women in society, both in conversation with the commentaries raised by her male and female peers, but also in her attempts to articulate the equality of women, married women in particular, to their married male peers.

I end the article with an examination of how Denniston sought to use the women's section to promote structural change, specifically in the realm of education. With this approach, she joined other black women in the Americas who also promoted education as a central means of ensuring the overall advancement of black people (Broadwater 2003; Gregg 2007; Jarrett-Macauley 2013). Denniston, however, offered a forceful critique of educational approaches touted by her male counterparts, pointing to her own transnational investigative work, as well as her "common sense knowledge" to defend her claims. This willingness to critique and assert new ideas underscored the full evolution of active self-making as a tool of empowerment. Denniston's departure as section editor shortly after this coverage, I contend, nonetheless exposed the assumed limits of the "Of Interest to Women" section and the gendered boundaries present in conversations regarding anti-colonial progress in Panama.

Birth of a Paper, Creating A Women's Section

As part of its inaugural issue on November 11, 1928, the *Panama Tribune* featured letters from readers sharing their excitement about the promise of a new community paper. One such letter writer, Mrs. St. Hill, equated the emergence of the paper to the joys and challenges experienced by new parents. "Here we are again...bursting our brains wondering if the new 'Baby Tribune' will develop into manhood. We had better say, womanhood, as we are aware that father means life-giver, and Papa Sid says he is expecting to have a real fine heir, whether it be a boy or a girl."⁶ St. Hill with this statement alluded to a longer history of journalistic endeavours among Afro-Caribbean Panamanians on the isthmus, and likewise affirmed that this development need not be

imagined solely as a male enterprise, but rather as the domain of men and women alike. In this regard, St. Hill called on the newsweekly to differentiate itself, in content and approach, from its predecessors.

Prior to the *Tribune's* inauguration, the *Workman* (1916-1930), a newsweekly owned and operated by Barbadian-born Hubert N. Walrond, and "West Indian Sections" in U.S. citizen-owned English-language dailies had served as the main journalistic options available to English-speaking Afro-Caribbean Panamanians. The *Workman*, as its name denoted, focused extensively on matters concerning male workers, particularly Canal Zone workers, although other community happenings also made their way into the newspaper (Burnett 2004; Parker 2016). The "West Indian Sections" offered a wider thematic scope, but were limited to the boundaries of a discreet section in newspapers dominated by the perspective of white male U.S. citizens. Sidney Young, prior to publishing and serving as chief editor of the *Tribune*, had inaugurated one such "West Indian Section" in the *Panama American*, making him the first Afro-Caribbean Panamanian to serve as editor for this paper (Corinealdi 2011). As editor, he helped to bring the writings of Afro-Caribbean men, and a handful of women, to a broader isthmian audience.

Also significant about Young's tenure at the *Panama American* was that it coincided with a shifting terrain in national and international policies as it pertained to the movement and citizenship of people of colour. Between 1926 and 1928, the Panamanian National Assembly passed laws that banned almost all non-white immigration into the Republic, introduced restrictive passport requirements and added a petition criterion to birth-based citizenship for all those born of foreign parentage (Conniff 1985; Durling Arango 1999). These laws echoed similar policies throughout Central America and in the United States. British officials likewise increasingly curtailed access to colonial citizenship to the children of Afro-Caribbean migrants born on the isthmus (Putnam 2013).

Exclusion thus came to typify colonialism as experienced by Afro-Caribbean Panamanians on the isthmus. Although Panama was not a colony by name, not

discounting the neocolonial presence of the United States, the hemispheric policies of exclusion targeting Afro-Caribbean descendants enforced a colonialism of marginalization and expulsion. As suspected outsiders, in the isthmus and in the world, Afro-Caribbean Panamanians remained constantly under “review” as citizens. This inability to presume inalienable citizenship rights made Afro-Caribbean Panamanians vulnerable to a system of hyper-colonialism willing to use the culture, labour and entrepreneurship of their “potential citizens” or “non-citizens” while offering few civic and political protections.

