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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Montréal-Nord and the boundaries of community funding: marginalized communities, radical transformation and the control of community action

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ABSTRACT: This article explores how community action in Montréal-Nord – a borough too often reduced to crisis in the urban imagination of Quebec (Canada) – navigates the paradoxes of funding, between institutional re-engagement and political repression. Drawing on interviews, we provide insights into how key politicized community actors reflect on and attempt to act upon the consequences of funding which, while urgently needed to support their local initiatives, also risks diluting their radical potential. Montréal-Nord – marked by racial stigma yet defined by deep-rooted solidarity – offers a critical case for examining these dynamics. Centring the experiences and perspectives of local actors, this paper argues that Montréal-Nord's community networks are strong, that its political memory is long, and that its capacity for self-organization is undeniable. Over the past two decades, the borough has been at the centre of two major waves of public and private funding. The first one followed the 2008 uprising sparked by the police

killing of the young Fredy Villanueva—a moment that crystallized decades of racial profiling and systemic neglect. The second one emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, when local organizations once again filled the vacuum left by public institutions. During both waves, funding flowed not as a neutral resource designed to meet critical needs, but as a political tool with serious consequences: enabling community work while simultaneously shaping its boundaries and direction. Focusing on private funding, this article identifies core dynamics that help understand how the funding of community action in Montréal-Nord navigates between control, transformation, and low-intensity political repression.

KEYWORDS: Community action, Private Funding, Montréal-Nord, Political repression, Racialized neighbourhoods

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1. Introduction[1]

Nestled in the northern reaches of the city, Montréal-Nord is a vibrant, complex, and deeply rooted borough. Significantly isolated in terms of urban infrastructure, access to public services and economic opportunities, it is often pointed at when speaking of a myriad of issues in the metropolis. That being said, Montréal-Nord is also home to over 88,000 people, nearly 60% of whom trace their origins to Haiti, Italy, Algeria, Morocco, and beyond (Ville de Montréal, 2021). This diversity pulses through its streets—in its food, its languages, its rhythms, and its ways of life. And yet, it is a diversity that, while celebrated in discourse, is met with neglect in practice. Too often, Montréal-Nord is defined from the outside: portrayed by mainstream media as a space marked by crisis, social problems, and poverty (Faucher, 2020; Jolivet et al., 2021). It is true that the borough faces significant structural barriers—underinvestment in public infrastructure, limited access to services, and persistent economic inequality. It has one of the highest population densities in the city, one of the lowest rates of higher education attainment (15%, compared to over 60% in other boroughs), and the highest proportion of single-parent families in Montréal (31.6%) (Boulianne & Guilbault, 2016). But these statistics, while important, tell an incomplete story.

Montréal-Nord is not just the sum of its challenges. In fact, it is under these very circumstances that residents of the borough have developed their own ways of caring, organizing, and thriving, something seldom documented. This was made exceptionally visible during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ruelland, 2021). Montréal-Nord was one of the hardest-hit areas in Canada (Groupe de travail sur l'immunité face à la COVID-19, 2021), yet it responded with remarkable solidarity. Residents mobilized to compensate for the lack of targeted response from public authorities: they distributed masks, prepared meals, shared critical health information in various languages and did so with a spirit of dignity and a denunciation of the political disengagement (Mazot, 2021; Ruelland, 2021; Heck et al., 2022). These were not just survival strategies; they were declarations of presence, of belonging, and of refusal to normalize abandonment. The borough's marginalization has been well documented (González Castillo & Goyette, 2015; Heck et al., 2015; Jolivet et al., 2021), yet the everyday resistance embedded in its community networks remains under-recognized. At the

[1] This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through the Insight Development Grant program.

heart of this dynamic lies a longstanding tradition of community action. Often operating outside—or in spite—of institutional structures, community organizations in Montréal-Nord have built impactful practices of resistance, care, and imagination. But as their visibility grows, especially in times of crisis, so too do the stakes.

The Infrastructure of Community Action in Montréal-Nord

As part of a research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, our interdisciplinary research team set to explore how resistance and community action are practised and reimagined in Montréal-Nord—not only in moments of rupture, but through the slow, everyday labour of community building. Grounded in a relational understanding of race and space, and drawing on Black geographies and Black urbanisms (McKittrick & Woods, 2007; Simone, 2016; Allen et al., 2019), we centre the agency, lived experience, and spatial practices of Black, racialized, and marginalized communities. Rather than reproducing materialist, elitist, or institutional conceptions of space, we foreground the plurality of ways these communities inhabit, negotiate, and claim urban space. Our analysis focuses on the intertwined processes of the spatialization of race and the racialization of space (Lipsitz, 2007). We proceed on the premise that race is not merely a variable in the production of space or social relations; rather, racial formation is constitutive of the spatial fabric itself. The social construction of race actively shapes urban configurations and structures social interaction across contemporary North America. As Dantzler et al. (2022, 163) argue, we understand "racism and corresponding racial inequality as constitutive of and inseparable from urban political economies and urbanization."

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a pivotal moment in Montréal-Nord. Faced with abandonment by public institutions, community organizations mobilized rapidly to meet urgent needs—but this new visibility also drew the attention of the private sector. In a context shaped by both a health emergency and heightened awareness of racial, social, and gender inequalities, large companies like Google, Bombardier, TD Bank, and Molson Coors began funding local initiatives, an unprecedented development in the context of Montréal-Nord. Various local organizations, with contrasted experiences of mobilizing and political advocacy, managed to secure unusual levels of funding from private foundations—some of which showed unexpected openness to funding projects that were explicitly designed to promote radical social transformation. These shifts were not isolated; they aligned with a growing push in the Quebec province toward public-private partnerships in the community sector (Bourassa, 2021).

