

F.B. Eyes

How

J. Edgar Hoover's

Ghostreaders

Framed

African American

Literature

WILLIAM J. MAXWELL

F.B. Eyes

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

WILLIAM J. MAXWELL

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
Princeton and Oxford

Copyright © 2015 by Princeton University Press

Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540

In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 6 Oxford Street, Woodstock,
Oxfordshire OX20 1TW

press.princeton.edu

Jacket art © James Wechsler, *Freedom of Information: Paul Robeson*, 3.124, 2006. Acrylic
and India ink on paper, 28" x 20." Jacket design by Pamela Schnitter.

All Rights Reserved

ISBN 978-0-691-13020-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014933936

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

This book has been composed in Minion Pro and Ideal Sans

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

F.B. Eyes

For Dad, the Third (1932–2011), and Bix, the Fifth (2004–)

The title of this book is inspired by Richard Wright's poem "The FB Eye Blues."

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, gover'ment 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 gover'ment spies.

—Richard Wright, “The FB Eye Blues” (1949)

Acknowledgments

This book was not ghostwritten. If it had been, it would not have taken so long. All the same, I have had many virtual coauthors since 2006. First among them is the FBI (the post-Hoover one, that is), which responded helpfully to scores of FOIA requests and less official questions. My thanks above all to Kirk Cromer, Dr. John F. Fox Jr., David Sobonya, and the staff of the Record/Information Dissemination Section. Other archives, academic and governmental, provided needed information and unexpected documents: the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University; the Clemson University Special Collections Library; the Library of Congress; the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University; the National Archives in both Washington, D.C., and College Park, Maryland; the Special Collections Department at the J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah; and the home team libraries of Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. My visits to some of these collections were supported by two timely institutional patrons, namely, the Center for the Humanities Faculty Fellowship program at Washington University and the University Scholars program at the University of Illinois.

The good people of Princeton University Press embraced this book from the very beginning, even before the FOIA requests piled high. In particular, I've benefited from the quick and reassuring work of Brigitta van Rheinberg, Ellen Foos, Juliana Fidler, Larissa Klein, Bob Bettendorf, Jenny Wolkowicki, and Claudia Acevedo, who deserves a fireproof raise. Two supervising editors, Hanne Winarsky and Alison MacKeen, improved my prose with inspiring blue pencils (both put the edit back in editing). My editor during the production process, Anne Savarese, graciously inherited both the tome and its author. Kathleen Kageff proved that copyediting can invigorate, while Thomas Broughton-Willett's index discovered what the book actually said. The manuscript readers chosen by the press—George Hutchinson and an anonymous reader at the start, and two anonymous readers at the close—encouraged and cautioned in good measure.

Friends, coworkers, and less indulgent audiences did some editing of their own. At the University of Illinois, numerous colleagues read early drafts or made them possible, including Nina Baym, Matti Bunzl, Martin Camargo, Jed Esty, Chris Freeburg, Jim Hansen, Matt Hart, Gordon Hutner, Trish Loughran,

Justine Murison, Carol Neely, Cary Nelson, Curtis Perry, Audrey Petty, Rick Powers, Cathy Prendergast, Siobhan Somerville, Mark Thompson, and David Wright. Stephanie Foote, Bob Parker, Michael Rothberg, Cristina Stanciu, and Joe Valente were (and remain) comrades-in-arms. At Washington University in St. Louis, Gerald Early and Rafia Zafar, my senior colleagues in African American literature and African American Studies, showed me the ropes while helping me finish old jobs. A new English department seamlessly welcomed my work, with special assistance from Miriam Bailin, Mary Jo Bang, Guinn Batten, Dillon Brown, Wayne Fields, Dan Grausam, Dillon Johnston, David Lawton, Joe Loewenstein, Marina MacKay, Bill McKelvy, Ed McPherson, Steven Meyer, Bob Milder, Anca Parvulescu, Carl Phillips, Vivian Pollak, Jessica Rosenfeld, Wolfram Schmidgen, and Vince Sherry. Gerald Early, Jian Leng, Barb Liebmann, Erin McGlothlin, and Elzbieta Sklodowska made my stint at the Center for the Humanities a productive one, while Iver Bernstein taught me the ways of American Culture Studies. Jean Allman, Adrienne Davis, Garrett Duncan, Andrea Friedman, Ron Himes, Ignacio Infante, Angela Miller, Shanti Parikh, Gaylyn Studlar, and Rebecca Wanzo helped me build bridges across campus, not too large a place to begin with. Paulo Loonin, Jaydee Lee, and Digital Librarian Shannon Davis skillfully built the book's website, "The F.B. Eyes Digital Archive," with crucial sponsorship from Joe Loewenstein, Douglas Knox, and the Humanities Digital Workshop. My graduate and undergraduate students at Wash. U.—as good as advertised—reenergized me when necessary. So did Kathy Schneider, administrator and pal extraordinaire. Campuses and conferences beyond St. Louis and Urbana-Champaign asked me to present ideas and then to change them. Cheers to the organizers of sessions for the American Studies Association, the Modern Language Association, the Modernist Studies Association, and the Richard Wright Centennial Conference in Paris. I owe even more to the colleagues who invited me to deliver papers at Ohio State, Ohio University, Penn State, Smith College, Southern Illinois University, Stanford University, the University of Maryland, and the University of North Carolina.

