

CARLETON UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY



Detail from *The Eavesdropper*, by N. Maes (1657)

Instructor: Professor William Walters

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Seminar times: Thurs. 11.35 – 2.25pm

Office: C673 Loeb

Office Hours: Thurs. 3.00 - 4.00pm

Location: See Brightspace.

Prerequisite(s): fourth-year standing

Method of delivery: In-person weekly seminars; online forum discussions; short videos.

COURSE AIMS AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This course is about doing secrecy research. It is *not* a training in how to dig up secrets about scandals and celebrities (let's leave that to investigative journalists and detectives) but rather how to research the social phenomenon of secrecy – its cultures, practices, and power relations. Our exploration of secrecy will utilize a particular method: each week we will focus on particular material objects, sites or scenes and ask what they reveal about different forms, experiences, and practices of revealing, concealing, sharing and hoarding knowledge and with what social effects.

The course has three learning objectives:

I. To introduce students to state-of-the-art research in secrecy studies. We examine the way in which sociologists, geographers, queer theorists, artists and others have approached questions of secrecy and power within modernity. We look at various types of secrecy like public secrets, silence, denial, and obfuscation and their entanglement in power relations of race, gender, class, colonialism and sexuality. In our discussions we will encounter thinkers like Simmel, Goffman, Foucault and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, as well as famous whistleblowers like Daniel Ellsberg and such artists as Jenny Holzer and Trevor Paglen.

II. To help you concretize and apply concepts and ideas from secrecy studies to other contexts, cases and events. For example in forum posts you might draw connections

between readings about files and documents (Module 5) with the ongoing 'Epstein' controversy.

III. To reflect on methods which scholars have used to research secrecy. For example, in Module 10 we consider how the visual analysis of government propaganda posts as well as artwork gives as a space to analyze rhetorics and tropes of secrecy. In forums and in your exam questions you will have the opportunity to reflect on what kinds of methods and cases are suitable for studying particular issues involving secrecy.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Readings, lectures and videos. There are two or three required readings each week. In addition I often will post on Brightspace short stories, videos, images and other artefacts that can help illuminate the week's topic.
2. Seminar Attendance and Participation (15%). You are expected to do the required readings and consult any relevant material posted on Brightspace before attending the weekly seminar. You are expected to actively participate in the discussions. Your grade will reflect your attendance and the quality of your engagement with the diverse course materials.
3. Weekly forum posts (30%). These will be hosted on BrightSpace for each week's topic. You should aim to post on SEVEN different weeks of the course - THREE before the mid-term and FOUR after the mid-term. We will use the posts to orient in-class discussions. **The readings are not there to be summarized. Instead, use them as jumping-off points or hooks for your ideas.** For example, you could post: (a) a thought, question or problem that arises from a particular reading (b) a point of criticism (c) a connection to another reading, event, or current affair (eg, something in the news, or something from the past) (d) a response to someone else's post. You will be graded on the quality of your overall contribution to the forums.
4. Mid-term test (20%) This will take place **in class** on **February 12th**. Duration: **80 mins** (start time: 11.50am). The test will be **open book**, ie, you can bring in and consult readings and use books, laptops or other mobile devices. However your answers will be **written in pen in the official university exam booklets**. The questions will include **short answers** and **one essay length answer**. The mid-term will test you on readings, as well as material I post on Brightspace and seminar discussions from weeks 2 to 5 inclusive.
5. EITHER: Final exam (35%). This will take place during the official exam period (April 11-23, 2026). The university will post the schedule during the term. Note that exams can be scheduled on any day of the week including weekends. Duration: **120 mins**. The test will be **closed book**, ie, no books, laptops or other mobile devices are allowed in the exam room. The questions will include **multiple choice, short answers** and **two essay-length answers**. To help you prepare, you will be given two possible questions 10 days before the exam. One of these will appear as one of the essay questions on the exam. The final exam will test you on readings, as well as material I post on Brightspace and seminar discussions from weeks 2 to 12 inclusive.
6. OR: Research paper (Proposal 5% ; Paper 30%). **If you score 70% or above on the mid-term test you have the option to write a research paper instead of the final exam. The course is designed to understand secrecy in context rather than in generic terms. You are therefore strongly encouraged to approach the project as a case study based around an object, controversy, practice etc. Word lengths – Proposal (500 words); Essay (4000 words, not including bibliography). Deadlines: Proposal (March 19th); Essay (April 8th,**

