

Contextualizing Octavius Catto: Studying a Forgotten Hero who Bridges the Past and Present

Lightning Peter Jay

In 2017, Philadelphia unveiled its first public statue of an African American. Depicted in mid-stride, Octavius V. Catto is frozen in permanent motion (See the photo on p. 343). Before him, just out of reach, sits a ballot box emblazoned with the words of the Fifteenth Amendment. The scene evokes both Catto's lifelong advocacy for the enfranchisement of African Americans as well as his shocking murder, in 1871, on the way home from voting. The ballot box in the monument is both a symbol of Catto's accomplishments and also of the equality that eluded him. Speaking at the unveiling, Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney said, "My hope is that some day, every child in Philadelphia—and America—will know as much about Octavius V. Catto as they do about George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Dr. Martin Luther King,"¹ a statement that simultaneously acknowledged Catto's significance and also his obscurity. The statue is a memorial to a forgotten hero, a celebration of equality in an unequal city, and a 12-foot bronze invitation to question: how can we remember not only the life of this citizen, but his context, community, and moment.

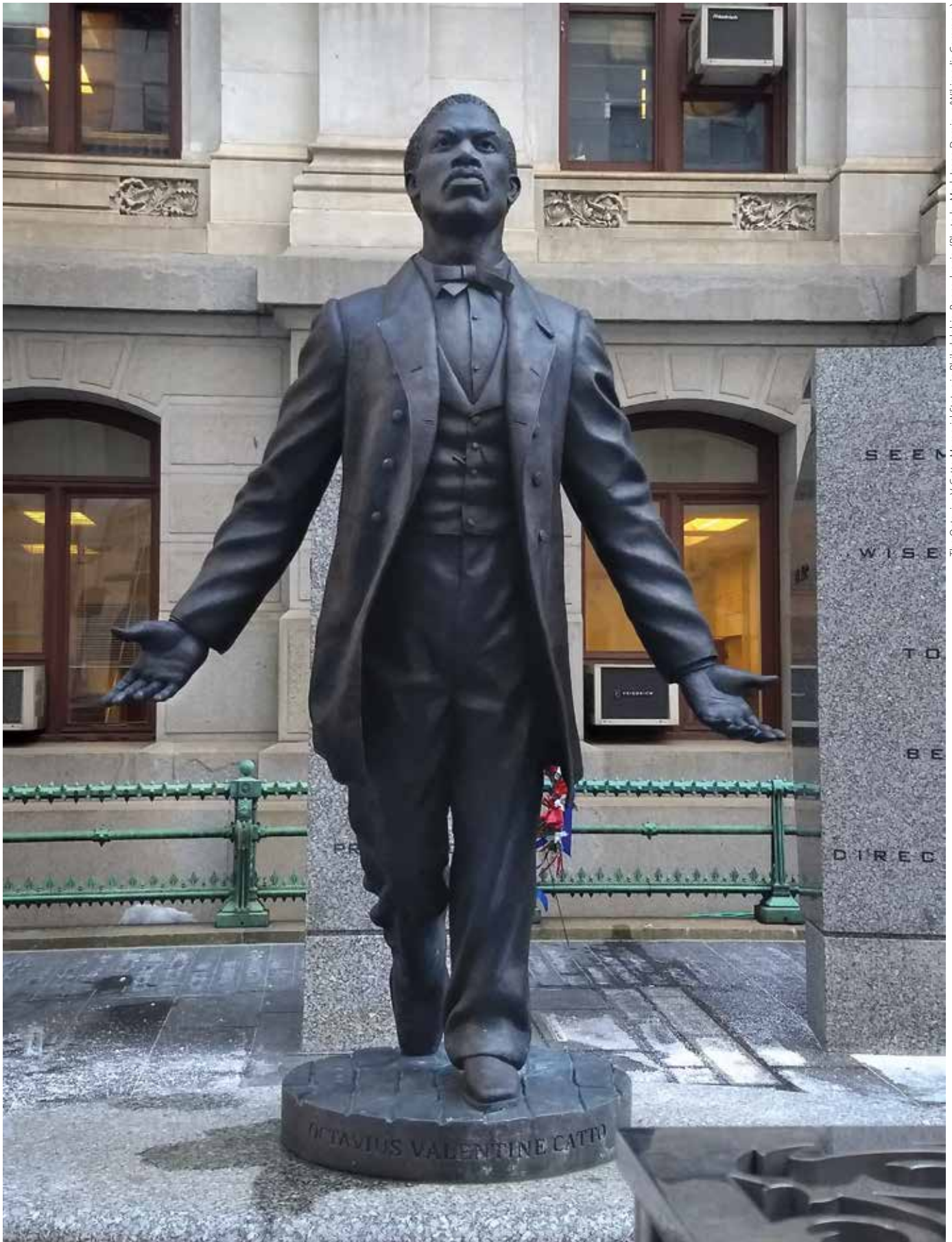
Home to Bishop Richard Allen and the African Methodist Episcopal Church; James Forten and the American Anti-Slavery Association; and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Underground Railroad, Philadelphia was the cultural, economic, and political heart of free African American life before the Civil War, and Catto was its favored son. A renaissance man, Catto defied classification and demonstrated the possibilities of freedom in an unfree country. By the time he turned 32, Octavius Catto was one of the only Black members of Philadelphia's premier scientific organization, the Franklin Institute; principal of the city's foremost school for African Americans, the Institute for Colored Youth; and founder of the Pythians, the baseball team that went undefeated in the Negro league and ultimately crossed "the color line" to play against white teams nearly 50 years before Jackie Robinson

