

**Re-Storying Rivers through Community Engagement: The Detroit River Story Lab****Histoires de rivières à travers l'engagement communautaire: Le Detroit River Story Lab****Author(s)' name(s): David Porter**

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**RÉSUMÉ**

La gestion réussie des systèmes fluviaux urbains nécessite une expertise culturelle autant que technique. Cette conférence présente une étude de cas d'une initiative universitaire interdisciplinaire visant à favoriser la gestion des ressources naturelles dans une ville fluviale en soutenant des projets d'infrastructures narratives centrés sur la communauté le long des rives du fleuve. Au cours des cinq dernières années, les étudiants et les professeurs du Detroit River Story Lab de l'Université du Michigan ont contribué à catalyser des projets transformateurs dans les domaines de l'éducation basée sur le lieu, du patrimoine public et du journalisme communautaire qui démontrent le rôle essentiel joué par les épistémologies narratives dans le succès à long terme des efforts de restauration des rivières. Les sujets abordés comprennent les méthodes de recherche, les principes de l'engagement communautaire et les stratégies d'intégration des sciences naturelles et humaines dans les contextes fluviaux.

**ABSTRACT**

The successful management of urban river systems requires cultural as well as technical expertise. This paper presents a case study of an interdisciplinary university initiative devoted to fostering stewardship of natural resources in a river city by supporting community-centered narrative infrastructure projects along the river's shores. Over the past five years, students and faculty at the University of Michigan's Detroit River Story Lab have helped to catalyze transformative projects in the domains of place-based education, public heritage, and community journalism that demonstrate the critical role played by narrative epistemologies in the long-term success of river restoration efforts. Topics to be covered include research methods, principles of community engagement, and strategies for integrating the natural and human sciences in riverine contexts.

**KEYWORDS**

Community, Detroit, Education, Narrative, Stewardship

Communauté, Détroit, Éducation, Récit, Intendance

**1****2 RE-STORYING RIVERS THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT****2.1 THE DETROIT RIVER STORY LAB**

The Detroit River ecosystem has been the focus of extensive and sustained environmental remediation and restoration efforts over the past fifty years, beginning with the passage of the locally inspired Clean Water Act and manifest most recently in the establishment of the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge, the large-scale post-industrial site transformations undertaken by the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, and the ongoing clean-up and habitat protection efforts of local nonprofits such as Friends of the Detroit River. Impressive visitor numbers at recently restored public sites along the waterfront suggest a high degree of success in engaging community interest in the new forms of outdoor recreation and programming opportunities they make available (Aguilar 2021). While research on the qualitative contributions of such local environmental investments on broader goals of community revitalization is still at an early stage, there seems little doubt that demonstrable effects, not least with respect to measures of physical and mental well being, will be lasting and profound.

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One potential constraint on the long-term efficacy and sustainability of such investments, however, in the Detroit River corridor as elsewhere, is the not-infrequent disconnect between the priorities of organizations managing such environmental interventions and those of the communities most directly affected by them. Mounting concerns about the conspicuous whiteness of major environmental groups and the racist attitudes of some of their founders have been well publicized in recent years, while academic studies such as Carolyn Finney's *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*, have provided much needed historical and psychological context for reckoning with the complex interleaving of racial and environmental politics in the U.S. (Fears 2020; Fears 2021; Finney 2014; Davis 2018).

At the most basic level, the core problem illuminated in such work often seems to come down to subjective experiences of ownership or identification. A common trope in public calls to environmental action is a reminder of the importance of protecting "our" forests, wetlands, or waterways. While no doubt intended as a color-blind, inclusive pronoun, the "our" in such appeals may be received as a hollow or even hypocritical gesture on the part of those who, individually or collectively, have rarely felt fully welcomed in such spaces and may even have experienced them as sites of danger or exclusion. The persistence of such dynamics might be expected, in some cases, to limit the effects on community revitalization of large-scale restoration investments. How likely am I to experience a benefit from the protection of natural resources that I've rarely had occasion to access or identify with in the first place?

