

Queer Keanu: Race, Sexuality, and the Politics of Passing

Why Can't Keanu Act?: Reading Race Back Into Reeves

Celebrity trades in the rhetoric of exceptionalism. It celebrates the unique and the curious so even widely recognized people of color seem to transcend the language of race. However, the focus on the individual eccentricities of each celebrity obscures the many ways that their story only becomes legible through familiar narratives. Our perception and reception of famous people is structured through their adherence to or deviation from common stories and stereotypes about race, gender, and sexuality. Every star is still constructed within common social relations. Keanu Reeves' much publicized sexuality and equally obscured racial categorization may seem to be random aspects of the publicity surrounding his fame, but, in fact, they work together within socially constructed narratives of race and sexuality. The furor over Reeves' sexual orientation serves to obscure and suppress Reeves' racial background. On the other hand, Reeves' race refuses to remain hidden and forgotten, surfacing through the language and rhetoric of "queer culture."

One of the odder aspects of Reeves' public persona is the public's collective amnesia when it comes to his racial background. Reeves himself offers a racial genealogy on his website, and almost all of his magazine profiles and interviews make some mention of his white mother and Hawaiian/Chinese father, usually in the context of explaining the

meaning of his name. Despite these continual reiterations, Reeves is generally racially unmarked in both his film roles and in public perceptions (with crucial exceptions that will be discussed later). An absence that is read as white. Thus Reeves is able to refer to unselfconsciously refer to himself as a “middle-class white boy.” While this continual forgetting of race may be due, in part, to a choice of film roles, even Reeves’ appearance as a young Siddhartha in *Little Buddha* passed by almost unnoticed. So, too, the argument that Reeves is perceived as white because he “looks white” is a circular one since race does not simply exist in bodies waiting to be seen and recognized. Instead, it is our perception of racial differences that enables us to read or ignore some bodies as raced and others as neutral.

Part of the reason Reeves racialization is so elusive lies in the swarm of gossip surrounding Reeves’ sexuality. According to DeAngelis, Reeves’ gay following started even before his film career due, in part, to his portrayal of a homosexual character in the stage play *Wolfboy*. Stories of Reeves’ supposed homosexuality circulated again when he played a gay prostitute in *My Own Private Idaho* and reached a peak following the release of *Speed* three years later when mainstream and gay press published rumors that Reeves married millionaire David Geffen in a secret ceremony in Paris (Robb, 180). These final rumors emphasized Geffen’s power in Hollywood and seemed to explain the record contract signed by Reeves’ band, Dogstar. As noted above, race and

homosexuality tend to cancel each other out in the public imagination so the widely spread rumors of homosexuality can literally blind many viewers to racial differences.

Even as one might argue that Reeves' rumored sexuality erases a racial reading of Reeves, the opposite is also true. The innuendo surrounding his sexuality simultaneously articulates the repressed and forgotten racial difference that, like the neurotic's symptoms, returns again and again in other manifestations. That the form it takes is a rumored homosexuality is not surprising given the close association of a "deviant" sexuality and racial difference both historically and in psychoanalytic terms. As Siobhan Summerville argues in her study of the interconnections between constructions of sexuality and race,

I show that these analogies [between racialized and sexualized bodies] have a specific history and became mobilized at the turn of the century: the formation of notions of hersexuality and homosexuality emerged in the United States through (and not merely parallel to) a discourse saturated with assumptions about the racialization of bodies. (4)

Furthermore, as both David Eng and John Dallimore have noted, Freud also used the logic of colonialism to cast racial Others as the field against which the progressive and civilizing European sexual norms develop. An Eng argues, "In crossing [Freud's] *Totem and Taboo* with 'On Narcissism,' we witness a convergence of homosexuality with racial difference, a coming together of the homosexual and the primitive as pathological,

banished figures within the psychic landscape of the social proper.” (13)

In more contemporary times, the discourses of homosexuality and racial mixing have developed along some similar narrative lines. Perhaps most prominent among them is the theme of the tragic, abject Other. On the surface, the classic figure of the tragic mulatta is an object of pity. Her ultimately futile hope of finding acceptance and humanity in white society lead to her tragic and untimely death. Despite her beauty and refinement she is betrayed by the men in her life, and, with no social or political power can only passively accept her sad fate. This story is told again and again in the anti-slavery literature of the last century, the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, and the race films of the 1950's. One of her most recent incarnations in fiction can be found in the film *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), and her story even resonates in the media stories of Halle Berry's string of abusive relationships. Representations of homosexuals also share a similar stereotype, particularly in the later half of the 20th century when it became possible to portray homosexuals in ways that were not wholly negative. Films such as *The Children's Hour* (1961) and *Boys in the Band* (1970) epitomize this storyline which seemed to humanize homosexuals only if they were filled with self-loathing and sentenced to an early demise. Even today popular culture seems to embrace homosexuals who are noble, tragic, and oddly desexualized such as Richard Brown (Ed Harris) in *The Hours* (2002) or Pedro in *The Real World: San Francisco* (1994), and Andrew Beckett

