Secrecy as security composition:
covert manhunting and meaning-making in the US ‘shadow war’

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Abstract:

Security studies continues to undervalue the productive and meaning-making role of secrecy in security discourses. Drawing on secrecy studies and on multi-layered compositional understandings of meaning-making, this article therefore sets out a framework for studying the power of secrecy in security discourses. More specifically, as this article contends, secrecy can be understood as a nested set of practices, a composition that obscures and makes illegible as a central part of the act of power. This composition of secrecy practices is collectively referred to as an *arcanum* and composed of four different layers: geographies of secrecy; specialist mediations of secrecy; cultures of secrecy, and pleasures of secrecy with attendant implications for the construction of subjects within a discourse. In particular, using the U.S. ‘shadow war’ as an empirical case study, and in particular conducting a close reading of a set of key memoirs associated with the rising practice of ‘manhunting’ in the Global War on Terrorism, the legitimizing and meaning-making practices of secrecy are explored.

Keywords: secrecy; security; layering; manhunting; global war on terror; arcanum
Introduction

On 31 October 2014, Rear Admiral Brian Losey, the commanding officer of Naval Special Warfare Command (more commonly known as the US Navy SEALs, for Sea, Air and Land), and the senior enlisted SEAL, Force Master Chief Michael Magaraci, circulated a letter to all SEALs (see Figure 1).

Each day, thousands of current and former members of Naval Special Warfare live as “quiet professionals”. Our members continue to serve around the world, accomplishing critical and sensitive missions that contribute to our national security, and keep our nation safe…. undertaken with little individual public credit. It is the nature of our profession.

At Naval Special Warfare’s core is the SEAL Ethos. A critical tenant of our Ethos is “I do not advertise the nature of my work, or seek recognition for my actions”. Our Ethos is a life-long commitment and obligation, both in and out of the Service. Violators of our Ethos are neither Teammates in good standing, nor Teammates who represent Naval Special Warfare. We do not abide wilful or selfish disregard for our core values in return for public notoriety and financial gain, which only diminishes otherwise honourable service, courage and sacrifice. Our credibility as a premier fighting force is forged in this sacrifice and has been accomplished with honor, as well as humility.¹

What part prompted this letter were the ‘revelations’ of two Navy SEALs -- and importantly two SEAL Team Six operators (officially known as Naval Special Warfare Development Group, DEVGRU, the most clandestine of the SEAL teams) -- who released accounts of the raid that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan in 2011. Matt Bissonnette (a.k.a. Mark Owens) and Robert O’Neill (a.k.a. ‘The Shooter’) violated non-disclosure

agreements and to many, the SEAL Ethos, in ‘going public’ about the raid: Bissonnette through a pseudonymously published and unauthorised hit memoir, *No Easy Day*, which was not cleared by US military censors, and accompanied by an interview on CBS’ *60 Minutes*; and O’Neill through an anonymised interview in *Esquire* where he identified himself as the one who fired the shots that ultimately killed bin Laden, an appearance on Fox News to pre-empt the revelation of his identity, and later, his own memoir, *The Operator*, with a new career as a motivational speaker.  

![ SEAL Force Master Chief Magaraci and SEAL Commander Losey write to all SEALs to remind them of the SEAL Ethos of the ‘quiet professional’.](image)

Since the raid, Bissonnette and O’Neill have therefore become the highest profile focal points of a recent concern within US Special Operation Forces (SOF) communities that the long-
standing, and for some, foundational, code of silence of the ‘quiet professionals’ has been broken. For those concerned, ‘operators’ going public so soon after retiring offers a significant challenge to this code, to the secrets it is meant to safeguard, and therefore to a set of interconnected securities: US national security (and by extension through the Global War on Terror discourse, international security), operational security (OPSEC) and security of US soldiers operating abroad, a threat to SEAL Team Six community cohesion and therefore effectiveness, to the personal safety and security of SEALs when home, the security of their families and wider communities, as well as a threat to the mythos itself.

The raising of Navy SEALs to celebrity status through media exploitation and publicity stunts has corrupted the culture of the SEAL community by incentivizing narcissistic and profit-oriented behaviour... [It] erodes military effectiveness, damages national security, and undermines healthy civil-military relations.

To date, this interplay between secrecy and security, as illustrated by the Bissonnette-O’Neill scandal, has been explored within security studies, politics and law literatures most often through a framing of secrecy and secrecy as a ‘balancing’ act, especially concerning executive power and intelligence agencies. Within this literature, secrecy and security are uncontested and self-evident, secrecy and revelation are binary opposites, i.e. secrecy ‘removes knowledge’, and excesses of either secrecy or revelation are a ‘corruption’ that ‘damages national security’ or democracy.


4 Crowell (2015).


Increasingly, however, the co-constitutive relationship between secrecy and security is the subject of scholarly explorations. Within critical geography, anthropology, cultural studies and international relations, secrecy has been examined in the context of nuclear secrecy and the Cold War, and in connection with the Global War on Terror (GWoT). Secrecy has been explored in terms of its spatialities and materialities, aesthetics, and wider cultures of secrecy, conspiracy and ignorance, as well as examined as a constituent element in the construction of enemy ‘others’ and in (re)producing cultures of ‘hypersecurity’. Unifying these studies is

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an important recognition of the power of secrecy as knowledge-making as opposed to knowledge unmaking or removal within security discourses. Secrecy is intensely productive and powerful.⁹

At its core, secrecy is inextricably intertwined with the willingness of subjects (consciously and subconsciously) to make and keep secrets, tied to the complex ways in which they do so.¹⁰ In other words, individuals are enrolled or hailed into subject positions of keeping and revealing secrets. Therefore, to further understandings of how secrecy and security are co-constitutive, we can explore how national and transnational interplays of secrecy-security are premised on everyday and sometimes intimate experiences of the secret, and how secrets are experienced, exploring the gendered, raced and sexed work of secrecy tied to security.¹¹ As Eve Sedgwick argues, secrecy is performative¹², co-constituting the personal while reproducing the structural formations through which knowledge is made.

Therefore, building on this literature that explores security through secrecy and in particular drawing on the transdisciplinary research area of secrecy studies¹³, this article asks not only

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¹⁰ As opposed to Sissela Bok and Kim Lane Scheppelle, who define secrecy as the intentional withholding of information, my definition of secrecy allows for the less conscious and intentional, as well as the more dispersed forms of secret keeping connected to broader cultural and societal generated secrets that produce ‘wilful ignorance’ and ‘hiding in plain sight’, for example, as well as secrecy that is a factor of complex systems. Sissela Bok, Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Kim Lane Scheppelle, Legal Secrets: Equality and efficiency in the common law (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).


how secrets are powerful in security discourses, but how secrets are made by and with subjects that keep secrets; how are secrecy practices interconnected with the making of gendered, sexed and raced bodies within security discourses, and how is this making made commonsensical. Rather than looking to ‘reveal’ the secret, this paper focuses instead on how secrets are made. In other words, this article seeks to understand how secrets are enacted, materialised and circulated, and how these generate subject-positions that are knowledge- and truth-making as part of security discourses.

