

The production of racial violence

Interview with Ted Rutland and Maxime Aurélien

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This interview was conducted on October 10, 2022 with Maxime Aurélien and Ted Rutland on the occasion of the publication, in 2023, of their co-authored book entitled (in French) Il fallait se défendre : une histoire du premier gang de rue haïtien à Montréal, published by in Montreal by Mémoire d'encrier and (in English) Out to Defend Ourselves: A History of Montreal's First Haitian Street Gang Montreal, published in Halifax and Winnipeg by Fernwood Press.

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Gabriel Fauveaud (FD) : Could you start by telling me about the book and its aims, what you set out to demonstrate?

Maxime Aurélien (MA) et Ted Rutland (TR) : This book is the result of a long-term collaboration between the two of us over the past three years. It looks at the origins of what the police and the media call "street gangs", a phenomenon traced in

the book through the history of Montreal's first street gang, the "Bélangers"¹, which Maxime helped create in the early 1980s.

This book aims to illustrate that the category of street gang is the result of institutional, social, and cultural processes that echo the dynamics of racism and violence at work in Quebec society and elsewhere. The book begins by showing how the expression "street gang" emerged in the 1980s. Since the onset of industrialization in the mid-19th century, Montreal, like all major cities, has been home to many groups that could be described as "gangs", a term that is commonly used today, particularly in North America. In Western cities prior to the 1980s, however, these groups were not called "gangs" in French but "*bandes*", and they were essentially made up of young white people. In Montreal, with the emergence of the Bélangers and other Haitian youth groups, the expression "street gangs" (*gangs de rue* in French) spread from the 1980s onwards, mainly through the police and the media. In a way, the media were creating a "new" social problem.

Secondly, we explain that Haitian gangs were not what the police and press said they were at the time. We show that, far from the image of organized crime groups, they were young people from the second generation of Haitian migrants to Montreal who, at some point, sought to defend themselves and find their place in society. This generation was the first to leave the neighborhoods where their parents were segregated, to go and experience the city and make a place for themselves. In doing so, they were confronted with incredible violence from white gangs and white racists. In response, some young Haitians formed groups to defend themselves, which the police and media began to call "street gangs". Then, yes, because we're talking about people who are victims of poverty and unemployment, some of the members of these groups fell into delinquency.

GF : Could you tell me a little about the genesis of your collaboration?

TR : My previous research focused on the link between racism and urban planning in Halifax, a city on the east coast of Canada. When I moved to Montreal in 2010, I became increasingly interested in the role of the police in Montreal's processes of racism and racial violence. I learned a lot from the activist groups that

1. All notes have been added after the fact to clarify the subject.

The name "Bélanger" refers to the name given to a soccer team created by Maxime's father, which trained in a park that locals called "*parc Bélanger*", because of "*rue Bélanger*" located nearby. By extension, the youngsters who hung out in the park became known as "*les gars de Bélanger*" (the Bélanger boys), later dubbed the "Bélanger gang" by the police.

organized against the police after the death of Fredy Villanueva in 2008². Through my involvement in community and activist activities in certain Montreal neighborhoods (notably Montreal North), I learned that the idea of street gangs was very harmful to racialized youth in these neighborhoods, for two main reasons. First, because, in the eyes of the police, any racialized youth can look like a street gang member. Secondly, police repression of gang members in these neighborhoods tends to amplify interpersonal violence and undermines community members' ability to support each other. It was activists, especially Haitian activists, who taught me that, for them, street gangs are above all a discriminatory political and social fabrication. So I started from there, and tried to better understand the historical processes that led to the formation of street gangs (as a political and social fabrication) in Montreal, in the broader context of the postindustrial transition of North American cities. It was through this research that I heard about Les Bélangers and contacted Maxime.

MA : Ted actually contacted me to arrange a meeting so that I could tell him a few things about myself and my gang. I agreed to see him, and what was supposed to be a simple interview quickly turned into a collaboration. I felt it was time for the real story to be written, which I explained to Ted. The co-writing of this book is the result of our meeting.

