

Everyone has a secret: Closeting and secrecy from *Smallville* to *The Flash*, and from shame to algorithmic risk

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Sexualities

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Abstract

This article charts changes in the representation and encoding of superhero closeting metaphors from US television programs *Smallville* (2001–2011) to *The Flash* (2014–). Many theorists have noted that superheroes' hidden secret identities resemble closeting. However, because of legal and social changes in LGBTQ acceptance, as well as intensification of the data-driven security state, closeting on *The Flash* connects to a fundamentally different set of algorithmic neoliberal social processes. As a result, *The Flash* portrays a form of post-shame closeting wherein secrecy is a practice of necessary self-defense against mechanized necropolitical violence and social erasure based on unpredictable data markers of risk.

Keywords

Algorithm, closeting, queer theory, superheroes, surveillance

Introduction

For decades, metaphorical connections have been noted between comic book heroes, ranging from Superman to the X-Men, and the lived experience of LGBTQ people navigating the pressures of closeting (Battis, 2006; Gilroy, 2015; Kustritz, 2005; Schott, 2010). Both groups must deceive the people closest to them to protect a rigid separation between their two identities: one normative public face, and an alter-ego developed for fear of social disapproval and legal consequences. Yet, the social position of LGBTQ people and their legal rights in

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America have changed significantly since Superman first transformed himself within the confines of a phone booth in 1941, and with them the dynamics of closeting have also shifted. Charting the historical evolution of the superhero as a closeting metaphor allows for simultaneous examination of how the social function of closeting changed over time, and how audiences have engaged with closeting metaphors differently in various eras. Therefore, this project compares changes in the approach to closeting and secrecy on two very similar series from the American CW television network, *Smallville* (2001–2011) and *The Flash* (2014–), in order to understand the persistent allure of the closeted Superhero for very different moments in LGBTQ history, one based on a cultural logic of gay shame and another that constructs a post-shame closet based on algorithmic risk.

While the timespan between *Smallville* and *The Flash* may seem relatively minor, there have been significant changes in law and culture around LGBTQ issues in the USA, as well as in the role of privacy and surveillance in society. When *Smallville* premiered in 2001, consensual same-sex sexual acts were still illegal in many American states, a record number of LGBTQ military personnel were dishonorably discharged from the military under the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy (Correales, 2007; Damiano, 1998), the marriage-equality fight was in its infancy, and it remained legal in most states to openly discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in almost all aspects of life, from housing to employment to adoption. In addition, the 9/11 attacks occurred only a month before *Smallville*'s premiere, which meant that the series developed alongside the War on Terror and an increasing cultural obsession with hidden internal threats and duplicity (Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2010). Thus, *Smallville*'s metaphors of closeting and secrecy were produced within a culture of hostility toward LGBTQ lifestyles, and a more general culture of suspicion for deviation from social norms.

While homophobia and institutionalized forms of discrimination certainly had not disappeared by 2014 when *The Flash* premiered, the framework of struggle had changed dramatically. A series of Supreme Court decisions and policy changes made same-sex sexual acts and same-sex marriage legal everywhere in America, Don't Ask, Don't Tell was a thing of the past, and in many cases, sexual orientation and gender identity had become legally recognized protected classes for the purpose of hate crimes and discrimination. However, at the same time, a growing backlash culture attempted to undo many of these gains, while some authors argued that the stigmatization of LGBTQ populations had shifted to other security threats, making terrorists the new social queers who represent an existential threat of cultural death (Edelman, 2004; Kulpa and Mizielinska, 2016; Puar, 2017). Also the ramifications of policies developed during the early years of the War on Terror have become apparent, exposing the shocking scope of American intelligence agencies' surveillance, both abroad and domestically.

