Skeleton Crew
Skeleton Crew
by DOMINIQUE MORINSEAU
directed by AUSTENE VAN
May 4 – June 9, 2024
McGuire Proscenium Stage

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This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show’s history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

NOTE: Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for more information.

“For more information
Thanks for your interest in Skeleton Crew. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.
Synopsis

“You work. You sweat. You fight to have somethin’ fair and right for yourself before you die. That’s the industry.”
Faye in Skeleton Crew

It is 2008, and the Great Recession is having devastating effects on Detroit’s automobile industry and economy. In the break room of one of the city’s last-remaining auto stamping factories, a makeshift family of employees must learn to negotiate and navigate the possibility of the plant closing. Dez is a young man with dreams for the future that he is determined to realize. Faye, an employee of almost 30 years, must decide where and how to live. Shanita must decide how she will take care of her soon-to-be-born baby. Their office manager, Reggie, is torn between loyalty to the employees who make up his work family and self-preservation. Skeleton Crew is the third play in Dominique Morisseau’s provocative Detroit trilogy.

CHARACTERS

Faye, a Black, working-class woman, mid-to-late 50s. Tough and a lifetime of dirt beneath her nails. Somewhere, deep compassion.

Dez, a Black, working-class young man, mid-to-late 20s. Young hustler, playful, street-savvy and flirtatious. Somewhere, deeply sensitive.

Shanita, a Black, working-class, pregnant woman, mid-to-late 20s. Pretty but not ruled by it. Hardworking, by-the-book and believes in the work she does. Somewhere, a beautiful dreamer.

Reggie, a Black, white-collar man, late 30s. Studious, dedicated and compassionate. The foreman. Somewhere, a fire brims.

SETTING

Morisseau, in her work, is in conversation with several other contemporary Black women artists interested in kinship and class, and in the thrilling music of talk, even in troubled times. *Cullud Wattah*, the recent play by Erika Dickerson-Despenza, set not far from Detroit in Flint, Michigan, shared *Skeleton Crew*’s emphasis on Black unionism and the meaning of solidarity. Both plays — in their exploration of secrets and money and generational tensions — have a cousinship with Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. *Skeleton Crew* is also a kind of twin to Angela Flournoy’s National Book Award finalist, the novel *The Turner House*. They both take place in Detroit near the 2008 election and are tugged along by the financial crisis that caused the Great Recession, which darkened the skies over the Obamian pageant before it had really got going. Like Lynn Nottage in her play *Clyde’s*, Morisseau inhabits people who take real pride in their unheralded work and shows how that pride can be a turn of the screw when trouble comes.

**Jesse Green**  
“In *Skeleton Crew*, Making Quick Work of Hard Labor,”  
*The New York Times*, January 26, 2022

**Vinson Cunningham**  
“*Skeleton Crew* Traces Power Dynamics at a Factory,”  
*The New Yorker*, January 31, 2022
Skeleton Crew is about what happens to people for whom survival becomes the foremost (if not the only) goal in life. It is, in many ways, an old-fashioned play: naturalistic, tightly structured and filled with self-defining monologues of vernacular lyricism.

Clifford Odets’ dramas of an oppressed and restless working class come to mind. So inevitably does the great Pittsburgh cycle of August Wilson, which Ms. Morisseau cites as an abiding influence. …

But Skeleton Crew is also squarely in the tradition of Arthur Miller’s probing studies of consciences under siege and the crippling concessions made in the name of success. It is, in other words, a deeply moral and deeply American play, with a loving compassion for those trapped in a system that makes sins, spiritual or societal, and self-betrayal almost inevitable.

Ben Brantley

Her plays are both angry and empathetic, forthright about the faults of the characters they describe while ready to honor their desire, ambition and essential decency. “I can’t write a story until I know what my characters are willing to fight or die for,” she said on a recent evening after rehearsal, a few days before Christmas. “Then I know who they are.” …

You can hear echoes of August Wilson in her work, of Lorraine Hansberry, of Tennessee Williams, of Anton Chekhov, but also a voice — seductive, poetic, comic, tough — that is unmistakably her own. Her plays overflow with sensory detail: the music that excites and soothes her characters, how they dance, what they wear, what they eat.

And as befits a writer who just finished a season on Showtime’s “Shameless,” a series that wrings comedy from poverty, her plays have an acute focus on economics — who is living large, who is living out of a car, what it costs (financially and otherwise) just to get by.