11.59pm via Brightspace). Further guidelines for writing the proposal and the essay will be posted on Brightspace.

COURSE TEXTS

There is no text book. All required readings are either accessible in the journals held in the library or via ARES.

COURSE WEBSITE

Brightspace will be used for the course.

THEMES AND READINGS

1. Introduction (Jan 8)

2. Perspectives on secrecy (Jan 15)

- Bok Sissela. (1984) *Secrets : on the ethics of concealment and revelation*, New York: Vintage Books, 3-14.
- Costa, Jana and Chris Grey. 2016. *Secrecy at work: The hidden architecture of organizational life*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 19-43.
- De Goede, Marieke. 2020. 'Secrecy vignettes'. In Marieke de Goede et al (eds) *Secrecy and methods in security research*, New York: Routledge, 261-272.
- Galison, Peter. 2016. 'The Revelation of Secrets: Peter Galison and John May on Artifacts of Surveillance, Part I and II.' *Thresholds* 43: 136-153.

Further reading. The follow provide broad, overviews of sociological, anthropological and political debates about secrecy in recent years:

- Potolsky, Matthew. (2016) 'Whither secrecy?' *American Literary History* 28(4): 787-799.
- Broeders, Dennis. 2016. 'The secret in the information society', *Philosophy and Technology* 29(3): 293-305.
- Galison, Peter. 2010. 'Secrecy in three acts', *Social Research* 77(3): 941-974.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2015. 'Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization', *Journal of Information Technology* 30: 75-89.
- Jones, Graham. 2014. 'Secrecy'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43: 53-69.

3. From the oath to the NDA (Jan 22)

- Cuenca, Esther Liberman. 2023. 'Oath-taking and the politics of secrecy in medieval and early modern British towns', *Continuity and Change* 38: 9-29.
- Ellsberg, Daniel. 2004. 'Secrecy oaths'. *Harvard International Review*. Summer. 16-19.
- Arditi, David. 2020. 'The Voice: Non-disclosure agreements and the hidden political economy of reality TV', *Popular Communication* 18(2): 138-151.

4. Postcards, posts, hashtags, platforms (Jan 29)

- Poletti, Anna. (2011) 'Intimate economies: PostSecret and the Affect of Confession.' *Biography* 34(1): 25-36.
- Ross, Andrew and Aditi Bhatia. 2025. '@Fesshole and the discourse of confession on X: A study of online sharing and community building', *Discourse, Context and Media* 63: 1-8.
- Chateauvert-Gagnon, Beatrice. 2024. 'Speaking truth to power in a digital age: #MeToo as parrhesia', *Signs* 49(4): 831-857.

5. Documents and files: thinking about the stuff of secrecy (Feb 5)

- Luscombe, Alex and Kevin Walby. 2017. 'Theorizing freedom of information: the live archive, obfuscation and actor-network theory', *Government Information Quarterly* 34(3): 379-387.
- Verdery, Katherine. 2021. "'The boys with blue eyes': An anthropology of secret police'. In: Kevin Karpiak and William Garriott (eds) *The anthropology of police*, New York: Routledge, 2-21.
- Gilbert, Emily. 2106. 'From declassified documents to redacted files'. In: Alison William et al (eds) *The Routledge companion to military research methods*, New York: Routledge, 30-43.

