

# Planning from the Black Counterpublic

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## Abstract

The Boston Black United Front (BBUF) was a large meta-organization that stands as a pivotal counterpublic institution in the annals of 20th-century community organizing. This study draws on archival documentation to explore the multifaceted strategies employed by the BBUF, highlighting their innovative use of print media, their dual focus on large and small pragmatic interventions, and their impact on the City of Boston. Central to its classification as a form of counterpublic work, I explore the BBUF's capacity to hold, process, and engage in discourse around ideological diversity and contradiction. The organization came about during a tumultuous period in Boston's history, before slowly fading out of existence as members pursued other endeavors, but not without making lasting material impact. Their confrontations with carceral violence, endeavors for economic justice, and efforts to foster community-centered alternatives to oppressive systems form the crux of their legacy. I examine the BBUF's nuanced position and varied roster, inspired by but not fitting neatly into the broader Black Power movement, and emphasize the breadth of their work. This study positions the BBUF as a model for both contemporary activists and planning scholars, illuminating the pathways of grassroots movements in challenging and reshaping cities.

## Acknowledgments

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## Introduction

In the vibrant landscape of 20th-century community organizing, the Boston Black United Front (BBUF, the Front) appears as a little-known footnote in the city's history despite its connection to national political leaders, its real material impact on the city, and the group's fashioning of new tactics. Northern U.S. cities like Boston at this time were landing places for new Black residents arriving from the South, arriving in droves seeking respite from southward Jim Crow regimes. In response, many white Bostonians fled to new suburban enclaves rather than grapple in place with this change, often pushing their elected officials to spring into action to maintain racial hierarchies and manage the problem of an electorate that was no longer quite as white. Amidst this period of conflict, the Front nurtured a cadre of organizational leaders that

intervened in the realms of welfare, policing, education, community-based research, and economic development. The BBUF not only responded to emergent needs but also pioneered new avenues of advocacy, wrestling with internal tensions and contradictions, before ultimately fading into nonexistence. Their story, rooted in the tumultuous capitalist and racist geography of mid-century Boston, offers a model for how grassroots movements can shape, challenge, and redefine planning and community organizing.

This paper details the activities and impact of this short-lived organization, the Boston Black United Front, between 1968 and the mid-1970s. The Front was a meta-organization, or an “umbrella organization” of about 85 groups, each working to address pressing communal needs in the heart of Black Boston, Roxbury, during a time of tremendous upheaval at the hands of white planners and city officials who worked to stymie a growing tide of white flight. Despite its short lifespan, the organization’s breadth touched the lives of most Black Bostonians during the 1960s and 70s. In order to construct a history of this work, this paper draws on a large archival collection of records from the BBUF, housed in its original home of Roxbury, alongside secondary texts and documented oral histories. The breadth of the Front’s work is not presented here in completion, but a selection representing the group’s scope that points to the Front as a Black counterpublic institution, underscoring the role of Black planning as a form of labor that both embodies resistance to white supremacist planning regimes and positively imagines and pilots alternative models, processes, and concrete projects that expand Black public life (Williams et al. 2023). In this text, I first define the Black counterpublic and engage the local context that birthed the Front. I then outline the BBUF’s founding, composition, and central demands. These demands spurred key programs, initiatives, and projects, a selection of which I will use to demonstrate the counterpublic nature of the Front. Finally, I conclude with some reflections on the contributions of organizations like the BBUF to Black freedom struggles globally as well as to scholars’ and practitioners’ understandings of the scope and methods of the urban planning profession. This is not a linear history, but rather a look at the explosion of organized counterpublic activity in the wake of key events, provocations, attacks, and collective shifts in understanding.

## **Black Counterpublics Defined**

The formation of a city is not seen as the solution to the problems of Black people. We would still be operating within a system filled with structural inequities. However, establishment of the city would give Black people additional power and resources to create the independent institutions we must have if we are to survive.

– Boston Black United Front Goals Statement, 1970 (BBUF 1970)

