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To cite this article: Keisha N. Blain (2018) “We will overcome whatever [it] is the system has become today”: Black Women’s Organizing against Police Violence in New York City in the 1980s, Souls, 20:1, 110-121, DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2018.1520059

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2018.1520059

Published online: 20 Dec 2018.
“We will overcome whatever [it] is the system has become today”: Black Women’s Organizing against Police Violence in New York City in the 1980s

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This article highlights the history of black women’s efforts to end state-sanctioned violence in New York during the 1980s. It centers on the political activities of Mary Bumpurs and Veronica Perry, two black women who led a grassroots initiative in New York City to combat police violence in black communities. Foreshadowing the kinds of activities organized by the Mothers of the Movement, Mary and Veronica joined forces to combat police brutality, transforming their grief into political action. These women effectively politicized their roles as mothers and daughters to challenge police violence on local and national levels. Through their writing and speeches—which reflected the political milieu of the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s—Mary and Veronica advanced a political ideology based on a historical contextual understanding of racism. They not only addressed police violence in the 1980s but also drew a link between the activities of the Ku Klux Klan and the New York Police Department to emphasize the historical legacies of racist violence in the United States and the role law enforcement played in maintaining it.

Keywords: activism, black women, history, New York, police violence

At the 2016 Democratic National Convention (DNC), a group of black mothers whose sons and daughters had been killed at the hands of the police while in police custody, or by police violence, received a standing ovation after sharing their stories. These Mothers of the Movement, which included the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Dontre Hamilton, Hadiya Pendleton, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Jordan Davis, and Michael Brown, explained why they chose to endorse Hillary Clinton, praising the presidential hopeful for supporting gun control policies that
would curb these kinds of incidents. Their featured spot at the DNC was a culmination of several months of organizing various community and national events aimed at bringing attention to the systemic problem of police violence in the United States. Their individual and collective efforts to address these local and national issues reflect the political activities of a long line of black women, often black mothers, who have mobilized to end police violence and brutality. In New York City, as in other cities across the nation, black women were at the forefront of political movements against police violence. During the 20th century, black women such as Madame Stephanie St. Clair, Audley “Queen Mother” Moore, and many others employed a range of political strategies and tactics to advocate police reform in the city and to bring attention to the disproportionate number of black people dying at the hands of the police. Their early efforts laid the groundwork for a new generation of black women activists who emerged in the decades to follow.

This article highlights the history of black women’s efforts to end state-sanctioned violence in New York during the 1980s. It centers on the political activities of Mary Bumpurs and Veronica Perry, two black women who led a grassroots initiative in New York City to combat police violence in black communities. In 1984, Mary’s sixty-six-year-old mother, Eleanor Bumpurs, was shot and killed by New York City police while resisting eviction from her Bronx apartment. A year later, in June 1985, Veronica’s seventeen-year-old son Edmund Perry was shot and killed by a plainclothes police officer. Both cases drew widespread media coverage and public outcry from black leaders who demanded tangible changes in policing. Foreshadowing the kinds of activities organized by the Mothers of the Movement, Mary and Veronica joined forces to combat police brutality, transforming their grief into political action. These women effectively politicized their roles as mothers and daughters to challenge police violence on local and national levels. Through their writing and speeches—which reflected the political milieu of the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s—Mary and Veronica advanced a political ideology based on a historical contextual understanding of racism. They not only addressed police violence in the 1980s but also drew a link between the activities of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and the New York Police Department (NYPD) to emphasize the historical legacies of racist violence in the United States and the role law enforcement played in maintaining it.

Significantly, these women also embraced what historian Joshua B. Guild refers to as a “radical democratic politics of possibility,” the belief that “politics—and by extension, the power to shape the world—should not be the exclusive preserve of the wealthy, or men, or a dominant racial group.” Central to a “radical democratic politics of possibility” is the perspective that ordinary men and women have the power to transform society through the formal political process. While not discounting the significance of grassroots organizing, Mary Bumpurs and Veronica Perry saw the utility of the ballot box as a means of tackling the problem
of police violence in New York and across the nation. To that end, they used their speeches during the 1980s to embolden New Yorkers to harness the power of the vote and worked alongside other black and brown activists in the city to push for citywide and nationwide reform in policing.