The purpose of this presentation is to introduce a new initiative at the University of Michigan designed, in part, to address this seeming conundrum. The following sections describe the rationale for the project, outline its principal components as they have taken shape to date, and call for practitioners to supplement resource-based paradigms for Great Lakes research with paradigms attuned to the narrative infrastructure of adjoining communities. In broad terms, the conceptual framework proposed here imagines the lines of causality between environmental and community health as being potentially bidirectional. The impacts of environmental conditions on community well-being are well documented; the possibility of inverse causal effects considerably less so (Williams and Hoffman 2020; Lertzman 2012). This inverse hypothesis, though less intuitive, would seem to warrant further investigation. If, as the universalizing "our" of the environmentalist call to action implies, an ethic of stewardship can be encouraged by promoting a sense of ownership or identification, it stands to reason that direct investments in communities of a kind that foreground their relationship to environmental assets might well, in the long term, increase the efficacy of and local support for remediation efforts.

#### Project Rationale

One of the several goals of U-M's Detroit River Story Lab is to provide opportunities for testing such a hypothesis. The Story Lab is a multi-disciplinary, grant-funded initiative, managed by a team of faculty representing a half dozen different departments, that partners with local organizations in their ongoing efforts to strengthen the narrative infrastructure of the Detroit River corridor in order to reconnect communities with the river and its stories. The term "narrative infrastructure," as used by the Story Lab, refers to the fabric of shared stories that binds a given community together. It is intended to evoke both individual stories--about the role of the river in the history of the Underground Railroad, say, or community activists' efforts to protect local water supplies--and the various conduits of their dissemination, whether interpersonal networks, media coverage, secondary curricula, cultural programming, interpretive heritage signage, or other means. Investing in a community's narrative infrastructure, then, entails elevating and celebrating community stories--especially those traditionally marginalized--and supporting projects that incorporate them into the public self-image of a locality.

University-based, publicly engaged scholarship projects rightly begin with the consideration and advancement of community interests and needs. For decades, Detroit riverside communities' most glaring needs have often been framed in terms of physical infrastructure, whether with respect to housing, transportation, utilities, or schools. Increasingly, though, community leaders and scholars alike have recognized the many ways that less tangible community assets associated, for example, with the arts, civic life, local journalism, and public history, are also critical to social cohesion, resilience, and vitality (Klinenberg 2018; Sullivan 2020; Bhanbhro et al 2017). Recent scholarship in psychology, anthropology, and sociology establishes that the human capacity for storymaking is a core cognitive technology that enables, through the circulation of shared stories within a collectivity, the dissemination of distinctive norms, strategies, and values crucial to these dimensions of community well-being (Gottschall 2013). Our project is premised on the observation that the narrative infrastructure of many Detroit River communities has been as badly decimated by decades of disinvestment, environmental injustice, and racist urban policies as have their physical landscapes. Mass incarceration, the bulldozing of neighborhoods, the war on public education, and the near-collapse of the journalistic ecosystem

have weakened communities and their bonds with defining natural resources in no small measure by undermining the creation and circulation of sustaining stories.

More concretely, legacies of pollution and compromised perceptions of the Detroit River ecosystem health deter residents from directly engaging with its waters. The privatization of the shorelands for industrial uses and wealthy communities remains an important roadblock in the reclamation and stewardship of the river as part of the public imaginary. Constructed ideologies of racially coded wilderness, meanwhile, inhibit many residents from identifying with the river as “their space.” Effective narrative responses to such barriers might include historical accounts and long-form news stories that center past and present Native and Black relationships with the river and its shorelines, along with opportunities for community youth to engage in participatory research, design action, and urban pedagogy pertaining to river heritage, ecosystem regeneration, and performative landscape design, all of which would help encourage direct personal ties with the river and redefine thresholds of access, identification, and advocacy.

The Detroit River basin has long been saturated with stories. Designated as a Heritage River by both the US and Canadian governments, the river and its wetlands were once vital wildlife habitats supporting the People of the Three Fires and immortalized by their lore. Over the past four centuries, the region has attracted fur traders in search of beaver, missionaries seeking a passage to China, and enslaved people seeking a passage to freedom. It has served as the battleground of empires, the stage of anti-colonialist revolts, a highway for commerce, and a sewer for industries that buoyed the fortunes of our state. Its geography accounts for the Detroit region’s historical associations with the Underground Railroad, the auto industry, Roosevelt’s Arsenal of Democracy, the Great Migration, and the Clean Water Act. Iconic sites along the city’s riverfront, from Windmill Point to Fort Wayne and Wyandotte, embed microcosms of these historical contexts that help shape, to this day, the identities of adjacent communities.