In particular, the power of secrets is explored by arguing that secrecy is a set of interconnected layers of secrecy practices, a composition of the secret across the spatial, sensory and cultural domains. Secrecy is made possible through an *arcanum*, a multi-layered composition for keeping secrets that is a knowledge-making process. Through a study of the discourse of the Global War on Terror, but in particular its ‘shadow war’ component and the increasing use of US SOF for ‘manhunting’ as a cornerstone of US counterterrorism, this article makes two interconnected arguments: 1) that to date scholarship has underestimated the amount of power invested in making the GWoT make sense and that this underestimated power is hidden in the composition of secrets; and 2) that this composition is always in the process of being produced and reproduced through dialectical relations across layers of the arcanum that centre around the gendered and raced bodies of those now at the heart of this war, US special operators who work across secrecy and revelation, surveillance and secrecy, and between spectacle and secret. Through these relations, and the subject positions they centre on, the composition of the secret within security discourses (re)produces relations of power.

This article therefore also invites a new way to approach the current focus on remotely piloted vehicles (or ‘drones’) as the signature technology and practice of the second half of the GWoT, arguing instead that to continue to centre this technology is to succumb to a techno-fetishism and ocularcentrism that occludes the broader network of actors involved in the shadow war.

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15 Christian Parenti, ‘Planet America: The revolution in military affairs as fantasy and fetish,’ in Ashley Dawson, Malini Johar Schueller (eds.) *Exceptional state: Contemporary US culture and the new imperialism* (Durham:
It is to mistake drones and drone operators as the centre of power, and to leave unchallenged the shadows and secrets as drivers, or logics, with attendant gendered and raced dimensions of the current strategies and policies of US security policy. Drones are a key development in this shadow war, but have not driven or determined it, instead they have been folded into an existing network and security logic, the logic of the hunt or ‘cynegetic warfare’ and ‘disappearing violence’ that has SOF actors at its centre.¹⁶

Drawing on key memoirs of the ‘shadow war’ as texts, some of which, as described above, have generated significant controversy, this article also makes a contribution to the methodological challenge of studying secrecy, particularly concerning organisations and institutions that are considered to rank amongst the most secret and covert.¹⁷ In particular, using a discourse analytic approach, this article draws on these memoirs in order to document the different secrecy practices and attendant subjects they make public, understand how those ‘at the front lines’ of manhunting make sense of the secrecy practices they used.

To do so, this article therefore proceeds along the following lines: First, this article begins by making a case for studying secrecy within security discourses. Second, it argues for a multi-layered compositional approach to knowledge-making and presents a four-part framework, the arcanum, for secret-keeping as part of this knowledge-making process. Finally, using the memoirs associated with manhunting in the US GWoT as texts, this article offers a critical reading of the multi-layered secret-keeping composition that made killing Osama bin Laden, for example, possible. Overall, this article will therefore offer an expanded understanding of power as concerned with the secret, demonstrate the interdependence between secrecy and security, and offer an account that connects the personal and transnational dimensions of security through secrecy, ultimately working towards a more complex and yet everyday understanding of how the layered composition of secrecy is an essential element of power within security discourses.

Secrecy in security discourses

Secrecy is a potent force within security discourses, and yet understudied as a knowledge-and meaning-making set of practices. With the exception of a thriving literature in intelligence studies as found within journals such as the journal *Intelligence & National Security*, which nevertheless leaves secrecy unproblematised, security studies continues to overlook the generative, productive and constitutive power of secrecy. As Claudia Aradau suggests, however, ‘we need to explore heterogenous modes of non-knowledge, their entanglements and (re)assembling for their implications for understandings of security.’ Amongst these ignorances are those produced as secrets, which, as a form of ‘non-knowledge-making’, have political effects. Secrets construct (rather than obscure) norms, identities, communities and truths, acting as an important legitimising force, as well as generative of more secrecy, bureaucratic practices, resistances, revelations, and scandals. They can be, as Eve Sedgwick suggests, ‘as performative as revelations’ and may be as multiple and follow different paths as the knowledge they work to obscure.

In particular, directing our attention to secrecy practices in the form of their social and cultural work is another layer to understanding power. More specifically, as Karma Lochrie argues, we can pay attention to the forces that make secrets -- the way secret-keeping is organized and the ‘social networks they organize’ -- as connected to the truth regimes they reproduce:

one of the tricks of secrecy is to call our attention to the supposed secrets as the locus of truth, rather than to the operations that make them appear to be truths and the social relationships that are negotiated through them. The secrets always distract us, too, from the power relations that surround and give meaning to them. The covert operations are much more diverse and ideological than the secrets themselves would suggest.

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21 Lochrie (1999), p.4
As Lochrie suggests, we must therefore also work to understand the forces that redirect our attention away from a secret; the power that makes it legitimate, commonsensical, or even that hides it in plain sight. As David Miller, Kim Lane Scheppelle, and Karma Lochrie argue, secrecy is a ‘cultural operation’ that is about the value ascribed to things that are kept secret.\(^{22}\) It is the ‘alliances and divisions, social spaces that are shared and those that are partitioned off from others’, the power relations this sharing and partitioning structures, and by the ‘covert operations’ that cover over the secret and reproduce forms of truth.\(^{23}\) Secrecy, secrets, and secret keeping are layered discursive practices, an architecture that involves linguistic-material-visual elements that not only produce secrets but are co-constitutive of the discourses in which they are situated, including security discourse, and to the values, norms and ideas that are at the core. This includes how secrets are connected to the personal, embodied, raced, gendered, queered, abled and everyday ways of being that make possible the broader international and transnational dimensions of power. In other words, to study the social and political life of secrets as secrets, their public life, directs ‘attention to the practices of concealment that cultures exert upon different subjects and in different ways.’\(^{24}\) These practices produce not only the ‘[c]arefully scripted absences and silences’\(^{25}\) of redactions and radio silences, but also a set of ‘opaque’, ‘invisible’, ‘quiet’, ‘passable’ and ‘alluring’ subjects as well.

So, as Miller and Lochrie argue, ‘instead of the question “What does secrecy cover?” we had better ask ‘What covers secrecy?” What, that is, takes secrecy for its field of operations?’\(^{26}\) Asking what covers secrets, what composes it, to explore how secrecy is covered or composed, we can therefore develop a new understanding of the power of secrecy as knowledge- and meaning-making, including and especially within security discourses.

In short, through a variety of practices -- including the classification and control of documents, the creation of secure rooms for the transmission of information, the use of code words and encryption, silence and anonymity, obfuscation and misdirection, covert identities and cover


\(^{24}\) Lochrie (1999), p.2.


storytelling, passing and passing over – the complexity of secret keeping as powerful and productive can be explored, along with the complex co-constitutive and dialectical relationships between secrecy and surveillance, secrecy and revelation, secrecy and spectacle, domination and resistance, within security discourses.