This shift from active military engagement abroad during the early years of the War on Terror to a strategy largely characterized by intelligence gathering, drone warfare, and mass surveillance, places *The Flash* within a fundamentally transformed culture strongly influenced by modern security politics and

consequently also influenced by suspicion about both corporate and government surveillance. In particular, many scholars argue that despite social and legal progress, LGBTQ populations remain disproportionately vulnerable to regimes of mass surveillance and big data, as, for example, hidden exchanges of data revealing sexual preference may become the basis of automated discrimination, or non-gender-conforming bodies can be marked as a threat by airport security (Bhattachali and Maiti, 2015; Conrad, 2009a, 2009b; Lewis, 2010; Phillips and Cunningham, 2007; Werbin et al., 2017). As a result, metaphors about closeting and secrecy in *The Flash* are differently inflected in relation to, on the one hand, modern gains made by the LGBTQ rights movement, and, on the other hand, increasing fears associated with pervasive state and corporate surveillance, as well as transformations in security politics. As a result, *Smallville* depicts an era wherein closeted superheroes enforce a social logic of gay shame, while on *The Flash* queer citizens become enforcers of closeting on others, while simultaneously becoming re-encapsulated in a post-shame closet themselves based on a new algorithmic logic of risk.

Secrecy and shame: Closeting in *Smallville*

Although many TV series on the CW structure their plots around keeping and revealing secrets, including *Supernatural* (2005–), *Gossip Girl* (2007–2012), and *Jane the Virgin* (2014–), *The Flash* also specifically draws upon a rich history of superhero narratives in which secret identities function as a central preoccupation. Superman is often discussed as the origin of this phenomenon, as some gay men may have identified with the way he must rigidly divide his life between a boringly normative day job, and a fabulous second self who can only find true expression by night, in secret. Although in the original comics Superman rarely changed in a phone booth, that location nonetheless became iconic, and the shape of that confined space for transforming from normal to super also invites association with the closet. As a result, superheroes' struggles with keeping their secret and super identities separate, and disclosing their identities to others, have often been read as a double narrative that expresses a political meaning for audiences who are able to decode the symbolism. The closeting metaphor also serves as an ideal driver of serial plots because, as noted by Eve Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), coming out is an unending process because of the social system that makes certain knowledge unthinkable. No one has to come out as straight, or non-superpowered, because these are assumed; yet, invisible, non-normative identities must constantly be performed and declared. As a result, the secret identity plot can continue to drive many short and long arcs within a serialized narrative as the character must come out in stages to each person, social group, and new acquaintance, rebooting the tension leading toward the climactic moment of revelation over and over again.

Charting how various superhero narratives navigate secret identities and their associated closeting metaphors can thus excavate an implicit form of politics. For example, some, like *The Uncanny X-Men*, draw on closeting metaphors to

align their heroes with socially marginalized and oppressed populations, paralleling the discrimination faced by mutants with LGBTQ people, as well as other groups like Jewish people and undocumented immigrants (Darowski, 2014). These structures allow some superhero narratives to examine unjust social hierarchies, internalized oppression, and shame, as well as consciousness raising, social justice, political organizing, and solidarity. However, in my 2005 article “*Smallville*’s Sexual Symbolism,” I argued that closeting and secrecy in *Smallville* primarily functioned to reinforce social hierarchy as part of post 9/11 politics that obsessively policed the homeland for hidden internal threats and moral degeneracy. On *Smallville*, there are two groups who have powers: Clark, and everyone else. Clark is an ideal immigrant, adopted as a baby and socialized in a two-parent midwestern farm household. This wholesome upbringing sets the moral framework within which he learns to control his naturally evolving abilities. In contrast, at the same time that Clark fell to Earth, a meteor shower of kryptonite also landed with him, and it invaded the midwestern soil with an alien influence that infected and mutated many of the inhabitants of *Smallville*. I noted that the powers they develop as a result of this unnatural transformation represent grotesque amplifications of a variety of otherwise common social deviances, often targeted by American conservative “family values” politicians who place central importance on the nuclear family, bifurcated gender roles, and abortion, among other issues (Lehr, 1999). As a result, I also pointed out that Clark vanquishes and often kills a variety of *Smallville* citizens who represent a threat to the existing social hierarchy, including unpopular people running for class president (“Drone,” Green and Levens, 2002), ugly girls who want to become pretty (“Craving,” Green, 2001), the son of a cancer patient who tries to end the suffering of terminally ill people (“Reaper,” Litvack, 2002), a metaphorically gay man exacting revenge on his metaphorical bashers (“Pilot,” Gough and Millar, 2001), and a lesbian who tried to seduce the prom queen (“Visage,” Slavkin and Swimmer, 2003).

