Swimming pools have long been contested spaces where Americans define the social boundaries of community life. Americans have fought over where pools should be built, who should be allowed to use them, and how they should be used. How these questions have been answered over the past 150 years reveals much about the power of social prejudices in American society and the persistence of racial inequality.

The earliest public pools were built in large northern cities during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They served mostly poor and working-class boys—both Black and white—and reveal the class prejudices of the time. In 1910, for example, the proposal to build a large municipal pool in New York’s Central Park generated intense opposition from the city’s middle and upper classes, because it would attract large numbers of immigrant and working-class kids into their oasis of genteel recreation. “I should consider it disastrous if the only swimming pool belonging to the city was put [in Central Park],” one critic told the New York Times. “It would attract all sorts of undesirable people.” The paper agreed and recommended that municipal pools be located underneath the Manhattan and Queensboro bridges. These locations would have effectively secluded working-class swimmers, thereby protecting the city’s class-segregated social geography.

The design of pools and the social composition of swimmers fundamentally changed during the 1920s and 1930s, when cities across the country built large, resort-like swimming pools and allowed males and females to use them together for the first time. In northern cities such as Chicago, New York and Pittsburgh, this gender integration brought about racial segregation. Public officials and white swimmers now objected to the presence of Black Americans, because they did not want Black men interacting with white women at such visually and physically intimate spaces. At the same time, the first wave of the Great Black Migration intensified other racist prejudices. Northern whites generally perceived the Black southern migrants settling in northern cities as physically unclean and likely to be infected with communicable diseases. This made them unwilling to share an enclosed body of water with Black Americans for fear of contracting a communicable disease from them or being contaminated by their supposed dirtiness. And so, throughout the North, public pools became racially segregated during the interwar years.

In some cases, white swimmers imposed de facto segregation through violence and intimidation. At Pittsburgh’s Highland Park Pool, white swimmers attacked Black swimmers—sometimes with rocks and clubs—to prevent them from entering the pool. Police officers encouraged these attacks and even arrested the Black victims, charging them with “inciting to riot.” In attempting to explain why Black swimmers were being attacked at Highland Park Pool, the Pittsburgh Courier wrote: “The whole trouble seems to be due to the way Highland Park Pool is operated. It is the only city pool...
where men and women, girls and boys swim together. This brings the sex question into the pool and trouble is bound to arise between the races.”

The same type of trouble had no chance to arise at public swimming pools in the South and in border-state cities such as St. Louis and Baltimore, because public officials mandated racial segregation, explicitly barring Blacks from entering “whites-only” pools. St. Louis, for example, opened seven municipal pools between 1913 and 1935, two of which were giant leisure resorts with circular pools measuring several hundred feet in diameter. All seven of these pools were for whites only. Officials mandated racial segregation, explicitly barring Blacks from entering “whites-only” pools. St. Louis, for example, opened seven municipal pools between 1913 and 1935, two of which were giant leisure resorts with circular pools measuring several hundred feet in diameter. All seven of these pools were for whites only.

Across the country, public swimming pools were racially desegregated after World War II, but that was met with widespread opposition from whites that again exposed their social prejudices. Southern cities typically shut down their public pools rather than allow mixed-race swimming. In the North, whites generally abandoned pools that became accessible to Blacks and retreated to ones located in thoroughly white neighborhoods or established private club pools, where racial discrimination was still legal.

Warren, Ohio, for example, was forced by a pending court order to desegregate its municipal pool in 1948. The local newspaper covered the first day of interracial swimming by printing a front-page photo showing a dozen children waiting to enter. The last two children in line were Black; the caption read: “Last one in the water is a monkey.” The racial antipathy expressed in the newspaper was shared by many local whites, who stopped using the pool when they realized Black residents intended to use it. Similarly, in 1962, several years after Pittsburgh’s municipal pools were desegregated, a sign posted outside a city pool still used exclusively by whites read, “No dogs or niggers allowed.”

In some cases, whites violently resisted desegregation. The day after St. Louis officials announced in 1949 that the city would no longer enforce racial segregation at its municipal pools, a white mob numbering in the thousands gathered outside Fairground Park Pool and viciously attacked each identifiably Black person who came near. A local newspaper described one of the assaults: “At 7:50 pm a Negro was seen on the east side of Spring Street, and another chase was underway. He ran, stumbled, and fell about 100 feet west of Grand Avenue. Members of the crowd pounced on the Negro, beating him severely.” When Black residents finally gained safe access to Fairground Park Pool a year later, white swimmers abandoned it en masse. The city closed the enormous pool a few years later.

