**Retooling Conversations on Civil Right: Catto and MLK**

**Remarks on Octavius V. Catto and What His Efforts Meant to the Modern Civil Rights Movement**

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Before we delve into looking at OV Catto, let’s start with some of the pillars that Rich Milner gave us at the August 31st keynote session. He gave us ten to keep in mind, but for today’s session, there are four that I think we should keep top of mind when exploring Catto and MLK.

* Remember who you are teaching
* Race still matters
* Our talk matters
* Instruction matter

The student population and households in Philadelphia schools are majority kids living in low income environments. The world they see and experience every day are different from the middle-class environments and life styles most of us experience. They see and experience the world that the Government Accounting Office reported in its 2016 report: “The promise of Brown V. Board of Education is unraveling. Racial segregation is deepening.” Students may likely struggle to see how O.V. Catto’s efforts made an impact on their lives and because Catto was among African American “elites” in Victorian America (1850 – 1910), they may not see him as someone like themselves. Even during his time, Catto’s life was not like that of the majority of African Americans, not just those who were enslaved in the South and later became freed people, but it was not like the people he lived sided-by-side with in the 7th Ward. Also, the majority of African American students in our schools today are descendants of those who came to Philadelphia during the Great Migration and afterward. And, if they reach into their family experiences in the South, it will not be like Catto’s and his associates. Catto’s situation also will not speak fully to “their” people’s experience, and he also spoke in a different “tongue” (with words) then what they speak today or even their people spoke then. The education values (speaking and learning Greek and Latin for example) of Catto’s time have little connection to their world today. So, our job will be to help students gain understanding of why this man matters and enable them to think through and discuss the connections of his world and issues with those today. **Your job will be as both as a translator and curator of Catto content for students, as well as MLK content that we will be covering today. So, this why knowing who you are teaching, and that your talk and instruction matter are important!!**

**Sessions Goals:**

We have three goals today to help build your content literacy around Catto and MLK. We will look at the two men by gaining insights into their political and social worlds to better understand how we can speak of these two important, groundbreaking civil rights leaders with students.

**Goal 1**: Gain knowledge of the arch of America’s civil rights struggle, using Catto and MLK as the lenses.

**Goal 2**: Strengthen knowledge of regional historical makers and sites, as well a contemporaneous media coverage that can be used for critical analysis in the classroom.

**Goal 3**: Apply insights from Rich Milner’s session on August 31.

**Explanation of Handouts:**

Your support materials for this session includes a wonderful publication by Charles L. Blockson on African American historical markers in Pennsylvania. You will find the majority are located in Philadelphia with many in neighborhoods that you could either visit or send your students to. We’ve taken a few of these markers related to Catto and MLK and have provided more detail description/content stories about them in the School District’s publication, so you can see how you might want to develop learning experiences using the markers in your classroom. Mr. Blockson’s book has been provided at a deep discount to this project by the Charles L. Blockson Collection as Temple, which you will hear more about during Dr. Turner’s presentation. Also, know that the State of Pennsylvania has all of its historical markers online at: <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/apps/historical-markers.html>. You can use this site to get a more complete list of African American and civil rights markers, since many more have been added since the publication of Mr. Blockson’s book in 1992.

In the School District’s materials are also speeches and some helpful current scholarship that looks at what happened in the 7th Ward after Catto’s death. (We are sure your students will ask you what happened there?) We also have included a brief scholarly article on the Pennsylvania Equal Rights League that can help you know more about Catto’s political agenda and how he and his associates were able to accomplish what they did. Lastly, you have copies or excerpts of speeches by Catto and MLK, so you can explore their words with your students. The King speech and writing are those from the last year of his life. *The Other America* speech is one he gave in Philadelphia at St. Joseph’s College (now University) and at the Spectrum during his Freedom Tour in October 1968. I think this particular piece positions King with issues important to Philadelphia and perhaps your students today. These can be a framework for discussing whether “Catto was the MLK of his time.”