**Knowledge-making as multilayered compositions**

If attention is needed to that which covers secrets, and secret-keeping practices are diverse and complex, how might we approach this? Taking inspiration from critical security studies’ engagement with assemblage theory\(^{27}\), how might a turn to composition offer new insight? The term and practice of composition that looks at the content, form and relations within a text -- an approach more common in visual and rhetoric studies\(^{28}\) -- also draws attention to *layering* as a knowledge-making practice in ways underexamined in security theory’s engagements with assemblage theory. A multi-layered composition, or an ‘assemblage of assemblages’\(^{29}\), entails a ‘flow’, route or *ductus*, by which it ‘leads someone through itself’.\(^{30}\) A multi-layered composition is a richly woven lattice or flow of heterogeneous layers that vary in terms of their complexity, fixity and combinability, with associated implications for meaning-making. In other words, multi-layered composition is a spatial way of conceiving of knowledge-making -- or ‘geographical imagination’\(^{31}\) -- that integrates the temporal and ideational within its layering practices. As Henri Lefebvre argues, meaning-making involves ‘levels, layers and sedimentations of perception, representation, and spatial practice which presuppose one another, which proffer themselves to one another, and which are

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superimposed upon one another. Layering also offers a means to explore the complex and dynamic interactions between the everyday and the global. As Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani argues, we can imagine individuals layering meaning onto experiences in dynamic, concentric and interconnected ways and in connection with the larger world and their world views.

Most importantly, compositions entail layers of meaning and practices that are constituted through their blanks, silences, absences and gaps, not as an enigmatic gap into which meaning can be poured, but as blanks, silences, absences and gaps tied to a specific flow of the composition and therefore to specific meaning and knowledge-making efforts. The conception of social space as layered is therefore complicated further by attention to the ways in which layering works through obscuration. As Susan Star argues, layering is a knowledge-making practice that include partial visibilities. Star argues that meaning is made in part through the interplay of the partial visibility and invisibilities between layers, and ‘a layering process, which both complicates and obscures’. Multi-layered compositions are therefore also made meaningful through the meaning-making potentials of invisibilities, negative space, silences, gaps, and absence about which there is a growing literature.

Taking layers, and in particular multilayers, that work to obscure seriously, as part of compositions within security discourses, therefore invites a way to think through the political work that covering secrets does within security discourses. Studying a security discourse as a

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multilayered compositions, enables a study of the way that everyday secrecy is experienced, sensed, narrated, negotiated, and woven into lives; to understand how people ‘know secrets’, and how knowledge of secrets is personal while also global. To disappear a body, a nuclear submarine, a file, terabytes of data, or a succession of US military bases relies on a multilayered composition for keeping secrets, what we might refer to as an arcanum.

**Into the arcanum: secrecy as multilayered composition**

The ability to create and keep secrets can best be imagined as a mountain with a deeply layered and complex system of tunnels and caves, a hidden bunker, citadel or fortress made up of vaults within vaults for secret-keeping.\(^\text{37}\) This is the arcanum, a multi-layered design, set of practices and cultural forces used to keep secrets and cover them (see Figure 2).

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The term arcanum itself is one introduced by Eva Horn in relation to secrecy. For Horn, an arcanum (from the Latin arca, or chest) is a secret that is ‘locked away and hidden in a
container: it is not available because it has been put under wraps and is thus removed (by lid or lock) from visibility or use’. Arcana, produced through ‘technique[s] of silence and concealment’ are a ‘force’ or a ‘tool of security, protecting sensitive forms of information from abuse’. For Horn, an arcana is the secret. They are necessary, even stabilizing, and are principally the basis of state power. Horn’s arcanum is a key component of statecraft (arcana imperii) that understands power as the control through separation and concealment of knowledge.

Repurposing Horn’s arcanum concept through an expansion of the concept of power, however, and shifting to focus on what covers secrecy, as opposed to the secret itself, we can understand how secrecy is not only about using power to keep certain knowledge separate, but also about (re)producing it. As such, an arcanum involves several layers, or orders of secrecy, each layer structured around a different epistemological category and each layer consisting of a different set of secrecy practices. For a secret to remain secret, each layer of the arcanum must be carefully composed and maintained. For a secret to be revealed, the layers must be removed or decomposed. Each layer is therefore its own composition of physical and material barriers and rhetorics of denial and obfuscation, but is also a product of layers of expert and arcane knowledge and tools, are multi-sensorial involving sound and touch as well as visual elements, are reinforced through layers of cultures and ideas that support looking away or overlooking, and that join together the personal, state and international. In other words, the composition of secrecy is multi-layered and works in different ways to keep a secret secret, not only through human and non-human compositions, as has been the focus within assemblage theory, but through the assemblages rooted in different epistemological layers and interconnections.

More specifically, we can speak of an arcanum being composed of four different epistemological layers or categories. These four different layers include secrecy practices that work spatially to limit knowing (geographies of secrecy), secrecy practices that mediate specialist or ‘expert’ knowing (mediations of secrecy), secrecy practices that discipline knowing (cultures of secrecy), and secrecy practices that circulate secrets (spectacular or

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38 Horn (2011), p.108
39 Ibid.
pleasures of secrets). Each of these layers then includes different practices that produce secrets (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Layered practices of the Arcanum</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Layer 1: Geographies of secrecy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Boundaries, controlled access, containment e.g. classification, SCIF</td>
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<td>• Masking/redactions (layering over); censorship through obscuring, blocking</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Distance</td>
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<td>• Removal/move</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Depth and height</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Size and scale (too small, too large)</td>
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<td>• Complexity</td>
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<td><strong>Layer 2: Mediations of secrecy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Mediation through technological ‘prosthetics’</td>
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<td>• Maskings through technological ‘prosthetics’ e.g. silencers, camouflage</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Reach through technological ‘prosthetics’</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Encoding and decodings</td>
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<td>• Obfuscation and confusion</td>
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<td><strong>Layer 3: Cultures of secrecy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Remaining silent and unnoticed (‘don’t show, don’t tell’)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Socio-technical practices e.g. non-disclosure agreements, lie detectors</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Lying and coverstorying (fictions)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Relying on the wilful ignorance of others</td>
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<td>• Letting time pass or patience</td>
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<td>• Disciplinary regimes</td>
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<td><strong>Layer 4: Spectacular or pleasures of secrecy</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Circulations</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Secrecy fictions</td>
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<td>• Misdirections and fakery</td>
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As this article contends, a closer examination of the secrecy practices surrounding US SOF operations in the GWoT reveals the composition of practices that make this force make sense. There is an arcum to special operations within the US ‘shadow war’ and studying this arcum can help us to see the complex ways in which these secrets are not only ‘protected’, but make sense. More specifically, this arcum becomes integral to the current ‘hunting logic’ that is driving current US security policies and US counterterrorism and its attendant subjects.
**The public life of secrets: studying layered compositions through memoirs**

More specifically, using a discourse analytic approach, this article draws on a set of key memoirs of the US ‘shadow war’ (some of which, as described above, have generated significant controversy) in order to document the different secrecy practices and attendant subjects they make public. Drawing on these texts written, co-written -- including through the censoring processes of the US Defense Office of Prepublication & Security Review, which vets, alters and redacts individual manuscripts -- and in some cases ghost-written by U.S. American special operators and drone operators, with a particular focus on those written by US Navy SEALs, this article explores how those ‘at the front lines’ of manhunting make sense of the secrecy practices they used and how these construct the subjects within this discourse (see Table 2). Many of these memoirs have made best-seller lists (*Lone Survivor, No Easy Day, American Sniper, My Share of the Task, Drone Warrior*), some have been made into popular Hollywood films (*American Sniper*, directed by Clint Eastwood, was nominated for several Academy Awards in 2016, including Best Picture, after selling over 2.4 million copies worldwide, while both *The Operator* and *Drone Warrior* are in development).  

