I have lived in the Detroit metro area for close to fourteen years now. Prior to living in Michigan, I grew up in the sun of southern California, a mere twenty minutes from the beach and just a few miles from Los Angeles. My move to Michigan was the result of my mother, Pamela, accepting a job from General Motors at the tallest building in Detroit, the Renaissance Center. To this day, I can recall the day she came home with the news of a possible relocation and my initial reaction was to run to my room and grab a map of our country. At that point in my youth, most of my days were spent at my grandmother’s house beside the pool or on the blacktop out in front of the house playing street hockey with children from the surrounding blocks. Naturally I didn’t have a great idea where the state of Michigan was, but when I located it on the map, there in the center of the state, was a red car. This was my first impression of Michigan and an impression that was meager and concise.

Currently, millions of people across our country hear of Detroit and identify the city with automobiles or maybe even the city’s achievements in the music industry. However, there also seems to be an overwhelming negative image of Detroit, propelled by the city’s crime rates and ramped poverty. Across the United States, our population is exposed to Detroit’s economic spiral, countless abandon buildings and desolate streets. At one time, Detroit was considered the “Paris of the Midwest.” Fueled by an expanding automobile industry, the city represented a powerhouse of industry, technology, and
architectural beauty. For example, in an article published by BBC titled, *The Decline of Detroit*, Steve Schifferes states, “In the 1950s the Detroit area had the highest median income, and highest rate of home ownership, of any major US city.” Schifferes goes on to say, “In 1955, the world looked like a very different place. Four out of every five cars in the world were made in the US, half of them by GM.” So what happened to Detroit? How did Detroit shift from being labeled the "Paris of the Midwest" to what it is considered today? The exact causes of Detroit's decline are debatable, however part of me does know the collapse of the auto industry, racial animosity over the years, and a corrupt government have played major roles into Detroit’s downturn. What specific events formulated these consequences? I ask these questions because even though my address does not contain Detroit, I feel as though the cities that lie around the metro area are deeply connected. I ask these questions because I believe our success as a state, economically or not, is correlated to the success of Detroit. Also, I ask these questions, because I consider Michigan my home and I am proud of where I am from. I go to school in Detroit, I spend the majority of my time in Detroit, and I’ve experienced what Detroit can offer. I am asking these questions because, despite what a person may read or hear on the news about Detroit, I am aware there are examples of Detroit’s ability to move forward and transcend its past.

I would like to start the narration of my research process with an explanation of how I have structured the content and body of my paper. I will admit, even though we’ve been discussing the I-Search project for weeks, I find the freedom that we’ve been given during this project quite overwhelming. I initially wrote my introduction with the intention of reciting a brief history of Detroit’s past accomplishments and contrasting
those with missteps of past decades - along with a narration of my research process. After I had detailed Detroit’s decline, I would simply report what Detroit is currently doing to improve its image at home and abroad. Consequently, after putting some time into my research, my initial plan for this project has changed as I’ve had the opportunity to gather information and form a strategy. During the process of my research it increasingly became obvious how subjective the answers are to my I-Search question. How did Detroit shift from being labeled the "Paris of the Midwest" to what it is considered today? I chose this question for the reasons I've stated previously, but also because it simply interests me. Maybe the reason I know such little about the answers of this question comes from the ambiguity or complexity of the answers themselves. Tackling such a question could, in my opinion, far exceed the page requirements set for this project and take a larger scale of time to write. Nevertheless, I still need to find a manner in which to answer the question at hand - how did Detroit fall into the circumstances it faces today?

The best way to answer this question comes from the opinions of many, myself included, which propose a range of reasons as to why Detroit “collapsed” and the image that goes along. In each of the following paragraphs I will summarize sources I found fit to identify the answers to my questions and offer supporting information from varied articles and texts.

I begin the narration of my research process with two articles I found stumbling online. One titled *The Geography of Detroit’s Decline*, by Ping Zhou and the other is a piece published in a special-report within TIME magazine, titled *Detroit: The Death — and Possible Life — of a Great City*, by Daniel Okrent. I’ll start by saying, after a great deal of time clicking through articles on the Internet and scholarly databases provided by
universities, I found both the articles to be a breath of fresh air. Ping Zhou, a graduate of Eastern Michigan University, divides his article into five sections, including an introduction, which reads, “During the mid-20th century, Detroit was the fourth largest city in the United States with a population of over 1.85 million people.” This article (along with Okrent’s) gave me the statistical aspect I wanted to incorporate into my paper, mainly because I frequently came into contact with articles and studies that used a very quantitative approach when detailing Detroit’s downturn. Ping Zhou’s article focuses on the geographical reasons as to why Detroit has experienced such drastic changes in demographics and industry, while integrating relevant social influences.