6. Mid-Term Test (Feb 12) - in classroom.**7. Winter break (no class)** (Feb 19)**8. Secrets and archives** (Feb 26)

- Logan, Tricia. (2018) 'Questions of privacy and confidentiality after atrocity: Collecting and maintaining records of the Residential School System in Canada', *Genocide Studies International* 12(1): 92-102.
- Anderson, David. (2015) 'Guilty secrets: Deceit, denial, and the discovery of Kenya's "Migrated Archive"', *History Workshop Journal* 80: 142-160.
- Gentile, Patrizia (2009) 'Resisted Access? National security, the Access to Information Act, and queer(ing) archives'. *Archivaria* 68: 141-158.

9. Conspiracy YouTube and TikTok (Mar 5)

- Grandinetti, Justin. 2023. 'Political outrage machines: exploring the algorithms structuring conspiracy TikTok'. In *Insights: Global Network on Extremism and Technology*. January 25. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/01/25/political-outrage-machines-exploring-the-algorithms-structuring-conspiracy-tiktok/>

- Marwick, Alice et al. 2025. 'Shapeshifters and starseeds: populist knowledge production, generous epistemology, and disinformation on US conspiracy Tiktok', *Social Media & Society*: 1-14.
- Grusauskaite, Kamile et al. 2022. 'Picturing opaque power: how conspiracy theorists construct oppositional videos on YouTube', *Social Media & Society*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221089568>,

10. Posters, films, paintings: researching covert imaginaries (Mar 12)

- Leone, Massimo. 2017. 'Silence propaganda: A semiological inquiry into the ideologies of taciturnity', *Signs and Society* 5(1): 154-182.
- Walters, William. 2026. 'What is secrecy today? Jenny Holzer, security controversies and the art of mass redaction', *Security Dialogue*. [Article in production - will be posted once published]

11. Navigating the closet (Mar 19)

- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. (1990) *The Epistemology of the Closet*, University of California Press, READ: 67-78.
- Brown, M. (2011) 'Sedgwick's closet', *Progress in Human geography* 35(1): 124-5.
- Gregory, Christian. 2022. 'The closet'. In Kamden Strunk and Stephanie Shelton (eds) *Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education*. Leiden: Brill, 93-102.

12. Accidents: theorizing secrecy in the breach (Mar 26)

- Balmer, Brian. 2004. 'How does an accident become an experiment? Secret science and the exposure of the public to biological warfare agents', *Science as Culture* 13(2): 197-228
- Paglen, Trevor. (2010) 'Goatsucker: Towards a spatial theory of state secrecy. *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 28: 759-771

13. Wrap up and exam prep (Apr 2)

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In accordance with the Carleton University Undergraduate Calendar Regulations, the letter grades assigned in this course will have the following percentage equivalents:

A+ = 90-100	B+ = 77-79	C+ = 67-69	D+ = 57-59
A = 85-89	B = 73-76	C = 63-66	D = 53-56
A - = 80-84	B - = 70-72	C - = 60-62	D - = 50-52

F= Below 50

WDN = Withdrawn from the course

DEF = Deferred

Academic Regulations, Accommodations, Plagiarism, Etc.

University rules regarding registration, withdrawal, appealing marks, and most anything else you might need to know can be found on the university's website, here:

<https://calendar.carleton.ca/undergrad/regulations/academicregulationsoftheuniversity/>

Carleton is committed to providing academic accessibility for all individuals. You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. The accommodation request processes, including information about the Academic Consideration Policy for Students in Medical and Other Extenuating Circumstances, are outlined on the Academic Accommodations website (<https://students.carleton.ca/course-outline/>). For an accommodation request, the processes are as follows:

Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

The Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC: <https://carleton.ca/pmc/>) provides services to students with Learning Disabilities (LD), psychiatric/mental health disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), chronic medical conditions, and impairments in mobility, hearing, and vision. If you have a disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact PMC at **613-520-6608** or pmc@carleton.ca for a formal evaluation. If you are already registered with the PMC, contact your PMC coordinator to send your **Letter of Accommodation** at the beginning of the term, and no later than two weeks before the first in-class scheduled test or exam requiring accommodation (*if applicable*).