GF : Before talking about the street gangs themselves, could you tell me a little more about the social context of the 1970s-1980s, particularly from the point of view of the Haitian community³?

MA : It was a small but close-knit community. Everyone knew each other, because there weren't many of us, and there were specific places where we met, like restaurants, or in the homes of certain members of the community. My parents opened a restaurant in 1976. It was a Haitian restaurant; it quickly became a meeting place for Haitians. There were other places. We also got together for different activities, like sports and theater.

What's important to understand is that the social context was very difficult and violent for Haitian immigrants at the time (1970-1980). First of all, access to employment was

2. For more on the issue of racial segregation in Montréal-Nord and the importance of this event in anti-racial struggles, see: Jolivet Violaine, Khelifi Chakib, Vogler Antoine, « Stigmatisation par l'espace à Montréal-Nord : revitalisation urbaine et invisibilisation de la race » ["Spatial Stigmatization in Montréal-Nord: Urban Revitalization and the Invisibilization of Race"].

3. The term "community" refers to the notion of community in English. Generally speaking, it refers to a group of people who recognize themselves as belonging to a group whose members are linked by social, cultural, religious or other affinities. For further information, please refer to the introduction to issue 17 of the journal: Emelianoff Cyria, Taylor Aiken Gerald, 2022, « (In)justice des initiatives communautaires » ["The (in)justice of community-based initiatives"], *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice*, 17.

very difficult. Unemployment was very high in the community and, as Black people, we were excluded from most jobs. There were perhaps a few more opportunities for more educated people, the professionals of the first wave of Haitian immigrants (1965 to 1971). There were also manufacturing jobs for some immigrants in the 1970s, but these disappeared with the economic crisis and deindustrialization (early 1980s). The jobs available to us, young Black people, were often very precarious. We had very few resources. Then, we lived in very unsanitary, small and precarious housing. Black people lived in basements, wherever white people were willing to rent us apartments. They wouldn't rent us better housing.

Finally, and most importantly, at that time we were dealing with a great deal of racism and racial violence. It wasn't like today, it was much harder. You couldn't walk down the street without hearing: "dirty n*gger", "boula boula, go back to your country", and so on. We were chased down the street and beaten up when we went to school. In some places, in some neighborhoods, we had to run all the time to get away from white people. People in the street would call us names from the movie *Planet of the Apes*, or they'd step aside when we got on the bus. There was a place called Le Palladium where we used to roller-skate. As soon as we left there at the end of the night, white people would chase us. There were even places that were off-limits to us because we had black skin, like this bar that had a sign out front saying "*pas de n*gres*" ("no n*ggers"), so we couldn't even get in. And then the police didn't say anything; it was us they arrested when white people chased us.

And then, and we don't say this enough, white people were organized in groups, in gangs (even if we didn't call them that). There were the Italians, the Québécois, each community had its own groups. Then we saw the arrival of the bikers, the Hell's Angels, who changed things quite a bit in the neighborhoods, as did the skinheads later on. All these groups systematically harassed us, and we saw them everywhere, especially the young bikers, or rather the wanna-be bikers, and we fought with them a lot. And finally, we were also being harassed all the time by the police, who were watching us and sometimes beating us up, hurling racist insults at us and always siding with the white people who attacked us. The result of all this was that we had to stand together in a group to defend ourselves, otherwise we'd be getting our asses kicked all the time.

GF : And that's where the idea came from, among young Haitian friends, to form your own groups?

MA : Yes, that's right. In the beginning, we got together a lot around sports, mainly basketball and soccer. We'd form teams in our neighborhoods, then go out to

all the fields in town to play against other teams, each team representing its own neighborhood. It was often at these times that we'd get into fights with other groups (groups of whites) who would pick fights or insult us. It was as if the city was off-limits to us.

