WE BELIEVE IT WAS MURDER

Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua
“We Believe It Was Murder”

Mobilizing Black Resistance to Police Brutality in Champaign, Illinois

SUNDIATA KEITA CHA-JUA

Introduction

On October 9, 2009, at approximately one thirty in the afternoon, it is alleged that Champaign police officer Daniel Norbits shot and killed fifteen-year-old, five-foot, two-inch, 120-pound Kiwane A. Carrington. Norbits, along with Chief Robert T. Finney, responded to a reported burglary at 906 W. Vine Street, the home of Carrington’s aunt, Deborah Thomas. Kiwane, who had been living there since the death of his mother from pancreatic cancer a year prior, was attempting with a friend, five-foot, four-inch, 140-pound Jeshaun C. Manning-Carter, to enter the home. According to the evidence report, Chief Finney, in plain clothes ordered the two boys to get down on the ground; the young men ignored Finney’s command and continued walking toward the officer. About this time, Norbits arrived gun drawn and confronted Carrington at the rear of the house near the back door. According to the Firearms Discharge Review Board, “In the space of less than a minute, Finney had subdued Manning-Carter and Norbits had fired on Carrington.” In his interview with the Illinois State Police investigation team, Norbits stated, “I remember trying to put my hand on his shoulder, pulling him, telling him to get down . . . he moves, twists. Something happens where I no longer have a hold of him. . . . We re-engage. I, this is where, and I’m not trying, I just, this is where I get a real vague recollection. . . . Um, I remember trying to get him down on the ground, er, yea, and the gun goes off.”

Manning-Carter remembered events quite differently. In the civil suit filed on his behalf, by his mother, Laura Manning, Manning-Carter claimed he and Kiwane were standing in the back doorway to get out of

the rain, when two police officers (Chief Finney in plain clothes and Officer Norbits in uniform) charged them “with their guns drawn and leveled” at them, yelling and swearing, and “ordered them to get on the ground.” According to Manning-Carter, they both immediately complied by sitting on the concrete stoop near the back door; Kiwane then “stood up and walked toward” the officers. Chief Finney “pushed him and he tripped over the concrete stoop and fell backward onto the ground into a seated position.” At this point, according to Manning-Carter, Finney “fired a shot downward into the chest” of Kiwane, who “yelled Oww” just as Manning-Carter heard Finney’s gun discharge. Manning-Carter then alleged that an officer other than Finney or Norbits threw him facedown onto the ground near Kiwane who as he struggled to breathe, and just before dying “kicked” him “in the side, leaving a muddy footprint on [his] clothes.”

Despite Norbits’s apparent dissimulation and forensic pathologist Scott Denton’s testimony that the shot was not fired at close range, three governmental investigative units ruled the killing of Kiwane A. Carrington accidental. About a month after the killing, Champaign County State’s Attorney Julia Rietz accepted the Multi-Jurisdictional Investigative Team’s findings and ruled that Norbits “fired his weapon unintentionally.” Thus, she ruled Kiwane’s death accidental and decided not to prosecute. This decision inflamed the local African American community and stimulated the formation of a new racial justice organization, the North End Men’s Breakfast Club (NEMBC).

This paper explores how black men in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, mobilized the black community’s critical social capital to respond to what many believe was the murder of Kiwane by either Officer Norbits or Chief Finney, as Manning-Carter claimed. By “critical social capital,” a term I borrow from sociologist Shawn A. Ginwright, I refer to human and material resources of an oppressed community that consists of social networks, associations, institutions, and relationships through which trust, values, norms, and beliefs are established with an emphasis on “the collective dimensions of community change” particularly “on how racial identity and political awareness serve as important community and social resource[s].” In regards to racial identity knowledge and political awareness, I am referencing what Tara Yosso has termed “transformative resistant capital,” or the “the cultural knowledge of
the structures of racism and the motivation to transform such oppressive structures.” 5 Critical social capital and transformative resistant capital refer to the same concept—an oppressed community or people’s use of their human and material resources to oppose their oppression. Therefore, I use the terms interchangeably.

Several core questions guide this study: (1) How did a diverse group of black men develop the critical social capital to generate norms and enough trust to coordinate organized collective action even though they differed greatly in terms of class, ideology, religion, approach to organization, and rootedness in the community? (2) How did the men in the NEMBC utilize the black community’s existing social capital to organize and mobilize the broader black community and non-black allies to challenge police brutality? (3) What role did gender, specifically masculinity, play in building a movement against police misconduct and use of excessive force? A related question is whether, over time, a male-centered approach impedes or facilitates democratic practices. (4) What are the differences between the organizing and mobilizing strategic approaches, and why does this matter? (5) Did moderate or militant tactics lead to greater success toward achieving NEMBC’s goals? I argue that the men in the NEMBC responded to what they believe was the murder of Kiwane Carrington in a variety of civic engagement activities that sought to mobilize the community’s transformative resistant capital to variously expand critical black social consciousness, organize black men into a militant social force, and mobilize the community to resist anti-black racial oppression across a range of arenas. In effect, the NEMBC sought to become what sociologist Aldon Morris has called a “local movement center,” an association designed to promote protest.6

Method

I collected data for this study during a two-and-a-half-year period (January 2010–July 2012) by participating in and observing the North End Men’s Breakfast Club. I supplemented the participant-observational data with primary documents from archival collections, newspapers, police video, governmental reports, and primary documents from community-based social justice organizations.

I did not begin my participation in NEMBC with the idea of studying it. In fact, many of the group’s early discussions concerned critiques of “university types” that “exploited” the community by using it as a research site without contributing to the community’s betterment. Operating from the black scholar-activist model, I intended to contribute my knowledge of African American history, radical politics, and social movement repertoires to the group, knowledge gained through both research and social activism. However, I intended to function mainly as an activist in this setting. As part of my involvement, I routinely participated in cooking breakfast, occasionally took notes during meetings, contributed to a wide range of discussions, led political education sessions, drafted resolutions, canvassed neighbor-
hoods, hosted fund-raisers for progressive black candidates, participated in town hall meetings, and attended and spoke at city council meetings.

