

Advance Praise for *Out to Defend Ourselves*

“The spectre of the Black gang haunts the police imaginary, leading to propaganda about crime, policing, and the necessity of racial profiling. In this collaboration between Ted Rutland, author of *Displacing Blackness*, and Maxime Aurélien, leader of Montreal’s first Haitian street gang les Bélangers, the authors challenge us to crucially rethink the role of street gangs in political organizing and the role of the police in creating street violence. An intervention into whitewashed histories of Canada and Quebec, this book examines racism in Montreal and the strategies mobilized by the Black community for self-defence. This book critically reshapes our understanding of race, gangs, and policing in Montreal and Canada more broadly, shattering myths of Black gangs through the voice of Aurélien. A crucial read at a time where policing is increasingly under scrutiny and where myths of Black criminality serve to buttress police powers.”

— El Jones, author, *Abolitionist Intimacies*
and *Live from the Afrikan Resistance!*

“An essential contribution to contemporary histories of policing the racialization of crime, providing critical perspectives on the historical emergence of street gangs. *Out to Defend Ourselves* describes the lives of those who experienced the confluence of anti-Black state and popular violence, and the carceral response to a moral panic around crime. The book provides a compelling firsthand account of the development of Montreal’s first Haitian street gang, which emerged as Black community self-defence against rampant white violence and acute economic disenfranchisement, while shedding light on the ways the police contributed to the violence they purported to combat. In a moment where political leaders continue to work in direct opposition to the widely supported call to #DefundThePolice, this text is crucial reading.”

— Robyn Maynard, author, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*

“Maxime Aurélien and Ted Rutland, in *Out to Defend Ourselves: A History of Montreal’s First Haitian Street Gang*, do an amazing deconstruction of the racist police and mass media construction of Haitian and Black ‘gangs.’ In this grounded oral historical investigation based

on Aurélien's and other members of les Bélangers experiences, they show how 'gang' formation did not have to do with instigating violence and crime but instead with resisting racist violence against Haitians in Montreal and seizing space for Haitian 'male' youth. This is a powerful book that will be useful for all those resisting anti-Black racism and the police, including their racist 'anti-gang' policing. As the authors note, while this book is about the historical past it is very much for our historical present."

— Gary Kinsman, co-author of *The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation*

"In this ground-breaking collaboration, the authors have produced a book that offers a new way of seeing the history of Montreal in the 1970s and 1980s, one that takes the reader into a world far removed from the city's sites of wealth and prestige. A must read!"

— Sean Mills, professor and Canada Research Chair in Canadian and Transnational History, University of Toronto

"Aurélien and Rutland detail the formation of the first Haitian street gang in Montréal not as some inherently violent and predatory force — the white supremacist, police-state, and mainstream narrative — but as a defensive response by young, working-class Haitian diaspora to racist violence at the hands of white society and the police. An important book to question preconceived notions of street gang formation."

— Asaf Rashid, author, *Solidarity Behind Bars*

"An excellent case study in how racialized moral panics fuel police power and abuse. A compelling analysis of how white Montrealers translated the Haitian community and Black empowerment into a threat during the 20th century. The rich narrative reveals how local media and public police worked in concert to constrain and contain young Black people, limiting their life chances and criminalizing those who resisted, while legitimizing vigilante white violence against young Haitians. The work is a lovely example of oral history blended with social science analysis, recounting an awful chapter of Montreal's and Canada's history of anti-Black racism."

— Kevin Walby, co-author of *Police Funding, Dark Money, and the Greedy Institution*

**OUT TO
DEFEND
OURSELVES**

EXCERPT

Excerpt

OUT TO DEFEND OURSELVES

A HISTORY OF MONTREAL'S
FIRST HAITIAN STREET GANG

MAXIME AURÉLIEN TED RUTLAND

Fernwood Publishing
Halifax & Winnipeg

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Montreal in the 1980s, showing neighbourhoods discussed in the book and the metro system. Map by Sarah Bengle.