Alexis Soloski
About the Detroit Trilogy

Three provocative dramas comprise Dominique Morisseau’s trilogy of plays, collectively known as The Detroit Project. Each play examines the social, economic and political history of this vibrant American metropolis. Penned by a fierce Detroit native, Morisseau’s plays represent the humanity of a city to which history has not always been kind. The following articles examine the trilogy overall and the individual plays in more depth.

Excerpt from “The Soul of This Place’: Dominique Morisseau’s Detroit” by Tyler Grand Pre, New Labor Forum

From bop performances in a renowned jazz club and illicit parties hosted in a basement on 12th Street to card games behind the boss’ back in the break room of an auto-stamping plant, playwright Dominique Morisseau tells the story of Detroit across three plays that comprise The Detroit Project. Morisseau, the recipient of a MacArthur “Genius Grant,” describes a social history of rising “the hell up” while going underground. The trilogy has rightfully been compared to August Wilson’s ten-play Pittsburgh Cycle in the way the plays ambitiously set out to tell the intergenerational story of each playwright’s hometown. However, unlike Wilson who wrote a play taking place in each decade of the twentieth century, Morisseau sets each play during one of three pivotal moments in the history of Detroit: the beginnings of urban renewal in the 1950s, the Detroit Riots of 1967 and the contemporary economic and infrastructural crisis that accompanies a major decline in the auto industry. Through her use of stage directions, set descriptions and rhythmic banter that shifts between playful, romantic and tragic, Morisseau writes in a continuum of spaces that resonates with the presence of Detroit’s Black community and the forces of state and industry that have historically shaped it.

Paradise Blue, the award-winning play that opens the trilogy, is set in the same year as the notorious Housing Act of 1949 that would fuel the “urban renewal” campaign of slum clearance in major cities across the United States. The play centers on the fate of the Paradise Club, owned by a trumpet player called Blue. The club is in the famous jazz town of Paradise Valley at the heart of Black Bottom, a neighborhood branded with the label “blighted,” bearing testimony to the line made famous by James Baldwin: Urban
renewal “means negro removal.” *Paradise Blue* follows members of a community on the verge of displacement and dispossession by “urban renewal” developers. Individuals in this community have very different plans for the future of the club and, by extension, all of the neighborhood. ...

The second play in the trilogy is *Detroit ’67*, winner of the 2014 Sky Cooper American Play Prize. It picks up eighteen years after *Paradise Blue* in a basement on 12th Street long after Black Bottom was demolished. The play is set in the days leading up to the notorious Detroit Riots of 1967 that pit the Black working-class community of Detroit against both federal troops and the National Guard as well as local police. This play follows members of this community who are no longer thriving in the socioeconomic haven of Black Bottom, now forced “underground” by rampant threats of unemployment in a racist job market and constantly harassed by a police unit that patrols the lower income communities like a hunting ground. ...

The final play in the Detroit trilogy, *Skeleton Crew*, takes us to the contemporary moment of Detroit after decades of “white flight” to the suburbs, subsequent disinvestment in the city and massive decline of the auto industry, which has been the city’s economic backbone since the Ford Motor Company opened there in 1903. Like the previous two plays, *Skeleton Crew* centers on the rising social tensions of a Black working-class community leading up to a socioeconomic upheaval — in this case, the closing of an auto stamping plant. However, unlike the previous two plays, the central debate in *Skeleton Crew* has less to do with the investment of economic capital as with the social capital of the four central characters. ...

All three plays in the series articulate the sociopolitical and economic struggles of Detroit’s Black community. But the Detroit trilogy is neither about “focusing on oppression,” nor even entirely about organizing against it. ...

Rather, the Detroit trilogy asks what are the social and economic conditions necessary for intimacy, community, performance, art and various forms of freedom? The trilogy also highlights the material and social markers of struggle, exploitation and betrayal that have both countered and, in many ways, shaped these forms of agency. Above all, the morally ambiguous situations in these plays allow us to interrogate the conditions of political solidarity and organization among the Black community of Detroit, even if we only partially see it onstage.

To read the full article, see the Additional Information section on page 20.
Morisseau was inspired to dramatize Detroiter's after reading the works of Pearl Cleage — a Detroit-raised playwright, essayist, novelist and poet — and the plays of August Wilson.

What she loves about Wilson's work, she says, is “the way he captures the jazz, and the way his people spoke in Pittsburgh. I thought how affirmed they must be when they read his work; they must feel so visible. I wanted to do that for Detroit, mostly because I felt that the narrative I know about the city is not visible. And I want to address the stuff that has been a conflict for us in the way that August Wilson did and be a griot, a storyteller, for them.”

