

Sethna, C., & Hewitt, S. (2018). *Just Watch Us: RCMP Surveillance of the Women's Liberation Movement in Cold War Canada*. McGill-Queen's University Press. ISBN 9780773552821. Paperback: 34.95 CAD. Pages: 318.

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In *Just Watch Us: RCMP Surveillance of the Women's Liberation Movement in Cold War Canada*, Christabelle Sethna and Steve Hewitt explore the nature of RCMP security service surveillance of the Canadian women's liberation movement between the 1960s-80s (Sethna and Hewitt, 2018, p. 4). This book marks a considerable feminist contribution to the field of surveillance studies and women's history, pointing to the way that notions of gender, race, class, sexuality, and religion contributed to state perceptions of subversive activities (p. 8). Sethna and Hewitt utilize the Canadian 1983 Privacy Act (ATIP) and 1985 Access to Information Act, drawing on a plethora of declassified RCMP files to articulate a "scrapbook story" of government surveillance of feminist individuals, organizations, events, and the consequences of these security practices (pp. 4, 206). *Just Watch Us* raises important ethical questions on the employment of declassified surveillance documents for research purposes and calls for concrete, widely practiced research procedures that consider these critical concerns (p. 199). Sethna and Hewitt explore themes of subversion and surveillance within the red-tinged prism that dominated the perspective of the RCMP during the Cold War to point to the broad surveillance lens of the state during this time period, the unique nature of surveillance of women's liberation groups, and the imperfection of these surveillance practices (pp. 4-6). This paper attempts to provide a comprehensive and nuanced review of this book, and the contributions it makes to feminist scholarship and Canadian feminist politics. The main arguments, concepts, and questions articulated in this book will be explored, facilitating a deeper understanding of *Just Watch Us*.

In *Just Watch Us: RCMP Surveillance of the Women's Liberation Movement in Cold War Canada*, Christabelle Sethna and Steve Hewitt explore Canadian state surveillance of the women's liberation movement between the 1960s-80s (Sethna and Hewitt, 2018, p. 4). This book makes four main arguments that provide structure and facilitate a deeper understanding of Canadian state surveillance from a feminist perspective (pp. 4-6). First, Sethna and Hewitt argue that the women's liberation movement was not the only or chief surveillance target of the RCMP, but rather was viewed with suspicion due to real or perceived ties to "left-wing activism" (p. 4). Second, RCMP surveillance of the women's liberation movement was unique in that it marked a departure from their usual Cold War surveillance framework as the movement did not explicitly claim to threaten liberal-democracy, like their more overtly communist contemporaries (p. 5). Third, the broad scope of RCMP surveillance implies that the state was incredibly insecure in its ability to maintain control through the liberal-democratic political structure (p. 200). Lastly, Sethna and Hewitt problematize the surveillance practices utilized by the RCMP during this time as they were not an

exact science, but were often deeply influenced by the implicit and explicit bias of those carrying out this work (pp. 5-6). The hegemonic white and male composition of the RCMP security service, and their failure to establish a concrete definition of subversion, contributed to a fundamental misunderstanding of feminist activity in Canada at the time (pp. 5-6, 41). Sethna and Hewitt conclude their book with a call for the establishment of thoughtful and widely-practiced research procedures in regard to the utilization of declassified surveillance documents, raising questions of privacy and transparency (pp. 198-199). *Just Watch Us* marks a considerable feminist contribution to the field of surveillance studies, presenting a chronological assessment of Canadian state surveillance between the late-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century, linking the end of the Cold War era and the rise of anti-terrorism (p. 6). Sethna and Hewitt articulate an awareness of the incompleteness of this work and the challenges faced by researchers navigating the broken landscape of declassified files (pp. 206-207).

Sethna and Hewitt employ the use of a variety of concepts that are explicitly defined to facilitate the productivity of their arguments. Of these key concepts, that of the red-tinged prism is the most prominent, and refers to the characterization of the surveillance framework used by the RCMP during the Cold War in Canada to assess the perceived threat of an individual, organization, or political movement to the national security of Canada, relating this to left-wing subversion (Sethna and Hewitt, 2018, pp. 4-5). RCMP suspicion of ties to the left-wing were informed by the anti-communist inclinations that characterized their surveillance frame (pp. 4-5). Sethna and Hewitt assert that this frame was shaped by the “dominant political culture... that encouraged the viewing of deviance on the receiving end of state power as subversion” (p. 8) This red-tinged prism was directed towards left-wing activists and exponentially expanded to include any individual or organization perceived to participate in subversive activities (p. 5). The concept of subversion enables the efficiency of the concept of the red-tinged prism, with Sethna and Hewitt utilizing it to describe what the RCMP viewed as a threat, and therefore worthy of attention (p. 11). Subversion refers to a perceived departure from and rejection of dominant political culture, and was used to describe any individual or organization that was connected to “suspect communities” (pp. 8-11). The concept of suspect communities is one that Sethna and Hewitt utilize throughout the book to describe the reality of RCMP surveillance (p. 8). The book argues that the form of surveillance that the RCMP participated in was not only meant to collect important information, but also to disturb and disrupt the lives of individuals and the goals/trajectory of organizations (p. 8). Through the process of “social-sorting,” those who were deemed to be a member of suspect communities by the state often already were socially located within the margins of society (p. 8). The concept of subversion, suspect communities, social sorting, and the red-tinged prism are all utilized by Sethna and Hewitt to facilitate the arguments presented in *Just Watch Us*.

