

## Strategies of Silencing

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**Maxwell, William J. *F. B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015. xiv + 363. ISBN 9780691130200. Hb. \$29.95.**

The blurb of William J. Maxwell's massive study—and the first few pages preceding the table of contents—almost tell the whole story. Indeed, by the time the reader turns to page ten, he/she will have been acquainted with the basic outline of this unusually informative and eye-opening book's core conceptuality, methodological protocols, and even ideological assumptions. The very title of the volume, however, needs clarification. Of course, every student of American Studies will know who and what the charismatic and feared J. Edgar Hoover was. To those who happen not to know, Maxwell's monograph may be the right place to start. On a separate page just preceding the table of contents, there is a poem in three five-line stanzas which, in the book's logic, explains what has already been explained on the previous page, that is, the initially somewhat enigmatic title of Maxwell's book. The text on page 6, merely a single sentence, makes this announcement: "The title of this book is inspired by Richard Wright's poem "The FB Eye Blues." This announcement is followed, on the next page, by the poem itself. More than two hundred pages later, the reader is told that he/she is actually reading only a fragment of the poem on page 7. (Confer pages 216 and 217 on that, where, in a formal sense, the poem is described as "nine cut-up A-A-B blues stanzas," as well as simply just as "nine stanzas," respectively.) Which, however, does not necessarily diminish the potential impact of the following dramatic revelation:

That old FB eye  
Tied a bell to my bed stall  
Said old FB eye  
Tied a bell to my bed stall  
Each time I love my baby, government knows it all.

Woke up this morning  
FB eye under my bed  
Said I woke up this morning  
FB eye under my bed  
Told me all I dreamed last night, every word I said.

Everywhere I look, Lord  
I see FB eyes  
Said every place I look, Lord  
I find FB eyes  
I'm getting sick and tired of government spies.

(1949)

It is obvious that Wright's quoted lines are offered to serve as a kind of motto for Maxwell's investigative and somewhat satirical delineation of US espionage, as a diagnosis of the FBI's decades-long (1919-1972) surveillance program targeting virtually everyone who mattered in twentieth-century African American modernism and, to a lesser degree, postmodernism. Thus we are actually reading about a racialized campaign spearheaded by FBI director Hoover's G-Men and other government agencies, such as the CIA, which continually violated the US's vaunted right of the freedom of speech. Maxwell details how the FBI, by resorting, among other things, to well-known strategies of silencing and restrictive devices, such as phone tapping, simulation of a given author's identity, or "stop notices," threatened the international travels of black writers and prepared to jail dozens of them in times of national emergency.

The author of the book is capable of convincing the reader that the Bureau's paranoid style could prompt insightful criticism from Hoover's ghostreaders, and creative replies from their literary targets. While laying bare the abuses of FBI surveillance, Maxwell also clarifies the intriguing ways in which American Afro-modernists developed and incorporated a critical awareness of spying into much of the literature they produced. To understand the nature of this apparent contradiction, we must remember that the Bureau's mission has always been twofold: to enforce US federal laws and to protect national security. However, Maxwell observes, "security trumped law" (1). Secretive counterintelligence, he argues, "the effort to mislead enemies by mimicking or otherwise hijacking their trusted sources of information, overshadowed aboveboard crime fighting" (1). An observation that also should help understand the word "frame" in the title of the book we are talking about: influencing and rehearsing, as it were, the perception of message meaning. In view of the fact that Hoover's ghostreaders were involved in a series of racialized transactions when they were confronted with African American modernism, prepackaged coding and externally prompted

evaluation were the result. Which also happen to be two of the many “framing” operations.

Maxwell’s well-researched and witty book is, however, full of surprises. Although Hoover’s “ghostreaders”—“critics behind the Bureau Curtain”—may be described as both diabolical and paranoid, quite a few of them with readerly habits and scholarly ambitions were informed by the texts of African American writers. Indeed, some ostensible perpetrators of government-inspired “counterliterature” not only learned to mimic African American texts but some educated “ghostreaders”—such as, for instance, the conservative Southerner Robert Adger Bowen (also author of *Radicalism and Sedition Among the Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications* [1919]), a report which did much to cement Hoover’s anticommunism, and FBI assistant director William C. Sullivan, a former teacher of English and a voracious race-reader—also became the most assiduous recipients and critics of black writing. In poring over the output of the twentieth-century luminaries of African American expressiveness for decades, the FBI/CIA “ghostreaders” and creators of a sort of “counterliterature” on both sides of the racial divide, themselves added layers of weight to the African American literary canon.

