

Black authors, blacklisted

The extent of J. Edgar Hoover's spying on black writers may surprise you, explains the author of 'F.B. Eyes'

BY ROBIN LINDLEY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Writer William J. Maxwell discovered that over the course of half a century, the FBI targeted the works and lives of more than 50 black writers.

It's no secret that under director J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI intensely monitored and disrupted African-American civil rights campaigns and militant groups in the 1950s and 1960s. The bureau's hounding of Martin Luther King Jr. is legendary, with its tracking of his movements, wiretaps of his phones and electronic surveillance of his rooms, as well as an active program to discredit and undermine him and his associates.

What may surprise and infuriate many is the extent of FBI surveillance of African-American literary figures, both acclaimed and obscure, during the course of Hoover's entire career with the agency, from 1919 to his death in 1972. During this time, bureau "ghostreaders" closely examined all forms of black American literary output, ostensibly to anticipate political unrest.

Maxwell details the intricate and lurid story of the FBI spying on black American authors in his book "F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature."

Maxwell reviewed and analyzed almost 14,000 pages of FBI documents on 51 writers, including Harlem Renaissance pioneer Claude McKay; poet Langston Hughes; the iconic novelists Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin; and playwright Lorraine Hansberry. He also explored how FBI ghostreaders came to influence the creation and reception of African-American literature.

Maxwell has created a website (bit.ly/fbiblackwriters) that contains the thousands of pages he reviewed, called the "F.B. Eyes Digital Archive: FBI Files on African American Authors and Literary Institutions Obtained through the U.S. Freedom of Information Act."

Maxwell, professor of English and African-American studies at Washington University in St. Louis, is also the author of "New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars" and the editor of Claude McKay's "Complete Poems."

Maxwell discussed his book and his research by telephone from his office in St. Louis.

Robin Lindley: How did you come to undertake this sweeping study of FBI surveillance of African-American writers?



J. Edgar Hoover led the FBI for nearly 50 years and worked for eight different presidents.

William J. Maxwell: It began with the acquisition of a handful of files for my first book, "New Negro, Old Left," on African-American writers and communism in the 1920s and '30s.

The file that most caught my interest was on poet Claude McKay. He was one of the founding figures of the Harlem Renaissance and arguably its first poet. He wrote militant yet formally pristine sonnets, the most famous of which is "If We Must Die," a call to black resistance in the face of race rioting in 1919.

What startled me about the file was its early date. The FBI was compiling information on a leading African-American poet as early as 1921. And the file exposed accurate information about McKay that many critics and historians have been reluctant to look at. Much of the file concerns McKay's trip to the Soviet Union for a meeting of the Comintern (Communist International, a group that advocated for the spread of communism). And the file exposed the seriousness of McKay's interest in communism and his eager participation in the world communist movement — something that most academic critics had done their best to forget.

So the first FBI file I consulted on an African-American author revealed surprising things not only about the FBI interest in African-American writers but also about that writer himself. It was the years after 9/11 and the USA Patriot Act, however, with the unignorable return of state surveillance to everyday American life that made me want

to collect the entire set of FBI files.

R.L.: J. Edgar Hoover started at the FBI in 1919, about the time Claude McKay became the first major African-American writer targeted for surveillance. Was this program of surveillance Hoover's idea?

W.J.M.: The program probably would have existed without him. Early on, there was not a thrust directed against black writers per se. McKay and his work was tied to the race riots of the so-called Red Summer of 1919. As the head of the FBI's new Radical Division, the 20-something Hoover was asked to investigate these riots.

It was the intersection of African-American writing with postwar black radicalism, then, that gets the FBI interested in reading black writers — not only McKay, but also like-minded poets including Andy Razaf (later the lyricist of the songs "Ain't Misbehavin'" and "Black and Blue"), Archibald Grimké and the better-remembered Langston Hughes.

Hoover, too, had a general interest in African-American life based on proximity. He grew up in Washington, D.C., at the turn of the 20th century, when the city was actively segregating itself. Hoover was a young man who watched segregation in housing, employment and social life being built all around him. Later, this experience was likely intensified for him by rumors that his own family was not segregated enough, from the perspective of white racism. He probably heard that his family tree contained African-American relatives.

Hoover's famous distaste for African Americans may have stemmed in part from a sense of unwanted kinship.

R.L.: I hadn't heard these rumors of Hoover's mixed-race background.

W.J.M.: In some versions, these rumors are ugly and scurrilous, as if to be black is to be tainted in some way. But there is at least one reputable genealogist, George Ott of Salt Lake City — thanks to the Mormons, a world capital of genealogy — who established that a branch of Hoover's family held slaves in Pike County, Miss. There were very few racially pure people on mid-19th-century American plantations, of course.

R.L.: So Hoover's obsession with black writers and other African Americans may be explained in part by his possibly being mixed race?

W.J.M.: Yes, possibly. At least that's the core of one rumor that troubled him. Better known is the accurate rumor that his emotional life was centered on a man, Clyde Tolson, who was second in command at the bureau. They dined daily and vacationed together for decades and effectively lived like husband and husband, with Tolson receiving the widow's seat at Hoover's funeral. I don't know — no one does, I don't

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think — what the sexual facet of that relationship was, but it was accompanied by intense gossip about Hoover's homosexuality. It was also accompanied by the FBI's public anti-gay strikes, which came to a head during the early Cold War. There thus may be a pattern of intimacy and distaste in the realm of sex as well as in the realm of race for Hoover.

