

**Out to Defend Ourselves:
A History of Montreal's First Haitian Street Gang
by Maxime Aurélien and Ted Rutland (2023)
Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 170 pp.
*Reviewed by Sacha Alfonzo V.***

O*ut to Defend Ourselves*, a collaboration between Maxime Aurélien – a former leader in the Haitian gang, les Bélanger – and Ted Rutland – a university professor – advocates for a more nuanced understanding of the formation of gangs, including problematizing the origins and application of the term “gang” itself. The authors skillfully tackle complex themes through a “constructed perspective” (p. 13) written primarily from Maxime’s viewpoint. His stories of childhood through young adulthood are examined within the broader landscape of immigration, racism, and poverty and their effects on integration for young Haitian men during the 1980s and 1990s in Montreal. The authors explore how these conditions led to the birth of (so-called) Haitian gangs.

The authors locate the emergence of les Bélanger as an act of resistance against the racism and violence perpetrated against the Haitian community and examine how those actions contributed to the solidification of a group identity. Additionally, they draw attention to the way amplified consumerism and soaring unemployment rates impacted on rates of poverty among new Haitian immigrants. This reality, coupled with pervasive racism and discrimination, led the same groups of friends to participate in petty crime. However, the authors assert that this “was something [they] did on the side to support [themselves], not the reason [they] came together” (p. 87).

The authors argue that the formation of les Bélanger “bears little resemblance to the stories shown in movies, popularized in the media, or discussed by the police” (p. 42). This aligns with Stanley Cohen’s (1972) work, which argued that media plays a significant role in amplifying certain issues, inflating public concern to disproportionate levels. Aurélien and Rutland expose how racist media representations and prejudice within the Montreal police force created a moral panic. For example, the authors discuss the ways in which immigration was depicted as a threat to white, francophone, Quebec culture. They also demonstrate how an increased concern over AIDS, led Canadian Blood services to add Haitians to the list of those banned from donating blood, along with “homosexuals, hemophiliacs [and] heroin users [...] the so-called Four H Club” (p. 70), further stigmatizing the Haitian community. Additionally, the authors

consider how media misinformation became a catalyst for the creation of a “special street gang squad” (p. 124), which targeted the Haitian community and was responsible for the arrests of hundreds of Haitian youths during its first year of operation.

The book describes how the new category of “street gang” or “gang de rue” (p. 109) emerged from a desire to manage the groups of young Haitian men that the police had come to define as criminal gangs. The authors argue that, in Montreal, “‘street gang’ came to be almost synonymous with ‘Haitian’” (p. 112). The defining of gangs in Canada is problematic as the vagueness of language creates a catch-all that can be leveraged to target associates.¹ Regardless, the implications of the label are real. In this case, the authors contend that the group transitioned from friends to being labeled as a “street gang”, resulting in increased police surveillance, profuse racial profiling, police violence, and criminalization. This point is important as it draws the reader’s attention to the problematic nature of labelling and how, drawing on the work of sociologist Howard Becker (1963), we can understand how the ‘gang’ designation imposed by agents of control, transformed the young men from associates to deviants and reframed their activities as deviant behaviour. There is a palpable tension with the word “gang” itself throughout the book. At times the word appears in quotations, while other times it is taken up and used in self-descriptions.²

The authors resist a singular narrative of “gangs” by examining the positive impacts that the solidarity and actions of les Bélanger had, particularly in reducing the attacks experienced by the Haitian community and other Black communities, at the hands of white Quebeckers. Additionally, they explore not just the sensationalized or climactic events, but also the quotidian moments of Maxime, his friends, and his community, and demonstrate the important role that both basketball and hip hop had in their social world. Aurélien and Rutland work to contextualize how the city’s geography – its “complex landscape of racism and violence” (p. 47) – conditioned the experiences of the group, including a map of Montreal neighbourhoods and transit system in the 1980s as an important visual reference for readers. The inclusion of Maxime’s personal photos also provides a conduit for a deeper connection with those featured in this story.

The book concludes by describing Maxime’s departure from the gang and its eventual dissolution. They discuss the complex reasons, including a shift from youth to adulthood, the changing priorities of members, the pursuit

of other endeavours and a change in leadership which altered the vision, purpose, and direction of the gang, that led to a change in the composition of the group. An epilogue, “What Is a Gang?”, attends to the definitions and histories of gangs, how the term is applied, almost exclusively, to Black people and looks at the roots of their formation. Furthermore, this section provides a brief update on Maxime’s life since his departure from les Bélanger. While this is an appreciated inclusion, one that augments the overall narrative, I suggest that the update may have been better situated in a separate section. Unfortunately, it feels almost hidden under the title of “What Is a Gang?”

In *Out to Defend Ourselves*, the authors skillfully weave together the histories of les Bélanger, the city of Montreal, Haiti, immigration, politics, sports, and music into a compelling narrative, providing readers with an intimate look into the genesis of Haitian gangs in Montreal. The collaborative approach to this book facilitates a multifaceted analysis, integrating firsthand accounts with contextual factors, such as societal dynamics and physical geography, advancing a more sophisticated understanding of the topic, while still remaining accessible and engaging for both academic and general audiences. The authors note that the book “is about the past, but for the present [...] what occurred in the past and what [...] needs to occur in the present” (p. 13). Given the ongoing crisis with the (over) policing of Black and other racialized communities (Maynard, 2017) and the persistence of racism throughout society today, this thought-provoking and powerful historical account is an important addition to the limited discourse on Haitian street gangs in Montreal (see Tremblay et al., 2016; Décary-Secours, 2020) and provides a much-needed perspective which not only analyzes but humanizes, while unsettling the contexts in which these “gangs” and the term itself emerged.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (2008) defines the term as “a more or less structured group of adolescents, young adults and/or adults who use intimidation and violence to commit criminal acts on a regular basis, in order to obtain power and recognition and/or control specific areas of criminal activities”.
- ² This same tension in language use can be noted in my own, incongruent, use of the term.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Sacha Alfonzo V. is an undergraduate student majoring in sociology at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan. Her ongoing research seeks to amplify silenced voices, carve out space for counter-narratives, and examine the intricate connections between creative expression and social justice. She has worked, in collaboration, on multiple public dissemination projects centred around prisoner-produced publications, poetry, and art. She is grateful to live, work, and study on the traditional and unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan People.