The dust jacket also offers a brief synopsis of sample critical views, evaluations, and diagnostic predictions from the pens of a select group of five present-day experts of the African American literary culture: Henry Louis Gates, Jr., of Harvard University, Werner Sollors, also of Harvard, Mary Helen Washington, University of Maryland, College Park, Kenneth W. Warren, University of Chicago, and George Hutchinson, Cornell University. As will be seen, the views cited are—well beyond the customary pieties—unanimously supportive: “a fascinating/meticulously researched book,” “a bold/well-written/witty study,” “an irresistible narrative steeped in investigative research.” Then: “Anyone who spies William J. Maxwell’s latest book is sure to have her or his eyes pop.” Finally, a couple of longer formulations: “*F.B. Eyes* is an exciting and important read: part detective story, part intelligence history, and part revisionist theory of black modernism. . . .”

[T]he book makes a valuable contribution to African/American and black diasporan literary history and will be an important resource for some time to come. . . . [It] reveals, among other things, a *pas de deux* between the FBI and black authors that had a significant impact on twentieth-century African American writing. [The author] shows that the FBI’s constant surveillance

had an influence on black writers and intellectuals that has largely been ignored until now.

He also shows, I will add, that the FBI was thus ultimately both against and for African American literature, a pattern of cross purposes nourished by a unique symbiosis of mutually exclusive forces. In the final analysis, the FBI as an institution is, was, and has been tightly knit to African American literature. Which also means that a relatively large number of Hoover's G-Men came across, perhaps even perversely so, as pioneering critics of black expression.

One of the striking features of Maxwell's monograph is the hitherto unsuspected, lavish abundance of revelations pertaining to Afro modernism. As detailed in the introductory subchapters, this rich body of factual sources boils down to a not so easily accessible archive first examined here in full: 51 declassified but mostly unpublished FBI files on individual authors, ranging from 3 to 1,884 pages each. This comes to nearly 14,000 pages of newly released FBI files. Historically, "the young Hoover's Radical Division boasted of 60,000 files on assorted suspects, publications, and political parties months after its founding in 1919; two years later it claimed an index of 450,000 names and titles . . ." (7). The Bureau's files never aimed at double secrecy. Hoover's first book on Bureau history, *Persons in Hiding* (1938), advertised the FBI's file as stepping-stones to infamy, bearing the "names of the Nation's most desperate criminals who may be tomorrow's most publicized menaces to society" (7). It is easy to see how the FBI's hostility to black protest was energized both by fear and respect.

How did Maxwell come upon and build up his unique treasury of Bureau-originated documentation? "About eight years ago," he confides,

I began systematically directing U.S. Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to the national offices of the FBI, hoping to enhance a small collection of Bureau documents then confined to Afro-modern "greatest hits," namely, copies of the previously released FBI files of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Richard Wright (who was indeed right about those prying government eyes). . . . The breathtaking growth of the Bureau and other branches of U.S. intelligence in the years after 9/11 and the 2001 Patriot Act inspired me to expand my collection. (7)

Whether the torrent of new information will coalesce into a new kind of American literary history remains to be seen. Until this happens, we can count our quiet, seldom recognized losses: the losses that tend to be inherent in

oblique, vague, indirect, and dimly perceived ways. What I have in mind, to be more exact, is the long-term damage of being censored. Maxwell quotes “poet and journalist Natalie Robins, the author of [a] comprehensive survey of the ‘FBI’s war on freedom of expression,” who claims that censorship tends to be most damaging when it is “worming its way into literary fashion and literary self-consciousness through Bureau-fueled angst”:

How many writers were censored . . . by nervous editors, publishers, teachers, or administrators who may have received visits or questions from FBI agents, or simply had heard of the writer’s reputation as a “radical”? And how many, knowing that relatives, friends, and neighbors, acquaintances, colleagues were being interviewed by the FBI, engaged in some form of self-censorship? (218)

And, finally, let us not be naive about the kind of surveillance Maxwell’s voluminous disquisition describes: it is not specific to the USA. In today’s world, surveillance is practiced in a much larger number of countries than it is not. If it is not called the FBI, it is called something else.

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