Coming Home Before the Street Lights Do: Chicago Artists, Method, and the Church’s Preferential Option for the Poor

“Although black women are routinely killed, raped, and beaten by the police, their experiences are rarely foregrounded in popular understandings of police brutality. Yet, inclusion of black women’s experiences in social movements, media narratives, and policy demands around policing and police brutality is critical to effectively combating racialized state violence for black communities and other communities of color.”

Kimberle Crenshaw spoke these words at the launch of the African American Policy Forum’s “Say Her Name” campaign, an effort aimed explicitly at raising awareness of the violence perpetuated against black female bodies. The need for such a movement is deeply troubling and it speaks volumes about our current social climate. This context is encapsulated by the state’s seeming beliefs that black bodies lack dignity, agency, and ultimately, that their lives are worth less than the lives of others.

While the Citizens Police Data Project (University of Chicago) and the Settling for Misconduct Database (Chicago Reader) have undertaken the task of codifying, collecting, and analyzing the ways in which the city of Chicago exemplifies this horrific reality, relegating the stories of women like Rekia Boyd, Bettie Jones, Sandra Bland, and many like them to data points does not fully reflect their inherent human dignity or shed light on the fruitfulness of their lives. As theologians and ethicists, the question remains, how can we undertake analysis of such trends while simultaneously uplifting the Imago Dei inherent in each victim of state sanctioned violence? There is an emphasis within Catholic Social Teaching on the power of that individual experience has on elevating human dignity and cataloging instances where that dignity is under threat. Nowhere is this clearer or more relevant to the topic at hand than in the USCCB’s Pastoral Letter on Racism “Open Wide Our Hearts”. The Bishops state

“As Christians, we are called to listen and know the stories of our brothers and sisters. We must create opportunities to hear, with open hearts, the tragic stories that are deeply imprinted on the lives of our brothers and sisters, if we are to be moved with empathy to promote justice.”

One historically effective approach in highlighting the individual persons impacted by State sanctioned violence has been to analyze the ways in which folk music functions to catalogue specific narratives as while also offering a space for communal healing and a reiteration of human dignity. The work of Marsha Hansen and James Cone is heavily inundated with analysis of how black spirituals function theologically and socio-politically, but is there a modern equivalent to the blues, sacred music, and hope songs? This project aims to analyze the work of Chicago artists such as Noname, Jamila Woods, Saba, and Malcolm London and their function in cataloguing not only the realities of state violence against black bodies in Chicago, but their ability to turn despair and devastation into hope and revival.

Through the use of specific pieces documenting their own experiences of state misconduct, the backdrop of the aforementioned databases, and the groundwork of theologically analyzing folk music laid out by Hansen and Cone, this paper will show the ways in which the work of Chicago’s contemporary artists can function as a vital methodological tool for theologians and ethicists. Specifically, the life-giving nature and reflection on praxis offered within those works will serve as a launching point for how the Church’s option for the poor can

be applied to the specific micro-context of Chicago in the wake of damning evidence of State sanctioned violence against black bodies. The process of critique, reflection, and action is highlighted by each of the aforementioned artists and their work offers a unique opportunity for the Church to promote and affirm the agency and subjectivity of the vulnerable within this context.

Rekia Boyd: Rather than beginning with statistical analysis and mapping trends of Police violence, given the trajectory of narrative that we are undertaking, an extended singular example may serve as the best entry point into our discussion. Rekia Boyd’s story provides one of the most extreme categorizations of State sanctioned violence in our context and the convoluted nature of the legal proceedings that followed further illustrate a sheer lack of justice within the current system generally and highlight the context of Chicago specifically. The details of Rekia’s death on March 21st, 2012 may be summarized as follows. Boyd was attending a party with friends in Chicago’s Douglas Park neighborhood where, shortly after midnight, she and a small group made their way to a local liquor store. On their way they encountered an off-duty police officer, Dante Servin, leaving a fast food chain in his vehicle after concluding the night shift of his second job working as a security guard. A verbal altercation between Servin and the group ensued which he claimed was due to the noisiness of the young crowd and they claimed was due to his approaching them to ask for narcotics.\(^2\)

What happened next however is undisputable, Dante Servin pulled out his police issued hand gun and fired multiple rounds into the alley where the group was congregated. One of the members of the group was struck in the hand and Rekia Boyd was struck in the back of the head, killing her instantly. Although the CPD report initially claimed that Antonio Cross, the individual shot in the hand, had pulled a gun on Servin—thus legally justifying the off-duty officer’s actions—a review of the evidence led the CPD to admit that no weapon was found in the vicinity and that the the item Cross had reached for was his cell phone. In the wake of that revelation as well as pressure from the media and local activist groups like Black Lives Matter, Servin was charged with involuntary manslaughter, reckless discharge of a firearm, and reckless conduct. He was provided a lawyer by the Chicago Police Officers Union, the Fraternal Order of Police.

The case against Servin began in November of 2013 and by November of 2015 the outcome of the bench trial seemed inevitable. As a result, on November 24th, 2015 Mayor Rahm Emmanuel publicly issued a recommendation that the Police Board fire Servin.\(^3\) However, given such forewarning and the lengthy procedure associated with removing a police officer, Servin was able to resign prior to being officially released by the CPD, thus keeping his pension. Police Review Board data from 2014-2018 reveals that only thirty-six percent of recommended firing procedures actually made it to the CPD Review Board and twenty-two percent of the officers recommended for firing resigned before the process was formally completed.\(^4\) This signals both that there was precedent for Servin’s actions and a lack of response to such a loophole in policy on the part of the CPD Board.

---

\(^4\) https://home.chicagopolice.org/inside-the-cpd/reports/
The initial act of violent ambivalence—an innocent bystander murdered by an off-duty police officer—was only made worse by the final outcome of the trial. In giving his verdict, Cook County Judge Dennis J. Porter began by giving background on the differences between manslaughter and murder as well as the legal nuance differentiating “reckless” from “calculated”. Porter deemed that "the act of intentionally firing a gun at some person or persons on the street is an act that is so dangerous it is beyond reckless; it is intentional and the crime, if there be any, is first-degree murder." For Porter, the prosecution had proven beyond a reasonable doubt that Servin killed Boyd. However, since the discharging of Servin’s weapon was done in a calculated way, thus in a manner of knowing that such actions would cause great bodily harm or death to a person or persons, the charge should have been first-degree murder, not manslaughter. As the charges stood, Servin was found not guilty and released.

A clear-cut case that may have achieved a semblance of justice for Rekia Boyd’s family was instead relegated to a dog and pony show which ended on a technicality. Due to what some would characterize as a “misfiling” of the charges and others would call political savvy on the part of Judge Porter, Servin would never be made to answer for his killing of Boyd. Instead, the law of double jeopardy ensured that he can never be charged in this case again as he sits and collects his pension (estimated at $70,000 a year), monies that will be provided by the tax paying citizens of Chicago, including Boyd’s family.

While justice for Rekia was not achieved in a criminal court, a civil suit against the CPD and the City of Chicago yielded some sense of closure as both parties, due to Servin’s actions, were found responsible for the “wrongful-death” of Ms. Boyd. The family was awarded a $4.5 million settlement but have adamantly spoken out about not taking solace from the monetary award.