By tracing the activities of Mary Bumpurs and Veronica Perry, this article provides a window onto how black women during this period “injected motherhood [and daughterhood] more forcefully into the political landscape of liberalism and defined [themselves] as political subject[s].” It joins an ongoing scholarly effort to document the various modes of protest, strategies, and tactics that black women employed in their struggle against police violence in the United States. It illustrates how these women engaged in organized insurgent resistance against police brutality and highlights the various platforms they utilized and the diverse networks they forged to advance their political goals. Centering these women’s ideas and political activities deepens our understanding of the black freedom struggle, underscoring how black activists framed their resistance against police violence as part of the larger vision for civil and human rights.

Ultimately, this article adds to the growing body of scholarship on black activism and protest in New York City, an important site for black political activity in the 20th century and beyond. Joining the scholarship of Julie Gallagher, Cheryl Hicks, LaShawn D. Harris, and others, this article situates black women’s ideas and activism as central to understanding the history of urban reform, politics, and civil rights in New York City. By highlighting the ideas and activism of black women who are often marginalized in public discourse on state-sanctioned violence, it also adds to the significant scholarship on black women and the criminal justice system, including works by Beth Richie, Monique W. Morris, Talitha LeFlouria, Sarah Haley, and Andrea Ritchie.

By the turn of the 20th century, police violence and brutality were common in black communities in New York City. As the black population in New York grew to 60,666 in 1900, these challenges only intensified. With an influx of black residents, including many from the U.S. South and the Caribbean, New York became a mecca for black people. The rich cultural and literary expressions that came to characterize New York in the early 20th century, however, stood side by side with a growing culture of police brutality in the city. By the mid-20th century, New York became an epicenter of both police violence and antibrutality organizing. The 1943 and 1964 race riots, which both erupted following the police shooting of unarmed black men, placed New York City in the national spotlight. Despite the efforts of activists in the city and beyond, police violence and brutality remained a persistent problem in the city well into the 1980s. In this period, New York witnessed a string of highly publicized cases involving white police officers and black residents.

Perhaps the most well-known case is that of Michael Stewart, a twenty-five-year-old artist who died from the injuries he sustained while in police custody in 1983. He had been arrested for spray-painting graffiti on the wall of the First
Avenue subway station in Manhattan. A year later, Eleanor Bumpurs was shot and killed by New York City police while resisting eviction from her apartment. This shooting would precede many other high-profile cases—most notably, the June 1985 killing of seventeen-year-old honors student Edmund Perry, whom a plain-clothes police officer shot and killed. The officer claimed that Edmund and his brother, Jonah, had attempted to rob him. A gifted young man, Perry had recently graduated from one of the most prestigious boarding schools in the country and had plans to attend Stanford University later that fall. In April 1985 two NYPD officers violently assaulted Mark Davidson, an eighteen-year-old high school senior, after they arrested him for allegedly possessing marijuana. It was later revealed that officers burned Davidson with an electric stun gun more than forty times to obtain a confession. Akosua Jackson, a local activist in the city, emphasized the tense atmosphere of the period. “I have an eight-year-old son,” she told reporters in 1986, “I know I could lose him to a (police) bullet because of the insecurity displayed by too many white officers.” Her statements underscore the heightened sense of fear and anxiety among black mothers who recognized the danger of raising black children—a lingering fear that remains constant in black life.

Although black New Yorkers could not escape the rampant police repression, they devised a range of strategies and tactics to resist, including legal redress, political lobbying, and armed self-defense. During the 1980s, black leaders demanded tangible changes in policing practice at the time. “People united and organized can end this reign of police terror,” Frank Chapman of the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression argued. “By mass protest and lobbying,” he continued, “we can change the present situation from one where we have no control to some control of the police.” Expressing similar sentiments, Lennox Hinds, an activist and attorney from Harlem, argued, “We must do the hard job of organizing on a block by block level … to develop legislation designed to control the police.” As Hinds called on black residents in the city to back legislation that would help to curb police violence, some activists emphasized the need for direct political action in the form of mass protests. “If we do not move to stop it now,” one activist explained, “we as a community will be as guilty as all the others, for ‘we knew’ and did not rise up to protest or take those community, political and legal actions that could effect change.” Many black activists in the city embraced this point of view and joined forces to launch a political movement to end police violence in New York city and across the nation.