After a brief introduction, the article addresses how millions of African-Americans migrated from the Southern regions of the country to the Midwest and Northeast regions, causing a rapid shift in demographics (Zhou). Zhou explains, “Prior to this Great Migration, the African-American population in Detroit was approximately 6,000. By the 1930s, that number has ballooned to 120,000, a twenty-fold increase.” Throughout the following years, racial tensions brewed and Detroit became as segregated as any city in America during the civil-rights era, resulting in numerous violent racial riots (Okrent). Most notably, in 1967 amidst the heat of summer, a police dispute with patrons at a local unlicensed bar sparked a five day riot that left 43 dead, 467 injured, 7,200 arrests, and more than 2,000 buildings in ruins (Zhou). The National Guard was called in to diffuse the situation, but it was only after President Johnson sent in 4,700 Army troops from the elite 82nd Airborne Division, did the violence and destruction seize. Daniel Okrent elaborates on his interpretation of what bred the events that occurred on those grim days in Detroit:
The riots that scorched the city in July 1967, leaving 43 people dead, were the product of an unarticulated racism that few had acknowledged, and a self-deceiving blindness that had made it possible for even the best-intentioned whites to ignore the straitjacket of segregation that had crippled black neighborhoods, ill served the equally divided schools and enabled the casual brutality of a police force that was too white and too loosely supervised (Okrent).

After the rights in 1967, animosity and fear ran through the veins of most communities in the Detroit area. These events sent mostly whites into the surrounding suburbs of Detroit, taking with them their tax revenues and labor. The developments that took place in the late 1960’s may've been the catalyst that initiated Detroit’s population decay, however the process was gradual over many decades and involved other factors.

Sometimes I think it’s very difficult for anyone to realize how large of a city Detroit is. Within the next section of Ping Zhou’s article he explains, “At 138 square miles (357km²), the city could accommodate Boston, San Francisco, and Manhattan all within its limits.” As Detroit lost more and more residents, its neighborhoods became increasingly less populated and spread out. Over decades, Detroit was not able to keep up with its expansive territory and was unable to maintain the city’s social and municipal services. Poor infrastructure quickly followed, as municipal services already lacking in funding, needed to cover larger distances, resulting to increases in crime and decreases in land value (pushing additional Detroit residents to the suburbs) (Zhou).

After the fires from the riots in 67’ were extinguish, there began the departure of countless residents of Detroit to the surrounding suburbs in the cars the city had provided them with. As a result, the sheer distance the departing whites had established between
their new neighborhoods and Detroit further perpetuated segregation of whites and blacks. With every mile former white residents drove away from Detroit, the more a divide was entrenched between the two groups and communities - Detroit and Suburbia (Okrent). And soon after these events took place, Detroit became a predominately-black city, which elected its first black mayor in 1973 – Coleman Young who served as mayor of Detroit from 1974 to 1993 (Okrent). In short, the new mayor was a militant former union man who concentrated his authority by taking on a confrontational policy toward the city’s suburban neighbors. Mayor Young mounted a campaign of verbal and political harassment, which dismissed any efforts to mend relationships with his neighbors to the north. Okrent explains that, “by his third term, Young was governing more by rhetoric than by action.” Consequently, crime escalated significantly and Detroit’s school system started their path to being “ranked at the bottom of the 50 largest school districts with less than 25 percent of freshmen going on to graduate,” according to Celeste Headlee in a recent NPR radio-broadcast. If this wasn’t enough, businesses that once lined the streets of Detroit were vanishing and the little industry Detroit still held onto, Mayor Young chose to neglect. Detroit, already considerably impoverished and increasingly abandoned, then had to confront mass unemployment emerging from a broken auto industry. Okrent ends his characterization of Young’s time in office with the Mayor’s sense of achievement he left Detroit with and a "level of autonomy ... that no other city can match." Okrent going on to say, “He apparently didn't care that it was the autonomy of a man in a rowboat, in the middle of the ocean, without oars.”