These texts are then supplemented by analysis of investigative reporting on the shadow war, analysis of policy documents on US special operatives, and by existing academic scholarship on contemporary counterterrorism practices and the ‘shadow war’.  

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For US military documents and accounts, see: Department of the Army, *Field Manuel 3-18: Special Forces Operations*, (2014), available online at: [https://info.publicintelligence.net/USArmy-SF-Ops.pdf](https://info.publicintelligence.net/USArmy-SF-Ops.pdf), accessed 11
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<th>Table 2 - Memoirs</th>
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In particular, as Rachel Woodward and Niel Jenkins argue -- but also drawing on a longer history in American Studies to look at military memoirs and ‘life narratives’ as sites of security meaning making -- memoirs as texts and practices are important sites for the reproduction of cultural understandings of war.\textsuperscript{42}

\begin{quote}
Memoirs are cultural products, one of the countless forms through which politics and popular culture are co-constituted. They are valuable sources for wider social imaginings about what armed forces are and do and what specific conflicts might be about. They have a utility.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

As Tracy Karner argues, ‘telling one's life story is an imaginative enterprise that creatively organizes experiences, events, feelings, and actions.’\textsuperscript{44} As Karner documents with respect to war veterans in particular, individuals use ‘the cultural conventions of storytelling to construct personal narratives that reflected their historical era and its cultural assumptions... [life narratives] makes known the available social and cultural resources from which such narratives can be created.’\textsuperscript{45}

In other words, memoirs offer insight into the ‘communication of experience’, laying out how the authors make sense of themselves and their place in the world.\textsuperscript{46} As a genre, these texts


\textsuperscript{44} Karner (1996), p.64.

\textsuperscript{45} Karner (1996), p.65.

contain ‘commentaries on the practices that individuals undertake during the course of their military duties, and reflections on how the actions of the individual sit within a broader cultural context of the military workplace and military life.’\textsuperscript{47} In particular, these memoirs follow the tradition of the memoir genre of a narrative arc composed of ‘sin’ (usually as a young man growing up somewhat wayward in a small US community, often with a dominant (if sometimes absent) father-figure, and usually involving hunting) \Rightarrow suffering and revelation and repentance (in the course of their SOF training and becoming functioning members of the community). In short, they illustrate not only the everyday details of their lived experience, but articulate this lived experience to the wider world, processes of militarisation and the ‘public narratives of conflict.’\textsuperscript{48}

Memoirs are thus also compositions in and of themselves that mobilise, organise and navigate through cultural conventions, at times specifically attempting to rewrite the historical record, as a number of the memoirs included here do. In the case of memoirs associated with covert ‘manhunting’, they are also compositions that not only detail the public life of secrecy associated with special operations in multi-layered form, but help to make sense of it in particular, as will be demonstrated in the sections that follow, through the articulations between violence, the heroic ‘self’ and the mastery of multiple layers of secrecy.

**The Arcanum of Manhunting and the US Shadow War**

*Layer 1: ‘Spy proof’: geographies of secrecy*

Two months before Operation Neptune Spear (the bin Laden raid) became public knowledge, 23 SEAL Team Six operators were recalled to their headquarters in Virginia Beach under mysterious circumstances. Directed to the Commander’s Conference Room in an area

\textsuperscript{47} Woodward and Jenkins (2017), p.530.

\textsuperscript{48} Woodward and Jenkins (2012). Memoirs are however also deeply interconnected with cultures of confessions, an element of memoir analysis within security studies that bears further scrutiny. As a ‘confessional technology’ where the public performance of revelation of secrets (or ‘insider knowledge’ to ‘bear witness’ and ‘set the record straight’) is part of the genre and its appeal, memoirs function in ways similar to Catholic confessionalists as ‘technologies of the self’ that produce secrets, subjects, norms as much as acting as tools of revelation, surveillance and discipline. Beyond the narrower formulation of memoirs as revelatory texts of existing scholarship on memoirs within security discourses, we can therefore understand memoirs as productive of the self, of security and of discourses of truth and authenticity-surrounding soldiers’ accounts of war.

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designated as a Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility, or SCIF (pronounced ‘skiff’), they were ‘read into’ a new mission, though only partly (MB1:161). For in addition to being briefed in a space intentionally constructed as highly secret and ‘spy proof’ -- with lead-lined walls to keep out electronic listening devices, encrypted data networks, special access passes, and a no outside phones policy, for example (the President of the United States’ Situation Room (actually a series of conference rooms) being the principal and most famous SCIF) -- the select groups of US operators encountered the most intense regime of secrecy they had ever encountered before. For them, the secrecy surrounding the operation was ‘strange’, ‘brand-new, and very odd. Nobody knew what the hell was happening’ (RO:272). 49 Their leadership would not provide additional information and the operators were under an unprecedented level of direction not to speak about their mission to anyone outside their smaller group or in any detail beyond the walls of their briefing spaces.

Something big was up and whatever it was, our leadership wanted it on a need-to-know basis. Even the other team leaders, Troop Chiefs, and troop commanders who hadn’t been specifically recalled were asked to leave. They had to be told a few times because they couldn’t believe their ears.’...[Master Chief Willy] reminded us – again – that the other members of our squadron were out in the main Team Room, and we weren’t to discuss a word of what we’d just been told. Every man in the room knew that this would cause a problem. The other guys would be wondering why they were not read-in and would think we were arrogant for not telling them what was going on’ (RO:274-276).

After a cryptic initial planning meeting at Headquarters, the operators were ordered to report the following week to a even more secret facility, ‘one of the most top secret defense facilities in the country’ (RO:281), or as an anonymous contributor to the website Cryptome later identified, to the Department of Defense’s Harvey Point Defense Testing Facility in North Carolina. 50 The facility is owned by the Department of Defense and used by the CIA and FBI

49 For the sake of clarity and brevity, memoirs are abbreviated here using the initials of the key author, see Table 2, followed by the page number.

50 The ‘revelation of this base’ and its role in the bin Laden raid is evidence of both the power of ‘hiding in plain sight’ of military and intelligence facilities in the US, as well as the power of public-coordinated ‘open source’ and crowdsourcing intelligence, when combined with more traditional journalism. Both bear further analysis for their implications for understanding the interplays between secrecy and security. Tim Weiner, Is the
for counterterrorism training, including and especially for covert high explosives training. Located amongst a pine forest, for Bissonnette, the facility ‘[f]rom the outside ... looked innocent except for the screens hung down along the fence to block anyone from looking inside’ (MB1:170). At the front security gate, O’Neill and the three operators he travelled with ‘encountered a fog bank of confusion. No one had given a list of our names to base security, not because they forgot, but because nobody wanted a list of the shooters to ever exist’ (RO:281). Bissonnette had a new badge issued (in addition to his military identification), and was directed to a compound surrounded by a ‘Large ten-foot-tall wooden security barrier... making it impossible to see inside’ (MB1:170). In the conference room inside, personnel were again checked once the doors were closed: ‘They took a long look around the room to ensure that no one was in the room who didn’t belong’ and documents were passed around for operators to sign (RO:282), possibly nondisclosure agreements. Even security guards assigned to the space were moved out of earshot (RO:282).