Often these powers developed because the victims were in the midst of breaking social boundaries or norms when the meteor hit, for example by having pre-marital sex (“Heat,” Verheiden, 2002b), or studying rather than going to a party (“Dichotic,” Verheiden, 2002a). Therefore, in “*Smallville*’s sexual symbolism” (2005) I argued that the closet functions on *Smallville* as a way of sequestering shameful powers associated with moral degeneration and threats to social order from public view, and having powers is frequently associated with forms of sexual perversity. While Clark uses his natural abilities for “good,” to cleanse the population from the threat posed by citizens overcome by alien influences, he must still hide himself for fear that others may see him as unnatural. As a result, Clark wishes above all else that he could become “normal,” represented in *Smallville* as joining the football team, dating the homecoming queen, and joining in an annual tradition to kidnap a gay-coded boy and crucify him in a cornfield. The need to keep secrets and closet his abilities reinforce the idea that his powers are shameful. That Clark, the hero, goes from becoming the football team’s ritual crucifixion victim in season one to a member of the football team in later seasons underscores

Smallville's association between normativity, heterosexuality, and goodness, making those who find comfort in the secrecy of the closet both morally suspect and dangerous.

The algorithmic closet: Secrecy, surveillance, and necropolitics in *The Flash*

Yet, by the time *The Flash* premiered on the CW in 2014, using a similarly secret-fueled plot structure, the politics of sexuality and secrecy had been significantly transformed since the early post-9/11 period by two primary forces: the development of a sanitized politics of gay assimilation in opposition to the consolidation of a new queer(ed) necropolitical outgroup in the figure of the terrorist (Puar, 2007; Seidman, 2001), and the rapid expansion of extralegal surveillance and detention, often in conjunction with privatization. These two forces both hinge upon the legal meaning of privacy, and the social resignification of the boundaries of normative citizenship to incorporate LGBTQ people who can pass as respectable, while consigning others to a state of exception in which all forms of inhuman violence, confinement, and exploitation become possible (Agamben, 2005; Butler, 2009). As a result, closeting metaphors take on a very different resonance in *The Flash*, as sexual perversity no longer functions as the dividing line between normal and abnormal. Instead, citizens are divided from inhuman others on the basis of a privatized, participatory, and datafied system for assessing risk, and consigned to permanent and secret incarceration (Nuttall and Mbembe, 2015), which dramatizes what Achille Mbembe criticizes as the intermingling between biopolitical and necropolitical modes in modern neoliberal security politics. In other words, *The Flash* reflects a new future wherein queer subjects are incorporated within the state as co-equal citizens, while simultaneously becoming disproportionate targets of algorithmic state violence based on quantified markers of risk.

The first significant shift in the politics of secrecy deals with the changing status of LGBTQ people in society, and the organization of gay rights politics around respectability and incorporation. Theorist Steve Seidman argues that while queer politics remain anti-normative, the main force of the modern gay rights movement seeks the acceptance of gay and lesbian people precisely on the basis that they are normal and even ideal citizens in every way other than in sexuality (2001), a tactic that Lisa Duggan calls homonormativity (2002). Seidman argues that, while this strategy has been successful in gaining civil rights for gay and lesbian people, these rights come with two costs: the disavowal of queer and non-conforming members of the LGBTQ population, and a wholesale endorsement of state sponsored capitalist exploitation, racism, nationalism, and militarism. First, the gay rights movement asks for incorporation within existing state institutions, which are rife with multiple forms of hierarchy, including discrimination based on race, gender, religion, class, and national origin. As a result, the rights gained through the gay rights movement unequally benefit those gay and lesbian people who are already the most privileged because they do not fall within another category of oppression.