Perhaps the most significant reason Detroit has declined over the years may be due to the city’s inability to curb its’ unemployment rate. During my research I had a
difficult time finding any consistent unemployment rates from past decades. Most of the unemployment data I found had been from the recent economic collapse and the amount of media surrounding Detroit’s auto industry. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2009 the unemployment rate in Detroit was 28.9%, however currently it stands around 18%. The more research I conducted about Detroit’s triumphs and defeats regarding employment and the auto industry, the more of a pattern I was able to recognize. There was a YouTube video I remember watching with a man interviewing pedestrians on the busy streets of New York City. The questions varied within each clip, but the interviews always ended with one question, “In one word, what would you describe the city of Detroit as?” Unanimously each pedestrian associated Detroit with the words “cars” or “Motown,” without much thought. The video may’ve been edited to its advantage, however it still supports and represents what Detroit has been standing by for decades – cars.

When Detroit began its auto industry, the city itself was a prime location for manufacturing and distribution – with close proximity to Canada and the Great Lakes. In his article Zhou suggests, despite Detroit’s geographical location the, “Expansion of the Interstate Highway System, globalization, and dramatic inflation in labor costs brought on by unionization,” drove the city’s “Big Three” out of Detroit and left the city with little industry to support itself (Zhou). Sometime in the 1980s, the Detroit auto companies and the United Auto Workers (UAW) had begun a self-interested relationship, that priced labor so outrageously high that it “Closed off Detroit to any possible diversification of its industrial base,” (Okrent). In more ways than not, the auto companies and the unions together unintentionally (or not) shut the door on entrepreneurship in Detroit. The
automakers were unable to keep up with demanding wages and benefits, thus leading them to layoff workers and cut corners, consequently making cars that didn’t meet the shifting demands of the market or compete with their foreign competition. Moreover, Detroit disregarded to diversify its industry, deeming anything that was considered bad for the auto industry was assumed to be threatening to Detroit (Okrent). Okrent diagnoses the, “Naive faith the industry would never run out of gas” was driven into the heart of Detroit, pulling the wool over all involved – fooling residents and assembly workers to collect their high wages and benefits, while showing little interest to pursue any higher education. Detroit and its departments were deteriorating, in part from reduced tax revenues to large unemployment rates, and among those departments was an education system that also fell into peril, leading to some of the worst national literacy rates – well below national averages.

Both Zhou’s and Okrent’s articles offered a consistent account of how Detroit has become, some consider, a model of urban decay. The two articles encompassed the data and major reasons of Detroit’s decline, which corresponded to nearly all of the research I was able to analyze. After each piece I read, I began to notice certain themes reoccurring, which justified combining their arguments to the majority of my project. Through the research I read on all facets of media covering Detroit and its collapse, I chose to focus on themes of racism, geography, political negligence, and industrial diversity, because of their influence in the crime rates, education woes, and the lingering political disregard of the city – which have crippled the city’s image in recent years. The events and developments that I have detailed in previous paragraphs are quick summations of what Detroit has gone through and only offer meager representations of the obstacles the city
has tried to endure. I consider the themes of Zhou’s and Okrent’s articles to be the foundation of the more visible difficulties the city of Detroit presently encounters. Furthermore, just as any foundation is the basis upon which a structure rests or any root system anchors the stems above, there is a groundwork that connects the events of the past to the conditions of the present, which are undoubtedly relevant when estimating Detroit’s future.

So where do we go from here? What path, if any, does Detroit take when salvaging its comeback? Well – actually Detroit's comeback is not only inevitable, it's already underway. There are numerous directions I could’ve taken when composing my initial sentences in regards to the transformation that is occurring in the great city of Detroit, however instead of beginning with a newly invented industry or even an influential activist group, I’ll start with a name – Mike Ilitch. The 82-year-old pizza baron is the founder and owner of Little Caesars Pizza and owner of two professional sports teams - the Detroit Tigers of Major League Baseball (MLB) and the Detroit Red Wings of the National Hockey League (NHL) (Nightengale). In an article by Bob Nightengale of USA Today, it explains how, “Ilitch is synonymous with Detroit. He owns Little Caesars Pizza. The Fox Theatre. Motor City Casino. The family holdings alone are responsible for bringing 10 million people into downtown every year, and his sports teams are worth an annual economic impact of $443 million, according to the Detroit Regional Chamber. A portion of that $443 million is due the relocation of the Detroit Tigers into the downtown area in 2000 (Nightengale). In my opinion, Comerica Park became ground zero of Detroit’s downtown renewal. Two years later, the Detroit Lions of the National Football League moved downtown, right across the street from Comerica Park. These
core attractions, including a renovated Fox Theatre, have brought an influx of money and people to the city of Detroit – as well as giving the city an opportunity to change a stigma that has encircled the city for decades. However, it is important for myself to clarify that I am not crediting Detroit’s recent progress solely to Mr. Ilitch, but the sports and entertainment in Detroit are largely responsible for enriching the city’s sense of identity and a public image that far exceed that of the past.