Introduction

A GANG HISTORY, OTHERWISE

In the late eighties, the pages of Montreal newspapers were suddenly filled with stories about a new social problem. A series of Haitian gangs, the media reported, were appearing in neighbourhoods across the city and terrorizing city residents. The members of the gangs were young, mostly in their teens, but their collective force was significant. The gangs had adopted the hierarchical structure of criminal organizations like Hells Angels and the mafia and were creating new networks of drug distribution, prostitution, and extortion. They were battling each other over the territories of these illicit markets, increasingly so. As new revelations hit the newspaper pages, the sense of panic in the city grew, along with the scale of the required response. More than a threat to each other, the gangs were “terrorizing the north of the city” and were armed with “a whole arsenal of weapons,”¹ the *Journal de Montréal* reported. In September 1989, the Montreal police responded by creating its first-ever street gang squad, a squad that arrested 150 young Haitians in its first year of operation.² It was the beginning of a new era — the beginning of a war on gangs in Montreal that soon became a permanent feature of police operations and a fixture in public debates about crime, policing, and security in the metropolis.

Many media and police reports at the time talked about a particular gang, the city’s first Haitian gang. The gang, known as les Bélangers, was reportedly formed in the early eighties in a park in the northeast of the city where Haitian youth gathered to play soccer. Over time, the gang gained new members and began to use ever-greater violence to build its reputation and achieve its objectives. The gang reportedly terrorized transit riders in the metro and bus system, stole money from youth and purses from old women, and gradually evolved into higher-level crime. By the late eighties, with rival gangs now established in other northeast neighbourhoods, les Bélangers were engaged in a bitter and violent war for supremacy and territory. The primary aim of the gang war, a police

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report explained, was to win or maintain domination over territory and therefore “secure exclusive control over the drug and sex trade.”³ While les Bélangers seemed to have disappeared by 1989, their impact on the city lived on. Les Bélangers, *La Presse* reported in 1989, “is considered the model” of all other Haitian gangs, the originator from which an ever-worsening gang problem descended.⁴

The truth of les Bélangers, however, could hardly be more different. Instead of being purveyors of violence, the gang was a response to the violence of others. In 1980s Montreal, Haitians faced racist insults and attacks at every step. Overt racism was widespread and socially accepted among white people then. It was normal for older white people to insult Haitians in public spaces, at school, and in the metro system. Often, these verbal insults were followed by physical attacks. Certain parts of the city were worse than others, and some Haitians found a small measure of security by avoiding the areas known to be the worst. They stayed home and they built their own institutions, places where they would be safe from a hostile city. But les Bélangers, the group formed by the children of Haitian immigrants, aspired to something bigger. They wanted to make a place for themselves and other Haitians in the city, and that meant organizing to confront and push through racist insults and violence. This was the express purpose of les Bélangers: to confront racist violence and create a more open city. They used violence in self-defence, ultimately making white racists pay a price for their actions and, in time, reducing the frequency of racist attacks against Haitians. Rather than “terrorizing the city,” les Bélangers confronted existing terrors and helped make the city less dangerous for Haitians and other marginalized groups.

Instead of being a criminal enterprise, moreover, les Bélangers was really just a group of friends. It is true, as reported, that the group formed in a park in the northeast of the city, a place that was officially called Parc Sainte-Bernadette but that Haitians always called Parc Bélanger. The group formed and evolved like any other group of friends: around a set of shared interests. In the early days, the interests were basketball and soccer. As they grew older, the group gathered at people’s apartments to drink, talk, and listen to music, and they went out together to dances and clubs. Like most racialized immigrants, the group largely grew up in poverty and faced incredible challenges finding decent employment. Some members of the group turned to petty crime to pay rent and get

what they needed to live, but it was never a “gang” activity. It was something some members did when they were alone or in smaller groups. The purpose of the group was something else. For over ten years, les Bélangers brought a group of young Haitians together, provided a sense of belonging and enjoyment, and enabled them to do together what they could have never done alone: take their place in a city in which racist insults and violence terrorized people of colour and kept them within narrow geographical boundaries.