This is most clear in the fight for marriage equality, which leaves behind all those who will not or cannot conform to the existing boundaries of marriage in all respects other than sexuality. By prioritizing marriage, the gay rights movement thereby sacrifices and further stigmatizes all the queer possibilities for living outside of marriage.

Secondly, by basing their request for inclusion as full citizens on the premise that gay and lesbian people are ideal citizens, the gay rights movement often invests heavily in nationalism and non-sexuality-based forms of hierarchy, rhetorically making themselves more similar to those at the top of what Lauren Berlant calls the Virtue–Value scale (1997: 176), and distancing themselves from those at the bottom. This structure is perhaps clearest in the positioning of gay and lesbian people as necessary national resources in the realm of consumerism and military service. These arguments emphasize the positioning of gay and lesbian people as necessary for the success of the state, and reinforces the notion that, despite their sexual difference, gay and lesbian people are the same as other citizens in that they love all the right things, namely money, and they hate all the right things, namely military enemies of the state, which today means terrorists. Seidman notes that these logics create two opposing rhetorics of national belonging and security: one older form focused on internal threats that requires the sexual purity of the state, and a newer strategy that requires the incorporation of some privileged gay and lesbian people in order to shore up failing institutions such as marriage and military service and to nationalize and exploit their resources in the fight against a larger, external threat.

Smallville's fixation with purity and the perversion of average citizens into grotesque threats to the social order fits within the earlier political-cultural structure and enforces closeting as a space of silencing and shame, while in *The Flash*, sexual identity becomes a wholly unremarkable issue, dwarfed by the spectacular scale of the threat posed by meta-human terrorism, wherein the closeting of sexual identity becomes seemingly nonsensical. First, unlike in *Smallville*, having superpowers does not function as a metaphor for sexual perversion in *The Flash*, and meta-humans who end up using their powers both for good and for evil show no clear pattern of engaging in deviant or virtuous behavior at the moment of the particle accelerator explosion that caused the mutations in Central City. The police captain, David Singh, who supervises *The Flash*'s main detective contact, as well as *The Flash* himself in his regular identity day job as a crime scene investigator (where he goes by his real name, Barry Allen), is also gay, and a gruff though unambiguously heroic character. The narrative produces significant tension when a terrorist attack threatens to derail Singh's wedding and widow his partner, which serves three purposes: positioning their relationship as relatable and sympathetic, domesticating gay sexuality within the state-sponsored institution of marriage, and constructing solidarity between this gay couple and all good citizens, against terrorism. The chief's gay identity appears completely unremarkable, as no storylines explicitly identify him as gay or deal with what might be termed "gay issues." Instead his fiancé then husband simply appears occasionally as a side character,

with no fanfare or commentary. Gay citizens in Central City thus seem to fold neatly into the regular functioning of daily life, and unproblematically function within state institutions, including the police force.

Even the far more anarchic queer sexual potential of various superpowered meta-humans is explicitly noted but largely underdeveloped and unremarkable; their perverse potential poses no particular threat to the social order, especially compared to the need to use their powers against terror threats. Thus, recalling the old “man of steel, woman of Kleenex” theory which posited that super strength may require Superman to find queer alternatives to normative heterosexual penetration as his super-speed ejaculate may kill a human partner (Horne, 2012; Niven, 1969), characters eventually realize that Barry’s super-speed may make him orgasm too quickly to please a female partner, the implication being that Barry may need to explore other forms of sex, or may need a different kind of same-sex partner: not “same” as in another man, but as in another preternaturally fast person, known in the series as a “speedster.”