Temple University Research Library also donated *Click* to you. This book is a compilation of photos that appeared in the *Bulletin* during the 1970’s and 80’s. Although the photos provide a first-hand view of events during these year, they also reflect the biases of the *Bulletin* regarding what it chose to cover, as well as what the photographer chose to photograph. During this period, the *Bulletin*’s leadership made a conscientious decision to never cover the work of Leon Sullivan. They did not want to give exposure to his civil rights efforts in around unemployment or his anti-Apartheid campaign against South Africa. Knowing this should help you and your students look critically at what newspapers decide to cover and whether the “news” is truly impartial and reflecting issues important to under-served communities. We also suggest that you look to the *Philadelphia Tribune* to present another lens to your students and to engage in discussion.

Lastly, keep in mind that **social history is a key lens when looking at Catto**. Social history looks at the **lived experiences of the past**. It incorporates a broad spectrum of topics and perspectives. It covers such topics as intellectual and social thought, gender relations; race in American history; the history of personal and community relationships; consumerism; sexuality; the social history of politics; crime and punishment, history of the senses, etc. We encourage to use a broad spectrum of topics and perspectives in teaching the story of Catto.

I will start today with you by exploring how Catto was shaped by his social world.

**Catto’s Lens to the World:**

To teach Catto history it will be important not just to deal with facts, but to also address the social historical content of Catto’s world.

* Born in 1837 into a free black family with privilege and social connections; he came of age during the Victorian era in America (known for strict standards of personal morality and class structure) and the during the age of Horatio Alger (known as the father of the American Dream---"pull yourself up by your bootstraps”). Catto arrived North and to Philadelphia with privilege and with family connections on his mother’s side.
* He received a classical “private” school (pay tuition) education, comparable to that given white elites during his time.
* Lived in a vibrant and politically active northern black community that established important founding black institution. It also had a small, but vocal black elite dating back to our nation’s founding.
* Philadelphia was central to the abolition movement and the founding of the Republican Party.
* The Philadelphia black community built and maintained strong connections with other black communities throughout the North, as well as with some southern communities.

**Catto’s World View:**

* **Entitlement** due to elite accomplishments, particularly in education. Belief in belonging in America. Belief that blacks can be accomplished through education. Belief that elite blacks were not lesser than poor whites, but equal to whites in the middle class.
* **Confidence** in demonstrating skills, knowledge and learning.
* **Education** is the path to upward mobility. (Put an emphasis on public education)
* **Citizenship rights** deserved due to accomplishments.
* **Social and political access** on par with white middle class deserved due to accomplishments. (May be somewhat prescribed, though. See Pennsylvania Equal Rights League article). **Strong advocate for black institutions led by blacks.**
* **Manhood** – expressed in such areas as imperialism (believed in the superiority of the “civilized world”), manners, religion, military service, and sporting competition (“to educate one’s mind, one has to educate one’s body”)

**Our Alma Mater Speech Excerpts:** (The full text is in your handouts.)

* “…the immense debt which those…that led the civilized world, owe to their educated men…”
* “The colored man…has within him an aspiration and capability to rise by faith, labor, and perseverance to a respectable place among his competitors…the intelligent foreigner and migrating Northerner.”
* “**All the he** (the colored man) **asks is**, that there shall be no unmanly quibbles about interesting to him any positions of honor or profit for which his attainment may fit him. And that which is committed to him as a man, he will perform as not other and a man could perform.”

**Pennsylvania Equal Rights League:** (See article in the handout)

* As an officer and leader in the League, Catto worked side-by-side with leading African American men like Frederick Douglass, John Mercer Langston and Henry Highland Garnet. The Pennsylvania League was also among the most influential of the organizations that form the National Equal Rights League.
* 300,000 African Americans lived in northern states in 1870; **65,000 lived in Pennsylvania** and was 1.9% of the state population.
* The PA League affiliate was one of the most influential. Both the PA group and the National Equal Rights League were founded in 1864, partly in response to the systematic segregation and exclusion that had long affected nearly every aspect of black northern lives.
* Motivated in part by a growing spirit of optimism and patriotism generated by the emancipation and the recruitment of black troops in the Union Army.
* As a marginalized minority, the members realized that they depended on white allies to make legal equality a reality.
* Sought to reassure white leaders that African Americans were law-abiding, moral people who sought neither “to lower the standards of **refinement*,* intelligence and honor**, nor to disrupt the society **nor achieve social equality”**. Spoke about “strict standards of personal morality.” They also believed in and supported a form of black nationalism through black-led and operated institutions.

