

## **RadioDoc Review**

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# **Narrative Justice: Somebody Delivers the Answers that Police Will Not**

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### **Abstract**

By investigating Courtney Copeland's 2016 murder, the podcast series *Somebody* (2020) does the work that should be done by police. Narrated by Courtney's mom, Shapearl Wells, the series not only decentres the official police narrative, but also opens up alternative paths towards seeking justice. Situated within the Black Lives Matter movement, calls to defund the police and questions about the usefulness of "objectivity" in journalism, *Somebody* attempts to put systemic violence on trial and hold those in power to account. Challenging extractive forms of journalism, *Somebody* moves towards a model of shared authority between producers and their sources. This review focuses on the use of voice and perspective in the series and how that lays bare the many ways that systemic police violence disproportionately impacts Black people. It uses narrative structure and true-crime tropes to illustrate how *Somebody* both deploys storytelling techniques and breaks them. It offers an example of what podcast series might sound like if they centred the communities they cover rather than trying to shock and surprise their imagined audiences.

### **Keywords**

police brutality, Chicago, institutional racism, motherhood, gun violence, investigative journalism, son, Courtney Copeland, narrative justice, victims' rights, defund the police, incompetence, impunity, Somebody

### **Recommended Citation**

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## **Narrative Justice: *Somebody* Delivers the Answers that Police Will Not** **By Neroli Price**

*Somebody*, co-production of the Invisible Institute, Topic Studios, The Intercept and iHeartRadio, in association with Tenderfoot TV.

7 episodes, 29 minutes – 1 hour 10 minutes each.

Host: Shapearl Wells

Producers: Alison Flowers and Bill Healy

Story Editor: Sarah Geis

Associate Producer: Ellen Glover

Executive Producer, Invisible Institute: Jamie Kalven

Executive Producers, Topic Studios: Maria Zuckerman, Christy Gressman and Leital Molad with special thanks to Lizzie Jacobs

Supervising Producer, The Intercept: Roger Hodge

Sound Design: Carl Scott and Bart Warshaw

Mix Engineer: Michael Raphael

Theme Song: “Everybody’s Somebody” by Chance the Rapper

Additional Reporting: Sam Stecklow, Annie Nguyen, Kahari Blackburn, Rajiv Sinclair, Henri Adams, Matilda Vojak, Dana Brozost-Kelleher, Frances McDonald, Diana Akmakjian, Andrew Fan, Erisa Apantaku and Maddie Anderson

Translation Support: Benny Hernandez-Ocampo and Emma Perez

Fact-checking: Nawal Arjini

Original Music: Eric Butler and Nate Fox of the Social Experiment

Listen at <https://invisible.institute/somebody-podcast>

### **Introduction**

Three years before calls to defund the police swept across America, the team behind *Somebody* was doing the police’s job for them. The podcast series documents Shapearl Wells’s investigation into her son’s murder - an investigation that should have been carried out by the Chicago Police Department (CPD). In March 2016, Shapearl’s son, 22-year-old Courtney Copeland, was shot in the back while driving through Chicago’s Belmont-Cragin neighbourhood late one night. In his last moments, he drove to the 25<sup>th</sup> District police station looking for help. What happened

outside that police station is unfortunately all too familiar to Black people. Instead of ensuring that he received immediate medical attention, police wasted precious time handcuffing Courtney, treating him like a suspect.

With the cover-up of Laquan McDonald's murder by the CPD two years earlier, Shapearl was immediately suspicious of the official version of events. Her suspicions only deepened as police refused to answer her questions or share updates and evidence with the family. As a consequence, Shapearl began her own parallel investigation. In 2017 she enlisted the help of the Invisible Institute, a journalistic non-profit production company that had been instrumental in bringing evidence to light in the Laquan McDonald case. Together they filed 80 requests for public records, consulted forensic experts, interviewed 30 of Courtney's friends and family and identified new eyewitnesses. This years-long investigation became the basis for the podcast series launched in March 2020 and went on to win 'Best Serialized Story' in the 2020 Third Coast / Richard H. Driehaus Foundation Competition.