Black women were at the forefront of this movement to resist state violence. Building on a long tradition of black women’s organizing against police violence and brutality in the United States, Mary Bumpurs and Veronica Perry emerged as leading activists in the city, politicizing their roles as mothers and daughters to shed light on the issue of police violence and brutality. Following her mother’s death in 1984, Mary Bumpurs, then thirty-two years old, launched a campaign to seek justice for her mother. “I’ve lost something that I’ve had all my life,” she
Determined to bring her mother’s killer to justice, Bumpurs became the spokeswoman for the Bumpurs family and began to speak out against police violence and other injustices facing black people in the city.

Significantly, Mary worked to counter the stereotypical images of her mother that dominated mass media of the period, including portrayals of her mother as a knife-wielding overweight black woman with superhuman strength. In public interviews following her mother’s death, Mary emphasized her mother’s humanity by offering details about her mother’s life and the developments leading up to the 1984 shooting. Mary’s public presence following her mother’s death and her efforts to counter stereotypical images in mass media mirrored the earlier efforts of Mamie Till Bradley, mother of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, who was murdered in Mississippi in August 1955 after being accused of whistling at a white woman. As historian Ruth Feldstein has argued, “Bradley was central to the politicization of her son’s murder.” By insisting on an open casket, speaking publicly about her son’s life, and working diligently to shed light on white supremacy and racist violence in the South, Bradley “helped make his death an international civil rights issue.” In a similar way, Mary Bumpurs’s actions helped transform the public discourse surrounding her mother’s killing from a local issue into a national—and even global—one. Indeed, Eleanor Bumpurs’s name would become a symbol of police violence in the United States and a call for political organizing for justice and police accountability.

During the mid-1980s, Mary Bumpurs’s growing public presence brought her into contact with a diverse group of activists in the city, including local politicians and religious leaders. In 1985, she collaborated with civil rights attorney C. Vernon Mason and Bronx City Councilman Wendell Foster in a series of local events to address police violence in the city. During this period, she also began working closely with Brooklyn civil rights activist Rev. Herbert Daughtry, pastor of the House of the Lord Church in Brooklyn. “We have to build monuments to our loved ones,” Rev. Daughtry argued at a memorial service for victims of police violence, “we have to keep the memory alive.”

Recognizing the urgency of the situation, Mary worked tirelessly to “fashion a response” to police violence in the city and envisioned collaborations with other activists as a necessary step to advancing her goals.

One of the most significant partnerships Mary established during this period was with Veronica Perry, the mother of Edmund Perry who was shot and killed by a police officer in June 1985. Veronica, a thirty-eight-year-old schoolteacher, became a vocal critic of the police in New York City in the aftermath of her son’s
Similar to Mary, Veronica turned her grief into political action, calling on activists across the country to demand immediate changes in policing and in the criminal justice system. And much like Mary, Veronica advocated a radical democratic politics of possibility to underscore the significance of formal politics for ending police violence and brutality. Because of their own similar experiences, Mary Bumpurs and Veronica Perry joined forces to combat police violence and brutality in New York City in the 1980s. Alongside other activists in the city, these two women worked to galvanize local New York residents around issues of police violence and brutality as they also pushed for nationwide reform.

From the mid- to late 1980s, Mary Bumpurs and Veronica Perry appeared together in a series of high-profile events. On September 24, 1985, for example, they were keynote speakers at the Spartacus Forum, held at the Memorial Baptist Church in Harlem. Their presence at the church that evening underscores the crucial role black churches have historically played as sanctuaries for education and sites for political organizing and mobilizing. Both women delivered rousing speeches before an audience of community members and religious leaders. "Because I am black and poor and live in Harlem," Mrs. Perry explained, "they thought my son was just another [black boy]. They found out that he was not just another black boy, that he was a very special and unique individual…"

Appealing to audience members to join local efforts to prevent the killings of other young black men, Mrs. Perry insisted that "we will not stand for the KKK in blue uniforms … we will not stand for it." Her comments emphasize black activists’ recognition that the fight for black rights in the United States was interconnected with the struggle against racist violence—whether at the hands of a lynch mob of ordinary citizens or at the hands of a police officer.

