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. 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 anywhere 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 sling ing 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
impulse to both join and beat the field of African American letters when baiting King highlights the curious fact that FBI harassment of black political leadership was habitually tied to an excited fear of black writing. As Sullivan, a voracious race-reader, knew inside and out, Hoover’s hard-line police and intelligence service also qualified as an informed consumer of African American prose, poetry, and theater. Poring over novels, stories, essays, poems, and plays as well as political commentary and intercepted correspondence, the FBI acted as a kind of half-buried readers’ bureau with aboveground effects on the making of black art. The “G” in the Bureau’s iconic “G-Man,” this is to say, should have stood not just for “government,” but also for what I call “ghostreading,” a duplicitous interpretive enterprise that, like ghostwriting, might be grasped through its effects if not always caught in the act. Unlike nearly every other institution of U.S. literary study, prone to showing interest only during well-promoted black renaissances, America’s ghostreading national constabulary rarely took its eyes off the latest in African American writing between 1919 and 1972. And during this more-than-fifty-year period, the whole of its Hoover era, the Bureau never dismissed this writing as an impractical vogue relevant only to blacks (or to bleeding-heart white “Negrotarians,” for that matter). Count the FBI, then, among the most dedicated foes of the diverse African American literary intellectuals, here loosely labeled “Afro-modernists,” who worked to modernize racial representation beginning with the Harlem Renaissance. But count it, too, among the most faithful readers ever convinced by the focal thesis of these intellectuals, the still-enticing proposition “that black cultural production is necessarily central to black politics” (Warren, So Black 28). For Sullivan and the rest of the Bureau’s cloak-and-dagger ghostreaders, black politics and black literary production in particular were powerful bedfellows whom only the FBI could separate.

Even now, when we know perhaps too much about the FBI’s many fingerprints on twentieth-century American media, these dramatic claims for its literary curiosity may appear inflated. Where, exactly, is the evidence of an advanced Afro-modernist reading program among FBI agents, an apparently unsophisticated group typecast by CIA rivals as provincial and philistine “Fordham Bronx Irish”? Why has the pattern of Bureau spying on black writing, as opposed to its spying on some black writers, not been seen before? Part of the evidence for the Bureau’s concerted interest in African American letters is public and reasonably obvious—though previously uncompiled or misunderstood. Typified by Richard Wright’s poem “The FB Eye Blues” (1949), the source of this book’s title and epigraph, the work of Afro-modernist authors provided vivid testimony of their place on FBI reading lists. From the earliest journalism of the Harlem Renaissance to the performative verse of the Black
Arts movement, these authors wrote openly about the Bureau and its intimate scrutiny. James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois led the first wave of black Bureau-writers, followed by such resonant voices as Langston Hughes, Chester Himes, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Ishmael Reed, and even the deradicalizing Ralph Ellison (late drafts of the single most canonical African American novel make the Invisible Man a G-Man too). As I suggest at greater length in the last part of this book, the worst of ghostreading was distinct from muzzling state censorship, and the peculiar modernity of Afro-modernist literature was in fact partly articulated in response to Bureau eyeballing. In The Man Who Cried I Am (1967), an exemplary historical novel (and chaotic antisurveillance romance) of the black 1960s, John A. Williams proposed that “the secret to converting their change to your change was letting them know that you knew” (386; emphasis in original). Many other Afro-modernists embraced Williams’s open secret and strived to convert the burden of FBI novel-gazing into grounds for artistic and social innovation, betting on the positive change in letting the Bureau know that, like King, its black writer-targets knew of their place in the crosshairs. “The FB Eye Blues,” a poem composed in classic blues stanzas, embodies this bet in miniature, moaning back at a Bureau familiar enough to repeat to Wright’s confessional speaker “all [he] dreamed last night, every word [he] said” (l. 10). Laying bare the FBI’s access to a writer’s bed, dreams, and words, Wright wagers, could jumpstart novel fusions of the black vernacular and the modern Esperanto of national security.

Paradoxically, Wright and like-minded Afro-modernists here collaborated with Hoover’s publicity-hungry FBI in at least one respect: the writers conspired with the spies to ensure that the secret of Bureau ghostreading would not fossilize into wholly privileged information, or what the vernacular of espionage dubs a “double secret” or secret secret, a confidence not widely known to exist. The FBI tipped its hand about its snooping on black writing, circulating beyond government channels virtual book reports and critical essays starting with the emphatic Radicalism and Sedition among the Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications (1919). Bureau ghostreaders hoped that using such disclosures to keep the secret of Bureau awareness a widely suspected “single secret” would deter potential literary outlaws and reeducate their audiences. The Afro-modernists tipped their hand in turn by circulating imaginative reactions to these Hooverite stabs at literary criticism. Their hope was that corroborating suspicions of federal spying would not quiet the outspoken but rather underscore black writing’s heightened gravity. Without declaring a decisive victor in the clash between spy-critics and black Bureau-writers, this book thus relies on dueling public documents of African American literature and FBI literary commentary to help establish their surprising depth of contact.
The Files and the FOIA

