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# Seeing Shadows: FBI Surveillance, Gender, and Black Women Activists

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**Seeing Shadows: FBI Surveillance, Gender, and Black Women Activists**

**Kiara Sample**

**April 7, 2018**

**Washington University in St. Louis**

## INTRODUCTION

On the morning of May 14, 1958 two New York City Police detectives, Joseph Kiernan and Michael Bonura,<sup>1</sup> knocked on the door of 25-46 99<sup>th</sup> Street, the duplex of Betty Shabazz and Malcom X in Queens, New York.<sup>2</sup> Yvonne X Molette lived on the ground floor of the duplex with her sister, Audrey X Rice, her younger 13-year old sister, and her husband John X Molette. Yvonne Molette answered the door when the detectives requested a “Mrs. Margaret Dorsey,” and when Yvonne Molette told them a Margaret Dorsey did not reside in the duplex, the agents asked to come into the home and look around. Yvonne Molette refused to let them in without a warrant. Frustrated and angry, the detectives tried to force their way into the house by pushing the door open. Yvonne Molette struggled, refusing their advances and blocking them from entering the home. Audrey Rice and her younger 13-year old sister rushed to Molette’s aid and helped her close the door, shutting the agents out of the duplex.<sup>3</sup> The detectives reluctantly left the house threatening to return later with a federal warrant. Yvonne Molette frantically called her husband, John Molette, to inform him of the incident at which point he rushed home. Later in the afternoon, the two detectives returned to the duplex along with a U.S. Postal Inspector. The postal inspector knocked on the front door while the two detectives went around the side of the house. John Molette met the detectives at the back door where he asked to see their credentials. A frustrated Joseph Kiernan tried to brush past John Molette. He refused to let them into the house and a fight broke out. With the help of his mother-in-law, John Molette slammed the back

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<sup>1</sup> Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), 150.

<sup>2</sup> “3 Moslems Seized as Police Fighters,” *New York Amsterdam News*, (New York, NY), May 14, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> “Moslems Charge False Arrests in NY,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), May 24, 1958.

door shut, preventing Kiernan and Bonura from entering.<sup>4</sup> Frustrated, the detectives shattered the glass pane of the door and fired two shots into the house.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, the detectives rushed into the house and chased Betty Shabazz and Minnie Simmons upstairs. That day, John Molette, Yvonne Molette, Audrey Rice, their 13-year old sister, Minnie Simmons, and Betty Shabazz were all arrested. This event was the catalyst to twelve years of FBI surveillance on Betty Shabazz. Her surveillance file began by affirming that she was the wife of Malcolm X, and then reciting the incident of the police invasion of the couple's duplex which framed Shabazz as the perpetrator of violence against the police officers. Throughout the rest of her file this incident and her marriage to Malcolm X were used to justify the FBI's surveillance of Shabazz.

Surveillance of "suspicious" individuals by the American government began with the creation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 1908. The FBI partnered with vigilante groups, who reported "disloyal" citizens to the Bureau.<sup>6</sup> It continued through the Red Scare of the 1940s and 1950s. Beginning in June of 1942 and completed in August of 1943, a survey titled The Survey of Racial Conditions in the United States, informally referred to as RACON, investigated the rising tide of "black agitation" stemming from World War II. The completion of the survey called for extensive surveillance of all areas of the black community.<sup>7</sup> The surveillance continued for decades eventually leading to the development of the Communist Infiltration program (COMINFIL). According to Ward Churchill, "COMINFIL was the program

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<sup>4</sup> Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), 151.

<sup>5</sup> "3 Moslems Seized as Police Fighter," *New York Amsterdam News*, (New York, NY), May 14, 1958.

<sup>6</sup> Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Robert A. Hill, *The FBI's RACON: Racial Conditions in the United States During World War II* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1995), 4.

used to gain intelligence on communist organizations—placing hundreds of informers in social and labor movements across the country” under surveillance. Under the guise of protection against communism, Black organizations were subject to wiretapping, bugging, mail tampering, and false arrests.<sup>8</sup> In 1956, COMINFIL transformed into the Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO). Among others, COINTELPRO focused on Black leaders during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement. In regards to Black Power, the purpose of COINTELPRO was to suppress Black leaders and organizations in the movement.<sup>9</sup>

Many strategies of surveillance have remained consistent throughout different U.S. social movements. To a certain degree, methods such as bogus mail, “Black Propaganda” operations, disinformation, harassment arrests, infiltrators and agent provocateurs, pseudo-gangs, bad-jacketing, fabrication of evidence, and assassinations of leaders of Black Power organizations were successful in containing movement organizing.<sup>10</sup> On a larger level, the strategies achieved a greater goal of distraction. At the time, FBI activities were able to slightly shift the focus of organizations from external activities, related to organizing, to the internal operations of the organization. In “Surveillance, Spatial Compression, and Scale: The FBI and Martin Luther King Jr.,” Jules Boykoff argues that this change in focus resulted in a significant scaled shift that prevented a more unified national movement. By regulating the space in which dissident citizens organize, the FBI was able to refortify and compress spatial boundaries of Civil Rights and Black Power organizations. The FBI did not directly regulate the organizing spaces of the movement.

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<sup>8</sup> Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 36.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 44-47.

Instead, through informants and social intimidation, they were able to force groups to consider the repercussions of protest along with the impact it would have on the sustainability of their organization.

The history of surveillance by the FBI can be described by the overall theme of suppression and containment under the cover of protecting the values and systems of America. Anyone who did not fully live within the system, or provided a public critique of social hierarchies, was perceived as a possible target. The current literature details the counterintelligence strategies used on prominent figures in the Communist, Civil Rights, and Black Power Movement such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Robert Williams, and William L. Patterson to name a few. Even more, the surveillance of Black authors of the Harlem Renaissance was a manipulative form of surveillance aimed at replicating techniques of Afro-modernist writing as a form of counterintelligence.<sup>11</sup> However, the surveillance of women and their experiences with the FBI are not covered as much.

It is easy to make the assumption that the same surveillance strategies – “Black Propaganda” operations, disinformation, harassment arrests, infiltrators and agent provocateurs, pseudo-gangs, bad-jacketing, and fabrication of evidence – were used on all targets of surveillance, and the experience along with the impact of being under surveillance is monolithic. However, the surveillance strategies applied to different targets were determined by the individuals’ visibility and their perceived threat. In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Simone Browne provides an analysis that places blackness at the center of surveillance. Racialized surveillance is oversight used as a method of social control to reinforce

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<sup>11</sup> William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover’s Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 62.

social boundaries along racial lines. Similarly, in “Saying Something: The Location of Social Movements in the Surveillance Society,” social factors are taken into consideration when defining surveillance. On a larger scale, it is defined as a method to support social hierarchies, create new methods of social exclusion, and maintain social order.

Understanding surveillance as a means to uphold social boundaries situates the identity of the surveillance target as an essential component to their experience under surveillance. Therefore, surveillance operates differently at the intersection of race and gender. The experience of Black women under FBI surveillance included different surveillance strategies than their male counterparts. Specifically, the surveillance of the wives of prominent Black male leaders differed in strategy and motivation. Using the FBI files of Louise Thompson Patterson, Betty Shabazz, and Mabel Williams, along their biographies, I argue that the FBI attributed a vagueness to the women’s lives to focus on gaining intelligence on people in their network, which created a blind spot in surveillance to the women’s activism.

This project attempts to understand the perceptions of Black women by the FBI, and to determine whether the FBI engaged in gendered surveillance or not. The FBI files of Louise Thompson Patterson and Betty Shabazz – acquired from an internet archive of past FBI Freedom of Information Act requests – along with Mabel Williams FBI file – obtained from the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland through a Freedom of Information Act request – are used as case studies to interrogate and theorize about the dynamics of gendered surveillance. I conducted a close reading and analysis of their files, which specifically addressed the questions of: how did Special Agents talk about the women? What language did agents use to identify them? How were the women portrayed? What sources were used to develop a narrative on their women targets? Were the women centered within their FBI

files? How did surveillance strategies change over time? And did FBI surveillance accurately portray the political work of the women? Additionally, using the holes in the FBI files as a guide, I used the biographies of the women to fill in the gaps in knowledge on the women's activism. The three chapters serve different purposes to support the overall argument that the women's surveillance files perpetuated an archaic understanding of gender roles, with the true focus being on their husbands. Louise Thompson Patterson's file utilizes a thematic analysis to identify different surveillance strategies and examine how the FBI formed her narrative. Betty Shabazz's FBI file is investigated through a comparative analysis with her husband's file, specifically paying close attention to changes in surveillance over time. Finally, examined through a textual analysis of how the FBI framed her as a wife and assistant, Mabel Williams file serves as an extreme example of FBI surveillance consolidating the actions of a wife and husband. Ultimately, this project seeks to make an intervention in surveillance scholarship by thinking through the intricate intersections of gender, race, and surveillance.

In chapter 1, through a close analysis of Louise Thompson Patterson's FBI file I contend that Patterson was not perceived as a target, yet her surveillance was used to understand the operations and network of larger communist organizations. Her file began with an incident at a communist party meeting, and after she was determined to be the wife of William L. Patterson, an influential communist, FBI agents decided to investigate her further and continued her surveillance. Based on special agent reports, the level of detail, and language used, I was able to determine three types of surveillance strategies that signified shifts in the FBI's surveillance motives and overall view of Patterson as a key figure in communist organizations. Over time, Patterson's image as the wife of William Patterson transformed to her being viewed as a window into a larger communist network. Furthermore, from examining the type of information reported,



and not reported, as well as the names they used to identify her throughout her file, I outline the narrative of Patterson's life crafted by the FBI. Agents portrayed her as the wife of an influential Black communist who was also involved with communist activities. However, by attributing her political activity to her husband and ultimately undermining her politics as a Black communist woman, FBI agents did not engage in repressing Patterson's political activity because they did not realize her radical potential.

Chapter 2 compares the FBI files of Betty Shabazz and Malcolm X in an effort to show that Shabazz's surveillance was used as a tool to monitor the men in her life, Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad. The chapter covers Shabazz's life as seen by the FBI starting from the beginning of her file, past Malcolm X's death, and through the end of her file. Agents began to build their case on Shabazz by using government documents to look into her past such as birth, marriage, and school records. Still, Shabazz was understood as an extension of Malcolm X. Her FBI file outlined her as a one-dimensional person whereas Malcolm X was seen as a more complex figure, as evident in comparing their physical descriptions and special agent reports. Shabazz's surveillance was distant yet watchful; briefly reporting her attendance at Nation of Islam meetings and only giving detailed reports when she was in the presence of important men. After her husband's death, Shabazz continues to be defined by her association to others, and her surveillance continues because she is understood as operating under the same ideologies as Malcolm X. The threat seen in Malcolm X as a figurehead was spread to Shabazz; consequently, she was not seen as a surveillance target in her own right but because of her marriage and access to her husband.

Chapter 3 analyzes Mabel Williams FBI file to uncover the FBI's view of Williams as a potential threat because she lived with her husband, Robert Williams, in countries on the U.S.

travel ban. Mabel Williams file began because she signed a petition along with her husband, who was wanted for interstate flight to avoid kidnapping charges. Although, at the beginning of her file, Williams was living in Cuba with her family, agents decided to gather intelligence on Mabel Williams to prepare for her return to the United States with her husband. Once the FBI's views of Williams were established, all subsequent information supported their view of her as a Mother, wife, and passive subject to Robert William's ideologies. In this case, Williams marriage to her husband was not used as a tool to gain intelligence; her marriage to Robert Williams was the sole justification of her being perceived as a future threat when she returned to the United States. Through the passive language used to refer to Williams and the information reported on her involvement in political activity, Williams was placed in the shadow of her husband which gave her a cover to continue her radical work without repressive surveillance tactics.