This influx of funding in Montréal-Nord then raises critical questions: can community actors sustain the "radical" ambition of their work under the weight of corporate sponsorship—enacted through funding? To what extent does private funding shape, limit, or redirect the terms of resistance and community action? The risk is that such support comes with covert expectations—to institutionalize in ways that align with the values of neoliberal governance, which often work to depoliticize urban and social interventions (Berthiaume, 2016; Ravazzi, 2016; Gressgård, 2019; O'Brien and Pike, 2019; Fuentenebro and Acuto, 2022; Puttick, 2023; Kapsali, 2024; Özatağan, Fearn and Eraydin, 2025; Sisson et al., 2025). The link between funding and organizational autonomy through the lens of community action in working-class and racialized neighbourhoods has been addressed elsewhere, notably in the contexts of France, Quebec, and the United States (Depelteau et al., 2013; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2020; Vidal & St-Onge, 2023; Chevallier, 2023). In our research project, we sought to investigate the notion and perception of "radicality" in community organizational practices. Here, radicality refers to an anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive praxis oriented toward profound and lasting transformations of the structures of dispossession and exploitation

that racialized and marginalized communities face (Rogowski, 2014, p. 14). Yet what is radical is not only the praxis itself, but also the very act of imagination it requires—an imagination forged through subversive ways of thinking, acting, and organizing that reject the normalcy of oppression and domination, while opening the horizon toward new political futures (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010, p. xxviii).

Public and private capital flows are inseparable from processes of dispossession and exploitation. Investment in urban infrastructures, services, and facilities, often managed by private capital, reinforces processes of capital accumulation and dispossession in racialized spaces (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019; Melgaço & Pinto Coelho, 2022; Dantzler, Korver-Glenn & Howell, 2022). Increasingly, these processes are taking place at low intensity in the crevices of the city (El-Kazaz, 2023). In this article, we focus specifically on low-intensity political repression in these spaces—particularly as it operates through funding in Montréal-Nord—understood as a set of coercive practices that maintain a climate of control, marginalization, and insecurity among targeted populations, without overt violence. These practices include policing (Simone, 2016; Kapsali, 2024), legal provisions and land tenure mechanisms (Simone, 2016; Özatağan et al., 2025), economic pressures (Simone, 2004), urban planning (Melgaço & Pinto Coelho, 2022; El-Kazaz, 2023), or symbolic and cultural landscape arrangements (Allen et al., 2019). In the face of such political, institutional, and economic marginalization, the resistance and community action of racialized and marginalized communities in dispossessed areas act as infrastructure (Simone, 2004). They develop informal, flexible, and collaborative networks to ensure their survival, circumvent institutional constraints, surveillance, and competition, and cope with structural racism. This form of agency, which is insufficiently taken into account, particularly in the Global North (Roy et al., 2020), constitutes a manifestation of spatial knowledge and resistance to urban austerity policies.

Tracing Radical Trajectories: Methodological Considerations

The questions raised above guided our fieldwork in Montréal-Nord. To better understand how these dynamics are lived and negotiated on the ground, we turned to the voices of community actors themselves. Our exploratory research focused on organizations active between 2008 and 2023—a period bookended by two defining events: the police killing of Fredy Villanueva in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The former stands as a critical rupture in the borough's collective memory, often cited as a key turning point in the genealogy of local demands and mobilizations (Perreault, 2013; González Castillo & Goyette, 2015).

We began by identifying organizations through academic databases (Web of Science, Google Scholar), local directories (Répertoire des organismes sociocommunautaires de Montréal-Nord), and the borough's official listings[2]. After several sorting phases, we compiled a list of 69 active community organizations with publicly available information on their funding sources. From this list, we defined two criteria for selecting

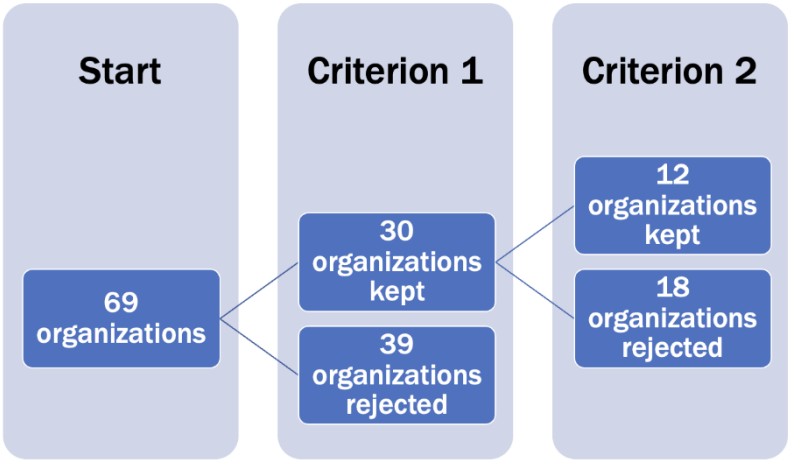
[2] We conducted a preliminary search using the keywords ("Montréal-Nord" OR "Montreal-North") AND ("association" OR "organisme" OR "projet" OR "project") on Web of Science (yielding 16 articles) and Google Scholar (yielding approximately 1,700 articles). In a second phase, we consulted the *Répertoire des organismes sociocommunautaires de Montréal-Nord* (https://211.qc.ca/), identifying 73 organizations based on the availability of public information about their funding. Of these, 28 overlapped with organizations from the previous lists, while 13 were excluded because they were public institutions (e.g., libraries, police stations, long-term care centres). In a third phase, we reviewed 103 organizations listed on the Montréal-Nord borough website (https://www.arrondissement.com/), which led us to retain 7 additional organizations not previously identified. Two final sorting phases were conducted: one to update funding information for the organizations identified in earlier phases, and another to compile an alphabetical list of the 69 selected organizations for which public information about funding sources and conditions was available.

organizations whose mission was rooted in a critical and historical perspective of social transformation in Montréal-Nord:

—**Criterion #1: Private funding**. The purpose of this exercise was to classify organizations with or without private funding. We wanted to take into account the potential balance of power between public and private funding in our analysis. Organizations with little or no private funding were not included. Several of them had private funding from a single source, while the vast majority received public funding.