At that time, between the late 1970s and early 1980s, the miniseries *Racines*⁴ was broadcast in French throughout Quebec. It was a series about slavery that became very popular and that we watched a lot, among friends. This series showed us that there was a long history of racism and violence in North America, and that the violence we suffered today echoed slavery and white domination. We also saw Ku Klux Klan members on TV, chasing Black people around the U.S., raping or killing them. All this mixed together was both traumatic and frustrating for us, and made us think.

So with our group of friends, we were between 16 and 19 years old, let's say, we decided to defend ourselves by redirecting the hatred and violence of the white aggressors against them. I'm not talking about all white people, I'm talking about those who were violent towards us, and those who had organized to hurt us. When we decided to organize, we were no longer just a group of friends, we gradually became something else: people started calling us the "Bélanger guys". So we became a kind of gang.

TR : The parallel with slavery mentioned by Maxime seems important to me. Slavery laid essential foundations for racial domination in the Americas, including Haiti and Canada. As with slavery, our book tells a story where race is inscribed on bodies through violence. In this context, we can see there is a long history of racial violence in Montreal that is very rarely told. As Maxime tells the story of the 1970s-1980s, many Haitian immigrants say the same thing : that they couldn't go out to buy milk for their family at the corner store, for example, without being harassed or attacked.

We often tend to analyze slavery as a primarily economic process, as a strategy for obtaining free labor. But above all else, slavery is the possession of the individual, the shaping of a social identity through violence. This is the argument of Saidiya Hartman, Délice Mugabo⁵ and other Afrofeminist researchers who have influenced me greatly. Maxime's testimony is a reminder of these mechanisms. Slavery is defined, above all,

4. *Roots*, in the original English version, is an American drama series broadcast in 1977 in the United States. The series was a great success and won many awards. Through the story of an African-American who goes in search of his family roots, it explores the enslavement of the African people, the deportation and exploitation of part of them in the United States, and the issues surrounding the abolition of slavery.

5. See Hartman Saidiya, 1997, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford, Oxford University Presse et Mugabo Délice, 2016, « Black in the city: On the ruse of ethnicity and language in an antiblack landscape », *Identities*, 26(6), p. 631-648.

by the gratuitousness of anti-Black violence: violence that is often a goal in itself, and violence that shapes and reshapes a racial hierarchy.

MA : So little by little, we got into the habit of staying in groups and self-organizing to defend ourselves. In a way, we were claiming our existence. It was often in the metro stations; we'd go downtown at night by metro and we'd have to defend ourselves. Berri-UQAM station, at the eastern end of downtown, was always a battleground, for example. We were also confronted with violence in places where we weren't wanted, like certain bars or neighborhoods. We also defended ourselves in public spaces. I remember once, after entering a bar that didn't accept Black people, they chased us down the street with guns! In short, we just wanted to defend our right to exist. We wanted to defend ourselves and take our place in the city. Then, little by little, people heard about us. Members of the community would call us to defend them when they were victims of racial threats or violence. And then other groups formed in other neighborhoods.

GF : And when and how does the term "gang" come into play in this context?

MA : That word "gang", that's what the police called us: "Black gangs." It was a term used just to describe us at first. White people, as we said before, were never called "gangs" (in French, the word "*bande*" was used instead). We didn't know about gangs, there weren't any where we came from. We were accused of sticking together, but it's normal to stick together: we were all Haitians in another country, we spoke Creole, and we were confronted with others through racism and violence. But the police would arrest us and say we belonged to this gang or that gang. And they didn't know us, they imagined we had weapons, they saw us as organized criminals, whereas most of the time we just wanted to be among friends, we didn't have weapons for the most part.

