Black Women & Police Brutality during the 1980s

On October 29, 1984, New York Police Department (NYPD) brutally shot and killed sixty-six-year-old grandmother Eleanor Gray Bumpurs in her public housing apartment. Her death, symbolizing a powerful parable about systematic police violence against African Americans and Hispanics, was and continues to be one New York City’s most recognized yet understudied police brutality cases of the 1980s. This presentation recovers the personal life of Bumpurs from historical obscurity, moving beyond her tragic death and departing from historical and disability and legal studies that primarily focus on her killing and 1987 trial of the police officer accused of shooting her. Snapshots of Bumpurs’ less familiar life as an urban migrant reveal her socioeconomic struggles and vulnerabilities, her encounters with carceral institutions, her visions for herself and family, her pleasure politics, and her familial relationships. Moreover, Bumpurs’ less familiar narrative serves as an entry point into the understudied socioeconomic and private lives of late twentieth century working poor black women, and different way in which varying socioeconomic and political structures and institutions, those deeply rooted in race, gender, and class oppression, worked to deny African American women citizenship rights, protection, and human dignity.


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