Then there are the colleagues here and there whom I talk to less formally, but whose effects on my work are most serious. Gary Holcomb, George Hutchinson, Jim Smethurst, Alan Wald, and Mary Helen Washington have been rocks, though they may disagree with the foundations of what follows. The list of other far-flung scholars who did the book good is long. It begins with Michael Bérubé, Sara Blair, Melba Boyd, Jeremy Braddock, Caleb Crane, Claire Culleton, Brian Dolinar, Eve Dunbar, Brent Edwards, Barbara Foley, Danny Franken, Scott Herring, Robert Hill, Marty Hipsky, Caren Irr, Lawrence Jackson, Gene

Jarrett, Benjy Kahan, Betsy Klimasmith, Aaron Lecklider, Karen Leick, Robert Levine, Eric Lott, John Lowe, Kathlene McDonald, Adam McKible, Jim Miller, Joycelyn Moody, Aldon Nielson, Evie Shockley, Amrit Singh, Michelle Stephens, Michael Thurston, Priscilla Wald, Maurice Wallace, Ken Warren, Mark Whalan, and John Young. Last and hardly least, my thanks to Professor Sonia Sanchez and to the late poet-teachers Amiri Baraka and Lorenzo Thomas, veterans of the history approached in this book who opened up poems or FBI files or more reliable lines of communication.

Members of my family, the scholars included, do not appear in the index but probably should. The Walkers and the Riegers always asked how the writing was going and accepted the answers; the Maxwell-Binders generously hosted twice-a-year mellowings in the capital of Texas. Meanwhile, at home in St. Louis, Elvis is still king, Bix makes beautiful music, and Jules remains the soul of grace and intelligence. Though it pales in comparison, the best of this book comes from them.

Brief sections of this book appeared in earlier forms in the following: as “Editorial Federalism” in *Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race Since 1850*, edited by George Hutchinson and John K. Young and published by the University of Michigan Press (copyright © 2013 by the University of Michigan); as “Total Literary Awareness” in *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War*, edited by Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam and published by the University of Iowa Press (copyright © 2012 by the University of Iowa Press; used with permission); as “Wright among the G-Men” in *Richard Wright: New Readings in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alice Mikal Craven and William E. Dow and published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2011 (reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan; available from: <http://www.palgrave-connect.com/pc/doifinder/10.1057/9780230340237>); as “Ghostreaders and Diaspora Writers” in *Modernism on File: Writers, Artists, and the FBI, 1920–1950*, edited by Claire A. Culleton and Karen Leick and published by Palgrave in 2008 (reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan; available from: <http://www.palgraveconnect.com/pc/doifinder/10.1057/9780230610392>); and as “F.B. Eyes” in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*, edited by Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst and published by the University of North Carolina Press (copyright © 2003 by the University of North Carolina Press; used by permission of the publisher; www.uncpress.unc.edu).