The counterpublic is, as Nancy Fraser tells us, a “parallel discursive arena where members of a subordinated social group invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990, 67). In such an arena, we find more than alternative organizations: we find worlds in which traditions are built; histories are constructed; culture is created; theory, parody, and debates are waged; and participants can engage a real and imagined other. The Black counterpublic is more than such actions carried out by (categorically) Black people. The Black counterpublic, particularly for African Americans, requires political and geographic reorientations unique to moving from being considered property to an asterisked humanity and citizenship. Andrea Roberts points to communities needing to be visible and invisible at the same time, requiring in-group recognition but out-group illegibility in an anti-Black society that exterminates this form of organized resistance (Roberts 2018). For participants in the Great Migration, a century-long post-Emancipation movement of over 6 million African Americans from the South to the North, Midwest, and West, building counterpublic institutions entailed literal and ideological marronage, in which geographic isolation in swamps, quiet countrysides, or even cramped ghettos produced the possibility to model “a totally different form of living” (Hosbey and Roane 2021, 71). Cedric Robinson’s articulation of the Black Radical Tradition suggests that the Black counterpublic has always required diversity in tactics, holding space for numerous diverging and converging freedom struggles (Robinson 2000). McKittrick and Woods point to the centrality of land in these endeavors, arguing that land becomes racialized and marked for Black life (and death) through histories of white supremacist violence alongside Black resistance and freedom projects (McKittrick 2006; Woods 2017). In a sense, in Black counterpublics, Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” becomes operationalized for a population working to resolve the post-Emancipation condition in which they found themselves (Anderson 1983). Du Bois was concise in describing this condition: “poor, landless laborers” who explicitly attempt to undo spiritual, political, and cultural knowledge loss from genocide (Du Bois 1935, 420).

The Boston Black United Front grappled with all these forces: a burgeoning Black Power movement that provided alternatives to assimilation to white America, organizing within gerrymandered political geographies, all resisting an ongoing tradition of white supremacist urban planning that confined Black Bostonians to segregated neighborhoods rendered for capitalist extraction of exploited labor. At the same time, the Front carried out affirming, celebratory cultural work to connect Black Bostonians with the lives and histories of other Black freedom fighters globally through holidays honoring heroes and martyrs, alternative educational opportunities, and joyous events.<sup>1</sup> While the Front was not explicitly a nationalist movement (despite numerous nationalist member organizations being under the umbrella), the group routinely

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1 (BBUF 1970) Roxbury Community College Archives and Special Collections. Box 18.

invited residents of Roxbury and Black Boston generally to consider opting out of the American nation-state project and the institutions that upheld it. One pamphlet, titled “Black Masses Government,” poses the idea that “you are a vital and urgently needed part of the Black Masses Government regardless of your age, religion, organization, complexion, social status, educational background, political background or economical background,” inviting diversity in Black perspective under the same banner.<sup>2</sup> The Front would pass and publish eight “Black Laws” that transcended border and boundary, applying to Black residents and essentially boiling down to mutual Black respect, solidarity, and the abolition of intra-racial harm, individually and communally, which included outlawing cooperation with the police (Sikowitz 2021, 49). For these reasons, I consider the BBUF to be a counterpublic, that is, a space of discourse and worldmaking across an actual and imagined community, towards developing institutions at odds with a dominant public (Fraser 1990; Wolf-Powers 2009).

### **The Boston Context That Birthed BBUF**

Midcentury Boston was in the midst of an identity crisis. Residents and city leaders alike spiraled over the suburban flight of the white middle class in tandem with an incoming wave of new Black residents during the Great Migration. The booming war economy was beginning to slow, and formerly poor white (and white ethnic Jewish and Catholic) parts of the city were becoming Black (Vrabel 2014). These demographic shifts, manifest in new geographies of race, frightened the city’s ruling class, prompting them to devise strategies to renew and restore the old character of Boston every few years. In his inaugural speech as mayor on January 2, 1950, John Hynes promised to create a “New Boston” (Sikowitz 2021, 14). This “New Boston” necessitated a slum clearance effort that marked many poor white, white ethnic, and Black neighborhoods for annihilation. Notably, Bostonians witnessed the Boston Redevelopment Authority, empowered by the Housing Act of 1949, completely destroy the West End neighborhood, displacing thousands of residents and stoking the fears of other marginalized corners of the city (Gans 1965).

In 1960, another newly elected Boston Mayor John F. Collins (1960-1967) announced the implementation of his “Operation Revival” plan. This plan marked the largely Black and Brown South End neighborhood for destruction in favor of the housing needs of a growing white professional class (Nelson 2000). The central neighborhood of Black Boston, Roxbury, also faced “clearance projects [that] had begun for two highways, the Inner Belt and the Southwest Expressway” (Sikowitz 2021, 15). Decisions about these land clearance and urban renewal projects were largely made by white mayors with a white technocratic staff in City Hall attempting to attract and retain white residents in the city. These planners and policymakers largely ignored or deprioritized the issues gripping the growing Black community in that same city, who

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2 (BBUF 1970) Roxbury Community College Archives and Special Collections. Box 18.

were struggling against de facto segregation, parental fights for adequate schools and housing, and the fight for dignity when receiving benefits from the state (Tager 2001). Boston, like many cities across the United States in the 1960s, was also the scene of numerous racist attacks and acts of resistance. From the perspective of those in City Hall and the Massachusetts State House, the city was in decline, as expanding white suburban projects flanked the edges of the city and the proportion of Black residents, once an extremely small minority, sharply rose.