(Tom Hanks) in *Philadelphia* (1993). While the much-lauded *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) did feature sex scenes, the film could not be characterized as anything other than a tear-jerker. Ultimately, both figures are victims of social norms, but their critique of compulsory heterosexuality and racial separatism is undercut by their final and inevitable expulsion, whether through ostracism or death, from society. While the tragic mulattas and the *Boys in the Band* brand of homosexuality may garner the sympathy of the audience, the ultimate message is a warning. Beware of miscegenation or homosexuality since it can only end badly.

These familiar types converge with Reeves' public and on-screen persona. As many of the articles and fan sites on Reeves note, a large part of his appeal is his vulnerability and his air of tragedy. Biographers unfailingly mention his peripatetic childhood, his estrangement from his father, his father's arrest for drug possession, and, in more recent accounts, his stillborn child, his sister's illness, and his girlfriend's automobile death. However, it is his movies that fully exploit the passivity associated with his vulnerability. Despite his reputation as an action hero, Reeves is, by and large, a passive victim in many of his films. DeAngelis argues that in his first action film, *Speed*, Reeves' character, Jack, reveals his own weakness with "uncharacteristically expressive intensity" (217). In addition the framing in the movie reinforces this reading of Jack. DeAngelis says, "Jack's vulnerability is conveyed not only by frequent high-angle and overhead shots that emphasize his helplessness, but also through plot elements that require the hero's body to undergo elaborate gymnastic contortions" (215).

In many of his films Reeves is left defenseless because he know so much less than

either the audience or the other characters. In *Johnny Mneumonic*, *Point Break* (1991), *Devil's Advocate* (1997), and *Sweet November* (2000), the audience learns the secret that is crucial to understanding the reactions of everyone around him before Reeves does. In fact, TNT ran a commercial promoting their screening of *Matrix Reloaded* (2003) by splicing together scenes of Reeves as Neo saying "what?" and "I don't understand" in reference to his clueless character. Reeves is also literally restrained and victimized in many of his films. As the IMDb points out, "[Reeves] frequently plays man (sic) either strapped or sitting in a chair while some type of procedure is performed on him. All three Matrix films, *Johnny Mneumonic* (1995), *Feeling Minnesota* (1996), *Dracula* (1992), and *Constantine* (2005)." These scenes serve as metaphoric rape scenarios. Reeves is held against his will, usually by a powerful and evil force that terrorizes him. The scenes then all turn to the involuntary breach of Reeves flesh by a foreign object or at least a threat of the same.

All of these factors combine to determine, indeed to overdetermine, Reeves' complicated gendering. Despite his status as a sex symbol and action hero, Reeves has often been feminized both onscreen and off. This is not to say that women are invariably passive or victimized, but that within the logic of Hollywood film narrative such traits are coded as female. As Carol Clover so succinctly states, "... there is something about the victim function that wants manifestation in a female," adding, "Sex, in this universe, proceeds from gender, not the other way around. A figure does not cry and cower

because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers” (12, 13). Given Reeves’ film roles, it is not accidental that Reeves’ star narrative more closely follows the female tragic mulatta stereotype than the sexually rapacious and often seditious mixed race, African American male, stereotype.

The emphasis on Reeves’ physical appearance off-screen also serves to feminize him. Both male and female movie stars are the object of scrutiny, but unlike other more rugged and conventionally masculine action stars of the Swartzenegger school or even everyman Bruce Willis types, Reeves is more often described in terms of more feminine ideals of exoticism and beauty. As one website rhapsodizes, “He’s the living incarnation of the beautiful brunet. Those almond eyes. So dark, so beautiful, so ... blank.”¹ On Salon.com Charles Taylor in his exploration of why Reeves is so widely despised asks,

Is there anyone in the movies who allows the camera to drink him in the way Keanu Reeves does? Movies have always yielded to performers with charisma and beauty... Reeves is also a repository both for the lingering resentment over the attention and devotion that beauty continues to command in pop culture and the way in which he represents a subversion of traditional sex roles.