More important evidence for the arguments of F.B. Eyes lies in a less approachable archive first examined here in full: fifty-one declassified but mostly unpublished FBI files on individual authors, ranging from 3 to 1,884 pages each, that together capture the Bureau's internal deliberations on half a century of African American literary talent. In bulk, of course, these and other specimens of the Bureau's files never aimed at double secrecy. 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 (U.S., Dept. of Justice, Annual, 1921 129). Hoover's first book from a commercial publisher, the noirish Bureau history Persons in Hiding (1938), advertised the FBI's files as stepping-stones to infamy bearing the “names of the Nation's most desperate criminals who may be to-morrow's most publicized menaces to society” (49). By the early 1970s, popular tours of FBI headquarters marched awestruck visitors (I was one) past rows of filing cabinets reminding guests of the Bureau's tens of millions of records on U.S. citizens. Like the Soviet secret police dossiers analyzed by Cristina Vatulescu, the FBI's metastasizing files thus served as “a highly visible spectacle of secrecy” (2). Hoover's closest political and journalistic allies, the beneficiaries of juicy, career-building leaks, were invited to view his file-hoard from an appreciative distance. Leaks excluded, the files' abundance was flaunted as a crime-control measure before a less dependent national audience, a slice of whom, we will see, joined novelist John A. Williams in gesturing back with literary “antifiles” of their own. What Williams and the rest of the Hoover-era public could not know, though, were the specifics behind the spectacle of omniscience, the full, non-cherry-picked contents of particular FBI files. These contents, relatively accessible since Hoover's death, are precisely what this book reads to fill out its case for the FBI as an institution tightly knit to African American literature.

Yet precisely which fifty-one files does F.B. Eyes rely on, and from where did they come? About eight years ago, 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), and Andy Razaf, the lyricist of the Invisible Man's biting theme song, “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue.” 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. Altering our sense of antistatism and
other hallmarks of the American past, this striking reemergence and expansion of federal surveillance power also transformed our sense of the intellectual present. To my mind, the sudden "return of the state" exposed gaps in reigning academic habits of thinking, feeling, and historicizing African American culture transnationally, beyond the borders of the U.S. nation-state. Acquiring a wide range of FBI files on twentieth-century African American writers, I imagined, would equip me to explore how earlier generations of black internationalists had wrestled with the hostile state institutions usually discounted in then-cutting-edge transnational theories. Specific revelations in the files I had already seen likewise argued for more. Letters, clippings, and photographs in the Claude McKay file I consulted for my edition of the Complete Poems (2004) had offered unique insight into his decade of globetrotting away from Harlem's renaissance, a bohemian adventure in fact prescribed by a transatlantic Bureau manhunt.8 Alarming international surveillance and oddball literary-critical acumen were documented in the files on Baldwin, Ellison, and Wright as well, suggesting the value of a sweep of the genre beyond this all-male circle.

In the fall of 2006, I thus set out to learn just how many authors guilty of being black and sometimes blue had attracted files at Hoover's FBI.9 To generate a field of telling names for FOIA requests, I turned to the second edition of The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (2004, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay), then the gold standard of its kind, and created a list of every deceased writer grouped there with black literary movements between 1919 and 1972, the whole of Hoover's rule at the Bureau. (I confined my list to the dead because, for very good reasons, the FBI does not entertain third-party FOIA requests on living persons. At the time of this writing in 2013, this list had grown to forty-eight names.) I then added a nonrandom sample of fifty-eight names of my own, concentrating not merely on the likeliest suspects (e.g., headlining literary communists such as Frank Marshall Davis, President Barack Obama's Hawaiian mentor in blackness), but also on departed but up-and-coming subjects of revisionist literary history (Marita Bonner, Henry Dumas, George Wylie Henderson, Eric Walrond, etc.). With the help of an overqualified research assistant, Cristina Stanciu, I assembled the biographies and obituaries recommended by the FBI to assist its internal research, and I surface-mailed packet after packet of FOIA petitions to the Bureau's Record/Information Dissemination Section currently located in Winchester, Virginia, occasionally short-circuiting the official process thanks to generous scholars who had gotten there first.10

The results of my file-quest as of 2013 are interpreted throughout this book, and itemized, writer-by-writer, in its appendix. Suffice it to say here, however, that the Bureau admits to having “filed” just less than half of the names on my
unscientific but indicative list of noteworthy Afro-modernists. Twenty-three of the forty-eight historically relevant authors in the *Norton Anthology*—or roughly 48 percent—were first canonized by the FBI. Twenty-eight more from my supplementary list of fifty-eight—or another 48 percent—were also certified by Bureau paperwork, raising the total to fifty-one “filees” out of 106 inquiries, and an overall filing rate of 48 percent. Twelve out of the fifty-one files, or 23 percent, are devoted to women, including the poets Gwendolyn Bennett and Georgia Douglas Johnson and the playwrights Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry. In part 2, I present the reasons why I believe the almost identical percentages of the filed from the *Norton Anthology* and from my own supplementary list are meaningfully high—disproportionately high, moreover, in comparison to what FOIA pioneers Herbert Mitgang, Natalie Robins, and Claire Culleton have shown us of the FBI’s file-stalking of white American writers. In several parts of *F.B. Eyes*, I illustrate that the surveillance of a dozen black literary women did not prevent either their male peers or Hoover’s virtually all-male school of ghostreaders from projecting a conclusive showdown between G-Men and black men. Whatever the full significance of these various numbers and percentages (it requires all of the pages that follow to approach it), it is certain that the FBI produced reams of formal ghostreading in response to its fifty-one filees, women included, with Hansberry, for instance, prompting a file of 1,020 pages: far longer, then, than any book ever published on *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and the rest of Hansberry’s prematurely silenced work, an object of special Bureau obsession. The collected files of the entire set of authors comprise 13,892 pages, or the rough equivalent of forty-six 300-page PhD theses. If this seems an artificial comparison or a low blow—and, from some angles, it is both—it should be noted that the average length of the forty-five files with page numbers we can count is a healthy 309 pages. FBI ghostreaders genuinely rivaled the productivity of their academic counterparts.