was born. Catto was also a civic leader, who helped form a Civil War recruitment committee to sign African Americans up to fight for emancipation, and became a major in the Union army. He helped desegregate Philadelphia's streetcar system (re-segregated 25 years after his death by *Plessy v. Ferguson*) and advocated for the right to vote through the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment.² But Catto never reached the age of 33. If his life represents the possibilities for free African Americans, his murder is a pointed reminder that those freedoms were brutally limited, even after the Emancipation Proclamation.

For the contemporary reader, Catto's story is both familiar and foreign, inspiring and troubling. The familiarity may stem from the resonances between Catto and King. Both were erudite Black men whose fathers were ministers, and both led nonviolent movements that blended

legislative lobbying and direct acts of civil disobedience. Both came to prominence desegregating public transportation, drew national attention for their fight for African American voting rights, and, ultimately, both were killed by white gunmen. Catto and King fit the templates of messiahs and martyrs that dominate classroom portraits of African American leadership.³ But Catto's life and work prefigure King's by a century. There is a chasm between 1860 and 1960. When Catto organized boycotts and protests against the segregated system of horse-drawn streetcars in Philadelphia, his case was buoyed by his status as a Union army officer. The legislative victory desegregating the system in 1867 came amidst the optimism of Radical Republicanism and anticipated the enfranchisement of African Americans, as many Republican officials hoped to ingratiate themselves to the new voters. None of these circumstances were at play during King's marches in Montgomery, Alabama.

Research shows that U.S. history curricula and teachers consistently reduce the topic of racism in America to a simplistic narrative of racial progress.⁴ Things were bad, but they got better. The resonance between Catto and King disputes the idea that U.S. history is a relatively straightforward march towards equality. King's fight for what Catto had already won highlights the way racial equality regressed between Catto's and King's lifetimes. In fact, some African American men managed to vote in Philadelphia



The Octavius V. Catto Memorial Statue in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Photo by Mark Jason Dominus/Wikimedia Commons)

before the 1830s. So even Catto was fighting to regain rights that had been lost. This raises questions about what progress looks like, whether it was made, and if it can be maintained. For students who have grown up with the simplified narrative that African American history can be distilled into slavery, the Civil War, and then the civil rights movement, the story of Octavius Catto might be unsettling. As students notice the strange and uneven nature of the past or so-called progress, it is important to contextualize.