The police crackdown, finally, was less a response to gang violence and criminality than a reason for it. Police action and inaction created the conditions that led to gangs being formed. The police harassed and brutalized the Haitian community, while ignoring the same actions of white racists. The Bélanger gang was formed to provide the kind of protection the police did not. Over time, the police devoted increasing attention to les Bélangers and the other Haitian gangs, having begun a quiet war on gangs two years before the official launch of the war in 1989. Police actions during this period promoted conflicts between gangs in various ways; gave a rebel image to the gangs, which was attractive to marginalized youth; and gradually pushed away youth who were less willing to face police harassment and tilted the composition of the gangs toward those who were. If some Haitian gangs eventually became criminal enterprises, it was partly because police action changed the composition and purpose of the gangs, leaving them more and more under the influence of members who were willing to face the threat of criminalization and punishment because they had chosen a criminal career. The result was a vicious, circular dynamic that persists into the present: the aggressive policing of gangs helps create the criminality to which the police claim to be responding.

The real history of les Bélangers needs to be told — and not just to set the record straight. The story of les Bélangers is about more than a group of young Haitians who organized to defend each other and the community. It is also the story of a city — Montreal — and the processes that transformed the city from an industrial centre dominated by competing French- and English-speaking white populations to a post-industrial and deeply multicultural metropolis where debates about language intersected with questions about immigration, integration, and racial discrimination. It is the story of new cultures and new landscapes, from immigrants playing soccer and basketball to Caribbean musicians

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and DJs bringing the sounds of reggae, soca, and hip hop into music venues and public parks. It is about the insecurities and challenges these changes brought about and how different individuals and communities found a way through them. It is about crime and the police, the crimes of the police, and a set of ideas about crime and the police that were new in the eighties yet incredibly commonplace today. As one member of les Bélangers says about the eighties: “everything was new then, everything about the city we know today was just appearing.” The story of les Bélangers “is about us,” he explained, “but it’s also about you.”

This book, then, tells the story of les Bélangers and the changing city its members confronted and transformed. The story begins in the seventies, with changes in Canadian immigration policy and the emergence of a significant Haitian community in the neighbourhood of Saint-Michel — the community in which the members of les Bélangers grew up. From there, the book tells the story of les Bélangers, from the days on the basketball court in Parc Bélanger in the late seventies to its eventual dissolution in the late eighties. Along the way, we describe the everyday, ordinary activities that brought the group together, the years of fighting white racists in the metro system and public parks, the emergence of other Haitian gangs, and the role of aggressive policing and other issues in changing the composition and function of les Bélangers and the other Haitian gangs. Although the book focuses largely on the eighties, it is written in the present and for the present. As street gangs continue to occupy the attention of the police, the media, and much of the public, the book provides details that are missing from mainstream discussions and simultaneously challenges mainstream understandings and responses to criminalized youth. As the epilogue makes especially clear, the very category “street gang” brings an exaggerated level of attention to Black youth (whether they are involved in a gang or not) and distracts from the broader social issues that shape the opportunities available to city residents and their safety.

As a story about a gang, the book departs massively from most existing accounts. As soon as Haitian gangs came to public attention in the eighties, the media and the police got the story wrong. The passage of time has cemented the error rather than correcting it. There are now hundreds of articles and books about Montreal street gangs, especially about Haitian gangs. Nearly all this work is produced by academics and

journalists who emphasize the most dramatic, criminal, and violent aspects of their subject matter. The academic writing, produced largely by criminologists, tends to use frameworks developed by academics in the United States, frameworks that have been intensely criticized by other US academics.⁵ As critics explain, these frameworks isolate gangs from their broader social context, including other groups of youth. As a result, they bring exaggerated attention to the misdeeds of gang members that are actually more widespread, while attributing these activities to the perceived social or cultural peculiarities of the community in which the members grew up.⁶ Recent claims made by a pair of Montreal criminologists that violence among Haitian youth is caused by “hip hop culture” is a case in point; the cause of Black criminality is assumed to be Black culture, no matter how long ago this culture emerged or how widespread and multiracial it has become.⁷