Young’s decision to form the *Tribune* came in response to this incongruity. Young and the writers he recruited for the paper were all born before the 1926-1928 legislative changes seeking to “retake” Panama. As such, they embraced the responsibility of portraying a Panamanian isthmus that had a rich and established Afro-Caribbean migrant descendant presence — a presence that had every potential for continued growth notwithstanding discriminatory attacks. Borrowing capital and using the connections forged during his tenure as chief section editor at the *Panama American*, Young launched the *Tribune*. The newsweekly, Young noted in his inaugural editorial, would serve as a “civic instrument” for Afro-Caribbean descendants in Panama. The work of the paper, he further declared, would be “concentered in the one word - Service. We bring light to help our struggling people find their way on the universal road to progress.” In fulfilling this goal, Young also recognized that the paper would need to secure the “unstinted support and enthusiastic cooperation” of the community.⁷

One logical way to garner this support included ensuring that all members of the community, men and women alike, felt that the paper addressed their particular realities and interests. By the late 1920s, black women throughout the circum-Caribbean matched their black male peers in literacy. This was especially the case in cities like Panamá and Colón where Afro-Caribbean Panamanian literacy surpassed the national average (Putnam 2013).⁸ Women, however, with the exception of their work as teachers, church auxiliary leaders

and tutors, rarely had the opportunity to make a career of this literacy (Altink 2011). In the case of Panama, select Afro-Caribbean descended women nonetheless found opportunities to contribute to “West Indian Sections” in English-language dailies (Young 1928). Some women also contributed to the *Workman*, which in 1928 and following letter-writing campaigns led by women, introduced its own, albeit short-lived, women’s section (Parker 2016).

Unlike the *Workman*’s twelve-year delay, the *Tribune*’s women’s section debuted one and a half months after the initial inauguration of the paper. It bears noting, however, that a number of sections including sports, news in the West Indies, news in Colón, Canal Zone town news, and views and opinions, all preceded the inauguration of a women’s section. Men, moreover, served as editors for all of these sections and would continue to do so for the fifty-year tenure of the paper. The women’s section, which would include editorials, recipes, fashion trends, reader’s letters and household and beauty tips, a coverage pattern similar to other papers in the black international press, would be the only part of the paper edited by a woman (Edmondson 2009; Taylor 2002). In the specific case of the *Tribune*, moreover, editorials by the section editor would at times occupy half of the allocated space, making it distinctive from all other parts of the section.

In introducing the “Of Interest to Women” section, and particularly the section editor, Young did not comment on questions of delay, the factors shaping the eventual decision to include a women’s section, or Denniston’s unprecedented role in the newspaper. Instead, the introduction read as follows, “The Tribune takes pleasure in introducing Mrs. Amy Denniston who has taken charge of our page which is dedicated to matters of interest to women. Mrs. Denniston is well known on both sides of the Isthmus, and will be glad to receive communications from women of the various communities.”⁹ This introduction served a dual purpose. First, it offered no fanfare about the creation of the section but rather briefly made note of who would “take charge” on the newspaper’s behalf. Denniston’s main credential, moreover, was presented as her social standing in Panamá and Colón. Indeed, Denniston and Young occupied a similar social

milieu on the isthmus. Both had been born in Jamaica and migrated to Panama as children, were literate, married, and particularly active in community organizations created by Afro-Caribbean Panamanians (Parker 2016; Putnam 2013). Young did not elaborate on this social and communal connection, but instead assumed that his readers, and Denniston's future readers, would benefit from Denniston's social position.

The second and unstated purpose of the introduction was to affirm both the reach and limits envisioned for the section. Young called on women from all over the isthmus to communicate their thoughts and ideas to Denniston. In this way, the paper not only increased in readership but also in occasional contributions. However, possible contributors would need to focus their writing on "matters of interest to women." What these matters would entail and how and why they differed from matters discussed in other parts of the paper remained unclear. The section, in this way, embraced women and their potential, but also distanced this contribution from the wider work of the paper.