Contextualization

Contextualization, a central disciplinary concept in history,⁵ requires students to consider the time, place, and circumstances of a historical event in order to appreciate change and continuity. Yet despite agreement on contextualization's importance, scholars disagree about how to teach it. Some educators prioritize the disciplinary importance of contextualizing, focusing on the foreignness of the past,⁶ while others prioritize the critical relevance of highlighting themes that cross from the past into the present.⁷ Contextualization requires thinking through change and continuity, but many instructional materials for contextual thinking push students towards either change *or* continuity. Leaning too heavily on either side of the equation defeats the purpose and deflates the wonder that animates contextual thinking. It is strange that battles for equality should repeat themselves, *and* it is strange that seemingly identical circumstances should be motivated by entirely different eras. Catto's memorial, with its uneasy balance of celebration and mourning evoking both recognition and wonder, is a fitting place to forge a contextualization that faces both the disciplinary past and critical present.

The Lesson

As a point of entrée to both Catto's life and the broader skill of contextualization, this high school inquiry lesson asks students "How were Philadelphia's

streetcars desegregated?" While the lesson functions on its own, the materials were initially designed as part of a larger unit that builds students' schemas for free African American life in Philadelphia over multiple days of class before delving into the specifics of Octavius Catto's life.⁸ This is a document-based inquiry lesson formatted to guide students to historical argumentation by providing short excerpts of contradictory or complex historical sources.⁹ A document-based lesson typically involves the teacher providing enough background knowledge to motivate a historical question, support students in reading a series of documents that are ordered so that early pieces of evidence help build students' comprehension before later evidence reveals greater complexity, and finally engage students in a whole-class text-based discussion. As teachers go through this lesson, the task is to productively guide students' attention by orienting them towards historical texts, historical argumentation, and the present.¹⁰

Orienting Students Towards the Text

Four documents anchor students' inquiry in this lesson. The first document (Document A, on p. 345) is a set of resolutions authored by Catto in 1866 on behalf of the Union League, an organization formed by African American boosters of the Union army. Because he is the author, this document places Catto front and center. We begin here because it is a recognizable narrative for many students: change is created by a charismatic man leading public demonstrations. The rest of the lesson will add layers and nuance to that story, but we want to begin by meeting students where they are. The second text (Document B, on p. 345) complicates the story by providing examples of the civil disobedience and lawsuits that pressured the operators of Philadelphia's streetcars. Drawn from historian Robert Lane's *Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia: 1860–1900*, this text presents Black women, particularly pregnant women and nurses traveling to the Union army

barracks, as the engines of change. The third document (Document C on p. 346), an excerpt from *The Battle to End Discrimination Against Negroes on Philadelphia Streetcars* by labor historian Philip S. Foner, portrays the streetcar fight as an example of a cross-racial coalition as African American and white leaders worked together. The final document (Document D on p. 346) is a speech Congressman Morrow Lowry gave in 1865, advocating legislation desegregating streetcars.¹¹ None of these documents offer outright contradiction. Instead, the shifting spotlight shows students the collaborative nature of organizing and the precarious nature of historical memory. Many people worked towards desegregation. When history singles one group out for recognition, it can reflect more about the values of the people remembering than the importance of those being remembered. If "failure is an orphan and success has many fathers," then students are asked to investigate these claims of paternity and consider what they might mean to us today.

To allow students to focus on the historical inquiry at hand, all the documents have been modified. They have been typed, excerpted, annotated, and their spelling and syntax have been adapted to modern conventions.¹² Headnotes and footnotes were added to provide sourcing information and additional context. These modifications allow students to access the texts, and ought to be adjusted to the specific needs of each group of learners. Reading is essential to the task, but the goal of contextualization extends beyond reading to inspire grappling with the historical moment and the incompleteness of historical knowledge.

Orienting Students Towards Historical Argumentation

The documents ought to put students in a quandary, prompting discussion. The teacher's role is to instigate, keep conversation anchored in evidence, and ensure that students build on one another's ideas. Many class discussions fail by becoming exercises in addition,

Document A: Union League Resolutions (Modified)

The Union League of Philadelphia was a group of wealthy African Americans who supported the Union Army (North) during the Civil War. In the summer of 1866 there were several cases of African Americans being physically thrown off streetcars in Philadelphia, including multiple women and one very sick boy who had collapsed. On June 21, 1866, the Union League met and Octavius Catto wrote the League's resolutions.