Journalistic accounts are no better. The stories produced by media outlets are meant to sell newspapers and drive online traffic. It is only natural they would feature dramatic headlines like “Taking Pleasure in Killing at 15 Years Old” (1989) or “Violent Gangs Armed to the Teeth” (2021).⁸ The sources for these stories are also few and partial in perspective. The police are the primary source of information about gangs, a perspective that necessarily exaggerates the danger posed by gangs and the effectiveness of the police in combatting them and keeping the public safe. At times, the media will also include the perspectives of residents living in neighbourhoods where street gangs are present. The residents cited in the stories are always afraid, either for themselves or their children, even when the violence in their neighbourhood occurs strictly between gang members. In a few cases, journalists and academics have produced more detailed accounts of street gangs, book-length accounts that are based on many sources and multiple years of research.⁹ Here too, however, the same narrow perspective prevails. Even a book about Master B, a Haitian gang we discuss in this book, emphasizes the criminality and violence of the gang at the expense of the ordinary activities that brought the group together in the first place and the white racism and violence it was formed to combat.

There are other ways to tell the story of a street gang, as a smaller and more critical literature demonstrates. Geographically, street gangs exist in cities around the world. Historically, their existence dates to the emergence of large industrial cities and they evolved in tandem with

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the world's large cities. Although gangs are incredibly diverse in their composition, activities, and identities, they are essentially a product of poor communities — and for good reason. As Mike Davis explains, “gangs mint power for the otherwise powerless from their control of small urban spaces,” from street corners to parks to neighbourhoods.¹⁰ They provide the social status, physical safety, and/or incomes that more privileged communities acquire through more conventional, legal means. Until the middle of the twentieth century, the marginalized communities of large cities in North America and Europe were mainly white, and so were the gangs. Gangs were especially prominent in communities that, although classified as white today, occupied a subordinate position due to their ethnicity (e.g., Irish, Italian, Jewish, and French Canadian communities).¹¹ In many cases, gangs were formed in these communities not simply to provide a source of income or social status, but also to combat physical attacks from more established, dominant white communities. Gangs in Montreal, which date back to the 1820s, follow this general pattern. Until the eighties, they were always based in poor white communities.¹²

The emergence of Black and other non-white gangs occurred later, as these communities grew in large cities due to international and rural to urban migration. In the United States, Black gangs emerged in large cities with the so-called great migration of Black people from the rural south to the industrial cities of the north and west from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Accounts of these gangs, like gangs in general, are largely stigmatizing. The gangs' existence is attributed to poverty and exclusion, but also the sociocultural dysfunction of their members, if not their entire communities. A few works, however, tell a different story. Some accounts of the Slausons in Los Angeles, for example, show how the gang was formed to defend the Black community from the physical attacks of white gangs, known as “Spook Hunters.”¹³ In the sixties, a Slauson leader, Bunchy Carter, built ties with the Oakland-based Black Panther Party (an activist or revolutionary organization) and transformed his gang into a chapter of the party. Similarly, a book about the Blackstone Rangers in Chicago reveals the sociopolitical purpose of the gang.¹⁴ Like the Slausons, the Blackstone Rangers combatted racist violence and oppression, sometimes through direct physical confrontation and sometimes through political activism.

This book draws on these richer, non-stigmatizing accounts of street

gangs — accounts that place the gangs in their socioeconomic context. Interestingly, early research on gangs in Montreal was far less stigmatizing than it is today. The first major study of Montreal gangs by criminologist Marc LeBlanc, published in 1973, found that gangs were rooted in poor white communities (Irish, Italian, and Québécois) and engaged in various petty crimes as a rational response to their poverty.¹⁵ They resorted to violence, according to LeBlanc, for similarly rational reasons (e.g., in the context of a robbery). Ironically, LeBlanc arrived at very different conclusions when Haitian gangs began to emerge in the eighties. These gangs resorted to violence, LeBlanc argued, because “of the culture of violence that has existed for generations in their country of origin.”¹⁶ To an extent, then, we seek to treat les Bélangers like the white gangs that preceded it, showing how it emerged as a response to poverty and social exclusion. Like the above-mentioned studies of Black gangs in US cities, however, this book also places white racism and violence at the centre of the story, showing how les Bélangers served the political purpose of combatting, and ultimately helping diminish, the insults and physical attacks the Haitian community faced in this period.