*The deadline for contacting the Paul Menton Centre regarding accommodation for February/March examinations is **February 1, 2026** and **March 15, 2026** for April examinations.

For Religious Obligations:

Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details, visit the Equity Services website: www.carleton.ca/equity/wp-content/uploads/Student-Guide-to-Academic-Accommodation.pdf

For Pregnancy:

Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details, visit the Equity Services website: www.carleton.ca/equity/wp-content/uploads/Student-Guide-to-Academic-Accommodation.pdf

For Survivors of Sexual Violence

As a community, Carleton University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working and living environment where sexual violence will not be tolerated, and where survivors are supported through academic accommodations as per Carleton's Sexual Violence Policy. For more information about the services available at the university and to obtain information about sexual violence and/or support, visit: www.carleton.ca/sexual-violence-support

Accommodation for Student Activities

Carleton University recognizes the substantial benefits, both to the individual student and for the university, that result from a student participating in activities beyond the classroom experience. Reasonable accommodation must be provided to students who compete or perform at the national or international level. Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. <https://carleton.ca/senate/wp-content/uploads/Accommodation-for-Student-Activities-1.pdf>

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the passing off of someone else's work as your own and is a serious academic offence. For the details of what constitutes plagiarism, the potential penalties and the procedures refer to the section on Instructional Offences in the Undergraduate Calendar. Students are expected to familiarize themselves with and follow the Carleton University Student Academic Integrity Policy (See <https://carleton.ca/registrar/academic-integrity/>). The Policy is strictly enforced and is binding on all students. Academic dishonesty in any form will not be tolerated. Students who infringe the Policy may be subject to one of several penalties.

Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools (e.g. ChatGPT)

Artificial Intelligence Tools continue to evolve and are already woven into the ways many of us do research. The course does not ban AI use but allows for you to integrate it into your workflow. In this course you are allowed to make **moderate use** of AI tools when formulating your posts for the discussion forums on Brightspace. But be sure to observe these guidelines:

A1. Clearly identify any paragraphs where you have drawn on AI. (Eg, “The following paragraph was generated with the assistance of ChatGPT/Copilot” etc.)

A2. Use AI Tools as a starting point in your research rather than treating it as a source of ready-made answers. This course takes a very specific approach to secrecy, approaching it through a focus on material objects and practices. When AI scrapes for material to answer your queries it might not generate answers that sufficiently appreciate the perspective developed in the course, so don't use AI as a cookie cutter. Treat AI as a research tool, not necessarily the final answer. As a general rule, AI generated content should not exceed 30% of any written post you make.

A3. Be sure to edit and ensure the accuracy of any post or statement you make.

Note: Students can also access resources related to citing Generative AI on the [MacOdrum Library website](#).

What are the Penalties for Plagiarism?

A student found to have plagiarized an assignment may be subject to one of several penalties including but not limited to: a grade of zero, a failure or a reduced grade for the piece of academic work; reduction of final grade in the course; completion of a remediation process; resubmission of academic work; withdrawal from course(s); suspension from a program of study; a letter of reprimand.

What are the Procedures?

All allegations of plagiarism are reported to the faculty of Dean of FASS and Management. Documentation is prepared by instructors and departmental chairs. The Dean writes to the student and the University Ombudsperson about the alleged plagiarism. The Dean reviews the allegation. If it is not resolved at this level then it is referred to a tribunal appointed by the Senate.