1. Resolved, that we unitedly protest against the rule which excludes us from the city streetcars. It is an outrage against enlightened civilization.
2. Resolved, that, with feelings of sorrow rather than pride, we remind our white fellow-citizens of the injustice of forcing delicate women and innocent children to ride on the front platform where they are subjected to storm and rain, cold and heat. These women and children are relatives of twelve thousand colored soldiers, whose services the white citizens gladly accepted into the Union army when the nation was in her hour of trouble.
3. Resolved, that we will never rest while men and women of a Christian community can sit unmoved and in silence, and see women barbarously thrown from the cars. We will protest as long as the courts fail to grant us justice for railroad companies' actions, which violate their contracts. We will work in court and out of court, asking help from the press, calling upon Christians to prove their Christianity, and the members of the law to grant us justice and right, until these unjust acts end.
4. Resolved, that we respectfully call upon our liberal-minded and friendly white fellow-citizens to cease to remain silent witnesses of the grievance of which we complain, and start acting on our behalf.

Source: Octavius Catto, writing for the Union League. June 21, 1866.

Document B: Historian Robert Lane

The tactics were simple. Women, sometimes pregnant, mingled with white crowds, climbed into streetcars, and had to be **ejected**. **Clergymen** in collars did the same. Black men sometimes gathered at stops and rushed to fill the cars before anyone else could enter.

Catto urged men "to prove their manhood, and no longer allow defenseless women and children to be assaulted or insulted by beastly conductors and drivers." A few white allies enlisted in this battle. Some Quakers had already begun to boycott the streetcar companies, and other passengers objected to the more outrageous scenes.

But the police ignored attempts to arrest conductors for assault. Alexander Henry, the Republican mayor of the city, said he would not want his wife and daughters to ride with "them" either. The police were more than willing to back up conductors with clubs, often to the white passengers' applause.

Lawsuits were a little more successful, beginning in 1865. In the key case, an old woman testified to injuries received when the driver and two other passengers threw her out on her way home from doing church work with wounded soldiers. Judge Joseph Allinson, then, had finally heard enough. He fined the company \$50 and said, "People who had rallied to fight for their country should not be denied the rights common to humanity."

Vocabulary:

eject: to push out

clergymen: Male priests or Christian religious leaders.

lawsuit: the process of a court of law making a decision to end a disagreement between people or organizations.

Source: Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia, 1860-1900, written in 1987 by Roger Lane, a historian who studies violence. This book explains how segregation made it difficult for African Americans to find jobs, which led to crime. It won the Bancroft Prize for best American history book in 1987.

rather than argumentation. Students may simply say streetcars were desegregated by African American activists *and* nonviolent protest *and* the support of white allies *and* legislation. That is not incorrect, but reading the documents as a laundry list misses the historical tension. It fails to contextualize. Teachers should

prepare to highlight the incongruencies of the documents and push students to understand how the documents are intertwined. They might ask, “Do the documents agree about how streetcars were desegregated in Philadelphia?”; “What do you think was the most effective tactic for desegregating the streetcars?”; and

“Why might so many approaches have been necessary?” Teachers can add this additional framing: “Some historians argue that the tide was already shifting at the time of the movement to desegregate streetcars. There was talk of a voting rights amendment (what became the 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870), and

Document C: White Petition

In June of 1862, 369 prominent white Philadelphians signed the following petition:

The colored citizens of Philadelphia suffer very serious inconvenience and hardship daily, by being excluded from riding in the city passenger cars [streetcars]. In New York City, and in all the principal Northern cities, they ride; even in New Orleans, they ride in the cars; why, then, should they be excluded in Philadelphia, a city famous for its love of freedom and Christianity, the City of Brotherly Love?