—**Criterion #2: Radical perspective on their mission**. For this second criterion, we looked at the mission, target audience and form of the organization. We were particularly sensitive to the direct and tangible impact on the local community and the multi-scalar and multi-faceted potential for urban transformation offered by the organizations.

Figure 1–Methodological Considerations



We selected and contacted 18 of these organizations via email, phone, and in person. Seven agreed to participate in interviews, and we were able to conduct six, all in the spring of 2023. Most were carried out by two members of the research team to foster reflexivity and deepen critical dialogue (Cunliffe, 2016). Consistent with the epistemological commitments of Black geographies, we approach these testimonies not with a rationale for statistical representativity but as situated knowledge—accounts that make legible the spatial and political conditions that institutional data tends to obscure (McKittrick, 2006). The small number of interviews reflects both the exploratory nature of this research and the relational conditions of trust required to engage meaningfully with community actors navigating institutional precarity. While we give primacy to the interviews we conducted, a diverse range of archival material was collected and generated. To complete our literature review, we drew on multiple types of sources such as peer-reviewed scientific articles, grey literature, press and media sources. Interviews were transcribed, manually reviewed, and analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Twenty-four codes were generated inductively using NVivo and organized into five themes—including 'Montréal-Nord reality' (e.g., sense of belonging, harsh reality of the community sector).

In the following section, we provide a narrative account of our findings based on archival and empirical material. We start by presenting the genealogy of community action in Montréal-Nord. Second, we examine how public and private funding influences and limits these actions. Finally, we turn to the effects of funding on the radical character of these organizations—asking what is preserved, what is transformed, and what is at risk.

2. A Genealogy of Community Action

2.1 The Emergence of Community Action in Quebec

Until the early 1960s, community life in Quebec was largely shaped by religious institutions and organized through parishes, schools, and leisure groups (Augustin, 1979). The Quiet Revolution radically restructured this landscape. Marked by political ferment and the expansion of the welfare state, the period saw the emergence of new actors—citizens' committees, grassroots groups, and social movements—that sought to assert a Francophone identity and claim space in public discourse (Deslauriers & Paquet, 2003). These groups played a pivotal role in shaping a participatory model of social development grounded in dialogue, local action, and collective responsibility. However, the transformations of the Quiet Revolution also contributed to the marginalization of racialized communities, particularly Black and Afrodescendant ones. While Francophone identity and state-building projects gained momentum, the historical Black presence in Montréal was pushed to the margins—cast as radically other and largely omitted from dominant narratives. Neighbourhoods like Little Burgundy, despite their vibrant cultural and institutional contributions—from community centres to newspapers, theatre groups, and educational initiatives—were sidelined in the broader imaginary of Quebec modernity (Austin, 2013). This marginalization was not only social but spatial. As Jolivet, Khelifi and Vogler (2021) show in the case of Montréal-Nord, the genealogy of territorial stigma in Montréal is deeply rooted in longstanding representations of Blackness and racialized presence in the urban fabric (Gay, 2004; Williams, 1997). This affective economy of space (Ahmed, 2004)—wherein certain bodies become associated with danger and disorder—has a longer genealogy in Montréal, moving from Little Burgundy through several neighbourhoods before settling on Montréal-Nord as the city's primary site of moral panic and racial stigma (Aurélien and Rutland, 2023; Décary-Secours, 2020). The 1960s and 1970s were also years of experimentation. Community groups challenged the state, demanded funding and jobs, and insisted on their role in shaping society (VESPA, 2013). While these movements remained relatively autonomous, the 1980s marked a turning point. Amid a global recession and the rise of neoliberalism, community action became increasingly institutionalized. Organizations that once resisted the state now relied on it for financial survival. As Deslauriers and Paquet (2003) note, public funding began to shape not only what was possible, but what was permissible. They explain this reorientation by the global recession that hit the province hard at that time, the failure of the 1980 referendum and the emergence of a neoliberal current that attacked the welfare state (Deslauriers & Paquet 2003, p. 10). Above all, this turning point highlights a tendency for the state to disengage itself from responsibility through public funding of community action, at the same time as local communities assume greater social responsibility for protection and security (Hurteau, 2019). One respondent described this process succinctly: "The community economic development sector was born out of the state's withdrawal, and then out of its failure to respond to economic transformations[3]" (Interview #4).

[3] We have translated all interviews from French into English for the purposes of this article.