TR : What's striking is that it was considered illegal for Black people to get together and defend themselves, whereas white violence (the violence that forced them to defend themselves) wasn't a problem. That's when the police started a war against gangs. Before the 1980s, there were already groups that we could liken to gangs, but there was no police war on gangs. It was really from 1987 onwards that the police began a silent war against Haitian gangs, without talking about it publicly. In 1989, the press began to talk about "gang violence", mainly in relation to groups of Black people. This was clearly visible in the media published at the time, which spoke of "indiscriminate violence perpetrated by Black people". The press, xenophobes and the far right created a kind of "moral panic" around the gangs. It was at this point that the police created the first "anti-gang street squad" in their history.

GF : You also analyzed the role of the media and the police in the creation of the gang category through archives and interviews, didn't you?

TR : Yes, absolutely, and it was interesting to talk to Maxime about what I'd learned from the archives and from a few dozen interviews with police officers who were involved in the war against gangs. It was through this work that I learned that the police were waging a silent war between 1987 and 1989, and Maxime recalled being under constant surveillance at the time. Then I had access to internal reports from 1989 on so-called street gangs. The reports showed that the police documented gangs extensively and knew their names, members and territories. Some of the details were accurate, others totally inaccurate.

What is clear is that from 1987 onwards, the criminalization of young Haitians in certain neighborhoods became much more systematic. When the police arrested young people, they automatically categorized them as belonging to one gang or another, depending on where they lived. They gradually became criminals in the eyes of the police and the public. As we said, the police were already harassing Black people in Montreal—long before gangs appeared. From the second half of the 1980s, the police were increasingly criticized for their racism and violence. There were many street protests between 1987 and 1988. In this context, the gang concept enabled the police to justify their practices: they were no longer arresting or harassing Black people, but gangs.

GF : And what were the effects of this criminalization of young Black people that you discuss in the book?

MA : With the creation of the war on gangs and the street gang squad, we started going to prison regularly, we got into the system. The lawyers would tell us: "If you plead guilty, you won't stay long," so we'd plead guilty, go to prison and our criminal record would grow. Inside, it was almost like being at home. It was in Montreal, we knew people, we were housed and fed, there were activities to do. We created a new life for a time, cut off from the difficulties of the outside world. Obviously, prison is less of a punishment for those who live in poverty, because we already experience a kind of punishment on a daily basis.

On the other hand, imprisonment was also very violent. When I was first arrested, I spent nine days in solitary confinement, only allowed out for 30 minutes a day. When I came out of solitary confinement, I felt like I was going crazy. And then in prison, we were with other criminals, real criminals, it was strange. Although I didn't see myself as a criminal, I was considered one of them. And that changes the way you look at

yourself. By dint of being arrested by the police, by dint of going to prison, by dint of being equated with criminals, well, some of us became convinced. And it's in prison that you also learn how to become a criminal. You learn how the system works and how to game it, what you need to do to make money without taking too many risks. Some of my friends made good contacts in prison; it helped them evolve towards more advanced forms of criminality. If gangs have become more criminal, it's also because of prison.

But that's not all. Some gang members didn't just want to defend themselves from white people, they also wanted the right to get rich like them, especially like the white criminal groups that were rarely harassed by the police. At the time, we heard a lot about white "criminals" on TV or in the newspapers (the Italian Mafia, Hell's Angels), but they seemed to do things in broad daylight, without really getting into trouble, without really going to jail. We wondered how people could accept these criminal gangs while it was so different for us, being harassed by the police simply because we were Black. So, little by little, we said to ourselves that if they had the right to do that, then we too wanted to get rich like them.

TR: I think that with police repression, there are at least two paths that people have pursued. There are people who, by dint of going to prison, have decided to stop. And then there are people who, by dint of going to prison, learned a lot and turned the gangs into something more criminal. The police believed that gangs were criminal groups, fairly structured, with territories. They weren't. But police repression finally succeeded in making real the fantasies, the speeches and the representations of the police, the media and some members of the population.

