A Black swim club meets at the Christian Street YMCA in Philadelphia during the 1950s. Although some YMCA branches allowed Black members, others were used by communities throughout the U.S. to create segregated recreation facilities under the guise of “private clubs.” City governments funneled money that should have been spent on public recreation facilities to these private facilities through tax exemptions, free utilities, cheap land, and other benefits.

In 2015, I stumbled upon a book by Dr. Jeff Wiltse called Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America. At the time I was reading everything I could about water, as inspiration and knowledge-building in support of the various water related exhibition and installation projects I was working on throughout Philadelphia and the Delaware River watershed. By the time I discovered Dr. Wiltse’s work, I had already wondered to myself, what is the future of water?

It had become clear to me that issues of equality and social justice are all central to contemporary regional, national and global concerns around water. This is true for drinking water, bathing water, water that supports agricultural production and all of the water that’s vitally intrinsic to our planet’s dynamic and vital ecosystems—the systems each and every one of us rely on to live. This is true in the United States and in every corner of the rest of the world, too, a truth that is only going to be amplified in the coming years and decades.

But what about swimming? The wondrous joy of swimming?

My safe place.

I was a water baby after all, learning to swim at 6 months old long before I could walk. I would start swimming competitively by age 7—traveling across the Mid-Hudson River to a club pool, as my small rural school district did not have a pool in the 1980s and still doesn’t today. I would go on to become a lifeguard and water safety instructor by 16, which would provide a much-needed means of employment for me from then on and throughout undergraduate school, where I would gravitate towards helping people get back into the water who had experienced trauma.

For me, water was always pure healing, freedom and grace, and I wanted to share these feelings with others. But all of these years later, Contested Waters required me to look back at the act and joy of swimming through a different lens.
We had an above-ground backyard pool growing up. My sister, brother and I spent most of the summers of our youth playing in it. And although I was born in March, once or twice my parents let me wait until summer to celebrate my birthday with a pool party. I was turning ten and convened my closest friends to spend the afternoon floating in the pool, eating snacks and later playing tag and chasing fireflies.

For my family, birthdays, holidays and Sunday afternoons were times for everyone to gather, to act out family rituals around sharing meals and backyard recreation as our primary expressions of love. So the usual suspects, including multiple generations of aunts, uncles, cousins and close family friends, were present for my pool party, too. This birthday is one of the few that I distinctly remember from my childhood. And it is Albert who stands out to me. He and I would later be crowned as Highland High School’s first bi-racial Homecoming King.

This is my trusted friend. Smart and funny and handsome—he’d brushed it off, said I was being too sensitive and tried to refocus my thoughts on the fun. But what I witnessed did not feel right or good or like fun. And it has stayed with me, that memory. But how could that be? My family had an open-door policy. Everyone was welcome at the dinner table. So why not at the pool?

Flash forward to 2016. I am sitting at a restaurant on 4th Street in Philadelphia watching the presidential election results come in, to my great disbelief and distress. Shortly thereafter, you might remember that some hideous floodgate had opened. Racially motivated harassment in public spaces, one account after another... and soon, some hideous floodgate had opened. Racially motivated harassment in public spaces, one account after another. It was then that I remembered a fictional museum exhibition set in the Fairmount Water Works Pool (known as the “Aquarium Pool” by those who swam there), providing an immersive platform for exploration of the role of public pools in our communities, with the goal of deepening understanding of the connection between water, social justice and public health.

POOL weaves together history, site-specific artwork, storytelling, scholarship and place-based learning. The exhibit installations build on one another to illuminate a history of segregated swimming in America and its connection to present-day drowning issues affecting Black communities.

Through an inspiring collective of artists, swimming champions, aquatic activists, researchers and scholars, POOL invites visitors to challenge personal assumptions about the act of swimming together. It encourages the examination of the role of public space in civic life today and in the building of healthy communities and individuals—illuminating the ongoing failures of democracy—as ordinary people continue to push and pull towards a more just world.

