Brother Hakim

On May 25, 2020 something occurred that happens all too often. Eight minutes of video displayed a state-sanctioned murder. The loss of George Floyd’s life, like countless others, may have passed in the quiet of the night without consequence, but a cellphone video of a white police officer kneeling on his neck until he was dead became a catalyst that reignited the Black Lives Matter movement. The collective response was so profound it became the largest mass uprising in the history of these racist United States. Across the political spectrum people condemned the murder. The call rang out in the streets, “How many more?! Not one more!”

But there would be many more, as there always have been, in a country deeply rooted in white supremacy. So-called liberal politicians have feigned disgust at the killing of Floyd from one side of their mouth, but from the other, continue the criminalization of Blackness in our cities. To them, Black lives only matter when there is public scrutiny upon them, the value of Black life is only upheld in the context of political expediency or public relations. They pick and choose when Black lives matter. They pick and choose which Black lives matter. They uphold a system of racial capitalism that commodifies Black lives by using violent measures of social control like police brutality to quell challenges to the racialized neo-liberal order. Black lives continue to be exploited for profit, and the Black people murdered by the state who do not fit within the liberal framework of community and justice are discarded.

Such was the case with Hakim Littleton, a nineteen year-old who was executed by the Detroit Police Department on July 10, 2020 in a brazen extrajudicial killing that would have never occurred if Hakim had been a white man in an affluent community. Likewise, the subsequent cover-up would have never stood if Detroit was not the poorest, Blackest city in the nation—a status that subjects residents to the type of hyper-policing that cost Hakim his life. A grim reality that is compounded by the absence of courage among city officials in confronting police misconduct. Furthermore, the public’s willingness to accept the Detroit Police Department’s argument that this tragedy is justified is indicative of a collective inclination to subscribe to our own oppression.

To realize freedom and make tangible the concept of Black liberation, we must look beyond liberal notions of law & order, which dictate that the lives of young Black men like Hakim do not matter. This is not a justifiable homicide, but an extrajudicial execution; murder. This is the plain truth of what took place, yet the public embraces the "copaganda,” which claims that the taking of Hakim’s life is an appropriate and justifiable response. These lies receive traction only because systemic racism has conditioned us to view poor and working class Black lives as expendable. Detroit Police Chief James Craig, who learned the art of obfuscation from the infamous Chief Darrell Gates and William Bratton, paints a lie to the press and another Black life is dehumanized in the eyes of the public.

In reality, Hakim Littleton was a complex young man with hope, love, and aspirations. He sought a future beyond the broken windows, stop-and-frisk, “community policing” of James Craig and the crooked liberal establishment that stands behind him.[[1]](#endnote-1) He, like many young Black men and women across the country, had his future curtailed long before his life was taken. Rightfully, Hakim wanted more. Characterized as a “thug” and “criminal” immediately after his murder, Hakim’s life was far more than a racialized stereotype, and was worth far more than this world allowed for him.

On a trip to New York with his family, Hakim and his mother were stopped by an African man on the street. The man insisted that her son had the face of a warrior, one who would resist. This was one of many trips that Hakim took with his family to different parts of the country throughout his short life. Hakim Jaha Littleton was born in Chicago on November 30th, 1999. His family moved to Detroit when he was not more than three. He grew up in the Northwest Detroit neighborhood of Bagley, a community currently in the throws of gentrification. Raised by a family rooted in love and revolutionary Black consciousness, Hakim grew up among academics, activists, and business owners that cared about his future and Black people. He loved to swim as a young child and took an interest in learning Japanese, which for a time was offered at Detroit Public Schools. Despite strong family bonds, a nurturing home, and exposure to different cultures and places, Hakim faced a dearth of pathways to success in a city short on opportunity for young Black people. “He had a lot of interests,” remembered his aunt Noloyiso. “He loved studying history, he thought about opening his own business.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Hakim liked working with his hands and pursued various trade certifications, but finding a job was difficult because he refused to conform to the mores and expectations of the white world. Like generations before him, the prevalence of racism kept him locked out of the work he wanted to do in the skilled trades. “He didn’t fit the prototype.” Noloyiso explained. “You can have all the education you want, if you don’t have the opportunity, you don’t get what you deserve.” Instead, Hakim worked at a store in Oak Park. It was here that he met Malica White, a young woman his family describes as the love of his life. They talked about marriage and moving to Arizona together. Hakim had reason to want to leave. His neighborhood is undergoing significant changes that deeply impacted his day-to-day life.