One hot afternoon on June 6, 1967, Black women from a local advocacy group, Mothers for Adequate Welfare (MAW), led a peaceful sit-in alongside a multiracial group of accomplices at the Roxbury welfare office in Grove Hall at 515 Blue Hill Avenue. This sit-in was not an unusual or isolated incident. MAW had staged various demonstrations for the rights and dignity of women welfare recipients across Boston since its founding in Roxbury in 1963 (Denton 2012). The mothers demanded the removal of police presence from welfare office spaces, more staff and hours availability, and an end to social workers' degrading practice of interrogating women about their sex lives in open floorplan offices in front of their neighbors and peers (Lebeau 2017). MAW held several sit-ins in the months prior to June 6 with no local uproar or police response. This summer day, however, the demonstration attracted a small gathering of onlookers and impromptu participants unaware of the escalation that would soon come.

The origins of the clash are contested, but verified accounts document that the Boston Police Department, at some point, attacked the crowd of Black residents with billy clubs, a decision that set in motion a costly sequence of events. Residents resisted the brutal beating and attempts to make arrests, and the attack quickly escalated to a full-scale rebellion in which over 1,000 police officers were called to the block to control hundreds of residents. Police snipers were placed on rooftops of local businesses and apartment buildings, "firing almost 100 rounds at 200 protesters" (Lebeau 2017, para. 11). Even white journalists of the local press reported instances of police officers being encouraged to hunt and kill residents during the incident. A week of rebellion commenced, with over 30 people injured, numerous buildings set on fire, and over fifteen blocks sustaining substantial damage (Fuerbringer and Milbauer 1967). By the next week, the neighborhood was left with checkerboarded lots—some vacant, some with intact buildings—and numerous burnt-out piles of ash and rubble. This would be the start of the "Long Hot Summer of 1967" in which many a Black community across U.S. urban centers would engage in rebellion against local police violence, racist and exploitative policymaking, and unjust material conditions (McLaughlin 2014). The famed Kerner Commission would come out of this summer, a presidentially appointed group that wrote a federal report diagnosing the cause of the uprisings as racialized economic inequity across the United States and local white governments' refusal to address this problem head-on and in good faith (Cobb and Guariglia 2021).

## The Front's Founding & Structure

One cold day in December 1967, Kwame Ture (then Stokely Carmichael) traveled to Boston to meet with the leaders of Black organizations in Roxbury, the heart of Black Boston and the site of the recent rebellions. Following the meeting, Ture delivered a speech at the Roxbury YMCA, urging residents to form a Bostonian “Black United Front” (Sikowitz 2021; Adams 2023). By this time in the late 1960s, Kwame Ture, having coined and popularized the concept of Black Power, was making his rounds to various Black Power conferences calling for unity among local Black organizations of diverse ideological orientations (Karenga 2016). In so doing, Ture intended for groups to move from collaboration at a local level towards a greater goal of Black internationalism and solidarity with freedom struggles around the world, of which there were many, as the 1960s were awash with continental African and Caribbean independence movements. This call for a “Black United Front” was energized by the slogan “unity without uniformity, unity in diversity,” affirming the many different tactics developed towards different Black freedom dreams, requiring communication, understanding, and coordination (Karenga 2016). Given present conditions and the goal of Black freedom, Ture’s call provoked the establishment of newspapers and alternative models of policing and conflict resolution, which reimaged educational institutions, childcare, gender relations, and connections to local electoral politics.

At this time, organization leaders were already exploring a variety of tactics, including how to rebuild Roxbury following the widescale destruction brought by the 1967 incident as well as how to weather the ensuing political backlash brought by the White Bostonian political majority. The city largely responded to the rebellion with condemnation and even municipal punishment, framing the neighborhood’s grievances as illegitimate. Even the most optimistic reading of the aftermath would reveal white Bostonians largely missing the point of the original sit-ins that brought about the space for rebellion: “The mayor and the police ascribed the violence to criminal elements and not to racial conditions. One newspaper, the Boston Herald, hinted that it was Communist-inspired” (Tager 2001, 183). Thereafter, local organizers occasionally discussed a United Front as a grand political concept, but it was not until the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968 that groups across the ideological spectrum felt the impetus to unite (Sikowitz 2021, 1). These 1968 uprisings took place precisely at the scene of the rebellions the previous year. American flags burned; youth and elders were in the streets; and businesses were looted, sometimes with additional signage: “This store is closed until further notice in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, the fallen martyr of the black revolution” (Tager 2001, 185). The revolutionary potential of Black folks living in Roxbury became clear to community leaders of the time, manifest through these displays of an appetite for organized resistance. Ture’s call inspired Bostonians and pushed several organizations to eventually establish the Boston Black United Front in 1968 (Sikowitz 2021).