Colored people pay more taxes here than is paid by the same class in any other Northern city. The members of the “**Social and Statistical Association**,” though their number is less than fifty, pay annually about five thousand dollars into the Tax Collector’s Office. Therefore, we respectfully petition that the City remove the rules excluding colored persons from the inside of the cars.

A few weeks later, William Still, an African American leader, wrote a second letter to address the concern among some white people that “filthy and degraded” Negroes might be able to ride inside the streetcars if the petition were granted. Still promised in his letter that “we make no advocacy for the filthy.”

Vocabulary

“Social and Statistical Association”: a science club for African American intellectuals.

degraded: low quality

advocacy: support

Source: “The Battle to End Discrimination Against Negroes on Philadelphia Streetcars” by Philip S. Foner, 1973. Foner was a white historian at Lincoln University, a historically Black university, who focused on the history of American workers.

Document D: Legislation

On January 19, 1865, after meeting with African American leaders including Catto and Still, Republican State Senator Morrow Lowry introduced a law to require streetcars to allow African Americans to ride.

I have seen it made impossible, for the friends and families of sick and wounded soldiers, to go to them on visits of mercy and missions of love. I have seen a soldier with only one leg—the other having been given to his country—rudely prohibited from entering the cars, and forced to walk, no matter the weather or distance.

Outrages of this nature are likely to happen daily. What a sight for the civilized world to see! A soldier of the republic, having done heroic battle, and risked his life so that his country may live, returning to his home in Philadelphia, scarred, and perhaps permanently disabled, is denied the privileges that are extended to the very lowest and most **repulsive vagabond** of the city. Denied by men for whose sake and safety he risked all, even life itself! Can we rationally hope to have the curse of war lifted from our land, so long as we tolerate such wrongs upon the race, to avenge whose wrongs “God has let upon us the dogs of war?”

If a railway company had the legal right to exclude men and women because of their complexion, it could next exclude those with red hair, short or tall people, or members of any race or religion the managers disliked. Where would it all end?

Vocabulary:

repulsive: disgusting

vagabond: a wandering person who does not own a home

Source: On January 19, 1865, Lowry gave this speech supporting a law to desegregate streetcars. The other state congressmen were not persuaded, and this law was rejected. Desegregation did not become law until 1867.

some say that Philadelphia politicians (all white at this time) finally acted to desegregate the streetcars because they wanted to court African American votes. Based on what you've read today, do you think this is a valid claim?" Most importantly, they must put the onus on students to articulate their own viewpoints.

There is no single correct understanding. Many elements were at play in the desegregation fight, from the way African American leaders galvanized their community, to the way the Civil War and the potential introduction of African Americans into the electorate changed the political math for white legislators. Students might leave the room believing the bravery of African American women swayed the public, or that Catto and the leaders of the Union ought to be credited for sparking the fight. When history offers multiple defensible narratives, what is important is that students reach their conclusions through inquiry based in evidence, through a process that reflects the ruptures and coherence between past and present.

Orienting Students Towards the Present

The final element of the lesson steps away from the deep text-based inquiry to draw connections across eras. In life, Octavius Catto was firmly rooted in nineteenth-century Philadelphia. As a symbol striding towards equality, he is timeless. Building historical analogies that honor the specificity of this real person while being meaningful to students today can be challenging, and may best be done by requiring students to note both similarities and differences.¹³ Teachers can utilize the resonances with Martin Luther King Jr. by prompting students to write a response arguing whether the streetcar desegregation of the 1860s can accurately be compared to the Montgomery Bus Boycott of the 1950s, or connect Catto's monument to ongoing debates about race, public history, and the Confederacy. The broad themes of advocacy, alliance building, and the contingent nature of equality

are front and center today. Recently, in Philadelphia, activists have used both Rosa Parks and Octavius Catto as figures to inspire ongoing activism, and Catto's statue has become a gathering place for demonstrations.¹⁴