Black activists also understood that the challenges facing black people in the United States were not unique to the United States. Drawing a link between the experiences of black people in Harlem to the experiences of black men and women living under apartheid rule in South Africa, Mrs. Perry explained, "we will not stand for the KKK as our mayor or as our president … [and] we will not stand for our sisters and brothers in South Africa being ruled by a few." Her statements illuminate how black women activists often framed their political demands through an internationalist lens—recognizing that the racist circumstances that gave rise to an unjust U.S. criminal justice system were not divorced from white supremacist and imperialist polices that circumscribed the lives of black men and women in other parts of the globe. In this way, the fight against police violence and brutality in Harlem was, to quote W. E. B. Du Bois, "but a local phase of a world problem."

Significantly, Mrs. Perry’s speech emphasized the need for black people to utilize political tactics and apparatuses long viewed as the purview of white men. To that end, she emphasized the power of the vote to challenge racist police practices in the city and appealed to young people in the audience to stand up to public officials like President Ronald Reagan and Mayor Ed Koch and insist that black
lives do matter. “You have to stand up and say also that I’m with the people of New York who say no more of this police brutality,” she argued. “[M]ake sure that when you reach 18 you have a voter registration card in your hand,” she continued, “And when it comes time to go to the ballot, even if you don’t know who you want to vote for, go and vote against who you don’t want.” Reflecting a radical democratic politics of possibility, Veronica Perry underscored the power of formal politics to combat police brutality.36 Her statements were reminiscent of other black women activists, including Fannie Lou Hamer—who passionately encouraged black men and women in Mississippi to register to vote during the 1960s—and Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman to serve in the U.S. Congress, who emphasized the significance, and transformative power, of the vote. Much like Hamer and Chisholm, Perry emphasized the “fundamental right of everyday people to determine their own futures by participating in the political process.”37 Her collaborator, Mary Bumpurs, followed in a moving speech, reflecting on her mother’s life and her struggles to care for her children with few financial resources and little support. “I would like to just clear up a couple of things,” Mary began. “In the papers they used this, she being psychotic or something or other. This woman had seven children, she raised them without my father being in the house. She raised us to the best of her ability…” Highlighting the class dimensions of police violence, Mary raised crucial questions about why her mother lost her life as a result of a series of events that unfolded because of missing rent. In a sarcastic remark, still painfully accurate in light of the circumstances, Mary cautioned, “Whoever’s been behind in rent better catch up quick, because they’re going to get you next! Believe me.”38

One of the most moving parts of Mary’s speech was when she drew parallels between the challenges her mother endured while living in the Jim Crow South and the experiences of black men and women living in New York City during the 1980s:

My mother told me a story, when I was about 13 years of age, about the experience that she had with the Ku Klux Klan. This was in North Carolina. I know nothing about North Carolina. She saw homes burnt down by these men in white sheets. When we use sheets, we put them on the bed, we don’t put them on our bodies. She saw these homes being burnt, she saw black people being taken in the woods and beaten to death. This is something she told us. I’ve never experienced, so all I can say is, I felt the pain, I was not there. She sat and she told us all the dreadful things that happened to her in her lifetime. … She did not instill hatred in us. … When you start hating people, to me you end up killing people. Now this is how the Ku Klux Klan to me is, in disguise in my city, which is New York City, in the blue uniforms.39

Mary’s statements spoke volumes about the persistence of racist violence in U.S. history—whether manifested as acts of lynching and cross burning in the Jim Crow era or as state sanctioned violence in black communities across the nation. She understood that her mother’s death was not solely at the hands of one or two police officers—it was the result of a broken criminal justice system that
consistently criminalized black men and women, especially those residing in poor communities. “I don’t hate [the police],” Mary explained, “But, there’s a big dislike because they did take something from me that they or no one else can replace.” Vowing to fight until she received justice for her mother’s death, Mary expressed some optimism that “we will overcome whatever [it] … is the system has become today.”\textsuperscript{40} Her optimism was rooted in the belief that change was possible through political organizing and formal politics.

This message continued to resonate in varied public appearances in the 1980s. On May 10, 1986, Mary Bumpurs and Veronica Perry appeared together again at a community forum at the C.A.V. building at 55 West 125th in Harlem to share their stories and call for policy changes. In an interview with the \textit{New York Amsterdam News} the coordinators for the event remarked that the “issue of police brutality has reached monumental proportions and it is critical to build a concerted community effort to combat police violence and racism.”\textsuperscript{41} Mary and Veronica certainly embraced this point of view and attempted to harness their collective experience and power to reduce police violence in black communities. In October of that year, the two women spoke together at a memorial service, held at the House of the Lord Church on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. They were joined by several other black women and their relatives including Carrie Stewart (the mother of graffiti-artist Michael Stewart) and Annie Brannon, whose fifteen-year-old son Randolph Evans was killed by the NYPD in 1976. At the service, they lit candles in memory of their loved ones and as they had done several times before, Mary and Veronica called on community members to take seriously the escalating police violence in New York City. As they painfully acknowledged at the time, hundreds of blacks and Latinos in the city had been killed by police officers since the mid-1970s.