Her family was also crucial to her research for the Detroit trilogy, as she wrote the plays largely to learn more about her city and in the process learned more about her relatives, as well. She had no idea, for instance, that her uncle was a journalist during the Detroit Riots of 1967. He essentially became her “teacher” while she wrote Detroit '67.

“I pretty much jacked their memories,” she says. “It has a lot of my own family history spilled throughout the play.”

Still, she’s shocked how often people ask her if she wrote the play in response to such current events as the deaths by law enforcement of Eric Garner, Michael Brown and others.

“It’s really easy to celebrate our dysfunction as a community, and the majority of theatergoers — our white brethren and sistren — sometimes fascinate at our own destruction,” Kwei-Armah concedes. “Dominique tends to be very much aware of that. So she’s writing not to perpetuate the stereotype, but she’s writing out of a truth in order to ask a political question of the community that she comes from: How can we do better?”

Morisseau is certainly aware of the media-perpetuated stereotypes surrounding her hometown, which is one reason she wanted to reclaim its stories on her own terms. She recalls the time a teacher at University of Michigan, where she studied acting with her now-husband, asked students to call out words to describe Detroit. One adjective, “degenerate,” made Morisseau and [her husband Jimmy] Keys weep in each other’s arms.

“I definitely think people come in with assumptions about Detroit,” Morisseau says of her play’s audiences. “Detroiter’s know that people feel negatively about the city, so they’re very particular about who’s going to write us. When I tell people from Detroit that I’m writing about the city, the first thing they say is, ‘Okay, make us look good now.’ And I’m like, ‘Why? That’s not an interesting play!’ I’m not going to do that. But what I promise is I’m not going to make you look bad. I’m going to make you look human. Because that’s what we are.”

Kwame Kwei-Armah directed Detroit '67 in New York, and the play will appear at Center Stage in Baltimore, where he’s Artistic Director, with [Kamilah] Forbes at the helm. He had initially slated a different play, but after the death of Freddie Gray in police custody and subsequent protests in Baltimore, he reached for Morisseau’s play. While the play visits a painful and unfortunately recurring chapter of Black history, Kwei-Armah feels that the playwright goes further than simply portraying her culture’s internal conflicts.

To read the full article, see the Additional Information section on page 20.
About the Playwright

“This is for my Auntie Francine, my grandfather Pike, my cousins Michael Abney and Patti Poindexter, my Uncle Sandy, my friend David Livingston, my relative Willie Felder and all of the UAW members and auto workers whose passion for their work inspires me. And this is for the working-class warriors who keep this country driving forward. This is also for the politicians, financial analysts and everyday citizens who echoed the negating sentiments, ‘Let Detroit Go Bankrupt.’ Yep, this is for you too, damn it.”

– In the dedication of Skeleton Crew

Dominique Morisseau is the author of The Detroit Project (A Three-Play Cycle): Skeleton Crew (Atlantic Theater Company/Broadway, Tony nomination for Best Play); Paradise Blue (Signature Theatre) and Detroit ’67 (The Public Theater/The Classical Theatre of Harlem/National Black Theatre). Additional plays include Confederates (Signature Theatre), Pipeline (Lincoln Center Theater), Sunset Baby (LAByrinth Theater/Signature Theatre), Blood at the Root (National Black Theatre) and Follow Me to Nellie’s (Premiere Stages). She is the Tony-nominated book writer on the Broadway musical Ain’t Too Proud: The Life and Times of the Temptations (Imperial Theatre) and is currently working on Hippest Trip – The Soul Train Musical (A.C.T.). In film and television, Morisseau is Co-Producer on “Shameless” (Showtime), the film adaptation of the documentary Step (FOX Searchlight) and consultant on the Netflix animated feature Tunga. Awards include the PONY Fellowship, TEER Trailblazer Award, Steinberg Playwright Award, AUDELCO Awards, NBTF August Wilson Playwriting Award, Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama, Obie Awards (two), Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellowship, Variety’s 2018 Women of Impact and a MacArthur “Genius Grant” Fellowship. In 2022, Morisseau was awarded the key to the city by the Mayor of Detroit.

“I don’t want to exclude anyone. To write about a specific experience is not an exclusionary practice, so I want to state that first. I think the more specifically a writer can write, the better the writing. ... The power of art is helping you find a way in, a point of connection with someone you know nothing about before you meet them for the first time.”