Champaign, Illinois: A Profile in Race

Champaign, Illinois, is a racially diverse medium-sized community with a population of 81,055 whose economy is largely composed of service-based industries, according to the 2010 census. Individuals listed solely as non-Latino/a whites numbered 54,918 and comprised 64.8 percent of the city’s population. Folks claiming only a black or African American identity numbered 12,680 and composed 15.6 percent of the population. The 8,566 people classified as Asians made up 10.6 percent, while the 5,111 persons categorized as Latino/As represented 6.3 percent of the city’s population. The city’s economy, though varied, is dominated by the public sector: the University of Illinois leads local employment, Champaign Unit Four School District is second, Parkland College fourth, and the city itself ranks eighth. With 10,900 local employees, the University of Illinois employs 4,000 more workers than the city’s next nine employers combined. Indeed, at nearly 24 percent, “educational services” constitutes the most “common industry” and according to one index, at 8.5 percent, “postsecondary teachers” represent the most common occupation.7

As in the state and nation, African Americans in the Champaign-Urbana metro area are mired at the bottom, according to most social indicators.8 The North End (Census Track 2), in which half of the African Americans in Champaign reside, is 86.54 percent black. It has the second lowest median family income in the city, at $24,107, and the lowest per capita income at $11,064. At 27 percent it is the census track in which the largest percentage of households do not own a vehicle. From 2000 to 2010, the African American homeownership rate dropped 4.2 percent to 28.8 percent. Meanwhile Latino/As and American Indian homeownership grew nearly 10 percentage points, respectively, from 26.3 to 36.2 percent and from 46.6 to 57 percent. Despite the foreclose crisis sweeping the country, white American homeownership in Champaign remained remarkably stable at 65 percent between 2000 and 2010. The only racial/ethnic group with a lower homeownership rate than blacks, Asian/Pacific Islanders, witnessed nearly a 4 percentage-point growth during the period. Blacks also have the highest rate of preterm births. In 2007–2008, blacks had a preterm birthrate of 15.2 percent compared to 9.6 percent for Latino/As, 9.1 percent for whites, and 7.7 percent for Asian/Pacific Islanders. The Census Bureau also noted that only 9.5 percent of the city’s 1,123,817 businesses were “black-owned.”9

Apartheid/segregation remains strong in the Champaign-Urbana metro area.10 Scholars often use the Index of Dissimilarity to assess the extent of apartheid in a metropolitan area. The dissimilarity index calculates how evenly a racial group is distributed across a metropolitan area relative to another group. In the U.S. whites are generally used as the normative group. The dissimilarity ratio
reflects the percent of a racial group that would have to move to other neighborhoods for that group to be distributed across the community in the same proportions as the normative group. A value of zero represents complete integration, while a value of 100 percent signifies total apartheid. In 2010, African Americans had the highest rate of residential apartheid at 53.8 percent followed by Asian/Pacific Islanders at 49.5, Latino/as at 37.1, and American Indians/native Alaskans at 23 percent. Blacks also had the highest segregation/apartheid rate among public primary school students at 65.2 percent. Asians and Pacific Islanders were not far behind at 63.9 percent, followed by Latino/as at 60.5 percent.11

The social inequalities at the heart of African Americans’ existence in the city also structured their relationship with law enforcement. As an oppressed racialized community with an increasingly large sector of its population deemed superfluous by the new globalized information economy, working-class African Americans are increasingly targeted for more outrageous forms of social control. Although they constituted only 16 percent of this city’s population between 2007 and 2011, 40 percent of all arrestees were African American. In perhaps the most astonishing example of racially discriminatory policing, 658 or 88 percent of the 744 persons arrested for jaywalking in Champaign in 2011 were black. This particular act of racial profiling is exposed as even more repressive when it is revealed that: (1) a large number of these tickets are given for walking in the street in the same direction as traffic; (2) a disproportionate number of people are ticketed in an area that does not have sidewalks; and (3) jaywalking tickets carry a $120 fine. Arresting Champaign blacks for jaywalking serves many purposes. First, it functions as a terrorist device of social control. Second, it ensures that black youth that might otherwise escape the state’s criminal justice system are incorporated into it. Third, this discriminatory process generates revenues for the city by extracting a “Black While Walking” tax. These disparities underscored by policing data are only suggestive of the adverse historic and contemporary relationship between the African American community and the Champaign Police Department (CPD).12

Perhaps nowhere is this relationship more pronounced than with black male youth. Champaign police practice a “problem-centered policing” strategy that is predicated on racial profiling and zero tolerance toward African Americans. In the trial of Brian Chesley, a seventeen-year-old black youth who was charged with resisting arrest and obstructing a police officer, two CPD officers, Shannon Bridges and Andre Davis, testified that they had been ordered to “randomly stop African American youth in the North District, check their IDs, and run warrant checks.” They complied by “stopping individuals on vehicle code violations, stopping people at the park after close, things of that nature.” The testimony of officers Bridges and Davis supports the research of sociologist Ronald Weitzer. In his study of citizens’ assessments of race and the police, Weitzer found that while the race of the police officer and the racial composition of the community matters, a “neighborhood’s class po-
sition shapes police-citizen relations” more. “Spartanburg,” the Washington, D.C., neighborhood that experienced the worst policing of the three neighborhoods studied by Weitzer, was a “lower class” black neighborhood, while the other two were white and black middle-class neighborhoods. Thus, what Weitzer discovered was the relationship between race and class. In that sense, Champaign’s North End is quite similar to the Spartanburg neighborhood, in that it is a largely working-class African American neighborhood.

However, overly aggressive policing of the North End is not the only social control mechanism the CPD has for harassing black youth. The CPD places school resource officers (SROs) in the Champaign public schools. In the 2006–2007 school year, the SROs had contact with 683 students that resulted “in suspensions, custodial arrests, and criminal charges.” Of these, 87.6 percent were black. A year later, in the 2007–2008 school year, nearly half of all black students, 49 percent, had contact with the SROs. That year, blacks constituted 84 percent of students arrested. Zac, a neighbor of Kiwane Carrington and also a local high school student, commented on the relationship between African American youth and the CPD. He observed, “They may not always be violent with us, but I’ve been in some pretty hostile situations with the police before, even though I’m always calm and respectful to them.” The aggressive policing of the North End and the SROs combine to snare a large percentage of black Champaign residents in the racist web of Champaign County’s judicial system. In addition to this legacy of racial discrimination and repression, the CPD also has a history of killing African Americans.