The classic Hollywood tradition of lingering over and celebrating female beauty has long been a subject of interest for feminist film critics who argue that female stars are made into the passive recipients of the viewers gaze. Taylor goes on to suggest that the rumors of Reeves’ homosexuality stem from a “panic” over Reeves assumption of a female

position through his “willingness to be looked at,” evoking Laura Mulvey’s famously awkward description of the female star’s “to-be-looked-at-ness.” When discussing the phenomenon of the cinematic interest in male bodies and beauty, Richard Dyer argues that the feminization of the male that accompanies being the object of the gaze is counteracted by narrative or highly coded “male” postures. As a brief filmography shows, however, Reeves movies often fail to work against his feminization.

Gender, then, provides another node, another point of intersection between race and sexuality in the construction of Reeves star persona. It is also at this moment that we can feel the force of Reeves “invisible” racial coding. Even though Reeves is generally perceived as unambiguously white, I would argue that such a reading must suppress any contradictory racial information. However, as Freud might argue, repression is never complete, and it will resurface in deflected and ambiguous ways. The familiar split between males who are defined by their action and females who are defined by their physical appearance has already been complicated by race theorists who point out the ways in which people of color are more thoroughly embodied and, thus, more visible and visually defined. They, too, are often the fetishized recipients of a gaze that is both fascinated and punishing. Although seriously undertheorized, Asian American men have had a complex relationship to the visual. David Eng points out that Asian American men may be more clearly understood as absent from the visual record, an invisible force that threatens to disrupt the authenticity or truthfulness of the historical image.

Thus, while critics and fans may fail to visually register Reeves' Asianness, it continues to inform the meanings they ascribe to his images. For example, the most fetishized aspect of Asian physiology is their eyes and, as DeAngelis argues, "The paradoxical nature of Reeves' depth often centers on the eyes as a site of vulnerability, receptivity and invitation" (194) and goes on to document several comments about the centrality of Reeves' eyes to his appeal. Brian Robb in his fan autobiography *Keanu Reeves: An Excellent Adventure* almost incidentally associates Reeves Asianness with his asexuality:

He has been defined through his career by his looks, and his acting ability always came secondary to his star power, a power intimately wrapped up with his sculpted cheek bones, Chinese-Hawaiian, almost Asian looks. In his films, he is the sexually passive character, having things happen around him rather than functioning as the driving force behind the action... In *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, his wife-to-be Winona Ryder fell for Gary Oldman, while in *Dangerous Liaisons* Uma Thurman preferred John Malkovich. For an actor whose very appeal was so wrapped up with sex, it seems amazing that there should be so little sex in his films and in his life. (107)

Even more revealing are the numerous references to Reeves' "exotic," "mysterious," and even "inscrutable" appeal, all code words long associated with Asian stereotypes.

Finally, the most significant eruption of race in the discourse of Reeves' physical appeal calls upon the long history of Asian American masculinity as effeminate, emasculated, and homosexual.²

The association of Asian males and an effete homosexuality is, arguably, one of the founding tenants of Asian American criticism. *The Big Aiiieeee!*, one of the initial works of Asian American cultural criticism, was, according to its authors, the first yell of protest against Asian stereotypes in American media. Of particular concern was the desexualized, aestheticized, passive, Asian male. Early Chinese American stereotypes of the "celestials," concerned mainly with poetry and the arts and their ingrained and even "natural" servitude, resonate today. Darryl Hamamoto argues that the historical roots of the stereotype can be found in the "bachelor societies" of early Chinese immigrants. Due to restrictive immigration laws, Chinese women were all but banned from entering the country. The mythology of the Asian male who does not need or want women arose in order to justify these racist exclusions. In addition, Hamamoto asserts that media images set "controlling images of African Americans as hypersexual beasts against that of the desexualized Asian male" (10). The desexualized Asian male plays a part of the sexual/racial economy whereby African American men are hypersexualized, Asian American men are undersexualized, and Euro American men are just right. Sau-ling Wong has also argued that the feminized image of Asian men also serves to justify the exclusion of Asian American men from the traditionally masculine definition of

American citizenship. These stereotypes still resonate in popular culture evidenced by the uproar in the Asian American community over the *Details* magazine piece which dissected a picture of a young Asian male asking, “Asian or Gay?” In reaction to this stereotype, Asian American nationalists often embraced a disturbingly rigid gender division and homophobic sentiments. The recoding of Reeves racial difference as a sexual difference seems almost inevitable given the multiple converging discourses surrounding his beauty.