Misconduct Databases: Had Rekia Boyd’s tragic case been an anomaly it would have been one thing, but the sad reality is that her experience fits into a statistically catalogued trend. Through the use of the Citizens Police Data Project and the Settling for Misconduct Database as well as an analysis of internal CPD documents and City of Chicago Budget reports, the overwhelming tendency of Chicago’s police force to engage in misconduct of all kinds knowing full well that they are unlikely to face real consequences will become apparent.

The Citizens Police Data Project, undertaken by the University of Chicago Law School Mandel Legal Aid Clinic and the Invisible Institute, declares that between 2004 and 2018 there were over 88,000 allegations of police misconduct, 94% of which were found unsustained. That number includes only those allegations that resulted in formal complaints, a number which is skewed by those that cannot or will not enter official channels of restitution for various reasons. Of the 5,280 allegations that were sustained, only 12% were complaints lodged by black women despite their responsibility for 32% of the total allegations. By comparison, white males comprised 12% of the total allegations but 43% of their complaints were sustained. Additionally, in that time, there was not a single complaint of “Racial Profiling” or “Racial Bias” sustained despite such accusations being part of numerous complaints (over one-hundred in the aforementioned time frame). Sustained complaints by the Internal Police Review Association

---

5 http://www.chipabf.org/ChicagoPolicePension/ActiveMembers.html
7 This window was not chosen for any specific reason other than recent relevance and a long enough period—fifteen years—to establish a trend.
(now replaced by the Civilian Office of Police Accountability) may or may not have ended in further action and may or may not have had a financial settlement awarded to the complainant.

Unlike the Invisible Institute database which catalogues mostly wider trends, the Chicago Reporter’s “Settling for Misconduct” Database provides detailed summaries of sustained and settled cases of misconduct. Those cases range from minor infractions of misconduct such as verbal abuse, illegal search, and operations violations, to the major cases of physical assault and sexual assault. Specific examples of those categories will follow in order to establish the general contours of instances that occurred in the aforementioned 88,000 allegations over those fifteen years.

In the category of “instances of misconduct that are traumatizing but do not otherwise result in physical harm”: on 7/17/2014 in case 15-CV-2820 Rosalind Sellers was awarded a settlement of $85,000 for her alleged false arrest, the use of racial slurs by police officers in the encounter, and the unnecessary threat of force against Ms. Seller’s children, all in response to a noise complaint which turned out to be for a neighbor’s apartment and not Ms. Seller’s. IPRA did not take any further disciplinary action against the officers.

In the category of Sexual Assault: on 9/15/2009 in case 11-CV-3388 an intoxicated unnamed plaintiff was offered a ride home from a bar by two on-duty police officers who allegedly sexually assaulted her both on the ride to her apartment and in her apartment. Photos of the occurrences were retrieved from the officers’ CPD issued phones. The settlement was $400,000 and the disciplinary action taken by IPRA was two weeks of desk duty for the officers involved.

In the category of Physical Assault: on 12/14/2011 in case 13-CV-8904 the complainant, Juanita Sandoval, alleges that an officer dragged her out of her car by her hair, spat on her, called her a “mixed bitch”, and tasered after she was already detained. Ms. Sandoval earned a $30,000 settlement. No further disciplinary action was taken against the officer.

It must also be noted that in these cases a settlement on the part of the CPD is not actually an admission of guilt. The cases pointed out above were specifically selected because they reflect instances where little to no further action (suspension, termination, completion of sensitivity training, etc.) was required on the part of the officers and no culpability was assigned to their infraction. Additionally, no statements of apology were issued in those cases and the wrongdoing, if any “had occurred”, was translated into a monetary payout without the ability to further pursue criminal charges.

Structural Sin: Spreading the Cost (and Profit) of Misconduct: The Rekia Boyd settlement and the other aforementioned monetary awards are just a small percentage of the $700 million in police misconduct payouts made by the City of Chicago since 2004. Interestingly, the payouts come out of the city’s budget on top of the pre-existing Police Department budget, not directly from it. As an example, the City of Chicago Budget Overview for 2016 shows that CPD Board and IPRA had a combined budget of $8.7 million for the year.8 However, the 187 misconduct suits that were filed against the CPD in 2016 coupled with the sustained allegations of misconduct that had monetary awards attached to them yielded nearly $32 million in payouts and an additional $20 million in attorneys’ fees for litigation9. This means that there was no way that the awarded monies could have come out of the budgets of the two offices that deal with

---

misconduct specifically. Examining the budget lines for the rest of the Police Department, including the Bureau of Support Services, does not yield a specific budget line for misconduct payouts either. It seems that the monies for the settlements come from elsewhere in the City’s budget.

Additionally, when the City of Chicago cannot cover the costs from within their allocated budget—something that is now a regular occurrence due to the high level of debt the city is in—bonds are issued to help generate revenue. In 2014 alone Chicago issued $100 million worth of bonds to alleviate the city’s legal costs—not all of which were related to misconduct payouts or misconduct litigation costs. This increases the financial burden levied on tax payers because not only are they funding settlements for state violence through their current tax dollars, but the eventual interest accrued on the bonds will need to come from future budgets and future tax dollars.

As a further caveat, it should be noted that municipal bonds are not priced or packaged in a manner that is approachable for private individual investors to take a risk on given the long-term ROI associated with bonds. When they do purchase municipal bonds, small-time investors usually do so through bond funds, but the more typical purchasers of bonds are hedge fund groups and large banks. For example, Barclays and Wells Fargo both invested heavily in the 2014 bonds made available by the City of Chicago while Goldman Sachs and JPMorgan Chase, the banks contracted to issue the bonds in the first place, generated revenue by charging the city “issuing fees”.

As a final comment on the troubling revelations that come from such an approach to funding payouts, during a revenue shortage (much like the one Chicago is currently experiencing), bondholder payments are prioritized ahead of other expenditures (schools, social services, sanitation, etc.) because defaulting on bonds results in turning people away from future investment and can have disastrous effects on a City’s credit rating.

The tax payer is thus left in a scenario in which they are being held directly responsible (at least fiscally) for the actions of someone technically in their employ, while having very little hope that those responsible for misconduct face any significant consequences or that they will be required to reform. Conversely, those corporations and banks that have no direct responsibility (fiscally or otherwise) for the actions of the CPD and individual officers stand at a distance and profit from the death dealing actions of others.

Department of Justice Report on the CPD: Having highlighted an individual case of Police violence against black bodies, fit that case into a wider trend of CPD misconduct, and noted the increasing budgetary allotment for payouts in the City of Chicago, it is time to turn to the State’s own acknowledgement of the problem. A discussion of the Department of Justice’s year long investigation of the Chicago Police Department and its tendency for unconstitutional policing, codified in the report “Investigation of the Chicago Police Department”, will move the conversation from cataloguing personal stories to establishing a wider trend. It must be noted

10 For an excellent analysis of this problem as it impacts the country in general, see Alyxandra Goodwin, Whitney Shepard, and Carrie Sloan’s “Police Brutality Bonds: How Wall Street Profits from Police Violence”, Action Center on Race and Violence, 2018.


that transitioning to an analysis of the report does not diminish the validity of the direct testimonies of Police violence listed above, nor does it contradict the trends catalogued in the Chicago Reporter Misconduct Database or the Citizens Police Data Project, but rather moves the category of Police misconduct from instances of violence perpetrated by individual officers to a category of State sanctioned violence. Whether the State sanctions such actions deliberately or through neglect is largely an irrelevant distinction as the report contains instances of both and neither descriptor negates the overall trend of unconstitutional policing.