– In an interview with Jose Solís, May 10, 2016
About the Director

Austene Van is the Executive Artistic Director at Yellow Tree Theatre. At the Guthrie Theater, she most recently directed A Raisin in the Sun. Van has directed numerous regional productions, including Intimate Apparel (Asolo Rep), Rule of Thumb, Lady Day..., In the Next Room, Passing Strange, The Royale (Yellow Tree Theatre), Crowns (New Dawn Theatre), Annie, Blues in the Night (Ordway), Gee’s Bend, Lady Day... (Park Square Theatre), Black Nativity (Penumbra) and Lonely Soldiers (History Theatre).

As a performer, she has appeared in Steel Magnolias, Familiar, Disgraced, Trouble in Mind, Crowns, The Darker Face of the Earth (Guthrie Theater), Wedding Band, The Owl Answers, Detroit ’67, Spunk, The Amen Corner, Ain’t Misbehavin’, Dinah Was, Blues..., Seven Guitars (Penumbra), Aida (Theater Latté Da), A Streetcar Named Desire, Henry IV, Into the Woods (Ten Thousand Things) and In the Next Room (Jungle Theater). Van is the recipient of a McKnight Theater Artist Fellowship and an Ivey Award.

“I love Dominique Morisseau. I’m struck by her poetry, I’m struck by what she sees and what she feels. In her work, we see that certain cultures have been relegated to slave labor and then tossed away. We’re too strong and we’re too mighty, and so we’re devalued. I’m excited to bring this show to comfortable Minnesota audiences so that when people come see us perform, they can’t help but be moved and touched and inspired to do something.”

- On the first day of rehearsal for Skeleton Crew at the Guthrie
In the Playwright’s Own Words

I was a kid who wrote. And I’ve said this 100,000 times. But I used to have these Cabbage Patch dolls. I was obsessed with my Cabbage Patch dolls. When I would write, I would write my Cabbage Patch dolls into my story. I had a trilogy; well, it was more than a trilogy. I don’t even know how many versions of the Cabbage Patch Kid mysteries I wrote, but I had several. And I would put them in the craziest situations. I mean, they were finding kidnapped children and bringing them back to their parents. You know? They were doing a lot of things.

I fell in love with writing very early. I called myself a story pusher. When I passed my little booklets around, my little paper booklets that I would staple together for my classmates to read the Cabbage Patch mysteries, the way that they responded to it was like, “Oh, my God. What else is going to happen? When’s the new Cabbage Patch mystery coming?” I said, “OK. I got something for you.” And I would go back and write another one. That’s when I fell in love with it. And I figured, “Oh, this is what I want to do.”

I told my mother when I was young that I wanted to be a writer, an actress and a child psychologist. Those are my three things I thought I wanted to be. And she was always, like, “Good. Because you’re going to need a back-up plan.” And I said, “Yeah, child psychology will be my back-up plan for acting and writing.” I was, like, six that I was talking like this.

Interview with Alison Stewart
“Our Moment, Our Movement: An Interview With Dominique Morisseau,” The Public Theater’s Creative Activism Summit, September 25, 2020

I don’t know that I chose theater. I feel like theater chose me. I grew up performing and dancing since I was a kid. It chose me a long time ago. I think the first live performance I remember seeing was Stephanie Mills in The Wiz. I just aged myself, but it was here in Detroit, and my mother is one of those mothers. She’s a teacher and educator. She just took me to everything. She wanted me to just be stimulated by all the things. I went to see a lot of plays; … [I experienced] live performance. Then I also had teachers; I saw plays in school for school productions, and I wanted to be up on that stage. So I got up on that stage in school. And I grew up dancing. My aunt, Carol Morisseau, founded Detroit Dance Center. I grew up dancing in her dance school all my life. And I think that’s why I say it chose me. I think … the bug of performing came from within, from the family influence.

Interview with Jordan Ealey and Leticia Ridley
“Writing Detroit: Dominique Morisseau’s Practice of the Possible,” HowlRound, August 10, 2022
I went to Michigan to study acting. I was getting my B.F.A. in Theater Performance. ... Michele Shay came and blessed our lives my first year in Michigan by being our guest director for *Wedding Band* by Alice Childress. ... And then the following year, Glenda Dickerson ... who was — I think — the second Black woman to direct on Broadway. ... But there were very few, and we were not studying work by any people of color or any women. None.

I went through my entire four years at Michigan, [and work by people of color was] never a class requirement for my major. When I was studying any work by Black writers, it was called Black theater. It was an elective. If I was reading Maria Irene Fornés, I was doing that in a women’s studies class, but it was never part of the pedagogy of the program. By the time I got to my third year at Michigan, I started writing plays. My first play at Michigan was called *The Blackness Blues — Time to Change the Tune (A Sister’s Story)*.