In introducing herself as editor of the women's section, Denniston affirmed this separation but also offered a link between her work and the general goals of the paper.

I have been requested by the Editor and Publisher of the TRIBUNE to assume the heavy responsibility of editing a section of his paper that will be devoted to the interests of our women. In making a timorous first appearance, I have done so with the hope of getting the whole-hearted cooperation of the large number of women who read this interesting paper. I shall endeavor to present articles which will convey a message of thought and helpfulness to our women and will be amply rewarded if my humble services tend in the slightest to urge us a little further on the road to progress.¹⁰

This introduction pointed to Denniston's awareness of who was ultimately in charge of the paper in addition to the relationship between her goals and those of the overall paper. Her appointment, she noted, was based on Young's personal selection. As with Young's introduction, she did not list previous journalistic experience. Acquiring such experience in the male-dominated world

of journalism would have been difficult. By noting the “heavy responsibility” of the position, however, Denniston nonetheless affirmed her commitment to promoting the paper as a “civic instrument.” As an editor, she too would offer careful and thoughtful advice and commentary regarding the community’s fight against exclusion, albeit her focus would be on promoting anti-colonial progress among the newsweekly’s “large” female readership. Distinguishing between what women had to undertake for this said progress and the responsibilities of the wider community in this struggle would, however, prove difficult.

Beyond the Eternal Feminine: Women as Men’s Peers?

Denniston’s first editorials for the section offered advice directed to women, but also had to attend to fixed understandings of the role of women in a society supposedly moving towards intellectual and entrepreneurial progress. As noted earlier, for her first editorial piece, Denniston counseled women on finding time to fulfill their duties and desires, reminding them of their immense ability to adapt. For her second contribution, Denniston focused on the very unprecedented nature of women reading about themselves as full human beings. This editorial especially showcased Denniston’s invocation of self-making and the extent to which this process entailed questioning fixed gender ideals while also advocating for women’s ability for self-discovery and growth.

“It must be strange,” Denniston began her editorial, “for women to see themselves written about not merely as they used to be - sphinxes or ideals, ‘one half woman and one half dream,’ but as a branch of humanity, as creatures in an active state of evolution, still in process of becoming possibly something else, or something very different from what they are.” Denniston further went on to explain that men were not written about in this manner because there was “less room for change for man, as he has always been comparatively free to expand and express himself.”¹¹ With these statements Denniston noted the duality of her column. While invigorated by the prospect of writing about women in new ways,

and mapping their path toward a full claiming of the isthmus, she remained aware that such conversations were not happening among men. As women continued to grow, men somehow remained in a post-evolutionary stage.

Denniston in this piece likewise connected this post-evolutionary assumption to men's erroneous "obsess[ion] with the idea that women were made to be in a state of subservience to the master mind of men." Such opinions, she affirmed, ignored the various ways in which women "[we]re filling positions of importance equally with men in the various arts and sciences." As examples, she noted the work of English feminist Emmeline (Lydia) Pankhurst, John Keats biographer Amy Lowell and Red Cross founder Florence Nightingale. These women, she reminded her readers, did not acquiesce to men but rather held visions that went beyond the goals envisioned by their male contemporaries. Yet, Denniston's choice of examples denoted the challenges that still remained for women's anti-colonial progress on the isthmus. After all, she had to draw from the experiences of white women in Europe and the United States to make her case.¹²

Women and gender studies scholar Brittney Cooper has examined "listing" practices among African American women intellectuals starting in the late nineteenth century. This "listing," she posits, created "genealogies of Black women thinkers" reaching back to the colonial era (Cooper 2017, 26). The absence of a similar list in Denniston's editorial pointed to the lonely nature of her work, notwithstanding the presence of women like St. Hill, and further alluded to the "heavy responsibility" Denniston had emphasized in her first editorial for the section. Denniston thus ended her second editorial with sober yet enthusiastic words, "if we are to make a mark in life we must study hard, we cannot in overnight spring into the literary or scientific world full blown, like a Venus from the sea, but it must be gradual development and perseverance."¹³ Women, even if they imagined themselves as enormously powerful figures (with the white Venus as one example of this power), would need to harness patience and fortitude on their road to progress.