*Somebody* veers away from the familiar narrative of lethal encounters between police and Black people. Unlike *16 Shots*, a WBEZ podcast series about Laquan MacDonalD's murder, *Somebody* is not a story about a police shooting or cover-up. It is a story about a far more widespread but less sensational kind of injustice: incompetence. *Somebody* wrestles control of the story away from the police and offers Courtney's family a form of narrative justice in the absence of any meaningful criminal justice. As Shapearl reflects, "the podcast allows you to tell your child's story and to actually push those who are in charge of pursuing justice for you, making them do their job". In this context, narrative offers a path towards police accountability, and importantly, a way for Shapearl to continue mothering her son. This review focuses on how the use of voice and perspective brings into focus police violence, institutional racism and the work that falls onto Shapearl's shoulders as a Black mother.

### **Voice and Shared Authority**

Expanding on *Radio Diaries'* classic model in which subjects act as producers of their own stories, *Somebody* is the result of a close collaboration that took years to build and blurs the line between source and storyteller. This is evident in Shapearl's role as the narrator, an active character in the story and as a reporter collecting tape and conducting interviews. Her position is made explicit at the top of each episode, "My name is Shapearl Wells. I'm Courtney Copeland's mom. And this is *Somebody*". Speaking to Shapearl for this review, I was struck by how much she sounds exactly like she does in the series. This is due to the scripting process that was drawn from Shapearl's own words, with many of the rewrites happening while tracking with

her in studio. By following Shapearl's lead, *Somebody* joins the move away from historically extractive forms of reporting and offers a way of sharing authority between source and storyteller. Pushing back against what Sandhya Dirks calls the "deeply colonial act" of capturing someone's story "taking something from where it lives – inside the messy complexity of an ever-changing person – and displacing it and confining it, putting it into the taxonomy of storytelling, kidnapping it into the narrative".

Writing about what she calls "the Unbearable Whiteness of true crime", Sarah Weinman calls on storytellers to rethink "what narrative structure is supposed to accomplish". *Somebody* uses narrative to celebrate Courtney's life, get answers about his death and to highlight systemic police failure. By centring Shapearl's point of view, the show is deliberately decentering the police's official narrative. The victim is at the center and the system is on trial. Although the producers and editor behind *Somebody* – Alison Flowers, Bill Healy and Sarah Geis – are all white, it is Shapearl's perspective as a Black mother grieving for her son and seeking answers that shapes the story (one that she is best placed to tell). Shapearl's voice is the most immediately striking element of what makes this dense and detailed investigation sing. Intertwined in the storytelling choices were dynamics about race. Editor Sarah Geis elaborates on the questions the team had to ask itself throughout the production process: "...what is the best way to support Shapearl in leading the story, but also not put all the responsibility and labor of telling a compelling audio story onto Shapearl when that's not her job?". To tackle this, the team emphasised self-reflection and brought in many outside listeners to gain perspective.

Being upfront about her agenda also gives Shapearl clear stakes and maps her narrative journey. We feel the emotional highs and lows alongside her as her voice shakes with grief or hardens with determination. Her strength as a narrator is in her proximity to the case, her vulnerability and openness. These traits actively push back against a more traditional so-called "objective" narrator typically associated with older forms of broadcast radio. In the world of first-person audio storytelling where transparency and intimacy are the gold standard, Shapearl is the obvious choice to tell her own story and that of her son. The transparency extends to the investigative team who, in episode three, have to reevaluate their assumptions when they make a discovery that changes the direction of the investigation, "we had to walk back our assumptions, and start over again". In this way, *Somebody* deploys radical transparency as an antidote to a pretence of objectivity and distance.

Having Shapearl as the guide also signals who the intended audience is. As Sarah Geis points out, "We were trying to make this for Courtney's community and his friends, and folks who are here in Chicago, and also, at the same time for a wider community of people who hear about Chicago and gun violence in the news, and don't understand it and feel far away from it". This

sense of place is bolstered by the use of music associated with Courtney and Chicago, such as the theme song *Everybody's Something* by Courtney's childhood friend and fellow Chicago native, Chance the Rapper. Rooting the series in the specific details of place and character helps to shrink the distance between the story and the listener. This is underscored by the use of music and sound in the series. Much of the ambient sound that helped to create scenes in the story came from Shapearl's own recordings or those made by Courtney and recovered from his phone. The scoring drew heavily on local Chicago music that was connected to Courtney in some way. Other than the theme song, the presence of music is subtle, adding momentum, punctuation and moments of reflection in amidst the expression of grief.