In other words, according to the memoirs, before the words Osama bin Laden or Abbottabad could be uttered or satellite images of ‘the Pacer’ and the layout of his house could be seen, an intense set of spatial practices were mobilised in order to keep the raid secret. In addition to those practices discussed below, and as the first layer of the arcanum and the set of making practices that controlled access to spaces, obscured and blocked information, censoring it through redaction, sequestering (information classification systems) and physical silencing, and placing it at a distance and in remote locations. Bodies and objects were

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52 Redactions are an important, even iconic, visual-geospatial layering secrecy practice as they literally and
moved into and out of spaces under extremely controlled circumstances, constituting new communities of the secret, or what might be called ‘contained subjects’.

For example, it was not enough to entrust these secrets to all special operators, the secret needed to be contained through the mobilisation of spatial practices that included the ‘high-technology’ bordering practices of the SCIF, but also facilities in remote locations, controlling access through lists, identity passes and guards, and using more mundane technologies such as concrete barriers, wooden fences and barbed wire. As Trevor Paglen argues, there is always a geography, spatiality and materiality to the composition of (state) secrets. ‘Keeping secrets means creating more secrets, undertaking secret projects means producing ever-expanding black geographies.’\textsuperscript{53} The spatial and material practices take the form of new facilities and bureaucracies, the traces and outlines of which can be followed, even if the secret cannot.

\textit{Layer 2: ‘Supersoldiers’ and (racialised) mastery: specialist secrets}

When it comes to U.S. counterterrorism and the GWoT, technologies and techniques are deeply intertwined with the construction of special operators as ‘supersoldiers’. For intelligence analysts such as Brett Velicovich who, as a (self-styled) ‘drone warrior’, worked closely with SOF in Iraq, success in the war on terror meant turning to special operators, as ‘the world’s best professionals, giving them the tools and technology they never had access to before, and then seeing them free to do what they do best’ (BV:66).

In particular, these technologies and techniques have come to be associated with covert SOF. They are the specialist ‘tools of the trade’ that enable operators to move quietly, through the dark, to see bodies hidden in shadows, or to take action from longer ranges. In other words, covert or secret surveillance and manoeuvrings as a ‘core’ function of SOF involve the mastery of the ‘technosensory milieu of secrecy.’\textsuperscript{54} This mastery of these tools and techniques work

\textsuperscript{53} Paglen (2009), p.122.
to cover over the secret of their presence, not so much by containing their secrets spatially but sensorially; to cover over the leaky traces of their existence (the sounds they make, or the visual ‘tells’) and make them illegible, in other words, to cover over the secret by making them ‘invisible’ subjects, while they go about their daily business of detecting those they hunt. In other words, the function of the state in this case, as embodied by SOF, is the task of making ‘illegible’ through an expertise and mastery of the domain of stealth.

Composing this layer of secrecy therefore includes the mastery of technologies such as night vision goggles; camouflage; high-powered rifle scopes and muzzle suppressors to muffle sound; camouflaged cameras with long-distance lenses; covert audio recording systems; encrypted satellite-supported imagery, communications and navigation (GPS) systems; drones, including the MQ-1 Predator and Reaper, but also the smaller, shorter range ones; laser-guided targeting systems (the ‘light of god’) and infrared or chemlight markers invisible to the ‘naked eye’; the ‘flash-bang’ stun grenades that overwhelm the senses; stealth helicopters for inserting special operators, such as the MH-6 ‘Little Birds’, MH-47 Chinooks and H-60 Black Hawk helicopters used by special operators (all flown by the 160th Special Air Operations Regiment (SOAR) (or Night Stalkers) who specialize in covert flying operations); and for SEALs in particular, the underwater diving equipment and the ‘swimmer delivery vehicle’ (SDV) ‘the minisubmarine that brings [SEALs] into [their] ops area... the stealthiest vehicle in the world’ (ML:173).

However, at the centre of this layer are the techniques of stealth trained into the bodies of covert special operators. The production of invisible subjects requires the mastery of these tools and technologies, as well as the training of bodies, in order to be the ‘warrior, assassin, spy’ highly valorized within this discourse (BW:20). Or, as U.S. Navy SEAL Petty Officer Marcus Luttrell, a SEAL sniper and the ‘lone survivor’ of Operation Red Wings, claims ‘it follows that the troops manning the world’s stealthiest vehicle[s] are the world’s sneakiest guys’ (ML:173).

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In order to become an operator, individuals must undergo a series of selection and training challenges that includes learning how to move ‘instinctively’ stealthily. For Luttrell, SEALs move ‘quietly, stealthily through the shadows, using the dead space, the areas into which your enemy cannot see. Someone described us as the shadow warriors. He was right. That’s what we are. (ML:31). In other words, they are trained to move in the dark and quietly, to read and navigate through all terrain, including to clear buildings, to use coded language along with knowing how to use encryption software/systems and respect classification orders (of the sorts associated with level 1), to dress covertly to avoid detection (see Figure 4), to survive, evade, resist and escape (SERE)\textsuperscript{56} capture (CK:49) and how to lie and create a cover story (RO:128; ML:283) as part of their hunt: ‘I was being trained to essentially disappear, to conceal who I was’ (BV:76); ‘I was a patient, silent hunter. I was armed’ (MM:37). Chris Kyle and Brandon Webb, as snipers, mobilised acknowledge of stealth and secret-keeping in order to construct ‘hides’ during the battles in Iraq and Afghanistan (CK, BW); Luttrell used his techniques and technologies, including the ‘noble art of camouflage’ (ML:156) to covertly surveil a target and then to evade capture; O’Neill and Owens used their stealth to take part in raids; Velicovich, McCurley and Martin, used drones in order to covertly surveil and at times deploy weapons from an unobservable distance.\textsuperscript{57} In other words, stealth is a highly valued and essential skillset of an elite warrior and ‘hunter’.\textsuperscript{58}


\textsuperscript{57} US special operatives, for example, may have been encouraged to use strip clubs in order to train in covert surveillance techniques. As Chris Kyle recounted of his training with the CIA, NSA and FBI in New Orleans circa 2005-2006:

Learning how to blend in and go undercover, I cultivated my inner jazz musician and grew a goatee…
I stole a car off Bourbon Street… (…I had to put it back…). We were trained to wear cameras and eavesdropping devices without getting caught. To prove that we could, we had to get the devices into a strip club and return with the (video) evidence that we’d been there (CK:206).

In order to constitute himself as a secrecy expert, Kyle (and presumably others) filmed women’s sexualised bodies without their consent (or the consent of the strip club owner(s)).