#### Project Components

The Detroit River Story Lab sets out, through project-focused community partnerships, to help activate the narrative potentialities of such sites and to restore community connections with the river severed by disinvestment and heedless industrialization. Our emphasis, in the project’s initial phase, has been on three distinct components of local narrative infrastructure that have been championed, in recent years, by a variety of local organizations: place-based education, community heritage, and non-profit journalism. In each of these domains, the Lab has sought out partners whose objectives align with its commitments and research expertise, enlisted their help in understanding the histories and contexts of community priorities, and offered research support and assistance in the role of a convener and capacity-building catalyst in helping to address them.

Mindful of the long history of academia’s implication in destructive colonial practices and of the decidedly mixed record of university-sponsored research in contributing to the well-being of marginalized groups, the Story Lab has set itself the goal of cultivating modes of research and engagement that are more restorative than extractive, more collaborative than hierarchical, and shaped more directly by community priorities than faculty research programs (Smith 2021). In practice, these commitments have led to research practices that put a premium on relationship-building and intensive listening and that privilege outcomes in which the co-production of tangible benefits to a community is the first concern. The production of new knowledge that is the traditional objective of academic research remains an important goal, but it can no longer always be the primary one.

#### Place-Based Education

Conversations with local partners have consistently revealed two long-standing educational goals with respect to Detroit River stories. The first, promoted by a variety of community history organizations, is to more fully incorporate traditionally marginalized stories of Black-led anti-slavery resistance in the Detroit River region into regional secondary school curricula. In support of this objective, the Story Lab worked in tandem with two of these groups and staff at the U-M School of Education to create an intensive three-week curricular module featuring carefully curated primary sources and lesson plans relating to the regional history of the Underground Railroad and local Black vigilance committees. Piloted by U-M’s Wolverine Pathways pre-collegiate enrichment program in the summer of 2021, the dozen case studies making up the curriculum are scheduled for further field testing in a handful of Michigan and Ontario middle schools in 2022, and will be made freely available to all interested teachers on completion of the final revision process. While it does not directly address the role of the Detroit River as an environmental resource, by encouraging an awareness of the river’s historical role in the forging of the river region’s vibrant bi-national Black communities and the symbolic resonance it has

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consequently enjoyed in the formation of regional Black identities, the project might be expected to encourage a stronger ethic of stewardship towards the river among community residents than would otherwise be the case.

A second educational objective that has come up frequently in consultations with local partners is pathway exploration opportunities for young people. Schools and neighborhoods that have long suffered from depopulation and disinvestment are structurally limited in their ability to model a rich variety of aspirational educational and career goals for their youth, or even to stimulate the curiosity that can help prompt the pursuit of possibilities beyond those presented by the immediate lived environment. Working in tandem with several youth-facing organizations and educational nonprofits, the Detroit River Story Lab developed a pair of river-themed experiential learning programs during the summer of 2021 designed to connect students, in an immediate and memorable way, with the river, its multi-layered stories, and some of the potential career trajectories they can bring into view. A week-long series of educational sails onboard the schooner *Inland Seas* provided some seventy local participants, many of whom had never seen the river before, the opportunity not only to get out on the water and haul up the sails of a functioning tall ship, but to engage through a series of learning stations, staffed by professional instructors and community volunteers, on topics ranging from civil rights movements in Detroit to the decline and recovery of the local sturgeon population. The following month, a similar river story-based curriculum--supplemented with carpentry and problem-solving skills--was presented to 15 participants in a week-long wooden boat building workshop on Belle Isle, which culminated in students launching craft they'd lovingly constructed and christened themselves into the calm waters off the Belle Isle beach.

A comprehensive evaluation of these two programs is currently underway. Early reports suggest they were very well received by participants and our partner organizations, several of whom are eager to build on the pilot programs' success next summer. As in the case of the Underground Railroad curriculum, the direct environmental impact of such programs is minimal. We expect, however, that current and future assessment research will demonstrate significant long-term environmental returns on these kinds of high-impact educational investments in the narrative infrastructure of river-facing communities.

#### Community Heritage

Place-based education, of course, is not limited to school settings. Events of the past year have not only reminded us of the importance of monuments and other heritage installations as components of local narrative infrastructure, but have encouraged a fundamental rethinking of their purpose and possibilities. Recent spectacles of stone monuments toppled by chanting crowds and city streets painted with racial justice slogans mark the dramatic emergence of a significant social movement. But they also testify to the enduring potency of public spaces and cultural objects, the paradoxical immediacy of the stories they shape and tell, and the inadequacy of rigid symbolic forms before the fluidity of social change. Impassioned reckonings with the reified emblems of our shared public life demonstrate at once the demand for the periodic revision of monumentalized history and the urgency of rethinking, from the ground up, the ways we constitute and deploy public sites as touchstones of collective memory and catalysts of belonging.