### **Institutional Racism and Police Incompetence**

An hour after hearing the news that Courtney had been shot Shapearl phoned her friend, Santita Jackson, who gave her the best advice she says she has ever received. "She told me, as soon as you get home, record yourself. I know that you're grieving right now, but eventually you're going to need this information". She could not have been more right. Those recordings ended up forming a crucial part of the investigation and in turn, the podcast series. "One of the things that I did early on in this investigation that that made audio recordings, I made a lot of notes, I pieced together a lot of timeline." Creating her own archive from the outset was another way for Shapearl to regain control over the story and lessen her dependence on inaccessible police records. This self-archiving is also an insurance policy of sorts, which falls uniquely on the shoulders of Black people in interactions with authorities - like a Black "documentation tax".

The "active, in-the-moment reaction" tape collected by Shapearl also creates an extraordinary textural range to complement the interviews, archival tape and subtle sound design and scoring in a story that is in large part a reconstruction of past events. We are transported to the night Shapearl found out her son had been murdered and we march into the police station alongside her as she demands answers from the police officers assigned to the case. The audio recordings of the police are perhaps the most remarkable pieces of tape in the entire series. They connect to the burden of proof of Black "documentation tax" that has brought the murder of so many unarmed Black men to the public's attention. Without the grainy cellphone videos, would we know the names of Eric Garner and George Floyd? Would we have as many calls to reform the criminal justice system and defund the police? Shapearl knows the burden of collecting evidence all too well, "Black people in America, we always have some type of uneasiness with the police, and I always knew that it was my word against theirs." Having the recordings and weaving them into the podcast forces the police and the public to listen. They are the grainy cellphone footage of *Somebody*, but instead of capturing immediate physical violence, they record the systemic violence of police incompetence.

The fact that Shapearl not only distrusts the police, but suspects them of being involved in her son's murder says a lot about existing relationships between police and Black communities. This disfunction is audible in Shapearl's recordings of the police.

SHAPEARL: *What I'm saying to you is that this problem didn't just occur with Courtney Copeland's case. The breakdown from the community and the police...*

POLICE: *I'm not here to talk politics with you ma'am. I'm here to talk reality.*

SHAPEARL: *I am talking reality.*

POLICE: *No, I'm here to talk reality about this case. No, you know what? I'm done. No. No, no, no, no, no, no, no.*"

This exchange begs the question of who has the authority to designate which narrative constitutes reality? Whose lives are rendered political? Whose point of view goes unquestioned and whose lived experience is treated with suspicion? These are all questions that are explored in Lewis Raven Wallace's podcast, *The View from Somewhere*, and picked up in relation to Black peoples' relationship with the police in shows like NPR's *Code Switch* and the BBC's *Have You Heard George's Podcast*? Following in this approach, *Somebody* destabilises the authoritative version, treating the police as possible suspects, guilty until proven innocent.

SHAPEARL: *I'm not saying that they did anything to my son.*

POLICE: *I take offence to that.*

SHAPEARL: *Why?*

POLICE: *I really do. Because you are painting with a broad brush, ma'am.*

SHAPEARL: *It's not a broad brush when it's an everyday reality for Black and brown people in Chicago.*

POLICE: *You're painting these guys with a broad brush.*

These lines go to the heart of the series: who gets to be an individual, somebody that matters? The police resent being generalised, but made assumptions about Courtney that might have

cost him his life. The fact that Shapearl has to work so hard to be heard reminds us that listening is an act of power. As Sandhya Dirks reminds us, “What incredible power lies in the silence you control while someone speaks their suffering”. *Somebody* gives us an example of what it looks like when you force those in power to listen – work that disproportionately falls to Black people, like Shapearl, whom the system repeatedly fails and who are left without a choice.