Chuck Turner, a local resident who had organized with MAW who had met with Kwame Ture during his 1967 visit, would become co-chairman of the BBUF alongside Leroy Boston and Lenny Durant, Sr., with support from local figures like Mel King of the New Urban League (Sikowitz 2021, 3; King 1981, 57–59). The group would define itself as an “umbrella organization,” initially through local fundraising and the philanthropy of wealthy white progressives (Sikowitz 2021, 43). Perhaps the “most prominent donor, Ralph Hoagland [was] a co-founder of CVS” and supported the BBUF through a grantor organization called the Fund for Urban Negro Development (FUND). FUND gave approximately \$500,000 to the BBUF in four years, with much of that money distributed to local businesses and organizations and the rest going to salaried BBUF staff (Sikowitz 2021, 41). With galvanized founders alongside financial support, Black Bostonians set about constructing a new kind of organization that had no precedent within the city.

A steering committee made up of local activists led the Front, bringing expertise in housing, civil rights, labor organizing, cultural work, and more. Chuck Turner, Leroy Boston, George Morrison, Bertram Alleyne, Drew King, Chuck Williams, Daleno Farrar, and Francine Mills recruited roughly 85 dues-paying organizations to participate, including the New Urban League, Freedom Industries, the Roxbury Historical Society, Tufts Afro-American Society, St. Cyprian’s Episcopal Church, and the Black Panther Party as well as the Malcolm X Foundation, local Unitarian Universalists, and smaller groups working with incarcerated people, migrant laborers, youth, and elders across Massachusetts (Sikowitz 2021, 41). They formed sixteen total committees, with several devoted to criminal justice (Defense, Prison, and Crime) and the development of “a detailed plan to organize, finance, and recruit a Black security corps to protect the community” (Sikowitz 2021, 44). Other committees were dedicated to education, fundraising, political action, and interfacing with city officials.

One defining feature of the Front itself as an exercise in Black counterpublic resistance was its repeated reference to the need for “operational unity” despite the vast ideological gulfs between groups. This is not to say that there were no guiding ideas or principles. The group spent a great deal of time posing such questions in meetings: “What is the political and economic philosophy of the Front?” “What programs [is] the Front now engaged in[?] What is the view of the future of them: political and economic[?]” and finally “What has been and what should be [the] relationship of each body [...] to each other / to the Front and individual bodies / to the Front as a joint body?”<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the Front would arrive at the written conclusion that “[the BBUF] believes Black people everywhere must unite or perish [and they] begin here in Boston to build a New Black Nation.”<sup>4</sup> This platform explicitly calls for community control of

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3 (BBUF 1970) Roxbury Community College Archives and Special Collections. Box 18.

4 (BBUF 1970) Roxbury Community College Archives and Special Collections. SC 1, Box 1. Boston Black United Front’s Political Platform.

“our land, our politics, security, administration of justice, schools, economy, housing, and communication” with a focus on institution-building over small-scale programming.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, the organization developed 21 demands, stretching across issues like youth development, municipal service contracting, city planning, health, education, and even fundraising in white communities. To demonstrate the full breadth and scope of this organization’s priorities, and underscore the counterpublic nature of the BBUF, the demands are listed in full below (BBUF 1970):

1. As of 12:00 AM Monday, April 8, 1968, all white-owned and white-controlled businesses will be closed until further notice, while the transfer of the ownership of these businesses to the Black Community is being negotiated through the United Front.
2. Every school in the Black Community shall have an all-Black staff.
3. All Police Stations in the Black Community are to be in the command of Black Captains.
4. ABCD [the Agency for Boston Community Development, a state-supported community development organization] is to be abolished as an umbrella agency in the Black Community.
5. Community control [of] Summer Work Programs.
6. All schools within the Black Community are to be renamed after Black heroes.
7. The Black Community is to immediately receive control of the BURP and TURNKEY HUD Programs.
8. The Model Neighborhood Board is to have complete control of the Model Cities Program.
9. The Black Community is to have complete control of all publicly financed housing programs.
10. The South End – Roxbury Boys’ Club are to be administered by Black Directors and Black Staff personnel.
11. The Mayor’s office is to mobilize the Urban Coalition, the National Alliance of Business, and the White community at large to immediately make \$100,000,000 available to the Black Community.
12. Contracts for street repair, garbage collection, and maintenance in the Black Community are to go to Black Contractors.
13. There are to be established immediately, operating School Board which will have control of hiring staff.
14. The Patrick T. Campbell Jr. High School is to be renamed the Martin Luther King Jr. High School, in addition the present structure is to be razed and replaced with a new campus.

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5 (BBUF 1970) Roxbury Community College Archives and Special Collections. SC 1, Box 1. Boston Black United Front’s Political Platform.