\textsuperscript{58} Van Veeren, ‘Hunting logics’ (2018).
Moreover, when composed with the geospatial layer of secrecy, the specialist secrecy layer produces covert SOF as ‘supersoldiers’ within a community of the secret. Through their specialist training and operations, SOF and their close associates became part of an ‘inner circle’ (BV:69), a ‘circle of trust’ (MB1:204), ‘a whole different world, sealed off’ (BV:67,79). O’Neill in the course of his training began to conceive of himself as spatially separate from what he was before: ‘the scant weeks between then and now had become an impenetrable border between what I’d been and what I was becoming’ (RO:57). Bissonette’s sense of achievement on becoming a member of SEAL Team Six was symbolised by his ‘getting to the second deck’ of DEVGRU headquarters (MB1; BW), a space reserved for the elite of the elite whose skills and professionalism made them ‘wanted for the most sensitive, secretive missions with the most at stake’ (RO:119).

Most importantly, these stealth techniques, so fundamental to ‘the hunt’, are used to constitute the operators, and by extension the US self, as supersoldiers in a particularly
gendered and racialised way. DEVGRU, for example, includes as the self-identification shoulder patch of its ‘Red squadron’ the image of a Native American, ‘Silver squadron’, crossed tomahawks.

Figure 5: The insignia of SEAL Team 6 Silver and Red Squadrons; Robert O’Neill and fellow Red Squadron posing with Red Squadron flag.

A life-size statue of a ‘mohawk chief’ adorns the entryway to DEVGRU, while each DEVGRU member was issued with a ‘tomahawk’ weapon to carry into battle. Operators simultaneously describe their work as going into ‘Indian country’ and fighting the ‘savages’ while also taking pride in their ability to move as silently and as stealthily as to ‘make an Apache scout gasp’

59 The terrorist other is of course also constituted through secrecy though constructions as duplicitous. See Van Veeren, ‘Hunting logics’ (2018).
O’Neill, deployed to Ramadi in Iraq as part of DEVGRU, describes how they ‘honed [their] tactics and techniques’ in stealth like ‘Native American warriors’ (RO:191):

[w]e became so good at entering targets silently that we started playing a game we called “counting coup” in honor of Native American warriors of the past. ... To demonstrate their courage and stealth, Native Americans would creep up on their sleeping enemy and touch him, even take items off his person without waking him. So we started doing that too. We’d sneak up on a house full of bad guys and enter as quietly as we could, forgoing explosives for the silent removal of windows, picking locks, or whatever clever ways we could think of that would make minimal noise’ (RO:191-192).

This construction was then layered with mastery of secrecy as part of the ultimate test of manhood and then as indication of ultimate patriotism and ‘American excellence’. For these authors, SOF, are ‘elite warriors’ (KB, MB1, MB2, CK, RO, BW) and ‘all that is best in the American male – courage, patriotism, strength, determination, refusal to accept defeat, brains, expertise in all that they did’ (ML:53).

The supersoldier, and ‘supreme’ American patriot (ML:54,159), therefore present a racialised masculinity that brings together a compelling mix of physical and technological know-how of moving secretly in order to function as security actors. The articulation of technology in connection with stealth as sophistication, technological ways of seeing and therefore knowing, and the technorational are inescapable in these compositions. Technology and the American technological sublime, already a gendered and racialised discourse, are essential components in the construction of these security subjects and the legitimacy of the hunt. But adding on to this is the constitution of the supersoldier through mastery of their environment in terms of mastery of the practice of stealth, the ability to see into secret worlds, while covering their own secrecy.

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61 For an excellent postcolonial critique of the discourse of mastery, see Juliette Singh, Unthinking mastery: Dehumanism and decolonial entanglements (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).
Layer 3: ‘Quiet professionals’: codes of secrecy

Immediately following the bin Laden raid, on May 6\textsuperscript{th}, 2011, President Obama and Vice President Biden travelled to Kentucky to address the troops at Fort Campbell, delivering a second and less well known speech to mark the death of Osama bin Laden. Obama’s remarks in Kentucky recalled 9/11, celebrated the results of ‘one of the greatest intelligence military operations in our nation’s history’, and described the raid as a sign that ‘Our strategy is working.’\textsuperscript{62} In particular, Obama singled out the ‘quiet professionals’ who took part in the raid and whose success ‘demands secrecy’, doing so again and again in future speeches that celebrated ‘the consummate quiet professional’, one of a ‘special breed of warrior that so often serves in the shadows.’\textsuperscript{63} For Obama,

> The American people may not always see them. We may not always hear of their success. But they are there in the thick of the fight, in the dark of night, achieving their mission. ... We sleep more peacefully in our beds tonight because patriots like these stand ready to answer our nation’s call and protect our way of life -- now and forever.\textsuperscript{64}

Therefore for many, including the operators themselves, their leaders, those who work alongside them, live with them, and for many who report on their operations, the success of Special Operations ‘demands secrecy, and that secrecy saves lives.’\textsuperscript{65} ‘SEALs and other commando units are shrouded in secrecy and, traditionally at least, the special operators

\textsuperscript{62} Barack H. Obama, ‘Transcript: President Obama Iraq speech’, 15 December 2011, \textit{BBC News}, available online at: \url{http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-16191394}, accessed 11 July 2018. Hours earlier Obama and Biden had met privately with the SEAL Team 6 operators, congratulating them on the operation and presenting them with the Presidential Unit Citation. The President in turn was presented with a framed flag signed with the ‘anonymous’ call signs of the operators (RO:321) or as Matt Bissonnette claims, ‘a random name’ in order to preserve ‘the only thing that remained secret’ (MB1:327).


\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.

have frowned upon talking publicly about past missions’. They have a ‘carefully cultivated aura of secrecy’, and pride ‘ourselves for being the quiet professionals’ (MB1:333; SM:112), for being ‘part of a team with a code of silence’ (RO:322). For Rear Admiral Sean Pybus, head of Naval Special Warfare Command (2011-2013), “hawk[ing] details about a mission’ and selling other information about Seal training and operations puts the force and their families at risk’. Or, as journalist Mark Bowden explains, ‘In the [US] military, secrecy is status... It’s an awfully powerful cultural pull’.

This construction of special operations as ‘quiet’ is formalised in their Ethos or Creed, as special operators:

US Special Forces Command: I am a member of my Nation's chosen soldiery, I **serve quietly, not seeking recognition or accolades**. My goal is to succeed in my mission - and live to succeed again.

Navy Special Warfare Command: I **do not advertise** the nature of my work, nor **seek recognition** for my actions.

It is also made material in the signs that decorate US special forces spaces, for example within the spaces of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), ‘**The Deed is All, Not The Glory**’ that discourages seeking fame, fortune and ‘Ego’, and in the non-disclosure agreements that they are obliged to sign when they join and when they leave.