Similarly, in *The Flash* the meta-human hybrid Firestorm could only effectively become a functional person and weapon against terrorism by accepting the queer excesses of his new powers. Created by a fusion of two men into one body, Firestorm could not control his powers or avoid internal combustion until both men fully accepted their fusion with each other. This is dramatized in the series by a queer sexual problem, that is, their shared experience of sexual attraction for each other’s wife and fiancé, and their acceptance of physical affection with both partners while still in the same body. Thus, while they at first nearly cause a nuclear reaction trying to rip themselves in two directions at once, toward each of their respective partners, and demonstrate disgust when one of them uses their joint body to kiss their partner, eventually they reach homeostasis partly by accepting their essentially polyamorous arrangement. Many of the meta-human terrorists in *The Flash* also similarly demonstrate queer sexual potentials; yet, unlike *Smallville*, in which, for example, a lesbian mutant is killed by impalement, their powers and punishments are not metaphorical extensions of sexual desires. Therefore, sexual variation does not form a key criterion in *The Flash* for dividing the population between normal citizens and abnormal threats to the social order, and resultantly the closeted space of superhero secrecy cannot stand in for gay shame or suppression.

Although it is difficult to argue against social changes that improve the lives of even a small portion of the gay and lesbian population, legal gains for some LGBTQ people may come with sharp costs for others according to scholars including Seidman (2001), Duggan (2002), and Lee Edelman (2004). Edelman uses Lacanian philosophy to argue that because all civilizations in history have died, modern civilizations consolidate the fear of social death in one absolute other, then engage in ritualized forms of sacrifice. By killing members of the outgroup that stands in for an existential threat to the survival of the civilization, modern societies may imagine that they can endlessly stave off their own inevitable end. Edelman particularly argues that children represent the future, and queer people often

represent social death because they have historically been associated with a hedonistic fixation on the present: they cannot biologically produce children with each other, and they have been culturally associated with the AIDS epidemic. As a result, he argues that the symbolic ritual is enacted in modern societies when the lives, health, security, and happiness of gay people are sacrificed to (rhetorically) ensure the safety of children. Yet Edelman also argues that because some outgroup must symbolize social decay and endure ritual violence, it would be unethical for queer people to attempt to alter their social position, since another outgroup would have to take their place. For Edelman, the only ethical response is to refuse the rehabilitation of queer identity; yet, given the data and surveillance-driven shifts in society discussed a bit later, conscious refusal may no longer be feasible and cultural struggle may provide no escape from algorithmic discrimination.

At this juncture JK Puar takes up Edelman's line of reasoning, arguing that the terrorist has been substituted for LGBTQ populations in modern rhetoric (2007). She charts numerous instances wherein gay and lesbian sexuality has been channeled through the marriage quest into a socially respectable form, while terrorist sexuality becomes the new perversity. Puar also argues that it is the terrorist who now represents the collective death drive, especially in the figure of the suicide bomber. Following Puar, like the gay death drive, manifested most clearly as bare-backing during the AIDS crisis, the terrorist death drive appears in a primal, illogical, and intractable form. In their book *The Media of Conflict*, Tim Allen and Jean Seaton explain that wars are often described by journalists through two lenses: as resource-driven, or as the result of primordial hatred (1999). The primordial frame forecloses the possibility of understanding, negotiation, or permanent resolution, leaving genocide an inevitable result. The social death drive, imagined either as queer or terrorist, remains equally rhetorically intractable and beyond the realm of logical explanation, leaving only containment and extermination as a solution. Conflicts with meta-humans in *The Flash* model the terrorist mode while *Smallville* demonstrates the queer mode. Unlike *Smallville*, wherein the perverse influence of foreign matter inevitably makes the town's citizens into evil monsters who pollute the body politic with sexual impurity that must be exterminated or hidden and closeted for shame, in *The Flash*, exposure to the particle accelerator explosion merely magnifies what people already were: an inherently good person like Barry will remain good, and inherently bad people, who were already engaged in crime and violence, will continue to do so on a larger scale. Meta-humans must be contained in *The Flash* because they have the power to commit unpredictable, often illogical, and frequently self-destructive violence against the civilian population of the city. As a result, having something to hide becomes associated in *The Flash* with terror rather than sexuality.