The History of Police Abuse of the Black Community in Champaign, Illinois

The history of the black community’s violent relationship with the CPD is partly reflected in the department’s historic hiring practices. Only 6, or less than 5 percent, of the 121 CPD officers were black in 2010. The CPD’s alienation from the black community is exacerbated by the officers’ place of residence. A full 75 percent of CPD officers live outside the corporate boundaries of the university town. Police officers’ residency is important for two reasons. First, until 1970, CPD officers were required to reside in the city’s corporate boundaries. After a successful school desegregation suit by the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), the bargaining unit for the CPD, demanded that the city’s residency requirement be rescinded. After some wrangling the city caved in. According to Champaign-Urbana (CU) Citizens for Peace and Justice researcher Kerry Pimblott, the city twice expanded its residency boundaries in 1970, but “eventually, handed decision-making power to the police department and the police union.” Today there are no residency requirements for city employees. The second reason residency matters is that three-quarters of CPD officers reside in surrounding suburban communities, many if not most of which, according to historical
sociologist James Loewen, are sundown towns. These are communities that as the name suggests either by law or custom and history prevent or minimize African American residence and enforce a sunset curfew for blacks. That police officers choose not to live in Champaign is somewhat surprising since out of 331 cities it was ranked the 33rd “best place to live” by Sperlings’ “Best Places to Live,” in 2005, and the fourth best college town in 2012 by Livability.15 Most CPD officers live in one of the historically sundown towns that surround Champaign, in virtually all-white communities like Monticello, Mahomet, Effingham, Arcola, Homer, and St. Joseph.16

Racial disparities in surveillance and arrest flow from the role police play in a racial capitalist state. This role—surveillance, containment, and repression—is reflected in the CPD’s racial composition, its officers’ racial attitudes, the department’s policing strategy, and officers’ alienation from the city in which they work. The racial disparities in policing are revealed in a range of statistical data collected by the government as well as in the memories of African Americans.

The starkness of the racial disparities revealed by the arrest data for 2007–2011 largely explains why relations between the African American community and the CPD have been so tense the last few years. While African Americans are arrested at more than 2.6 times their percentage in the population, whites and Asians are arrested well below their percentage and Latino/as are arrested slightly below their percentage of the population.

The disparities in the policing data partially explain why other racialized communities have not joined blacks in struggling against police misconduct and abuse. As the policing and other data discussed in this article reveal, blacks bear the brunt of racial oppression in Champaign.

The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) began collecting racial profiling statistics in 2004, after then–state senator Barack Obama successfully sponsored two pieces of legislation: in 2003, the Illi-

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Source: Champaign Police Department

nois Public Act 93-0209, 93rd General Assembly, *An Act Requiring Data Collection*, and in 2006, Illinois Public Act 94-997, 94th General Assembly, *An Act Concerning Transportation*. The two acts require police to collect data on each traffic stop, including information on race, gender, the reasons for the stop, whether a search was conducted, and whether a citation was issued. In 2008, the state began requiring police to visually record all traffic stops and to turn in the data to IDOT. The information is given to Northwestern University, which calculates a “disparity index” for each municipal, county, and campus police department. If members of oppressed racialized communities (African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and American Indians) and whites were stopped equally, the figure would be 1.0. If the number was 1.50, it would mean that members of an oppressed racialized community were pulled over 50 percent more for a routine traffic stop than whites.  

The IDOT data reveals that the Champaign Police Department has consistently stopped African Americans at a disproportionate rate. Over the eight-year period from 2004 to 2011, Champaign police had an index of 1.48, meaning they stopped African Americans 48 percent more often than whites.

Champaign-Urbana Citizens for Peace and Justice (CUCPJ), a decade-old local social and racial justice organization, has documented numerous incidents of police use of excessive force, including the killings of four African Americans between 1970 and 2009.  

- April 29, 1970: Champaign police officer Fred Eastman shot and killed Edgar Hoults, a twenty-three-year-old family man. Eastman was chasing Hoults through a field northwest of Dunbar Court in Urbana when he allegedly tripped while firing a warning shot. Hoults was shot in the back of the head. Contradicting Eastman, witnesses claimed they saw him take aim and fire at Hoults, killing him.
- 1971: Seventeen-year-old James Williams was killed by CPD. Police claimed he was a gang member, part of the Vice Lords, and that he was shot by gang members during a crossfire between police and gangs. Four years later, it was revealed that police covered up officer Michael Parker’s wrongful killing of Williams.
- October 8, 2000: Late at night, Gregory Brown, a developmentally disabled man, was beaten in an alleyway.
by over a dozen Champaign police officers. Witnesses heard Brown crying for help and telling police he could not breathe. He died of a heart attack.

- March 2007: Four Champaign police officers were observed by dozens of witnesses throwing a black seventeen-year-old against a fence, then dragging him into the middle of the street, where they pressed their knees into his body against the concrete, and repeatedly pepper-sprayed the youth in his face. He had to be taken to the hospital for treatment. Two officers later testified at trial that CPD officers were required to randomly check the IDs of anyone in the Douglass Park area (considered an African American neighborhood) for outstanding warrants and to enter their personal information into the CPD’s computer database. The youth had refused to present his ID, and walked away. According to eyewitnesses, the CPD officers falsified probable cause by alleging the youth was trespassing in a closed park after dark, despite the Champaign Park District’s late-night programming that night. The youth was never charged with trespassing by the state’s attorney’s office, but was found guilty of misdemeanor resisting arrest and obstruction of justice.

- July 24, 2007: Champaign police officers chased a fleeing suspect into the home of Mildred Davis, a sixty-two-year-old, and fired around thirty bullets into the house despite being told by people outside that Davis and others were inside. In the home with Davis were her two-year-old great-grandson and two grandchildren. Fortunately, no one was injured during this incident.