As Denniston called on women to steadfastly pursue self-progress, male contributors to the paper, at times purporting to defend women, reproduced fixed notions of women's roles in society. L.C. Joliffe, one such letter writer, focused on the ultimate value of motherhood and the debt all men owed women for this gift. Unlike St. Hill's first contribution to the paper, which used parenthood as a motif for the gender-inclusive and communally-fostered growth of the newsweekly, Joliffe presented motherhood as a fixed and ideal role for all women, which ultimately benefited men and humanity at large.

There is no loftier thought, no thought more consoling to the human mind, than the thought of a mother...Let us take a retrospective glance to the days of our infancy, when that Mother took us in her arms but a mere babe, and shielded us with her maternal protection, until we finally attained the age of manhood. Consequently we should never conceive the thought of being ungrateful to a mother who has borne and suffered so much for us. Women, on the whole, should be respected by every well-thinking, ambitious, and intelligent young man: because they are the persons who are inspired by that great title. The title of 'Mother.'¹⁴

In writing this letter Joliffe quite possibly thought that he was being progressive. Here he acknowledged that women had a capacity that men did not have (to be mothers) and he likewise lectured young men on not appreciating their mothers, and possibly the future mothers of their children. Yet, the capitalization of Mother, and the focus on mothers as protectors and nurturers ushering young babes into manhood, ignored female aspirations that went beyond a desire to care for others. As noted by feminist scholar Kimberly Juanita Brown, this kind of focus formed part of a "collective request that black women participate in repetitions of maternal sacrifice" (Brown 2015, 15). Joliffe, like so many of his contemporaries, focused solely on the heroic sacrifices and supposed joys and gifts of motherhood, not recognizing other gifts and others joys that women sought to bestow onto themselves.

The power of this discourse of women as caregivers rested precisely in its ability to subvert other means of discussing womanhood. Indeed, even critics like Denniston, who invested in emphasizing the equality of the sexes and engaged

in self-making work, had to at times work through these assumptions to critique inequities or propose new models. One such example included an October 20, 1929 editorial entitled “Women are Men’s Peers.” The motivation behind this editorial, Denniston explained, was a question regarding “whether women los[t] the power to think earlier than men.” It was in answering this question that Denniston affirmed the equality of men and women, doing so, however, by first pointing to the differences in experiences that shaped how women and men navigated in the world. She conceded that in fulfilling their duties at home (as wives and mothers) some women became less informed about outside events. Yet she pointed to all of the skills learned in childrearing, including “patience, quick-wittedness, tact, ingenuity, and executive ability,” which only added to women’s intelligence once they were ready to focus on events outside the home.¹⁵ Here she embraced the professionalizing of motherhood and communal welfare that also typified the language used by midwives, nurses and social workers in the wider Caribbean. Women could be both mothers and professional caregivers for the community at large. Curiously, Denniston did not, as was common in this discourse, focus on women as inherently caring, gentle or sensitive (Altink 2011; De Barros 2014; Macpherson 2003; Reddock 1990).

Denniston’s editorial also pushed against the stereotype of women’s supposed lack of intellectualism. In challenging this idea, however, she presented a view of gender equality that was predicated on age and status qualifications.

The real women over twenty-five care far more for their intellectual and higher development than they do for their clothes, amusements and social position... Women are discussing today international relations, politics, aviation, athletics, and other matters of general interest. While they still enjoy bridge and home parties they are a serious-minded group, eager to assist in all educational activities. They are up to date - in fact they are the peers of their husbands in almost every phase of life.¹⁶

Denniston with her editorial pointed out that “real women” could be both socially and intellectually engaged people. Certainly some young women did gather to discuss fashion and social events, but women over twenty-five took

greater interest in local, national and international socio-political events. Making this age distinction was a crucial one for Denniston, and one very much connected to ongoing debates within the newspaper regarding the morality and intellectual development of young women.¹⁷ However, even in making this age distinction, Denniston was also clear about how a social life need not distract from a married woman's intellectual growth. Married women could gather and "play bridge" while also making time to discuss the world of sports, educational opportunities and politics. Left to their devices, married women could indeed equal "their husbands in almost every phase of life."