**Discussion with professor Michael Dinwiddie**

“A Conversation With Dominique Morisseau,” NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study, February 22, 2019

My husband is a hip-hop artist, so music is important in our household and our family, and how we connect and relate through music is important to us. I think how people relate to music is important in the world. I was at a live music show last night seeing a very talented singer, and he had an open prayer at the end of his performance that was so generous and healing for the audience members. I thought in that moment we were all being healed and connected through this man’s music. We were all having an intimate exchange together. Music inspires activism because it unites us through common emotions and issues. Music can help evoke the emotional picture. Through language and lyrics, it creates a vivid portrait of how we’re all connected and how an issue affects us all collectively. Music can unite people and inspire them to be upset about the same thing and seek change.

**Interview with Jose Solís**


Oh, all of my family lives in Detroit. All of them. There’s very little empathy for the people who live in Detroit, and there’s such a bleak hopelessness that’s been assigned to their situation. That’s what bothers me most. The people who say those things really don’t understand our city. And I think when we hear certain things about ourselves over and over, we start to believe in them — even the best of us. That’s the power of writing. The media really has the power to manipulate people’s beliefs. So I, too, want to manipulate people’s beliefs and get people to start believing in our city again.

**Northlight Theatre program, Detroit ’67 2013**

I think the one thing I can say I’ve learned to embrace, that I didn’t always, is the idea of being a political writer. I did not look at myself as a political writer for a very long time because I’m not trying to push a political agenda, per se, or tell people what politics to embrace, but I am looking at how politics, in a certain light, impact people. I’ve learned to embrace that I have a very strong social justice call to my work. Even when the work is very personal and not pushing a political agenda, there is some sense of justice I am always seeking for my characters. How are they or are they not getting justice in their lives for the things that they want? How are they or are they not being measured fairly by each other and by the world? And how are they or are they not being considered by those who have status over them?

**Interview with Victoria Myers**

“The play is set in 2008 when the big foreclosure crisis happened. The auto industry was in trouble and that’s what built my family. I wanted to create an anthem for the working-class folks in the D that keep this country driving forward,” she says. “This was my way of paying homage to my family and to remind the country who’s doing the labor that they take for granted.”

Interview with Randiah Camille Green
“Playwright Dominique Morisseau Shows Love for Detroit on Broadway,”
*Detroit Metro Times*, December 17, 2021

In a way, history gives me hope. Nothing is ever permanent. History teaches me that things that get undone can get rebuilt. Things that burn can be built again; the phoenix can rise from the ashes. History teaches me that in bad, bad moments, there are those who are resilient and who can change the course of where things are headed, and that gives me hope. The current state of the world right now is pretty bleak in a lot of ways. But history tells me it’s impossible that it stays exactly this way. What gives me hope is a little bit of history and a little bit of the future. There are people who will not tolerate the things that we’ve all tolerated for so long, that have been harmful in our culture. And art, people’s stories, the fact that storytelling is changing and more stories are being told from more cultural perspectives, that gives me a lot of hope, and I want to see more of it. Knowing that there’s a way in which we might be able to hear from each other and have access to each other globally makes me hopeful.

Interview with Liz Appel
“Dominique Morisseau’s Revolutionary Vision,” *Vogue*, February 13, 2024

My advice is to think about what stories you are interested in telling in this world. What kind of stories excite you that you’d like to usher forward?

Because we are ALL storytellers, whether designing the set or the lights, directing, acting, writing, stage managing … we have signed up to tell stories together. And so before you can accomplish any great theatrical feat, get very connected to who you are as an artist and what you find purpose in, and follow THAT. Find a way to not just be served, but to also be in SERVICE to others. Those are the makings for the greatest kind of artists … those who are here for reasons beyond their own self-preservation. Join the movement of bringing unheard stories to the mainstage, and be brave in your art. If it scares you, that’s a good sign to say yes!

Interview with Maia Safani
“A Closer Look: Interview With Playwright Dominique Morisseau,” Concord Theatricals’ *Breaking Character*, May 8, 2018
An Introduction to the UAW

All the characters in Skeleton Crew are members of the UAW, the international labor union that represents automobile, aerospace and agricultural implement workers. Founded in 1935 and headquartered in Detroit, the union has helped to create a legacy of Black middle-class workers in the city for decades. Here is a page from the union’s website explaining the identity and achievements of the organization.

WHO WE ARE

The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW), is one of the largest and most diverse unions in North America, with members in virtually every sector of the economy.

UAW-represented workplaces range from multinational corporations, small manufacturers and state and local governments to colleges and universities, hospitals and private non-profit organizations.

The UAW has more than 400,000 active members and more than 580,000 retired members in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico.