As background for the DoJ investigation, on December 7, 2015, the United States Department of Justice and the United States Attorney’s Office for the Northern District of Illinois, jointly initiated an investigation of the City of Chicago’s Police Department and the Independent Police Review Authority. This decision may be seen as coming to fruition in the wake of the October 2014 shooting of black teenager Laquan McDonald. The killing of McDonald, the subsequent murder charge filed against then CPD officer Jason van Dyke—following the release of dashcam footage of the incident—and a clear conspiracy to cover up the actions of van Dyke by both individual CPD officers and City of Chicago officials seemed to be the final straw in admitting to a culture of misconduct.13 Per the DoJ document itself, “this investigation was undertaken to determine whether the Chicago Police Department is engaging in a pattern or practice of unlawful conduct and, if so, what systemic deficiencies or practices within CPD, IPRA, and the City might be facilitating or causing this pattern or practice.”

The scope of the investigation was further clarified by stating that seven distinct categories of misconduct, malpractice, or deficiency were explored by the DoJ team working in Chicago 14: Force; Accountability; Training and Supervision; Officer Wellness and Safety; Data Collection and Transparency; Promotions; and Community-Focused Policing. While the report extensively enters into the data collected in each of those sub-categories and describes its findings in great detail, for the sake of brevity this article will provide a synopsis of the DoJ’s conclusions.

In the area of “Force” the DoJ’s report found that the patterns of when, how, why, and to what extent force is used by the CPD exhibit a tendency to use force in a manner incompatible with the Constitutional rights of citizens. The document specifically states that the DoJ “in consultation with several active law enforcement experts, found that CPD officers engage in a pattern or practice of using force, including deadly force, that is unreasonable. [The DoJ] found further that CPD officers’ force practices unnecessarily endanger themselves and others and result in unnecessary and avoidable shootings and other uses of force.”15

---

13 It may also be noted that the swaying of public opinion on the culture of the CPD and policing in Chicago was heavily influenced by the grassroots organizing of local organizations like BYP100, Assata’s Daughters, and the Chicago chapter of Black Lives Matter, all of which were instrumental in drawing attention to the Laquan McDonald case.

14 As a clarification of method, the DOJ report stipulates that their team reviewed thousands of pages of documents provided by CPD, IPRA, and the City, including policies, procedures, training plans, Department orders and memos, internal and external reports; accessed complaint databases and data from all reports filled out following officers’ use of force; spent over 300 person-days meeting with community members and City officials, and interviewing current and former CPD officers and IPRA investigators; observed training programs and training facilities; met with the Fraternal Order of Police; and met with over ninety community organizations, including non-profits, advocacy and legal organizations, and faith-based groups.

In analyzing the data presented in the DoJ report and the individual cases listed therein, the trend of unnecessary force includes the following categories: discharging weapons at suspects fleeing through public areas; discharging weapons at suspects who pose no immediate threat to themselves or others; discharging weapons at vehicles (both stopped and moving)—contrary to official protocol; discharging weapons from moving vehicles—contrary to official protocol; making tactical decisions that unnecessarily increase the risk of deadly encounters; exposing bystanders to risk of harm; utilizing CPD vehicles in improper and reckless ways during pursuits; and using excessive force once suspects are already apprehended. As an alarming caveat, the DoJ report also notes a trend in using excessive force against children.

In the area of “Accountability” the DoJ report declares, “we discovered numerous entrenched, systemic policies and practices that undermine police accountability”. By way of summary, the lack of accountability described throughout the report may be seen as falling into the following categories: the City of Chicago does not investigate a vast majority of the cases that it is required by law to investigate; the cases that are investigated suffer from serious investigative flaws (both in terms of official practice and in terms of illegal activity intended to alter the outcome of investigations); investigations directed at officer misconduct are often marked by a failure to challenge inconsistencies and illogical officer explanations; oversight committees and their practices are overwhelmingly favorable to officers implicated in misconduct; officers are instructed on how to create narratives which justify the use of force despite the actual circumstances of the encounter; a “Code of Silence” prevails in the department which directly hinders that gathering of potential evidence which might implicate officers in wrongdoing; and that, overall, the current parameters in place for accountability do very little to actively deter misconduct.

In the area of “Training and Supervision” the report notes that “CPD’s pattern of unlawful conduct is due in part to deficiencies in CPD’s training and supervision”. These deficiencies include not providing officers or supervisors with adequate training; a lack of mentorship in the field and in the office; an inability to proactively identify areas for improvement; a lack of adequate re-training in instances of misconduct; and the lack of adequate facilities.

In the area of “Officer Wellness and Safety” the report bluntly summarizes the lack of care exhibited by the department and the city when it comes to providing the support necessary to complete policing duties properly:

“Because of how officer wellness can impact officer behavior, and the uniquely tense circumstances facing CPD officers each day, CPD officers need greater support from the City and CPD leadership. CPD and the City should think meaningfully about how to better address the stressors CPD officers face, and how to create an overarching operational plan that includes robust counseling programs, comprehensive training, functioning equipment, and other tools to ensure officers are successful and healthy”.

Following the overall tendencies for inefficiency and insufficiency, the DoJ found that in the area of “Data Collection and Transparency”, under its current system, “CPD is unable to easily use the data at its disposal to identify trends, including trends in misconduct complaints, training deficiencies, and more”.

16 Ibid., 7.
17 Ibid., 10.
18 Ibid., 12.
19 Ibid., 13.
Last, and perhaps most relevant to this article, in the area of “Community Focused Policing”, the DoJ found that under current auspices, CPD officers are not seen as trustworthy in the eyes of the citizens of Chicago, specifically in the realms of protecting them, their families, and their neighborhoods. Predicated on the successful turnarounds of other police departments, the DoJ sees Community Policing as a necessary philosophy that is to serve as a foundation for adequate and successful policing.

Lest the project be seen merely as purely accusatory, the end of the DoJ’s report on the CPD contains over 100-line items which suggest ways to improve the deficiencies described in the report. Essentially, the recommendations recap the aforementioned breaches of police protocol and ineffective policies in a format that calls for implementing programs and policies that would reverse the shortcoming. For example, in response to the trend of using excessive force, the DoJ recommends that CPD “adopts use of force practices that minimize the use of force” in general while providing specific line items that correspond to the breaches in current policy. Reversing the trend of officers endangering themselves, the public, and the suspect with reckless foot pursuits can be achieved by developing, training and implementing a foot pursuit policy that makes clear that foot pursuits are dangerous and that sets forth guidelines for foot pursuits that balance the objective of apprehending the suspect with the risk of potential injury to the officer, the public, and the suspect. The misuse of police vehicles and the tendency to fire at or from moving vehicles is remedied by revising and reinforcing policies against shooting at or from a moving vehicle and provide additional training on avoiding dangerous vehicle maneuvers. Etc.