Games aside, Detroit has seen the arrival of several major companies into its vacant streets, including DTE Energy, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, and Quicken Loans (Bello and Gardner). The city’s efforts have brought a major influx of young entrepreneurs and artists, turning warehouses into massive art studios and old factories into new businesses. Even Hollywood has taken notice, with major production companies making movies featuring Detroit locations. The major Detroit automakers - General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler are looking at profits, years after laying off tens of thousands of workers and closing several factories. According to a study by the Center for Automotive Research, there are 22% more auto-related jobs in Michigan than there was when Detroit automakers hit bottom in 2009. A New York Times article titled, Sign of a Comeback: U.S. Carmakers Are Hiring, written by Bill Vlasic reports that Ford Motor Company, “Added about 8,000 salaried and hourly jobs last year (2012), and has said it plans to hire about 2,200 white-collar workers in 2013. Ford is also moving some vehicle production from Mexico to a Michigan plant, where it will add 1,200 jobs.” Collectively, due to recent progress in the past decade or so, Detroit has brought itself to the attention of the world once again. This time around, Detroit has casts itself as resurgent, while also cognitive of the dark affairs from its past. A Chrysler commercial broadcasted during the
2011 Super Bowl was part of ad campaign titled, "Imported from Detroit.” In the commercial, an announcer asks deeply, “What does a town that's been to hell and back know about the finer things in life?” He goes on by saying. "This isn't New York City. Or the Windy City. Or Sin City. And we're certainly no one's Emerald City.” - "This is the Motor City. And this is what we do," Detroit rapper Eminem finishes. This commercial nationally announced what Detroit stood for and seemingly cultivated an image of Detroit that represented a proud sense of resurrection and native grit.

This may have not been the longest project I’ve been assigned in my academic career, but it certainly was one of the more difficult papers I’ve had to write. The overwhelming freedom I previously mentioned did play a part in my difficulties, but it was more the subject matter I struggled with. The actual research that went along to answer my questions wasn’t challenging to find, but condensing the research and sources was my most laborious task. As I began to dive into the history of Detroit and the argued reasons the city has steadily declined, the more invested I became into the sentences I was composing and how increasingly critical I became of them. It was almost as if the words I was asserting about Detroit somehow mattered in its path to recovery or the battle of the city’s image. Even though this project at times was demanding in certain degrees, I’ve gotten a sort of gratification out of it. This gratification that I've observed almost urges me to continue reading about what Detroit has had to face as a city and what may lie ahead. I've learned Detroit's future is uncertain, however the city must accept, the 138 square miles that once accommodated 1.85 million inhabitants is way too large for the approximately 700,000 that remain. In Okrent's article, he argues Detroit must:
Shrink its footprint, even if it means condemning decent houses in the gap toothed areas and moving their occupants to compact neighborhoods where they might find a modicum of security and service. Build greenbelts, which are a lot cheaper to maintain than untraveled streets. Encourage urban farming. Let the barren areas revert to nature. (Okrent)

Such a radical suggestion seems almost sensible in the case for Detroit, due to its inescapable size. The city needs to consolidate its resources and concentrate its energy in order to maintain the integrity of its municipal services, education, and infrastructure (Okrent). I learned during the process of this project, that I developed an informed opinion concerning the future of Detroit - which I'm thankful for. I’m thankful that I chose this subject, because it has given me a much greater appreciation of Detroit and also the current strides the city has made to change its image. I’ve learned how the most prosperous manufacturing city in the nation fantastically dwindled to a small ember. Moreover, I’ve learned more about my home and the flame that has been kindled from the support of Detroiter and suburban communities alike.
Works Cited


<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1926017-4,00.html>.