Academic historians of the FBI complain about a more recent, less efficient aspect of the Bureau’s institutional culture: its sometimes agonizingly (some have said criminally) slow and uncooperative response to FOIA requests, first allowed for Bureau records in 1974. Assuming the role of the scholar-detective, one of the few marketable guises left to academic authors seeking a general audience, professors frustrated by FOIA hurdles commonly flavor their narratives of FBI spies with anecdotes of their own tenacious sleuthing. In my case, the scholar-detective costume has proved tempting, but ultimately unwearable. This is not to say that the Bureau’s replies to my FOIA requests were uniformly quick, clarifying, or heartening to historical preservationists. At least twenty-four of the fifty-one files I stockpiled had never been requested before, and some of these previously unearthed documents took Bureau processors nearly
two years to scour, line by line, for legally permitted deletions in the name of privacy, law enforcement, or national security.\textsuperscript{13} (In addition to formalistic close reading and statistical distant reading, both applied to Bureau documents in this book, FBI files may therefore demand inconveniently delayed reading.) A cluster of files required two- or three-digit payments to cover copying costs. Others, such as the probable files on \textit{Black Aesthetic} editor Addison Gayle Jr. and Third World Press founder Carolyn Rodgers, seem to have been lost as the Bureau evaluates inactive records for possible transfer to the National Archives. More than one irreplaceable file—those on \textit{Jubilee} author Margaret Walker and \textit{Dessa Rose} author Sherley Anne Williams, for example—has been pronounced historically unworthy and knowingly destroyed under the auspices of an ongoing “Records Retention Plan and Disposition Schedule,” a court-ordered procedure for weighing the right to life of aging FBI documents. (More later on this misnamed plan, which could use the services of a knowledgeable African Americanist.)\textsuperscript{14}

Much of the worst that can befall a FOIA request to the Bureau is compressed in the tale of the disappeared file of Alain Locke, the editor of the crucial \textit{New Negro} anthology of 1925 and the headmaster of the civil-rights-through-copyright school within the Harlem Renaissance. My initial query about a potential Locke file resulted in the disturbing report that “[r]ecords which may be responsive” to my request “were destroyed on September 3, 2004” (Hardy, 19 Oct. 2006). “Since this material could not be reviewed,” the head of the FBI’s Record Section spelled out, thickening the mystery, “it is not known if it actually pertains to your subject” (Hardy, 19 Oct. 2006). I then appealed what seemed a late-model catch-22 to the Justice Department’s Office of Information and Privacy, whose associate director conveyed the better news that “the FBI has informed a member of [her] staff that this response was in error. In fact, records responsive to [my] request were transferred to the National Archives and Records [Administration] (NARA)” (McLeod). I thus “might wish to make a new request directly to NARA,” she suggested (McLeod). Taking her lead, I did wish it and learned from a frankly irritated librarian at NARA that “[w]hile it is certainly possible that the FBI transferred records concerning Mr. Locke to NARA in [sic] September 3, 2004, we cannot search for these records without more information from the FBI. While the FBI has transferred thousands of feet of records to NARA over the past several years, they retain custody of their central name index. As all FBI records are filed by case file number, and not by name, we would need the numbers of case files pertaining to Mr. Locke” (Mathis). Falling short of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and Chester Himes’s Coffin Ed Johnson, I then let the trail grow cold. FOIA law combined with enlightening interdepartmental frictions may keep U.S. federal agencies somewhat forthright
by international standards, but the withholding of the FBI's central name index is a maneuver from the shadowy Eurozone where Franz Kafka meets George Orwell. Under cover of a buck-passing tautology, FBI files of serious historical value have been buried in the National Archives (the self-described “nation's record keeper”) as deeply as they were in Hoover's famed but closed cabinets (“What Is?”).

Thankfully, however, the fate of the Locke file, transferred from the Bureau to the bureaucratic void, was atypical in my experience: forty-six of the fifty-one files I hunted down were untouched by the paradoxes of the Records Retention Plan. Locating usable files with the Bureau's assistance, it turned out, was easier than sorting through the thousands of pages of them sent to me in sturdy government cardboard. In the end, the majority of my file requests were answered swiftly; my contacts with the staff of the FBI Record Section were courteous under both the George W. Bush and the Obama administrations; and most released files were comparatively free from massive national security excisions, the bane of three generations of FOIA researchers. (As the technology of file censorship changes with the times, unruly cross-outs in black pen have become neat rectangles of electronic “white-out” applied to scanned documents [see figures 0.1 and 0.2].)

Pragmatically speaking, a bit too much, rather than too little, finally slipped through the FBI's edits, making the scholar-as-detective persona less fitting than the role of scholarly batch processor. The sheer volume of the response to my FOIA requests indeed suggests that today is an unprecedentedly good time to study the Hoover Bureau's devotion to Afro-modernist writing. Ironically, the prolonged explosion of counterterrorist secrecy seems to be opening some of the remaining secrets of Hoover's cultural Cold War. Twentieth-century confidences are no longer protected with uniform ferocity as old informers pass away, new enemies are engaged covertly and officially, and another protracted, indefinite, and increasingly customary war—the Global War on Terror, whatever its latest official name—has become the Bureau's highest priority. On the FBI's Internet home page, “terrorism” is now the primary answer to the question of “What We Investigate,” and an international rogues gallery of “Most Wanted Terrorists” threatens to eclipse the latest edition of the “Ten Most Wanted” list, a Hoover trademark dating from 1950 (FBI.gov). If the openly shredded Margaret Walker and Sherley Anne Williams files could talk, they would tell us that growing indifference to pre-9/11 swaths of the Bureau's past may pose a greater peril than stubborn concealment. The FBI's instinctive secrecy has not faded away but has moved on.