Yet, as noted by Kristie Ball, the idea that the innocent have nothing to hide and nothing to fear becomes especially ironic within an era of pervasive state surveillance and datafication, especially for populations that historically have good reason to fear government intrusion and criminalization, including queer communities (2005, 2010). This situates closeting and secret identities in *The Flash* within

modern struggles over both private and government spying. Privacy, situated within the constitutional right against unlawful search and seizure in American law, is the legal structure that protects citizens from government scrutiny and secures a wide range of rights, from abortion to the legalization of gay sex (Berlant, 1997: 55–82). However, as demonstrated by repeated leaks, we now live in a world of shrinking private zones, saturated by constant extralegal surveillance, perpetrated by governments, corporations, and hackers. The common desire to retain a private life yet still take part in public forums now echoes the super-heroic struggle to shield one's private life from the dangers inherent to public exposure.

These dangers, as mirrored in *The Flash*, are at least two-fold. As emphasized by the constant slew of doppelgangers and impersonators on *The Flash*, as well as the so-called “reverse-Flash’s” mission to kill the real Flash’s mom upon the discovery of his secret identity, exposure of identifying details makes one vulnerable to crime, from identity theft to stalking. Yet, perhaps even more worrisome, exposure of personal data in an era when mass surveillance is coupled with abstract, algorithmic systems for measuring risk, also known as dataveillance or actuarial surveillance in David Phillips’ terms (2015), also entails vulnerability to discrimination and criminalization based on invisible and unforeseeable correlations. Given enough information, no one’s life is completely free from data somehow correlated with risk factors, either those associated with national security, or those associated with the denial of service or employment by private entities. Some of these risk factors are obvious or well known, including race, religion, and national origin. Yet, dataveillance does not separate people from the population only on the basis of *a priori* socially defined stigmatized categories, but instead based solely on statistical correlation (Andrejevic, 2007). As a result, undoing shame and stigma does not matter within a system of dataveillance when, for example, a data trail full of LGBTQ-oriented reading material may eventually make one ineligible for a blood transfusion based on a hidden algorithmic calculation of risk. In other words, while the longstanding refusal of gay men as blood donors is overtly based on pejorative assumptions about gay sexuality and phrased as such in official documents (Grenfell, 2011; Hurley, 2009; Valentine, 2005), an algorithmic system depersonalizes and repackages shame-based social systems into a seemingly objective and hidden quantification that does not require human biases of those carrying out its instructions, while operating autonomously from those biases.

Scholars including Virginia Eubanks (2018) have argued that such systems entrench existing social hierarchies that are built into data. For instance, because of a long history of class and racial disparities in policing, a computer trained to look for patterns of crime may continue to disproportionately target poor communities of color, and when violence with a political motive is categorized as mental illness in white people but terrorism in Muslim people, a computer system will repeat the correlation between Muslim faith and terrorism, since these correlations are built into the data set itself (Chander, 2016; Corbin, 2017; Leurs and Shepherd, 2017; Wevers, 2018). Such phenomena were underscored when Google attempted to use a machine-learning algorithm to automatically

add labels to photos and the algorithm not only learned image recognition skills from its contact with human behavior on the internet, but also racism, as it began to label African-American people as gorillas (Hern, 2018; Poyant et al., 2015; Simonite, 2018). Similarly, data trails left by queer subjects may not fit within statistical parameters of normality, as discussed extensively by Michael Warner (2000) and Judith Halberstam (2005), among others, and many choices and behaviors of queer communities may seem “risky” when compared with socially entrenched understandings of the life course that privilege nuclear heteronormative families (Amir and Kotef, 2018; Bersani, 1987; Harvey, 2011; Quinlivan, 2002). As a result, the category of the terrorist and the category of the queer begin to reconverge as targets of risk assessment, according to new logic. Secrecy and closeting thereby also re-emerge, not as a response to shame and stigma, but as tactics for evading dataveillance based in part on the targeting of what might be called queer data profiles, that is, those with non-normative patterns that may then be interpreted as markers of “risk.”