While the DoJ report provided extensive recommendations for reform and the report itself totaled more than 150 pages, the DoJ itself does not have specific jurisdiction over CPD policy and has limited power of enforcement\(^{20}\). Beyond individual cases of misconduct in which the DoJ may prosecute the officer(s) in question, the Attorney General can only make recommendations for reform and oversight is explicitly prohibited by the Safe Streets Act of 1968.\(^{21}\) Such a lack of enforcement meant that however accurate the report and its recommendations were, the CPD was not obligated to enact any of the recommendations.

Instead, the City of Chicago, under Mayor Rahm Emanuel, entered an “Agreement in Principle” with the DoJ regarding the CPD and reform. The document, signed and made public on January 13\(^{th}\), 2017, stipulates that “while the City does not concede that there is a pattern or practice of constitutional violations, it agrees that the United States’ findings raise issues of

\(^{20}\) CONDUCT OF LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES  
§ 14141. Cause of action (re-codified at 34 U.S.C. 12601)  
(a) Unlawful conduct: It shall be unlawful for any governmental authority, or any agent thereof, or any person acting on behalf of a governmental authority, to engage in a pattern or practice of conduct by law enforcement officers or by officials or employees of any governmental agency with responsibility for the administration of juvenile justice or the incarceration of juveniles that deprives persons of rights, privileges, or immunities secured or protected by the Constitution or laws of the United States.
(b) Civil action by Attorney General: Whenever the Attorney General has reasonable cause to believe that a violation of paragraph (1) has occurred, the Attorney General, for or in the name of the United States, may in a civil action obtain appropriate equitable and declaratory relief to eliminate the pattern or practice.

\(^{21}\) OMNIBUS CRIME CONTROL AND SAFE STREETS ACT OF 1968 42 U.S.C. § 3789D  
§ 3789d. Prohibition of Federal control over State and local criminal justice agencies; prohibition of discrimination.  
(a) General rule: Nothing in this chapter or any other Act shall be construed to authorize any department, agency, officer, or employee of the United States to exercise any direction, supervision, or control over any police force or any other criminal justice agency of any State or any political subdivision thereof.
importance to the City and the community and is committed to addressing the issues raised by the investigation.”

In order to further define this commitment to reform the document specifies that

“the Parties commit to negotiate in good faith to reach a comprehensive settlement in the form of a consent decree to be entered as an order of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois ("Settlement Agreement"). The Settlement Agreement will include reforms of CPD's use of force practices and accountability mechanisms, as well as its training, community policing, supervision, data collection, transparency, officer wellness systems and promotion practices. The Parties agree to seek to have the Settlement Agreement approved by and entered as a consent order in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, where venue is proper. An independent third-party monitor will be selected to assist in determining whether the Settlement Agreement is being implemented and whether the goals of the Settlement Agreement have been achieved. The Settlement Agreement will specify the selection and appointment process for the independent monitor. The Superintendent of CPD, who is answerable to the Mayor of Chicago, will always retain full authority to run CPD in accordance with law.”

This type of agreement and an allusion to a Consent Decree in the near future were perhaps the best possible outcomes in the wake of the DoJ not having any subpoena powers over police departments and the Trump administration adopting a laissez faire approach to investigating and mediating instances of police misconduct patterns. However, a serious commitment to the recommended CPD reforms has yet to materialize.

The Chicago Reader Database, which tracks the implementation of the DoJ’s recommendations as well as any CPD and City of Chicago commitments to further reform, shows that as of August of 2018, only 25 of the recommended reforms had been enacted. The newly implemented policies include additional screening and training for Crisis Intervention Team officers; improved communication channels for informing CPD employees about the Employee Assistance Program and increasing officer wellness resources; renewed review processes for instances where force is used; updates to the academy training program and to field training; the creation of a $95m Police Academy; and ensuring proper staffing for COPA and BIA oversight committees. However, the adopted reforms fall overwhelmingly into the DoJ categories of “Training” and “Officer Wellness and Safety” while the categories of “Community Policing”, “Use of Force” and “Accountability” remain largely untouched.

Because of the seriousness of the allegations present within the DoJ report, the overwhelming evidence presented therein, the increasing frequency of misconduct incidents as well as the amount of City Budget space allotted to payouts, and a lack of acceptable reform on the part of the City of Chicago itself, the State of Illinois, through the Illinois Attorney General’s

22 Agreement in Principle Between The United States Department of Justice and the City of Chicago Regarding the Chicago Police Department, January 13th, 2017.
23 Ibid.
24 Under former Attorney General Jeff Sessions and current acting Attorney General Matt Whitaker the DoJ has not entered into any new investigations of local PDs, has not shown an interest in upholding previously made agreements, and has not entered any new agreements.
Office, has filed a Consent Decree request which is currently pending approval by a Federal Judge. Per the Illinois Attorney General’s own explanation of a Consent Decree, the document

“is a court order that establishes an enforceable plan for sustainable reform. Typically, consent decrees are detailed documents that include specific requirements and deadlines for action. Police consent decrees in other cities around the country have required an independent monitor. The independent monitor needs to be approved by a federal judge. Once the federal judge approves the independent monitor, that monitor is charged with measuring the police department’s progress by making sure the police department implements the changes required in the consent decree. The independent monitor reports to the federal judge. The federal judge oversees the police department’s compliance with the consent decree and holds the department and the city accountable for satisfying the consent decree’s requirements”.  

While the filing of such a Decree is a step towards reform, there is no given timetable for the approval or rejection of the document at this time. It appears as if the initiatives suggested by the DoJ find themselves in limbo and the situation of injustice created by unconstitutional policing continues. Furthermore, it appears as if the CPD and the City of Chicago have used waiting on the approval of the Decree as an excuse to halt the implementation of further reform.  

**Cone and Hansen:** As was noted in the introductory statement above, there is perhaps no stronger theo-ethical community glue that at once encapsulates and enriches the black experience, catalogues the trials and tribulations—historic and current—of its people, and offers hope to the community than black music. As a category, especially in the realm of theology, this has typically included genres such as Black Spirituals, the Blues, Gospel, and Jazz, but arguments for the inclusion of Hip-hop, rap, R&B, reggae, ska, and Motown may be made as well. Rap will especially take center stage within this work. However, before transitioning into a discussion of the relatively new genre and its specific Chicago scene, an exploration of the classics is in order. The best entrance into the relationship between theology, praxis, ethics, and black music comes from James Cone in his *The Spirituals and the Blues*.  

Perhaps the best place to start when undertaking an excurses on the genre is the beginning. In his analysis of black spirituals, through the use of the prior work done by W.E.B DuBois, John Lovell, and Miles Mark Fisher, Cone summarizes the spirituals as “historical songs which speak about the rupture of black lives; they tell us about a people in the land of bondage, and what they did to hold themselves together and fight back”. Furthermore, Cone explicitly differentiates between the genre as an aesthetic and the dailiness and community understanding gained from the African roots of the spirituals. He argues that at its core, the spiritual “is the spirit of the people struggling to be free; it is their religion, their source of strength in a time of trouble.” Additionally, the genre was meant to affirm the human dignity and self-worth of those

---

25 http://chicagopoliceconsentdecree.org/faq/
26 The Consent Decree was approved by Judge Robert Dow on January 31st, 2019. This approval has officially given the Federal Court System jurisdiction over the CPD and oversight over its reform. As of yet, there had been no movement towards enforcement under current DoJ leadership.
28 Ibid., 30.
29 Ibid.
that participated in its singing, to function as a source of strength, a source of joy, a source of resistance.