There are more than 600 local unions in the UAW. The UAW currently has 1,750 contracts with some 1,050 employers in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico.

A unique strength of the UAW is the solidarity between its active and retired members. A solid majority of the union’s retirees stay actively involved in the life of their union, participating in retiree chapters and playing a vital role in the UAW’s community action program.

Since its founding in 1935, the UAW has consistently developed innovative partnerships with employers and negotiated industry-leading wages and benefits for its members. UAW members have benefited from a number of collective bargaining breakthroughs, including:

- The first employer-paid health insurance plan for industrial workers.
- The first cost-of-living allowances.
- A pioneering role in product quality improvements.
- Landmark job and income security provisions.
- Comprehensive training and educational programs.

A VOICE FOR ALL

As impressive as it is, the UAW’s success record at the bargaining table is only part of the story. From our earliest days, the UAW has been a leader in the struggle to secure economic and social justice for all people. The UAW has been actively involved in every civil rights legislative battle since the 1950s, including the campaigns to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Fair Housing Act, the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1988 and legislation to prohibit discrimination against women, the elderly and people with disabilities.

The UAW also has played a vital role in passing such landmark legislation as Medicare and Medicaid, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Employee Retirement Act and the Family and Medical Leave Act. In Washington and state capitols, the UAW is fighting for better schools for kids, secure health care and pensions for retirees, clean air and water, tougher workplace health and safety standards, stronger worker’s compensation and unemployment insurance laws and fairer taxes.

The UAW’s commitment to improve the lives of working men and women extends beyond our borders to encompass people around the globe. Through vigilant political involvement and coordination with world labor organizations, we continue to fight for enforcement of trade agreement provisions on human and worker rights, fair labor standards and a new approach to international trade — one that raises the quality of life for working people worldwide.

Further information can be found on the UAW website at www.uaw.org.
The following excerpt from a 2009 NPR interview with New York Times contributor Mary Chapman illustrates the devastation of the Great Recession on Detroit's Black auto workers.

TONY COX: From NPR News, this is News & Notes. I’m Tony Cox. General Motors (GM) lost nearly $31 billion last year. That’s the automaker’s second-worst year since it first started building cars. It announced last week that it would be hacking another 47,000 jobs and closing five more plants in the United States. As orders for cars continue to slump, the pink slips keep raining down and the long reliable middle-class comfort enjoyed by auto workers, many of them Black, is rapidly vanishing. Mary Chapman, a Detroit native and contributor to The New York Times, has kept close tabs on the auto industry for 20 years.

Let’s talk first of all about the situation GM finds itself in. Its shares have lost 89% of their value in the last year, vehicle sales in North America down 31% in the fourth quarter of 2008 and sales are even worse in Europe. I know this is a tough question. But what is it going to take to turn things around for them?

MARY CHAPMAN: First of all, there needs to be a real national energy policy out of Washington and some consistent regulation. I mean, overall I think that’s where the nation needs to start in terms of helping this automaker get back on the right track. GM is trying to muddle through. They’re asking for some additional moneys, $17 billion on top of the $13 billion that it already has. But many people don’t understand that’s just to get it through the year. It thinks it will be in the black by 2012, but that’s all conditional on sales coming back.

TC: Let’s talk about some of the people impacted by the loss of these jobs because of the decline in the auto industry. You have been writing about how Black autoworkers are disproportionately affected in large part because of the role that the auto industry has
played in providing jobs for them. 20,000 Black auto workers lost their jobs in the fourth quarter of 2008 alone. Talk a little bit about why it seems to be hitting Black workers harder, if that’s true.

MC: That’s nearly a 14% drop since the recession began compared with just 4.4% of all workers. I mean, as it is, this recession has hit African Americans harder than other groups, unemployment statistics show. I guess the main reason why Blacks are disproportionally affected is that they are disproportionally represented in the industry. There are more Blacks in the automotive workforce than in the overall U.S. workforce, and African Americans cannot make this kind of money anywhere else, particularly the line workers, and particularly because African Americans are overall less educated in the industry than other groups. They make $17 an hour on average in this industry compared with $15 an hour in any other sectors of the economy. About 95% of all minority dealers are first-generation workers. That’s an astounding number compared to just 30% of non-minority dealers. So, these prospective dealers are going into the business without the established credit, without the familial ties, without the established customer base. And so, it’s harder to withstand a protracted downturn.

TC: It seems as if for Black auto workers — and tell if I’m correct or wrong about this, Mary — that the collapse or the near collapse of the auto industry is like a Hurricane Katrina for them.