In this accounting of Asian American masculinity, there is a frequent slippage between asexuality and homosexuality. The sexuality ascribed to Asian men is closely tied to gender reversal and a specific, narrow conception of homosexuality. It is the sexual inversion model of homosexuality predicated on a heterosexual model of gender difference, giving a “proper” gender assignment to each half of a homosexual couple. Asian men, then, assume the female role or “bottom” in a top/bottom pairing. The gendering of Asian men as female accounts for his passivity and lack of sexual interest which supposedly characterizes the ideal female subject. Predictably enough, the rumors of homosexuality that surround Reeves cater to this particular conception of gay sexuality. Indeed, the longest lasting rumor of Reeves homosexuality involves his marriage to Hollywood power broker David Geffen who supposedly chose Reeves as his “trophy wife.”

Reeves, then, evokes an emphatically passive gay sexuality. DeAngelis claims

that Reeves' appeal for gay spectators resides in his receptivity to gay desire, what he calls "gay accessibility," rather than any definite homosexual identity. The role assigned to Reeves not only reaffirms a specifically Asian American "deviant" masculinity, but also aligns with a more generalized racial marking. As Hiram Perez, Kobena Mercer, and Jonathan Dollimore have all argued male gay culture has been predominantly *white* male gay culture. People of color only become visible within that culture through the adoption of dominant cultural stereotypes (ie the savage black stud and the fragile Asian exotic). As the objectified Other, gay people of color are the recipients rather than the originators of a masterful, sexualized gaze. Homosexual desire is coded as white while homosexual desirability is racially marked, replicating pre-existing racial hierarchies.

Bad Acting and the Postmodern Man

Given the evacuation of Reeves sexual subjectivity, it is not surprising that he refuses to define his sexuality publicly. In fact, he has famously avoided either confirming or denying reports of his homosexuality. Unlike other celebrities, Reeves has not sued those claiming that he is gay (Tom Cruise), condemned homosexuality (Mel Gibson), or taken out full-page ads defending his heterosexuality (Richard Gere and Cindy Crawford). Instead, he has fanned the flame of those rumors by giving vague and ambiguous answers to questions about his sexuality. In one of most cited examples, in an article in *Interview* magazine in 1990 Reeves responded to questions about his sexuality

by saying he was straight, but then added, "But ya' never know." Of course, in the typically sound-bite heavy celebrity interview any response Reeves might give denying his homosexuality would be read as a rejection of homosexuality itself. In an interview with *Vanity Fair* in 1995 Reeves says, "There's nothing wrong with being gay so to deny it is to make a judgment. And why make a big deal of it?" In a polarized world where homosexuality and heterosexuality are seen as diametric opposites, Reeves seems to have found a middle space. Despite the hostility toward Reeves noted by Taylor, his ambiguous sexuality appears to have broadened his fan base. Rather than hurting his career, rumors of homosexuality have coincided with the rise in his popularity.

Although much has been made of Reeves' ambiguous responses to questions about his sexuality, little attention has been paid to his similar resistance to questions of race. While explicit discussions of race are rare in interviews with Reeves, racial discussions are sometimes recoded as questions about national origins or names. Names play a significant role for Reeves whose first name denotes a deviance from the European American mainstream. The significance of names was made obvious when Keanu Reeves, whose first name is Hawaiian, appeared on the *Tonight Show* to promote the film *The Replacements* (2000). Jay Leno began his interview by prompting Reeves to recall his early days in Hollywood when Reeves' agent tried to get him to change his name. Reeves says that his agent asked him to try the name K.C. Reeves because, in the

words of Reeves' himself, "People, when they heard (the name) Keanu Reeves, they didn't know what I was [this last phrase accompanied by Reeves physically gesturing air quotes]. What ever that means. I'm not touching that." Then Leno replies off camera, "What is a Keanu?" By "not touching that" Reeves manages to mobilize the same strategies he uses to shape public perception of his sexuality to mold understandings of his race. Just as Reeves resists naming his sexuality, he also manages to invoke race while studiously avoiding words like Asian or Hawaiian or race. For a mainstream audience, the story merely recounts the misdirected enthusiasms of a Hollywood agent and racial overtones are gently muted in ethnic difference or individual eccentricity. He is able to utilize maximum play in his racial identity. Thus he is able to make statements calling himself a "middle-class white kid" while interview after interview states that he is European, Chinese and Hawaiian. Like Reeves sexuality, his multiraciality seems to reside in the absences, in the elipses, of his star persona.