But what about unmarried women? Were they equal to the men around them? Was this something that they should aspire to? While not explicitly addressing this question, in future editorials Denniston nonetheless focused on avenues for self-improvement available to a broader set of women. One such avenue included selecting a vocation that coincided with their "natural aptitude." As Denniston proposed to her readers,

Finding our right vocation and fitting ourselves into the niche nature intended for us, is a vitally important matter to every woman who desires to gain any degree of success... If we are to get out of our time and efforts what they are really worth, we must select a career in which we can use our natural talents, our inherent ability... In Nature's great scheme of progress each of us has been considered, we are allotted a place, and made a unit of the world's affairs. Regardless of our humble position, we are important in the place where we belong.¹⁸

While Denniston's words offered women reassurance, they also affirmed that only select power rested in their hands. She encouraged women to pursue vocations that connected to their strengths and allowed them to enjoy success, but also presented Nature, not necessarily structural policies, as a determinant to the kind of career women could have. Nature in this way held a dual role: as regulator and as hope giver. Nature would not give women more than they could comfortably handle but it also held the promise of as yet untapped potential.

As Denniston's future editorials would detail, however, she held her own doubts regarding Nature's ultimate power to both empower women and facilitate the kind of structural changes needed for the anti-colonial communal progress promised by the Tribune. This recognition pointed to a crucial component of Denniston's approach to active self-making. Self-making included the ability to both embrace one's full potential and the willingness to promote new ideas, even if said ideas challenged accepted structural norms.

Women Promoting Structural Change

Shortly after her one-year anniversary as editor of the "Of Interest to Women" section, Denniston targeted one particular kind of structural change: educational instruction. Specifically, through contributions by female educators and with her editorials, Denniston offered concrete critiques and suggestions regarding the educational options available to Afro-Caribbean Panamanians. This focus on education placed Denniston in alignment with women in the Caribbean described by sociologist Rhoda Reddock as "middle class nationalists" for whom "education in general, and for women in particular, was to be the key to enlightenment and modernization" (Reddock, 1990, 63). Denniston differed, however, by challenging accepted understandings, even those held by her peers, regarding the approaches to, and the ultimate uses of, education.

Debates over access to education, quality of education, and securing vocational opportunities dominated the pages of the Tribune from its earliest issues. However, although young female students would at times be mentioned in these stories, rarely did these pieces focus on the opinions of women as educators or as advocates with particular visions of progress.¹⁹ By giving central space to the question of education in the women's section, and including the thoughts of other women invested in educational advancement, Denniston directly challenged this practice.

Leonor Jump, one of the contributors featured in the education discussion, served as a crucial reminder of the increasing role played by women in formal education. Jump was a teacher in the co-educational Canal Zone Colored Schools, located in the U.S.-controlled Panama Canal Zone, and a graduate of the Escuela Normal de Institutoras (a teacher training school for women) in Panamá. Jump, unlike some of the other writers and contributors to the paper, had been born in Panama and was likewise a proponent of bilingual (English-Spanish) instruction (Corinealdi 2011). At the time of her editorial contribution Jump was also unmarried and twenty-years old. These factors nicely pushed beyond the idea of married women, particularly those over the age of twenty-five, leading the charge for equality on the isthmus.

In her piece for the women's section Jump emphasized the importance of looking beyond elementary education and focusing on avenues for higher education. "In this age of specialists and efficiency," she affirmed, "higher education becomes a necessity."²⁰ For Jump, however, higher education was not simply a matter of economic survival, but instead also entailed providing the needed socio-cultural framework for communal progress. As she insisted in her contribution to the section, institutions of higher learning instilled valuable lessons about ethical and cultural survival. "Due importance," she averred, "is given to the things that bear most directly on the preservation of life and health, on our moral relations and duties, on the cultivation of the taste and imagination which derive pleasure from music, painting, poetry, and good works of fiction. We are composed of what we know, what we feel and what we believe. In response to these things we act, in respect to ourselves and to others."²¹ Jump's focus as an educator was not only on the knowledge she imparted to her students in the classroom, but also on how they would share this knowledge with the world, and how this knowledge in turn would shape the kind of person, and the kind of leaders, that they could become.