MC: Oh, absolutely. And you have to remember these white-collar cuts as well. I mean, they are coming in wave after wave. That’s a very apt illustration there because every morning, it’s astounding. I mean, I’ve been covering this industry for a long time as you’ve said, and every day it seems like the situation is feeding upon itself. The tentacles are long and very far-reaching. We’re talking about an entire middle class here, particularly in areas like Detroit where Black unemployment is already hovering around a 14% to 15% rate, at least twice the national average, and that’s for African Americans. We’re talking about people who have bought the second homes, the second cars, they established the businesses. These effects are devastating and very, very far-reaching.

Want to learn more?
Read the full NPR interview and Mary Chapman’s article in The New York Times.
A Brief History of Detroit

**July 24, 1701** Antoine de La Mothe Cadillac establishes a French settlement, Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit, along with 100 French soldiers and an equal number of Algonquians.

**1760** Britain wins the city from the French.

**1796** U.S. forces capture Detroit from the British.

**February 1, 1802** Detroit becomes a chartered city, covering about 20 acres. It is incorporated as a city of Michigan territory in 1806, unincorporated in 1809 and then reincorporated in 1815, this time for good. The population in 1816 is about 850.

**1827** Detroit adopts its forward-looking city motto: *Speramus Meliora; Resurget Cineribus* (We hope for better things; it shall rise from the ashes).

**1850** Bernhard Stroh opens Stroh Brewery Company. Over the years, Stroh's acquires several rival brands, including Schaefer, Schlitz, Old Milwaukee, Lone Star and Colt 45.

**June 4, 1896** Henry Ford test-drives his first automobile on the streets of Detroit.

**1898** Ford establishes the Detroit Automobile Company, producing all of two cars before the company fails three years later.

**1899** Ransom E. Olds opens Detroit’s first auto manufacturing plant.

**November 3, 1901** Ford opens his second car company, Henry Ford Company. Ford leaves the company in August 1902, and it becomes the Cadillac Motor Company. Detroit is America’s 13th biggest city, with a population of about 286,000.

**June 16, 1903** Ford starts the Ford Motor Co. in Detroit; among the 12 initial investors are brothers John and Horace Dodge, who start manufacturing their own Dodge cars in 1915. Ford soon moves his operations to the suburb of Dearborn. (The company hasn’t built a car in Detroit since 1910.)

**September 16, 1908** William Durant and Charles Stewart Mott found General Motors in Flint, Michigan, as a holding company for Buick. (Today, GM is now the only one of the major U.S. automakers headquartered in Detroit proper.)

**1914** William Perry is hired by Henry Ford to work at the Highland Park Plant, becoming the first African American employee hired at Ford Motor Co.

**1916–1918** In a two-year period, approximately 25,000–30,000 African Americans arrive from the South as part of the Great Migration. Less than 1,000 Blacks are employed in the auto industry in 1914, but 12,000–18,000 from 1916–1918, albeit in mainly menial positions.

**June 6, 1925** Walter Chrysler starts the Chrysler Corporation in Detroit. It is now headquartered in Auburn Hills, a Detroit suburb.

**1935** The United Auto Workers labor union is founded.

**1949** The passing of the National Housing Act authorizes the process of urban renewal, which begins the demolition of Black Bottom.

**1950** Detroit’s population hits 1.85 million, making it America’s fourth-largest city with 296,000 manufacturing jobs.

**1956** The 3,500,000-square-foot Packard Motor Car Company factory in Detroit, which opened in 1903, is shuttered. It still stands today as a symbol of Detroit’s long, slow decline.

**1959** Berry Gordy founds Motown Records. He names the record company’s center of operations — a two-story house at 2648 West Grand Boulevard — “Hitsville USA.” And he isn’t exaggerating. With artists like the Supremes, the Temptations, Martha and the Vandellas, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder and the Jackson 5, Motown has 120 singles hit the Top 20 in the 1960s and changes the direction of popular music.
**July 23–28, 1967** The 1967 Detroit unrest is one of the most violent racial insurgencies in U.S. history, pitting Black residents against police, then National Guard troops sent in by Gov. George Romney and Army soldiers deployed by President Lyndon B. Johnson. In five days of rioting, 43 people are killed, 467 are injured and more than 7,200 are arrested. Some 2,000 buildings are destroyed.

**1973–1974** The gasoline crises help give smaller, more fuel-efficient, foreign-made cars a toehold in the U.S., signaling a long period of crisis for Detroit’s Big Three automakers.