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An interesting comparison can be made between the socio-technical-juridical power of a non-disclosure agreement and the socio-technical of the lie detector test. While there is no evidence that SOF undertake lie detector tests as some of their counterparts may do working for the CIA or NSA, the disciplining effect of an
In other words, any achievements within these communities are ‘traditionally’ celebrated privately and without public fanfare. Even following the bin Laden raid, the message emerging from officials was that the SEALs involved should ‘be proud but keep quiet’ about the details and about their identities in keeping with the code, to keep their identities and role secret in order to protect them and their families: as the ‘fight is not over’, ‘sharing too many details can endanger the next operation’, Rear Admiral Ed Winters, head of Naval Special Warfare Command (2008-2011) told SEALS in a confidential email sent the same day and leaked to the Associated Press. ‘The operators of their unit and they themselves will know about it, but nobody else will,’ he said. ‘That’s just the nature of the business,’’ former Navy SEAL Craig Sawyer.71

In short, US SOF are constructed as the ‘quiet professionals’ with associated disciplining and policing mechanisms, and as articulated to security concerns. The work of SOF is not only intentionally kept secret but carefully constructed and disciplined as such by those ‘inside’ as well as ‘outside’ the ‘circle of trust’ (MB1:204), especially within and associated with ‘black ops’ units. Across the world of special operatives, this code of secrecy of the ‘quiet professionals’ is therefore a third layer of secrecy practices that make up the arcanum, the composition of secrecy, around US special operations.

This third layer therefore mobilised sets of secrecy practices connected with mitigating the effects of secrecy practices of layers 1 and 2, the ‘tells’ and gaps in the coverage of the other layers. The practices and techniques of the layers of the composition already discussed have material (and often visible) consequences, including, as argued above, in producing material traces in the shape of bodies moulded into stealthy weapons. These traces of secrecy, if left unchecked, work against secret keeping. This therefore necessitates a layer of secrecy that does more cultural work to discipline subjects into secret keepers and limit secret showing.

As Joseph Masco has argued with relation to nuclear secrecy, intensified secrecy regulations or ‘hypersecurity protocols’ reveal ‘that the most portable nuclear secrets are not in the

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documents but are locked up in the experience and knowledge of weapons scientists’ who need to be disciplined.\textsuperscript{72} Similarly with respect to SOF and ‘man hunting’, for secrets to remain secret, one or two layers are not sufficient, a multi-layered composition is needed that specifically enrols the subject into keeping secrets beyond the practices already discussed. These practices include remaining silent and unnoticed (‘don’t show, don’t tell’), lying and coverstorying (fictions), relying on the wilful ignorance of others (the communities in which they live, for example, may discourage active questioning around the work of the SOF amongst them), and letting time pass or patience, along with the regimes of surveillance and punishment that produce a disciplining power around this layer. Adding this layer of the composition therefore helps to move the discussion of the power of secrecy away from the technologies and techniques of secret keeping in the ‘high’ technology domain to the interconnections between the subjects, their bodies, their cultural surroundings, and ‘low’ technologies needed to keep a secret.

This third layer, that mobilises the less spoken about cultural and intimate practices associated with secret keeping within security discourses, is therefore overall concerned with generating ‘passable’\textsuperscript{73}, as opposed to ‘invisible’ subjects of layer 2. For the ‘quiet professionals’, passing involves ‘hiding in plain sight’ and ‘covering’, often within their own communities through adopting the signs, cultural codes and conventions of the given identity into which one passes and steering the curiosity of others away, as they are taught (BV:79; MB2:6). In other words, covering and coverstorying always also entails a raced and gendered component.\textsuperscript{74} As Kristin Beck summarises of her time as a Navy SEAL being quiet enabled ‘passing’: passing as Afghan while on clandestine intelligence-gathering missions but also ‘passing’ as normatively heterosexual male ‘quiet professional’.

\textsuperscript{72} Masco (2006), p.279.
It was weird that I could grow a beard and trick them into thinking I was one of them – and really I’m an American woman in disguise as a U.S. military guy in disguise as a Pashtun! (KB:80).

But this code of silence is also a deeply masculinised one, as codes of silence (or òmerta) often are. ‘Snitches’ and ‘leakers’ are derided for their inability to contain themselves, as feminised ‘gossips’ who have ‘gone wild’ put themselves ahead of their (male) honour and the honour of their community. It is heroic to stay silent, to ‘hold demons inside’ (BV:192), or ‘live the lie’ (RO:103). For Velicovich, this heroic silence was a cost to be borne in the service of US security:

You had to bottle war up, even when your instinct was to talk and sort things out. Any accomplishments could only be shared among the group. ... I had learned to give up the idea that I should be patted on the back or hugged every time I did good... None of that mattered. I had an important job to do and American lives depended on me to do it well, whether they knew about our existence or not (BV:77).

I couldn’t talk to anyone at home about anything. Everything I did was top secret.

... Normal sentences became censored, my mind reciting the lines in my head multiple times before they were spoken aloud. It forced me to become quieter and more introverted. I simply shut down when I wasn’t in the office (BV:150).

This layer of secrecy, however, requires maintenance. Within SOF communities, violators of the code of the quiet professional are punished. Bissonnette, for example, has been subjected to a certain amount of blacklisting and is ‘persona non grata’ by the SEAL community in response to the ‘greatest betrayal[s] the community has ever known.’

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75 Crowell (2015).

The response and scandal over who reveals a secret is also very telling: On May 3rd, while thanking SEAL team 6 operatives at a Washington dinner, Vice President Joseph Biden publically disclosed what was until that point
the community who aren’t talking to me anymore,” he said, especially active-duty SEALs who fear their careers would be ended if caught communicating with him.78 Bissonnette’s former commanding officer is reported to keep a mock tombstone with Bissonnette’s name on it, and instructed Bissonnette to delete his phone number.79 “Those who divulge mission secrets to reporters – even retired SEALs who appear as analysts on television – are often criticized or even ostracized by peers.”80 In other words, to cover over the secret requires disciplinary power that functions on a very personal and everyday level for operators, and yet is a key part of the composition.
Layer 4: ‘Everybody wants to touch the magic’: pleasures of the secrecy

In the final layer of the secrecy composition, secrecy, security and the US state are reproduced within the US ‘Shadow War’ discourse through their connections to magic, pleasure, voyeurism, concealment and sex. Embodied and materialised in a way that complements the geospatial layer of secrecy in particular – objects and bodies are still strategically revealed as part of the ordering process -- this layer of the composition works in particular to reproduce SOF operators, the SOF community, US military and US state as ‘alluring subject’ through the work of the secret as pleasure.

This final layer is about a carefully managed interplay and interdependence between concealment and revelation, between secrecy and spectacle as explored in secrecy studies in relation to secrecy fictions as the secret as spectacle, but through the added insight of queer theories. Secrecy is often ‘sexy’, as well as dangerous, in the same way that weaponry and sex have been articulated historically within US security discourses. This ‘allure’ not only reproduces the logic of the existence of a secret and the secrecy practices it is associated with, but is generative of a set of economies of pleasure surrounding the secret. It is, in essence, a layer made up of a series of ‘fan dances’, a seduction through the careful and strategic concealment and revelation of parts of a secret where to know everything (to see everything in the context of the fan dance) is ‘obscene’ and in a way, impossible. The pleasure or reassuring commonsense instead comes from the interplay between the concealment and revelation, rather than the elimination of concealment, for example; the pleasure, and therefore the power of, ‘touching the magic’ and generating ‘alluring’ subjects, rather than revealing its secrets.

