Challenging Traditional Perceptions of Civil Rights through *The Dawn of Tomorrow*

Matthew Patterson
Dr. Nina Reid-Maroney
History 3313F
November 30th, 2016
If one were to do a survey on a street corner about times and locations for civil rights movements, it is doubtful that anybody would suggest London, Ontario in the mid 1920’s. The usual major moments of the Civil Rights Movement would likely be brought up, places like Selma, Alabama; or Washington D.C. The main period of which people would speak would likely be the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. Analysing *The Dawn of Tomorrow*, and making it more accessible to the public challenges these conceptions. That is not to say that events such as the March on Washington or the Voting Rights Act were not crucial moments in the history of civil rights, but rather to suggest that there is a long, diverse history of civil rights in North America. *The Dawn of Tomorrow* demonstrates a long history of activism, not in just Harlem or in the Deep South, but in a moderate size town in Ontario. It also shows the variety of ways in which activism took place, showing a literate and organised effort to increase awareness of Black causes in North America and around the world. The project that this class has undertaken serves to bring this awareness and education back in a 21st century context, and complicates overly simplistic approaches to histories of civil rights.

An easily overlooked aspect of the project is simply the value of preserving these documents. Few records exist of *The Dawn of Tomorrow*, only a few microfilm copies for many issues are available and several microfilms have already been lost. By digitising the documents it ensures that they will be accessible for future generations, and helps expand the historical record. It ensures that a valuable part of both local London history and the larger history of North American civil rights movements are preserved and accessible. This is especially the case through the addition of *The Dawn of Tomorrow* to *The Black Quotidian*, which contextualises it within a broader history of African American news media and documents. This process also makes the documents available to historians and students elsewhere, and the challenges that a
newspaper such as it poses to traditional historiographies can therefore be more easily brought to the public. As the internet becomes an increasingly intrinsic aspect of modern life, digital histories are expanding and it is becoming a far more significant part of the scholarly field. This is especially true for many histories, including African American, which have traditionally been marginalised and have been excluded from monographs and other academic publications, and which are now being brought to light through digital history projects such as *The Dawn of Tomorrow* and *The Black Quotidian*.¹

While it is easy to think of the Civil Rights Movement in terms of historical legends, this way of thinking often comes at the expense of the humanity behind both the oppression of African Americans and Canadians, and their activism. Documents such as *The Dawn of Tomorrow* juxtapose articles about major activist movements or violent oppression with regular community events and advertising. It serves as a reminder that the people fighting for civil rights and suffering under segregation and white supremacy, whether they were leading the March on Washington or simply trying to eat at a restaurant, were human beings. This humanisation is especially strong given the local nature of *The Dawn of Tomorrow*. Although London has certainly changed since it began publishing, there are still many mentions of local landmarks and people with whom modern readers would be familiar. By making these records accessible to the public, people who otherwise would not be aware of this history are able to see a history of racism and civil rights activism within their own communities, and are able to understand just how close these events and this history are to them. Given the recent troubles that have been brought to light regarding racism in London, it is highly prudent at this moment for the public to

---

have a understanding of how London’s racial composition developed and how it has evolved over the years from the perspective of a Black Canadian newspaper, rather than traditional media which has been dominated by white voices.

From a more academic standpoint, analysis of *The Dawn of Tomorrow* and similar documents contributes to a recent trend in the historiography of civil rights which has shifted away from a focus on only the Movement in the 1950’s and 1960’s and towards understanding the institutional and grassroots activism that occurred in the first half of the 20th century. Of particular note is the proliferation of the Associated Negro Press, whose articles are frequently published in the newspaper. This suggests a significant organisational framework for African American news-media. The prevalence of organised media within the African American community leads to questions as to the ignorance of civil rights history during this time period. From a historiographical perspective it is difficult to understand how the activism of this period could be overlooked considering the clear and written record of it taking place. Perhaps it is due to popular audience’s preference towards more dramatic and televised events such as those in the early 1960’s, or perhaps it is simply due to inaccessibility of the documents. If it is the latter, then this project should help bring this evidence, and therefore stronger history, into public view.

As racial tensions flare up across North America, whether through police violence or overt racism in a presidential campaign, it is important to understand the history behind race, oppression, and activism. A public focus on the later aspects of the Movement at the expense of earlier activism has distorted perceptions of history and led to misunderstandings of racial activism. Projects such as *The Dawn of Tomorrow* and *The Black Quotidian* help to challenge tacit understandings of race in North America, and deepen the historiography of the subject. They connect local stories to larger national and international movements, and help complete the
picture of African American activism in the 20th century. As documents are lost to time, there is

tremendous value to digitising records, which not only gives them permanence, but enables

broader access for anybody seeking to research the subject. It is difficult to know how

historiography will evolve in the future, and how perceptions of civil rights history will change,

but more accessible documentary resources can only add to the record, and expand the base for
research in any related field.
Bibliography