Alongside several activists in the city, Mary and Veronica expressed their growing frustration and appealed to residents in Harlem to unite in the fight to end police brutality. “We as a people have to stand together,” Mary explained. “It takes each of us banding together,” Veronica added.\textsuperscript{42} For Veronica Perry and Mary Bumpurs, and those who supported their efforts, the appropriate response was mass lobbying and public protest. They emphasized the need for black men and women to unite in resistance to a criminal justice system in desperate need of reform. They also emphasized the need for new policies that would hold police officers accountable for their actions and, in turn, send the message that the lives of black men and women mattered. At this pivotal event in 1986, Veronica and Mary extended a national call for unity and change.

Despite years of protests against police brutality, both women came to recognize the limitations of the American political system even as they had envisioned it as an avenue for social change. Two years before the police officer who killed her mother was acquitted in 1987, Mary Bumpurs expressed her profound disappointment, arguing that the ruling ultimately sent one clear message: “If you’re poor, if you’re black, then there’s no justice.”\textsuperscript{43} In 1987, Veronica Perry filed a $145
million wrongful-death lawsuit against the city, the NYPD, and the police officer who shot and killed her son. In the lawsuit, she charged that the city was liable for permitting “a pattern of illegal beatings and shootings of minority people.” Two years later, Perry reached a settlement with the city for $75,000, but the “pattern of illegal beatings and shootings of minority people” that she emphasized in her lawsuit continued to persist in the years to follow.

Today, Mary Bumpurs and Veronica Perry have largely drifted from our public memory, even as the spirit of their work lives on in the Mothers of the Movement. While many certainly remember the Eleanor Bumpurs and Edmund Perry cases, few remember these two women’s efforts to bring justice for their loved ones or their grassroots political organizing around the issue of police violence in Harlem during the 1980s. On October 4, 1991, only five years after she and Mary stood together at the House of the Lord Church in Brooklyn, Veronica Perry passed away as a result of a heart condition at the age of 44. The brief obituary that appeared in the New York Times described her as a “Harlem teacher and the mother of Edmund Perry” and only made reference to her educational achievements and her active involvement in local school districts. Members of the community, however, remembered Perry’s tireless efforts to secure justice for her son and her commitment to ending police violence in black communities. Shortly after Perry’s death, Rep. Charles B. Rangel praised Veronica Perry’s courage on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives. Her collaborator, Mary Bumpurs, went into seclusion after receiving a settlement from the city in 1990 but continued to support efforts to end police violence. Despite her inability to secure justice for her mother, Mary bore witness to how her mother’s death sparked a nationwide and international campaign against state-sanctioned violence.

In an interview with a journalist in 1999, Mary Bumpurs admitted that the pain and regret she felt in the mid-1980s had not subsided. “Every day, I look in the mirror and see my mother and I think about people who have been killed since then,” Mary said. “I say to myself, my mother could still be alive here today.” Her 1999 interview, much like other recent interviews, made no mention of the importance of political action in black communities to end state-sanctioned violence—perhaps an indication that Mary had grown ambivalent toward the idea of a “radical democratic politics of possibility.” Instead, her interviews conveyed her feeling of disappointment concerning the persistence of police violence in black communities. She noted that she wished there was “something” she “could say or do to convince people to stop.” Despite this feeling of disappointment, Mary still managed to maintain a glimmer of hope, and called once again for national unity and the need for immediate changes in policing.

Notes


6. Ibid.


21. Ibid.


27. Ibid., 89.


29. Ibid.


39. Ibid., 7.

40. Ibid.


42. Bailou, “Relatives Remember Police Slay Victims.”


48. For example, Eleanor Bumpurs also does not address the topic of politics in a 2016 interview. See Stephanie Pagones, “NYPD Shooting of Mentally Ill Woman Invokes Memory of Eleanor Bumpurs,” New York Post, October 20, 2016.


About the Author