Richard Wright’s poem “The FB Eye Blues” from *The Richard Wright Reader*, published in 1978 by Harper and Row, is copyright © 1978 by Ellen Wright; reprinted in part here with permission of John Hawkins & Associates, Inc., and

the Estate of Richard Wright. Excerpt from “Hoover Trismegistus,” copyright © 1993 by Ai, from *The Collected Poems of Ai*, is used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Excerpts from “A Short Essay of Affirmation Explaining Why (With Apologies to the Federal Bureau of Investigation)” from *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni, 1968–1998*, by Nikki Giovanni, are copyright © 2003 by Nikki Giovanni; chronology and notes copyright © by Virginia C. Fowler; reprinted here by permission of HarperCollins Publishers. Dudley Randall’s poems “F.B.I. Memo” and “Informer” from *Roses and Revolutions: The Selected Writings of Dudley Randall* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009) are reprinted by permission of the Dudley Randall Literary Estate. Excerpts from Sonia Sanchez’s poem “A Modern Song of the F.B.I.” are reprinted by permission of the author.

Contents

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction 1

The FBI against and for African American Literature 1

The Files and the FOIA 7

Five Theses and the Way Forward 15

Part One/Thesis One: The Birth of the Bureau, Coupled with the Birth of J. Edgar Hoover, Ensured the FBI's Attention to African American Literature 25

The Bureau before Hoover 29

Hoover before the Bureau 35

Bureau of Letters: Lit.-Cop Federalism, the Hoover Raids, and the Harlem Renaissance 42

Part Two/Thesis Two: The FBI's Aggressive Filing and Long Study of African American Writers Was Tightly Bound to the Agency's Successful Evolution under Hoover 59

Flatfoot Montage: The Genre of the Counterliterary FBI File 63

The Counterliterary State and the Charismatic Bureaucracy:

Trimming the First Amendment, Fencing the Harlem Renaissance 68

Persons to Racial Conditions: Literary G-Men and FBI

Counterliterature from the New Deal to the Second World War 76

Afro-Loyalty and Custodial Detention: Files of World War II 85

Total Literary Awareness: Files of the Cold War 94

COINTELPRO Minstrelsy: Files of Black Power 107

Part Three/Thesis Three: The FBI Is Perhaps the Most Dedicated and Influential Forgotten Critic of African American Literature 127

Reading Like a CIA Agent 131

Reading Like an FBI Agent 141

Critics behind the Bureau Curtain: Meet Robert Adger Bowen
and William C. Sullivan 150

Ask Dr. Hoover: Model Citizen Criticism and the FBI's
Interpretive Oracle 165

**Part Four/Thesis Four: The FBI Helped to Define the
Twentieth-Century Black Atlantic, Both Blocking and Forcing
Its Flows 175**

The State in the Nation-State; the State of the Transnational Turn 180

The State of Black Transnationalism; the State in the Black Atlantic 186

Checking Diasporan ID: Hostile Translation and the Passport Office 195

State-Sponsored Transnationalism: The Stop Notice and the Travel
Bureau 205

Jazz Ambassadors versus Literary Escapees 212

**Part Five/Thesis Five: Consciousness of FBI Ghostreading Fills
a Deep and Characteristic Vein of African American Literature 215**

Reading Ghostreading in the Harlem Renaissance: New Negro
Journalists and Claude McKay 225

Invisible G-Men En Route to the Cold War: George Schuyler,
Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison 232

Mysteries and Antifiles of Black Paris: Richard Wright, William
Gardner Smith, and Chester Himes 243

Black Arts Antifiles and the "Hoover Poem": John A. Williams,
James Baldwin, Sam Greenlee, Melvin Van Peebles, Ishmael Reed,
Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez 259

Bureau Writing after Hoover: Dudley Randall, Ai, Audre Lorde,
Danzon Senna, and Gloria Naylor 269