15. Contracts for repair and maintenance functions by utility companies [...] in the Black Community are to be given to Black contractors.
16. Increase the quota of employment of Black personnel in State and City agencies, departments, divisions, and bureaus.
17. The Black Community must have representatives on the Mayor's Public Service Board, to be elected by the United Front.
18. Establishment of a local park and recreation department in the Black Community.
19. The planned construction of the Inner Belt and Southeast Expressway are to be halted immediately and their continued planning and construction negotiated with the Black Community since both of these highway projects will radically affect the lives of the people in this community.
20. The Black Community must have control of all public, private, and municipal agencies that affect the lives of the people in this community, e.g., City Sanitation, Health, Housing, UCS, Boy's Club etc.
21. The South End Urban Renewal Plan is to be halted immediately (the relocation planning and demolition) and the continuation of this Urban Renewal Plan is to be renegotiated with an elected Urban Renewal Committee.

While the groups explored differing ways of accomplishing these demands, ranging from working with large private foundations to grassroots fundraising and movement-building, for several years they maintained unity over these larger goals: "Operational unity was resoundingly successful for the BBUF. Churches and trade groups sat at the table with the Black Panthers and the Malcolm X Foundation" (Sikowitz 2021, 47). The Front fostered ongoing active discourse about the use of funds, from helping individual members of the community make rent and pay bills to providing temporary and permanent office space to struggling organizations, to supporting those who forged relationships with elected officials and local development agencies. Despite this ideological and tactical diversity, there were consistent and explicit critiques of Black capitalism, and BBUF literature tended to lean left economically and socially: "Ironically, some of the most militant Black Nationalists, as they call themselves, have been the first to jump on the bandwagon of Black capitalism."<sup>6</sup> This statement was published at the time when white capitalists were funding much of the Front's operating costs. The groups would hold this unresolved tension from the start to the end of the Front's lifetime.

### **Programmatic Work & the (F)utility of Urban Planning**

Upon founding, the Boston Black United Front's committees immediately got to work. Organizations collaborated to resist academic incursion, reimagine land cleared for

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6 (BBUF 1970) Roxbury Community College Archives and Special Collections. Box 15. "Black Manifesto."

highways, resist the federal government, develop a Black urban planning program, establish educational institutions, and more. In pragmatic socialist fashion, the priority for BBUF programs included ameliorating the material conditions of Black Bostonians, though much of the work also featured epistemological and symbolic interventions.

The Front nurtured an early movement toward epistemic justice and diversity through its Community Research Review Committee (CRRC). One pamphlet from the committee defines the body as “a committee of representatives from Black agencies, organizations, professional groups, and individuals in the Community, representing Black people [...] CRRC is community control in action.” The text additionally reads “CRRC is at work all the time, trying to find out what research is being done on Black people, why it is being done, who wants it done, and what its effect will be on the subjects and on the Black Community” as well as urging residents to refuse to participate in research efforts unless approved by the committee.<sup>7</sup> There is documentation that this committee met several times to discuss projects being carried out in the area, though specific details are difficult to identify. This committee was formed in response to being “researched to death” by local institutions such as Harvard, MIT, Northeastern, Boston University, and others, particularly in the wake of scandalous research tension around Black children and the Harvard School of Public Health, as well as the technocratic approaches for City Hall to justify large-scale land clearance of poor neighborhoods within Boston.<sup>8</sup>

As demands #19 and #21 demonstrate, the Front also engaged in protracted community resistance to several large urban planning projects. By this time, land was already cleared for the Inner Belt and the Southeast Expressway, two highway projects that would potentially subsidize white suburban living by promising easy routes in, out, and across the city during an era when the city population was becoming Blacker. Despite decades of action leading to the defeat of these highway projects, there was still a great deal of land already cleared and owned by the state, with questions about its highest and best use (Crockett 2018). The implementation of U.S. President Lyndon Johnson’s Model Cities Program, part of his War on Poverty policy push, also attracted community critique and the reimagining of local governance. Roxbury was chosen as the focus of the Model Cities Program in Boston, with Paul Parks, a Black man, as the administrator. Despite a Black person being at the helm of the office, with initiatives such as community health centers, childcare, eldercare, and housing rehabilitation, a fierce debate over program implementation ensued (Parks 2009). Front organizations critiqued the lack of transparency over programs and pushed for (though never achieved) collective control over the implementation of the Model Cities Program

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7 (BBUF 1970) Roxbury Community College Archives and Special Collections. SC 1, Box 1, CRRC.

8 (BBUF 1970) Roxbury Community College Archives and Special Collections. SC 1, Box 1. Boston Black United Front’s Statement of Demands, 1–2.

(BBUF 1970). At times, member organizations competed for resources from the Model Cities Program, while at other times, they outright admonished and criticized it.