These incidents of disparate surveillance, arrests, misconduct, and use of excessive force, including deadly force, represent not isolated incidents or aberrations, but crimes of control—wrongdoings committed by agents of the state, criminalities that are necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of the system of racial capitalist domination. That large segments of the African American population have been made superfluous by the transformation to financialized global racial capitalism has made black life less valuable than at any other time in the last century.20

Marginalized from the economy, and victims of brutal racist repression, it is no wonder; according to sociologist Anthony J. Lemelle, working-class black men are “alienated from the cultural values of the propertyed and professional-managerial elite.” Their disaffection from white bourgeois values and norms is reinforced by the legacy of police terror. Widespread police misconduct and brutality has convinced large sectors of African Americans that the police are “an occupying army,” in the words of Black Panther Party founder Huey P. Newton.21 Lemelle’s interviews with working-class African American men confirm that this perception extends beyond radical activists. According to him:

Their relationship with the police operates in a way similar to the relationship of police to colonized and neocolonized populations in Third World countries. While most Americans believe that the police
function to protect and serve the community, black males most often perceive the police as settler agents whose intentions are to “set up,” “hold down,” and “roll on” the community.\textsuperscript{22}

In part due to their awareness of racial injustices, African Americans have resisted their intensifying oppression through a variety of means.

The collective memory of the African American community and social justice organizations document a long, disreputable history of racially motivated abuse by the CPD. Each incident sparked outrage and each generation of black activists drew from the well of transformative resistant capital at their disposal. Individuals have sued the city; groups have negotiated with the city and the CPD; while others have protested police misconduct and use of excessive force. In recent years, a number of blacks have sued and the city has settled several wrongful death and misconduct suits out of court. The family of previously mentioned Gregory Brown, who died of a heart attack after being severely beaten by fourteen CPD officers in 2000, was awarded $185,000. Even though three governmental entities found Kiwan’s death accidental and Je-shaun Manning’s civil suit was dismissed, the city paid his estate $470,000 for wrongful death. Brandon Ward and Gary McFarland, victims of police use of excessive force, received $45,000 and $50,000, respectively. Additionally, local activists Martel Miller and Patrick Thompson reached an unreported out-of-court settlement of a civil suit alleging civil rights violations after they were charged with “felony eavesdropping” for videotaping CPD officers’ differential treatment of African American and white suspects in the North End and in campus town, the university’s business district.\textsuperscript{23} In 1976, African American community activists; Larine Cowen, then director of the city’s community relations department; and Thomas Moore, a university professor, collaborated with police officers and a white university professor to teach police how to better communicate with the community and the public to better understand the difficulty of police officers’ role. In 1998, the NAACP and Urban League collaborated to press the city and the CPD on a variety of issues. The two local affiliates of national organizations requested the creation of a citizen review board, diversification of the police workforce, abolition of racial profiling and
pretextual traffic stops, mandatory diversity training, and increased opportunities for minority contractors. Out of these negotiations came the Champaign Community and Police Partnership (CCAPP), whose stated purpose was “to seek solutions to policing issues raised by the African American community that will improve community and police relations.”

The killing of Kiwane Carrington enraged the black community and sparked a new level of militant resistance. According to the News-Gazette, “The blast of Norbits’ gunshot . . . might as well been the detonation of a bomb. . . . Relations between the city’s police force and the black community had already been splintered, but on that day they shattered.” Police–black community relations were not the only relations fragmented by Kiwane’s killing, however. How to respond to this latest police killing divided the black community. Militants and radicals led by Aaron and Carol Ammons, Martel Miller, and CUCPJ immediately called for criminal charges against Norbits, the firing of Chief Finney and City Manager Steve Carter, and mobilization to defeat Mayor Jerry Schweignt and State’s Attorney Julia Riez in the April elections. Additionally, on October 22, in conjunction with the National Day of Protest to Stop Police Brutality and in honor of Kiwane, CUCPJ initiated an annual march and rally against police brutality. The CUCPJ marches featured militant rhetoric and pushed toward mass direct action.

What made the response to the killing of Kiwane Carrington different is that by 2009, the CUCPJ and its leading African American male activist, Aaron Ammons, had created a network of multiracial militant activists, and the black activists in CUCPJ’s orbit publicly challenged more moderate African American leaders. The ensuing anger over Kiwane’s killing moved militant activists to call for the disbanding of CCAPP, which ironically was partly a product of a previous generation of African American activists. Militants, however, believed the group often rationalized police misconduct. Long-time local activist Terry Townsend charged CCAPP acted like “a secret society” and that it “encouraged inter-group conflict and silence from [black community] leaders.” Addressing the city council, Carol Ammons, a leader in CUCPJ, claimed, “This group (CCAPP) is not vetted publicly or voted on by council.” Going further, she stated, “I challenge you (the council) to look carefully at the ongoing mission of CCAPP.” Failing to get CCAPP abolished, the militants called for black community members to resign and deemed those who continued to cooperate with it collaborators.

The demand that black members resign generated even more enmity between black male militant and moderate activists. One reason the debate over CCAPP turned hostile was that a Freedom of Information Act search revealed that two African American leaders, former city council member Gina
Jackson and Rev. Jerome Chambers, then president of the local NAACP branch, were forwarding e-mails from CUCPJ activists to City Manager Steve Carter, who passed them on to Chief Finney. The public nature of what can only be described as confrontations led Champaign native William Patterson, affectionately known as “Dr. P,” to organize biweekly early Saturday morning meetings at the Don Moyer Boys & Girls Club to “settle beefs between Black men in private.”

The NEMBC was born out of the antagonistic political divide that developed as different groups of black men sought to lead a fight-back strategy in response to the killing of Kiwane Carrington. Initially the club was conceived as a “safe space” where combatants could discuss their differences within the “family.” The CCAPP controversy took concrete form through a “beef” or heated political dispute between Rev. Chambers and future NEMBC member Rev. Troy Burks. It was ultimately resolved or at least put to rest when Burks defeated Chambers for the local NAACP presidency. The centrality of mediation characterized the group’s mission. It sought “to organize Black men to create a safe space for sincere discussion and debate designed to formulate strategies and actions designed to eliminate inequalities and injustices.” In addition to intercession, the group sought to “develop a brotherhood” and to build on “the social traditions of the community” as they pursued “reparative justice.” In addition, the killing of Kiwane opened a dialogue between black members of CUCPJ and men who wanted to construct a militant all-black group that would work in alliance with CUCPJ but would focus exclusively on organizing the African American community. Within a year, the men had developed enough trust to transform this network of politically and ideologically diverse black men into a vehicle for social movement activism.