**Appendix: FOIA Requests for FBI Files on African American Authors
Active from 1919 to 1972 277**

Notes 285

Works Cited 315

Index 343

Introduction

The FBI against and for African American Literature

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, the most storied name in U.S. law enforcement, capped its long struggle against African American protest with a homemade imitation of black prose. Late in the evening of November 20, 1964, FBI assistant director William C. Sullivan, a former English teacher who still dreamed of a professorship at a snug New England college, fed a sheet of unwatermarked paper into a worn-down, untraceable typewriter—both items were common tools of the trade within Domestic Intelligence, the Bureau division where Sullivan held sway.¹ Then as now, the Bureau's mission was twofold, to enforce U.S. federal laws and to protect U.S. national security. Inside Sullivan's Domestic Intelligence Division, however, security trumped law. Secretive counterintelligence, the effort to mislead enemies by mimicking or otherwise hijacking their trusted sources of information, overshadowed aboveboard crime fighting. By devoting his literary ambition to the covert art of counterintelligence, the Irish American house intellectual nicknamed "Crazy Billy" had climbed to the number four spot in the FBI, overseeing all national security investigations within the United States. And his clout exceeded his rank. As J. Edgar Hoover's preferred interpreter—and impersonator—of the civil rights movement, Sullivan had become the legendary FBI director's heir apparent as a racial policeman, poised to assume command of a grimy war on so-called black hate groups. Channeling Hoover's outrage at the news that Martin Luther King Jr. had won the Nobel Peace Prize, Sullivan burned midnight oil like a journalist on deadline. By the end of the night, he had transformed his carefully anonymous sheet into a history-making poison-pen letter:

King, look into your heart. You know you are a complete fraud and a great liability to all us Negroes. White people in this country have enough frauds of their own but I am sure they don't have one at this time that is any where [*sic*] near your equal. You are no clergyman and you know it. I repeat that you are a colossal fraud and an evil, vicious one at that. You could not believe in God and act as you do. Clearly you don't believe in any personal moral principles.

King, like all frauds your end is approaching. You could have been our greatest leader. . . . We will now have to depend on our older leaders like [Roy] Wilkins a man of character and thank God we have others like him. But you are done. Your “honorary” degrees, your Nobel Prize (what a grim farce) and other awards will not save you. King, I repeat you are done. . . .

The American public, the church organizations that have been helping—Protestants, Catholics and Jews will know you for what you are—an evil beast. So will others who have backed you. You are done.

King, there is only one thing left for you to do. You know what it is. You have just 34 days in which to do [it] (this exact number has been selected for a specific reason, it has definite practical significant [*sic*]). You are done. There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal fraudulent self is bared to the nation. (Sullivan to Martin Luther King Jr.)

What was the “one way out” urged in Sullivan’s letter? The question was anxiously debated by the inner circle of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) that received it in Atlanta. Ralph Abernathy, Joseph Lowery, Andrew Young, lawyer Chauncey Eskridge, and King himself gathered to interpret the text alongside King’s wife, Coretta Scott King. Uncomfortably enough, she had first opened a package containing both the letter and audio evidence of her husband’s extramarital affairs, a compilation tape recorded by FBI bugs planted in hotel rooms from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. Some in the SCLC huddle argued that Sullivan’s unsigned message was meant to blackmail King into declining the Nobel, an honor that Hoover improbably considered his own due. Others interpreted the thirty-four-day deadline as a schedule for suicide. Everyone agreed that the letter sought more than an ugly divorce, and that only the FBI possessed the technical know-how (and the shrewd spite) to join the tape to the threat. Hoover’s eavesdroppers “are out to break me,” a depressed, unsleeping King concluded in a conversation ironically preserved by FBI phone tapping (qtd. in Garrow, *Bearing* 374). “They are out to get me, harass me, break my spirit” (374), he lamented, his case of the FBI blues a signal that Sullivan’s blow had come near its mark.

Recent historians of the Bureau have suggested that King underestimated the scope of his tormentors’ ambition. In the emerging consensus of post-Hoover scholarship, race matters as a pivotal theme of FBI history, and Sullivan’s notorious act of epistolary counterintelligence reflects a lengthy and comprehensive campaign against African American activism, not just a jealous crusade to silence the most charismatic spokesman of the civil rights generation.² On