Conclusion

Teaching contextualization might best be compared to the motions of sewing, pushing through the past and then returning to the present in order to join disparate fabrics.¹⁵ Like sewing, the connections are stronger when they are made multiple times. Lessons like this one are intended to help students understand the deep and complex story of race, racism, and resistance in the United States. To do this, they need access to historical inquiry that is authentic in two ways. First, it must engage the epistemological work of considering how we know what we think we know. And second, it must hone the tools of reconstruction by helping young people see the constructed and inequitable structures of society, and engaging them in the work of change. 🌍

Notes

1. Jim Kenney, "A Philadelphia Hero: Octavius Catto Statue Unveiled at City Hall," *Office of the Mayor* (September 26, 2017), www.phila.gov/news/mayors-office-of-black-male-engagement/a-philadelphia-hero-octavius-catto-statue-unveiled-at-city-hall/.
2. Daniel R. Biddle and Murray Dubin, *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press, 2010).
3. Ashley N. Woodson, "'There Ain't No White People Here': Master Narratives of the Civil Rights Movement in the Stories of Urban Youth," *Urban Education* 53, no. 3 (2017): 316–342.
4. Maribel Santiago, "Historical Inquiry to Challenge the Narrative of Racial Progress," *Cognition and Instruction* 37, no. 1 (2019): 93–117.
5. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2013): 45–50.
6. Avishag Reisman and Sam Wineburg, "Teaching the Skill of Contextualization," *The Social Studies* 99, no. 5 (2008): 202–207.
7. Anthony L. Brown, Keffrelyn D. Brown, and Angela Ward, "Critical Race Theory Meets Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Advancing a Critical Sociohistorical Consciousness for Teaching and Curriculum," *Social Education* 81, no. 1 (January/February 2017): 23–27.

8. Lightning Jay, "Constructing Local History Units with Document-Based Lessons," *The History Teacher*, in press.
9. Abby Reisman, "The 'Document-Based Lesson': Bringing Disciplinary Inquiry into High School History Classrooms with Adolescent Struggling Readers," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 44, no. 2 (2012): 233–264.
10. Abby Reisman, Sarah Schenieder Kavanagh, Chauncey Monte-Sano, Brad Fogo, Sarah C. McGrew, Peter Cipparone, and Elizabeth Simmons, "Facilitating Whole-Class Discussions in History: A Framework for Preparing Teacher Candidates," *Journal of Teacher Education* 69, no. 3 (2018): 278–293.
11. J.W. Brown, "Home Affairs: The Cars and Our People," *Christian Recorder* (June 30, 1868); Roger Lane, *Roots of Violence in Black Philadelphia 1860–1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Philip S. Foner, "The Battle to End Discrimination Against Negroes on Philadelphia Streetcars: (Part I) Background and Beginning of the Battle," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 40 (October 1973): 260–291; Morrow Lowry, "Minutes of the Executive Board of the Pennsylvania Equal Rights League," (March 29, 1867) as quoted in Daniel R. Biddle and Murray Dubin, *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press, 2010).
12. Sam Wineburg and Daisy Martin, "Tampering With History: Adapting Primary Sources for the Struggling Reader," *Social Education* 73, no. 5 (September 2009): 212–216.
13. Lightning Jay and Abby Reisman, "Teaching Change and Continuity with Historical Analogies," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 14, no. 1 (2019): 98–104.
14. Joseph Otis Minott, "Continue the Fight for Transit Equity Started by Octavius Catto and Rosa Parks," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (February 25, 2019), www.inquirer.com/opinion/transit-equity-public-transportation-septa-20190225.html; Oona Goodin-Smith and Hadriana Lowenkron, "Philly Protests Call for Defunding Police in Favor of Arts and Affordable Housing," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (June 16, 2020), www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia/philadelphia-protests-defund-police-george-floyd-arts-affordable-housing-essential-workers-20200616.html.
15. Sam Wineburg, "Reading Abraham Lincoln: An Expert/Expert Study in the Interpretation of Historical Texts," *Cognitive Science* 22 (1998): 319–346.

LIGHTNING PETER JAY is a doctoral candidate in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He can be reached at lightjay@upenn.edu.