Bagley is a neighborhood that remains standing despite decades of decline, divestment, and the erosion of Black wealth, which culminated in the 2008 Great Recession.[[3]](#endnote-3) The community, which is adjacent to some of Detroit’s wealthiest neighborhoods, is being gutted by discriminatory predatory loans, casting Black homeowners and renters adrift while creating a new target for real estate speculators who are seeking to economically exploit Black misery.  Bagley is a key target in Mayor Mike Duggan’s vision for a “New Detroit,” and speculators use their capital to exploit depressed real estate value.[[4]](#endnote-4) Hyper-policed and slated for gentrification, Bagley is a hard place for any young Black person to walk down the street, let alone realize their dreams. It is a place where police harassment is a regular occurrence for Black youth like Hakim. “They drive around all the time. They did a lot of harassing Hakim,” recalled his aunt Dawn. “They knew his name.”

On July 10th, at around eleven in the morning Hakim stopped by his aunt Dawn’s house. She asked if he was ok. He smiled and told her, “I’m good, I love you.” That was the last time a member of Hakim’s family saw him alive, the last time aunt Dawn saw his infectious smile. Around an hour later, Detroit’s notorious gang squad, a particularly violent tactical unit common within U.S. police departments, arrived at the intersection of McNichols and San Juan, much like they always do, in large numbers with guns drawn. This is the typical protocol of a highly militarized police force sent to carry out a politically motivated strategy of repression against working class Black people, also known as “the war on drugs Gang squad officers were there to serve a DEA federal drug warrant for Hakim’s friend Darnell Sylvester, who was wanted on charges in North Dakota, yet they aimed their weapons at Hakim. It was an act of aggression, an unprovoked response from police who had day in and day out subjected him to intimidation and the threat of death because he was a young Black man on the west side of Detroit. To them, his life was disposable. After a moment in which it was initially unclear what transpired, Hakim turned to run and was brought down in a hail of gunfire. An officer jumped on his back while he was face down, rendering him immobile. Hakim was in police custody, and still breathing. He was no threat to the over half a dozen heavily armed men that surrounded him, but that did not matter. Hakim dared to stand up to the domestic enforcers of state power, a police force that was sent to wash away young Black men like Hakim from Bagley to make way for a whiter, richer future for the neighborhood. As he lay pinned face down, gravely wounded with an officer on his back, another officer approached. He aimed his pistol a short range from Hakim’s head and fired, killing Hakim. The officers closed off the scene and set about the process of justifying another police murder of a young Black man by distorting the true nature of what occurred.  Members of the community began to gather at the intersection of McNichols and San Juan, inquiring why someone had been killed. Among the onlookers was Dawn, Hakim’s aunt, who saw him just an hour earlier alive, well, and full of hope.

When Dawn approached the caution tape that was now surrounding the area to ask what happened, the officer she encountered told the first of many lies and distortions from members of the DPD regarding what had happened and why. She asked about her nephew, an officer told her “I know Hakim.”  “Is he ok?” She asked. The officer replied, “He is alive. No one touched him.”  However, he was not ok. Rather, he was the one who had been gunned down by the police, something Dawn found out from one of his friends. Hakim’s body was taken from the scene with unusual haste. There was little, if any, documentation done at the scene to figure out what happened. The fire department arrived and washed Hakim’s blood from the sidewalk. It became clear that no credible investigation of an officer involved shooting would take place. “By the time I showed up after my sister called me,” Hakim’s uncle Asar recalled, “the people were already out there. It was actually real calm. When the people tried to ask questions they pushed them back and put up a barricade.” The community gathered in protest at the scene, demanding accountability from the police. They were soon joined by a militant direct-action organization that formed in wake of George Floyd’s death in May to oppose police brutality and systemic racism, Detroit Will Breathe.