Statement on Student Mental Health:

“As a student you may experience a range of mental health challenges that significantly impact your academic success and overall well-being. If you need help, please speak to someone. There are numerous resources available both on- and off-campus to support you. For more information, please consult <https://wellness.carleton.ca/>”

Emergency Resources ([on and off campus](#))

- Crisis/Urgent Counselling Support: 613-520-6674 (Mon-Fri, 8:30-4:30)
- Suicide Crisis Helpline: call or text 9-8-8, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- For immediate danger or urgent medical support: call 9-1-1

Carleton Resources

- Mental Health and Wellbeing: <https://carleton.ca/wellness/>
- Health & Counselling Services: <https://carleton.ca/health/>
- Paul Menton Centre: <https://carleton.ca/pmc/>
- Academic Advising Centre (AAC): <https://carleton.ca/academicadvising/>
- Centre for Student Academic Support (CSAS): <https://carleton.ca/csas/>
- Equity & Inclusivity Communities: <https://carleton.ca/equity/>

Off Campus Resources

- Distress Centre of Ottawa and Region: call 613-238-3311, text 343-306-5550, or connect online at <https://www.dcottawa.on.ca/>
- Mental Health Crisis Service: call 613-722-6914 or toll-free 1-866-996-0991, or connect online at <http://www.crisisline.ca/>
- Good2Talk: call 1-866-925-5454 or connect online at <https://good2talk.ca/>
- The Walk-In Counselling Clinic: for online or on-site service <https://walkincounselling.com>

Important Information:

- Student or professor materials created for this course (including presentations and posted notes, labs, case studies, assignments and exams) remain the intellectual property of the author(s). They are intended for personal use and may not be reproduced or redistributed without prior written consent of the author(s).
- Students must always retain a hard copy of all work that is submitted.

- Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.
- Carleton University is committed to protecting the privacy of those who study or work here (currently and formerly). To that end, Carleton's Privacy Office seeks to encourage the implementation of the privacy provisions of Ontario's *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FIPPA) within the university.
- In accordance with FIPPA, please ensure all communication with staff/faculty is via your Carleton email account. To get your Carleton Email you will need to activate your [MyCarletonOne account](#) through Carleton Central. Once you have activated your MyCarletonOne account, log into the [MyCarleton Portal](#).
- Please note that you will be able to link your MyCarletonOne account to other non-MyCarletonOne accounts and receive emails from us. However, for us to respond to your emails, we need to see your full name, CU ID, and the email must be written from your valid MyCarletonOne address. Therefore, it would be easier to respond to your inquiries if you would send all email from your connect account. If you do not have or have yet to activate this account, you may wish to do so by visiting <https://students.carleton.ca/>.

WINTER TERM 2026 – Important Dates and Deadlines

Date	Activity
WINTER TERM 2026	
December 29, 2025	Deadline for course outlines to be made available to students registered in full winter and early winter term courses.
January 5, 2026	University reopens.
	Winter term begins. Full winter and early winter classes begin.
January 9, 2026	Last day for registration and course changes (including auditing) in early winter courses.
January 16, 2026	Last day for registration and course changes (including auditing) in full winter and late winter courses.

Date	Activity
	Last day to withdraw from early winter courses with a full fee adjustment.
	Graduate students who have not electronically submitted their final thesis copy to Graduate Studies will not be eligible to graduate in winter 2026 and must register for the winter 2026 term.
January 23-25, January 30- February 1, 2026	Full fall and late fall term deferred final examinations will be held.
January 31, 2026	Last day to withdraw from full winter courses and the winter portion of fall/winter courses with a full fee adjustment.
February 1, 2026	Last day for academic withdrawal from early winter courses.
	Last day to request Formal Examination Accommodations for Feb/Mar final examinations from the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities. Note that it may not be possible to fulfil accommodation requests received after the specified deadlines.
February 6, 2026	Last day for summative tests or examinations, or formative tests or examinations totaling more than 15% of the final grade, in early winter undergraduate courses, before the official Feb/Mar final examination period (see examination regulations in the Academic Regulations of the University section of the Undergraduate Calendar/General Regulations of the Graduate Calendar).
February 13, 2026	Last day of early winter classes.
	Last day for final take-home examinations to be assigned in early winter courses, with the exception of those conforming to the examination regulations in the Academic Regulations

