In “The FB Eye Blues” (1949), Richard Wright, a renowned black writer and a frequent target of J. Edgar Hoover’s G-men, satirized the agency he deemed the most invasive, pervasive and powerful arm of the American surveillance state: “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.”

According to William Maxwell, an associate professor of English and African American studies at Washington University in St. Louis, African American writers were high on Hoover’s most-wanted list. In “F.B. Eyes,” Maxwell draws on the bureau’s files of dozens of them (obtained through the Freedom of Information Act), its publications and its covert activities to argue that the FBI became a purveyor of “lit.-cop federalism,”
crossing the line between state power and civil society to insert itself in as a shaping presence in the nation’s print public sphere, and producing a “counter-literature” designed to “police black writing with some of its imaginative medicine.”

Maxwell makes the provocative (and counterintuitive) claim that by maintaining an uneasy — and perverse — obsession with African American letters, the bureau became “the most dedicated and influential forgotten critic of African American literature.”

Maxwell demonstrates that the FBI paid considerable attention to the poems, plays, essays and novels of African American writers. Released in 1919, “Radicalism and Sedition Among the Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications” was the bureau’s “first major work of book-talk” and an early survey of the Harlem Renaissance.

Aspiring to total literary awareness, the FBI amassed one of the world’s largest libraries of radical writing. In 1943, the FBI’s Internal Security Division completed a 730-page Survey of Racial Conditions, compiled from 77,000 pages of raw data. During World War II, the bureau designated many black writers as candidates for “Custodial Detention.”

A year before the Broadway premier of Lorraine Hansberry’s “A Raisin in the Sun,” Maxwell reveals, Hoover ordered an investigation of the play’s debt to communism. And the now infamous FBI Cointelpro program of the 1960s singled out “Afro-American type bookstores” and compiled a “Black Nationalist Photographs Album.”

Impressive and ingenious, “F.B. Eyes” at times goes too far. Maxwell includes claims that J. Edgar Hoover had black ancestors, admits they are speculative, then writes that “Hoover had drilled like a New Negro and worried that he might have genetic reasons to become one.” Nor does Maxwell adequately explain the absence of new dossiers on African American writers between 1925 and 1939.

Most importantly, although Maxwell reads into the record the impressive academic credentials (and literary pretensions) of FBI officials Robert Adger Bowen (who published stories in black dialect and saw himself as a lesser Joel Chandler Harris) and William Sullivan, he does not make a compelling case that FBI “ghostreaders” were incisive critics of African American literature or influential “arbiters of Afro-modernism.”
Maxwell acknowledges that many black writers “were pursued as garden variety unionists or communists before their artistic ambitions assumed equal billing.” Not surprisingly, most of the information in their FBI files concerned their politics. Maxwell is impressed, with good reason, that the Philadelphia agent assigned to review “A Raisin in the Sun” found no comments about communism “as such” in the play. But does the agent’s description of Hansberry’s search for “a means of self-expression and self-identification” really “double as a confession of his own unfulfilled literary need”? Is his observation about the play’s budding black internationalism especially significant?

Although, of course, they did not know the contents of their FBI files, many African American writers understood that spies were tracking their words and deeds. This knowledge, Maxwell speculates, may well have produced self-censorship. However, he insists, it also generated “a deep and characteristic vein of African American literature” that gave voice to the implications of ghost reading “with growing bluntness and embellishments.” Albeit in different ways, Maxwell indicates, Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison (an episode in “Invisible Man,” which Ellison ultimately eliminated, used an FBI supervisor to examine the myth of black subservience) addressed the literary incursions of Hoover’s minions.

Profound concern about the national security state, to be sure, is not unique to African American writers. Nor did their texts about the FBI dominate “their reputations or royalty checks.” That said, Maxwell’s claim that African American writers raised alarms about the huge and mendacious federal intelligence bureaucracy “decades before the 'post-' met the modern, or epistemological uncertainty became a required sign of literary contemporaneity, or the CIA became the exemplary face of U.S. state security,” is intriguing. Especially in light of the evidence he has amassed about those prying, lying “FB eyes.”

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F.B. Eyes

How J. Edgar Hoover’s Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature

By William J. Maxwell