While the contents of my fifty-one files were rarely anticlimactic, the means of acquiring them thus could be. The same Cristina Vatulescu quoted above,
an ingenious critic of police aesthetics on the communist side of the Cold War, recounts a four-year ordeal en route to her first look at Soviet-era intelligence files from her native Romania. The moment when she sat at a desk at the headquarters of the former Securitate and finally laid eyes on “the files of some of [her] favorite Romanian writers,” she confesses, was “one of the most exhilarating” of her life (11). Inspecting the files of Hoover’s intelligence service no longer requires this sort of charged, belly-of-the-beast meeting with singular
texts. Symptomatically, “The Vault,” the contemporary FBI’s busiest archive, is located nowhere and everywhere and forever open to the public, an online library of 6,700 digitized documents instantly accessible “in the comfort of your home or office” (Vault.fbi.gov). Hoping for a less comfortable encounter after years of mail-order file reading, I thus wrote to David Sobonya, the FBI’s public information officer for FOIA requests, and arranged an in-person visit to the

FIGURE 0.2: The look of FOIA censorship in the new millennium: Neat patches of electronic “white-out” applied to scanned documents, here taken from the newly released FBI file of poet-critic Sterling Brown. (Courtesy of the FBI)
J. Edgar Hoover Building, the Bureau’s cast concrete Washington headquarters dedicated in 1975. Armed only with a legal pad, I arrived one summer morning in 2012 for an appointment with the F.B. eye on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Gaining access to the Bureau’s “Seat of Government,” now a high-rise Brutalist fortress, had become more difficult since my childhood tour of the FBI’s former home in the Justice Department. In the wake of 9/11, group sightseeing at the Hoover Building is irregular, at best, and individual callers must penetrate multiple credentials checks, magnetic weapons detectors, and full-body scanners looking like airlocks from a science fiction film. Once through tightened security, I was welcomed by the FBI’s resident historian, Dr. John F. Fox Jr., who kindly indulged my interest in seeing the building’s nonvirtual Reading Room, an opposite number of Vatulescu’s perch at the Securitate. No desks overflowed with original files and exhilarated scholars; that day, no one at all occupied the computer stations and swivel chairs that made the Reading Room resemble a modest commercial office. Things were more stimulating inside Fox’s personal office, where a portrait of abolitionist Frederick Douglass hung on one wall (Fox’s PhD was earned in American history), and bookcases were stuffed with scholarship on his employer (the seemingly unnecessary title Unlocking the Files of the FBI occupied one space). We spoke freely about FBI historiography, which Fox is professionally committed to fostering and correcting, and agreed on the value of David Garrow’s scrupulous book on the Bureau and Martin Luther King Jr. Kirk Cromer, an experienced FOIA processor, joined us to talk about the development of the Record/Information Dissemination Section. Cromer, an African American proud of his work with historians of the civil rights movement, estimated that in the mid-1970s blacks composed 40 to 50 percent of the Bureau staff hired to answer FOIA requests. This proportion has dropped since the main FOIA office moved to northern Virginia, he observed, but he thought it likely that several of my files on African American writers had been close-read first by African American processors. The conversation flowed smoothly, with the three of us, variously occupied by the FBI, agreeing to agree on much. When I asked Fox what he finally thought about the dealings between Hoover’s Bureau and African Americans, however, the accord politely broke down. Hoover was a typically paternalistic racist of his day, Fox stated, but also a potent adversary of the Ku Klux Klan. The “racial culture” of Hoover’s FBI was little different from the rest of the U.S. federal government, he claimed. The files I had gathered with the help of Fox and other affable Bureau employees had led me to different conclusions. Racial culture at the Hoover Bureau was hardly typical, these files instructed, not least when it came to the Hooverites’ fascinated policing of black literary culture.
Five Theses and the Way Forward

While *F.B. Eyes* quotes from dozens of unknown or little-known FBI files on African American writers, it does not describe them page by page or case by case. Those interested in the often-troubling nuts and bolts of particular files can examine the electronic copies available through this book’s website, accessible at http://digital.wustl.edu/ibeyes (like the files held in the FBI’s “Vault,” these online documents can be read in domestic tranquility). Avoiding inventories of file ingredients, *F.B. Eyes* instead mines Bureau files for traces of the uneasy intimacy of African American writing and FBI ghostreading, the latter an almost exclusively white occupation under Hoover’s leadership. In the process, I dissect evidence of the criminal intent of Hoover and Sullivan’s “black hate” counterintelligence program and other authentically scandalous chapters of Bureau surveillance. But my overarching aim is to read the files responsively as well as judgmentally, and to reconstruct rather than prosecute the meddling of the FBI in Afro-modernist letters, a collision of dissimilar cultural forces wrongly assumed to occupy disconnected worlds.

One danger in this approach to the files is the temptation to glamorize the abuses of state espionage by aestheticizing its texts—a temptation similar to that experienced by fans of better-written spy literature. I try to avoid this temptation here, while admitting that Hoover’s FBI, a star of page and screen, schemed to glamorize most everything it touched. More to the point, I note that FBI files on Afro-modernists are peppered with ghostreaders’ judgments of the true and the beautiful; like Vatulescu’s craft-conscious literary files of the communist secret police, these Bureau texts were thus often “pre-aestheticized” at their moments of composition.16 A second danger in my approach to the files is the risk of reviving an insulting and disproven vision of African American literature as an art more acted on than acting. When seen through the spyglass of FBI ghostreading, do Afro-modernist authors reappear as professional victims, objects of (white/police/government) domination whose only proper subjects are evasion or surrender? Is the old, clumsy, pre-Foucauldian “repressive model” of state sovereignty back in black?17 As mentioned above, the last part of *F.B. Eyes* makes it plain that African American writers answered these questions in advance, and in the negative. Through novelistic antifiles and acid “Hoover Poems,” they acted to elevate or transcend their terms of engagement with the FBI, exposing unsightly facts about government spying while recycling them into imaginative fictions. Earlier parts of *F.B. Eyes* do stress the daunting pressures placed on Afro-modernism by Hoover’s Bureau, a feeder of racial paranoia, a seizer of U.S. passports, and by no means a simply stimulating foil for African American artists. In
particular, part 4, a look at the FBI’s underestimated influence across the international “Black Atlantic,” emphasizes the Bureau’s capacity to construct a rigid border and to incriminate those within it—in other words, its capacity to “frame” African American literature in the two most restrictive senses invoked in my subtitle, How J. Edgar Hoover’s Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature. From start to finish, however, F.B. Eyes tests its sobering discoveries from FBI files against counterstatements from the Bureau’s African American targets. It documents the scope of FBI interference to produce a more accurate picture of the barriers scaled by literary expressions of African American agency. During the long, uneven insurgency of Afro-modernism, the combined peaks and crashes of the Harlem Renaissance, the “Indignant Generation,” and the Black Arts movement, this form of agency indeed overcame state-built obstacles we are just beginning to see. 18

