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Seeing Shadows: The Gendered Surveillance of Black Women

Kiara Sample
Washington University in St. Louis

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Mentor: Jonathan Fenderson

This project, "Seeing Shadows: The Gendered Surveillance of Black Women," explores the ways gender and race influenced the FBI's surveillance of Black women activists. Previous scholarship has covered the role of surveillance in repressing revolutionary movements and neutralizing radical organizations. Male leaders such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Huey Newton have been the overwhelming focus of surveillance research in social movements. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to the ways the FBI monitored the lives of Black women. Historically, within many social movements, Black women have been marginalized, silenced, or reduced to only their gender because of patriarchal leadership. As a result, the persistence of sexism within these Black movements has affected Black women's visibility within movement organizations. My research asks, how does gendered marginalization impact their surveillance and visibility to the FBI? It seeks to understand the influence of race and gender on the FBI's surveillance of three women—Louise Thompson Patterson, Betty Shabazz, and Mabel Williams. By examining components of their FBI file—such as the language used to describe them, the content (not) included in each file, and the narrative built by the agents and informants—the project provides a comparative analysis across gender and across time to theorize the dynamics of surveillance, race, and gender. Based on a close analysis of their FBI files, I argue that the tension between hyper-visibility of surveillance and invisibility deriving from gendered stereotypes, resulted in two things: First, it created a cover for the women to continue their political activity without the repercussions of extremely suppressive surveillance, and second, it produced a vague understanding of the women's lives, on the part of the FBI.