

**William Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature*.
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From 1919 to 1972, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and its director J. Edgar Hoover policed and influenced the development of African American literary culture. This is the convincing conclusion of William J. Maxwell's new book, *F.B. Eyes*. Drawing on fifty one declassified FBI files on prominent African American authors and literary institutions, Maxwell proves that for over five decades Hoover's FBI "ghostreaders" monitored African American writing, influenced its composition, and performed acts of minstrelsy by creating a black counter literature of their own. The official justification for surveillance was that aesthetic defiance, not inequitable structures, caused outbreaks of social unrest. In truth, however, Hoover aimed to carve out a space for the state police in the twentieth century print public sphere, enabling intervention in the creation and reception of modern black literature.

F.B. Eyes begins by examining J. Edgar Hoover's upbringing in a segregated Washington D.C., where he attended a racially exclusive school and Presbyterian church. He later developed an obsession for classification systems while employed at the Library of Congress. By the time of Hoover's appointment as head of the Bureau's Radical Division in 1919, he was convinced of an alliance between black literacy and political radicalism. His anxious scrutiny of African Americans during the "Red Summer" helped to inspire a twenty-six page Bureau report on black writing, titled *Radicalism and Sedition among the Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications*.

Maxwell describes *Radicalism and Sedition* as "a seminal document of African Americanist criticism" (53). The report reviewed New Negro poetry and journals, paying particular attention to Claude McKay's *If We Must Die*. Although *Radicalism and Sedition* indicated an admiration for black writing, it was dominated by anti-New Negroism, drawing direct links between black aesthetic defiance and urban restiveness. McKay's critical response drew the ire of Bureau agents and the "notorious negro revolutionary" became the first African American author to be scrutinized and filed by Hoover's ghostreaders. In the following years and decades, the Bureau became a purveyor of "lit. cop federalism," a term coined by Maxwell to

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describe the FBI's pursuit of national literary influence through the supervision of African American writing.

The scrutiny of Afro-modernism declined between 1925 and 1939. Although Maxwell recognizes this was a result of restrictions placed on the Bureau after the excesses of the Red Scare, and Hoover's preoccupation with battling gangster America, the diminished interest in African American writing is not fully explained. Maxwell does, however, recognize the importance of Franklin D. Roosevelt in enabling Hoover's renewed attack on Afro-modernism. In 1936, Roosevelt gave the FBI director expanded powers to investigate subversive activities. Hoover's broad conception of what constituted "subversive" resulted in the addition of eleven African American authors to his World War II Custodial Detention list (later renamed the Security Index). The list pre-targeted writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright for arrest in the event of a national emergency.

During the Cold War, Hoover exploited legitimate concerns over espionage and sabotage in order to further restrict African American literature. Maxwell details how Hoover authorized serial encroachment on black literature, spying on authors as they wrote, and intercepting and screening manuscripts before they reached publishers. This campaign to achieve "Total Literary Awareness" also involved the FBI engaging in literary critiques and minstrelsy, as agents produced poems, letters, political platforms, and an entire newspaper in a black nationalist vernacular, in order to infiltrate and disrupt the Black Arts movement.

The FBI further distrusted the international mobility of black authors and texts. Maxwell examines how Hoover's international oversight of Afro-modernist writing interfered in the transnational flows of the Black Atlantic. The FBI ransacked passport applications, legal attachés spied on black authors during their travels, and stop notices were issued at U.S. ports to intimidate returning writers including Claude McKay, William Gardner Smith and James Baldwin. This international harassment, however, elicited an artistic response. Richard Wright penned "The FB Eye Blues" in 1949 - the inspiration for the title of Maxwell's book - and Richard Wright, Chester Himes and William Gardner Smith wrote "literary anti-files" which harnessed FBI close reading as a form of inspiration.

How then do we measure the literary effects of FBI surveillance? Although it inspired new literary subgenres, the policing of African American writers also produced writer's block, self-censorship, and the silencing of authors. A section critical of the Bureau was removed from the last draft of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, while James Baldwin attributed his shrunken activity to FBI wiretapping. Maxwell is therefore more than plausible when he speculates that intimidation led to the abandonment of potential books, plays, and articles, and that Afro-modernism's unpopularity stemmed, in part, from tales of suspicion borne by the FBI.

Although Maxwell is correct in placing Hoover and the Bureau at the centre of the state's policing of African American literature, the importance of other federal actors is not made sufficiently clear. Hoover's ability to police the Black Atlantic, for example, rested on his strong relationship with the chief of the Passport Division, Ruth Bielaski Shipley, who shared Hoover's conservative political views, but only receives a fleeting mention. In general, however, the book is prodigiously researched, leaving no doubt that Hoover's FBI directly influenced the creation and reception of African American writing. Maxwell has also done a great service to scholars, by making forty nine FBI files available online through the F.B. Eyes Digital Archive.¹ *F.B. Eyes* is vital reading for those interested in U.S. national security and twentieth century African American literary culture.

¹ The F.B. Eyes Digital Archive, containing FBI files on African American authors and literary institutions obtained through the U.S. Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), can be viewed at <http://digital.wustl.edu/fbeyes/>