One sustained political and epistemic struggle throughout the lifetime of the Front was resistance to being counted in the U.S. Census. In pamphlets titled “What Will the Census do for Blacks?” the BBUF doubted the supposed connection between being counted by the state and the securing of proportionate federal and state resources (Figure 1). Instead, circulated literature spoke of potential targeting for a rapidly expanding prison state to “control the inhabitants of the ghetto.” This tension around measuring and accounting for Black population growth and the flow of resources from federal, state, and local seats of power would erupt several times later in the form of secession movements.



**Figure 1** Artwork from the BBUF's 1970 anti-Census Campaign

Despite this communal trauma of urban renewal, land clearance, and continual fights over Model Cities governance, the Front still saw urban planners as necessary accomplices. One 1970 document titled “A Proposal for the Establishment of a Boston Black Community: Urban and Environmental Planning Studio” was drafted by Melvin Mitchell of 2MJQ and the Harvard Graduate School of Design. 2MJQ (named after a combination of the founders’ last names and their favorite band, the Modern Jazz Quartet) defined itself as “a Black Environmentalists’ Research Corporation in Washington, D.C.,” with the slogan “Only Blacks can plan for Black people” (Quintana and Jones 1969, 39; McQuirtter 2018, para. 1). 2MJQ’s plan defined Black life in the city as an exploited “domestic colony” where residents should prioritize local control of “land, labor, capital, technological capabilities, and political definition through self-government” in order to be “a stable community.” The document argued that these priorities could be realized through planning and political organizing, distinguishing Black-led urban planning efforts from the 1960s tradition of advocacy planning.<sup>10</sup> Though never realized beyond a few dossiers of micro-level plans, parcel sketches, and building drafts, the document lays out a 12-month set of objectives that include developing a “planning arm” of the Front capable of carrying out conventional urban planning research and implementation across infrastructures of transportation, housing, health, and economic development. Further, the proposal states that “the Boston Black United Front is the embryonic genesis of an independent and self-governing Black community, i.e., a provisional government,” a fact that is “probably beyond debate and question by even the most conservative elements in the community.”<sup>11</sup> The Front presented critiques of the technocratic planning regime that they lived and worked under, while also believing in the work of urban planners and presenting alternative technocratic interventions. This nuanced approach extended beyond urban planning into other areas of focus.

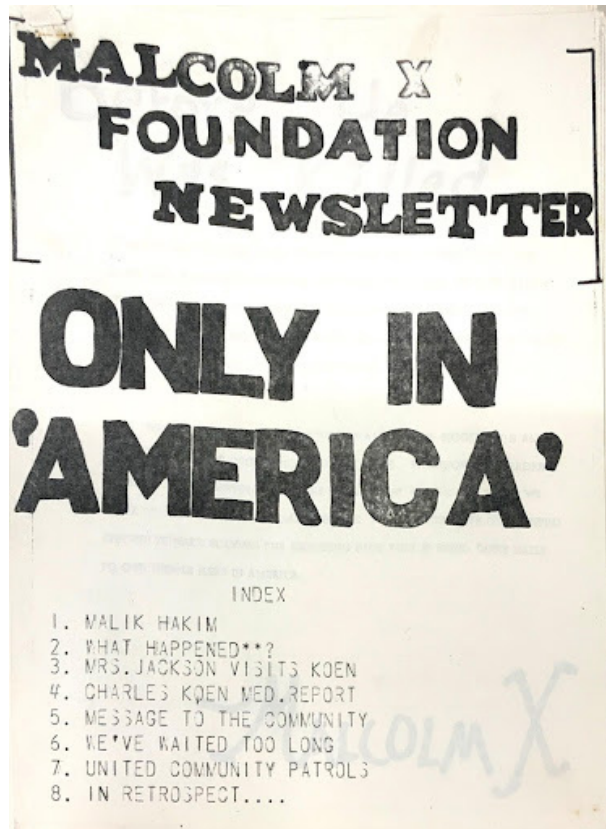
As prior explorations of Black counterpublics note, an alternative press and means of education are often central to maintaining the vibrant, diverse discourses that distinguish counterpublic institutions from singular organizations (Williams 2023). Rather than develop one newspaper or news outlet, organizations in the Front published numerous zines, pamphlets, and recurring newsletters that engaged many of the matters invoked in the list of demands. Notably, BBUF archival records include numerous zines detailing the experiences of incarcerated people, a population often kept from engaging in wider discourse (Figures 2 and 3). The Front supported incarcerated publications, hunger strikes at prisons in the Massachusetts Correctional Institution network, and ongoing correspondence with Black freedom fighters who were incarcerated during resistance movements of the late 1960s. Archival records point to a singular employee of the Front named Khadija as the primary link between

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10 (BBUF 1970, 2–4) Roxbury Community College Archives and Special Collections. Box 15.