MA : Yes, indeed, the result of all this is that it has pushed us, at least some of us, into deep criminality. Without the police's attitude towards us, there would surely be far fewer criminal gangs today. Some of my friends wanted to become "real criminals", wanted to get into that world, like the Italian Mafia or the Hell's Angels. I have a friend, for example, a member of my gang, who watched the film *The Godfather* all day long, and encouraged others to do the same. He wanted to become Michael Corleone. It got serious at some point. People like this friend took up more space in the group, more control. It's very different from what we started out with. Some of them managed to make a lot of money and get into real organized crime. And in time, they earned the respect of the Italian Mafia and the Hell's Angels, the very people who hated us before. But there are very few cases like that.

But the result today is that gangs see themselves more as criminal groups, it's different from the old days. They're a little more organized, and they work with the other criminal groups, who didn't trust us before—we were just "dirty n*ggers" to them. But in the end, most Haitian gang members are nothing more than underlings: they often do the dirty work of the bikers and Italian mafia. The latter no longer expose themselves to violence; it's up to us Black people to do it now, as the others did before.

GF : And how do the police use the notion of street gangs today?

TR : In gathering a number of testimonies, I also realized that the police aren't really afraid of gangs, because ultimately, as we've said, this categorization of Black youth served to justify their actions by producing a certain narrative about insecurity and violence, which also served to justify increased police budgets and resources. This is still the case today: when society criticizes the police and their actions, the police wave the threat of gangs, insisting on the dangers they pose to ordinary citizens. By the way, other criminal groups love street gangs too, because they draw all the police's attention to them. And the media love them too, because they give stories to tell, sell papers and generate clicks online.

On the other hand, what the police are really afraid of is these gangs organizing themselves politically, like the Black Panthers, for example. That, above all, is what they want to destroy. What Maxime described, what they did to defend themselves against racism and oppression, that's what's really disturbing for the police. Today, I don't think gangs really play that political role; they mostly provide income for young people who have no other economic opportunities. That being said, the political dimension of racial struggles still scares the police. We've seen this most recently with the Black Lives Matter movement. In 2020, two of the largest anti-police demonstrations in Montreal's history were held. In a survey conducted in the fall of that year, 73% of Montrealers said they were in favor of "defunding" the police⁶. Immediately afterwards, the police, relayed by the press, put gun violence back at the center of the public debate—a violence they explicitly associate with gangs. In my opinion, the police greatly exaggerate the problem of violence, and this is rarely questioned publicly. After that,

6. The slogan "Defund the police", which followed on from the abolitionist and civil rights struggles of Blacks in the USA, gradually became a political project championed by a section of North American civil society after the murder of George Floyd in the USA in 2020. This movement, which has now expanded to include intellectuals and celebrities, denounces the growing budgets allocated to the police, as well as their role in racial discrimination and violence. The movement advocates a reallocation of these budgets to community projects and services that support the safety and well-being of all.

the police got a substantial increase in funding in 2021; and, in 2022, they got the biggest budget increase in their history.

GF: Finally, although you've already mentioned it, how does your book contribute to a better understanding of spatial injustices?

TR: Everything we've said here and everything we write in the book can be analyzed from a spatial perspective. What Maxime and his friends have done is to defy an urban order characterized by racism and violence. In a way, they have taken a place in the city they were denied. Although the generation before Maxime's had begun to gain a foothold in Quebec society (somewhat through work and culture), it was really his generation that demanded greater spatial justice. The book also deals with the role of the school in these processes, but we don't have the space to go into detail here.

MA: Yes, what Ted says is right. Our parents didn't understand the system, but we did. Our parents, when they were there (which was often not the case), didn't really know what it was like outside, because they weren't on the street or in school, they were old, and they didn't mix with Quebecers. You couldn't ask them where downtown was—they didn't even know! We were the first to get out of the neighborhood and into the city. If most Haitians breathe today, it's partly thanks to us.

TR: I fundamentally think that what they did made the city better. In a way, they opened up the city.

To quote this article

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