This transformation unfolded across the Greater Montréal area. Grassroots collectives gave way to formal nonprofits. Many accepted the trade-off, exchanging autonomy for financial security. Participation in state-led consultations, such as the 1988 Commission on Health and Social Services, reflected this new alignment (Deslauriers & Paquet, 2003). The Côté reform would cement this reorientation, institutionalizing community work as service provision within a neoliberal framework of partnerships—useful, but depoliticized. As one respondent observed,

> *[…] we live in this system where organizations […] are obliged to impose themselves and provide services that, let's be very clear, the government should be providing.* —Interview #1

Here then lay the contradictions at the heart of the current model: community groups are compelled to absorb responsibilities offloaded by the state, yet are constrained by the conditions attached to that very support. The consequences of this shift are profound. Once-radical spaces became entangled with bureaucratic imperatives of accountability and competition. The ideals of collective emancipation were replaced with risk management, service delivery, and precarity. As another interviewee stated bluntly, "*The notion of cheap labour is there too […]. Yes, yes, [we] are exploited.*" (Interview #2). Another added:

> *So it's no longer like we're emancipating our communities, we're [subcontracting] state services. […] Sometimes you're really […] subcontracting state services […]. They want to see everything, your invoices […]. In any case, sometimes they realize that they are too far removed from the field, so they prefer to have it done by others.* —Interview #4

These testimonies reflect more than frustration—they speak to a broader political condition in which community organizations are expected to fill the gaps left by the state, while operating under structures that limit their autonomy and erode their transformative ambitions (Deslauriers & Paquet, 2003). In concrete terms, this translates into formal recognition of the social utility of community organizations and their eligibility for public funding, but at the expense of their radical potential. The dismantling of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberal governance—centred on the rhetoric of partnership—have enabled new forms of control and surveillance. These are enacted through increasingly restrictive funding requirements, a competitive funding environment, and a push for individual performance metrics over collective empowerment. As Germain and Boudreau (2010, p. 215 [our translation]) note, "[…] the objective of emancipating the poor from the yoke of oppression by the dominant class has gradually been transformed into an objective of assisting the most disadvantaged, and then more recently into an objective of preventing the risk of social breakdown."

2.2. Community Action in Montréal-Nord

Before turning to community action in Montréal-Nord, it is worth outlining some of the main transformations that shaped the borough. Founded in 1915 as an independent municipality, Montréal-Nord experienced significant industrial growth throughout the first half of the 20th century. Textile, clothing, and shoe manufacturing industries flourished, fuelling an expanding local economy (González Castillo & Goyette, 2015; Linteau, 2007). After the Second World War, the borough continued to grow, attracting Italian and Haitian immigrants during the 1960s and 1970s. Following the trends of suburbanization across Greater Montréal, Montréal-Nord began to resemble a middle-class suburb. Between 1966 and 1977, its population surged by

nearly 30,000, reaching close to 98,000 residents (Jolivet et al., 2021). This demographic growth, however, coincided with an economic slowdown. Beginning in the 1970s, Montréal-Nord was hit hard by the wave of deindustrialization sweeping North American cities (Linkon, 2018). The Canadian recession of the 1980s deepened the crisis, driving unemployment and inflation rates upward (Miller, 1988). Successive waves of business closures hollowed out the local economy, and Montréal-Nord's working-class residents bore the brunt of this disinvestment (High, 2022; Vogler, 2020). In this context of rapid demographic transformation and economic fragility, community action emerged as both a response to crisis and a vehicle for solidarity. The broader evolution of community action in Quebec presented above can help situate the distinct dynamics of community organizing in Montréal-Nord.

The structural transformations observed at the provincial level—the institutionalization of community work, the rise of neoliberal governance, and the erosion of radical grassroots autonomy—were not evenly distributed across space. In Montréal-Nord, they collided with entrenched patterns of racialization, underinvestment, and marginalization. The result is a community landscape shaped as much by necessity as by resistance and survival, where community action operates as infrastructure (Simone, 2004).

The development of community action in Montréal-Nord cannot be understood apart from the borough's specific sociopolitical and economic trajectory. The migratory waves of the 1960s and 1970s—particularly of Haitian and Italian origin—unfolded during a period of economic turbulence and under the long reign of Mayor Yves Ryan, who held office from 1963 to 2001 (Vogler, 2020). While some accounts highlight the administrative stability and continuity of his nearly four decades in power (Lagacé, 2011; Lapointe, 2006), more critical scholarship points to the enduring consequences of Ryan's urban governance, particularly its role in deepening the borough's structural vulnerabilities (González Castillo & Goyette, 2015; Jolivet et al., 2021; Vogler, 2020). Ryan's urban planning philosophy centred on large-scale real estate development aimed at attracting middle-class residents and boosting property tax revenues. However, this market-driven logic clashed with the lived experiences of an increasingly racialized and working-class population. The administration granted tax breaks to private developers, enabling the construction of housing ill-suited to residents' actual needs (Jolivet, Khelifi & Vogler, 2021). Meanwhile, investments in local infrastructure, public services, and facilities remained minimal—a cost-saving strategy that kept per capita spending low (Vogler, 2020). As the neighbourhood densified, public investment failed to keep pace. Precarity intensified, and social conditions deteriorated, while the administration largely ignored the mounting needs of its residents.

At the same time, and as outlined above, this was the era in which community action was taking root across Quebec—and Montréal-Nord was no exception. Similarly, the borough's austerity-driven governance did not exist in a vacuum; it reflected broader urban shifts across Montréal. Like Mayor Drapeau's downtown-oriented vision (Paul, 2004, p. 578.), Mayor Ryan's administration in Montréal-Nord focused on economizing public services and courting developers, offering tax incentives while neglecting the borough's pressing social needs. In this context, community organizations emerged not only as a response to urgent needs, but also as acts of quiet resistance (Heck et al., 2015; González Castillo & Goyette, 2015; Vogler, 2020; Jolivet, Khelifi & Vogler, 2021; Klein et al., 2023). At the provincial and federal levels, public administrations were shifting toward decentralization policies aimed at addressing poverty in a more diffuse, hands-off manner. Meanwhile, the responsibility for managing residents' precarious living conditions and deteriorating urban infrastructure fell primarily to municipalities—which did not consider them a priority (González Castillo & Goyette, 2015; Jolivet et al., 2021). Residents mobilized to create local networks of solidarity—often underfunded and undervalued—laying the groundwork for a community sector that, even today, continues to shoulder the burden of social support in the face of persistent structural neglect—all within a fiercely competitive