This passive passing, this failure to force a racialized reading of Reeves body both interrogates and undermines racial identifications. If Reeves is ambivalent about his racial assignment, Asian American fan discourse seems equally ambivalent about Reeves. The online discussions often focus on the right to categorize Reeves as Asian American. When the question of what "qualifies" as Asian is posed on on- line forums such as ii Stix, a volley of responses follows. On the Asian American interactive site, Goldensea, there is even poll set up breaking down Asian-ness into a series of questions.

Is Reeves Asian because he “looks Asian”? Or Asian because he self identifies as Asian?

Or simply Asian because he has Asian blood? All three questions center on the relationship between identity and volition. They ask to what extent does the ability to have one’s body read as racialized or as unmarked dictate identity. These questions are also questions of identification. As Ed Cohen argues identity relies upon a comparative relationship to other bodies. He traces the history of identity which imagines an “unchanging and highly idealized notion” of the body:

This dehistoricizing gesture correspondingly organizes a matrix of intelligibility and visibility which produces the idealized body as both the ground and the guarantee for making qualitative distinctions between “kinds” of human beings.

The rhetorical effect of this somatic idealization is to support the more wide reaching and perhaps historically significant inference that if one’s “identity” presupposes the “sameness” of one’s somatic differentiation, than conversely one’s somatic difference(s) must “naturally” define the “sameness” of one’s “identity.” (77)

Since mainstream America is unable to read Reeves as Asian, because their visual language for racial difference dictates and delimits their ability to see mixed race Asians, Reeves is unable to enter into the “matrix of intelligibility and visibility.” This, in turn, jeopardizes his inclusion in an identity based on somatic sameness. Yet, at the same time, these fan sites demonstrate the impulse to include Reeves as representative, as an

example of an Asian American male, breaking down the link between identity and somatic sameness (Despite how I look, I am Asian American) or redefining somatic differentiation (This is what Asian American looks like). Reeves body functions as a testing ground, a space to work out the boundaries of racial identification.

In many ways, Reeves personifies the free-floating, destabilized, post-modern subject. By never answering the question posed by Leno, “What is a Keanu?,” he is not confined to a singular stable identity. By defining “Keanu,” Reeves would, simultaneously, need to block out what “a Keanu” is not. As Cohen argues, “If identity presupposes the ‘fixing’ of difference (in the sense of both repairing it and pinning it down), then the fixation on identity reiterates a painful process that simultaneously excludes and exacerbates ‘non-identity’” (76). The construction of Reeves’ public persona seems to resist “fixing.” Instead, it includes many possible identities. Is Reeves gay? Well, “Ya’ never know.” The slippery nature of Reeves public persona points to the ways in which race, and sexuality, is an effect of a performance. It is what one does rather than what one is. This is not merely saying that Reeves “acts white.” Rather, in order to be perceived as mixed race as opposed to the normative default of whiteness, Reeves must continually racially “out” himself. In both instances, race and sexuality cease to be a given. They are not, as conventional wisdom would dictate, natural or biological facts that give birth to an individual’s subjectivity. Instead of the familiar Romantic vision of the artist whose work and life reflect their singular, true self or soul,

Reeves more closely resembles a post-structuralist understanding of a self that is invented in relation to prescribed social types. As a result, the very notion of the individual is put into question, and rather than a transcendent core self, we are presented with a self that shifts, changes, and ultimately proves elusive.

Although, Reeves has been able to parlay this destabilized public self into an extremely successful career, the effects of his disorienting persona shape both media profiles and criticism of his acting style. Many interviews and profiles begin with the caveat that Reeves is “as enigmatic off-screen as on” (Robb, 8) or “Keanu Reeves has always had the reputation of revealing nothing to the press. Even those who work with him find him a tough nut to crack” (Fischer). On-screen Reeves is similarly opaque.

Although sexual and racial ambiguities pertain most clearly to Reeves “personal” life, the problems with articulating a legible self extends to his on-screen work. Mariam Hansen in her work on Rudolph Valentino argues that for stars neat divisions between real and reel life are difficult to maintain. She says:

Because the star is defined by his or her existence outside of individual films, by the publicity that surrounds his or her professional and “private” personality, the star’s presence in a particular film blurs the boundary between diegesis and discourse, between an address relying on identification with fictional characters and an activation of the viewer’s familiarity with the star on the basis of production and publicity intertexts” (246).

