Book Review

Review of Sethna, Christabelle, and Steve Hewitt. 2018. *Just Watch Us: RCMP Surveillance of the Women's Liberation Movement in Cold War Canada*. Montreal, CA: McGill-Queen's University Press.

318 pp. CA\$34.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9780773552821.

Emily Arsenault

University of New Brunswick, Canada
emily.arsenault@unb.ca

In *Just Watch Us* (2018), authors Christabelle Sethna and Steve Hewitt explore the history and complexity of state surveillance of the women's liberation movement, carried out by Canada's Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) security and intelligence branches in the 1960s to mid-1980s. Sethna and Hewitt provide an ambitious historical account of the women's liberation movement and affiliated activist organizations within the context of the Cold War, explore RCMP ideology and counter-subversion tactics used to assess left-wing political threats to the dominant culture, and engage in a vulnerable discussion of ethical-based challenges regarding surveillance and research. Through Sethna and Hewitt's detailed exploration of the fight for gender equality, their extensive use of Cold War police records collated by RCMP informants reinforces the need for researchers and minority groups to "break through the state-surveillance research ceiling" (206); *Just Watch Us* contributes new and valuable insight into thinking about, and investigating, past, present, and future surveillance of and state-intervention in protests both in Canada and on a more global scale.

A noteworthy component of *Just Watch Us* is Sethna and Hewitt's multi-method data collection approach. The authors relied on consultation with participants in the women's movement at the time, referencing four individual interviews throughout the text. In addition to conducting interviews, the authors read through an extensive range of secondary sources, covering a vast array of literature on the Cold War, policing and surveillance, the women's movement, and other activist movements, organizations, and conferences considered a threat to the state at that time. The authors also conducted reviews of many archival materials from Simon Fraser University, the University of Pittsburgh, and the Canadian Women's Movement Archives at the University of Ottawa. However, most supportive of the text's arguments is the close readings of thousands of pages of RCMP intelligence files on the women's liberation movement collated by the RCMP and their informants, which Sethna and Hewitt had declassified under Canada's 1985 Access to Information Act and the 1983 Privacy Act (ATIP). Through each methodological tool, the authors were able to catalogue, analyze, and exemplify the complex interactions between the RCMP security service and the Women's Liberation Movement.

Arsenault, Emily. 2021. Review of Sethna and Hewitt's *Just Watch Us: RCMP Surveillance of the Women's Liberation Movement in Cold War Canada*. *Surveillance & Society* 19(3): 409-411.

<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/index> | ISSN: 1477-7487

© The author(s), 2021 | Licensed to the Surveillance Studies Network under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

In utilizing several methods to collect and analyze their data, Sethna and Hewitt successfully supported three significant claims throughout the text. First, while sexism towards women was heavily prevalent within and outside of the RCMP before, throughout, and after the Cold War, surveillance of the women's liberation movement did not develop through a state hatred of women, nor was the movement the only target of state surveillance during that period. Instead, the movement was observed by the RCMP security and intelligence units through what Sethna and Hewitt call a "red-tinged prism," which refers to the expansive surveillance frame used by the RCMP to "assess the potential for left-wing threats and the possibility of violence" (5). From this perspective, the state was seen as endangered by communism through several political and social means. Therefore, given the gaze of a "red-tinged prism" and the state's concerns regarding communist subversion, RCMP security and intelligence branches also heavily monitored other activist collectives, such as labour movements, university campuses, anti-war activism, abortion movements, Black Power and Indigenous movements, as well as any other collectives considered by the RCMP to be a part of left-wing political agenda or have potential communist affiliation.

The second supported claim made by Sethna and Hewitt is made in defence of the efforts of the Women's Liberation Movement and how it forced the RCMP to shift away from their "red-tinged prism." While the radical restructuring of gender equality is inherently connected to the rhetoric surrounding civil rights, anti-war movements, decolonization, and a critique of capitalist society, given the movements more general goal of gender equality, as well as the conflicts and different branches of activism that came with the second wave of feminism, the RCMP were unable to adequately determine and separate radical-left activism from more general feminist activism. This forced the intelligence and security RCMP branches to challenge their own red-tinged prism and abandon many of their traditional surveillance tactics (137). The fact that the women's liberation movement was able to challenge and outlive the invasive counter-subversion efforts of the RCMP, as well as profoundly change Canada on a political, social, and economic level, displays not only the strength of the movement itself but the instability within the intelligence and security branches at that time.

The authors' last claim, and arguably one of the most candid points in the text, is the reality that it is not possible to obtain a truly "clean" history of social movements under state surveillance (197). In chapter six, "The Paradox of the Mountie Bounty," Sethna and Hewitt explore the gaps and challenges of conducting research using ATI documents and files collected and created by the RCMP and their informants. Given that the RCMP were conducting counter-subversion tactics in positions of power, relying on many different informants, as well as the immense retractions and editing of the ATIP and document files by RCMP and government officials, researchers and readers alike must be aware of the unreliability of the collected and presented data.

This final claim made by Sethna and Hewitt provides a seamless bridge into discussing the overall limitations within the text itself. In addition to the unreliability and "fractured nature" of the collected data, the authors also openly discuss the ethical issues of sharing declassified documents (170). The authors heavily disagree on this issue, and highlight concerns regarding the obligation of researchers to ensure that those who have been spied on are not revictimized. Additionally, they pose questions regarding the complexity of finding a balance between exposing problematic histories, protecting identities, and determining whether these files should even be entirely accessible for researchers. Ultimately, the unreliability in the files, paired with the inability of the authors to agree on what researchers should be taking away from this sort of data collection, leaves lingering questions and gaps that the readers themselves must navigate on their own. While this could leave readers and researchers with a sense of inconclusiveness or hesitancy moving forward, it also provides a sense of criticality and autonomy that not only adds a unique component to the text but also further perpetuates the importance of reflexivity when conducting anti-oppressive social research.

In an attempt to fill some ambiguities within the research, it may have been useful for Sethna and Hewitt to rely more heavily on interviews and narratives from the victims of surveillance during that time, especially given that the women's liberation movement occurred within the past fifty years. Nevertheless, through the

authors' openness to discussing their limitations and challenges and the use of thousands of archival data and ATIP files, photographs, and historical descriptions, Sethna and Hewitt achieve the primary goals of their text. Not only do Sethna and Hewitt map the little-known history of the women's liberation movement, but they also pose a call-to-action for readers and researchers to think critically about state surveillance and intervention, the policing of activism, and ethical research practices. These explorations make it challenging, if not impossible, for the reader to navigate the ever-changing surveillance society without questioning the impacts on civil liberties. As such, *Just Watch Us* is not only a uniquely informative yet unsettling account of police power, state intervention, and human vulnerability but also an important resource for activists and social science scholars studying social movements, police power, and state surveillance both in Canada and on a broader scale.