environment for public funding (González Castillo & Goyette, 2015; Klein et al., 2023). Amid this policy environment—shaped by decentralization at the provincial level and disinvestment at the municipal level—community actors stepped in to fill widening gaps. The weight of social reproduction began to shift toward local initiatives, compelled to develop networks of solidarity in a context of growing precarity. These initiatives emerged not in collaboration with the state, but often in spite of it (Mills, 2010, 2016; Austin, 2013). This dynamic remains visible today through the cracks of the neighbourhood (El-Kazaz, 2023). Nearly twenty organizations created in the 1970s and 1980s are still in operation, as confirmed by our own mapping of the community sector in Montréal-Nord. Even then, however, public funding was already being deployed as a mechanism of control—shaping not only what could be done, but how, by whom, and with what kinds of accountability structures. In this light, the emergence of community organizing in Montréal-Nord during the 1970s and 1980s can be read as subversive acts in a hostile context of budgetary austerity and underfunding of the urban periphery.

3. Controlling Community Action Through Funding

The early 2000s marked a turning point in the political and territorial trajectory of Montréal-Nord. With the municipal amalgamation of 2002—part of the larger reorganization of Quebec's municipal landscape—Montréal-Nord was absorbed into the City of Montréal. This development accelerated a shift already underway: a hardening of the urban imaginary surrounding Montréal-Nord, now increasingly marked by stigmatization, over-policing, and narratives of crisis (Décary-Secours, 2020; Jolivet et al., 2021). In the post-merger era, Montréal-Nord became central to a growing geography of fear in the city. The media's portrayal of the area often focused on violence and street gangs, while policy responses became increasingly punitive. This shift was not only symbolic—it materialized through heightened police presence, intensified surveillance of young people, and a growing state emphasis on security over support (Heck, 2020; Jolivet et al., 2021; Klein et al., 2023).

These changes had a direct impact on the local community sector. As public narratives focused on managing risk, funding mechanisms followed suit. State support for community action became increasingly conditional, tied to outcomes that aligned with securitarian logics and short-term results. Organizations faced a double bind: simultaneously expected to solve systemic problems and increasingly constrained by funding models that limited their autonomy. In this context, the legacy of radical, grassroots mobilization gave way to a form of *contractualised* community work—one increasingly shaped by risk management at the cost of solidarity.

3.1 After Fredy's Life, Came the funding

The heightened policing of Montréal-Nord reached a tragic and defining moment in 2008. On the evening of August 9, 2008, in the parking lot of Henri-Bourassa Park in Montréal-Nord, Fredy Villanueva, his brother Dany, and their friends were playing dice (Vogler, 2020, p. 23). Dany was approached by two police officers over a minor infraction of municipal regulations. Without warning, officer Jean-Loup Lapointe quickly pinned Dany to the ground. Fredy and the others, confused and concerned, approached—not aggressively, but their mere presence seemed to ignite fear. Within 57 seconds, four shots were fired (Perreault, 2013). One bullet hit

Denis Méas in the shoulder, another struck Jeffrey Sagor Metellus in the back, and two bullets hit Fredy Villanueva, who would not survive. He was only 18 years old.

Fredy's death shattered the fragile balance in the community, exposing decades of institutional neglect, stigmatization, and the violent consequences of over-policing. It unleashed widespread anger and mobilization, as residents and local organizations loudly denounced years of marginalization and the failure of public institutions to protect and support the borough's predominantly racialized population (González Castillo & Goyette, 2015; Alalouf-Hall & Fontan, 2020; Vogler, 2020; Bensiali, 2024; Jolivet, 2025).

The ensuing social mobilization forced political and institutional actors to respond with significant public funding, attempting to address some of the borough's most pressing deficits. As one interviewee recalled:

> *Villanueva had just died […] He was here. We were shocked […] they gave over 300 million. I said, why are you doing this? They don't want it to change; it's not going to change. And that's how it's stayed until today.* —Interview #5

Less than a year after Fredy's death, the city allocated twelve million dollars to urban infrastructure and youth programming (City of Montréal, 2009). Without fundamental structural change, these efforts primarily aimed to ease tensions and improve the borough's public image (Vogler, 2020). In this shifting terrain, the response to the crisis also opened the door to growing private sector involvement. Public-private partnerships gained traction, bringing in businesses and private foundations to shape the borough's development. New plans for socio-economic development and social innovation increasingly relied on private actors to address what remained, fundamentally, structural failures of public authorities (Mendell et al., 2020).

A persistent tension runs between conceptions of community intervention. On the one hand, local institutions acknowledge poverty and attempt to develop initiatives around socio-economic integration and collective agency (Ricard et al., 2003; Emploi Québec, 2003; González Castillo & Goyette, 2015). As one interviewee put it:

> *In fact, we work from a perspective, as I was saying, of trying to ensure that everyone in Quebec participates in the development of Quebec society. We are also aware that sometimes we have to play a role in the distribution and redistribution of wealth. Sometimes it's recognition, sometimes it's representation, that's it […].* —Interview #3

On the other hand, the majority of public investments in Montréal-Nord have focused primarily on security and control (González Castillo & Goyette, 2015). Crime prevention narratives dominate funding frameworks, emphasizing the removal of youth from the streets (Chevalier et al., 2009; Touzin, 2009; Jolivet et al., 2021). In practice, commitment to crime and delinquency prevention have become central—indeed, virtually indispensable—for organizations seeking public funding (González Castillo & Goyette, 2015; Jolivet et al., 2021; Jolivet, 2025). The consequences are felt directly by actors on the ground, as one interviewee reflected:

> *When I was hired, we were funded by the National Crime Prevention Centre. I didn't know when I was hired that we were funded by them. And then, you know, the Ministry of Public Security, Federal Crime Prevention, I thought that was… and it was a lot of funding. It was $1.5 million over five years. That's a lot of funding. So now, you know, when I see that this is what's funding us, I'm like… Oh, that bothers me a bit, you know. Because, basically, we're looking at young people who, you know, have full potential, but who are vulnerable, marginal because they're economically unhealthy, but who, you know, we're going to tag with a crime prevention envelope.* —Interview #4

3.2 The Contribution of Private Foundations

Despite the tragic events and subsequent injections of public funds, the socio-economic conditions in Montréal-Nord have continued to deteriorate and community organizations continue to make up for the disengagement of the state and public institutions (Vogler, 2020; Ruelland, 2021). Montréal-Nord consistently receives some of the lowest levels of recurrent funding for community missions within the metropolitan region, despite facing some of the most pressing social needs (Arrondissement de Montréal-Nord, 2019; Shaw & Godin, 2019; Mendell et al., 2020). This chronic underfunding has opened the door to increased reliance on public-private partnerships and private capital. Foundations such as Centraide and the Foundation of Greater Montréal have become significant contributors alongside corporate donors. As one interviewee explained:

> *You know, it's that, basically, the state and the foundations come to substitute, like the commitment of the state […]. State funding is insufficient to meet the needs of the population. So we've had to deal with this issue to some extent […] we've continued to work with foundations and receive donations from private companies.* —Interview #3

This dependence comes with significant drawbacks, since private capital often reinforces mechanisms of control over community action, limiting the radical potential for transformation that grassroots actors have historically pursued—continuing the dismantling of social protection that began in the 1980s. Private funders typically offer project-based funding only—instead of mission-based funding—adopting funding cycles that are usually limited in duration, increasing financial instability (Mazot, 2021; Shaw & Godin, 2019). A community actor reflected on this precarious dynamic:

> *You know, we've worked on this; we've supported them. We're now somewhere else, except that the work isn't finished yet […]. Once you've had five years of funding from private financial partners, well after that, they move on, but you don't.* —Interview #4

For some community actors, the abrupt ending of project funding raises questions about political motives: "Why wasn't it renewed? I don't know. Was it because [we] were too critical?" (Interview #1.) This fragility became acute during the COVID-19 pandemic, which marked a turning point in the entanglement between private capital and community action in Montréal-Nord—a neighbourhood that experienced one of Canada's highest infection rates (Alalouf-Hall & Fontan, 2020; Ruelland, 2021)—exposing the failure of state action. Local organizations mobilized rapidly and creatively to meet the basic needs of the most vulnerable. Private foundations and businesses stepped in, positioning themselves as key actors in the borough's recovery. Fondation Desjardins, for instance, launched a support plan for local entrepreneurs, while the City of Montréal partnered with the business sector to implement "Uni.e.s pour la relance à Montréal-Nord[4]," a commercial and economic recovery initiative (City of Montréal, 2020; Goudou, 2020). As one interviewee put it:

> *The pandemic and the assassination of George Floyd were also catalysts that transformed [our] activities […] and made them attractive to people who had never been interested in [us] before.* —Interview #1

[4] United for recovery in Montréal-Nord

This development was anything but unpredictable. Foundations have funded community action in Montréal since the 1960s (Lefèvre & Charbonneau, 2011), and by the 1990s, public-private funding was celebrated as innovative—aligned with neoliberal emphases on partnership and competition among organizations (Savard et al., 2015; Deslauriers & Paquet, 2003; Hurteau, 2019). The early 2000s saw the acceleration of new public management reforms, reshaping funding models and operational expectations for community organizations (Gaudin, 2006; Savard et al., 2015). In Montréal-Nord, these shifts were compounded by years of underinvestment and surveillance. The pandemic laid bare how ingrained this model of conditional, competitive, and often short-term funding had become—leaving organizations to reckon with long-term community needs on increasingly precarious ground. The expansion of private capital in community funding has direct implications for the everyday functioning of local organizations (Savard et al., 2015). While this influx of funds can temporarily bolster material resources, it often comes with strings attached—reshaping not only the operations but also the orientations of community action. The growing dominance of philanthropic and corporate partners tends to reinforce a managerial discourse centred on efficiency and service delivery, even as many services remain misaligned with or inaccessible to their intended audiences (Lesemann, 2011). In this context, private entities become increasingly legitimized as strategic partners in public programs (Ducharme & Lesemann, 2011), with political actors actively facilitating their role and cementing their authority in the governance of community initiatives (Lefèvre & Charbonneau, 2011). Yet, this rising influence erodes community autonomy and contributes to a growing disconnect between the lived realities of residents and the priorities defined by funders—priorities that can shift rapidly with political or media attention. As one community actor reflected:

> *When you're a funder, all of a sudden […] systemic racism is in the air, you have to work on it […] Then all of a sudden, you're talking more about homelessness, violence, inflation, food aid, etc. […] So systemic racism is kind of put aside because it's all the same envelopes. We don't add money. We take the money that's there, and then we move it elsewhere.* —Interview #4

4. Navigating Funding between Control and Social Transformation

4.1 The Contradictions of Community Action in Montréal-Nord

Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, local citizen-led initiatives in Montréal-Nord began to formalize by adopting the legal structure of community organizations—mirroring broader patterns across the Montréal metropolitan area. This wave of institutionalization was made possible by the gradual injection of public funding, which not only allowed these initiatives to persist but also legitimized them by creating employment within the neighbourhood and anchoring their actions in the local service economy (Epprecht, 1996). Over time, this institutionalization led to increased social responsibilities being transferred to the community sector—particularly in the fields of social protection and urban security—amid the state's gradual retreat (Hurteau, 2019).