Jump likewise urged parents and others in the community to encourage children to think of their personal growth as part of a long history of communal

progress. “There is a time,” she emphasized, “when every boy and girl feels admiration for those who have triumphed and the desire to also fight and conquer. Your duty it is, to meet him on the ground, stirring the desire to be something, leading him in the field of commerce, industry and science, selecting achievements of our own people who fought greater battles with fewer instruments as inspirations toward his goal.”²² Jump’s words suggested that the readers of the Tribune, and the readers of the women’s section in particular, had a rich knowledge of history. This history, if taught and remembered correctly, could empower the actions of future generations for decades to come. Curiously, Jump here also made use of the plural “him,” a practice typical of the time, but also one that highlighted the work that remained in moving beyond accepted narratives of male-centered universalism and progress.

Denniston followed Jump’s contribution with two editorials that addressed both the rich histories that formed part of Afro-Caribbean Panamanian experiences, while also seeking to affirm gender inclusivity in ongoing discussions of educational and communal progress. The first editorial focused on “commercial teaching” — or technical training in Jamaica — and its possible applicability in Panama. Denniston wrote the editorial following a one-month visit to Jamaica. This was her first trip to Jamaica since leaving the island as a young child.²³ In referencing Jamaica, Denniston drew on a regional history familiar to most readers of the Tribune. Jamaican descendants formed a large part of the Afro-Caribbean Panamanian community. Furthermore, many acknowledged the availability and rigor of the island’s secondary education training.²⁴

Regarding commercial teaching in Jamaica, Denniston expressed deep admiration for both the work and the promotion of equality within these schools. “It was very refreshing to see boys and girls, young men and women attending these schools. They are opened from 7am until 8pm for the convenience of students who work during the days. Typewriting, shorthand, bookkeeping, business correspondence and Spanish are taught. The young people are very enthusiastic over their lessons and as a result are very efficient.”²⁵ Rather than

not gendering the pupils at these schools, Denniston was quite explicit about their gender. Boys and girls, young men and young women, she emphasized, were benefiting from the skills being acquired in these schools. This she contrasted with what was taking place in Panama. Few students on the isthmus, she posited, were taking advantage of this type of technical training.

As noted by historian Henrice Altink, in early 1930s Jamaica possessing these technical skills did not guarantee jobs or economic mobility for young professionals, especially black women (Altink 2011). Denniston nonetheless saw promise in this training and in the economic options available in the Panamanian Republic. The one obstacle she recognized was the need for fluent bilingualism, in Spanish and English, but saw this as a challenge that young Afro-Caribbean Panamanians could, with a “high standard of efficiency,” successfully surmount.²⁶

While Denniston’s first editorial focused on technical training and the skills to be learned by a new generation of students, in her second editorial she addressed the failings in private education options available to Afro-Caribbean Panamanian youth. Denniston’s main criticism focused on the qualifications and long-term applicability of Afro-Caribbean or West Indian private schools on the isthmus. According to Denniston, the majority of the teachers in these schools “should be pupils instead of teachers.” Indeed, unlike their counterparts in Jamaica, these “teachers” and the “schools” they operated were failing in the two central aims of education: “transmit[ting] to each subsequent generation the best knowledge gained from the previous generation,” and providing pupils with sufficient knowledge to face “the battles of life and to contribute worthily to [their] heritage.”²⁷ These private schools, instead, reproduced the very bondage that allowed a repressive colonial condition to thrive: an undereducated, unmotivated, and unresponsive generation ignorant of the work involved in affirming continued claims to the isthmus while upholding communal growth.