Cone explores various facets of the genre including its themes of painting God as a liberative figure, one that is allied with the oppressed; the place of suffering in scripture as it relates to the believer; the subversive possibilities of spirituals; the transcendent present of Heaven and the Kingdom within black music; and the tension between hope and despair encapsulated within the musical form itself. He transitions into a discussion of the blues as a type of secular spiritual before reiterating the potential of freedom songs no matter which sphere they are based in.

One of the most relevant aspects of Cone’s work for our discussion came much later than the original 1972 printing. In a reissued edition of the book, Cone amended his concluding reflections to include a discussion of newer forms of life-giving discourse including rap and its emergence in the black community. He describes the genre as “musical-talk, extremely popular among young people who are searching for meaning in a world that has no place for them”. 30 Although the structure, tone, and message may differ from spirituals, gospel music, jazz, and the blues Cone believes that rap is still an expression of black life in America and what people must do to survive with a measure of dignity in a society which seems bent on destroying their right to be human beings. 31 Although an endorsement from Cone goes a long way, it also extends much of the analysis present within his work to the newer genre. Thus, we will be able to utilize much of Cone’s method below.

However, there is also a glaring aspect of Cone’s approach that bears critique. While his monograph is rightfully seen as the cornerstone of theological work on the Spirituals and the Blues, the scope of his work is very much limiting when it comes to audience. For Cone, a complete understanding of the musical forms as well as their social, political, and theological significance is only graspable by those that find themselves living within the Black experience. He is convinced that “it is not possible to render an authentic interpretation of black music without having shared and participated in the experience that created it. Black music must be lived before it can be understood” 32. Although he does allude to “objective” data being available to listeners outside of the Black experience, academic tools can never get at the heart of the matter and truly feeling the music, its power, its despair, and its hope are outside the bounds of such analysis.

While I as a privileged white male am indeed approaching this subject matter with a natural distance and great caution in not overstepping my bounds—specifically, knowing that many of the music’s themes are beyond the realm of my experience, understanding, and authority to speak on—I must also critique Cone’s conclusion that my discussion must be limited to objective analysis or that I can never gain understanding from the music.

Many of the artists that will be presented below have personally inspired and motivated me to explore the aforementioned patterns of misconduct and unconstitutional policing, have instilled a sense of solidarity with those victimized by such experiences deep within my soul, driven actions of activism and protest against the persons and systems responsible for such experiences, and have led to some of the deepest theological reflection upon my place within such structures that I have ever undergone. Again, these experiences are in no way reflective of being exposed to oppression myself, but to discredit my want for the liberation and freedom of

30 Ibid., 130.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 3.
others and understanding of the hopeful and critical power of black music through a relegation to objective “academic work” does not fully express my position in this conversation.

Additionally, to limit such an exploration of black music discredits a community that I am in many ways bound to. My spouse teaches in Chicago’s North Lawndale neighborhood, an area that is disproportionately affected by unconstitutional policing, a lack of resources and services from the City, as well as gun violence. Her students know the ins and outs of having wrongfully incarcerated family members, of attending funerals for loved ones that are victims of police brutality or gun violence, and the lingering trauma that comes with the uncertainties offered by their surroundings. Through her recounting of their narratives and through my participation in various community and school activities we remain outsiders, but outsiders with a glimpse into a harsh reality that urges discussion, hope, and response. Neither she nor I will ever know the feelings articulated by the community, but we are witnesses to them.

It is within my power as one on the periphery of such experiences to bring attention to them without being an authority on the topic. To critique the system that I am a beneficiary of, in the wake of gaining an understanding of its ugliness through the Chicago music scene, and to amplify its shortcomings to an audience wholly unaware or purposefully ignorant of its brutality is a position that should not be abandoned because of my distance to the experiences themselves. It is not within my ability to feel the loss of a loved one from targeted police violence, but it is within my ability to listen, to disrupt my thinking, and to bring such narratives back to a wider community. As such, an expanded scope through Marsha Hansen, a protégé of Howard Thurman and his Church for the Fellowship of all Peoples will help to clear a path for my participation.

Marsha Hansen is a current vocal performer who specializes in African American sacred music. Beyond her musical performances, Hansen holds a degree in theology and teaches seminars on the history and theology associated with the pieces she presents. She explains the powerful nature of spirituals as follows,

“As is poignantly true with some other musical forms, the rhythms, tunes, and poetry of spirituals overcome the limitations of language and of human understanding in ways that transcend words, time, place, and culture. This is music that is at once culturally rich, yet totally inclusive. Perhaps the simple truth is that all good music somehow serves to breach existential loneliness and brings segments of humanity together in closer communion.”

For Hansen, there is a sense of universal truth which lies behind the spirituals, both the music, the tone, and the words strike at the very heart of what it means to be human, what it means to struggle, and what it means to hope. There is also a specific focus on the power associated with the narratives present within the spirituals. The artist performing the piece, the composers who authored it long ago, and the audience are all united in a search for divine truth through the medium of song and the exploration of Biblical narrative present within the genre.

Hansen explores various facets of the genre in her work, ranging from the musical form and its technical nuances to the function of spirituals within the ecclesial realm. However, for the purpose of our study here, an excursion into Hansen’s discussion of spirituals as “Songs of Resistance and Protest” and their “Lyrics of Hope” will take center stage. The most relevant questions addressed by African American spirituals—in terms of addressing State sanctioned

33 Marsha Hansen, My Soul is a Witness: The Message of the Spirituals in Word and Song (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Books, 2006), 11.
violence—revolve around questions of humanity and freedom. What does it mean to be human? How do we interact with others? What is freedom? How is it achieved? Can oppression be conquered? etc. Hansen further explores these questions through an analysis of the classics “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen”, “Oh Freedom”, “Give me Jesus”, “Listen to the Lambs”, and “Wasn’t that a wide River”? all of which argue that living in a state of oppression is antithetical to the ontological identity of human beings and a violation of their Divinely given purpose.

Speaking of “Oh Freedom” specifically, Hansen makes the case that this short spiritual (Oh, Freedom, Oh, Freedom, And before I’d be a slave I’d be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be Free) is a song not about suicide but about self-realization and a transition from object to subject on the part of the oppressed. She argues that “it is a serious, sad, somber song but not the song of a broken people. It is a song of a people who came to understand that their labor and their thoughts and their bodies and their children were their own.” The solemn lines served as a reminder of self-determination in the face of a system that actively negated human freedom. It is no wonder that the spiritual was widely adopted as a rallying cry during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, a time when Jim Crow had non-too-subtly replaced outright slavery as the modus operandi of the State in the American South.

While it may be viewed as an eschatological foreshadowing, it must also be noted that the spiritual is an outright negation of a socio-political institution in favor of a deeper human truth. This juxtaposition of licit practices sanctioned by the State and a more fundamental principal of human dignity reflects the reoccurring clash of the status quo and the category of “Justice”. The medium allows for the artist and the audience to communally generate self-understanding while also being a catalyst for empowerment and change. This movement from inner freedom to outward action—whether actions of slave resistance or participation in Civil Rights era initiatives—typifies the other spirituals covered by Hansen as well.