As a story about Montreal, this book also departs from existing accounts. The seventies and eighties were a time of profound changes for the city, and many of these changes have been well documented. Once the industrial centre of Canada, Montreal lost around half its manufacturing jobs in this period. The southwest borough, adjacent to the Lachine Canal, lost over 10,000 manufacturing jobs between 1973 and 1988 and saw its population reduced by half.¹⁷ These losses were a part of a broader shift in the Global North from manufacturing to service sectors, but the new head office and advanced services jobs tended to appear in Toronto rather than in Montreal. Public and parapublic sectors, sectors that began to flourish with the Quiet Revolution in the sixties, continued to grow in the seventies, but economic stagnation strained public expenditures, especially when a major recession hit in 1982. For all these reasons, the city’s unemployment rate began to climb in 1975, reached a peak of 14 percent in 1983, and did not drop below 10 percent until the late nineties.¹⁸ The period between the mid-seventies and the late eighties, the period covered by this book, was one of sustained economic crisis and nervous debates about how to put the city on a better path.

While the economy was weakening, Montreal was also changing in multiple ways. Since the beginning of industrialization in the 1830s,

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the city was deeply divided by language. Anglophones (English speakers) became a minority of the population in the 1860s but controlled the business world and obtained the best-paying jobs. It was not simply a question of language competence. As the 1961 Canadian Census famously showed, bilingual anglophones earned 41 percent more than bilingual francophones (French speakers). Even unilingual anglophones earned 37 percent more than bilingual francophones, while earning 93 percent more than unilingual francophones.¹⁹ Such linguistic and ethnic inequalities animated the social movements of the sixties and launched an enduring political debate about language, nation, and sovereignty in Quebec. Various changes in the sixties and seventies, including the Charter of the French Language (Bill 101) in 1977, eliminated the gap between bilingual anglophones and francophones by 1981 and shifted the advantage to francophones by 1991.²⁰ As this shift was occurring, the effects of changes in Canadian immigration policy in the sixties were becoming apparent. Beginning in 1975, the majority of Canada's and Quebec's immigrants hailed from the Global South rather than Europe or the United States, and they stepped into a city and a country long structured by white supremacy.²¹ While debates about language and sovereignty continued into the eighties, they occurred alongside, and/or intersected with, tense debates about immigration, integration, and racial discrimination.²²

The challenges and injustices faced by racialized migrants in Montreal are relatively well documented. There are many studies, for example, of the discrimination faced by racialized immigrants in Montreal's housing market, labour market, and education system. A notable study in 1982 found that racialized immigrants faced systemic discrimination in the housing market, and were confined to renting in a few areas where landlords were willing to rent to them and housing was rundown.²³ Another study found that the unemployment rate among non-white youth was over 65 percent in 1984 — more than triple the rate for white youth.²⁴ These accounts provide essential background for this book, and we refer to them in the chapters that follow. Their interest, however, concerns the reception or “inclusion” of non-white immigrants in the dominant society; they seek to document what happens when a non-white migrant applies for an apartment or a job, or enters a majority white classroom. In doing so, they overlook a different and more aggressive form of racism, one that does not wait for a non-white person to seek inclusion, but

goes after them in the streets, in public parks, and the metro system. It is this more aggressive form of racism that les Bélangers was formed to combat — and that this book seeks to document.

Alongside accounts of racial injustice, there are a few books that describe how racialized immigrant communities organized to combat these injustices. Particularly helpful are works focused on the community organizing of Haitian Montrealers by Paul Dejean, Grace Sanders, Sean Mills, Vivane Namaste, and Désirée Rochat.²⁵ These works document how Haitians and other Black Montrealers confronted and combatted various forms of racial injustice. In the seventies, most Haitian organizing in Montreal focused on bringing down the François Duvalier and Jean-Claude Duvalier dictatorships in Haiti, but increasing attention was directed to local issues as well. Important campaigns in the seventies and early eighties focused on stopping the deportation of Haitian migrants, ending racism in the taxi industry, and challenging the racism and violence of the Montreal police. Equally important but less recognized organizing was carried out by Haitian feminist groups. This work challenged the interlocking oppressions of race, gender, social class, and citizenship status — both within society at large and within the Haitian community. As Sanders writes, Haitian feminists in Montreal organized around a range of issues, but the very possibility of organizing required them to challenge “long-standing national [Haitian] narratives that cast women as natural domestic labourers” and cast feminists as “selfish troublemakers incapable of healthy relationships.”²⁶