On the other side of the coin, F.B. Eyes spends a good number of pages charting the influence of Afro-modernist writing where it might be least expected: inside the operations of Hoover’s FBI, a pacesetter in American criminology and “the global leader among national criminal detection agencies” (Jeffreys-Jones 2). Taken together, parts 1 and 2 of the book offer a revisionist history of the Bureau’s Hoover era recentered on the intersection of American literature and black-white race relations, not coincidentally the home junction of African American writing. Part 1 submits that the Bureau’s involvement with the literary thoroughly racialized the common analogy between the writer and the spy. Like all of the book’s five parts, it devotes ample textual and historical detail to the task of proving a brash and initially counterintuitive thesis: in this case, The birth of the Bureau, coupled with the birth of J. Edgar Hoover, ensured the FBI’s attention to African American literature. The argument begins with twin portraits: one of the Bureau before Hoover, and the other of Hoover before the Bureau. Each portrait displays how its subject was born into an atmosphere wary of the entrance of the New Negro and alert to the uses of literary self-advertisement. I then turn to Hoover’s hiring by the Bureau in 1919, and his rapid upgrade of an already insistently literary agency into the citadel of what I call “lit.-cop federalism,” the desire to inject a compelling federal police presence into the print public sphere. Cashing in on the antiradical Red Scare and his early work experience at the Library of Congress, Hoover combined the resources of this federalism—curatorial, editorial, and authorial—to promote the nationwide clout of the first national police force in U.S. history. The early FBI thus wrote up more than its thousands of case files: it also issued a raft of animated government reports and mass-market hype vetted, bylined, or authored by Hoover, the editor- and eventual agent-in-chief. Impressed by the page count of Bureau self-exposure, the New Yorker would dryly thank the head
G-Man for ensuring “that a moderately literate criminal ought to be able to avoid capture indefinitely” (Jack Alexander, “The Director—III” 25).

One thing a moderately literate criminal might have noted was the Hoover Bureau’s unusual concern with African American writing. As I discuss toward the end of part 1, the FBI’s first major work of literary criticism was the essay-pamphlet Radicalism and Sedition among the Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications. Excerpted in the New York Times and ratified in the Congressional Record, Radicalism and Sedition was a precocious assessment of Harlem Renaissance poetry and a valuable anthology of black journalism produced at the crossroads of Marxist and New Negro radicalisms. In its even glance at both creative and polemical literary genres—poems as well as treatises—Radicalism and Sedition predicts the inclusiveness of the FBI’s working definition of Afro-modernist writing, a definition I adopt as my own. In its generous quotations and supporting commentary on Afro-modernism’s seriousness of purpose, it reveals another, more flattering sense of the Bureau’s “framing” of African American literature. In the manner of a state museum, the FBI collected, preserved, and educationally labeled works of black art, exhibiting foreign objects it intended to defang but came to emulate. Most importantly, Radicalism and Sedition illustrates the chief reason why the FBI ghostread African American writing in the first place. The New Negro instigators of Afro-modernism, this essay acknowledged, both threatened and drove the Bureau’s custom blend of racial animus and literary aspiration, the fuel for some of the agency’s earliest efforts to win national approval for federal policing.

Part 2 of F.B. Eyes carries my revisionist history of the FBI forward from the Harlem Renaissance to the year 1972—both the height of Afro-modernism’s “Renaissance II,” otherwise known as the Black Arts movement, and the year of Hoover’s death in office. Along the way, part 2 pursues the thesis that The FBI’s aggressive filing and long study of African American writers was tightly bound to the agency’s successful evolution under Hoover. I begin by introducing the features that distinguish FBI author files as a genre, and I go on to identify some of the factors—ideological and bureaucratic—behind the Hoover Bureau’s chronic interest in filling them. Yet the lion’s share of part 2 samples dozens of individual files and related black texts to track the Bureau’s evolving dialogue with Afro-modernism across several stages of FBI institutional history, those shifting contexts in which Hoover successfully maneuvered to serve and outlast nine different U.S. presidents. Following an anomalous break during the Great Depression, Hoover’s ghostreaders returned with a vengeance to the scene of Afro-modernism in the early 1940s. Worried by wartime black internationalism, they placed Gwendolyn Bennett, Langston Hughes, George Schuyler, and a minimum of eight other African American authors on a dubiously legal
“Custodial Detention” list, an index of prominent dissidents subject to summary arrest and military confinement in case of national emergency (another of the authentic scandals, then, of FBI ghostreading). Then, in the late 1940s and 1950s, on the eve of the civil rights movement, Hoover’s Bureau answered the mainstreaming of African American writing with a program to detect cultural assimilation before it occurred. The case of A Raisin in the Sun, haunted and reviewed by FBI agents before its New York premiere, is emblematic of this Cold War stage of Bureau ghostreading, intent on advanced warning of literary threats to state segregation. Finally, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, FBI ghostreaders followed Hoover’s lieutenant William C. Sullivan in meeting Afro-modernism with both severity and the sincerest form of flattery. Sullivan’s blackface letter to King was the tip of a coming iceberg, since the Black Power movement and its Black Arts sibling motivated stacks of synthetic black writing at the FBI, a wave of G-Man minstrelsy green-lighted at headquarters but largely composed in outlying Bureau field offices. With Sullivan and Hoover’s endorsement, ghostreading came to approximate a national writer’s workshop in which the Bureau’s long-standing passion for black literature married its even older longing to create a literature of its own. This last stage of Hooverite ghostreading inspired the unifying concept of part 2: “counterliterature,” my term for an adaptable strain of counterintelligence that attempts to convert literary challenges into criminological advantages. As employed by Hoover’s FBI, counterliterature digested and repurposed the voices of Afro-modernist authors. Propagating in-kind replies to the fifty-one filees noted above, it aspired to police African American writing with some of its own literary medicine and succeeded in enriching the FBI’s unlikely status as a clued-in government race expert. Fusing literary inspiration and counterintelligence technique, the idea of counterliterature encapsulates the mixture of literary history and police and intelligence history plied in the whole of this book.19