Date	Activity
	of the University section of the Undergraduate Calendar/General Regulations of the Graduate Calendar.
	Last day that can be specified by an instructor as a due date for term work for early winter courses.
	April examination schedule available online.
February 16, 2026	Statutory holiday. University closed.
	Deadline for course outlines to be made available to students registered in late winter courses.
February 16-20, 2026	Winter break, no classes.
February 21-22, February 28-March 1, 2026	Final examinations in early winter undergraduate courses will be held.
February 23, 2026	Late winter classes begin.
February 27, 2026	Last day for registration and course changes (including auditing) in late winter courses.
March 1, 2026	Last day for receipt of applications for admission to an undergraduate degree program for the fall/winter session from applicants whose documents originate outside Canada or the United States.
	Last day for receipt of applications to Bachelor of Architecture, Bachelor of Industrial Design, Bachelor of Information Technology (Interactive Multimedia and Design), Bachelor of Music, Bachelor of Science in Nursing

Date	Activity
	and Bachelor of Social Work degree programs for the fall/winter session.
	Last day for receipt of applications for admission from candidates who wish to be guaranteed consideration for financial assistance (including Carleton fellowships, scholarships and teaching assistantships) administered by Carleton University. Candidates whose applications are received after the March 1 deadline may be considered for the award of a fellowship, scholarship or teaching assistantship (Graduate students only).
March 6, 2026	Last day to withdraw from late winter term courses with a full fee adjustment.
March 13-15, 2026	Early winter undergraduate deferred final examinations will be held.
March 15, 2026	Last day for academic withdrawal from full winter, late winter, and fall/winter courses.
	Last day to request Formal Examination Accommodations for April full winter, late winter, and fall/winter final examinations from the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities. Note that it may not be possible to fulfil accommodation requests received after the specified deadlines.
March 25, 2026	Last day for summative tests or examinations, or formative tests or examinations totaling more than 15% of the final grade, in full winter term or fall/winter undergraduate courses, before the official April final examination period (see examination regulations in the Academic Regulations of the University section of the Undergraduate Calendar/General Regulations of the Graduate Calendar).
April 1, 2026	Last day for graduate students to submit their supervisor-approved thesis, in examinable form to the department.

Date	Activity
	Last day for receipt of applications from potential spring (June) graduates.
	Last day for summative tests or examinations, or formative tests or examinations totaling more than 15% of the final grade, in late winter term undergraduate courses, before the official final examination period (see examination regulations in the Academic Regulations of the University section of the Undergraduate Calendar/General Regulations of the Graduate Calendar).
April 3, 2026	Statutory holiday. University closed.
April 8, 2026	Winter term ends.
	Classes follow a Friday schedule.
	Last day of full winter, late winter, and fall/winter classes.
	Last day for final take-home examinations to be assigned, with the exception of those conforming to the examination regulations in the Academic Regulations of the University section of the Undergraduate Calendar/General Regulations of the Graduate Calendar.
	Last day that can be specified by an instructor as a due date for term work for full winter, late winter, and fall/winter courses.
April 9-10, 2026	No classes or examinations take place.
April 11-23, 2026	Final examinations in full winter, late winter, and fall/winter courses will be held. Examinations are normally held all seven days of the week.
April 23, 2026	All final take-home examinations are due on this day, with the exception of those conforming to the examination

Date	Activity
	regulations in the Academic Regulations of the University section of the Undergraduate Calendar/General Regulations of the Graduate Calendar.
May 1, 2026	Last day for receipt of applications for undergraduate internal degree transfers to allow for registration for the summer session.
May 15-27, 2026	Full winter, late winter term, and fall/winter deferred final examinations will be held.
June 1, 2026	Last day for receipt of applications for admission to an undergraduate program for the fall/winter session except for applications due March 1.
June 15, 2026	Last day for receipt of applications for undergraduate degree program transfers for the fall term.