The files of these women, all wives of influential leaders, capture a different kind of surveillance that is not repressive, all-knowing, or pervasive. The surveillance conducted on Louise Thompson Patterson, Betty Shabazz, and Mabel Williams was distant, dismissive, and, often times, inattentive. Their visibility was heightened by their marriage to their husbands, yet they remained unseen because the importance and perceived threat of their husbands overshadowed their individual complexities and radical politics. FBI agents placed their gendered stereotypes and assumptions of traditional marriage onto the women being surveilled which arguably gave these women an advantage in masking their political activity and painting an image of them as naïve followers of their husbands. Simply put, the FBI's gendered stereotypes and notions of traditional marriage worked, at times, to undermine their own surveillance efforts

## Chapter 1: Louise Thompson Patterson

On February 1, 1941, a group of self-identified communists held a secret gathering in New York City to discuss communist issues. After the meeting had started, a forceful knock at the door alerted the group, or maybe a person acting as a look out gave a signal to the group; either way everyone in the meeting was made aware of a police presence. Every group member understood having communist beliefs, let alone meeting to discuss communist ideologies, could lead to intense police persecution, which led them to quickly vacate the room. In the chaos of fleeing, Louise Thompson Patterson left behind a small bag. When the police arrived the room was empty, but they found “a small handbag filled with various material relative to the Communist Party, among which was a list of names, apparently the personal property of Louise Thompson....It [was] not known what the following list [represented]; there [were] many names of individuals on it who [were] prominent in the country and who [had] visited other countries during the past few years.”<sup>12</sup> This forgotten list was the catalyst for 924 pages of surveillance documentation that came together in the shape of Louise Thompson Patterson’s FBI file.

Patterson was deemed an interest of surveillance because of her high-ranking position in the International Worker’s Order. On the first page of Patterson’s FBI file, she is pinpointed as the Vice President of the International Workers Order, and agents made a point of identifying her as a “negress,” or more specifically, “a well-educated negress.”<sup>13</sup> Patterson was an immediate threat because of the economic power of the International Workers Order, one of the wealthiest

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<sup>12</sup> Memo, February 17, 1941, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 01.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

communist groups in the country with a financial reserve of about two million dollars.<sup>14</sup> Even more, Patterson's perceived threat level was compounded by her being a "well-educated," well-connected, Black woman with national organizing capabilities for the Communist and a year-long stay in Russia.<sup>15</sup> Patterson's threat was heightened when she delivered a list of 201 new members of the International Workers Order to the Communist Party headquarters in Chicago on June 12, 1941.<sup>16</sup> Four months after the raid on the communist meeting, Patterson is regarded as her own entity. She is perceived as an influential official of a powerful communist organization and as an individual who perpetuates communist beliefs of her own volition.

Although Patterson is initially perceived as a "national threat" because of her position as an influential, Black, communist woman, her individual competence is overshadowed by her marriage to William Patterson. When her file started on February 1, 1941 the FBI knew her only as Louise Thompson. On September 24, 1941, in a report detailing the investigation of Louise Thompson Patterson's marriage, she is identified as "Mrs. William L. Patterson with aliases Mrs. Louise Patterson, Mrs. Louise Thurman, Louise Thompson, [and] Louise Tolls."<sup>17</sup> Patterson had just married William Patterson on December 3, 1940 – two months before her FBI file started – and when her marriage to William Patterson was confirmed by talking to informants and reviewing his marriage affidavit, she was conflated with her husband's image through the use of his name.<sup>18</sup> Because William Patterson had a surveillance file before the start of Louise Patterson's file he is described as "well-known as a communist in [the] area."<sup>19</sup> From this point

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Report, September 24, 1941, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 01.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

forward, Patterson no longer exists as her own entity within the FBI file. Her communist activity is placed in the perspective of her connections to her husband and communist organizations. Her “potential threat” is exacerbated because of her access to influential people in her network, yet her individual agency and complexity is simultaneously rendered invisible because the focus has been shifted away from the individual and towards her network as a whole.

The beginning of Louise Thompson Patterson’s FBI surveillance sets the tone for her file moving forward. Throughout the rest of her file, agents go back and forth between trying to surveil Patterson and concurrently pay attention to interactions within her network. Because of the split in attention her surveillance is executed with minimal detail, which ultimately weakens the FBI’s understanding of how Louise Patterson operated on all fronts as a Black communist woman. The focus of her surveillance is not on her as an individual Communist figure, but on Patterson as a supporting role within communist organizations.

### **Surveillance Strategies**

Throughout the Federal Bureau of Investigation files on Louise Thompson Patterson, different strategies of surveillance are used to gain intelligence on Patterson’s background and current communist activity. Throughout her files surveillance is normalized, as the different strategies used to gain information are not explicitly stated. Additionally, due to the restrictions of the Freedom of Information Act, the names of many sources and contacts connected to the Pattersons are blacked out. The level of surveillance – the proximity of informants to the targeted subject, extent of the invasion of privacy, and the amount of detail of new information gained from surveillance – must be inferred from the type of information written in the file as well as the information left out. The deliberate holes within the files simultaneously hide information

and give insight on the surveillance tactics of Special Agents. After doing a close reading and analysis of Louise Thompson Patterson's file, I have extracted three main strategies of surveillance used by the Bureau to gain knowledge on her whereabouts, activity, and network of people: passive, undercover, and physical surveillance. The strategies of surveillance shift as Special Agents' perceptions of Louise Thompson Patterson change.

The Bureau's use of passive surveillance places Louise Thompson Patterson as a subsidiary agent within the purview of surveillance, which reflects their perception of her as having a minimal role in communist organizations. Passive surveillance is understood as an obscure form of observation that gains intelligence from using preexisting monitoring structures put in place to focus on another person in the subject's network. It is a transference of surveillance from a target to a person within the target's network, which is only made possible when two people occupy the same space or interact across a medium that is being surveilled. The passive surveillance strategy is used mostly at the beginning of Patterson's file – when the Special Agents were still trying to figure out who she was and gauge her importance within different organizations.

At the beginning of Patterson's file, most of the informants' reports associated her with another organization or had her participating in a large communist event. An informant in attendance at the Illinois Peoples Conference for Legislative Action on May 24, 1941 reported on the proceedings of the conference. The informant recounted the formation of a committee to meet with the Abraham Lincoln Hotel on the issue of racial discrimination among hotel management, and "Louise Thompson" was appointed a member of the committee. Additionally, the informant documented the election of different officers; included was "Louise Thompson,"

from the International Workers Order, elected as Treasurer.<sup>20</sup> In the American Peace Mobilization file it is stated on December 1, 1940 at an Emergency Peace Mobilization meeting, “Louise Thompson, colored National Vice-President, International Workers Order, was a speaker in the afternoon session.”<sup>21</sup> It is reported in the Communist Party activity file that a confidential informant was present at the June 9, 1941 Midwest District Convention of the International Workers Order. “He stated that the first speaker was Louise Thompson and that the first five speakers urged cooperation and unity in fighting ideals and purposes and in aiding to defeat the ‘imperialist forces’ which were responsible for the war.”<sup>22</sup> After a further review of the files of the confidential informant, Special Agents found a variety of pamphlets, flyers, and miscellaneous papers *mentioning* Louise Thompson; through these they were able to connect her to National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, The League for Women Shoppers, and a member of a group that visited Soviet Russia in 1939.<sup>23</sup> Within the informant’s reports they found Louise Thompson to be a member of the National Advisory Board of the International Labor Defense, National Committee for Peoples Rights, Sponsoring Committee of the Scottsboro Defense, and a speaker on behalf of Loyalists Interests in the Spanish War.<sup>24</sup> All of this initial intelligence on Patterson was acquired through the surveillance structures in place to survey the communist party and “suspicious” organizations; it was not the result of a specific focus on Patterson.

The passive style of writing used to reference the informant’s records on Patterson positions her at the margins of the surveillance target. The informant report on Patterson’s

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

involvement at the Illinois Peoples Conference for Legislative Action refers to her almost as an afterthought. The main focus of the report is the incident with the Abraham Lincoln hotel and the proceedings of the meeting. Snippets of Patterson's activity is seen in the report – her role in the organization was addressed along with a one-sentence summary of her speech at a session in the conference. Furthermore, at the Midwest District Convention of the International Workers Order, the informant groups Patterson's speech with the message of five other speakers placing importance on the message of the group rather than Patterson's ideas as an individual. At this stage in the beginning of Patterson's file, phrases such as "The report mentions...", "A further review was made of the files...", "...reviewed for possible additional information concerning Subject," and the use of the word "reflected" as compared to "reported," all signify that Patterson's involvement was not a priority.<sup>25</sup> Once her file was started, agents reviewed previous communist, and communist sympathizers, files for intelligence on Patterson, and that information was used as foundational knowledge to develop Patterson as a surveillance target . As Patterson became a point of interest for Special Agents they used her association with known communists to map a network of connections between different organizations.

Undercover surveillance, a more invasive and active form of surveillance, was used prevalently by the Bureau to access personal information and conversations of Patterson. Bureau agents frequently posed as non-threatening persons or friends of Patterson to get her, or people close to her, to give agents information that would otherwise be hidden from them. As a form of covert surveillance, undercover surveillance was one of the more intrusive tactics - agents would use deceit to access a space or take personal information not available to them. This surveillance strategy can be identified based on the level of detail within the type of information reported, as

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



well as understanding the relationships of the people who had access to certain spaces in which the agents reported. Within the FBI files there is no indication that Patterson, or anyone else, was aware of undercover surveillance taking place within their circle of people.

Posing as a friend or a non-threatening person over the phone was the easiest way agents uncovered information about Patterson. At the beginning of her file, when agents were trying to connect “Louise Thompson” to William Patterson through marriage, special agents “interviewed Patterson under pretext and he, in addition to supplying the birth data concerning himself, verified he married a Mrs. Louise Thurman, a widow.”<sup>26</sup> Later in the file it was revealed that William Patterson was interviewed under a false pretext. He was told that since “the Bureau of Vital Statistics had changed its location, it was necessary to review the various marriage records on file and to bring them up to date. Agent in the course of this interview described himself as [redacted].”<sup>27</sup> William Patterson went on to explain Patterson’s marriage history and the history behind her usage of the names: Louise Thurman, Louise Tolls, and Louise Thompson.<sup>28</sup> The fake call to her husband was just the first time a person close to Patterson was deceived into giving information; over the next twenty years of Patterson’s surveillance, people within her network would be repeatedly called and interviewed under false pretexts.

Undercover surveillance was also used to find out logistical details of Patterson’s life compared to deeply personal material. Sixteen years later on April 11, 1957, when Patterson was living in Brooklyn with her daughter and husband, an FBI agent called an “individual at 1268 President Street, Brooklyn, New York who identified herself as the daughter of [Patterson], revealed that [Patterson] currently [resided] at that address and is employed. The nature of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

[Patterson's] employment was not learned; however it was determined from this individual that [Patterson] leaves at approximately 7:45am and returns at approximately 6:15pm."<sup>29</sup> Later in the file it was revealed that the special agent represented himself as a credit representative from Macy's Department store.<sup>30</sup> Over the next three years, FBI agents repeatedly called her places of employment and her home, using fake names, acting as potential clients, and one time even posing as her friend. The purpose of most of the calls was to verify her employment at different organizations or to support previous intelligence received from other forms of surveillance.

Undercover physical surveillance was more prominent than fraudulent phone calls as there were many informants within Patterson's network who came into contact with her on a daily basis. In April 1942, "Louise Thompson...stated that she had recently talked to a girl named [redacted] Morale Division of the Office of Civilian Defense. [Redacted] requested Thompson to secure a person for her who would be able to work with all kinds of language groups. Thompson told the informants that she had been unable to furnish anyone immediately, but tried to locate someone from the IWO."<sup>31</sup> Based on the use of the words "stated" and "told" in the report, it can be inferred that informants spoke directly to Patterson. Furthermore, the nature of the information, being about IWO operations, indicates that informants worked closely with Patterson, perhaps even in the IWO office. Although, informants constantly came into contact with Patterson, and possibly operated within her personal space, there is little detail on her personal life outside of working with communist organizations. The use of undercover surveillance to get background information, physically locate Patterson, and get access to

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<sup>29</sup> Report, April 15, 1957, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 08.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Report, April 13, 1942, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 11.

information on IWO operations shows that the Bureau primarily perceived Patterson as a key operant within communist organizations.