Part 3 of F.B. Eyes marks a break from the concept of counterliterature, though not initially from the question of Afro-modernism’s influence within Hoover’s Bureau. Its topic is the theory and practice of FBI reading, the intellectual precondition for ghostreading’s enlistment in any larger criminological project. As usual, the organizing thesis is not shy: The FBI is perhaps the most dedicated and influential forgotten critic of African American literature. But the file evidence, here especially, is plentiful. I begin by demonstrating that the Bureau’s many files on Afro-modernist authors are, among other things, recognizably literary-critical documents, analytical encounters with black writing that cannot always resist the pleasures of the enemy text. I move on to illuminate the interpretive principles of these files against the backdrop of the best-known entanglement of American espionage and American literary
criticism: the firsthand stamp of Yale University–bound New Criticism on the counterintelligence branch of the CIA. By the 1950s, the conventions of CIA-endorsed New Critical formalism had crept into FBI critical practice. Ahead of the CIA’s invention in 1947, however, Bureau ghostreaders had cobbled together a separate mode of spy-reading, one sympathetic to pre–New Critical academic schools and exceptionally attuned to the political mindfulness of Afro-modernist writing. In their serious approach to African American literature, critics recruited from the “Fordham Bronx Irish” outperformed the mandarin WASPs of the CIA.

Part 3 then looks beyond G-Man stereotypes to explore the literary training of those Bureau agents tasked with criticizing Afro-modernism. Individual FBI ghostreaders have tended to disappear behind cloaks of bureaucratic anonymity and FOIA redaction; the names of living Bureau agents, for example, are usually removed from FBI files prior to public release. Nonetheless, the literary lives and opinions of two supervising critics at the FBI—William C. Sullivan and Robert Adger Bowen, the latter the lead author of Radicalism and Sedition and of earlier stories in Uncle Remus–level black dialect—have been aired in unconventional autobiographies and here serve to answer an inevitable question about ghostreading: whodunit? The last section of part 3 assesses the impact of Bureau ghostreaders on an interested non-Bureau audience: not, in this instance, African American writers themselves, but the self-appointed reader-patriots, black and white, who turned to Hoover as a literary-critical wise man. One Houstonite in this camp gamely wrote the FBI director with questions about the “writings and connections” of Langston Hughes, and about something fuzzier: “I seem to remember that [A Raisin in the Sun] was a highly controversial production written by a Leroi [sic] Jones and that Jones is something of a professional trouble maker and rabble rouser. If you cannot furnish information pertaining to this play and its author please advise where I might obtain such details” (U.S., Federal, Hughes, 8 July 1970). A Raisin was no forgiving Dutchman (1964), and Jones/Baraka did not look much like Hansberry, but the Houstonite rightly supposed that Hoover’s FBI knew what it took to learn differently. Despite the closed contents of FBI files, a fairly accurate impression of the Bureau’s attentiveness to Afro-modernism escaped the Washington Beltway and proceeded to generate critical correspondence imagining the state apparatus as the brains of a nationwide interpretive community. The aura of FBI ghostreading was thus capable of touching nonprofessional readers outside the FBI. In its small way, it helped to ensure that impassioned common reading and ideologically honed suspicious reading were not, in fact, mutually exclusive styles of twentieth-century literary reception, the assumptions of stylish academic “surface reading” to the contrary.

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Part 4 maintains the spotlight on the effects of ghostreading outside FBI headquarters, a widened focus held throughout the rest of the book. In this portion of *F.B. Eyes*, the beyond-the-Beltway subject is the evidence that Bureau literary criticism encroached on the travels of African American expatriates around the “Black Atlantic,” Paul Gilroy’s now-standard model of the zone of transnational exchange “based on the structure of the African diaspora [in] the Western hemisphere” (*The Black Atlantic* 15). The FBI file of recurrent expatriate Langston Hughes repeatedly quotes his claim that “Negroes are growing in international consciousness” (U.S., Federal, Hughes, 3 June 1947). Hughes’s file and many others, I point out, also confirm that the Bureau concluded it should grow in the same way. As early as the 1920s, the FBI exceeded its domestic authority to influence the movements of expatriate Afro-modernists—this even as it nationalized itself on the U.S. home front through its program of literary federalism. In Paris, the European capital of the Black Atlantic, and several of its satellites in Africa and Latin America, FBI informants and legal attaché agents kept tabs on a network of black literary travelers they tried to link by the vulnerabilities of statelessness alone. Hence *F.B. Eyes’s* most far-reaching thesis: The FBI helped to define the twentieth-century Black Atlantic, both blocking and forcing its flows.