Getting involved in community work during the 1980s and 1990s already meant building urban infrastructure in an austerity-driven climate:

> *Today, very few community organizations have basic funding. […] So when they divided up the pie, we weren't really there because Montréal-Nord was underprivileged.* —Interview #4

This legacy of neglect continues to shape the contradictions at the heart of community action today. Montréal-Nord is consistently portrayed in public discourse as a marginal, dangerous space—marked by street gangs, poverty, and insecurity (Heck, 2020; Jolivet et al., 2021; Vogler, 2020; Klein et al., 2023). At the same time, community organizations operate as vital infrastructures of care, resilience, and service provision, striving to meet real needs with limited resources and in spite of a deeply stigmatizing media and political environment (Heck, 2020; Ruelland, 2021).

> *We're already marginalized by society. But the fact remains… We have major commitments to the Montréal-Nord community. We've started projects that we'd like to finish or continue.* —Interview #1

The killing of Fredy Villanueva in 2008 exposed not only the institutional dysfunction and disengagement of public authorities, but also the ways in which community action itself had become institutionalized (González Castillo & Goyette, 2015). Despite political rhetoric centred on loitering, the presence of local youth in public spaces speaks less to the promotion of a criminal or delinquent lifestyle than to the absence of adequate social, cultural, and educational infrastructure. This absence reflects broader patterns of insufficient public investment, limited opportunities, and a lack of institutional support for residents as a whole (Klein et al., 2024). In this vacuum, citizen initiatives and community organizations became the central actors compensating for institutional withdrawal—whether material, financial, or symbolic. They are confronted with the dual legacy of overinvestment in security and disinvestment in social protection, a defining feature of the neoliberal urban shift in Montréal (Kapo & Boudreau, 2017; Khalil & Rutland, 2019). Community action in Montréal-Nord thus operates at the crossroads of control and social transformation, embodying both the limits of institutional compromise and the potential for grassroots resistance.

4.2 The Control of Community Action through Funding

While Montréal-Nord's community organizations have long carried the weight of state disengagement, the way they are funded has increasingly shaped—and constrained—their capacity to act. A key turning point came in the 1990s, when the neoliberal turn replaced mission-based funding—which historically acknowledged the specific role and autonomy of the community sector—with project-based funding. This transformation introduced market logics into community action, reframing organizations as service providers competing for short-term, performance-oriented contracts (Depelteau et al., 2013; Vidal & St-Onge, 2023). As public budgets shrank, this shift accelerated. Project-based funding demands constant reinvention, compelling organizations to design "innovative" initiatives that match the changing expectations of both public and private funders. In practice, this often leads to a disconnect between the historical mission of community organizations and the projects that actually receive financial support (Locas, 2014). Organizations must diversify their sources of income while adapting to increasingly narrow criteria—funding is contingent not on rooted, long-term work, but on aligning with donor-defined metrics, logics, and timelines:

> *I think the trap that many organizations find themselves in […] is inventing projects to get the grant. […] And how do we respect our mission? Well, we spend our time with the flipchart there, and then we create bubbles […] What are we asking for? But you can never be sure that if you ask, who's going to say yes? So if we miss our shot, we didn't ask at the other place. So it's always like playing Tetris.* —Interview #2

> *And if, for example, […] they agree to take on, say, [name of program] in schools—well, that's under their conditions. Then we'd have to offer it free of charge…* —Interview #2

The growing influence of private capital intensifies this dissonance, as financial support is often tied to predefined projects or pilot initiatives developed in advance—sometimes without consultation with local actors (Ducharme & Lesemann, 2011; Kramer & Phillips, 2024). In many cases, private foundations or corporate partners undertake studies on social issues to justify their interventions and only later involve community organizations to implement these predefined solutions (Savard, Bourque & Lachapelle, 2015). As a result, funding becomes a tool for advancing specific agendas that may be misaligned with local realities.

To secure funding, community actors often find themselves code-switching between institutional language and grassroots needs, translating their work into donor-friendly terms that dilute the radical and situated nature of their actions:

> *It means speaking several languages. […] For a grant application, they want language X, and it has to fit in there. […] We spend our time playing Tetris.* —Interview #2

> *The language you need, the jargon […] there's a whole language, a whole culture. […] We're basically trying to seduce people into giving us money*. —Interview #1

> *[…] Then we take notes on the key words that come up a lot. What are the issues that are said […] that sound sexy?* —Interview #4

In this context, the very act of applying for funding becomes a performance. Community organizations must anticipate funders' expectations, adopt strategic vocabularies, and align with shifting trends. This dynamic not only undermines their autonomy but also risks diverting them from the needs and interests of the Black, racialized and marginalized communities they serve (Pereira et al., 2020; Warner, 2022).

4.3 The Impact of Funding Control Over Community Action in Montréal-Nord

As funding becomes conditional and performance-based, many actors find themselves distanced from their original missions. This creates a precarious environment in which their perspectives and expertise are undervalued, while competition between organizations intensifies (Ducharme & Lesemann, 2011; Savard, Bourque & Lachapelle, 2015). Collaboration becomes performative, offering no guarantee of solidarity or equitable distribution of resources:

> *You sent money for the project that we filed jointly with […] it was the same, just one project, but with two branches. […] When the money arrived, they kept it. Everyone there […] knew about it.* —Interview #5

The logic of competition can even push community organizations to abandon their initiatives or shift their missions in order to avoid overlapping with others—despite pressing needs on the ground:

> *We could easily have done something by working in [this field]. But they were going to work in [that field], and we knew that. It's so acute that I was like, okay, go ahead, we'll pass. But that's why, in the*