Lastly, physical surveillance, a form of overt observation conducted by FBI agents, was used to physically keep tabs on Patterson's movement and activity. Physical surveillance can be understood as the presence of conspicuous FBI agents within the same space as the targeted person of surveillance – tracking her movement, watching her home, and interviewing her. The visible nature of this type of surveillance can be interpreted as an intimidation method and a power move because FBI agents made direct contact with Patterson and were visible in the places that were supposedly secure for her, which sent the message that they had the power to access her personal information.

The physical presence of FBI agents in Patterson's personal spaces can be interpreted as a method of control. On November 30, 1953, two special agents showed up at Patterson's apartment in New York City. They "advised that she was specifically contacted in connection with an official investigation specifically regarding a meeting allegedly held in 1935 at the time the National Negro Congress was organized. Mrs. Patterson asked if she was not one of the original members of the National Negro Congress, to which she replied that she supposed she was, adding, 'I do not care to discuss the matter with you.' She also declined to cooperate to the extent of answering any questions concerning the meeting held in 1935."<sup>32</sup> This was the first and only time the FBI agents made direct contact with Patterson, however they continued to make their presence known in her life. "On March 31, 1958 [a special agent] of the FBI observed that

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<sup>32</sup> Letter, December 7, 1953, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 06.

the subject continued to reside at the above mentioned address.”<sup>33</sup> FBI agents would routinely watch Patterson’s house, not just to affirm her residential address, but also to document her comings and goings at her house. This same surveillance tactic was used to confirm her involvement with the Communist Party in New York. A special agent “furnished information identifying the subject entering or leaving 23 West 26<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, New York, on July 3, 1957. This address according to [redacted] is the Headquarters of National and New York State offices of the CP.”<sup>34</sup> FBI agents even trailed Patterson and her husband throughout New York.<sup>35</sup>

The FBI’s overt monitoring of Patterson’s activity was a method of intimidation to attempt to assert the Bureau’s power to regulate its subject. Special agents showing up at Patterson’s house to interview her on information they already knew was a way for them to send the message that she was being surveilled. Sitting outside of her home, being present at her work, and following her throughout New York were tactics to create a sense of pervasive surveillance. The strategy behind agents being overt instead of covert is that if Patterson knew she was being watched, her illicit behavior might change. Therefore, physical surveillance was used as a tool to influence Patterson’s decision making and perceived suspicious activity. Consequently, this form of surveillance was not to gain intelligence, but rather to suppress communist activity. The use of surveillance as a tool of suppression means that Patterson was perceived as a person whose activity is pertinent to the operations of the communist party.

The surveillance strategies and motivations behind surveillance align with the FBI’s understanding of Patterson’s role in communist activity. At the beginning of her file, regardless

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<sup>33</sup> Report, April 30, 1958, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 08.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

of the positions she held in communist affiliated organizations she was viewed as an insignificant member, constantly overlooked by surveillance operatives. Her marriage to William Patterson increased her visibility to Bureau agents which led them to seek out information to justify her elevated level of surveillance. As the special agents learned more about her involvement in different organizations, communist affiliated or not, Patterson was understood as a connecting agent between organizations and as a person who possessed a wealth of knowledge pertaining to the operations of the groups. The shift from surveillance as a method to gain intelligence to surveillance as a tool of suppression, aligns with the view of Patterson as a key player in communist activity. The development of her surveillance tells the story of the FBI's approach to a prominent Black communist woman. Patterson was propelled into the circle of focus through her connections – marriage to William Patterson. However, she was always seen as being a part of something greater than herself – an influential network of communist organizations. Her surveillance was justified because of her role within organizations and not because of her work as an individual who was a “threat to national security” based on her own prestige.

### **The FBI's Crafted Narrative**

The surveillance strategies used on Louise Thompson Patterson give insight to how the FBI's perception of her developed over time. The surveillance tactics were not explicitly stated throughout her file; they were extracted from a close analysis of the text that focused on the writing style, type of language used, and level of detail in the reports. Similarly, understanding Patterson's FBI file as more than just a documentation of surveillance creates a window into the motives and priorities of the special agents surveilling her. Patterson's FBI file reveals two things: the FBI prioritized any information about communist involvement, and the FBI crafted

narrative creates a one dimensional view of Patterson. This section focuses on Louise Thompson Patterson's narrative constructed by FBI agents through their surveillance. By focusing on the intelligence reported in her file as well as missing information, I aim to answer the questions: how did FBI agents view her? What information was valued as important? What kind of person did they make Patterson out to be? And how did they justify her surveillance? The abundance of information about her connections to influential people and organizations as compared to the limited attention given to her personal life conveys that FBI agents prioritized Patterson's connections.

When Patterson's file first began, they justified the continuance of her surveillance by connecting her to William Patterson and communist organizations. Her file began when she left behind a list of names of influential individuals at a raid of a communist party meeting. Her visibility and threat was heightened when it was determined that she worked for the International Workers Order, "one of the wealthiest communist setups in the country."<sup>36</sup> After this discovery, one of the first things agents did was ascertain her marriage to William L. Patterson, "National Vice-President of the [International Labor Defense], long well-known as a communist in [the] area, Executive of the board of the Communist Party, and long official of the National Negro Congress."<sup>37</sup> Next, FBI agents reviewed their previous files for any prior knowledge in which they uncovered Patterson's involvement in communist affiliated organizations. Agents then looked into her birth records, academic records, arrest records, bank records, and even talked to old college acquaintances to get a sense of who she was. Forty-seven pages into her FBI file, in

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<sup>36</sup> Memo, February 17, 1941, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 01.

<sup>37</sup> Report, September 24, 1941, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 01.

order to justify a request for technical surveillance of Patterson, Special Agents established her involvement with the International Workers Order, Communist Party, American Peace Mobilization, National Committee for People's Rights, Committee for Defense of Political Prisoners, Bloor Festivities, Illinois Peoples Conference for Legislative Action, International Labor Defense, League for Women Shoppers, Mazzini Society, Midwest Federation for Constitutional Liberties, and League for the Struggle for the Negro Race and National Negro Congress. At the end of the first section of her file, Special Agents had constructed Patterson's image as a well-educated, Black communist woman heavily involved in communist organizations and connected to Black prominent figures in the communist party.

Moving forward, agents documented the activity that aligned with the image of Patterson they established for her in the beginning of the file to further support their previously crafted narrative. Bureau informants and agents continued to document Patterson's activity to strengthen the intersection between her identities of being Black and a Communist. In November 1945, Patterson "asked for the establishment of a 'South Side People's Center.' This center would be used to weld negro and white solidarity in the labor movement."<sup>38</sup> At this time, Patterson was the head of organizing the DuSable Lodge in Chicago which focused on Black enrollment in the International Workers Order. An informant later reported on an International Workers Order banquet held to "welcome Paul Robeson as a No. 1 member of Dusable No. 751 lodge."<sup>39</sup> Including Patterson's involvement with the new center and her association with Paul Robeson in

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<sup>38</sup> Report, November 26, 1945, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 03.

<sup>39</sup> Report, June 27, 1946, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 04.

the FBI file, strengthens the FBI's argument for Patterson's involvement in interconnecting Black and Communist issues.

Later in the file, when they submitted a request for technical surveillance of Louise Patterson they did a short profile on her husband, William L. Patterson. They labeled him as a leader of the Communist Party in the Chicago area and as someone who is particularly interested in the communist infiltration of the "Negro Situation."<sup>40</sup> Right after reinforcing her marriage to an influential communist leader, the file uses the name "Mrs. William L. Patterson" to refer to Louise Thompson Patterson followed by the description that she is "regarded as one of the leading figures in Communist activity in the Chicago area," a description also used to describe William Patterson.<sup>41</sup> The description is followed by a command urging special agents to determine whether she had a criminal record or not. Conflating William Patterson with Louise Patterson by using his name, and attempting to connect her with a criminal record are included in the file to contribute to the narrative that serves to reinforce the image of an important communist operative.

Furthermore, Patterson's FBI file maintained she had an important contributing role to the operations of the International Workers Order, yet they never grounded her actions within ideology. An FBI investigation into the International Workers Order (IWO) bank account found that Patterson, along with two other anonymous people, were authorized to sign checks to the account.<sup>42</sup> Her authorization meant she had partial control over the finances in the IWO which

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<sup>40</sup> Memo, June 26, 1943, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 03.

<sup>41</sup> Inspection Report, December 17, 1945, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 03.

<sup>42</sup> Report, August 21, 1953, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 05.



positioned her at a high level of influence. Later in the same section of her file, agents describe her as an “executive secretary [who] was the directing force in the Du Sable lodge No. 751, IWO, Chicago, which had the largest IWO membership in the U.S. and was composed mostly of Negroes.”<sup>43</sup> The report went on to describe how Patterson was working with churches to increase membership in the Du Sable Lodge of the International Workers Order. Additionally, she was working with the Communist Party, International Workers Order, the United Auto Workers Union, and the Committee on Race Relations of the Chicago Mayor’s office. Even more, Patterson spoke at an Anti-Lynching Rally in Chicago.<sup>44</sup> The report hints at Patterson’s radical ideologies by citing her work that intersected with the Communist Party, anti-lynching organizations, and labor unions. However, why were her political beliefs and ideologies never flushed out? Why were her speeches never transcribed in her file? Agents continued to place Patterson in a box - the box agents outlined in the beginning of her file. Within the file, Patterson was not allowed to be more than her actions and contributions to organizations; within their minds, agents did not give Patterson the space to grow as a threat beyond the image they perceived her to be.

Louise Thompson Patterson was well-known in many Black activist and communist circles as having a global analysis of racism, capitalism, and sexism. After she returned from her travels in the Soviet Union, Patterson joined the National Committee to Defend Political Prisoners, an organization involved in Scottsboro. She became the lead organizer for the “Free Scottsboro March,” a very successful event as the first major protest for racial equality in

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<sup>43</sup> Report, December 23, 1946, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 05.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Washington D.C., drawing five thousand protestors to the nation's capital.<sup>45</sup> Shortly after the march, Patterson joined the Communist Party as a high profile Black woman communist – “the Black, communist, and mainstream press described as a confident, militant, activist.”<sup>46</sup> In 1934, Patterson's arrest in Birmingham, Alabama while organizing for the IWO made headlines.<sup>47</sup> The year after, in 1935, in front of a special investigative committee on the Harlem Riots, Patterson testified on the root causes of the riots as “the community's frustration with poverty and racism.”<sup>48</sup> In February of 1936, Patterson was elected as the national secretary of the IWO's second largest division, the English section, which made her the highest ranking Black woman in the IWO.<sup>49</sup> Patterson became the director of Du Sable 751 Lodge on the South Side of Chicago in 1940. Under her leadership the lodge became a thriving center for Black political and cultural work, specifically, featuring the art and work of Black women intellectuals in support of left-wing causes.<sup>50</sup> Although, Patterson was connected to high profile Black leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Ishmael Flory – a Chicago communist leader – Patterson's political impact and visibility as a Black communist woman was because of her own organizing work and prestige that occurred before her marriage to William Patterson. The disconnect between Patterson's prominence in communist communities and her shallow portrayal in the FBI file illuminates the FBI's oblivion to communist operations because of a limiting gendered lens.