R.L.: How closely in your time period, 1919 through 1972, was Hoover monitoring the program on black writers?

W.J.M.: One point I make in the book is that the FBI was deeply interested in African-American writing at a time when most white cultural institutions didn't even know there was a renaissance in Harlem.

Hoover was at least bureaucratically on top of the FBI's scrutinizing of black writing. He got all the paperwork. But at various moments, as in the 1960s when he discovered James Baldwin's work, he was personally and intensely interested.

He worried about Baldwin's "perversion" of American literature and scribbled this in his distinctive blue ink on one FBI document.

R.L.: Readers may also be surprised by the use of informants in targeting black writers and by publishing-industry folks who gave the FBI advance copies of the works of these writers before they were public.

W.J.M.: Yes. By the 1950s, the glory years of the Cold War, there were informants at least sympathetic to the FBI inside many major New York publishers. That didn't mean there was outright censorship of a Soviet kind, but the FBI could slow down or punish the publication of some of the first critical work on FBI history.

R.L.: And the FBI made life difficult, too, for many African-American writers. They prevented people from getting federal jobs and even interfered with travel.

W.J.M.: Yes. One of the ironic things I discuss in the book is that the FBI was alert to the international range and importance of African-American writing earlier than most academics were. The FBI helped to seize W.E.B. Du Bois' passport, (and) they were involved in the withdrawal of the passport

of Paul Robeson, the singer, actor and globetrotting black radical. From the 1920s on, then, the FBI was quite involved in the monitoring of African-American (writers') travel abroad.

R.L.: And several of these writers were aware of the FBI surveillance, and they responded directly to the FBI monitoring?

W.J.M.: Yes, as early as the 1920s, Du Bois was publicly saying, "It's nice the Justice Department is finally paying attention to us. Too bad it's not thinking about lynching."

R.L.: The FBI and Hoover had a special interest in the complex writer James Baldwin?

W.J.M.: He indeed was a complex thinker and, in the present, an increasingly important one for the young generation of black activists. He's very often quoted in Black Lives Matter arguments, and Ta-Nehisi Coates (author of the National Book Award winner "Between the World and Me") has of course been knighted as Baldwin's official successor by Toni Morrison.

Baldwin is thus very present now, and I think that has to do with his combined eloquence and pessimism about American race relations, and his ability to see American race relations through an international lens. Baldwin was also a bravely open gay man writing about the sexual nexus within American racism, and this strikes a chord with DeRay McKesson (a 30-year-old black activist visible today on social media) and other leaders of the young generation of activists. As his file shows, Baldwin is also their close predecessor in being tracked by national intelligence agencies.

R.L.: Did Baldwin's sexuality affect Hoover's obsession with his work?

W.J.M.: Absolutely. As I mentioned earlier, one of the most forthright Hoover additions to the James Baldwin file is Hoover's scribbling on the side of a document: "Isn't he a well-known pervert?" I'm not the first to notice that this question is somewhat ironic given Hoover's emotional life. Hoover thought he should be discreet about his affections, and Baldwin, an incessant articulator of experience, was not discreet in any way, which made for a lot of suffering in his own day.

The Baldwin file seems to be the longest single file that the FBI compiled on a black writer, and that reflects not only its interest in his sexual life but also the fact that Baldwin was directly and sometimes heroically involved in the civil rights struggle. He, in fact, maintained a sympathetic but distant relationship to the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers, who counted on him for his public advocacy but also didn't embrace the style of masculinity he presented. It was a complicated relationship. But the FBI saw it as all one and the same, and (it) imagined Baldwin as the most dangerous nationalist writer of that period.

R.L.: Were any of these authors under the same intense FBI scrutiny as Dr. King, with his rooms bugged and phones tapped?

W.J.M.: Yes, in a few cases in the '60s and '70s. Baldwin's phone was definitely tapped, and he believed he was tapped, which is just as important if you're interested in the history of his art. I don't know if Richard Wright ever thought his phone was tapped, but he understood that he was being read constantly.

There were agents who did street-level surveillance of Lorraine Hansberry. They recorded when she had her haircuts. Once in her file they note that she had shifted to an "Italian-cut" style. Now that's close observation.

But the FBI's interference with King was finally above and beyond. I didn't find evidence of attempts to blackmail literary people with their indiscretions, as the FBI did with King and some other political figures. The word in Washington held that Hoover had files on everyone in the Capitol, on anyone in the city's public life — pretty much any extramarital affair or so-called deviant form of sexuality would be recorded there.

R.L.: Is there anything you'd like to add?

W.J.M.: I think there is probably more out there. The book is a first stab. Readers can go to the files available at the "F.B. Eyes Archive" and do their own research there. One thing I'd like to suggest to people interested in history, and literary history in particular, is to write away for the FBI file on the person you are interested in. These files are absorbing and surprisingly revealing documents even, or especially, when they are inaccurate.

There's a funny way in which the FBI — a great keeper of secrets — is also the researcher's best friend. It's surprising how helpful these files can be. For years, it was difficult to get these files released without large redactions, but it's less hard now. I don't think the FBI is particularly worried about its Cold War history any longer, and I don't believe it's consciously censoring these files beyond legally permitted deletions for security and privacy, etc.

R.L.: So the FBI files were quite accessible?

W.J.M.: Yes. Some files are excerpted or partially "blackened out" for reasons of national security or for keeping the names of private citizens private. But it's easier to extract many files than you might think. I had good relations with the FBI records department when I asked for documents, and I think that historians should give the bureau the chance to do the right thing.

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