The North End Men’s Breakfast Club: A Profile of Black Cultural Homogeneity and Political Diversity

The network of black men took its name partly from the historic designation of the African American community and partly from its primary unifying activity. Originally the North End was designated Germantown, named for the nationality of its most populous residents, but during the early 1930s, black laborers recruited by the Illinois Central Railroad began moving into the area to be near their jobs. Typical of urban community formation in the United States, the African American presence sparked an exodus by the German families, prompting the phenomenon that sociologists would later call “white flight.” As the labor migration of African Americans from southern Illinois, Arkansas, and Mississippi accelerated, real estate agents steered them into the northeast area crisscrossed by the railroad tracks and bounded on the north by Bradley Avenue, on the south by University Avenue, by Wright Street on the east, and by First Street and the Illinois Central railroad tracks on the west. In 1951, the federal government facilitated ghettoization by building apartheid low-income public housing in what was then known as “the Negro community.” Soon that ethnic designation was replaced...
with a geographic euphemism, “the North End.”

The spatial designation came to serve as a metaphor for the African American community: for whites it symbolizes an impoverished rough area populated by legions of culturally deprived, shiftless, criminally inclined, undeserving black poor; for the indigenous black Champaign resident, the North End represents the memories of youth and signifies the spatial boundaries in which the core institutions of black civil society are located. It is in this area that one finds the core institutions that shape and define Champaign’s black civil society: Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in 1863; Salem Baptist Church, 1867; the Church of the Living God, affectionately known as the “Love Corner,” founded in 1946; the Frederick Douglass Center, a library and recreation center, which began operation in 1970. Additionally, First Street is the site of the old black business district. Thus, by taking the name “North End” the breakfast club signaled that it was an indigenous organization concerned with the interests of the African American community.

The ritual of collectively eating breakfast is the other source of the group’s name. In part, this rite is functional, since they meet from 6 to 10 a.m. every first and third Saturday. However, more important, eating breakfast together also works to build critical commonalities among the diverse group of black men. First, everyone performs some task: some cook, others set up, and still others clean up. Food preparation generally involves free-flowing discussions in which the men often joke about one another, share news and information, and debate music, politics, and sports. Second, each meeting begins with the men forming a circle around the dining table and holding hands; because of the group’s religious diversity, individuals provide Christian and Muslim prayers, and a moment of silence for the non-religious members. Third, each meeting ends with a similar ritual. Collectively, the rituals facilitate the building of trust and work to establish a norm of inclusivity.

The NEMBC consists of a core group of sixteen, though meetings often include twenty-five or more participants. The men range in age from thirty to sixty-one. Most men, however, are in their early to mid-forties. In terms of the ascribed social characteristics of race, gender, and nationality, the NEMBC is quite homogenous. All are black and all but one is African American. The non–African American is from South Africa, where he was classified as “coloured,” a mixed-race category consisting of descendants of various southern African ethnicities and the white Afrikaners. In terms of nativity, the group is largely indigenous to the region. Almost all spent their formative years in central Illinois in towns and cities with small African American populations that ranged from 9 percent to 12 percent. Of the three members born outside of Champaign-Urbana, two are from places within an hour’s driving distance, Decatur and Rantoul, and the third is from Cape Town, South Africa. Most grew up in working-class families with both parents present, at least during their pre-adolescent years. Ten of the core group played high school sports—football, basketball, baseball, wrestling, or ran track. A few currently serve the community as coaches. Almost all were raised in the traditional core African
American culture that emphasized collectivity or group centeredness and valued sharing; mutuality; spirituality; being genuine, expressive, and assertive; coolness; toughness; having personal style; and skepticism of whites and those working for the power structure, especially the police. Music is essential to the group: 1970s rhythm and blues or soul and neo-soul music, particularly the music of individual artists like Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, and Curtis Mayfield and groups like the Impressions, the O’Jays and the Isley Brothers. Soul music serves as a source of shared experiences, common feelings, and life philosophy. R&B music assists the group in generating an ethic of brotherhood. Race combines with masculinity, generation, and lived experience, both in terms of a shared culture and shared experiences, especially confrontations with racial oppression, particularly racial encounters with public school teachers and police, to create a shared outlook.

Though they have similar lived experiences and share a common culture, the men are quite diverse in class position and religion, and in their ideological, political, and strategic and tactical beliefs. In terms of class, the middle-class stratum consists of entrepreneurial and professional-managerial-technical segments. The entrepreneurial stratum includes three members; two own retail businesses while the other is in real estate. About half the men are employed in the “management, professional and related occupations” category. Two are in educational administration, three are university professors, one works in the finance industry, one is a supervisor, and another is in sales. About a third of the men work in traditional working-class job categories or are unemployed. Of the working-class members, two work in construction, one in janitorial service, and two are unemployed. Eight, or 50 percent, of the men work for the University of Illinois, the city’s largest employer. Religion and spirituality are very important to most group members. Most are participating members in black Christian denominations—Baptist, African Methodist, or Pentecostal—though a fourth of the members are Muslim, and at least one is agnostic and another atheist. Despite differences in faith, the men share a core set of values that renders the religious differences largely moot.

The group is homogeneous in other ways. Like a significant percentage of African American men in the U.S., almost all have had negative encounters with the police. A third have been incarcerated for three years or more and half have an adult police record. Undoubtedly, the individual members’ own histories with the police and the judicial system largely explain their focus on issues of police misconduct and abuse. That many of the men overcame their encounters with the “injustice” system to rejoin society and become successful working- or middle-class men, even though a few because of felony convictions cannot vote, also serves as a unifying experience.