11 (BBUF 1970) Roxbury Community College Archives and Special Collections. Box 15, 6.

incarcerated people and the vast network of resources the Front had to offer. Numerous handwritten letters between Khadija and incarcerated people point to the symbolic and emotional importance of keeping up with political prisoners during this time of tumult.<sup>12</sup> Beyond correspondence with incarcerated people, the Front devoted committee resources to reimagining policing entirely. There are several documented instances of a “Community Security Agency,” dedicated to the establishment of a community patrol explicitly in the wake of incidents associated with a “kidnapper of little Black girls” (Figure 4). This group would derive its legitimacy from the buy-in of local businesses, residents, and nonprofits. Later, Roxbury community organizing around the 1979 serial killing of young Black women prompted canon Black feminist theorist Barbara Smith and other members of the then-newly formed and locally based Combahee River Collective to galvanize the public to recognize the connectedness of anti-Black and misogynistic violence (Smith 1979).



**Figure 2** Malcolm X Foundation Newsletter Cover

12 (BBUF 1970) Roxbury Community College Archives and Special Collections. Box 1-15.

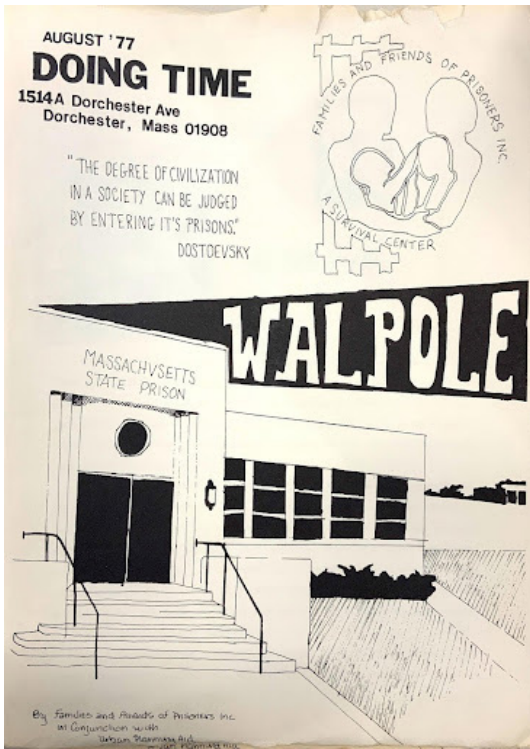


Figure 3 August 1977 cover of *Doing Time*

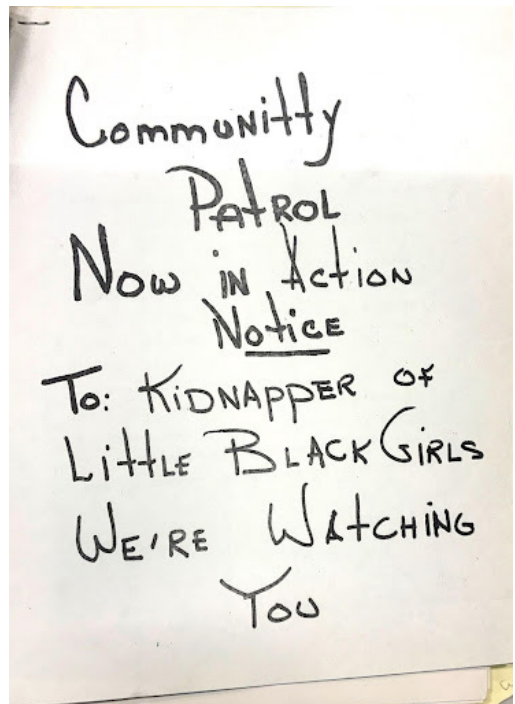


Figure 4 Community Patrol Poster

As expressed in demands #2, #6, and #14, members of the Front took part in fierce public debates over the role of education. School quality in Roxbury was abysmal compared to whiter parts of the city. Residents developed sharp critiques of the whiteness of the public school curriculum, alongside the contradiction of living in a city with numerous elite universities but a lack of opportunities for Black advancement past secondary education. The Front critiqued history as taught in K-12 education and supported small educational programs on Black history in the U.S., Caribbean, and Africa, as well as African language courses for locals. The BBUF circulated literature from local groups critiquing U.S. education, such as the socialist Social Action Coordinating Committee, which published “Rethinking American Education” urging readers to resist schooling as a device promoting “behavioral monotony.”<sup>13</sup>