Late in the afternoon of July 10th, I awoke to a text message asking about a police killing that took place on the west side. I immediately called Nakia Wallace, co-founder of Detroit Will Breathe, to find out more information. When she answered the phone I could hear people in the background chanting “Say his name! Hakim Littleton!” The only thing Nakia said to me was, “get down here.” When I arrived, what activist Paul Jackson later described as the Battle of San Juan was well underway. I found my way to Nakia and she led me to her uncle, Tristan Taylor, another founding member of Detroit Will Breathe. Tristan was sitting alone deep in thought, eyes red with sorrow from the loss of another Black life at the hands of police weighing heavy on his mind. It was then that I knew that the state would not allow us to make it home that day. Hundreds of people amassed at the intersection, demanding answers from an increasingly aggressive police force that was already assembling a riot squad at the north end of San Juan. “You have to ask yourself why and you’ll get to the root cause,” said Noloyiso.

The police committed another extra-judicial execution and conspired to cover it up, like it had been done without incident in the past. They are used to acting with impunity in the streets of Detroit. However, this time was different. It was one of those moments in history when the people had enough. In the eyes of the police, this could not be tolerated. They reacted with the only method by which they are trained to engage the public, violence. They began launching tear gas, while a phalanx of officers fully clad in riot gear lurched into the crowd searching for activists. Those who stood their ground were brutally beaten and dragged away. Nakia Wallace was among those who were taken, but not before she was placed in a chokehold that threatened her life, a maneuver that Chief Craig previously claimed had been banned by the department. While she was being arrested, a gang squad officer told her, “Shut the fuck up before I make you the next victim.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Upon seeing the police brutalize Nakia, I demanded her release. Instead, I was slammed to the ground, before I too was drug away. In all, eight people were arrested, including four members of Detroit Will Breathe: myself, Brian Silverstein, Tristan Taylor, and Nakia Wallace.

The arrested protesters were being held as political prisoners, placed on a bus at Santa Maria and San Juan, a block north of McNichols. Unbeknownst to the protestors demanding justice for the murder of Hakim who remained at the scene, it was decided that we were to be taken to the 12th precinct. At some point, Detroit Will Breathe organizers, the Littleton family, and the community decided to march on the 12th precinct, unaware that their comrades were being taken there. By this point, police chief James Craig already stood in front of the cameras rationalizing and spinning the killing several blocks from the scene. Craig exercised a familiar strategy of justification by way of criminalization. He opened the press conference with an explanation that officers were investigating a gang affiliated block party shooting.[[6]](#endnote-6) Hakim, however, was not in a gang and not involved in the shooting, nor was he even a suspect. Craig later admitted this fact, but the damage had already been done.[[7]](#endnote-7) None of this was relevant to why Hakim was shot in the back of his head while he was on the ground. However, the media is eager to oblige a narrative in which they have played a major role in crafting, one which demonizes young Black men while absolving the police of culpability. Unfortunately, this was made painfully clear in the days ahead.

When the bus arrived, the 12th precinct it was bustling with activity. Hundreds of officers appeared to be gearing up for war in the streets of Detroit. Armored vehicles with mounted machine guns and assault rifles abounded; the precinct was more akin to a military installation than an institution of public safety. Officers were in good spirits, laughing and high-fiving. They displayed a genuine excitement at the prospect of exacting violence against the unarmed mass movement headed toward the precinct. There was not a trace of remorse over the fact that one of their own took the life of a young man, nor an inkling of introspection despite a violation of community trust that now brought over a thousand people to their doorstep. Nothing quite like this has been seen in the city since the 1967 Rebellion, an uprising sparked by pervasive economic inequality, systemic racism, and police brutality.[[8]](#endnote-8) The similarities are startling.

         By the time protestors reached the 12th precinct on West Seven Mile, there was a battalion of police officers in formation blocking the street. For a time, there remained a standoff. The police were unwilling to engage on one side, and the movement unwilling to back down on the other. Something, though, was different. In Bagley, police did not hesitate to fire tear gas in a residential neighborhood without concern for the noxious poison drifting into Black homes or to brutalize protestors with batons and riot shields. The answer is socioeconomic. Bagley, and particularly the area where Hakim was killed, remains a working class Black neighborhood of renters, despite the primordial stages of gentrification. However, the 12th precinct is located right between three of Detroit’s most affluent neighborhoods, Sherwood Forest, University District, and Palmer Park. The power of more than a thousand people marching in defense of Black life and the optics of a violent assault in front of Detroit’s elite with tear gas wafting into their homes must have given Chief Craig pause. The line of police in riot gear opened and the march carried on. As it passed the 12th precinct, the movement was alerted that we were being held in the bus behind a parking lot in a fenced off area east of the precinct, approximately 100 yards south of Seven Mile. The movement came to a halt, roaring for our release before returning to Bagley.

