The Dawn of Tomorrow: A Reflection on Community-Based Research

Andrew Sussman

History 3313F

Wednesday, November 30th, 2016
Students of the liberal arts are taught to develop their critical thinking skills to challenge the paradigms across many academic disciplines. Perhaps in no case is this truer than in the field of history, in which scholars tirelessly revise previous understandings in an effort to uncover the most holistic accounts of people, places, and events from the past. In many ways, the civil rights movement, especially the period that began in the early 20th century and that largely continues today, is an excellent example of this revisionism in action. Beginning with the dichotomy between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois’ approaches to achieving social equality and leading up to the Black Lives Matter protests that exist today, continued historical research has created a dynamic of constant evolution in the way that people understand the movement. Although the broad themes remain relatively static, the discourse on who, what, when, where and why certain events were important in the resistance against institutional discrimination across the United States of America has been constantly developing. One area that has become increasingly important to this process is community-based research. Just as the synergy of community and cause often catalyzed progress for the civil rights movement throughout the 20th century, today, that same synergy of community and classroom produces new perspectives that inform our understanding. This is the importance of community research in the digital-history age. As societies become more globalized and individuals become less involved in their local communities, it also becomes easier for students to take macro-perspectives on history, often leaving important local perspectives, such as those found in *The Dawn of Tomorrow*, out of their research. This project sought not only to challenge previous understandings of *The Dawn of Tomorrow*, but also to demonstrate the importance of bridging the gap between classroom and community for contemporary academia.
This project began with a trip to the London Public Library to examine both physical as well as micro-film preserved editions of *The Dawn of Tomorrow*. The class was divided into partnerships, and each pairing was assigned an early issue of the periodical to use as the material for the project. The project was from there divided up into three sections, beginning with the reading of the issue in search of notable people, places, events, motifs, or styles within the text that were relevant to the course content. Each issue was rich with relevant material, and was subsequently annotated with definitions and analysis of important concepts. The second section of the project involved selecting a single article to be the subject of a primary source analysis, a task which allowed the class to examine articles that provide a local perspective on broad civil rights movement themes. This reflection is the third and final section of the project, in which the meaning, values, and limitations of the research are considered. Ultimately, the purpose of this project is to produce a digital edition of those first few issues of the paper, complete with the annotations and supplementary analysis for the benefit of others interested in this area of the movement.

Community-based research projects provide a crucial perspective in all areas of history, however, areas that deal primarily with social issues and civil disputes are arguably the most intimately connected with communities. Often, for historical areas such as the civil rights movement, the memory of people, places, and events can live on as part of the community. For example, *The Dawn of Tomorrow* continues to address many of the same intrinsic civil rights issues today that it did when it was first published, even though the language, style, and manner in which it was written has evolved significantly over time. As students in London, Ontario, being able to visit the London Room at the London Public Library and examine not just the microfilm copies of the original issues, but browse through entire boxes of issues from each
decade of the 20th century, gave the class important contextual information about the paper that students referencing single issues published digitally would not have been exposed to. Furthermore, the benefit is not just for the students. By visiting and using the resources and services that the Library offers, the class is demonstrating to the staff that these are worthwhile collections to curate and maintain, and that the library’s self-proclaimed mandate to be “a place to share London’s story, past, present, and future” is not representative of an ambition, but a reality.

The project is also extremely relevant to the course themes. This course has placed a significant emphasis on continuity and change throughout the civil rights movement. Often, texts and curriculums can heavily generalize the movement, creating a culture where the average person, when asked what comes to mind when they hear “Civil Rights Movement”, would likely respond with “Martin Luther King Jr.”, “Malcolm X”, or perhaps “Bus Boycott” or “Brown v. Board of Education”. Although these are all extremely significant parts of the movement, a major part of this course has been recognizing and acknowledging the contribution of individuals like Ossian Sweet, or the Harlem Renaissance, or the countless women who fell victim to sexual assaults in the Southern States without justice. Just as this course has been about revising our understandings of the macro-trends of the movement, this project has been about understanding the importance of community and local history and the intimate perspective that it offers on themes of race, activism, and identity. Many of the assigned texts have involved taking a glance at the minutiae of everyday life for an African American throughout the 20th century, and this research project has allowed the class to do hands-on investigation with primary sources relevant both in a broad sense to the wider movement, but also in a direct sense with the London community. Thus, this research is important not just as an example of research into underused
historical material and perspectives, but also as an opportunity to bridge that gap between community understanding and classroom understanding.

Overall, the research associated with this project has been a refreshing new approach to liberal arts scholarship. The outcome has been to provide the class with a new perspective on details of the civil rights movement as they have been preserved by *The Dawn of Tomorrow*, as well as enhance our understanding of the values of community research. These values are in many ways inherent. Although it is not a revolutionary approach to historical research, it provides an important medium with which scholars and communities can ‘bridge the gap’ in order to produce a more holistic understanding of a historical area such as the civil rights movement. Engaging with the community not only benefits the scholar by providing new and personable research tools, but also benefits the community institutions, such as the London Public Library, by bringing awareness to the collections and services that they offer. Of course, any historiographical project also presents limitations. Although the members of this class had the good fortune of being able to conduct research within the community, visiting the library and sifting through the records of hard-copy first edition prints of the newspaper, this ability is becoming ever rarer as history enters a digital-age. The connection that a student has with their research when they are able to hold it in their hands and witness it with their own eyes so clearly trumps other presentations and mediums of research. However, even the editions of *The Dawn of Tomorrow* assigned to the class were in an electronic format, having been captured via the microfilm reader and converted into digital photographs. This is part of a larger historiographical question concerning digital scholarship and the challenges it presents as it grows. The degrees of separation between scholar and subject, no matter how minor, can evidently create historiographical issues that alter the perceptions of those that study these materials. That being
said, this limitation serves to remind us that although convenient, digital history in many ways can isolate one from the subject of study. This project has been a testament to how community-based research can not only be of mutual benefit to students and communities, but is also essential for scholars hoping to account for important local perspectives, and develop a more holistic account of historical issues.