This theme of empowerment continues in the chapter “Lyrics of Hope” in which the author views spirituals through a lens in which they offer people immersed in conspicuous suffering an opportunity to celebrate in hope. Hansen sees the likes of “Rock in Jerusalem”, “There is Balm in Gilead”, and “A City Called Heaven” as spirituals which utilize an other-worldly scenario to inspire a this-worldly hope. Although the lyrics themselves are full of eschatological allusions, the overall message of the songs is one of the Divine’s transformative power and commitment to the oppressed.

This powerful message of change is expressed in heavenly language but is inherently committed to structural change in the present life as well, signaling a direct relationship between how things should be and how things might be. Hansen rejects the “pie in the sky” mythology

---

34 Ibid., 37.
35 Ibid., 41.
36 Ibid., 81.
37 Oh Mary, Oh Martha, Oh Mary, ring dem bells. Oh Mary, Oh Martha, Oh Mary, ring dem bells. I hear archangels, they rock in Jerusalem, I hear archangels, a ringin’ dem bells.
38 There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole, there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.
39 I am on a pilgrim journey of sorrow. I’m left in this whole wide world, I’m left in this wide world alone. I have no hope for tomorrow, But I’ve started to make Heaven my home. Well, sometimes, I am tossed. Sometimes I am driven low, Sometimes, my dear lord, I don't know to which way I can roam. But I've heard of a city called Heaven, and I've started to make heaven my home.
sometimes attributed to such spirituals—one which discourages direct action in favor of anticipating heavenly reward—but rather sees these songs of hope as reflective of real-life situations that long for this-worldly resolution. Her interpretation of the verses is one which presents alternatives to pain and suffering on an individual level in hopes of familial and communal reunion as well as a shaking of socio-political foundations responsible for the initial environment of injustice.

Through the use of Hansen, it is evident that the primary functions of freedom songs include their ability to serve as a source of self-identity, a coping mechanism, a subversive critique of the status quo, community glue, and catalyst for direct action for structural change. It is with this in mind that we may approach the topic of Chicago’s contemporary rap scene as a parallel to black spirituals.

**Chicago Artists Reflecting on Police Violence:** The following artists and pieces were chosen due to their Chicago residency as well as the fact that they deal with the aforementioned issue of police violence and misconduct explicitly. A brief introduction to each figure will further set the scene for the relevancy of their work in both descriptive and reflective capacities. Lastly, it must also be mentioned that both of the artists traverse the boundaries between musician and activist in some fashion, another important factor in determining their presence within this project.

**name:** Fatima Nyeema Warner, or noname as she prefers to be known, grew up on Chicago’s Southside in Bronzeville. Exposed to music, art, and poetry at a young age through her mother’s book shop, grandparents love of blues, and the CPS’s extracurricular spoken word club Louder than a Bomb, noname channeled this love of the spoken and written word into a career as a rap artist. Honing her skills alongside artists such as Chance the Rapper, Malcolm London, and Saba through programs like the YOUMedia project and Open Mic night at Harold Washington library, noname made her first recordings under the name of Noname Gypsy. These early relationships and growth in the scene led to her featuring on Chance the Rapper’s “Lost” which elevated her status as a rising star in Chicago.

Her first mixtape, Telefone, was officially released under the shortened “noname” and was highly praised within the industry, earning Fatima multiple guest appearances on late night shows and a host of opportunities to feature on tracks with other rapper activists. The content of that mixtape largely revolves around her experiences growing up in Chicago and takes the form of telephone conversations, both real and imagined, that wrestle with the struggles as well as the hopes and dreams present in the lived experience of the Southside. The selected track from that mixtape below deals expressly with the themes of structural racism discussed above.

“Casket Pretty”
I've been searching for God in the bottle he gave me
Ashes to Ashes, dearly departed, regarded as Holy
Dont hold me, dont hold me
When friends is dying and dying
And I'm afraid of the dark
Blue and the white
Badges and pistols rejoice in the night
And we watch the news
And we see him die tonight
Tonight the night his baby said goodbye
Roses in the road, teddy bear outside
Bullet there on the right
Where’s love when you need it
Too many babies in suits
Too many babies in suits
Back before the dawn
Ricochet the pawn
Bullet in the chest
You ain't mean no harm
Collecting your check mate
I know you in love with the power
Its flowers at every occasion
I need me a medicine man
Somebody heal me
Somebody take my hand

All of my friends is casket pretty
Ain't no one safe in this happy city
I hope you make it home
I hope to God that my tele' don't ring
Friends is casket pretty
Ain't no one safe in this happy city
I hope you make it home
I hope to God that my tele' don't ring

This track is a powerful reminder that too many men and women on Chicago’s South and West sides find themselves “Casket Pretty”, or susceptible to violence. While the forms this violence takes are varied, this piece in particular is dealing with is the state sanctioned execution of colored bodies discussed in the first part of this project. The scene is set with noname drowning her sorrows in a bottle, “looking for God”, or divine answers to the existence of such violence. The presence of agents of the state is reiterated by “the blue and the white, badges and pistols rejoice in the night”, a commentary on how noname and other residents of these neighborhoods believe that the CPD takes joy in the death of those that are victim to their bullets. The only recourse they have in the wake of such actions is to liter the streets with flowers and teddy bears, tokens to lives cut short.

The constant presence of bodies in the street on the news and the fear that this time it may be her phone that rings is a stark reminder of the lasting trauma that a context of fear has on individuals and communities. Additionally, the lack of accountability and oversight discussed in the DoJ report and our analysis above takes on meaning in the lines “bullet in the chest you ain’t mean no harm, collecting your check, mate. I know you in love with the power”. There is an overwhelming sense of hopelessness present in knowing that the existence of a friend can be wiped away and excused with the reasoning of following protocol or attempting non-lethal procedures that took a wrong turn, all while continuing to receive a paycheck in the wake of misconduct. Lastly, the presence of self-medication or alternative healing reiterates the lack of mental and emotional healthcare available within a community that is underfunded. With
resources unavailable, hope and resting within faith become the only options for survival and coping. Within this piece we have a raw glimpse into the real lived experience of our brothers and sisters that is unavailable through any of the recounting done above.  

**Malcolm London:** Growing up in Chicago’s Westside Austin neighborhood, London has evolved into an internationally recognized Chicago poet, activist, educator and musician. As an organizer, London was part of a historic youth delegation to the United Nations in Geneva to address police violence in Chicago. Deeply interested in working on ways to improve the national education system, London regularly visits high schools, youth jails, colleges and communities to work with students on writing workshops and performances. London also runs the largest youth open mic in Chicago along his side friend Chance the Rapper and moved in many of the same circles as the aforementioned noname. He sees art as the intersection between justice and poetic imagination.  

As an activist, Malcolm has put in time working nationally and internationally on ending gun violence and mass incarceration. London is an advocate for public education, reeducating young men on enthusiastic consent and simply holding one another accountable. On a more specific level, he was the cochair of Black Youth Project 100 in Chicago. The selected track from his *Opia* project aims to catalogue various facets of institutional racism as it rears its ugly head in Chicago.

“**Charlie**”  
Ooh, I'm a black boy, targets on my back, boy.  
Three strikes comin' better go and get your bat, boy.  
Face up on a plaque boy, don't you know that slavery is back, boy, go on and get your passport.