These accounts of Haitian organizing, while essential, focus exclusively on formal community/activist organizations. As such, they ignore the role of les Bélangers and other early Haitian gangs in combatting some of the same forms of racial injustice — something they did, not through protest, but by taking on the purveyors of racial harassment and violence head-on. These activities are an essential part of Montreal’s history. Alongside more conventional forms of activism and advocacy, the actions of les Bélangers helped to confront and reduce certain forms of racism and violence that were extremely prevalent in Montreal of the seventies and eighties. Recounting their struggle, important in itself, also helps to document the forms of everyday racism and violence that many Haitians endured but found ways to live through. As a group of young men, of course, les Bélangers approached these problems with the same male-centric perspective that Haitian feminists were challenging

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in the same period. Their conceptions of the world and the form of freedom they sought were shaped by their gender, an important limitation to their actions that we return to at various points in the book.

There are a few notable works that tell the story of a changing city through the lives and activities of a small community beyond Montreal. Steve McQueen's five-part television series, *Small Axe*, parallels this book in important ways.²⁷ Focused on the West Indian community in London in the sixties and seventies, the series shines a light on the social lives and spaces of this small community, as well as the daily harassment and violence they faced from white civilians and the police. Harassment and violence, the series shows, were gratuitous. They were prompted by nothing but the development of a strong Black community in a predominantly white city. The book *Policing the Crisis* by Stuart Hall and four co-authors is another parallel.²⁸ Focused on the United Kingdom as a whole, the book shows how social and economic changes in the seventies produced a series of new anxieties and, importantly, grossly exaggerated public concerns about a small problem: the petty street crimes of Black youth. This exaggerated response, which the authors call a "moral panic,"²⁹ helped bring about a new social order in which protecting society from Black crime — rather than more pressing issues like unemployment — would play a central role. Various authors have drawn on *Policing the Crisis* to analyze social changes in other contexts, especially the United States.³⁰ Its approach has proven useful in explaining both how certain forms of crime attract surprising levels of public attention and how this attention shapes major, period-defining processes of socio-political change.

This book draws on and extends these studies of urban and social change. It focuses on an important period of change, the seventies and eighties, a period in which Montreal transformed from an industrial city shaped by competing white ethnolinguistic (anglophone versus francophone) claims to power into a multicultural and post-industrial metropolis. It tells this story by focusing on a particular community, the Haitian community, and the challenges it faced and fought to overcome. These challenges were multiple, from unemployment and social exclusion to racist insults and physical attacks. The creation of community organizations and institutions, we show, was an important response to these challenges, but so too was the formation of *les Bélangers*, a group that combatted and helped to diminish certain forms of racism in the

city. The book also details the public response to les Bélangers and other early Haitian gangs. Describing this response as a moral panic, we show how the police and the media exaggerated the crime and violence of the gangs, presenting them as a threat to the city as a whole. This response shaped public attitudes, as well as the composition and activities of the gangs themselves. All these developments, from the development of the Haitian Montreal community to the police and media responses to the gangs, were central to this period in Montreal's history and the making of the city we know today.

This book originated in a chance encounter between a former Haitian gang leader (Maxime) and a university professor (Ted). In 2018, Ted was conducting research for a book about the war on street gangs in Montreal. Much of his previous research had focused on the role of anti-Black racism in modern urban planning and development. Since moving to Montreal in 2010, he had attended many protests and political events in Montreal-Nord and learned from activists there about the racist underpinnings of the war on gangs. He had also learned from activists that the first Haitian street gangs were formed to combat white racist violence and he knew this early history needed to be part of any book about the war on gangs. While he knew the name les Bélangers, it was hard to learn anything about the gang other than the obviously sensationalized stories in a few newspaper articles. Eventually, he met an older Haitian activist, Lazard Vertus, who told him that if he wanted to learn about les Bélangers, he would have to find Maxime Aurélien, the leader of the gang. Ted found Maxime on Facebook and sent him a message. Maxime wrote back almost immediately and they agreed to meet at a restaurant on the Plateau for what he assumed would be a relatively short, one-off conversation. It turned out to be the beginning of a three-year project and a meaningful friendship.