Reeves himself acknowledged the impact of his private life on the critical reception of his movies. He says, “More than a lot of actors, my public persona has really colored the interpretation of my work” (Goodrich, 137). Certainly, reviewers have a particularly hostile reaction to the lack of affect and emotional depth in his acting. For instance, in a CNN review of *The Matrix Revolutions*, Paul Clinton opines, “Neo continues to be a custom-made role for Reeves' limited talents. The fact that his one-dimensional character is dazed and confused throughout most of the film fits Reeves' performance style to a T.” In another scathing, but not atypical review in the *New York Times*, Karyn James writes, “Keanu Reeves is not supposed to be a robot or an android or any other humanoid form in ‘Johnny Mnemonic,’ but from his robotic delivery you'd never guess he's meant to be a flesh-and-blood man with a memory chip implanted in his brain.”

Indeed, as Taylor in the above article confirms, Reeves inspires a notably potent mix of derision and ridicule in critics. Often characterized as air-headed or wooden, his on-screen presence resists the viewers impulse to find the true emotional source behind his actions. Ultimately, the discomfort and even, in some critics, the anxiety he engenders is mainly due to inability to read him. Contemporary audiences and critics equate good acting and great actors with the ability to appear “natural” or “authentic” despite the fact that they are creating a work of artifice. However, as Judith Butler argues, the illusion of naturalness depends upon the types of categories that Reeves puts into question.

Although Butler speaks specifically about gender, her analysis could also be extended to

other “natural” categories as race. She explains by saying, “In effect, one way that gender gets naturalized is through being constructed as an inner psychic or physical *necessity*. An yet, it is always a surface sign, a signification on and with the public body that produces this illusion of inner depth, necessity or essence that is somehow magically, causally expressed” (Imitation, 28).

The accusation that Reeves is all surface beauty with no depth assumes that there should be an essential self that reveals itself to the perceptive viewer. Where is the authentic core that lies beneath or behind the image? DeAngelis describes Reeves star appeal saying, “Star and fan discourse often attribute the mystery and fascination of Reeves’s persona to its opacity, its propensity to change unexpectedly, and its ability to exceed any single image or description” (192). Just as Reeves’ star persona puts into question the notion of an unchanging, generative, identity, his on-screen presence also resists reading. Rather than providing a “window into the soul, “ Reeves’ acting is often describes as soul-less, a description perfectly in keeping with a post-Enlightenment understanding of the individual and identity.

Reeves and the Politics of the Closet

By destabilizing sexuality and race, then, Reeves also destabilizes subjectivity. The resulting freedom from the dictates of an essential identity would seem to empower Reeves, to give him control over such seemingly intractable “problems” of race and

sexuality. Yet, this vision of Reeves as masterfully in control of his subjectivity is at odds with one of the main characteristics of Reeves persona, his passivity. In order to understand this discrepancy, one must step back from Reeves as an individual actor, to see him within a cultural context that materially limits the subject positions and identities available to him. Jonathan Dollimore writes that Europeans such as T.S. Lawrence searched for sexual freedom in the Middle East in order to disidentify with Western culture. He says, "In other words, precisely because of the coercive and normative alignments between subjectivity and sexuality in our culture, deviant sexuality becomes a refusal of certain kinds of subjectivity, as well of certain kinds of normative desire" (26). It is important that Dollimore does not suggest a new subjectivity, but, rather, the rejection or "refusal" of "certain kinds of subjectivity." Indeed, Reeves' subject position in terms of his sexuality and his race relies on his refusal to embrace a specific subjectivity. While his subjectivity may be fragmented, we do not have the language to account for this fragmentation. As Reeves, himself, says, "to deny it [homosexuality] is to make a judgement." As a result he has no place from which to speak. Instead, he can only fail to speak or refuse to speak since telling would position him in one camp or the other.

Reeves ambiguous sexuality also filters through dominant, juridical discourse. The infamous "Don't ask, don't tell" (DADT) military policy supposedly protects soldiers against retaliation, prosecution, and expulsion only if they remain "in the

closet.”³ The new policy was instituted in the wake of the increasing visibility and political clout of queer activists; although, ultimately, they were not powerful enough to reform the military. The compromise measure came into effect in 1993, the year before Reeves broke through as an A-list actor with the film *Speed*, and when rumors of Reeves marriage to Geffen started to spread. The policy was and is largely ineffective in protecting gay, lesbian and bisexual soldiers, but it is still significant for the way it both reflects and produces a particular, post-Stonewall, understanding of homosexuality and identity. Prior to “Don’t ask, don’t tell” military policy tended to focus on homosexual acts as basis for expulsion. In fact, a soldier could claim to be homosexual or “come out of the closet” but could remain in the military if “there is further finding that the member is not homosexual or bisexual.” Under the new policy, the assertion of a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity is targeted as the main threat. While sexual contact with members of the same sex is still considered grounds for administrative action, the new policy is notable for its emphasis on speaking. In the act of telling, of verbally claiming an identity, the soldier becomes a subject under military law.