Public officials briefly prioritized the recreational needs of Black Americans during the late 1960s. In response to the violent protests that erupted in New York, Watts, Newark, Detroit, Chicago, and many other Americans cities between 1964 and 1968, the federal government funded hundreds of swimming pools for inner-city residents of “troubled neighborhoods.” Providing summer recreation for urban Blacks suddenly became a national priority. And yet, most of the municipal pools opened during this building spree were “mini-pools,” measuring only 20 by 40 feet and uniformly 3 feet deep. They did not provide viable recreation or encourage actual swimming. Children mostly stood in the water splashing. Nor did the mini-pools provide any leisure space. The tanks were surrounded by a narrow concrete perimeter and enclosed by a chain-link fence. Most did not even have changing rooms, so swimmers traveled to and from the pools in their swimsuits. Children in one New York neighborhood dubbed them “giant-sized urinals.”

The “mini-pool” building spree of the late 1960s was short lived. Whereas urban public pools had briefly been a national priority, pool building stalled during the next several decades. The primary reasons were economic. Ballooning budget deficits and the threat of bankruptcy forced many cities to abandon plans for new pools and put off costly maintenance and repairs on existing pools. A wave of pool closures followed. Youngstown, Ohio, closed 6 of its 8 municipal pools between 1985 and 1991. Pittsburgh closed 20 of its 32 municipal pools between 1996 and 2004. The remnants of these empty pools exemplified the urban crisis of poverty and public neglect. As the Detroit News described the state of McCabe Pool in 1989, “Boards have replaced broken windows. The water fountain is broken. Walls are smeared with graffiti. The ground is littered and a burned car sits in the parking lot.”

In recent times, many swimming pools continue to be racially divided and contested spaces. In 2009, 65 Black and Latino campers from the Creative Steps Day Camp in North Philadelphia arrived at the Valley

One of several African Americans who were beaten and bloodied by a white mob outside Fairground Park Pool in St. Louis on the night of June 21, 1949.

**WHY HAVE SWIMMING POOLS IN THE UNITED STATES BEEN SUCH CONTENTIOUS AND CONTESTED COMMUNITY SPACES?**
Swim Club in suburban Montgomery County to play for an hour and a half. Camp director Althea Wright had paid the private club $1,950 to use the facility Monday afternoons throughout the summer. As the campers entered the water, some club members reportedly pulled their children from the pool and wondered aloud what all these Black and Latino kids were doing there. A few days later, the Valley Swim Club canceled the lease agreement. When pressed to explain, the club president stated, “There was concern [among the members] that a lot of kids would change the complexion … and the atmosphere of the club.”

Several racially charged confrontations occurred at swimming pools during the summer of 2018. In one instance, a white woman physically assaulted a 15-year-old Black boy at a private community pool in Summerville, South Carolina, claiming he and his friends “didn’t belong” there, then exclaiming, “Get out, little punks!” A couple weeks later in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, a white man singled out the only Black family at a crowded community pool and demanded to see the mother’s “identification.” When she refused, the man called the police. That same day, 555 miles away in Memphis, Tennessee, the manager of a large apartment complex engaged in a similar act of racial profiling. Even though several other people were wearing prohibited clothing in the pool area, the manager only confronted the lone group of Black swimmers. She reprimanded 25-year-old Kevin Yates for dipping his sock-clad feet in the water and eventually demanded that he and his party leave the pool. When they refused, she, too, called the police. The common thread in all three of these confrontations was a white person’s assumption Black people do not belong at swimming pools, at least not the same pools that whites use.

Why have swimming pools in the United States been such contentious and contested community spaces? Part of the answer has to do with the uniqueness of swimming pools as physical spaces. They are visually and socially intimate. Swimmers gaze upon one another’s nearly naked bodies, lie in the sun next to one another, navigate through crowded water, and flirt. This type of contact and interaction piques social anxieties and exposes the lack of trust and understanding between people of different social groups.

Swimming pools have also been intensely contested because they are places at which people build community and define the social boundaries of community life. Swimming pools are primary summertime gathering places, where many people come together (often for several hours), socialize, and share a common space. Swimming with others in a pool means accepting them as part of the same community precisely because the interaction is so intimate and sociable. Conversely, excluding someone or some group from a pool effectively defines them as social others—as excluded from the community.

For these reasons, swimming pools serve as useful barometers of social relations. If we as a nation want to know how we relate to one another across social lines, how we structure our communities socially, and how we think about people who are socially different from ourselves, just look at our swimming pools. The answers will be obvious.

Sterling Playground Pool in New York City was one of many “mini-pools” funded by the federal government and located in predominantly Black neighborhoods during the late 1960s.

Detroit’s McCabe Pool, photographed here in 1989, exemplified the decline of urban public swimming pools during the late twentieth century.

Jeff Wiltse is a professor of history at the University of Montana, Missoula. He has written extensively about the history of swimming pools in the United States, including the award-winning book Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America.