However, FBI agents did allow room for possible doubt to discredit the efficacy of the work Patterson was doing. A report from William Patterson's FBI file was included in

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<sup>45</sup> Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 75.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

Patterson's file which documented a complaint from a South Side Section member about how William Patterson and Louise Patterson were not running the center efficiently. It states that: "Louise had attempted to run the activities of the South Side Section and that when anyone became critical of her activities in that regard, she would immediately go to her husband, a paid [Communist Party] employee...During that time Louise was frequently intoxicated and obnoxious and many South Side CP members became disgusted with the leadership of the section."<sup>51</sup> Including this complaint in her file undermined the perception of her as a powerful leader in the organization and positioned her under her husband, William Patterson. Additionally, a report from a member of the Negro Allied Veterans of America "advised that Louise Thompson Patterson might have been a Communist, but he would not consider her a Communist in the same sense that he considered William L. Patterson (her husband) a Communist. Mrs. Patterson was not as aggressive as William in propounding Communist ideology, but she, more or less, went along with her husband's thinking. According to [redacted], Louise was so interested in the fruits of Capitalism that he did not see how she could have a strong feeling for Communism."<sup>52</sup> Once again, Patterson's ideology and actions are attributed to her husband. Recording these statements from Patterson's associates adds a limiting dimension to the FBI's crafted narrative. Agents recognized the gravity of the work she was doing and the importance of her role in the organization, yet they did not see her as a leader with her own radical ideologies which made her less of a national threat.

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<sup>51</sup> Report, July 21, 1951, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 05.

<sup>52</sup> Memo, August 7, 1951, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 06.

As a Black communist woman in the predominantly white Communist Party USA, Patterson often critiqued the party's social dynamics that often left Black Women on the margins.<sup>53</sup> Louise Thompson and Beulah Richardson wrote "A Call to Negro Women" in the summer of 1951, the founding manifesto for the organization known as Sojourn for Truth and Justice (STJ) – an all-Black women's radical group. The manifesto condemned "Jim Crow, lynching, the rape of black women, police brutality, black poverty, political persecution of black radicals, and the imprisonment of Rosa Lee Ingram."<sup>54</sup> STJ "combined black nationalist and Popular Front organizational strategies with Communist positions on race, class, and gender to advocate for Black women globally."<sup>55</sup> On October 1, 1951, as part of the STJ's inaugural convention in Washington D.C., Patterson led a group of 60 Sojourners into the Civil Rights section of the Department of Justice to speak to the Attorney General and demand the government end racial injustice.<sup>56</sup> Patterson continued her leadership in STJ often speaking on their behalf and helping to organize new chapters. In one speech, Patterson stated "that the Sojourners could build 'the greatest organization in the history of our people because, triply oppressed as we are, we can lead the fight for our people's freedom.'"<sup>57</sup> Patterson was a leader in her own right, and she publicly proclaimed and acted on her Black feminist ideologies. Her eminence within STJ raises the question: why was her effectual work not reported in her FBI file? Her politics and position as a leader in radical black, communist organizations would have been enough justification for her continued surveillance without her being married to William

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<sup>53</sup> Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 119.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

Patterson. The FBI's focus on men as a potent "threat to national security," limited their understanding of Black liberation and led agents to turn a blind eye to the important work of Black women.

Because the FBI continued to place importance on Patterson's connections instead of her ideology, they continued to interpret her ideological growth as an expansion of her network. Louise Thompson Patterson was a founding member of the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, "the first and only group during the entire Old Left period explicitly organized 'to fight for full freedom of the Negro people and the dignity of Negro womanhood.'"<sup>58</sup> The creation of this group signifies that Patterson had an understanding of how race, class, and gender intersected to contribute to Black liberation. The group had a radical ideology that "posited black women across the diaspora as the vanguard of global radical change."<sup>59</sup> However, the documentation about Patterson's involvement with Sojourn for Truth and Justice (STJ) in her FBI file focuses on the communist aspect of the group. Agents describe STJ "as a Communist front, and Mrs. Louise Patterson, one of the members of the initiating committee was either a CP member or sympathetic toward the CP."<sup>60</sup> Taking the step to be a founding member of a Black left feminist organization, Patterson proves a sense of leadership and an analysis of Black liberation independent of her husband. At one point, a report on the STJ stated, "It was determined that Negro women progressives were to dislodge themselves from the white women progressives and organize on a national and local basis into chapters of a movement known as the Sojourners for

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>60</sup> Report, August 19, 1951, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 06.

Truth and Justice.”<sup>61</sup> However agents did not interpret this split as a radical action because the surveillance strategies and diction used for Patterson did not change (unless there was a separate file for STJ). Agents continued to vaguely report on Patterson’s activity and involvement with the communist party and STJ. Patterson continued to prove her independence, leadership, and radical politics through her actions and involvement with Sojourners for Truth and Justice, yet the FBI continued to place her within the boundaries of their fixed narrative for Patterson.

At the end of Patterson’s file, FBI agents showed a limited understanding of Patterson outside of her connection to her husband and communism. Patterson’s file was started because of her connection to influential communists, therefore the communist perspective behind her surveillance was consistent throughout her file. The FBI understood the intersection of blackness and communism in Patterson’s work, yet their traditional understanding of gender limited their views of her as a black communist woman. The FBI’s narrative of Patterson as a Black communist woman, relegated her to the shadows of her husband and large communist organizations. As seen in the vague reports on Patterson’s activity and involvement with communism, there was no motivation to develop Patterson’s life outside of her organizational roles.

### **Conclusion**

In the eyes of the FBI, Louise Thompson Patterson was the wife of William L. Patterson, a Black Communist who was a woman, and an active operative within a network of Communist organizations. She was a probable drunk, a friend of Paul Robeson and Claudia Jones, and she

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<sup>61</sup> Report, November 12, 1952, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Louise Thompson Patterson, 100-HQ-407934, section 06.

was a leader, not in her own right, but because of the influence from prominent Communists in her network. Patterson's file began because of her status as Vice President of the IWO and her connection to influential communists proved by a seemingly insignificant list left behind at a Communist meeting raid. Patterson's surveillance continued because she was married to William Patterson, a well-known communist. The FBI came to understand Patterson within the framework of their traditional views on gender. The marriage between Louise Thompson and William Patterson was viewed as a union between a powerful Communist Black man and a Black woman. In the FBI's assessment, their marriage equated to a transference of ideas from William Patterson to Louise Patterson that increased her surveillance visibility, heightened her potential threat to national security, and simultaneously overshadowed her own intersectional ideologies of race, gender, and class.

It would be an overstatement to label Patterson as a primary target of FBI surveillance. Louise Thompson Patterson's surveillance was a tool used by the FBI to achieve their end goal of repressing Communist activity. Patterson was a window in which the Bureau could see into the operations of the International Workers Order and other Communist organizations. Special Agents did not truly understand how different Communist organizations interacted with each other. They did not understand the true agenda of Black communists, specifically Black Communist women like Patterson who worked along the lines of race, class, and gender. They did not know who held the true power within the organizations. Agents were grasping for information and blindly establishing connections based off the information available to them. Similar to a window, agents saw Patterson, but they looked right through her. Based on Patterson's file, the Bureau did not completely comprehend the depth of Patterson's analysis of oppression along the lines of race, gender, and class. When the Bureau looked at Patterson they

saw a network of organizations and that is it. Because of the Bureau's narrow agenda focused on Communist repression, and their sexist views on the capabilities of women, the full potential of Patterson's "threat" to the stability of a racial Capitalist system, as a result of her intersectional ideologies of liberation was never realized.



## Chapter 2: Betty Shabazz

### Introduction

Malcolm X's FBI file began in 1953 because of a letter he wrote in 1950, in which he stated that he was a communist.<sup>62</sup> His surveillance continued with the FBI looking into his criminal records, background information, and his involvement with the "Muslim Cult of Islam."<sup>63</sup> Entire letters written to and from Malcolm are transcribed within his file, direct quotes from his speeches about black nationalism are included, along with a detailed physical description and picture. Two years after his file was initiated, Malcolm was interviewed by the FBI in which he was questioned on his beliefs and teachings on "racial hatred," his following of Elijah Muhammad, and his views of the United States Government.<sup>64</sup> He was placed on the communist index and informants were planted in his temple. Due to the fact that he came into contact with FBI agents, and they questioned the members of his temple, Malcolm was aware of his surveillance.<sup>65</sup> Malcolm X's FBI file reads like the prototypical COINTELPRO file of a Black Power activist of the 1960s. In fact, we can say that his files serve as a prototype of the FBI's efforts to keep tabs on "Black Messiah." However, the story of his wife's surveillance is much different.

Betty Shabazz also experienced FBI surveillance yet it was very different from Malcolm X. Shabazz's file focused more on her interactions with her Nation of Islam network, rather than

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<sup>62</sup> Report, May 4, 1953, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Malcolm X Little, 100-33921, section 01.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Interview, January 10, 1955, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Malcolm X Little, 100-33921, section 01.

<sup>65</sup> Report, May 23, 1955, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Malcolm X Little, 100-33921, section 01.

her political ideology and beliefs. Throughout the twelve years of her surveillance she was never interviewed. Shabazz was rarely ever quoted within her file, and the majority of information on her came from informants and government documents. Regardless of the lack of information on her political activity, Shabazz was placed on the national security index up until 1971. When one looks comparatively at the FBI surveillance between Malcolm X, a Black male radical, and Betty Shabazz, a Black women activist, it is clear that the Bureau focused more attention on the political engagements of Malcolm X under surveillance, making him a target; whereas with Shabazz, the FBI turned its attention to her associates and broader network, consequently using her surveillance as a tool to map networks and associations.

### **“3 Moslems Seized as Police Fighters”**

Betty Shabazz was arrested on May 14, 1958 after two police officers forcibly entered her duplex under the guise of looking for a “Margaret Dorsey.” Betty Shabazz was not an initial target of the police home invasion. Sixteen days later, on June 30, 1958, the first page of Betty Shabazz’s FBI file was entered. Working with the New York Police Department, special agents of the FBI were able to find that Shabazz was indicted on June 3, 1958 for the “felonious assault on a police officer and conspiracy”.<sup>66</sup> Initially, the FBI did not know who Shabazz was. Three informants reported “[they knew] the subject to be married to Malcolm Little, Temple Number 7 minister, but that [they] did not know her personally.”<sup>67</sup> After reading a letter from Malcolm X to the Mayor of New York condemning the police home invasion, the FBI connected Shabazz and

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<sup>66</sup> Report, June 30, 1958, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

Malcolm X as husband and wife.<sup>68</sup> Due to the fact that the information about her arrest was used to start her FBI file only after her marriage to Malcolm X was affirmed, it can be concluded that Shabazz was a tangential subject of surveillance because of her relationship to Malcolm X.

There are discrepancies in the police's story of the invasion of the Queens duplex, along with varying accounts of the sequence of events. However, the fact that the police forcibly entered the home to look for a Margaret Dorsey remains constant. Based off of the FBI files of Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz, the motivation for the police raid of the duplex is unclear. It is not documented who was targeted in this invasion and it is unclear whether a Margaret Dorsey even exists. Shabazz's proximity to Malcolm X in place – they lived together – and relationship as newlyweds, resulted in her being viewed as a potential threat to national security.