Further, within neoliberal capitalism, a large portion of the state security apparatus has been privatized, meaning that the algorithms responsible for dividing the population between acceptable citizens and terror threats are themselves often secret and proprietary (Andrejevic, 2010; Hayes, 2012; Katz, 2006; Klauser, 2009; Rosky, 2003). Thus, becoming classified as a threat to society cannot be effectively fought both because of the depths of modern fear and loathing for the category of the terrorist, and because algorithmic evidence cannot be questioned or interrogated by the public since it remains “black boxed” via intellectual property laws (Mattern, 2018; Pasquale, 2015; Tufekci, 2014). Therefore, this categorization is unidirectional and places one in a permanent state of exception, outside of the regular operation of law, a concept developed by many critics of the American War on Terror, including Judith Butler (2009) and Giorgio Agamben (2005). Reinforcing the alignment of the terrorist with death, Achille Mbembe classifies this state of exception as an exercise in necropolitics (2003): as opposed to Foucault’s concept of biopolitics, necropolitics describes the social administration of death and decay, and the process by which states divide populations between lives worth cultivating, who are recognized as citizens subject to the law, and killable populations consigned to neglect and extermination, beyond the recognition of the law (Haritaworn et al., 2014; Lamble, 2013; Mbembe, 2003).

In modern security policy, necropolitics thus includes practices like extraordinary rendition, drone warfare, black site prisons, and indefinite detention. For instance, the disastrous American drone bombing of a wedding in Dah Bala, Afghanistan and of a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz helped to reveal that the drone program decision tree consisted largely of correlating metadata: if several sources of metadata statistically tied to a terrorist were geolocated simultaneously, a drone and death could follow (Perugini and Gordon, 2017; Sheppard, 2015; Vishvanathan, 2015; Wilcox, 2016). These reports suggest that the decision tree that consigns groups of people to the necropolitical state of exception may be almost entirely algorithmic and automated, and thus irreversible and

unaccountable. As reported by the UN, even as Doctors Without Borders called the American military during the bombardment to explain the mistake, the bombing continued (Daugirdas and Mortenson, 2016); the data had already placed them in the necropolitical realm and erased the protection of human law. Given the irrevocable, secret, and unpredictable processes that underlie dataveillance, any form of secrecy may thus become justifiable in self-defense.

The Flash echoes this new neoliberal data and surveillance saturated reality on several fronts. While neither necessarily good nor bad, mutation in *The Flash* as a result of the particle accelerator explosion changes humans into meta-humans and forms a potent criterion by which risk may be calculated. This terminology explicitly defines and separates a portion of the population as potentially threatening and different from the normal human population. Even though many meta-humans are not inherently violent, their extraordinary powers are often difficult to contain and frequently attract notice by systems of surveillance. The Flash and his team often use a variety of surveillance technologies to detect and subdue meta-humans, including CCTV, facial recognition, and big data analysis. Closeting is thereby necessary for meta-humans to escape state and private surveillance apparatuses, as a variety of characters attempt to either exterminate or exploit all meta-humans.

The Flash reflects the too-close-for-comfort relation between private interests, dataveillance, and necropolitics in at least three ways, emphasizing the stakes of modern closeting and double-lives. First, as I just mentioned, Barry and the Flash team use state and private surveillance to search and analyze personal data; yet because they are not acting as direct state functionaries, they do so with no oversight or accountability. Acting as a private contractor, The Flash can thus carry out searches without a warrant, interrogate suspects with no legal boundaries, and collect evidence outside the chain of custody. As a hero of unquestionable goodness, Barry thus normalizes these practices and encourages the acceptance of sweeping unauthorized access to personal data. Yet at the same time, Barry's own powers place him in an unusual position: he often relies on surveillance to identify, locate and capture other meta-humans, but his own speed is a power perfectly attuned to the surveillance era: when he runs through crime scenes and zooms away with a captured villain, all he leaves behind on surveillance footage is a flash. His powers thus act as a form of dataveillance closeting that allow him to maintain a secret identity while at the same time making him the perfect proxy state functionary, who can work in absolute secret beyond the boundaries of the law, without leaving a trace.