Picture this: who kills Laquan McDonald more  
An officer, a jail cell or McDonalds stores?  
Donald Duck, Donald Trump  
We leaving racism in the Devil's trunk  
Deflated, like Tom Brady bunch  
What if they called Jesus a terrorist cause he cared a bit?  
They called me a terrorist cause I cared a bit  
City on gridlock but I care for it  
Even on a dark night I care for Gotham  
What if the genesis of Jena Six was just forgotten?  
We need kindness and gentleness

In addition to a blistering assessment of the culture that led to the death of McDonald—“who kills Laquan McDonald more? An officer, a jail cell or McDonalds stores?”—resistance to the dehumanizing nature of those mechanisms is present within London’s text—“what if we had

---

40 As a reiteration of my position as an author in this instance, while I have no experience of children attending the funerals of their father, brothers, uncles, and other loved ones unlawfully assassinated by police officers, I do know that no one should ever have such an experience.

41 This introduction to Malcolm London is a summary of his biographical information present on his website, [https://malcolmlondon.com/about](https://malcolmlondon.com/about).
the kindness of Mary Poppins?”. There is also a raw energy in the lyrics which resonates with Cone’s theme of black music tearing down walls and building the skeleton of new structures in the here and now. All of this is under a genre which is based in storytelling, exploring narrative techniques, and cataloguing communal and individual experiences.

Whereas Cone and Hansen both explore the Spirituals and the Blues’ reflection of these facets, what we are offered by the rap genre is a level of specificity that goes beyond many of the statements meant to be encompassing of a wider black experience; a specificity that allows these artists to weave between easily identifiable trends and a personal narrative that amplifies the power of the story. Thus, they are able to combat the dehumanizing effects of persons and structures on a level that moves firmly beyond the abstract.

The individual affirmations of personhood project outwards towards wider experience and back inward towards reflection on the part of the listener. Malcolm’s discussion of police brutality in response to his activism—“they called me a terrorist because I cared a bit”—is a microcosm of the ethical imperative to question right and wrong within a system meant to erase any authentic expression of freedom. Although not all may know the feeling of being arrested, assaulted, and falsely charged, Malcolm’s narrative sparks introspection on all aspects of the structures that produced his experience.

Exploring and Expanding CST as a Response to State Sanctioned Violence: As we approach the dilemma of state sanctioned violence against black bodies, Catholic Social Teaching has much to say on both the general violation of the Imago Dei present in such a context as well as the power of narrative and the necessity to listen to victims of injustice. While an expansive excurses of CST is not viable within such a short work, an important entrance into the conversation can be made through Gaudium et Spes, Lumen Gentium, and their assertions of the social nature of human beings. As a way of narrowing our focus to the aforementioned instances of racial profiling by police, disproportionate arrest and conviction ratios, marginal admittance to wrongdoing in misconduct cases, and outright executions of black and brown persons by agents of the state, GS and LG will be built upon by more recent and more relevant USCCB documents.

In terms of the wider scope of CST, Pope Paul VI understood that individual persons and their reflection of the Imago Dei cannot function alone in a vacuum. People certainly are sacred in the Church’s teaching, but they are also social creatures. More specifically, the Pastoral Constitution argues that “Humanity is created in the image of God, but is not a solitary creature for by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential”\(^{42}\). While this may have a hint of blurring the lines between the subject/object distinction of upholding the autonomy of persons, the Holy Father’s point is surely that human potential as a general category cannot be achieved to its fullest extent outside of community. The possibilities for relating to others takes a plethora of new forms in the post-modern world, as alluded to within GS, but the preferential option for relating to and approaching those that are most vulnerable became a clear theme of CST in the wake of Paul VI’s groundbreaking work on the social nature of human beings.

Specific declarations of this need for the growth of community and the widening of our relational boundaries are found in another work of Pope Paul’s, Lumen Gentium. The Dogmatic Constitution clearly outlines the need for sanctifying the socio-political realm when discussing the vocational calling of the laity and its unique position to preach the Gospel within a wider context. He states,

\(^{42}\) Pope Paul VI, Gaudium et Spes, I.13.
“The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity.”

While the tone of the Constitution is indeed general, intentionally vague, and non-programmatic, the foundation for insisting upon the sanctifying power of social life is clear. It is in and through others that we are best able to express the work of Christ and Pope Paul’s call for engagement in the temporal realm leaves no room for categorizing the problems outlined in this paper as beyond the scope of faithful action. If we are indeed to order the socio-political realm in accordance with the Divine, none of the aforementioned expressions of police violence musically catalogued by our Chicago brothers and sisters is acceptable.

The “ordinariness” of children in suits and caskets within the daily life of West side residents expressed by noname as well as the intersectionality of the capitalist system, structural racism, and state sanctioned executions present in Malcolm London’s work are antithetical to the calls for growing the kingdom present in CST. Although the Dogmatic Constitutions offer an entrance into this conversation, a more explicit Catholic discussion of structural racism, state sanctioned violence, and the power of narrative as a catalyst for dialogue are present within recent statements made by the USCCB.

It is here that we return to where this project started, a declaration from the US Bishops which concretely acknowledges the problems outlined above and demands action. Open Wide Our Hearts continues the call to listen to the narratives of our brothers and sisters within the realm of racial reconciliation and the combating of institutionalized racism. The call comes as follows,

“Too many good and faithful Catholics remain unaware of the connection between institutional racism and the continued erosion of the sanctity of life. We are not finished with the work. The evil of racism festers in part because, as a nation, there has been very limited formal acknowledgement of the harm done to so many, no moment of atonement, no national process of reconciliation and, all too often, a neglect of our history. Many of our institutions still harbor, and too many of our laws still sanction, practices that deny justice and equal access to certain groups of people. God demands more from us. We cannot, therefore, look upon the progress against racism in recent decades and conclude that our current situation meets the standard of justice. In fact, God demands what is right and just.”

It is this demand for justice and the call for reconciliation that has fueled my current project and I believe the work done here not only statistically solidifies the task force’s declaration of the presence of institutional racism, but it has offered an entry point into a more concise understanding of the experiences of those directly impacted by this evil. I hope that the narratives

43 USCCB, Open Wide Our Hearts, 10.
present in the analyzed musical pieces as well as the excurses into the work of Cone and Hansen can lead to a reversal of neglecting the historical and perhaps offer a platform for dialogue. Such a general hope will gain further contours below.

A central question that arises in the wake of the Church acknowledging failures in the realm of justice is “what now”? What can the Church do to remedy the highlighted shortcomings of the public sphere as well as its own shortcomings in eliminating structural sin? This brings us to our second relevant CST document, the Final Report and Recommendations from the USCCB’s Special Task Force to Promote Peace in Our Communities. The report contains especially poignant calls to not only realize that the Church spans beyond just our immediate familial and social circles and enters into the public sphere, but also explicitly highlights the power that narrative and dialogue with younger generations can have on reversing current trends.