However, the most critical differences are located not in class position or religion but in ideology, politics, and strategies and tactics for social change. The men in the NEMBC can be divided into three groups: black liberals, moderate conservatives, and nationalistic black radicals. These political classifications mirror four of the five ideological categories identified by political scientist
Michael Dawson in *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African American Ideologies*. Like Afro-America, most of the members are ideological and political liberals. They believe racial oppression is endemic to the U.S. and while quite critical of “American democracy,” much of their critique concerns the country’s hypocrisy—its exclusion of blacks from the “American dream.” Perhaps because they are indigenous, they support core black institutions and unlike an emerging trend among the community’s middle class, they remain faithful to black social institutions—churches, fraternities, etc., and African American core culture. Like modern liberals, they believe in the power of knowledge, diversity, racial justice, the free market, but with strong regulatory and redistributive policies. Their main interest is in racial equity—inclusion in governing structures, proportional representation—on decision-making bodies. Led by the liberals, about half of the core group believes primarily in the tactics of personal relationships and quiet negotiation. This strategic difference largely reflects the members’ ideological orientation. While supportive of protest, they believe politics is the realm through which social change occurs, thus they place great importance on electoral politics and inclusion in appointed positions and on appointed boards and commissions.\(^{31}\)

As the designation suggests, the moderate conservatives are quite complicated. In many ways they are traditional conservatives but in matters of race, they often act like liberals. Unlike most contemporary conservatives, they believe racism remains a major feature of present-day U.S. society. They view the Tea Party as a white supremacist venture. They are conservative on many social issues, believe in individualism and volunteerism, or self-help and uplift, and even when they are willing to challenge racist outcomes, they usually begin an analysis by condemning the behavior of blacks. They generally support neoliberal free-market approaches, but contradictorily are strident supporters of set-asides for black- and minority-owned businesses. Getting a “piece of the pie” for African American businesses is their primary concern. The moderate conservatives’ percentage in NEMBC is greater than the percentage of black Republicans, locally and nationally. They constitute a quarter of NEMBC’s core group, whereas a June 2009 Gallup poll found that only 2 percent of registered Republicans were African Americans.\(^{32}\)

The nationalistic radicals also bridge two of Dawson’s ideological categories, black nationalism and black radicalism. They generally support what I call proto-nationalism or what political scientists Michael Dawson, Robert A. Brown, and Todd C. Shaw refer to as “community nationalism.”\(^{33}\) This type of nationalism sees African Americans as a distinct people, supports the maintenance of independent black institutions, the preservation of or actually the continued reproduction of an autonomous core culture, and advocates self-determination, but not necessarily in the form of an autonomous nation-state. Their radicalism is reflected in their desire for social transformation. The nationalistic radicals are critical of capitalism. Some are socialists; all believe in black community control, support unions, and advocate multiracial alliances with political progressives. The radicals’ main areas of
concern are police brutality and racialized incarceration, and jobs with a living wage.⁴⁴

Even given this diversity of political thought and tactical preferences, the men share some political perspectives. Led by the nationalistic radicals, half of the men prefer tactics that emphasize community organization, contestation, and public protest. All believe in using the ballot, though for different reasons and with differing levels of preference. Half of the core group consistently votes for Democratic Party candidates, though about a third occasionally vote for the Green Party or the most leftist candidate. Four of the core group, including one Muslim, generally vote Republican, except against a black candidate. Interestingly, President Barack Obama was subjected to harsh critique, especially from the Republicans and radicals: one for undermining the free market, the other because he has not seriously challenged the 1 percent, addressed issues of racial oppression, and for his imperialist adventures, especially the use of drones. Nonetheless, the group unanimously supported his reelection.

**Resistance and Affirmation: Struggles for Social Change and Constructing a Black Consciousness**

Initially, NEMBC was viewed as a safe space where activists could share, process differences, and announce upcoming events. They initially focused on resolving heated “beefs” among individual activists, developing a mission statement, creating a structure for conducting meetings, building trust, and holding what Black Power activists called “consciousness raising” sessions. Perhaps, overly, desiring the participation of young adults, the group began with a utopian approach to meeting facilitation; they had the youngest person facilitate each meeting. The organized portion of each meeting generally occurred from 8 to 10 a.m., during which the men ate and engaged in discussion and planning. After the ritualized beginning and brief introductions, the conversation began with what the group calls “family time,” or dialogue about personal or political problems between individuals. The rest of the meeting, about seventy-five to ninety minutes, is dedicated to a set topic. In the beginning, the men discussed their developmental experiences, holding discussions on topics like “What it means to be a man/How being black complicates manhood”; “What is blackness?”; “Relations with fathers”; “Inclusion and working relationships with black women activists”; and “U of I researchers’ exploitation of the black community.” Occasionally, the group watched video clips, including the confrontation between Al Sharpton and Tavis Smiley, discussed the different political positions of President Barack Obama and Cornel West, or had presentations on local programs such as UC2B, Urbana-Champaign’s big broadband initiative, and opportunities for jobs and black business involvement. Workshops were also held on “Racial Formation and Transformation in African American History” and “Social Movements and Electoral Politics.” Collectively, these activities were essential to the group developing trust, establishing norms, and building a sense of brotherhood.

By fall 2010, a small inner circle of the most active members had emerged;
inclusive of members from each of the three factions, they pushed for more structure. They restructured NEMBC into three working groups: political action, political education, and social welfare and economic development. The task forces consisted of core members and others and met outside of the Saturday morning meetings.

The group’s reorganization proved timely. In November 2010, with the election for mayor, the city council, and the school board scheduled for April 2011, Craig Walker proposed the group participate in the upcoming elections. Led by Walker, the political action and political education task forces constructed an electoral empowerment plan, “Project Vote.” The electoral plan provided a unified focus for the fledgling organization but it also reflected political and ideological fissures within the group. All factions desired to elect NEMBC member Jamar Brown to the school board. The radicals saw the campaign as “punishing” Jerry Schweighart, the Republican mayor, while the moderate-conservatives saw the project as supporting the candidacy of Democrat Don Gerard.

**Defeat Schweighart/Elect Brown**

Over the course of his thirty-year career as a police officer and as mayor since 1999, Schweighart had developed an especially hostile relationship with Champaign’s African American community. Martel Miller, a group member who settled a civil suit against the police in 2004 for “felony eavesdropping,” for videotaping police, recalled that Schweighart had beat him with a billy club when he was fifteen. Schweighart had been particularly vociferous in his defense of Officer Norbits and resisted the city council’s decision to settle with the Carrington family. And on April 16, 2010, in a video interview that went viral making national news, Schweighart acknowledged his membership in the Tea Party and when asked what he thought about President Barack Obama, replied, “I don’t think he’s an American, personally. . . . You know, if you’re not willing to produce an original certificate, a birth certificate, then you’ve got something to hide.” Schweighart’s racist comments proved especially useful in mobilizing the African American community to vote against him in the April election.35

From December to April, members of the political action and political education task forces canvassed door to door several times a week in the seven precincts that compose District 1, the center of the North End. Additionally, they sponsored town hall meetings at churches and the Frederick Douglass Community Center, attended candidate forums, posted signs with a black panther and the words “Dignity, Power, Vote” throughout the North End, and sponsored fund-raisers for Brown.