A narrative of Shabazz was developed by the FBI based on superficial institutional documents that gave only minor details about her as a person. The FBI began their surveillance of Shabazz by creating a profile for her which included investigating her family background and past endeavors. They started by checking both the Credit Bureau of Greater New York and the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, which both showed “no record for the subject.”<sup>69</sup> The special agents of the Detroit Division found her marriage records in the Vital Records section at the Michigan Department of Health. From her marriage records, they got a description of Malcolm X and Shabazz, whether it was their first marriage or not, their occupations, and the names and addresses of their parents, or in Shabazz's case, her legal guardians.<sup>70</sup> At the end of June 1958 special agents had three goals for continued surveillance of Shabazz:

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

- “1. Will maintain contact of NOI sources at Temple Number 7, NYC, for information pertaining to the subject’s NOI activities.
2. Will maintain contact with [Behavioral Science Section], NYCPD, for final disposition of the matter concerning the subject and her indictment.
3. Will make attempts to verify subject’s present physical condition and to ascertain if and when she expects the birth of her child.”<sup>71</sup>

Similar to the way Shabazz’s surveillance was a product of her association with Malcolm X, her surveillance spread to her network of people in the form of interviews. Three months after the incident at Betty Shabazz’s duplex, a special agent interviewed a housemate at her duplex under the pretext of “a baby food company advertising their baby food products by supplying free samples to expected mothers.”<sup>72</sup> They knew she was pregnant from Malcolm X’s letter to the mayor about the police invasion where he mentions his “pregnant wife.”<sup>73</sup> From the interview, FBI agents were able to ascertain that she was not only pregnant but currently out of town.<sup>74</sup> This would be only the first of many disguised interviews of Shabazz’s close friends and family. However, it is difficult to confirm whether Shabazz knew the interviews were a cover for her surveillance. Shabazz did know Malcolm was being watched because of the random phone

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<sup>71</sup> Memo, June 30, 1958, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

<sup>72</sup> Memo, August, 29, 1958, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

<sup>73</sup> Report, June 30, 1958, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

<sup>74</sup> Report, August, 29, 1958, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

calls and death threats directed towards him, however it is unable to be confirmed if she was aware of any surveillance directed towards her.<sup>75</sup>

The names used to identify Shabazz within her file are indicative of the FBI's perception of her as an accessory to Malcolm X. After confirming her identity as "Betty Little," her association to the Nation of Islam, and her marriage to Malcolm X, the FBI agents added the alias "Mrs. Malcolm Little" to her file. Before then they had been using "Betty Sanders" or "Betty Little" to identify her.<sup>76</sup> Adding the name "Mrs. Malcolm Little" emphasized her connection to Malcolm X, and underscored the FBI's motivation for her surveillance. Even more, the name took away from her embodiment as a separate entity from Malcolm, which, in the FBI's assessment, spread the threat seen in Malcolm to Shabazz.

In November 1958 the surveilling agents and informants started to document her every move associated with the Nation of Islam (NOI) using cursory surveillance methods. For about a month, three informants within the NOI reported each time she attended a Muslim meeting and nothing more. They did not include any specifics such as her interactions with other NOI members and Malcolm, or what she did at these meetings. Her presence at Temple Number 7 every week was valuable information in itself because it was enough evidence to continuously connect her to the NOI – the information needed to justify her surveillance. The reports of her attendance are laid out in sequential order, back to back, in a section by themselves on the same page as the section on "Status of Criminal Indictment."<sup>77</sup> Her attendance reports alongside the

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<sup>75</sup> Russell Rickford, *Betty Shabazz: A Remarkable Story of Survival and Faith Before and After Malcolm X* (Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2003), 201.

<sup>76</sup> Report, August, 29, 1958, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

<sup>77</sup> Report, November 18, 1958, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

status of her case feed into the crafted narrative that Shabazz's surveillance was justified because she had a criminal past and a strong association with the NOI. The reflection of Shabazz in the file is only a shell of her actual life meaning the surveillance of her was inattentive because she was not the primary focus of the surveilling agents.

Looking into Shabazz's background meant contacting anyone who could give information on her past. Shabazz's family was interviewed by special agents to get more background information to add to the FBI profile. On November 14, 1958 a special agent in Detroit interviewed Betty's adoptive mom at her home under the pretext that "he was conducting an investigation and attempting to identify a Betty Sanders, reason not specified."<sup>78</sup> Additionally, they looked into Shabazz and her guardian's Detroit criminal record, credit records, and bank information. From the interview, they received a short timeline of Shabazz's life up until that moment: from her birth in Georgia, to her attending Brooklyn's nursing school, and her marriage to Malcolm. The interview also led the special agents to her high school where they obtained her school file – it included information on the different colleges she attended and her possible addresses in New York.<sup>79</sup> Subsequently, her high school file led New York special agents to the two nursing schools Shabazz attended in New York. The special agents talked to the two principals of the School of Nursing in Brooklyn to find that Shabazz had renounced Catholicism to become part of the NOI.<sup>80</sup> Similar to the transference of surveillance to Shabazz because of her association to Malcolm X, Shabazz's surveillance transferred to anyone associated with her.

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<sup>78</sup> Memo, November 26, 1958, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Betty actually renounced being a Methodist to join the NOI Ula Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 94.

The special agents kept their distance from Shabazz but continued to come into close contact with other people in her life. Motivation for her surveillance and interviews of her family and friends are not stated in the FBI files. Her inattentive surveillance and the constant grasping for information on Shabazz can be understood as a method of mapping surveillance – where the true focus is aimed at the network. Knowing where she was, her activity, and the individuals assumed to be in her network, was a power move asserting the FBI’s ability to dominate and maintain control over “subversive individuals.” However, the information gained from her background check and interviews provided only a glimpse into Shabazz’s past, and gave minimal information on her then present state.

Shabazz was much more involved in the Nation of Islam, specifically the Muslim Girls in Training (MGT) group than the FBI ever revealed in their file. At this point in Shabazz’s life, she was figuring out her role in the Nation of Islam and in her home as a wife and mother. She had just married Malcolm in January of 1958, four months before the start of her surveillance. During the November of 1958, she gave birth to their first child, Atallah.<sup>81</sup> Additionally, she accompanied Malcolm to different speaking engagements “and sometimes, like other minister’s wives she represented the [Muslim Girls in Training General Civilization Class (MGT-GCC)] without him...she addressed affairs, meetings, and conventions in Atlantic City; Detroit; Dorchester; Massachusetts; Chicago; Hartford, Connecticut; New York; and Philadelphia.”<sup>82</sup> Women involved with MGT participated in bazaars where they would sell different items – handmade washcloths and towels, aprons, and children’s cloths – to earn money for themselves,

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<sup>81</sup> Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, (New York: The Penguin Group, 2011), 148.

<sup>82</sup> Ula Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 99.

NOI activities, and the national headquarters in Chicago. In 1959, Malcolm appointed Shabazz as the head of all MGT on the East Coast; a major appointment which put her in a position of leadership in the organization.<sup>83</sup>

One year after the incident at her house, the FBI continued to have a distant yet watchful eye over her activities. After a year of surveillance and interviews with her associated, it was recommended Shabazz not be interviewed because she “is the wife of Malcolm Little...and it is not anticipated that any attempt to interview her would prove successful,” and because she was “involved in an assault against law enforcement officers ..”<sup>84</sup> The decision not to interview her creates the illusion of Shabazz as a dangerous person while simultaneously discrediting her level of importance. In comparison to Malcolm X’s file, Shabazz’s FBI file lacks specificity. Moreover, they illustrate a stark contrast with her husband with whom the FBI special agents conducted a comprehensive interview questioning him on his political beliefs and noting a detailed description of his appearance. The refusal to interview Shabazz aligns with the surveillance tactics throughout her file that become more specific only when her actions are associated with Malcolm X or Elijah Muhammad.

Shabazz’s file has a five-year gap where no information on her surveillance is reported. During that time, Shabazz and Malcolm separated from NOI Temple number 7 in New York and founded Muslim Mosque Incorporated.<sup>85</sup> After a five-year hiatus, the next page in Shabazz’s file is her National Security Index card.<sup>86</sup> The justification for her placement on the National

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>84</sup> Report, June 2, 1959, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

<sup>85</sup> Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, (New York: The Penguin Group, 2011), 325.

<sup>86</sup> Memo, December 24, 1964, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.



Security Index is her interaction with Elijah Muhammad, her activities in the Nation of Islam, specifically with Muslim Girls in Training, and her involvement with the Organization for Afro-American Unity.<sup>87</sup> While her involvement in these organizations are noted, there are no details or elaboration on her role within the organizations, which proves a shallow level of surveillance. Although Shabazz is placed on the National Security Index, once again, they state they will not interview her because she is the wife of Malcolm X, who is understood as a revolutionary figure, and “an attempt to interview his wife could cause embarrassment to the Bureau and is deemed inadvisable.”<sup>88</sup> Betty is not viewed as a revolutionary figure because of her involvement in any organization, yet her proximity to Malcolm makes her revolutionary and a threat to national security. Shabazz’s surveillance can be understood as a potential avenue to acquire more information on Malcolm. Her proximity to Malcolm made her a satellite for information in the eyes of the FBI.

Betty Shabazz’s file is filled with her goings and coming to NOI meetings, small interactions with persons of interest, and slight revolutionary statements. In 1964, eight years after the start of her file, the FBI took all of the information they collected and put it in story form – separating the information into categories such as birth, education, residence and employment, former residence, marriage records, children, identification records, arrest records, credit, NOI activity on the part of Shabazz, attendance or activity at NOI meetings, association with Muslim Girls in Training, association with the Organization for Afro-American Unity, and her physical description. In the section titled “Attendance and/or Activities at NOI Meetings at New York,” dating from 1958 to 1963, the FBI recorded her attendance at any NOI event in both

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

Chicago and New York. A lot of the entries looked like this: “Little attended five meetings of the NOI Mosque Number 7 from August 15, 1958 through September 14, 1958 at New York City.”<sup>89</sup> Most reports had little information about what she did at the meetings, what was said, what the meeting was about, or how Betty participated in the meeting. The lack of information does not align with the propinquity of the source to Shabazz because most of the intelligence collected came from African-American informants within the NOI; informants who were supposed to have interacted with her on a personal level, yet they only reported on her goings and comings to NOI meetings. This misalignment of details raises the question of whether Betty was the focus of the informants’ covert surveillance, or merely a tangential player in the overall of surveillance of the NOI and Malcolm.

Intelligence reports become more detailed whenever Shabazz is in the presence of a male target or when she mentions a male person of interest, reinforcing her role as a tangential subject of FBI surveillance. For example, on August 13, 1959 – the first time a portion of her speech is recorded and transcribed in the file – she mentions Elijah Muhammad, stating according to the informant, “‘Elijah Muhammad is providing jobs and opportunity for all of us.’ She said ‘we are going to have a bank of our own here in Chicago and we are going to loan money. This bank is being organized on paper now. We are going to have a restaurant, dress shop and bakery just like we have in Chicago. We are also going to open a health center here. We want educated members with college degrees to help us so that we can help our own people.’”<sup>90</sup> Additionally, reports on her involvement with the Organization of Afro-American Unity shift the focus away from her as an individual to the actions of the group, which associate Shabazz with the group’s politics, and

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<sup>89</sup> Report, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

in a sense, credit her political views to the group rather than her as an individual. “Little attended an OAAU meeting held at Hotel Theresa on August 24, 1964 at New York City. At this meeting a discussion was held on the ‘Congo Situation.’ It was suggested that members of the OAAU come out openly and take a stand against what is going on in the Congo and to pass out leaflets protesting United States activities in the Congo Area.”<sup>91</sup> The language used in this entry is vague and indirect. The words “a discussion” and “it was suggested” are non-specific to Shabazz and cover for the lack of specificity in the surveillance entry.

When compared to Malcolm X’s file, the physical description of Shabazz is also vague and non-specific. Special agents used information from her school, marriage, and arrest records along with input from informants to create her written description<sup>92</sup>:

Name	BETTY LITTLE nee Betty D. Sanders aka Mrs. Malcolm K. Little, Betty Shabazz, Mrs. Malcolm Shabazz, and Betty X.
Date of Birth	May 28, 1934, at Pinehurst, Georgia
Race	Negro
Sex	Female
Height	Five feet, seven inches
Weight	130 pounds
Complexion	Medium
Eyes	Brown
Build	Slightly stocky
FBI Number	B-415754
Residence	23-11 97th Street East Elmhurst Queens, New York
Former Residence	313 Hague Street, Detroit, Michigan 1952-1953 Brooklyn State Hospital (Nursing School) 681 Clarkson Avenue Brooklyn, New York September, 1953-September, 1956. 25-50 99th Street East Elmhurst, 1958
Fingerprint Classification	15 0 29 W 100 17 I 20 W 001

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

On the surface level this may seem like a standard description, however, when compared to Malcolm X's FBI file, it lacks detail. His file includes a section for scars and marks – detailing a one-inch scar from the right eye to the nose, a half-inch scar on the chin, and a two-inch scar below the elbow. The peculiarities section states he is a confirmed user of marijuana, wears chin whiskers, and has a mustache, while Shabazz's file lacked a “peculiarity” section altogether.<sup>93</sup> The FBI file gives space for more nuance and complexity in Malcolm X's life, which can be seen in his transcribed speeches and letters, interviews, and blatantly within his description. Shabazz's file frames her as merely a void figure moving through space. She is not portrayed as her own entity by the FBI, she does not initiate actions, actions are done to her. People interact with her, the spaces she occupies define her as a threat, and her speech and actions are rooted in the ideals of Elijah Muhammad or Malcolm X. The file frames her as a person without agency, although Shabazz was a person who continuously tried to assert her independence within an organization that called for her to be submissive to patriarchal rule. Her surveillers come into close contact with her, yet they continue to erase her peculiarities and complexities, ultimately seeing her as an addendum to others and not as an actor in her own right.