81 Bratich (2007); Melley (2012); Horn (2013); Lochrie (1999); Melanie Richter-Montpetit, ‘Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (in IR) But were Afraid to Ask: The ‘Queer Turn’ in International Relations,’ Millennium, 46:2 (2018), pp.220-240.
84 Jean Baudrillard, Fatal Strategies (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990 [1983]).
Within the context of the GWoT then, this final layer of this arcanum only makes sense through reproducing the sexuality of the US self through these special operatives and their close network, and the sexual deviance of those they ‘hunt’, in effect reproducing the US security state and what it means to be US American and to have values as patriotic, ‘hard’, (normatively) heterosexual men who are attractive to women and feel empowered to gaze on them and others. In other words, to take seriously the political work that ‘sexuality and gender does as part of wider relations of power and normalisation’ and to think through how the ‘mutually constitutive relationship between ‘normal’ and ‘perverse’ sexual subjects and practices’ make soldiers, state and security policies make sense. And then to build on these insights by thinking through the pleasures of secrecy as part of the composition.

![Figure 6: The SEAL Team 6 (DEVGRU) Challenge Coin](image)

Within the discourse of SOF, sharing intimacies with secrecy operators is constructed as highly desirable and valuable – whether through the personal exchange of challenge coins (commemorative coins and collector’s items produced for each unit of the military and, in the case of coins connected to ‘elite units’, a US military equivalent of a secret handshake) (CK:224) (see Figure 6) and through the opportunity to ‘touch the magic’ by meeting an

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operative (BV; RO; MB2), or even by imagining an encounter with their secret world (romantic
fiction centred around US Navy SEALs, for example, is an entire flourishing sub-genre. 86 For
example, for Velicovich,

The girls [women working at the US Defense Intelligence Agency] always seemed to
perk up when we arrived. There was something that got these girls hooked when
they worked with us or the SEALs. I think they got a taste of what it was like to get
out from behind their desks – we called it ‘touching the magic’. The upside for us
was that the girls from the DIA were always good looking (BV:158).

For O’Neill, flying on a US military ‘Little Bird’ reaffirmed a connection between stealth,
technology and sexuality: ‘Every time I took off on one, I’d say to myself, Yep, Chicks dig this’
(RO:194, emphasis in original). SEALs with their ‘perfect physique’ (RO:102) – part of the set
of ‘tools’ of the trade of Layer 2 that concealed and revealed them as covert – were often
‘damn good-looking’ (323), ‘studs’ (326), and ‘cool guys’ (334), ‘spending down time
impressing women, living the SEAL dream’ (120) and where ‘All they want to do is pick up
babes’ or, if they are a ‘good SEAL, be with their families.’ 87 But while they could ‘look good’;
as per layer 3 they had to stay quiet. This meant, ‘living the lie’, as O’Neill claim (RO: 103).
This ‘living the lie’, however, or ‘charade’ included covering over the absence of ‘action’:
‘We’d pull the old “can’t talk about it” crap, leaving the impression of untold secret missions’
(RO:103).

This allure and ‘fan dance’ in other words, works intertextually with the growing collection of
Hollywood films, television shows, advertising, political campaigns and memoirs (many
produced with the support of the US military) to reproduce the commonsense of this secret
world. 88 This fan dance is an essential part of the US military’s recruiting strategy, as the now

86 Annys Shin, ‘SEALs go from superhero to sex symbol’, Washington Post, 8 May 2011, available online at:

In other words, Bissonnette and O’Neill were not alone in breaking this code of the ‘quiet professionals’, or to benefit financially, politically and professionally from its secrecy and then its selective revelation: President Obama, Vice President Biden and CIA Director Leon Panetta celebrated the ‘public win’ of the existence and successful deployment of special operators; Navy SEAL Mark Luttrell was encouraged by and worked with the US Navy in order to publish his memoir, \textit{Lone Survivor}, which, like Chris Kyle’s story, \textit{American Sniper}, became a New York Times bestseller and a feature film; former SEAL Brandon Webb, along with a writing career, has runs SOFREP.com, a public website on the controversies and debates affecting US special forces; recently disgraced former Missouri Governor, Eric Greitens, campaigned for office strongly based on his identity and experience as a US Navy SEAL; as did current Interior Secretary Robert Zinke; while current and retired SEALS are regularly employed to consult and act as extras in Hollywood and US television productions, such as CBS’s \textit{SEAL TEAM} television show.\footnote{Keveney (2017).}

In other words, the hunting logic and its secrecy composition ultimately only makes sense, and is made possible, through the work of its ‘fan dances’ and the reproduction of the ‘allure’ of secrecy and its ‘alluring subjects’. The secret world of the ‘quiet professional’ as ‘quiet’ is very often quite spectacular.

\section*{Conclusion}

Drawing on secrecy studies and on multi-layered compositional understandings of meaning-making, this article sets out a framework for studying the power of secrecy in security discourses. In other words, this article makes the case that to understand the complex workings of power within a security discourse, the political work of secrecy as a multi-layered
set of practices needs to be analysed. Taking inspiration from the work of David Miller, Kim Lane Scheppelle and Karma Lochrie who argue that rather than focusing on what is being covered by secrecy as the locus of power, studying ‘what covers secrecy’ and the particular social context of these practices offers new insight into the ‘power relations that surround and give meaning’ to secrets.”

More specifically, as this article contends, secrecy can be understood as a nested set of practices, a composition that obscures and makes illegible as a central part of the act of power. This composition of secrecy practices is collectively referred to as an *arcanum* to describe the effect of choreographing a dance around a secret in order to prevent the flow of information while still making meaning. More specifically, the arcanum is composed of four different layers: geographies of secrecy; specialist mediations of secrecy; cultures of secrecy, and pleasures of secrecy. The result of these different layers and their associated practices are the production of different forms of subjects within a discourse in relation to secrecy that include ‘contained subjects’, ‘invisible subjects’, ‘opaque’ or ‘passing subjects’, and ‘alluring subjects’.

Using the U.S. ‘shadow war’ as an empirical case study, and in particular conducting a close reading of a set of key memoirs associated with the rising practice of ‘manhunting’ in the Global War on Terrorism, this legitimizing and meaning-making practices of the arcanum are explored. This article therefore also responds to the methodological challenge of studying secrecy, by focusing on the public life of these secrets, such as the details surrounding the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, and how their covering over was detailed and narrated. In staying with ‘what covers the secret’\(^\text{92}\), rather than on what is concealed and its revelation (including any subsequent scandal), the series of interconnected and layered practices for covering the secret becomes the site of power and which may, as these memoirs demonstrate, outweigh the power of any secret.

Secrecy is powerful and productive. As Michel Foucault suggests ‘there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things... There is not one but many silences, and they are an

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\(^{92}\) Miller (1988).
integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse’. To understand the power invested in security discourses therefore means paying closer attention to these diverse ways of secret keeping and their attendant meaning-making as legitimizing forces.

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