Part 4 first accents the present-day relevance of FBI internationalism, outlining its up-to-date challenges to theories of the state in relation to the nation, the police, and transnational literature. The national security state’s adventures in transnational policing, I argue, underscore the need to integrate the dynamic of state security into U.S. literary history, even—and especially—following this history’s “transnational turn.” Over the past two decades, high-profile attention to writers’ transatlantic journeys has clarified Afro-modernism’s ties to radical Pan-Africanism, to less politicized black cosmopolitanisms, and to the print-cultural practice of black diaspora. Yet the parallel history of FBI internationalism reminds us not to neglect the coercive state power lurking on the right side of the “nation-state” hyphen. For this reason, the remainder of part 4 inspects the two main means through which Hoover’s state police interfered in the flows of the Black Atlantic. The first is the Bureau’s translation of foreign-language texts and riffling of U.S. passport applications to track or immobilize black literary travelers. FBI files verify that in addition to the famous passport withdrawal visited on W.E.B. Du Bois, the passports of dramatist Shirley Graham Du Bois, critic Harold Cruse, novelist William Gardner Smith, and cartoonist-essayist Ollie Harrington were revoked for years at a time. The passport records of James Baldwin, Katherine Dunham, Lorraine Hansberry, Chester Himes, Langston Hughes, John O. Killens, Julian Mayfield, Claude McKay, Willard Motley, Louise Thompson Paterson, Dudley Randall, George Schuyler, Walter White, and
Richard Wright were all combed by the Bureau for travel patterns and abusive irregularities, with Alice Childress's papers checked twice after New York agents discovered her ties to a “Committee to Restore Paul Robeson’s Passport” (U.S., Federal, Childress, 20 Mar. 1958). Recovered FBI files thus remind us of the steep ticket price of Black Atlantic mobility: for many of the most diaspora-minded Afro-modernists, black internationalism entailed the real prospect of global surveillance or national house arrest. The mistranslations required when thinking and writing across a multilingual African diaspora were not the only impediments and goads faced by those who best articulated twentieth-century black internationalisms.21

Part 4 then clarifies a second, complementary means by which the Bureau acted against traveling African American authors: the incongruous weapon I label “state-sponsored transnationalism.” When not keeping prominent Afro-modernists from drifting, the U.S. state police could encourage them to drift, practically underwriting extended world tours. The FBI files of Baldwin, Du Bois, McKay, Motley, and Smith—all of whose passports were endangered—also contain an underbrush of “stop notices,” official instructions to advise the Bureau if a traveler attempted to return through a U.S. port of entry. Considered as instruments of border policing, “stops” were less literal than their name suggests. Yet they had the power to pinpoint their targets’ international crossings to the minute, sometimes before that minute arrived, and occasionally down to the airplane seat number. They provided U.S. state agencies with a ready pretext to detain and quiz literary suspects on arrival.

Most significant of all was the stop’s unwritten service as a government travel advisory: if you had appreciated lands beyond the Bureau’s ideological orbit, stops counseled, you should continue to do so, and stay away. Most of the African American authors troubled by stop notices understood this message, though few respected it permanently. McKay, who composed Home to Harlem (1928) in France, correctly assumed that U.S. officials would not “let me in . . . without special intervention” (letter to Max Eastman, [?] April 1933). He returned to black Manhattan only after James Weldon Johnson and Walter White (a cagey friend of Hoover with his own Bureau file) pulled strings with FBI skeptics at the State Department. James Baldwin, who mock-showcased a copy of the best-selling FBI Story (1956) while writing in Turkey, noticed that the same U.S. passport that pronounced him “a free citizen of a free country” when in Europe “underwent a sea change” when flashed at checkpoints “on the other side of the ocean” (James Baldwin, No Name 378). Reinterpreted at the stopped-up borders of white America, Baldwin’s national ID card warned him “that I was not an African prince, but a domestic nigger and that no foreign government would be offended if my corpse were to be found clogging up the sewers” (378).
Baldwin’s open disdain for the Bureau became a cause célèbre among ghostreaders during the years he talked up *The Blood Counters*, a never-completed exposé sworn to blast Hoover “to the wall” (U.S., Federal, Baldwin, 7 June 1963). Part 5 of *F.B. Eyes* surveys this and less notional examples of African American writing about the Bureau—many of them, like Baldwin’s unfinished book, attempts to force a sea change in the balance of literary surveillance. As in part 4, the focus thus falls on events and histories outside FBI headquarters. Here, however, this outward focus finally involves closer encounters with Afro-modernist poems, stories, essays, and novels than with their silhouettes in FBI files. My fifth and last thesis turns the agenda fully over to such black texts and affirms that *Consciousness of FBI ghostreading fills a deep and characteristic vein of African American literature*.

The expressly literary effects of FBI ghostreading might be measured in slippery but provocative metrics of silencing: the number of novels abandoned or banned from bookstores and libraries; the number of early radical poems unreprinted or apologized for; the number of whole literary careers shortened or never started. Proof of book-killing, stop-the-presses FBI censorship of Afro-modernist literature is thin on the ground, however. Past this and the even hazier data of Bureau-inspired self-censorship lies a more definite archive of contact, the collected works of an Afro-modernism that actively grappled with Hoover’s FBI across various styles, genres, and generations. The page production of many years of African American literature, in other words, is solid, surface-readable evidence that African American authors declined to suffer ghostreading in silence.