> *calls for projects, we miss the targets. […] The criteria could be better adapted to serve areas where it's more acute and complicated to act.* —Interview #4

More broadly, the influx of private capital potentially contributes to a blurring of responsibilities between civic, social, and public sectors (Ducharme & Lesemann, 2011; Lefèvre & Charbonneau, 2011; Kramer & Phillips, 2024). As the financialization of community action increasingly becomes the playground of multiple funders and stakeholders, identifying who is accountable for delivering services—or addressing failures—becomes particularly difficult. In this fragmented ecosystem, responsibility is diffused and the burden of care shifts to local organizations, often without the needed resources or recognition:

> *We're losing out because we're always chasing that self-financing part. […] It feels like a lack of recognition of our contribution in the field.* —Interview #2

> *The problem I have with this kind of grant is that it's too much like charity. And for me, there's always a difference between charity and the government taking its responsibility*. —Interview #4

The expertise, knowledge, and real impact of community actors on the local community tend to be minimized. In the case of Montréal-Nord, our analysis suggests that it is precisely the urban infrastructure of community action that is impacted by funding modalities, turning the latter into low-intensity political repression against Black, racialized, and marginalized communities and organizations (Simone, 2004; Simone, 2017). Private funding does not necessarily take into account the scope, specificities, quality of interventions, and long-term contribution of community organizations, as management and evaluation methods are mainly based on quantitative indicators (Ducharme and Lesemann, 2011; Savard et al., 2015). When quantitative targets are not met, programs may be reoriented, redirected or terminated—regardless of their local relevance or long-term potential. Ultimately, the mismatch between the timeframe, logic, and language of funders and those of community actors may lead to a sense of despair. As private capital exerts more influence, community organizations are left with fewer levers for resistance and must navigate a complex web of constraints and expectations, often at odds with their mission, long-term vision, needs and interests of the Black, racialized and marginalized communities they serve (Pereira et al., 2020; Warner, 2022; Kramer & Phillips, 2024).

5. Conclusion

While neoliberalism is increasingly recognized as incapable of addressing urban challenges—and beyond (Joy & Vogel, 2021; Özatağan et al., 2025)—the existing literature on urban neoliberal governance in Montréal-Nord appears relatively limited. By foregrounding the experience of local actors with private funding, this article identifies three key dynamics. First, the persistent contradictions of community work in Montréal-Nord resonate with the "expendability" of residents on the urban peripheries of Jakarta, Johannesburg, and North American cities (Simone, 2004, p. 411; Simone, 2016, p. 9); as well as with post-political Athens, where "post-politicization of urban governance through philanthropic giving [is] a multidimensional process that changes and mutates across time and spaces" (Kapsali, 2024, p. 2304). These contradictions sustain a climate of fear and precarity within the crevices of the city that limits collective agency (El-Kazaz, 2023). Second, the shift from mission-based to project-based funding reveals the covert expectations and values of urban neoliberal governance, where the pressure for innovation and deliverables rests disproportionately on community organizations, distancing them from their foundational principles and

long-term visions. This trend mirrors the cultural landscapes described by Allen et al. (2019, p. 1006), that become tools of discipline normalizing elite visions and marginalizing Black spatialities. Similarly, Özatağan et al. (2025, p. 2919) show how the coexistence of formal regulatory mechanisms and informal governance practices enables the state to enforce control while preserving the façade of technocratic neutrality. Third, this funding regime—especially in its private form—deepens a permanent logic of competition, blurs the boundaries between civic and institutional responsibilities, and erodes both the symbolic and material recognition of community expertise. This dynamic forecloses and silences political dissent through an authoritarian drift, as observed in Athens and other European cities (Kapsali, 2024; Özatağan et al., 2025), while also reconfiguring community action as a market commodity—forcing community actors to absorb the real cost of sustainable transformation and care infrastructures (Simone, 2004; Simone, 2016), thereby converting resistance into a form of precarious labour.

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that budgetary guidelines—whether public or private—function as concrete political tools that subtly repress the needs and aspirations of residents of Montréal-Nord, reproducing a pattern of low-intensity repression that operates through surveillance, project-based control, selective financial support, and the symbolic capture of place. Radical and autonomous forms of community action therefore operate under a double bind: their transformative potential limits their access to funding, and the energy required to sustain their work under such conditions fuels the exhaustion of community actors. Private funding may offer short-term relief, but it carries its own political constraints. Beyond the tax advantages it provides to corporations and foundations—advantages that, as Alepin (2021, p. 210) notes, may take between 38 and 53 years to be "repaid" through philanthropic giving—private funding shapes public policy and, in some cases, manages public funds through government programs (Ducharme & Lesemann, 2011). Philanthrocapitalism—however generous—not only appears insufficient to compensate for the state's incapacity to bring about more durable improvements in the living conditions of society's most vulnerable citizens (Kramer and Phillips, 2024), but may also contribute to the low-intensity political repression of Black, racialized, and marginalized communities through the very mechanisms of funding.

This article aims to encourage the development of critical scholarship on Montréal-Nord regarding power dynamics in Black, racialized and marginalized neighbourhoods (Bradlow, 2024; El-Kazaz, 2023). By moving beyond spatial stigma (Jolivet et al., 2021) and mobilizing Black geographies and Black urbanisms, we addressed the relatively unspoken relationality between space and race in this context, foregrounding the attachment and affection that residents have for their neighbourhood as expressed through the voices of community actors themselves. In doing so, it opens the door to more empirical work—particularly through triangulation with institutional perspectives—that could reinforce or challenge the analysis developed here. What remains clear is that the struggle over funding is never merely technical: it is a political struggle over whom the city belongs to, and who gets to transform it.

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