Concurrently, and perhaps most importantly, the report explicitly acknowledges institutional racism as a national problem and connects it directly to a violation of the sanctity of life espoused by the Church. It expresses concern with the lack of urgency among the faithful in dealing with such violations of the Imago Dei and calls on us to implement a process of reconciliation and atonement. In a segment of the report dealing with potential responses to the overarching evils of contemporary structural racism generally and the reappearance of targeted racial attacks in the wake of the most recent presidential election, the task force states,

“Some stressed that the Church must find its bold prophetic voice at this important time, both heeding the voice of conscience as well as bringing right conscience into the public square. The power of the Church, in collaboration with others, in helping set the stage for a conversation on large questions ought not be underestimated. The Church has an opportunity to convene and bring those with fresh insight to the dialogue. This is a moment to hear from young people and foster real dialogue on topics that directly impact their perceptions of their own futures.”

The Church’s commitment to listening and amplifying voices in the document is clear. I would propose that paying attention to the aforementioned artists and the myriad of justice-oriented groups that they are a part of, fund, and echo is one way that the Church, specifically in Chicago, might move from the declarations of a subcommittee to a tangible commitment to action. The dialogue on topics that impact the futures of the younger generations exposed to over policing, state sanctioned violence, the under funding of social programs and education is indeed already happening in these circles.

The Church need not create avenues for dialogue but may choose to invest its time, resources, networking capabilities, and strong dogmatic commitment to ending structural racism into pre-existing circles with a unique understanding of specific needs within the communities most affected by such a violation of the Imago Dei. Groups like My Block, My Hood, My City have garnered national attention and earned various grants at the federal and state level but have not received attention or support from the archdiocese of Chicago and at times their progress has been hindered by the Church.

Acknowledgement of such hindrance appears in the task force’s report in a discussion of political ties negatively impacting the viability and success of locally mirroring larger CST trends. Specifically, the committee highlighted inaction in condemning violence due to public

44 USCCB Special Task Force to Promote Peace in Our Communities: Final Report and Recommendations, November 10, 2016, 8.
perception and political allegiances. The report states, “one official warned that when local church leaders become too politically connected, there can be a lack of action when it comes time to decry violence. It is important that they be willing to hold those on the local level accountable for their actions or lack of action.”\(^{45}\) While a specific context is not provided for the interviewee’s comments, I would once again point to Chicago as a parallel example for the complications that navigating the political realm add to seeking justice.

This past November, Cardinal Cupich presided over the funeral of CPD Officer Samuel Jimenez in the wake of the tragic shooting at Mercy Hospital which saw an instance of domestic violence spill over into the public realm.\(^{46}\) While celebrating mass for an officer who put himself in harm’s way is a commendable act, such specialized attention has not been afforded to the victims of police executions in Chicago. Additionally, the cardinal has also spoken at various CPD precincts in support of their attempts to create community initiatives while the varying community initiatives mentioned above do not receive the same blessings.\(^{47}\) Lastly, even actions such as Cupich’s commitment of $250,000 in discretionary funding to combat violence in the city have a certain political hue to them as none of that funding went to initiatives aimed at addressing misconduct and over policing as categories of violence.\(^{48}\) While Cupich did address racism and economic inequality as catalysts of violence in Chicago, he has not overtly acknowledge any of the state’s direct involvement in the problem.

Perhaps the most relevant example of this lack of accountability in terms of police violence is illustrated by the Catholic Chaplain for the Fraternal Order of Police, Dan Brandt. Fr. Brandt chose not to attend Cardinal Cupich’s multi-denominational and multi-faith prayer service for justice in the City of Chicago in the wake of the release of the Laquan McDonald murder footage. The chaplain saw the service and its implications of wrongdoing on the CPD’s part as a threat against police sovereignty, going so far as to call Jason van Dyke a hero.\(^{49}\) Such unwavering support of someone found guilty of murdering a child is a slap in the face to the Church’s stance on state sanctioned executions and the lack of sanctioning in the wake of this action may be seen as guilt by omission. The contradiction present between the USCCB affirmations in these documents and the actions on the ground is staggering and one which I hope moves towards resolution.

While the focus has thus far been on the hierarchy, its missteps, its triumphs, and its acknowledgement of the need for progress, the task force also echoes the importance of the laity’s participation in solutions. Unsurprisingly, the importance of dialogue takes center stage within the document. The task force found interviews with community members to be not only a vital task in terms of outreach and fostering communication, but the data garnered through such a medium reiterated the need for growing relationships with communities impacted by institutional racism and violence. Specifically,

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{46}\) While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this case in more detail, I would like to use this space to acknowledge that gun violence is multifaceted in Chicago and is not limited to police misconduct or gang violence. Domestic violence involving firearms is its own plague on our nation.

\(^{47}\) One such documented visit was his presiding over a mass at St. Peter and Paul Parish in Chicago’s Fifth Ward for the CPD officers patrolling that neighborhood.

\(^{48}\) https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/04/04/cardinal-cupich-launches-anti-violence-program-chicago-pope-francis?gclid=Cj0KCQjwjiwjpkBRDRARlSfAKv-0011TFwwFkDx8WvLwF_NubnfxfC2H7djg-ciXjGfDnvzrIQ0en8AsMwEALw_wcB

“Participants identified a lack of understanding and inadequate opportunities to gain insight into realities within others’ communities as a particular problem. Intentional efforts to encounter one another are vital to lasting solutions and healing. The need for honest dialogues across many groups and communities was stressed – with and among faith communities, as well as with law enforcement (including judges and prosecutors), community leaders, young people, activists, and community groups. Dialogue need not mean endorsement, but no progress can be made if we are unwilling to engage one another and find new ways to hear others’ perspectives.\(^50\)

It is here that I would like to offer our discussion of Chicago’s music scene as an entry point into fulfilling this call for dialogue and fostering the growth of relationships across institutional borders. Through the amplification of the narratives present within those pieces and an engagement with the artists creating them, the Church has the ability to enter into relationship with four of the categories highlighted in the task force’s call for honest dialogue. Not only can perspective and understanding be gained through the narratives, but it has been shown here that the work of Malcolm London and noname has been a catalyst for community organizing and serious reflection upon the ills troubling Chicago.

A concerted effort to enter into a space of wrestling with the struggles of others can indeed be made through such an amplification and both the hierarchy and the laity have a tangible way to commit to expressed CST stances. To be clear, I am not arguing for simply advocating an appreciation of Chicago’s rap scene at a surface level, there has been enough cultural appropriation of rap music on the part of affluent whites in recent memory. What I am attempting to say is that there is a wealth of critical knowledge, practical strategy, and cultural expression present within such artistic work and that the aforementioned Church documents seem to indicate an interest in accessing oppressed realities but have not found successful ways of doing so. The ability to offer critique of dysfunctional systems, provide alternative realities, and engage in righteous action present within those pieces can and must be accessed in any serious undertaking of grasping the lived experienced of Chicago’s residents.

While it is undeniable that there is a gap between stated critiques, intended outcomes, and real progress present in many facets of CST and in the realm of combatting state sanctioned violence specifically, a genuine step towards moving peripheral voices towards the center in hopes of achieving just structures can be made through a careful opening up of hearts and minds towards the plights catalogued in the music presented here. The statistics and data highlighted in our excurses into misconduct databases and police reports does not adequately present the lived experience of those who have had their daily existence altered by state sanctioned violence. The medium offered here reiterates the shadow cast over the lives of those who live in fear of state sanctioned violence in a way that numbers and percentage points simply cannot. As has been argued by Hansen and Cone and reiterated here, the depths of human reality can be expressed through songs of freedom, hope, and despair, the Church need but listen to have the understanding they supposedly crave.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 11.