POOL brings to life additional new work by artists Homer Jackson, Calo Rosa, Azikwe Mohammed, James Ijames, Dylan Caleho, Lowell Boston, Modupeola Fadugba, Ed Accura, Cathleen Dean, and Liz Corman that springboards from the historical context to expand the depth and breadth of POOL, while providing multiple, and unexpected, lenses to reconsider swimming together.

For more than 100 years, pools across the United States have provided a stage for brutal acts of both conformity and social change, as people, ideas and beliefs intersected, clashed and shifted through public recreation. Even before the Supreme Court’s landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954, federal judges had already issued rulings declaring swimming pool segregation unconstitutional and injunctions forcing cities to desegregate public pools.

But this is just the beginning of the story, really.

Past racial discrimination at swimming pools, coupled with a general shift of funds away from public pools to private swimming and recreational opportunities, have had a significant and lasting impact on Black communities—an impact that continues today.

• According to reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Black children and teenagers are almost six times as likely as white children to drown in a swimming pool.
• USA Swimming reports that 69% of Black children have little to no swimming ability, compared with 42% of white children.

For many Black individuals and families, the answer to these growing disparities has been to avoid the water altogether or to stay in the shallow end or pretend to be able to swim when forced into the water. But these self-protections fall short when the unexpected, and sometimes tragic, happens.

To change this cycle, people such as swimming champions Cullen Jones, Maritza Correia McClendon, Simone Manuel and Sahir Muhammad, and aquatic activists, researchers and scholars such as Ed Accura, Naji Ali, Dr. Angela Beale-Tawfeeq, Kevin Colequist, Malachi and Olivia Cunningham, Dr. Kevin Dawson, Coach Jim Ellis, Rhonda Harper, Dr. Miriam Lynch, Anthony Patterson, Sr., Bruce Wigo, Dr. Jeff Wiltse, and Diversity in Aquatics, Inc. (our featured swimming voices) believe the answer to correcting these disparities can be found in making the lifesaving skill of swimming available to all.

These are the voices that POOL sets out to amplify. And these are the people I send a heartfelt thank you to.
I know that the products of collaboration can sometimes be disappointing and, at the worst of times, can add insult to injury. But POOL is positioned to foster the kind of transformation all of our featured swimming voices are working towards. Philadelphia has done it before with the landmark and impactful Swim to Live Program (1954 to 1977) that made swimming lessons available to elementary school children free of charge. Philadelphia can do it again. And the time is now!

Today, many of us live in a digitally curated world where our “likes,” our “friends,” our purchase histories and zip codes guide us to “connections” with more like-minded people, possibly leaving us with a very specific, and perhaps narrowing, world view. But social change depends on creating a fertile ground for the exchange of diverse ideas and experiences so that inequalities can be illuminated and corrected, and common ground can be found. The intersections that can naturally occur in public spaces help to move the imperfect democratic state closer to realizing its ideal principles for all. This also requires a conscious decision for each one of us to move beyond the ease and comfort of preaching to our own choir, and to purposefully seek engagement with a broader network of collaborators and audience.

At this moment in time, the persistence of institutional racism has fueled a movement that has touched every major city and small town in America. The messages and experiential goals for POOL connect the FWW to this landmark time in American history. These current events validate how important shared social and public spaces are to fostering social change. I feel now more than ever that POOL can contribute to a better understanding of the roots and complexities of present-day racial and social inequality and the persistence of structural racism through the exhibit experiences we have created, and the voices included throughout the exhibition and this magazine.

In many of my water-awareness building projects, it has been the plants and animals (our greatest allies in the clean water movement) that have created pathways for deeper connection to the natural world. But with POOL, it is the people working in this space of aquatic justice that are leading the way to a greater understanding of humanity—a deeper connection to our shared experience of the world and vision of the future that we must build together.

So, please, dive in to the content of this magazine and the POOL exhibition at www.poolphl.com. And please support our public pools (and learn to swim programs) with greater funding and your appreciation. They, like many of our vibrant public spaces, matter.

Thank you,

VICTORIA PRIZZIA
Pool Creator and Founder of Habithèque, Inc.