As a partial solution to the inadequate and repressive training offered in these private schools, Denniston suggested that parents send their children to public

schools in the Republic. Here, in addition to attaining a formal education, they would further strengthen their Spanish language skills, a skill that would prove invaluable for commercial or any other form of professional success.²⁸ In the early 1930s, most Afro-Caribbean Panamanian children attended public schools, mainly in the Republic, and to a lesser degree in the Canal Zone. Select parents and guardians interested in imparting a younger generation with a British colonial education nonetheless opted for West Indian private schools (Westerman 1980). With this and her previous editorial, Denniston called into question whether this focus on British colonial instruction, rather than taking selectively from this model, ultimately hampered the community's growth. Would the community really fall apart, her editorial suggested, if the principal language of education for most students became Spanish and if said education more cohesively included professional development for male and female pupils alike?

Denniston's piece on private schools would be her last contribution as editor of the "Of Interest to Women" section. In criticizing West Indian private schools Denniston not only went beyond the assumed parameters of the women's section, at least as presented by Young during the section's debut, but also directly challenged a communal project led by her male counterparts. Prior to this July editorial Denniston had asserted her stance on matters such as the need for modesty and self-respect, ways to inspire younger generations, and men's responsibilities as providers and husbands.²⁹ In contrast to these earlier pieces, her editorial on private schools challenged a still male-dominated industry poised to shape the question of anti-colonial progress in Panama. Educators like Leonor Jump marked the shifting nature of this dominance, but in July of 1930, when Denniston wrote her editorial, both women were outliers in their fields. Denniston, moreover, in critiquing West Indian private schools extended her mantle as editor of the women's section. Not only was she offering reflections and advice on shifting gender roles, but here she also sought to demarcate a matter of interest to the entire Afro-Caribbean Panamanian community – the need for pluralistic approaches to progress and the role of women in calling for institutional change.

Communal Progress as the Return of the “Eternal Feminine?”

The “Of Interest to Women” section continued after Denniston's departure, with a greater number of beauty, fashion, and cooking tips dominating much of the section. Furthermore, rather than finding another editor to speak to and for the interests of women, other members of the Tribune team took on the role of “speaking at” women. Almost a year after Denniston's final contribution to the newsweekly, Sidney Young wrote an editorial which enforced the fixed notions of womanhood that Denniston both explored and struggled against in her earliest editorials. In it he asked women to inspire and support the men in their lives, to take greater interest in the happenings around them and to discuss these matters with their “husbands, fathers, sons and brothers.” He likewise urged them “to be equally if not more resolved, to make any sacrifices required and carry out any program adopted for our common protection and welfare.”³⁰ The women invoked by Young functioned as human beings and as inspirations. They were, to borrow Denniston's framing, “half sphinxes and half humans” expected to willingly self-sacrifice while also learning from their male counterparts on the requirements for communal progress. Women, per this articulation, could not narrate their progress into being, regardless of their skills and ideas, and instead had to remain in the service of men.

What do we make then of the very existence of the “Of Interest to Women” section? If the end goal of the paper was to ultimately have men lecture everyone in the community about the tasks needed for progress, why even create such a section? Women were avid consumers of the paper and their money and continued engagement bolstered the newspaper's overall popularity. Young was likewise adamant on the fundamental role played by women, at least in theory, in the work of civilization. As he explained in the editorial noted above, “where women do not inspire their men to great deeds, there is no human progress.”³¹ Such a view of women's roles in society, however,

prevented an actual engagement with flesh-and-bone, educated, vocal, and complex women.

Amy Denniston, notwithstanding her own deep immersion in male-centered narratives of progress, sought to be understood in her own terms. Through the Tribune's women's section she tested her voice, invited other women to share their voice, imagined future opportunities and, effectively, attempted to be fully human. This quest directly went against the view of women as appendages, as side actors, in larger histories and movements of progress and change. Instead it embraced the work of women as producers, thinkers, critics and visionaries. Afro-Caribbean Panamanians in interwar Panama, faced with the challenge of a colonialism of marginalization and exclusion, had much to learn from women in their community fighting these very struggles from within.