**1974** Detroit elects Coleman Young as its first Black mayor. He serves until 1993.

**July 1992** Moody’s Investors Service cuts Detroit’s debt rating to junk status.

**1994–2001** Under Mayor Dennis Archer, the city’s credit rating rises to a solid investment grade. A strong supporter of numerous construction projects in downtown Detroit, Archer works to bridge the gap between the suburban and urban populations of Detroit.

**1999** Stroh Brewery Company is sold to Pabst and Miller, with its brands divided between the two breweries or discontinued.

**2002–2008** Under Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, the city’s credit ratings start to slide back into junk territory.

**September 2008** Kilpatrick pleads guilty to obstruction of justice charges and leaves office.

**December 2008** President Bush gives a provisional $17.4 billion bailout to Chrysler and GM.

**April – June 2009** Chrysler and GM declare bankruptcy, and the Obama administration provides financing and guides the automakers through expedited bankruptcy proceedings.

**March 2011** The U.S. Census Bureau reports that Detroit’s population has fallen to 713,777, a 25% plummet from 2000 and the lowest level in 100 years. Detroit’s finances are premised on a minimum tax base of 750,000 people. Public Act 4, a new law that allows the state to intervene in financially troubled local governments, takes effect.

**December 21, 2011** Michigan Treasurer Andy Dillon says that the state will conduct a formal review of Detroit’s finances.

**November 2012** Voters repeal Public Act 4. The next month, Gov. Rick Snyder signs a replacement bill, Public Act 436, that lets struggling local governments choose between mediation, a deal with the state, a state-appointed emergency financial manager or Chapter 9 bankruptcy.

**February 19, 2013** A state review board appointed by Snyder decides that Detroit is in “operational dysfunction,” unable or unwilling to restructure its finances, and needs intervention from the state.

**March 25, 2013** Kevyn Orr, a restructuring specialist appointed by Snyder as Detroit’s emergency manager, takes office at an annual salary of $275,000.

**May 13, 2013** Orr, in his first public report on Detroit’s finances, calls the city “clearly insolvent.”

**June 14, 2013** Orr says Detroit will stop making payments on some of its $18.5 billion in debt, putting it in technical default. Orr also lays out a plan to restructure Detroit’s finances to avoid bankruptcy, including cuts to the pensions and health benefits of retired city workers and a steep cut on municipal bonds.

**July 18, 2013** Orr files a Chapter 9 bankruptcy petition on behalf of Detroit, marking the largest municipal bankruptcy filing in history and sending the Motor City into unknown territory.

**December 10, 2014** Detroit and Michigan officials hold a news conference announcing the city’s exit from bankruptcy. “We’re going to start fresh tomorrow and do the best we can to deliver the kind of services people deserve,” said Mayor Mike Duggan.

 Portions of this timeline were sourced from “The Rise and Fall of Detroit: A Timeline” by Peter Weber for *The Week*, January 8, 2015.
For Further Reading and Understanding

BOOKS
Black Bottom Saints by Alice Randall
Black Detroit by Herb Boyd
Detroit, I Do Mind Dying by Dan Georgakas
The Detroit Project: Three Plays by Dominique Morisseau
Dilla Time by Dan Charnas
The Mangle by S.L. Stoner
The Most They Ever Had by Rick Bragg
The Turner House by Angela Flournoy

ARTICLES AND INTERVIEWS
Playwright Dominique Morisseau Can’t Forget the Motor City. An interview with the playwright, 2016.

Dominique Morisseau Is Telling the Story of Her People. An article about the playwright and her hometown, 2016.
www.americantheatre.org/2016/01/04/dominique-morisseau-is-telling-the-story-of-her-people/

www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnMwFldYKmc

www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIWdj23OVM4

“The Soul of This Place”: Dominique Morisseau’s Detroit. An article about The Detroit Project, 2022.
www.newlaborforum.cuny.edu/2022/09/27/the-soul-of-this-place-dominique-morisseaus-detroit

Writing Detroit: Dominique Morisseau’s Practice of the Possible. An interview with the Daughters of Lorraine podcast on HowlRound, 2022.
www.howlround.com/writing-detroit-dominique-morisseaus-practice-possible

FILMS
Harlan County U.S.A. (1976)
Blue Collar (1978)
Norma Rae (1979)
8 Mile (2002)
Man Push Cart (2005)
Workingman’s Death (2005)
Detroit (2017)
No Sudden Move (2021)

MUSIC
Slum Village (Fantastic, 2000)
J Dilla (Welcome 2 Detroit, 2001; Donuts, 2006)
Jaylib (Champion Sound, 2003)
Amp Fiddler (Motor City Booty, 2016)