    As the people made their way back to McNichols and San Juan, something unprecedented occurred. Police chief James Craig released footage from the dash camera of a police cruiser and from a body camera of one of the officers that fired at Hakim.[[9]](#endnote-9) It was unusual that evidence in a supposedly ongoing investigation would be released so quickly after an incident took place, but they clearly feared another uprising. It was clear that the demands of the people and their active presence in the streets became unnerving to Craig. He sought to get out in front of a situation that was growing beyond his control and understood that the media would happily accommodate his efforts to spin the story. The video he presented showed the officers descend on Hakim and his friend from two angles. Hakim raises his hands, backing away slowly. He then reaches in his pocket and raises his left hand in the direction of an officer with what appears to be a handgun as the sound of gunshots can be heard before he turned to run. It was not clear, though, where the shots were coming from. Hakim is fired upon as his back is turned and then falls to the ground. The officer whom Craig alleges was shot at, quickly jumped on his back. Other officers surround Hakim, firing until he is motionless. According to Craig’s depiction of events, Hakim fired on officers whose lives were in mortal danger, so the only appropriate response was to kill him. Not only did Craig exonerate the officers, he claims they were heroes.

     The media responded in kind, parroting this narrative without any independent investigation of its own, blindly accepting the word of Craig and a carefully edited video that clearly did not represent a full picture of what actually transpired. Mayor Mike Duggan immediately commended Craig, claiming that the video was proof for the public that Hakim had to die. Within an instant, Hakim was found guilty for his own death, a turn of events that angered and frustrated his family. “People don’t think,” Asar reflected. “They threw out all their critical analysis. We know it's bigger than Hakim. Anytime one of our people is murdered by the police it takes weeks to get the evidence back. Why would they release the video within hours? They wanted to protect their own. It’s called the blue wall of silence, and people believe it because they believe in white supremacy and don’t even know it.”

         By the following day, mainstream local and national outlets had fully embraced Craig’s version of the events leading to Hakim’s death, and effectively cast away his life. So-called “civic leaders” joined the resounding chorus led by Craig and Mayor Duggan, echoing, without question, that the killing had been justified. Even some within the mass movement that had taken to the streets since May questioned whether it was appropriate to mobilize in defense of Hakim. “All this society has is hate for a young Black man,” Asar noted. Amid a deluge of condemnation, Hakim’s family and Detroit Will Breathe refused to allow the DPD to escape accountability for Hakim’s murder. They refused to accept his dehumanization by a public consciousness programmed by white supremacy. “When we say Black Lives Matter, that means they have to matter all the time,” I often heard Nakia say. We continued to call for the release of all body cam footage, the names of the officers involved, and an independent investigation into what happened on July 10th. Some journalists also began to pick apart the inconsistencies in the police narrative and the video they released. After Violet Ikonomova of *Deadline Detroit* slowed down the dash cam video and layered it with the sole body cam audio, it confirmed what Hakim’s family had already known: an officer shot him in the back of the head while he was already detained in police custody.[[10]](#endnote-10)

         The fight for justice in the case of Hakim Littleton carries on. He joins a dark legacy of high profile police killings in the city of Detroit like that of Cynthia Scott who was shot in the back by police in 1963, the Algiers Motel murders in which three young men were tortured before they were executed, and the 1992 murder of Malice Green who was beaten to death by police. Despite overwhelming evidence suggesting a cover-up, if not a conspiracy to do so, no state or federal review of the case has been initiated. In late July, Hakim’s family, in partnership with the newly formed Coalition for Police Transparency and Accountability (CPTA), called for a formal investigation by State Attorney General Dana Nessel into the killing.[[11]](#endnote-11) In mid August, Nessel’s office declined the group’s request for an investigation, leaving it to a superficial review by the Wayne County prosecutor’s public integrity unit, which has a track record of rubber stamping police shootings. It has yet to issue its findings. Unsurprisingly, there would be no reckoning in a criminal justice system that was operating as intended. Justice for Black people remains impossible under the law as it exists. Detroit Will Breathe and the CPTA organized a public tribunal that took place on October 25th, 2020 in an attempt to provide a counterweight to the distortions put forth by the DPD and the state, and reaffirmed Hakim’s humanity in the process.[[12]](#endnote-12) It was reminiscent of the People’s Tribunal organized by activists 53 years ago after the murder of three young Black men at the Algiers Motel during the 1967 Rebellion. Rosa Parks served on the jury. She, like her peers, understood all too well that justice could only be secured by the people rather than within the existing “criminal injustice” system.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The death of Hakim Littleton cannot be viewed through the narrow lens of an unfortunate encounter with police on July 10th. Racial capitalism, as defined by Cedric Robinson, condemned Hakim and others similarly situated to death long before that fateful day because poor and working-class Black lives are ultimately undervalued and exploited in our society.[[14]](#endnote-14) “His story was no different than any young Black man, except he realized he was in a cage,” said Noloyiso. Hakim dreamt of life beyond Bagley. A life beyond white supremacy and police repression. Despite what this world kept from him, Hakim was hopeful and resilient. He had love in his life and a community and family that supported him. The state robbed him of that. “It wasn’t a broken family that killed Hakim, it was this system,” explained Asar.