Sethna and Hewitt leave readers with a number of pressing questions regarding the consequences of RCMP counter-subversive surveillance, the use of declassified documents for research purposes, and the future declassification of secret state documents negotiated through a desire for transparency and the necessity of privacy (Sethna and Hewitt, 2018, pp. 200-207). The book asserts that the damage done by RCMP counter-subversion surveillance activities cannot

accurately be measured due to the inaccessibility of documentation, noting that “the absence of evidence of state persecution of surveillance targets is not evidence of absence” (p. 202). RCMP utilization of informants is a recurring theme throughout *Just Watch Us*, and is used to point out the adverse effects of state surveillance on individuals and organizations participating in the women’s liberation movement (pp. 202-203). The issue of informants gives rise to the question of the future use of declassified documents due to the complicated relationship between transparency and privacy (pp. 203-207). For Sethna and Hewitt, this issue necessitates an interrogation of the use of the Canadian 1983 Privacy Act (ATIP) and 1985 Access to Information Act (p. 170). These two acts allow researchers to request declassified documents, and presents major ethical complications (p. 170). Acknowledging this discrepancy, Sethna and Hewitt pose a series of ten thought-provoking questions including “should we identify clearly the surveillance file origins of appended material when we wish to use these items,” and, “should we attempt to... try and identify or even reveal the identity of informants” (p. 198). The concluding question regarding this matter asks, “how do we protect ourselves or any researcher... in doing this research” (p. 199). In this, Sethna and Hewitt convey their conflation, asserting opposing views on the matter and differing commitments to privacy versus transparency, and call for researchers to pursue a deeper understanding of the issue (pp. 175-176).

*Just Watch Us* presents an explicitly feminist argument against the validity of state surveillance of social movements, including the women’s liberation movement (Sethna and Hewitt, 2018, pp. 206-207). Sethna and Hewitt masterfully draw together a patchwork of primary and secondary sources to present an understanding of state surveillance that calls on its insidious and problematic legacy (pp. 10-17). The field of surveillance studies is desperately lacking in the application of a nuanced understanding of the implications of intersections of class, race, and gender (pp. 10, 206-207). Sethna and Hewitt’s intersectional feminist framework aids in rectifying this discrepancy, and offers a scholarly body of work to which contemporary feminists can reference. RCMP surveillance practices, particularly, the use of human informants, has had lasting consequences on its targets, including those who participated in the women’s liberation movement (p. 203). *Just Watch Us* contributes to knowledge on state reactions to the women’s liberation movement, providing insight into the way that threats were assessed, and where exactly feminism was positioned in relation to other collective social movements. Sethna and Hewitt engage in a historical analysis of state persecution, creating a scholarly contribution to Canadian herstory.

*Just Watch Us: RCMP Surveillance of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Cold War Canada* marks a considerable feminist contribution to the field of surveillance studies (Sethna and Hewitt, 2018, pp. 16-17). Sethna and Hewitt offer crucial insight into the surveillance practices of the RCMP Security Service during a period of massive social upheaval (p. 16). The utilization of understandings of the intersections of race, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity, provide a unique intersectional feminist perspective through which the lived realities of surveillance targets can be understood, and calls into question the validity of these state activities (pp. 10-17). Sethna and Hewitt present an understanding of RCMP perceptions of subversion within the New Left and the

women's liberation movement in regard to the anti-communism of the Cold War, conveying the interconnected relationship between a plethora of burgeoning social movements that arose within this time period (pp. 58-60). By identifying and problematizing this RCMP surveillance frame (the red-tinged prism), *Just Watch Us* offers researchers an unmissable opportunity to explore the nuances of state surveillance. This book provides a historical study of state persecution of feminists and the harmful implications of RCMP surveillance, presenting a deeper understanding of the history of feminist politics in Canada (p. 17).

## References

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