Post-Stonewall, the act of coming out gained political momentum as both a play for acceptability through ubiquity (“We’re queer and we’re here”) and as a move towards a collective identity.⁴ Following in the footsteps of earlier civil rights movements, the Gay Pride movement emphasized the positive claiming of a “deviant” sexuality. Much like the “Black is Beautiful” slogans of the late 1960’s and 70’s coming out did not only

affirm the identity of the individual, it also promoted a positive group identity. As if in recognition of this phenomenon, DADT does not simply police the activity but also the subjectivity of the homosexual soldier. Rather, DADT collapses the distinction between subjectivity and action by viewing the verbal act of coming out as a homosexual activity that can be policed. Janet Halley in her detailed analysis of the DADT policy argues that although it is perceived as a policy that distinguished between status and conduct, the net effect of the policy is to break down that very same distinction. She argues, “Anti-gay practices developed under the 1993 revisions do not target status or conduct: rather, they persistently render status a sign of conduct and vice versa” (126). By disallowing the act of “coming out,” the military simultaneously acknowledges and creates the closet.

The policy points to the source of the homosexual threat for the military, an open declaration of an essential identity, an identity that can be deployed for political ends. Thus, Reeves evasiveness on the subject of his sexuality is reflective of changes to social and political boundaries and the overt politicization of queer identities. Queer identities have come to be understood as clearly defined, exclusive, and essential identities. In order to be understood both as a subject under the law queer identities needed to be stabilized, with clear boundaries between straight and queer worlds. In the struggle for civil rights, a group needs to be readily identified since legal remedies must have specific subjects to address. Without a categorical definition, groups become amortized as individuals with no political status. They disappear. When, for instance, Reagan decided

to stop keeping a record of how many government contracts were given to racial minorities, he no longer recognized minority business owners as a group, “disappearing” them from the government record. As a result, affirmative action policies were rendered ineffective as there were no recognizable inequalities to remedy. Yet, the act of coming out was not met with unqualified approval. It disturbed anti-essentialist factions of what might be termed a queer, as opposed to gay rights, movement. As Butler has argued, the act of coming out of the closet creates the precondition of being in the closet. It produces a narrative that orders earlier activity as “closeted,” in effect, reproducing and supporting the structure of the closet. For Reeves to claim or reject either an exclusively queer or straight identity, then, requires a capitulation to rigid and essentialist identity categories that further divide and define sexual differences.

Like the closet, passing also creates racial boundaries in the moment it crosses those boundaries. Elaine Ginsberg asserts that passing challenges problematic assumptions of identity saying, “... the first of which is that some identity categories are inherent and unalterable essences: presumably one cannot pass for something one *is not* unless there is some other, pre-passing, identity that one *is*” (4). In her analysis of *Imitation of Life* (1959), Samira Kawash provides an extended reading of the moment the passing heroine, Sarah Jane, is confronted by her boyfriend. The scene culminates in his slap in her face. Kawash argues, “It is at this moment that the workings of history are rendered effectively irrelevant in the violent restoration of the racial order that claims its

origin in timeless nature. Thus it is important to recognize that my reading of Frankie's slap as the force of the color line *does* essentialize race" (19). However, the social meaning and impact of this reification of race through passing differs from sexual passing or closeting.

The act of coming out usually marks a point of divergence between sexual and racial passing. Racial passing is conventionally read as a threat to social stratification while sexual passing is read as a salve to the social order. Linda Schlossberg notes, "Yet it remains a provocative fact that the dominant social order often implores gay people to stay in the closet (to pass), while subjects who pass for white are encouraged to "come out" or reveal themselves as authentically "racial" subjects – at times by both minority *and* the dominant social order" (6). Critical evaluations of passing narratives in literature and film have emphasized the implicit critique of racist dominant culture in the act of passing. Especially disruptive are the ways in which passing blurs racial categories. If someone looks white, lives like a white person, and speaks like a white person, but is "really" Black, then what defines whiteness? Passing puts the very notion of authenticity, of an authentic self, into question and threatens the stability of racial hierarchies.

According to this logic, social order is restored when passing ends and the "true" racial identity of the passer revealed, so the dominant social order would encourage racial outing. As Ginsberg writes, "Race passing thus not only creates, to use [Marjorie] Garber's term, a *category crisis* but also destabilizes the grounds of privilege founded

on racial identity” (8). If we can’t define whiteness as common sense then the power dynamic that supports and creates racial difference is laid bare. Society demands a legible racial body in order to justify its inequalities.