I never met Hakim Littleton and had the police not murdered him, I would never have known his name. Since July 10th I think about him everyday. I think about how he could have been my younger brother, or how it could have been me shot down by the police 15 years ago when our lives were not so different. Detroit Will Breathe and the mass movement continue to seek justice in his name, often accompanied by his family who have been in the struggle for Black liberation longer than most. If Black lives really matter, then Hakim’s right to live must be upheld and fought for. We will carry on in his memory. Rest in power, Brother Hakim.

1. Jay, Mark, and Philip Conklin, “Detroit and the Political Origins of ‘Broken Windows’ Policing.” Race & Class, vol. 59, no. 2 (October 2017): 26–48. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396817717149. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Noloyiso, Amen-ra, Asar, Fuller, Dawn, in conversation with the author, August 19th, 2020 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Garriga, Carlos, Lowell R. Ricketts, Don E. Schlagenhauf, and Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. "The Homeownership Experience of Minorities during the Great Recession." Review - Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis vol. 99, no. 1 (2017): 139-167. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Moskowitz, Peter. *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood*. (New York: Nation Books, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Neavling, Steve. “Federal lawsuit accuses Detroit police of using excessive, brutal force against peaceful protesters” *MetroTimes*. August 31, 2020. https://www.metrotimes.com/news-hits/archives/2020/08/31/federal-lawsuit-accuses-detroit-police-of-using-excessive-brutal-force-against-peaceful-protesters. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ikonomova, Violet. “Video: Detroit Police Fatally Shoot 20-Year-Old They Say Fired On Officers.” *Deadline Detroit,* July 10, 2020. https://www.deadlinedetroit.com/articles/25725/detroit\_police\_shoot\_and\_kill\_man\_they\_say\_fired\_on\_officer. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *WWJ Radio Detroit,* “Chief: Man Shot and Killed During Struggle with Detroit Police.” MSN. July 10, 2020. https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/crime/chief-man-shot-and-killed-during-struggle-with-detroit-police/ar-BB16Au44. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Jay, Mark and Virginia Leavell. "Material Conditions of Detroit's Great Rebellion." *Social Justice, vol.* 44, no. 4 (2017): 27-54. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Baldas, Tresa & Laitner, Bill. “Detroit police chief: Video shows killing of man by officers was justified shooting.” *Detroit Free Press*, July 10, 2020. https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2020/07/10/fatal-police-shooting-photo-shows-man-armed/5417939002/. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ikonomova, Violet. “Questions raised over Detroit police shooting of Hakim Littleton.” *Deadline Detroit*. July 14th, 2020. https://w.deadlinedetroit.com/articles/25752/questions\_raised\_over\_detroit\_police\_shooting\_of\_hakim\_littleton. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Cwiek, Sarah. “Groups demand that Nessel investigate the death of Hakim Littleton, shot by Detroit Police.” *Michigan Radio*. July 24th, 2020. https://www.michiganradio.org/post/groups-demand-nessel-investigate-death-hakim-littleton-shot-detroit-police. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Coalition for Police Accountability and Transparency. “Hakim Littleton Tribunal.” Detroit Will Breathe Instagram. October 25th, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/tv/CGx71Vnj2ji/?igshid=1548gvcaon97u. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Hersey, John. The Algiers Motel Incident, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.) Accessed November 23, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Robinson, Cedric J., Black *Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Accessed November 23, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)