Maxime had just gotten out of prison when Ted contacted him. He had recently turned 50 years old, he had four children, and was aiming to remake his life. His days with les Bélangers were long behind him — it had been almost thirty years since he had stepped away — but his memories of the time were vivid, and the passage of time had left him more and more with the impression that he and the gang had left their mark on Montreal. They were a part of its history. This perspective was fortified when, from time to time, he was approached by a journalist

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or an academic who wanted to tell the story of his gang — entreaties he refused. He told Ted at their first meeting: “A few people have come to me over the years wanting to tell my story, but I wasn’t ready.” When Ted contacted him, he realized he was ready to tell the story. At their meeting, Ted was fascinated by the stories Maxime told him. Maxime, in turn, was impressed with Ted’s openness and his interest in the full story of the gang, not just the sensationalized stories of violence and criminality. By the time the waiter brought the bill, they had settled the basic details of a book project. They were going to co-author a book, each bringing their own abilities and expertise to the table. The book would be about Maxime, but mostly about les Bélangers and the city they encountered and transformed.

A writing process began from there. Every two weeks or so, Maxime and Ted met to work on the project. The early meetings were informal and open ended. Maxime would tell stories about his life and the gang; Ted would record the conversations on his phone and transcribe them when he reached home. Over time, as the elements of the story became clearer, Ted would arrive with questions to ask Maxime — questions meant to fill in the details of the emerging storyline. Maxime also made a list of people to interview, mostly former members of the gang. Sometimes Maxime and Ted met and interviewed people together; sometimes Ted went on his own. In total, fifteen former gang members were interviewed for this book. Ted also continued his research on the war on gangs, combing archives and conducting interviews with former police officers and community members. He often shared what he learned with Maxime; parts of this research were integrated into this book. Eventually, the pair developed a chapter structure, and Ted began to draft the chapters. Once a chapter was completed, Maxime and Ted read the chapter together, with Maxime correcting mistakes, adding new details, or suggesting other changes.

While Maxime and Ted made different contributions, the book is a resolutely collaborative project. The events in the book are largely those that Maxime felt were important and chose to talk about when he met with Ted. But Ted also asked Maxime questions, often prompted by his own sense of what readers needed to know, and the book took shape largely as a conversation does — with each party carrying it forward, giving it their own energy. Back at his desk, Ted constructed a written narrative based on, as much as possible, Maxime’s own words. Parts of

this book are taken directly from the transcription of their conversations, while others are looser paraphrases of Maxime's words. Other parts, especially those meant to provide context, stem from Ted's own research. But the contours of relevant context are driven by the main text, and so each author contributed here as well. We also asked other members of les Bélangers what they wanted to see in the book and we ensured this was reflected in the result. We shared drafts of the book with several of them and made changes in response to their comments. This book is the fruit of their contributions as well.

A book, nevertheless, has to adopt one perspective. Aside from the introduction and the epilogue, the chapters of the book are written in the first person, where the pronoun "I" denotes Maxime. We chose this approach to bring the reader closer to the story, to recount not just a series of events, but what a participant in the events thought and felt. We hope the book is more lively and personal as a result. If there is a single perspective conveyed in the book, however, it does not belong to a single individual. It is a constructed perspective, a point of view forged from the observations of many people over many years, from members of les Bélangers discussing events after they occurred, to the two of us defining a story through a conversational back and forth that focused on les Bélangers but often drifted well beyond the gang and its context. One of the less tangible outcomes of this book is the development of a relatively common sociopolitical analysis on the part of two authors with very different life histories — an analysis that stretches from the seventies into the present. This book, as we noted, is *about* the past, but *for* the present. It reflects, then, what we think about what occurred in the past and what we think *needs* to occur in the present. Our common appreciation for what les Bélangers succeeded in changing — and shared convictions about what remains to be changed — shapes every page, every sentence, of this book.