Shapearl views what happened to her son as a form of police brutality that goes unchecked, “We don't know how many Courtney Copeland's they are. Because it doesn't have that sensationalism. Because it's not a cold-blooded murder, not eight minutes with a knee on his neck”. Although police shootings of unarmed Black men rightfully get a lot of media attention, according to Alison Flowers, they “are still relatively rare events that happen too frequently”. What is not rare, she adds, “is how the murders of Black and brown people are not prioritised. That is every day”. For Shapearl and many others like her, the trauma of losing a loved one is compounded by an incompetent and often inconclusive police investigation. This is an institution designed to serve, and yet woefully unable to prevent or solve such high numbers of murders leading to widespread impunity. An institution that treats the communities it serves as suspects, breaking down trust and eroding legitimacy. Without ever directly coming out and saying it, *Somebody* adds to growing calls to defund the police. After all, it was Shapearl and the Invisible Institute that found the answers she was looking for, not the police.

Much like the second season of *In the Dark*, season three of *Serial* and *Missing and Murdered: Finding Cleo*, there is no single “evil villain” in *Somebody*. While not letting go of the importance of solving the case, the series also does not suggest that the imprisonment of an individual perpetrator neatly removes danger from society. Doing so obscures systemic violence by limiting evil to the so-called “bad apples”. This is mirrored in *Somebody*'s narrative structure that does not crescendo with an unveiling of the murderer and subsequent arrest. However, as with the aforementioned series, the focus on proving that systemic violence exists implies an intended audience that needs to be convinced time and again that institutional racism exists. In this way, *Somebody* does the work of the investigative work of the police and the narrative work of the mainstream media, whose disproportionate focus on the exceptional cases obscures the larger picture. One that bears witness to the “slow violence”, to borrow from Rob Nixon, of systemic inequity, institutional racism and police incompetence.

### **Black Motherhood**

Finding answers and protecting his legacy become the way that Shapearl continues to mother Courtney even after his death. In particular she has to protect his reputation. In episode one, Shapearl describes how she has to counter rumours about Courtney's character: “Police say he

wasn't a gang member? Why was that even a question? I had to do everything I could to protect his image. When reporters asked to use photos of him, I made sure he looked his best". The constant implication that Courtney was somehow responsible for his own death exhausts Shapearl who feels like she has to constantly guard his memory. This is a burden that disproportionately falls on the shoulders of Black parents. The parents who too often have to get up in the public eye, put their grief aside, and demand justice for their children.

In episode three, Alison and Shapearl have a conversation about how their personal biographies have shaped their relationship with the police. Sarah Geis explains that this narrative break to step back and zoom out was inspired by Chana Joffe-Walt's 2018 episode of *This American Life* episode, 'Five Women', which examined how women's sexual histories shaped their experience of assault. "I wasn't raised to fear the police", says Alison who's white, but for Shapearl it's a different story. She had to teach Courtney from a young age about how to interact with police: "Make sure you don't reach for anything, Courtney". "Be very calm." "Be very polite and courteous."

This goes to the heart of how race shapes interactions with the police. As Shapearl summarises, "there has always been a sense of I believe comfort for white people and a sense of fear for black people when it comes to police". To illustrate this history, Shapearl and her husband, Brent, discuss how their grandparents fled the South, "because of all the hangings and the lynchings". Racially-motivated violence that police were either complicit in or failed to protect Black victims from.

Through generations, Black mothers have worried that they will lose their sons to racism's lethal force. When Shapearl believed that her son had been shot by police, it was this familiarly tragic story that helped her to place her son's death in context, to make sense of a senseless killing:

"When I thought police killed Courtney, it made me feel like his death served some type of higher purpose.

Like Emmett Till. Or Laquan McDonald.

Their killing actually woke up the country. With Emmett Till, when people saw how he was murdered, they were shocked to see such brutality. And the same with Laquan McDonald.

With Courtney dying, if the police did it, it would have been a major coverup and it would have shook Chicago to the core.



But if cops *didn't* kill him then his death just another unsolved Chicago murder.

I went from knowing who killed my son...to knowing...*nothing*.”

For Shapearl, Courtney’s life and death mattered. He was somebody. The title of the podcast is drawn from this sentiment expressed by Civil Rights leaders Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rev. Jesse Jackson and explored in episode two.

“Black people have always had to say it out loud: I am somebody. Because the people in charge kept telling us we’re not.”

Shapearl continues:

“And my son Courtney, he was somebody. I felt that I had the responsibility to force the police to take a look at his case and say, “Hey, this kid is somebody.””