Beyond K-12 education, Front members pushed the governor, the City, and residents to consider establishing a college in the neighborhood. They envisioned a school named Roxbury Community College, with a curriculum that would empower residents to achieve economic mobility and affirm Black cultural heritage. Finally, on July 1, 1968, the Massachusetts legislature approved the establishment of a community college for the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston” (RCC, n.d.-a). At the time, the Massachusetts Board of Regional Community Colleges (MBRCC) was entirely white, and the Front demanded a local Roxbury Community College Board that reflected the population of the neighborhood and had some degree of local autonomy. After a protracted struggle over several years in the form of protests and committee meetings that included battles over the college’s name and location, in 1972, the institution was named Roxbury Community College and located on Blue Hill Avenue, where the bulk of BBUF organizations were based (RCC, n.d.-b). After several moves throughout the 1970s, Roxbury Community College found its permanent home at Roxbury Crossing atop the land previously cleared for the halted Southeast Expressway highway plan, where it currently stands (RCC, n.d.-b; Stidman 2012).

### A Waning Organization

It is difficult to identify a tidy ending to the work of this once-massive organization that was connected to an international movement. Networked unity was key to Ture’s original conception of a United Front. The Boston Front was just one of several meta-organizations bearing the United Front name working towards freedom in the United States. On September 30, 1970, the BBUF published a press release, stating its intent to participate in a conference later that year, “[joining] with the Washington Black United Front, the Cairo, Illinois United Front, other Fronts and interested Black people from around the country,” underscoring a continual sharing of tactics, knowledge, and resources nationally despite the BBUF’s prioritization of local Boston issues

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13 (BBUF 1970) Roxbury Community College Archives and Special Collections. Box 18.

in their demand statements.<sup>14</sup> Though the Front was supported by a nationwide and global community of Black freedom fighters, it seems the Boston Front blinked in and out of the historical record, even in local historical sources (Sikowitz 2021). Slowly, the Front met less frequently, and organizations began operating more individually and autonomously. Despite the vast scope of its work and its real, tangible impacts, the Front “eventually faded away in the mid-1970s as support from wealthy white businessmen waned” (Sikowitz 2021, 42). Prominent personalities from the Front would go on to do other kinds of movement work, most notably Mel King of the New Urban League, who would be elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1973, serving until 1982, run for mayor of Boston twice, and found the Rainbow Coalition/Green-Rainbow Party (King 1981). Final records of the BBUF indicate the last bits of activity took place around the time of King’s 1973 campaign, though many initiatives, such as amplifying print publications featuring the voices of the incarcerated, continued up until the 1980s.

Seeds planted by the BBUF nurtured an outright secession movement, in which the predominantly Black neighborhoods across the city attempted to band together under a new municipal name, Mandela, and secede from the City of Boston (Neill 1986; Haggard-Gilson 1995; Miletsky and González 2016; Gulaid 2021). This proposal was put to voters in citywide referenda in 1986 and 1988, and both times the ballot measure was defeated by a 3-to-1 margin (Miletsky and González 2016). Chuck Turner would go on to do labor organizing before representing Roxbury after being elected to the Boston City Council in 1999. By even conservative assessments, the Front made material progress on most of its original 21 demands, despite stopping short of building the Black autonomous democratic community that they envisioned.

## Conclusion

The Boston Black United Front stands as a model of Black counterpublic action. The BBUF’s strategies, including the capacity to maintain unity amidst political diversity and intra-racial difference underscores the utility of the counterpublics concept in Black studies. Its skilled use of print material, protest, and institution-building highlights the simultaneous diversity and unified determination of this meta-organization. Its tactics prompt reflection on the role of urban planning in helping and harming such efforts, as well as the utility of alternative institutions in local community organizing.

The BBUF [was] not purely a Black Power group; other factors like the history of Black activism in Boston and lived conditions of Black Bostonians must also be considered. Its diverse constituents, grounded in prior local social movements, and conditions specific to Boston, meant that it had to

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14 (BBUF 1970) Roxbury Community College Archives. And Special Collections. Box 15.

balance between Black Power's ideological pronouncements and more pragmatic concerns (Sikowitz 2021, 32).

This balance between micro and macro concerns, tending to pragmatic material intervention and long-term reimagining of structures, was key to the success of its scope. Furthermore, the BBUF's endeavors offer insights into what McKittrick calls "cartographies of struggle" and Hosbey and Roane's "marronage," the ways that racialized landscapes can become sites of some of the most unique social and political innovations in the United States (McKittrick 2006; Hosbey and Roane 2021). In the spirit of Ture's call to Black cooperation as a network of Fronts, the Boston Black United Front's work addressed the challenges faced by Black Bostonians and Roxbury residents specifically, from confronting state violence to advocating for economic justice, and serves as a model for Black organizations today. The BBUF's history, marked by its commitment to democratic alternatives, its focus on land, its struggle over political contradictions, and its resistance to large and small oppressive systems, is an asset to students of freedom struggles everywhere.

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