Members of the Story Lab have been inspired by the ongoing efforts of our nonprofit partners to advance this collective reckoning and to leverage the sociocultural, historical, and ecological centrality of the Detroit River for staging historically nuanced and contextually aware stories that center the river in the lives and struggles of its adjacent communities. By providing material, logistical, and research support for oral history interviews, exhibits, interpretive installations, site designation efforts, and public events, the Story Lab promotes affective connections with the river of a kind likely to enhance the long-term well-being of river corridor inhabitants, human and non-human alike. One example of an ongoing collaboration is the Lab's partnership with the Detroit Historical Society in support of a multi-year effort to retell the story of Belle Isle and surrounding waterways from Black and Indigenous perspectives through the use of community-based story telling and myth-breaking sessions, palimpsestic mapping research, and the co-creation of live and virtual guided tours of the island. A second example is an emerging partnership with a half-dozen nonprofits and municipal agencies currently working on a variety of interpretive signage projects for river-facing parks and greenways. While each of these groups has its own priorities with respect to signage content and design, several have expressed interest in coordinating these independent efforts in order to reinforce the historical interconnectedness of riverside communities. The Story Lab has offered to assist in the development of shared narrative infrastructure, in the form of a dynamic digital archive of site-specific, multimedia resources, that might be accessed by visitors to each "story station" using a QR code.

## Non-Profit Journalism

The ongoing collapse of local journalism ecosystems, the most obvious sign, in many cities, of the progressive deterioration of narrative infrastructure, gives particular urgency to the third primary component of the Lab's current efforts. Community-based newspapers and other media outlets contribute in measurable ways to the accountability of municipal government and the overall health of civil society. Where they falter, disengagement and corruption tend to follow, along with a dramatic shift in citizens' attention away from local and regional issues and debates towards those playing out on an ever-more polarized national stage. The Story Lab has begun experimenting with a variety of approaches to leveraging university resources in support of ongoing efforts to rebuild the local storytelling capacity lost as the financial models that once supported local newsrooms have become unsustainable. Fully funded internships, placing graduate students with extensive research and writing experience with nonprofit news organizations, such as Bridge Detroit, Planet Detroit, and Detroit Public Television, to assist thinly stretched staff in the coverage of a wide range of river-related stories, have been the most obvious place to start, and a number of publications have already resulted from these partnerships (Jewell 2021; Balachander 2021). The next phase of these efforts will focus, funding permitting, on further expanding the possibilities for community journalism through approaches that might include river-themed story booths, community listening sessions, ethnographic story sampling, and citizen journalism training opportunities.

## Conclusion

Taken together, the narrative-based practices and institutions associated with secondary education, public history, and journalism have a critical role to play in strengthening the connective tissues that bind Detroit River communities to their defining waterway, to their multi-layered histories, and ultimately to one another. By working alongside organizations committed to the strengthening of place-based narrative infrastructure, the Detroit River Story Lab brings supplemental expertise, logistical capacity, and financial resources to bear on existing efforts to center the river as a generative site of community identity, collective memory, and personal inspiration. The river, we have learned, has long taken a central role in the efforts of local change-makers, whether associated with anti-slavery resistance in the 19th century, ecological restoration in the 20th, or environmental justice in the 21st, to forge a more equitable and life-sustaining future for the region. Sustained attention to stories of past struggles and of current residents' renewed relationships to the river will, we hope, help to inform and shape emergent new forms of local engagement and collective action and accelerate the ongoing transformation of dominant paradigms concerning the relevance, environmental and cultural, of water resources to human lives.

While the work of the Story Lab has only just begun, preliminary results from some of its early-stage experiments suggest that the conjoining of narrative and natural resource perspectives on the Detroit River could well prove a generative and mutually enriching one. Viewed through one set of disciplinary lenses, the river appears as ecosystem, habitat, fishery, or hydrological basin. Through another, it comes into focus as a sedimentary accretion of stories and metaphors, potent in their symbolism and power to forge connections across historical, municipal, demographic, and species boundaries. The vitality of human (and nonhuman) riparian communities will increasingly depend, in coming decades, on practitioners' ability to move easily between these vantage points, an exercise which might well persuade us that the divide between them is less stark than our disciplinary habits have led us to believe.

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