The public image of Reeves, however, violates this opposition of racial and sexual passing. Butler has argued that passing relies on a constant and repeated disavowal (*Bodies*, 171), but while Reeves often fails to affirm his racial difference, he does, in fact, declare himself as racially marked through his name. Nor has he attempted to obscure his racial background, leading to the “revelation” of his race a la Mariah Carey or Meg and Jennifer Tilly. Yet, he is continually read as racially unmarked. While all passing is a collusion between the individual and the larger social order, Reeves, once again, appears to be the object rather than the subject of a racialized identity. Rather than being urged to come out, a form of willful forgetting keeps pushing Reeves back into the racial closet. Thus, the language of closeting and outing, the language of queer identity, can be employed to speak about Reeves when the language of conventional racial analysis fails.

The case of Keanu Reeves forces a reconsideration of the meaning of racial passing as well as what one might call racial outing. One major way that Reeves, as an object of critical analysis, differs from the majority of examples of racial passing is the fact that his passing takes place in the post-Civil Rights era. How do we speak about passing when the end of official, legal racial segregation makes passing less legible and less defined? Even though segregation and discrimination are still everyday occurrences

in contemporary American culture, rhetoric has shifted from using the inherent inferiority of non-whites to justify inequalities to blaming cultural differences. Thus, structural inequalities are not due to racism. Instead, non-whites through their embrace of cultural differences bring their troubles upon themselves. Unlike white Americans who as “just people,” American of color engage in group identities at their own detriment. Given this line of thinking, Americans can continue to believe that racism belongs to the distant past and that racial difference is perpetuated by those most victimized by prejudice. The assumption, then, is that racism is an aberration rather than a constitutive part of America’s national identity. In similar ways, closeting soldiers allows for the comforting illusion that American remains familiarly straight. Queer soldiers challenge our notions of American identity by asserting their place in the national imaginary. In this version of social reality, only those soldiers who invite discrimination by being openly gay need worry. By encouraging mixed race people to pass as white, racial difference is effectively domesticated and depoliticized. Race, and by extension racial discrimination, becomes a personal choice. The preservation of the dominant social order is better served by racial passing than revelation.

Reeves appears to be caught between the devil and the deep, blue, sea. To claim a racialized identity, to “out” himself as a person of Asian descent, means defining himself as exclusively and essentially Asian. On the other hand, failing to declare a racialized or queer identity leads to the default assumption of a white and straight subject position. As

I have been arguing throughout this book, we do not have an adequate language for multiracial identities, particularly identities formed after the Civil Rights era. While I may borrow from the language of queer culture it cannot fully describe the specificities of the multiracial complex, just as the popular language of gay rights cannot fully encompass the diversity of sexual subjectivities. While we might understand the post-modern “individual” to be a multiplicity of subject positions, an abundance of selves, we might alternatively understand that same self or selves in terms of lack. This is the conundrum of the figure of the multiracial subject or, perhaps, the impossibility of a multiracial subject. The inability to “fix” or stabilize the multiracial subject provides an escape from essentialist, exclusionary identities, yet it also presents a “broken,” unrecognizable and unrecognized self. A multiracial person may find a degree of freedom in a subject position that blurs, crosses, or doubles racial boundaries, but the “subject” is always at risk of disappearing as both a legal and cultural entity.

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¹ DeAngelis reports a similar quote from Michael Gregg Micaud who says, “I love his almond shaped eyes, their vacant look...” (207).

² The list of references would be too long to recount here. For particularly in-depth treatment see Robert Lee’s *Orientalism*, Darryl Hamamoto’s *Monitored Peril*, and David Eng’s *Racial Castration*.

³ The official policy of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue, Don’t Harass (more commonly termed Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell) was the result of the failed political agenda of then President Clinton. Clinton promised during his 1992 campaign to end the ban against homosexuals in the military. However, once elected, he face strong resistance from the military establishment, Congress, and members of his own party. In a compromise measure, a policy was crafted to allow homosexuals to serve as long as they did not declare themselves to be homosexual and, in turn, they would not be asked about their sexual orientation or investigated unless there was “credible information from a reliable source.” The policy has proven to be ineffective in protecting gay, lesbian, and bisexual soldiers and actually increased the number of discharges from homosexuality immediately after taking effect.

⁴ The slogan “We’re queer and we’re here” is most closely associated with the gay activist groups Queer Nation which rose to prominence in the 1980’s and played a major role in the shift in the perception of coming out from a personal to a political act.