Brown was elected and Schweighart was defeated in the April 2011 elections. Brown received 5,033 votes, 18.89 percent of the ballots cast, to clinch the fourth and final position. Gerard garnered 4,317 votes to Schweighart’s 4,087, a difference of 230. In District 1, he received 572 votes to the birther’s 243, a difference of 329. Analysts of the mayoral election calculate that the vote in District 1 increased by 77 percent and the 329-vote margin for Gerard largely explains Schweighart’s defeat. In a post-campaign
interview Schweighart gave his interpretation of why he lost. “District one because it’s interested in firing the chief of police and they got commitments from the candidates they would work to do that,” explained Schweighart. “They felt I was the only obstacle from keeping that from happening; if I was gone they would get the votes to do it.” Despite the skepticism of the nationalistic radicals, largely through Walker, who also served as his campaign manager, Gerard had developed a relationship with the NEMBC. Shortly after the election, Gerard met with the NEMBC. Two club members, core member William Patterson and Andre Lotts, were appointed to his eleven-member transition team. And as Schweighart had predicted, within a few months, the group had assembled enough council votes to remove Chief Finney.36

Resignation of Chief Finney and Appointment of Anthony Cobb

On August 22, 2011, four months after the mayoral election, Chief Finney announced his impending retirement for January 20, 2012. However, after two additional high-profile incidents of police use of excessive force and charges of corruption from within the CPD, he was forced to resign six weeks sooner than he desired. Reluctantly, City Manager Steve Carter accepted Finney’s resignation and appointed Deputy Chief Holly Nearing as chief, effective December 5, 2011.37

In the first incident, the police attempted to pull over Calvin Miller, Martel Miller’s eighteen-year-old son, for a traffic violation on October 24. Rather than pull over in a darkened area, young Miller drove for home. After exiting his still-moving vehicle, Miller fled. Police ran him down and upon capture apparently administered a brutal beating off camera. Miller’s Carle Hospital report revealed two bruised ribs; a severely sprained ankle; and as the photo above shows, a lump on the right side of his head and his right eye was swollen shut.38

In response, the NEMBC and CUCPJ organized a large demonstration at the October 25 city council meeting. This council meeting did not have a public comment section but when Mayor Gerard attempted to “recess the meeting” to determine whether the council would hear public comments, “the mood in the chamber quickly became tense.” Essentially, activists seized control of this public space. It was clear they were not going to leave without addressing the
council. The council swiftly decided to hear from the public. Still dissatisfied, activists left the meeting determined to return in greater force.  

In large part due to Martel Miller’s call for the “whole community” to attend the next city council meeting, the next week, November 1, 250 people packed council chambers. In an ironic expression of political theater, social justice activists literally sat mainly on the left while CPD officers and their supporters sat largely on the right. Members of CUCPJ and NEMBC called for a citizens’ review board, drug testing after an officer fired a weapon, and a residency requirement. NEMBC member Byron Clark charged, “The problem is that there’s no accountability in the police department. They don’t have the ability to police themselves.” CPD officers vigorously denied accusations of racism. African American school resource officer and native Champaign resident Jonathan Westfield alleged blacks used race as an excuse. He stated, “It’s easy to blame someone else, to use race as a scapegoat, because it draws attention. . . . It deflects blame away from somewhere else.” Initially, the heated council meetings looked like a stalemate, but as pressure continued and another incident came to light, the city first attempted to sell City Manager Carter’s six initiatives for improving police-community relations and then negotiated with activists.  

On February 22, 2010, City Manager Carter announced his six initiatives. Three of the more “substantial” initiatives called for the city to “review the current police complaint process,” “review the police officer recruitment and selection process,” and “work with African American community members to create a new police officer community orientation program.” The city launched an elaborate process, a series of community forums on police community relations, which culminated in recommendations derived from Carter’s innocuous initiatives. Carter’s plan was derailed when a video surfaced of CPD officers Brian Ashell and Patrick Simon’s harassment, pepper spraying, and choking of Brandon Ward, a twenty-year-old African American man (ucmc.org/content/video-champaign-police-choking-black-youth-while-handcuffs). In response to this latest incident of police brutality, approximately 100 people, mostly African American, met in a town hall meeting at Salem Baptist Church. After ninety minutes of presentations and discussion, the gathering unanimously endorsed the eight demands presented by the NEMBC. The NEMBC demands ran counter to Carter’s initiatives. They demanded Carter be immediately placed on “administrative leave without pay” while his role in creating and maintaining “the culture of racial discrimination—racial profiling, excessive force and misconduct—that pervaded the Champaign Police Department” was investigated. Additionally, the NEMBC reiterated the community’s traditional demands for a citizens’ review board with subpoena power and a local residency requirement.
The video of Ward’s unprovoked choking swept away the CPD’s remaining credibility. In the context of settling lawsuits, marches, demonstrations, town hall meetings, and confrontations in council chambers, the city launched its search for a new police chief. When word leaked that Carter was leaning toward selecting the most militaristic candidate, Gregory Anderson, chief of police in Oak Forest, Illinois, a community with a 3.64 percent black population, NEMBC members immediately informed Gerard and members of the council that anyone but Anthony Cobb, a local African American, would ensure continued disruption of council meetings and an escalation of mobilizations against the city. On January 27, 2012, City Manager Carter announced Cobb, then the assistant chief of police in Champaign’s twin city of Urbana, as the city’s new chief of police. With Cobb in office and with City Manager Carter’s announcement of his retirement in October 2012, effective March 29, 2013, the two individuals activists considered most responsible for the racist policing strategy were no longer in office.

Champaign previously had an African American police chief, William Dye, from 1975 to 1982, so, African American activists and their social justice allies in CUCPJ clearly understand Chief Cobb will not be a panacea. However, during his candidacy, Cobb publicly endorsed a citizens’ review board and his record suggested he would be an advocate for positive change. Indeed for Cobb to be successful in reconstructing the CPD, local activists must continue to use a variety of tactics, including militant actions, to pressure the Champaign City Council to enact progressive reforms.