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¹ Amy Denniston, "Finding Time," *The Panama Tribune*, January 20, 1929.

² Denniston, "Finding Time."

³ Other countries that had comparably smaller Anglophone Afro-Caribbean descendant populations included Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, Cuba, and Venezuela (Chambers 2010; Giovannetti 2006; Harpelle 2001; Opie 2009; Putnam 2013).

⁴ Sidney A. Young, "Our Steady Growth," *The Panama Tribune*, March 10, 1929.

⁵ This list does not account for the women who served as regular columnists. Some included Amy Beckford Bailey for *Public Opinion* and the *Jamaica Standard* (both based in Jamaica), Paulette Nardal for *Le Soir* and *La Dépêche Africaine* (France), Linda Smart Chubb for the *Workman* (Panama), and Philomena for the *Limón Searchlight* (Costa Rica) (Edwards 2003; Gregg 2007; Leeds 2013; Parker 2016).

⁶ St. Hill, *The Panama Tribune*, "Views Section," November 11, 1928.

⁷ Sidney Young, "Making Our Bow," *The Panama Tribune*, November 11, 1928.

⁸ This trend was initially a legacy of labour recruitment policies in the British Caribbean during the U.S.-financed Canal construction project, whereby those seeking to migrate increasingly had to prove financial soundness. Those able to migrate were quite often both financially sound and among the most educated in their places of birth (Newton 1984).

⁹ Sidney Young, "Editor of Woman's Page," *The Panama Tribune*, January 20, 1929.

¹⁰ Denniston, "Finding Time."

¹¹ Amy Denniston, "The Eternal Feminine," *The Panama Tribune*, February 3, 1929.

¹² Denniston, "The Eternal Feminine."

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ L.C. Joliffe, "Motherhood," *The Panama Tribune*, August 18, 1929.

¹⁵ Amy Denniston, "Women Are Men's Peers," *The Panama Tribune*, October 20, 1929.

¹⁶ Denniston, "Women are Men's Peers."

¹⁷ Amy Denniston, "Modern Literature and the Girl," *The Panama Tribune*, February 10, 1929; Everett, "Are the Women of Today Degenerating?," *The Panama Tribune*, May 19, 1929.

¹⁸ Amy Denniston, "Finding Our Vocation," *The Panama Tribune*, December 15, 1929.

¹⁹ Sidney Young, "Commencement," *The Panama Tribune*, July 7, 1929; "Young Teacher Making Splendid Record," *The Panama Tribune*, August 18, 1929.

²⁰ Leonor Jump, "Higher Education," *The Panama Tribune*, April 13, 1930.

²¹ Jump, "Higher Education."

²² Ibid.

²³ Amy Denniston, "Au Revoir to Our Readers," *The Panama Tribune*, March 2, 1930.

²⁴ Sidney Young, "Panamanian Students in Jamaica," *The Panama Tribune*, January 26, 1930. Jamaica at this time had the largest number of secondary schools throughout the region. Schooling options for girls and women, however, came much later than those for their male peers and in some areas remained confined to domestic arts training (Altink 2011).

²⁵ Amy Denniston, "Commercial Teaching in Jamaica," *The Panama Tribune*, June 1, 1930.

²⁶ Denniston, "Commercial Teaching."

²⁷ Amy Denniston, "Quarks in Our Private Schools," *The Panama Tribune*, July 13, 1930.

²⁸ Denniston, "Quarks."

²⁹ Denniston, "Modern Literature and the Girl"; Denniston, "The Decline of Modesty," *The Panama Tribune*, November 10, 1929; Denniston, "Self-Respect," *The Panama Tribune*, November 24, 1929; Denniston, "Love After Marriage," June 15, 1930; Denniston, "Life Insurance as a Protection," *The Panama Tribune*, June 29, 1930.

³⁰ Sidney Young, "A Task for Our Women," July 19, 1931.

³¹ Young, "A Task."