this view, the nadir of FBI history reached in Sullivan's letter took decades to prepare. The vendetta against King can be said to have begun no later than August 1919, when a twenty-something Hoover first joined the Bureau's new Radical Division amid the bloody race riots of the "Red Summer." Cementing the Bureau's early wariness of the self-defending and stridently modern "New Negro," the southern-born, fast-rising Hoover paved the way to King's hounding by triggering over forty years of investigations of African American dissent. A who's who of black protest was spied on, often infiltrated, and sometimes formally indicted by Hoover's FBI: among these individuals and organizations were the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Ida B. Wells-Barnett and her antilynching drives; William Monroe Trotter and the National Equal Rights League; Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA); the Christian pacifist Congress of Racial Equality (CORE); A. Philip Randolph and his World War II March on Washington movement; Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam; Malcolm X and his breakaway Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU); King's rebellious junior partners at the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); and black socialists and communists of every phase and faction. In short, the Hoover Bureau targeted practically the whole of the African American freedom movement starting with the first signs of the Harlem Renaissance.³ In the disillusioned judgment of Tyrone Powers, a retired black FBI agent, the Bureau's steady aim was "to weaken and unlink the unified chain" of black self-organization, frustrating any sustained "move forward by African Americans" (367). While denying that the FBI thwarted the lawful progress of African American groups, Hoover affirmed his lasting duty to probe their contact with communists and lesser subversives. Considered "from an intelligence standpoint" alone, the director informed Congress in 1964, the Bureau's concern with radical influence on black America was obvious and permanent (*J. Edgar Hoover Speaks* 54).

Given all this, the blunt malice of Sullivan's letter to King looks like an artless smoking gun, final proof of the Hoover Bureau's unswerving racism. Yet the complication of the letter's race-passing literary artifice, its involved design to police black assertion under cover of black expression, may be just as revealing. Such literary artifice, this book argues, can indeed clarify overlooked wrinkles in the FBI's influential history. When it comes to Sullivan's twisted letter, the wrinkles are several. The white Sullivan's unnamed black speaker, an embittered guardian of Christian morality who commands King to "look into [his] heart," writes on behalf of "all us Negroes," and from a location inside or sympathetic to the nonviolent civil rights movement, a place where Roy Wilkins of the NAACP is a trusted household name and the endorsement of the ecumenical

spectrum assisting the movement is reckoned a strategic good. This Negro persona lectures King from sorrow as much as anger—"You could have been our greatest leader"—at least when not slinging accusations of Satanic evil, hammering out an ominous drumbeat of *you are done, you are done*, or honing the chilling rhetoric of the precisely timed but indistinct threat (no nonviolence promised here). Sullivan's insider paints himself as a biblically based movement ally called to brutality only by knowledge of a preacher's hypocrisy. "Protestants, Catholics and Jews will know you for what you are—an evil beast," he forewarns, threatening King on the home field of the King James translation, where evil beasts imperil the righteous from Genesis 37:20 to Titus 1:12. By the time that King is offered "one way out," Sullivan's letter has blessed a number of the touchstones, religious and political, of the same black-led movement it plots to decapitate.⁴

What clues do the race-crossing literary gambits of Sullivan's letter hold about the larger life of Hoover's FBI—clues, that is, beyond the awful signs of the Bureau's capacity to invite the death of Martin Luther King? For one, the letter's claim to speak for "us Negroes" unveils the link between FBI counterintelligence and "American Africanism," Toni Morrison's name for American literature's formative reliance on ventriloquized blackness (6). Although Morrison, a Nobel Prize-winning novelist, gravitates to the elevated examples of Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Willa Cather, Sullivan's far less imaginative fiction is determined to prove her point that Africanist accents and characters loom whenever white American writers seek ways "of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability" (7). Among other things, Sullivan's letter, an FBI indictment preoccupied with sex, morality, and political control, suggests that the pseudo-Africanist "policing" of all these matters could be quite literal. By the same token, the letter does its best to illuminate the FBI's part in blackface minstrelsy's literary afterlife. Beginning as a wildly popular "nineteenth-century theatrical practice, principally of the urban North, in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit" (Lott, *Love and Theft* 3), blackface endured into the mid-twentieth century as a symbolic resource for white authors (usually male) on the make. The letter demonstrates that Norman Mailer, William Styron, and other hiply liberal, Democratic Party-linked novelists of the 1950s and 1960s were not the only professional dissimulators then attracted to minstrelsy's "second skin" (Szalay, *Hip Figures* 4). As later pages of this book will show, the nominally Democratic Sullivan helped to transform the postwar literature of FBI counterintelligence into a liberal-bashing outpost of burnt cork.

But there is something even stranger, and more significant, than these keys to Bureau minstrelsy at work in Sullivan's experiment in black authorship. His