Discussion

Over the past few decades, much research has focused on the alleged dysfunctional character and nihilism of black men. This paper repositions discussions of black men by examining the struggle of a cross-class, politically and ideologically diverse group of black men utilizing critical social capital to respond to and resist police brutality and to transform the system of racial oppression in Champaign, Illinois.

Given their differences in class position, ideology, religion, and approach to social change, how did the NEMBC members unite to successfully challenge police brutality in Champaign? I contend that NEMBC worked with the transformative resistant capital embedded in black civil society, in the neighborhood-based networks of collective interests, collective identities, mutual trust, and people’s shared capacity to act in their own collective interest.

1. NEMBC used critical dialogues to build trust and establish norms for political and personal relations.
2. NEMBC used dialogues and political education to challenge negative concepts of African Americans, and social policies and practices that negatively affected the black community. By actively resisting manifestations of antiblack racist ideology, NEMBC built critical social capital through racial solidarity, and shifted the interpretative frame from the notion that black men in particular and blacks in general are “a social problem” to the idea that they are “civic problem solvers.”

Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua

“We Believe It Was Murder”
NEMBC spent nine months basically developing trust through a series of dialogues in which members shared deeply personal information about their upbringing, experiences, and core values. During this period, members discussed their relationships with their fathers, women, sense of blackness, and conception of manhood/black manhood. William Cross’s Nigrescence theory of black identity development was used to help members process incidents of racial discrimination as well as their feelings toward whites, the United States, and black people as a group. Because individuals revealed so much of themselves in these discussions, they developed a bond that transcended their politics, ideology, and approach to social change.

3. Working within the geographic space of the black community, NEMBC used the black community’s sense of itself as a distinct community to deepen its sense of political efficacy.

4. NEMBC used the existing social capital, the existing institutions within the black community, to facilitate its organizing strategy.

Even though several NEMBC core members lived outside of the North End, the organization resisted notions that the black community no longer was an enclave confined within the spatial boundaries of the North End. NEMBC, especially the nationalistic radicals, argued that as long as the largest concentration of blacks and their core institutions were located in the North End, any strategy of liberation required organizing the residents living in that geographic area. This perspective was largely shared across the radical, liberal, and conservative divide. The NEMBC drew on black civil society, the established institutions, and African American core culture to create a sense of brotherhood within the group and a sense of peoplehood in the broader community.

5. NEMBC members created or used new critical social capital to organize African Americans.

In 2006, as part of the Department of African American Studies conference “Race, Roots, and Resistance: Revisiting Black Power,” future NEMBC members William Patterson, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, and Aaron Ammons created Song Poetry Education Arts Knowledge (SPEAK) Café, a spoken-word hip-hop venue for students and youth in the community. SPEAK Café continues. Aaron and Carol Ammons host a weekly radio show, Common Ground, and in early 2012, Patterson launched a weekly hip-hop radio show. These vehicles along with Imani Bazell’s ACCESS LIVE radio program were used to “Agitate, educate, organize.” In these ways, relatively new cultural resources were mobilized to facilitate the acquisition of a critical black social consciousness.

In the wake of what many African Americans believed was the murder of fifteen-year-old Kiwane Carrington, a diverse group of black men over a two-year period mobilized critical social capital—nativity, generation, a problematicized black masculinity, a shared African American core culture, and a history of personal encounters with antiblack racial oppression, especially police misconduct and brutality—to minimize their class, po-
political, ideological, and strategic and tactical differences. An inner core group of about eight men representing the three ideological and political orientations within the group built on the community’s traditions of using transformative resistant capital to use the community’s geographic concentration, historic institutions, a political alliance with a progressive multiracial organization, and the creation of new cultural institutions to successfully challenge virulent ubiquitous police brutality in Champaign, Illinois.

Notes


10. I am substituting the concept apartheid for segregation or Jim Crow because it is a harder term, a concept that is not easily separated from white supremacy. In the contemporary U.S., segregation has been stripped of its relationship to white supremacist power and is normally conceived of as simply racial separation that leads to individuals often equating the establishment of black/Africana studies academic units, black cultural centers, or even black students sitting together as equivalent to policies and customs that created or reinforced white domination and black subordination. See Winston A. Grady-Willis, Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 196–01977 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), xvii–xviii.


16. Loewen identifies 500 sundown towns in Illinois including nearby communities of Monticello, Mahomet, Effingham, Arcola, Homer, and St. Joseph, which are home to many CPD officers. According to the 2010 census, 26 blacks resided in Monticello composing 0.5 percent of the town’s 5,379 population; the 34 African Americans in Mahomet also composed 0.5 percent of its 6,566 population; Effingham’s 83 blacks represent 0.7 percent of its 11,671 population; only 9 blacks live in Arcola composing 0.3 percent of the 1,988 population; Homer’s 2 African Americans compose 0.2 percent of the town’s 1,156 population; and the 14 blacks in St. Joseph compose 0.4 percent of the community’s 3,796 residents; City-Data.Com; Kerry Pimblott, “Beyond City Limits: Race, Residency and Champaign Police Department,” CU Citizens for Peace and Justice, 1; James Loewen, Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism (New York: Touchstone, 2005), 4; Ida, “Whites Only After Dark”: Historian James Loewen uncovers Illinois’ legacy of Sundown Towns,” Urbana-Champaign Independent Media Center, September 10, 2007, ucimc.org/content/whites-only-after-dark-historian-james-loewen-uncovers-illinois-legacy-sundown-towns; James Loewen, “Was Your Town a Sundown Town?” UUWorld.Org, February 15, 2008, uuworld.org/life/articles/90579.shtml; Jessica Crowe, “The Influence of Racial Histories on Economic Development Strategies,” Ethnic and Racial Studies 35, no. 11 (November 2012): 1955–1973.


21. Anthony J. Lemelle, Black Male Deviance

22. Lemelle, Black Male Deviance, 40.


27. Brian Dolinar, “FOIA’d Emails in Kiwane Carrington Case Reveal Monitoring of Local


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eventually pled guilty to two misdemeanors and
was sentenced to eighteen months’ probation,
100 hours of community service, and $1,700 in
restitution to the owner of the home his vehicle
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“Champaign Council Hears Accusation Against
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