Secondly, *The Flash* also depicts the privatization of participatory forms of surveillance, exemplified by Flash's love interest, Iris. The only time The Flash becomes vulnerable to surveillance is as a result of the ubiquity of citizen surveillance in the form of Iris's cell phone. She later becomes a professional journalist based solely on her cell pictures and amateur blog, chronicling her personal investigation of The Flash. Iris thus represents what Anders Albrechtslund calls the diffusion of state surveillance via social media and participatory production of data for state and private analysis (2008; Albrechtslund and Lauritsen, 2013).

Finally, *The Flash* also dramatizes the end of the necropolitical process as the meta-humans Barry identifies as a threat end up either killed or indefinitely detained in solitary confinement within the STAR Lab's secret, private prison, with no charges, and no legal recourse. As with terror suspects, *The Flash* provides a similar rationale – the particularly heinous nature of meta-human crimes, and the extraordinary security threat they pose means that both terrorists and meta-humans cannot be contained by ordinary prisons and legal processes. As the District Attorney in *The Flash* notes, the court system simply is not prepared to handle threats of this magnitude. *The Flash* underscores the categorically inhuman nature of the meta-humans' crimes by explaining that they will all be released only when they can be biogenetically transformed back into regular humans. Their crimes and inhuman, necropolitical status are thus inextricably intertwined.

The Flash thereby imagines a post-shame version of the closet, which dramatizes practices of secrecy and hiding in the absence of stigma. This kind of imagining becomes ever more urgent as the legal and social situation for LGBTQ people improves dramatically in formal terms, while the deadly consequences of exposure via social media emphasize the remaining entrenchment of homophobic violence (Savage and Miller, 2011). Fear of detection may no longer be organized around legal forms of oppression, but instead around dispassionate algorithmic processes of sorting people between citizens recognized by law and the social order, and those consigned to the state of exception outside of law and society. These structures open the possibility that increased social representation and legal acceptance of LGBTQ populations remains a facade, if the future involves primarily algorithmic forms of policing and social control. Such systems allow for the outsourcing of human prejudice, fear, and disgust onto machines, whose apparently autonomous and rational operation symbolically purges human culpability for the violence they inflict. In such a situation, a society may understand itself as fully pluralist with equality entrenched as a matter of law and equal representation instituted in the lifeworlds of culture and social practice, while at the same time a largely invisible structure of mechanized violence systematically removes citizens from the body politic. Such a society has essentially subcontracted its own brutality to machines so that it may repress consciousness of its own inhuman acts. Thereby, with no overt spite or malice, in a country with civil rights and equal protection, queers of all sorts may still find themselves struggling to remain within the privacy afforded by the closet, or risk algorithmic removal into the living death of necropolitical erasure.

Conclusion: Closeting life from shame to surveillance

In sum, secrecy and closeting metaphors in *The Flash* explore a fundamentally different set of political contingencies than those constructed by *Smallville*. While Clark Kent sought the protection of the closet because he felt ashamed of his potentially perverse powers and tried desperately to mature into a normative heterosexual adult, on *The Flash* neither powers nor sexuality are inherently shameful;

yet Barry Allen still hides his queer powers from a much more expansive net of state and private surveillance, in which publicly revealed data can become a deadly destiny. Paradoxically, he also uses his surveillance-defying powers to capture and contain other meta-humans, within a secret and unaccountable private form of indefinite incarceration. Each superhero narrative thus dramatizes the anxieties and contractions of post-9/11 security politics, yet within a social and legal structure transformed by changes in LGBTQ rights, and the algorithmic administration of life and death. As such, *The Flash* offers an important glimpse into queer post-shame closeting and the mechanized processes of violence inherent to necropolitical neoliberal societies of the present and future. After all, for Barry, the very same powers that allow him to accomplish extraordinary feats, and that necessitate creatively queer sexual practices, also classify him indelibly in the eyes of the surveillance apparatus as a non-normative data point, and thus as little more than a risk.

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