So, Catto’s social world made him a social “radical”and an activist, while holding many Victorian sensibilities in terms of some of his social attitudes and beliefs. This is something to have your students explore. How did Catto change his world through civil rights? What did “full equality” mean to them? How did or would the PA League’s agenda leave unresolved issues or create new ones?

**Philadelphia After Catto**: (see article *Black Philadelphia after the Philadelphia Negro* in handout)

* The promise of equality that Catto and his associates envisioned during post-Civil War Reconstruction (the period of bringing the seceded States back into the Union) was short-lived. “Full equality” was not realized. Reforms that occurred were ultimately defeated by Southern white intransigence and violence, as well as Northern white indifference, neglect and violence.
* At its height, the Seventh Ward contained close to 15,000 black residents along with shops and a myriad of cultural and social institutions. There DuBois described in 1896 – “an atmosphere of dirt, drunkenness, poverty and crime”. The problems of African Americans in Philadelphia (and elsewhere) were the result of centuries of prejudice, enslavement and discrimination. (DuBois). The *Philadelphia Tribune* called the ward “Hell’s Acre”, a place more desperate than Skid Row. Because of segregation practices, blacks in the 7th Ward lived in cramped, deteriorating housing without indoor plumbing and with inadequate heating.
* When DuBois surveyed he found that 12.17% were illiterate (an improvement from Catto’s time which was 44%), but the average family earned the equivalent of $7,214 to $14,300 in today’s wages. Blacks were barred from most avenues of employment for well-paying jobs. This prevailed will into the 1950’s and 60’s. (e.g. William T. Coleman, Jr who graduated first in his class at Harvard Law was denied employment by Philadelphia legal firms. He eventually found employment in NYC.)
* In the 1930’s and 40’s civic “reform” practices drove African Americans out of the 7th Ward, seeking new and better housing that was being built for them in North and West Philadelphia under the “racial composition rule”. This created new “ghettos, where today 40% of households are living below the poverty line. (*Philadelphia Tribune*, December 1, 2017)

**Civil Rights Between Catto and MLK: Catto’s Legacy**

* Catto and his associates put the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments “on the books” in the U.S. Constitution. These amendments changed the meaning to the Constitution and produced what historian Eric Foner calls the “Second American Revolution”. These amendments remained what Charles Sumner called “Sleeping Giants”. The issues in the years between Catto and MLK became those focused on: Equalization v. De-segregation and Black Nationalism.
* Plessy v. Ferguson ruling in 1896 by the Supreme Court. Ruling advanced the doctrine of “separate but equal”, upholding that segregation (Jim Crow) was constitutional as long as public facilities were equal.
* There emerged the next generation of leaders and institutions, among them Booker T. Washington, DuBois, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, Mary McCloud Bethune, Sadie Tanner Alexander, Charles Hamilton Houston, A. Phillip Randolph (Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), Historically Black Colleges, the Niagara Movement, Urban League (Armstrong Association), NAACP, UNIA (Marcus Garvey), and Thurgood Marshall. Support of Progressive whites.
* Many protest activities, e.g. “Silent Parade” in 1917 – 10,000 blacks marched against violence in NYC down 5th Avenue.
* Very important – Howard University Law School and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund created by Charles Hamilton Houston (aka “The Man Who Killed Jim Crow”) and later led by Thurgood Marshall with a team of outstanding attorney’s including Spottswood Robinson and William T. Coleman, Jr. **Special Note:** Houston was an alumni of Dunbar High School, made possible by Catto’s work in establishing schools for blacks in D.C.