The major events or incidents that impact Malcolm but also have a great effect on Shabazz were not considered in her file or as part of Shabazz's life. For instance, on February 14, 1965, the home of Shabazz and Malcolm X was fire-bombed while their family was inside the home asleep. In her FBI file, in relation to her change of address the special agents wrote: “A recent change has been determined but is being set forth below (change only specified).”<sup>94</sup> There

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<sup>93</sup> Report, May 4, 1953, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Malcolm X Little, 100-33921, section 01.

<sup>94</sup> Memo, January 28, 1965, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

was no indication that her house had been bombed, no report on possible suspects, and no mention of whether she was safe. Compared to Malcolm X's file where an entire report of the incident, including the method used to bomb the house, was painstakingly transcribed. Additionally, her FBI file completely skips over Malcolm's death, not even mentioning he was no longer alive. The next page in her file, after Malcolm died, focused on a Sudanese student who gave a eulogy at Malcolm's funeral; this is the first mention of Malcolm's death.

After Malcolm's death, Shabazz's identity is cemented as an extension of Malcolm's life in the FBI file. Within the next page of Shabazz's file, she is primarily referred to as the widow of Malcolm X. At one point, when talking about the Sudanese student they referred to Shabazz as: "Malcolm's widow, Betty."<sup>95</sup> This was a stark departure from the previous names used for her such as "Betty D. Sanders," "Betty Little," or "Betty Shabazz." Previously, whenever they referred to her within the text of a file they would say her first and last name such as "Betty Little," or just her last name such as "Little." Reintroducing her as Malcolm's widow, fortifies her marriage to Malcolm X, designating it as her defining element. This change in the way they refer to Shabazz signals a shift in surveillance; once Malcolm was dead, they began to view her as her own entity acting on behalf of Malcolm's legacy.

Shabazz's movement and activity after her husband's death are always placed in the context of Malcolm's legacy and ideology. After Malcolm's death, Shabazz took a pilgrimage to Mecca paid for by the Muslim World League of Saudi Arabia. In her FBI file, her trip was not documented at the same level of obscurity as had been before. The special agents wanted details about her trip – what city she departed from, the airline she used, and the city she would return

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<sup>95</sup> Report, March 17, 1964, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

to.<sup>96</sup> Even when relying on informants, who had been keyed into Malcolm's network, they could not find this information. The special agents' interest in the details of her travel align with the shift in her surveillance after Malcolm X's death. Her surveillance initially began because she was a tangential actor in Malcolm's life, and they viewed her as an avenue to get more information on him. Her pilgrimage proved she had an international network after Malcolm's death, and it demonstrated a level of independent agency they may have not previously accounted for. In Malcolm's absence, she is understood as an extension of Malcolm – an individual person acting under the same ideologies and beliefs that made Malcolm be perceived as dangerous, and her pilgrimage to Mecca confirmed their views of her as a threat.

The FBI continued to define Shabazz by her association to people of interest, not just Malcolm. People around the world came together to support Shabazz and her family in the wake of Malcolm X's murder. Her support from Black activists was diverse, including pan-africanist Shirley Graham DuBois and the Socialist Workers Party. Additionally, a benefit night was held to buy a new home for Shabazz and her family. "The sponsoring committee [was] the 'Concerned Mothers' Co-chairmen [were] Miss Ruby Dee and Mrs. Sidney Poitier. Honorary Chairmen [were] James Farmer, National Director, CORE; Mrs. W.E.B. DuBois; Cleveland Robinson secretary-treasurer, District 65 RWDSU, AFL-CIO; Doris Turner, Vice-president, Local 1199 Drug & Hospital Workers Union, AFL-CIO; and Fannie Lou Hamer, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party."<sup>97</sup> Even though Shabazz was not able to make it to the performance because of her pilgrimage, there were still informants in the audience at the Benefit Night.

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<sup>96</sup> Report, April 13, 1965, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

<sup>97</sup> Memo, April 29, 1965, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

Seeing people with different levels of involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, Unions, and people who held communist beliefs come together to uplift Shabazz and her family increased her level of importance and maintained the belief in her as security threat. Although Shabazz was establishing herself as an individual, she was continuously characterized by her associations and relationships to prominent people.

Special agents followed her interactions and activity in relation to the OAAU. Using information from informants, FBI agents learned about the tension between OAAU members and who would take over as leader in Malcolm's absence. In an argument over leadership of the organization, Shabazz and Malcolm's sister, Ella Collins, had a falling out. There was a split, and the OAAU Provisional Committee formed of people who supported Betty Shabazz.<sup>98</sup> However, in the FBI file, their informant discredits the OAAU Provisional Committee as not a real organization, stating "it is, in reality, just a number of individuals who were followers of the late Malcolm X and the memory of the latter continues to linger in their hearts."<sup>99</sup> This quote is indicative of the way special agents, informants, and the public viewed her. They did not see her as Malcolm. They did not see her as having the same power, militant, or authoritative capacity as him. They understood Shabazz as a vestige of Malcolm X's legacy, and not as a separate political figure in her own right.

After her split with the OAAU, the FBI stopped closely watching her activity. It is documented in her file that Betty Shabazz gave birth to twins in October of 1965, but the information came from a newspaper article, signifying a decrease in the intensity of her surveillance. After this point in 1965, her overall surveillance drastically declines. At the

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<sup>98</sup> Report, December 13, 1965, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 02.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

beginning of 1966, Special Agents checked in with Shabazz's bank and the Records Division to find that she was running a boarding house out of her new home in New Rochelle, NY.<sup>100</sup> At this time, even though she was no longer active in the OAAU or Muslim Mosque Incorporated, she was put on the 1966 security index with the justification being her "previous activity in the OAAU...past affiliation with NOI, MMI, OAAU, and fact that she [was] the late widow of Malcolm X Little, leader of these groups."<sup>101</sup> Despite numerous statements of her decline in "racial activity," the FBI kept her on the security index and maintained a minimal level of surveillance until 1971. Over those five years, Shabazz participated in speaking engagements on behalf of Malcolm X and was engaged with the Republic of New Africa.

### **Conclusion**

Shabazz was placed in the shadow of Malcolm X by the greater public and FBI agents conducting her surveillance. From the beginning of her surveillance she was a casualty of Malcolm being targeted. Her positionality as Malcolm's wife was reinforced in her surveillance through the FBI's traditional notions of gender roles. In their view, she was trapped in her marriage to Malcolm; she had no identity outside of him. She was not treated as a separate entity with her own beliefs and political actions. Her voice was shrouded by Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad's voice – the FBI only included quotes from her were when she mentioned them. The justification for her continued surveillance was her marriage to Malcolm. Her surveillance was determined by her relationships and the spaces she occupied.

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<sup>100</sup> Report, January 18, 1966, U.S Federal Bureau of Investigation, Betty Shabazz, HQ-105-29845, section 01.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.



Shabazz's surveillance began because she lived in the house with Malcolm X and other Nation of Islam members. She was arrested and later identified as Malcolm X's wife. At this point, FBI agents knew nothing about who she was or about her level of involvement with the NOI. Throughout her file, each time they documented her attendance at an NOI meeting or an OAAU meeting, regardless of her activity at these meetings, the case for her being a "subversive individual" was strengthened. The fact that her presence within these spaces was enough evidence for her surveillance, indicates the FBI's surveillance was not an intentional way to gain intelligence; it was a method of control stemming from a place of being unaware of actual occurrences in the Nation of Islam.

Shabazz's surveillance was made possible because of her proximity to persons of interest. The informants who reported on Shabazz's attendance at NOI meetings and her involvement were in place to provide information on other individuals, not Shabazz. The structures of surveillance put in place to watch Malcolm made it easy to surveil Shabazz as a subsidiary subject. The FBI surveillance of her was relentlessly consistent yet there were gaps in knowledge; it was simultaneously invasive and distant. Shabazz came into contact with the informants, yet the amount of detail on her life did not match the level of specificity in Malcolm's file. The lens of the FBI did not give space for human complexity, but instead reduced Shabazz to the wife of a leader. Shabazz's surveillance lends itself to the dual visibility of Black women. There is a hypervisibility in being consistently watched, criticized, and put under a label to reinforce social hierarchies, yet there is an invisibility where her humanity, work, and complexity is undermined and reduced to fit their minimalizing view of a Black radical woman.

### Chapter 3: Mabel Williams

#### Beginning of File

On October 10, 1961 William Worthy Jr., a prominent Black journalist and Civil Rights activist with close ties to people like A. Phillip Randolph and Malcolm X, arrived in Miami, Florida from Havana, Cuba on a commercial airline flight. Before leaving the country, Worthy's request for a passport renewal was denied by the State Department because of his travel in Communist China and Hungary. When he tried to enter the country, Worthy showed his birth certificate as proof of his citizenship, however that was not sufficient. Worthy was arrested and charged with unlawfully entering the United States without a valid passport.<sup>102</sup> His case became well-known with people around the world rallying to protest his arrest. Robert F. Williams and Mabel Williams, along with a group of other Americans seeking asylum in Cuba, sent a petition to the United States attorney general, Robert F. Kennedy. The petition called for the release of William Worthy Jr. connecting his case to "mass arrests and police brutality directed against Negro people throughout the USA."<sup>103</sup> The name of "Robert F. Williams" on the petition stuck out to the Assistant Attorney General because he was wanted by the FBI "for interstate flight to avoid kidnapping charges."<sup>104</sup> Williams was considered an armed and dangerous man, therefore the FBI moved to investigate all of the names signed on the petition in case they ever returned to

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<sup>102</sup> William Worthy, Jr., Appellant, v. United States of America, Appellee, 328 F.2d 386 (5th Cir. 1964).

<sup>103</sup> Memo, August 17, 1962, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mabel Williams, 100-HQ-439185.

<sup>104</sup> Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & Roots of Black Power*, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 28.

the United States.<sup>105</sup> This move to investigate the names on the petition list with Robert Williams marks the beginning of Mabel Robinson Williams' FBI file, however this is not the starting point of her surveillance. By placing her name on a petition associated with William Worthy Jr. – a communist empathizer and Civil Rights Activists – and her husband, Williams heightened her visibility to FBI agents. At this moment, agents did not consider her an immediate threat but an accessory, which is why the first real report on Williams was not entered into her file until six years later on March 7, 1968.

FBI surveillance of Mabel Williams was justified by her marriage to Robert Williams, a perceived threat to national security. In 1968, FBI agents received intelligence that Robert Franklin Williams was planning to return to the United States, which prompted Mabel Williams' surveillance: "In view of [Mabel Williams] long residences in Cuba and China, her probable sympathy for the revolutionary beliefs of Robert Williams, and the information indicating that Robert Williams intends to return to the United States, it is desired that a report on the subject be prepared at this time."<sup>106</sup> Using the word "probable" in the report signifies their ignorance of her revolutionary beliefs and emphasizes that the essence of their surveillance justification lies in the assumption of shared ideologies. As seen in past chapters with women who were the wives of prominent leaders, marriage is perceived as a transference of ideologies with the wife taking the role of the passive student and accessory to potential crimes. Therefore, Williams actions and movement are viewed as an extension of her husband's, with Mabel Williams acting as an adherent with no knowledge or agency of her own. The passive language used to refer to

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<sup>105</sup> Memo, August 17, 1962, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mabel Williams, 100-HQ-439185.

