Access to water sustains life, of course, but in most times and places, it has been critical in sustaining wealth and power as well. In an era when the quotidian importance of waterways to human communities has faded from view for many, it can be easy to overlook the degree to which the freedom and mobility associated with aquatic spaces has been central to our nation's history, and critical, in particular, to the stories of populations whose freedom and mobility have consistently been most stringently constrained.

With the help of seed funding from the Egalitarian Metropolis Project, the Detroit River Story Lab is undertaking a multi-year, collaborative research project on the racialization, past and present, of aquatic space along the Detroit River and the Michigan Great Lakes. The project will culminate in multiple public-facing deliverables, including experiential educational programs, a digital museum, a traveling physical exhibit, and a series of location-cued, mobile-based interpretive installations, tentatively planned to coincide with the bicentennial of the Erie Canalway in 2025.

Launched in the fall of 2020 in response to growing nationwide recognition of the importance of resilient narrative infrastructure, the Detroit River Story Lab (DRSL) is a collaborative, public-facing research initiative that leverages the sociocultural, economic, and ecological centrality of the Detroit River corridor to reimagine it as a case study in narrative placemaking and inclusive civic renewal. A compelling theme that has emerged through the Lab's projects to date is the racialization of aquatic spaces and resources. Local partners have called our attention to stories from across a variety of periods and contexts that foreground the prevalence of aquatic racialization in our region. These include the legal restrictions placed on Black residents' access to the Detroit River in the aftermath of the successful escape of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn from Kentucky slave catchers in 1833, repeated episodes of the often violent expulsion of Black workers and residents from Wyandotte and other sundown towns along the Detroit River between the 1870s and 1940s – and the repeated erasure of these stories from official published histories of these towns, the Bob-Lo Excursion Company's policy, in the 1930's and 40's, of barring Blacks from the ferry boats that provided access for Detroiters to the Boblo Island amusement park, a policy famously up-ended by the US Supreme Court in 1948 after being challenged by a 24-year-old Detroit, Sarah Elizabeth Ray, after being ordered to leave the boat, the demolition of the predominantly Black, riverside neighborhood of Black Bottom in Detroit in the 1950s in the name of urban renewal, the UN's 2014 appeal, on the grounds of basic human rights, for the city of Detroit to restore access to water sourced from their own Detroit River to residents who can't afford monthly water bills, and consumption restrictions on Detroit River fish important to local populations owing to long histories of environmental degradation

Considered together, these cases would seem to point to an undertheorized dimension of racialized systems of hierarchy and exclusion in the Great Lakes region and possibly the US more generally. The origins and long-term effects of zones of racial exclusion in the economically decisive domains of work, education, and housing are by now well known. The role of waterways as similarly delineated spaces of privilege and oppression is less commonly noted; in a state whose history has been so thoroughly defined by its lakes and rivers and so regularly scarred by racial conflict, the phenomenon of aquatic racialization calls out for integrative examination and public reckoning.