Exhaustive treatment of Afro-modernism’s increasingly raw conversation with the FBI might fill another book, so part 5 highlights a handful of major episodes on the road from 1919 to 1972 and beyond. The first of these episodes is the prompt reply to FBI ghostreading in the early journalism and foundational poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. Just as James Weldon Johnson and other columnist-midwives of the renaissance publicly greeted *Radicalism and Sedition*, the Bureau’s original rejoinder to Afro-modernism, Claude McKay refined the opening statements of renaissance verse in light of his vocal police readership. McKay’s once-baffling preference for the traditional Shakespearean sonnet, I argue, consciously echoed the censor-burdened poetry of early modern England, a prior expression of cultural renaissance saddled and energized by state interference. In McKay’s hands, the FBI’s inspiration for Afro-modernism was thus first extended to the level of literary form.

The second section of part 5 charts the FBI’s migrant standing in Afro-modernist prose from the mid-1930s through the early Cold War and ranges from George Schuyler’s pulp fiction to Langston Hughes’s beloved “Simple”
stories to Ralph Ellison’s drafts of *Invisible Man* (1952). In a near-final version of Ellison’s Great American Novel, the transparent narrator dreams of faithful service under “a master FBI man” (“Writings” 186), an unconscious confession of blindness that also divulges repressed ties between the mask of black servility and the loyal-American disguise of the G-Man. The third section of part 5 revolves around the expatriate trio of Chester Himes, Richard Wright, and William Gardner Smith and investigates their interlocking fictions of so-called *Rive noire* Paris in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Despite their impressive differences, all three of these Bureau-hunted novelists produced black Parisian detective fictions inventively stretched in the direction of the “antifile,” an emerging genre of novelized counterinvestigation that recoded known forms of FBI rhetoric. The fourth section less selectively addresses the profusion of black Bureau writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Briefly taking the stage are such novelists as John A. Williams, Sam Greenlee, and Ishmael Reed, each of whom published fantasies of a Black Nationalist secret service able to outfox the FBI. Also featured are Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez, a poetic collective joined in agreement over Hoover’s place in the demonology of the Black Arts movement. “J. Edgar Hoover will / soon be dead” (ll. 13–14), Baraka promised in “Three Movements and a Coda” (1963–65), the anticipation of a string of “Hoover Poems” that dance on the FBI’s looming grave and that offset the better-remembered canon of Black Arts “Coltrane Poems,” elegies commemorating a jazz culture hero who died before his nation-time—exactly unlike Hoover, an aged national icon born in a bygone century.

The fifth and final section of part 5 acts as a historical coda and an epilogue to *F.B. Eyes* as a whole. It sketches African American literature’s less heated and less defining skirmish with the FBI after Hoover’s unpoetic death—a skirmish now led by black women including Ai, Audre Lorde, Danzy Senna, and Gloria Naylor. Naylor’s Orwellian book *1996*, a “fictionalized memoir” published in 2005, pictures a Jewish American officer of the National Security Agency (NSA) who commands spy-readers to produce a “detailed synopsis” of each of her publications: “Every newspaper article, every book review, is to be read and analyzed. . . . Files from the FBI and CIA are ordered. . . . Yes, by the end of the day, Gloria Naylor’s life will become, no pun intended, an open book” (33). As *F.B. Eyes* sees it, *1996* suggests that surveillance-fed paranoia can make for crude anti-Semitism, and, despite itself, for penetrating literary history. In the style of Naylor’s eponymous protagonist, her life an open book to readerly spies, the national loyalty of the fifty-one African American writers filed by Hoover’s FBI was in fact tested through literary evidence. Like both Naylor and her author-function, these writers plead that a shaping awareness of the national security state was not reserved for Don DeLillo, Joan Didion, and other
post-1945 white postmodernists. Decades before the “post-” met the modern, or spylike epistemological uncertainty became a required sign of literary contemporaneity, or the CIA and NSA became models of state security gone virulently imaginative, Afro-modernism confidently represented the ploys and tastes of U.S. intelligence. For better and for worse, what helped to make this modernism a relatively coherent body of texts was its common knowledge of being good enough—and “BaddDDD” enough—to keep FBI ghostreaders up at night, turning its pages.22

All five parts of *F.B. Eyes* make hay from the similarities between ghostreaders and academic literary critics, two classes of interpreters fond of decryption, identity theft, and (often enough) hermeneutics of suspicion. But the whole of the book also benefits from a considerable difference between these two professional readerships: academic literary critics are more open to debate, and much less displeased by citation. In addition to the critics already mentioned, *F.B. Eyes* has taken inspiration and free pointers from several different sets of literary scholars. These include historians of Afro-modernism’s voyages and exchanges outside the United States (Brent Hayes Edwards, Michelle Stephens); diverse chroniclers of the longue durée of Afro-modernism beyond the Harlem Renaissance (Lawrence Jackson, James Smethurst, Kenneth Warren); wide-ranging biographers of the radical experience of literary surveillance (Carole Boyce Davies, Barbara Foley, Gary Holcomb, Alan Wald, Mary Helen Washington); new Americanists newly interested in old questions of literature, the state, and politics as such (Sean McCann, Michael Szalay); and, closest to home, skilled analysts of the clues linking other U.S. literatures to the covert sphere of espionage (Erin Carlston, Michael Holzman, Timothy Melley). For its part, History with a capital *H*, the kind that hurts and that refuses most academic desires, has continued to offer inspiration of its own. Begun five years after 9/11, this book was finished in the summer of 2013, a confusing season in which NSA contractor Edward Snowden first revealed quantities of electronic spy-reading that put Naylor’s 1996 to shame, and then found asylum under the wings of a onetime lieutenant colonel of the Soviet KGB. Published as we enter a phase of skepticism about government spying unparalleled since the 1970s, *F.B. Eyes* hopes to contribute to the renewed case against unchecked surveillance. It also aims to offer hope in the likely event that this case fails to stem the tide. When all is said and read, the Afro-modernist writers shadowed by the FBI illustrate both the painful costs of epidemic ghostreading, and the ways in which liberating expression can exploit and withstand it.