<sup>106</sup> Report, March 7, 1968, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mabel Williams, 100-HQ-439185.

Williams, the inexorable framing of her as a wife and mother, and the refusal of the surveilling agents to take action on her potential threat, proves the concentration of Mabel Williams' surveillance was aimed at gaining intelligence on her husband through their relationship.

FBI agents spend most of Williams file justifying her potential threat to anticipate her return to the United States with her husband. There is a duality in Williams file in that agents engage in both retroactive and anticipatory surveillance. In 1968, when Williams file began, she was living in Tanzania with her husband and sons. The physical distance of Williams from the United States made it difficult for agents to engage in active surveillance, which prompted investigators to gather intelligence on Williams from past events. The only form of active surveillance was directed at Williams' family and friends still residing in the United States. Much of Williams' file is based on government documents, past surveillance reports on Robert Williams, and covert surveillance of those close to her. In that sense, the FBI agents' strategy is retroactive by looking to the past for information, yet anticipatory by setting up Williams' profile in preparation for her return.

### **Portrayal of Mabel Williams**

In Mabel Williams file, the Bureau treats her as a non-threatening subject whose actions are not deliberate and are a result of her following her husband. One of the first issues addressed in her file is that she lived in countries that were on a U.S. travel ban list. In a report from the Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs it is brought to the FBI's attention that Mabel Williams violated the travel ban to Cuba. Williams travelled from New York to Canada by car and then from Canada to Cuba without a valid passport. However, Williams' personal responsibility for these actions is redirected to her husband by noting that Robert Williams – the main person who

was placed on a lookout notice – travelled to Cuba with her. There is “a lack of evidence to establish the subject’s knowledge of the ban on travel to Cuba, the precise point of her departure from the United States, and her intention to travel to Cuba when she departed from this country.”<sup>107</sup> The report concluded Williams would not be prosecuted for the violation of the travel ban, however a lookout notice for her was placed through the Immigration and Naturalization Service so when she did return to the United States her case could be reviewed for prosecution.<sup>108</sup> The lookout notice reflected the FBI agents attempt to put in place a method to repress and persecute Williams before she even returned to the United States. Traversing boundaries and physically existing outside of U.S. national law signifies an outright rejection of governing laws, whether it was of her own will or not. Although she is not credited for “intent,” her actions set her up to be a future threat.

Mabel Williams developed her political ideologies through her community-centered activism that delivered behind-the-scenes, impactful support to the Monroe Black community. With her neighbor, Azalea Johnson, Williams cofounded the Crusader’s Association for Relief and Enlightenment (CARE) in 1945. The organization critiqued the lack of support for the Black community and intervened by providing poor Black families in Monroe with clothing and food. Women were the primary leaders of this organization; they held sewing and Black history classes for Black women and children.<sup>109</sup> During the late 1940s and 1950s, Williams typed many of her husband’s protest letters he sent to newspapers and magazines, and, with her husband, “wrote articles published in the *Monroe Enquirer* that challenged segregation and anti-black

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<sup>107</sup> J. Walter Yeagley to Abba P. Schwartz, Letter, January 6, 1966, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mabel Williams, 100-HQ-439185.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Pero G. Dagbovie, “God Has Spared Me to Tell My Story,” *The Black Scholar* 43, (2013): 79.

violence.”<sup>110</sup> In 1959, Azalea Johnson, Mabel Williams, and Robert Williams started a newsletter, *The Crusader*, where Mabel Williams played a central role in writing articles, editing, and producing the physical magazine copies.<sup>111</sup> Although Williams engaged in low-profile activism, she did not hesitate to act on her belief in armed self-defense. Williams was a member of her husband’s rifle club where she trained to protect her home and family; on several occasions, she even “prevented police officers from invading her home at gunpoint.”<sup>112</sup> Williams was not just a passive participant in her husband’s political actions and ideologies, she was actively engaged in protecting and uplifting her Black community where she saw fit. The FBI may not have seen her grassroots activism as “a threat to national security,” but she was more than the wife and mother the FBI perceived her to be.

The minimization of Mabel Williams as an activist proves the extent of FBI surveillance did not go beyond their purview of males as the dominating role in relationships and Black radical organizations. Williams was more than just a figure attached to her husband. She played a key role in maintaining, producing, and perpetuating Black armed self-defense and Black power from a local and global perspective. Yet, within her FBI file the only reflection of Williams work is through her husband. Mabel Williams was not recommended for inclusion in the Security Index because “it [appeared] that rather than having taken an active part in the subversive activities of her husband Robert Franklin Williams, [a Security Index] subject, she has merely gone along with him in a more passive rather than active manner. The activities of subject’s husband are followed on regular basis and her activities are also followed through investigation of his activities. If and when it appears that her activities have progressed to the point that she

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 79.

should be included in the [Security Index], this case will be re-evaluated and appropriate recommendation made.”<sup>113</sup> The FBI’s strategy of monitoring Mabel Williams through her husband’s activities, confirms their view of the couple as a unit, but not as equal partners. Robert Williams’ image is placed onto Mabel Williams in a perfunctory way. Special agents see Robert’s actions as applying to Mabel Williams, yet their surveillance does not act on her as a “national threat,” which can be understood as a hierarchical perception of the relationship where Robert Williams is the most important role. Proved within the brief 75 pages of her FBI file and by the retroactive scramble for intelligence, the Bureau overlooked Williams capacity as a radical operative and agent in her own right.

After the Williams family fled the United States, covert surveillance was used to gain information about them. Although it is not explicitly stated in the files, based on the language and level of detail in the reports it can be inferred that informants conducted covert interviews with Williams’ sister, Elizabeth Robinson Redfern. Somehow, an informant obtained a letter written from Mabel Williams to her sister about how she was “dissatisfied with conditions in Cuba and wished they were back home.”<sup>114</sup> Her sister also told the unnamed informant their family was trying to bring Mabel Williams back home because their mom “was out of her mind again” and it appeared as though she might have to be committed to a mental institution.<sup>115</sup> Her mother’s mental break down was attributed to the Williams fleeing the country from kidnapping charges after the race riot in Monroe.<sup>116</sup> This is the first reflection, from the FBI’s perspective, of

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<sup>113</sup> Report, May 20, 1968, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mabel Williams, 100-HQ-439185.

<sup>114</sup> Special Agent Guy Hill Cox Jr., Report, May 20, 1968, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mabel Williams, 100-HQ-439185.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

Williams' views on leaving the country to live in Cuba. The secondhand relaying of information through the lenses of a separated family is the primary depiction of Williams throughout her FBI file. The intelligence on Williams did not come from direct surveillance of her, which made it easy for FBI agents to craft a superficial narrative of Williams life.

FBI agents utilized government documents to track Williams and from there derive the intentions of her movements. On June 22, 1964, Mabel Williams applied for Swiss protection passports for herself and two sons.<sup>117</sup> Special agents were able to extract her Birthday, Birthplace, current address in Cuba, along with information and names of family members from the application. With the application, Williams stated the reason for her coming to Cuba was to "join [her] husband, who was already living there...and principal reason for there was to keep their family together."<sup>118</sup> However, Williams was not able to return to the United States because she had to wait about five months to obtain Mexican transit visas.<sup>119</sup> An informant report in July 1965 stated Elizabeth Redfern, Williams' sister, received a letter informing her that Robert Williams took one of their sons to China with him, and Williams and her husband were not getting along very well together.<sup>120</sup> The state department documents along with the informant intelligence paint a picture of a struggling mother trying to keep her family together despite the agenda of her husband. Agents used the documents to reinforce their assumptions of a women's obligation to her family, as well as to support the FBI's perception of Williams as having a compliant role in her relationship in addition to being ignorant of radical ideologies.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.



### Perceptions of Political Involvement

The language used to report on Williams' political involvement positioned her as an assistant to her husband. In an FBI interview with Mattie Livingston, a neighbor of the Williams family, Robert Williams is recognized as the driving force behind the publication of *The Crusader* newsletter. "She stated that he is assisted in this endeavor by his wife Mabel and a neighbor Azalee Johnson (sic)."<sup>121</sup> The word "assisted" takes away any sense of ownership or significant contribution Williams made to *The Crusader*, ultimately revealing the FBI's ignorance of actual internal operations as Williams was a writer and played a central role in the publishing of the newsletter.<sup>122</sup> Later in the interview, Livingston informed the agent that Robert Williams had "been relieved of his position as President of the Monroe chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Through his influence; however, his wife Mabel now holds this position."<sup>123</sup> The connotation in the interview is that Williams replaced her husband as President not because of her own competence, but because of her access and connection to her husband. Williams' leadership and involvement was perceived within the framework of the duties of a wife. By understanding Williams within the confines of the role of a traditional woman, they discredited her individual agency which created a cover for Williams to continue her integral, radical work.

Although Robert Williams was more visible, involved in outward-facing operations, Mabel Williams worked closely with her husband and was a leader in her own right. While Robert Williams was President of the NAACP chapter in Monroe, and during the six months he

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Pero G. Dagbovie, "God Has Spared Me to Tell My Story," *The Black Scholar* 43, (2013): 80.

<sup>123</sup> Special Agent Guy Hill Cox Jr., Report, May 20, 1968, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mabel Williams, 100-HQ-439185.

was suspended as an official in 1959, “the people of her community elected her interim president.”<sup>124</sup> Williams also was involved in foreign affairs when she lived abroad with her husband in exile. While in Cuba in 1962, Robert and Mabel Williams created a radio program called “Radio Free Dixie.” Robert Williams wrote his own script, “often reading his speeches to her for feedback before broadcasting them, and Mabel Williams was in charge of playing socially conscious music and reading news items about the struggle going on in the United States.”<sup>125</sup> In 1965, the Williams family relocated to China where Mabel and Robert Williams met the top Peking leaders, including Mao Zedong. Additionally, they traveled to North Vietnam with “her husband and members of the China Peace Committee to participate in the International Conference for Solidarity with the People of Vietnam Against US Imperialism for the Defense of Peace.”<sup>126</sup> While in Vietnam they met the communist revolutionary Ho Chi Minh, and discussed with the anticolonial struggle with him.<sup>127</sup> While abroad, Mabel Williams was not just living with her husband in exile, she was building an international network of revolutionary people while also cultivating her own political beliefs on liberation.

FBI agents foreground Robert Williams by referring to him by name as compared to identifying Williams in the secondhand. The reports on the Williams family activity in Peking, China consistently refers to Mabel Williams as “his wife.” “A [New China News Agency] dispatch dated October 1, 1963, Peking, stated that Chairman Mao Tse-tung received and had a cordial, friendly talk with Robert Williams and his wife on that day.”<sup>128</sup> Robert Williams is

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<sup>124</sup> Pero G. Dagbovie, “God Has Spared Me to Tell My Story,” *The Black Scholar* 43, (2013): 80.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>128</sup> Special Agent Guy Hill Cox Jr., Report, May 20, 1968, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mabel Williams, 100-HQ-439185.

framed as an active participant and the main recipient of the conversation with Mao Tse-Tung. Through the language, Mabel Williams and Robert Williams are not portrayed as a couple on equal levels with each other, and Mabel is relegated to an afterthought. Furthermore, in another report on September 23, 1964, Robert Williams is given the descriptor of “a noted American Negro leader,” while Mabel Williams is referred to as “his wife and two children.”<sup>129</sup> The language FBI agents used to give more attention to Robert Williams than Mabel exposes their motivation of surveillance. Although the surveillance subject was Mabel Williams, the ultimate target was her husband.