Hearing these words in 2020, when again there are uprisings for racial justice across America points to the long history of Black people having to fight to access their basic rights. In *Somebody*, Shapearl forces the police to listen, and she forces us to listen. In the time of the Black Lives Matter movement, Shapearl insists that her son’s life mattered, that he was somebody. Having to prove that her child was somebody and that he did not somehow cause his own death is another kind of Black “documentation tax”.

## **Conclusion**

*Somebody* is an ambitious project that straddles investigative journalism and true crime, but challenges both. “It’s real life”, says producer Bill Healy, “there’s no tidy resolution”. Even though the series hints at the fact that the team has solved the murder, there is no big reveal at the end. That is, in part, because there has not yet been a conclusion to Courtney’s case. The fight for justice continues. The series may be over, but the story is not. Indeed, the Office of the Inspector General in Chicago is currently looking into the case which could lead to new charges being brought or potential disciplinary action against the police.

A series like *Somebody* was only possible because it was funded by a non-profit that was invested in digging deeper into the case as its bread and butter. This is not typical in podcast production processes that need to make more compromises in order to attract wide audiences to offset costs. Giving the story the time and attention that it needed and going over every detail

before publishing required a lot of investment. At the end of production, to be able to distribute the show and recoup some costs, the series was sold to partner organisations that placed their own restrictions onto the series, such as legal disclaimers and insistence that it be placed in the category of true crime.

To the dissatisfaction of some listeners, there are no neat bows at the end. *Somebody* deploys narrative techniques like stakes, cliffhangers and scenes, but is not always loyal to its conventions. The series does not try to make sense out of a senseless murder. It does not divide the characters up into “good” and “evil” camps. There are no simple, tidy conclusions. In the end, the story became less about what exactly happened the night that Courtney died and more about challenging the official police version. By telling the story from Shapearl’s point of view, the dense details of the investigation are easier to digest. The triumph of the narrative is that Shapearl’s stakes are so accessible. She is real and close, not some slick radio professional recounting a story from the safety of the recording studio. The messiness of lived experience seeps into the narrative structure.

*Somebody* is bookended by Courtney, creating a sonic memorial to his life. It became a way for Shapearl to access justice in the form of narrative - a place where she was in control, could seek answers and make sense of her loss. It also gave her an avenue to real recourse, “Once the podcast was released, I actually felt relief. I felt like now the story is going to be told. So there is no more time for the police to hide. They have to face it, just like I have to face it every day”. In this way, narrating her own story and that of her son becomes a way to continue mothering Courtney even after his death.

Sewing together Courtney’s individual life with the systems that reduced him to another unsolved murder statistic makes room for agency and the limitations of context. *Somebody* teaches us, as Sandhya Dirks puts it, to “... listen to how power works”. Taking this further and borrowing from Dirks, could *Somebody* be the beginning of what narrative reparations sound like? In the final episode, Shapearl connects with other mothers of murdered children sharing the burden of her pain and showing the global nature of systemic violence. She also gives examples of officers who help save gunshot victims in Philadelphia adding nuance to the portrayal of police. The series ends with a striking visual image of a painting of a slave shackled in captivity titled *The Struggle Lives On.* “As a mother”, Shapearl says in the last lines, “you do whatever you can to protect your child, and in that moment I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do it. And then you sit here and you like, I should’ve been there and it was beyond my control”. The podcast series provides a space for regaining some of the control Shapearl feels like she lost. It opens a space to access narrative justice and to celebrate Courtney’s legacy: “When Courtney was alive, he

would say, 'Mom, I'm gonna be famous. The world is going to know about me!'. Now a little more of the world does.

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### Bio

Neroli Price is a writer and audio producer from Cape Town, currently based in Seattle. She has worked for the independent podcast *Sound Africa*, the anti-corruption non-profit Open Secrets and the "Sundance for Radio", Third Coast International Audio Festival. Her audio work has appeared on *Reveal* from the Centre for Investigative Reporting, the BBC's *Shortcuts*, *Sound Africa*, *Field Recordings*, KNKX and KEXP. Neroli is the founder and writer of South Af-

rica's first weekly podcast review column and has a chapter in the forthcoming *Routledge Companion to Radio Studies*. She holds a MA in History from the University of Cape Town and a graduate certificate in Radio and Podcasting from the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies at the Maine College of Art. You can read more about her work at [neroliprice.com](http://neroliprice.com).