Even when Williams is explicit with her radical beliefs, surveillance perceptions of her do not change. On February 21, 1967, Mabel and Robert Williams were interviewed by the “People’s Daily” on their impression of the great proletarian cultural revolution. Mabel Williams is quoted as saying, “I started to study Chairman Mao’s works several years ago. At that time, I only made a study of the works and I had no personal experience in applying them. After I came to China, I began to acquire a deeper understanding. I have begun to use Mao Tse-Tung’s thoughts to guide myself and to revolutionize my own thinking.”<sup>130</sup> Williams goes on to assert that Mao Tse-Tung’s thought should be taught to people in the U.S. to revolutionize their thinking and allow them to struggle better.<sup>131</sup> In this interview, Williams proved her revolutionary intentions and her support for communist ideologies. Even more, she explicitly states her long term study of Mao Tse-Tung indicating herself as more than just a passive student to her husband’s beliefs. However, after the report of her interview, surveillance strategies do not change. In past FBI files – Louise Thompson Patterson, Betty Shabazz, and Malcolm X – the

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

existence or association with any type of communist thought was enough justification for placement on the Security Index. In Williams' case, FBI perceptions of her did not shift, she is not placed on the security index, and her husband continues to be the focus of surveillance. On June 25, 1969, an informant reported that Williams and her two sons were planning to return to the United States, and Robert Williams would remain in Tanzania.<sup>132</sup> After they received the report Mabel Williams would be returning to the United States without her husband, surveillance of Williams dropped off for three years until 1972.

Mabel Williams' surveillance was reinitiated when she became involved with a foreign organization on behalf of her husband. On January 4, 1972, Williams was "contacted by the Japanese Committee for the Defense of the Life and Fundamental Human Rights of Robert F. Williams. [Mabel Williams] was reportedly advised that that organization had directed telegrams to President Nixon, Vice President Agnew, Chou En-Lai and Carl Albert, Speaker of the House of Representatives, requesting that Robert F. Williams be freed from 'frame up and contempt of Congress charges.'"<sup>133</sup> Being contacted by a foreign organization solely devoted to Robert F. Williams, a key black extremist, that was in communication with high ranking U.S. officials heightened Williams surveillance visibility. Special agents immediately requested an investigation using "established sources and informants to identify captioned subject and to determine the nature and extent of her involvement in black extremist activities."<sup>134</sup> Immediately, following this request is an update on Robert Williams activity, which supports the theme of

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<sup>132</sup> Report, July 22, 1969, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mabel Williams, 100-HQ-439185.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

Robert Williams as the underlying target of surveillance. Again, Mabel Williams was used as a tool for agents to attain intelligence and bolster their surveillance of Robert Williams.

Mabel Williams surveillance diminished once she was no longer in contact with foreign ambassadors. On January 24, 1972, Williams “was contacted by Jo Li-liang, counsellor of the People’s Republic of China Mission to the United Nations (PRCMUN), and wife of Huang Hua, permanent representative of PRCMUN. Ho invited Mrs. Williams and her husband to come to New York to visit with her and Huang Hua. Ho said it has been a long time since they have seen the Williams.”<sup>135</sup> Following this conversation FBI agents closely monitored any contact Williams had with the PRCMUN representatives. A month later the new push to investigate Williams was brought to a halt when it was affirmed the Williams family would not visit with the PRCMUN representatives. The last page of Mabel Williams’ file was from a report on June 15, 1972 stating that “since the subject has been identified as the wife of Robert Franklin Williams, on whom a case is currently pending, Detroit is closing this matter.”<sup>136</sup> This last sentence can be understood as either the decision to take any future information on Mabel Williams and place it in her husband’s file, or the perception that Williams was no longer useful in providing adequate information about her husband. Williams’ file abruptly ends when correspondence with the Japanese organization and representatives of the Peoples Republic of China stopped.

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<sup>135</sup> Memo, February 2, 1972, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mabel Williams, 100-HQ-439185.

<sup>136</sup> Memo, June 15, 1972, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mabel Williams, 100-HQ-439185.

## Conclusion

Surveillance of Mabel Robinson Williams was used as a tool to conduct a larger spying operation on a key black extremist, her husband Robert F. Williams. Her surveillance was initiated because of her marriage to her husband. Throughout the file, it is evident the FBI did not understand Mabel Williams. They never engage her political beliefs or involvement. Instead, they positioned her as a wife radicalized by her husband, a key Black extremist. While the FBI may have been motivated to watch Williams because of the *possibility* of her being a Black extremist, their views on women limited their view of her. To the FBI, Mabel Williams was a wife and mother, and not much more. When looking back on information collected from past surveillance of Robert Williams and those around him, they focused on Mabel Williams assistance to her husband rather than her individual involvement.

Many wives of influential black leaders describe themselves as working in the shadows of their husband, and the FBI played into the assumption that women operated in the shadows of their husband. The radical activity of Robert Williams overshadowed Mabel Williams giving her the ability to operate with minimal surveillance. Special agents did not see Mabel Williams, they saw the shadow of Robert Williams. The focus was on Robert Williams and she became a collated subject of surveillance due to her association, involvement, and assistance to him. In other words, the FBI profiled their targets based on their identity, and simultaneously played into gender stereotypes. Their one-dimensional understanding of gender created a blind spot in which Mabel Williams could carry out her radical activity without intervention from the FBI.

## CONCLUSION

“On July 7, 2016, Micah Johnson ambushed and shot 11 law enforcement officers, killing five, in downtown Dallas, Texas during a First Amendment protected protest, before being ultimately killed by the police. The five deceased officers were white....During the standoff with police, Johnson told police negotiators he was upset about recent police shootings and white people, and expressed a desire to kill white people, especially white officers.”<sup>137</sup> On October 23, 2014, “Zale H. Thompson attacked four white New York Police Department officers in Queens with a hatchet....According to an open source reporting, Thompson was angered after ‘a recent spate of deaths at the hands of the police.’ In his own writings, Thompson advocated for armed struggle against ‘the oppressor’ and ‘mass revolt’ against the US social, economic, and political systems, which he perceived to be ‘white dominated.’”<sup>138</sup> On November 21, 2014, “a [Black Identity Extremist] was arrested and eventually convicted for purchasing explosive the subject intended to use in the Ferguson area upon release of the grand jury verdict for the police officer involved in the shooting death of [Michael Brown]. He previously discussed a desire to kill white St. Louis County prosecutor and the white Ferguson police chief who were involved in Brown’s case, according to FBI information.”<sup>139</sup> On August 3, 2017, the FBI released an intelligence assessment titled “Black Identity Extremists Likely Motivated to Target Law Enforcement Officers,” where they pinpointed the ideology of supreme blackness as the motivation for violence against police officers.<sup>140</sup> The title “Black Identity Extremists” suggests the FBI is thinking about identity in a more critical way. However, demonstrated in the three out of six

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<sup>137</sup> Report, August 3, 1972, U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Black Identity Extremists Likely Motivated to Target Law Enforcement Officers, 2.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

stories presented in the intelligence assessment, the main identity explicitly addressed is the race of perpetrators and police victims. Inexplicitly stated, all of the perpetrators of violence referred to are men. The fact that the FBI centers these six men as the essence of what they call the “Black Identity Extremist” movement when the Black Lives Matter movement was founded, and has been led, by many Black queer women, demonstrates a continued lack of understanding by the FBI on social dynamics of intersectional identities and their power in liberation movements – evident in Louise Thompson Patterson’s FBI file dating back to 1941.

Understanding the gendered assumptions FBI agents perpetuated through surveillance gives a different perspective on the impact of surveillance on different individuals and social movements. Public visibility is an important factor in surveillance. As seen in the Louise Thompson Patterson, Betty Shabazz, and Mabel Williams FBI file, the perception of who had power and who was a threat was based on the level of visibility of the target. The social hierarchies and oppressive systems of the larger society were often replicated within many communist, civil rights, and Black Power organizations.<sup>141</sup> Black women were regularly placed in positions below their male counterparts which affected their outward facing visibility. However, Black women were also essential to the effective function and operation of organizations.<sup>142</sup> The attribution of power based on visibility reveals FBI agents often lacked a

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<sup>141</sup> Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011); Keith Gilyard, *Louise Thompson Patterson: A Life of Struggle for Justice*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017); Pero G. Dagbovie, “God Has Spared Me to Tell My Story,” *The Black Scholar* 43, (2013).

<sup>142</sup> Ashley Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed and Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Robyn Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party In Oakland*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press: 2016); Ula Y. Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).



critical understanding of the internal workings of these different organizations, or an analysis of the ways gender politics played out in Black liberation projects.

The FBI surveillance of these Black women stripped the details of their complex lives in order to place them within their perceptions of traditional gender roles and marriage. The gendered stereotypes of Black women were perpetuated through surveillance creating a blind spot for the FBI. The tension between hyper-visibility of surveillance and invisibility deriving from gendered stereotypes, resulted in two things: it created a cover for the women to continue their political activity without the repercussions of suppressive surveillance, and it attributed a vagueness to the women's lives. Moreover, it grants insight to the FBI's motivation for conducting surveillance.

The idea of seeing a shadow can be used as a trope to understand the one dimensional surveillance of Patterson, Shabazz, and Williams. A shadow is created when a body blocks a source of light and its shape is projected onto a surface while the light continues to shine around the individual. Comparably, FBI surveillance functions like the light source, the husbands are the body or object blocking the scope of surveillance, while the women are seen as the shadows of their husbands. The FBI understood their relationships within the framework of a traditional marriage dynamic where the man is in the dominant role, taking charge of the thinking and actions of the couple, and the woman is a passive participant and follows the actions of her husband. This thought process is seen in the use of the names of their husbands to identify them and justify surveillance. With a shadow, you can see the outline of the body, its movements and actions, as well as position the shape within a context based on its surroundings. However, when looking at a shadow the identifying features, complexities, and dimensions of the figure are blacked out. Similarly, the women's actions are followed in relation to their husband, yet their

individual distinctions are ignored. These women are understood as byproducts of their husbands instead of agents of history in their own right. This is Exemplified by the FBI's focus on Patterson's activity because her husband was a renowned communist, the belabored documentation of Shabazz's attendance at Nation of Islam meetings, and the fixation on Williams living in banned countries with her husband. Prioritizing their political actions in relation to the men in their lives exposes the FBI's motivation for watching the women as being part of a larger surveillance operation targeted at their husbands.

It is important to analyze the way the FBI perceives and treats its targets to understand how to combat repressive surveillance. Just as surveillance of "dissident" individuals has been used as a tool of control and suppression from the Red Scare of the 1940s through the 1970s, the current Black Lives Matter movement has been a target of surveillance. However, because of advances in technology, surveillance strategies have shifted. Technology has increased the capabilities of surveillance, eliminating distance or physical barriers as affective impediments. It has also become less labor intensive, because data can be stored, compressed, shared and analyzed faster and much more easily. The boundaries of surveillance have also shifted with the advancement of technology and the rise of social networking sites, like Facebook and Twitter. Different software allows police to easily focus in on a region, search through multiple social media sites for target words, and instantaneously uncover an individual's network of friends. Social media effectively disrupts the traditional boundaries of what is considered a public and private space, creating permanent archives of lives, and ultimately changing the dynamics of policing. A lot of the organizing for the Black Lives Matter movement has taken place through social networking sites abolishing the social barriers that would affect visibility, allowing anyone with a social media platform to be exposed to possible surveillance. Additionally, the structure of

organizations in the movement have changed to a vague hierarchy where it is hard to pinpoint a specific leader, and Black queer women have been the organizers of many actions and protests. The “Black Identity Extremist” intelligence assessment suggests the continued surveillance of Black radicals with a limited analysis of gender. Due to the changes in policing capabilities, grassroots organizing methods, and internal structures of organizations, current surveillance may not have the same effect of a gendered blind spot as in the past. Future research, could build on an analysis of gender and race in current surveillance of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

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