

Book Review

Patrick S. Cheng, *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality, and Spirit*. New York: Seabury Books, 2013. 208pp. \$24. ISBN 978-1-596-27241-5 (pbk).

Reviewed by: Dr Pamela R. Lightsey, Associate Dean of Community Life and Lifelong Learning, Clinical Assistant Professor of Contextual Theology and Practice, Boston University, School of Theology.
ronnice@bu.edu

In *Rainbow Theology*, Patrick Cheng identifies two goals: (1) “to lift up the writings by LGBTIQ theologians of color and to break the silence with respect to such writings”; (2) “to rethink the enterprise of Christian theology by moving the experiences of LGBTIQ people of color from the margins to the center”(xv). He undertakes both these goals in similar teaching fashion as can be found in his work, *Radical Love*.¹ In both cases, he includes “Study Questions” and “For Further Study” sections at the end of each chapter. One can imagine not only students in schools of theology reading this text: Cheng has made it accessible to students, clergy, laypersons, and persons beyond those contexts. In a sense, the book itself is *queer* in its absence of dense linguistic boundaries.

Central to the book are the ways in which queer people of color have written about their experience of racism and *queerphobia* (a term covering phobia of LGBT persons). In Part I Cheng provides a historical survey of the writings of LGBTIQ queer theologians of color, focusing on Black, Asian American, Latina/o theologies and Two-Spirit Indigenous scholarship. The latter contains no writings authored by Two-Spirit Indigenous scholars. This absence points us to perhaps the book’s greatest weakness and one for which Cheng offers a disclaimer of sorts at the end of chapter 1, saying, “Although I have tried my best to step outside of my own social location and include perspectives other than my own in this book, I will inevitably fall short in terms of my sources and examples” (13).

It is precisely because Cheng *cannot* step far enough outside his social location to more broadly cover those writings known by we LGBTIQ persons of color in our specific context, that what he *has* been able to capture is an act of *radical love*. Cheng makes the attempt. Does it perfectly convey the work of scholars of color? No. That is a work that must be engaged by more persons of color. Though Cheng’s work has its deficiencies he has nonetheless gathered a good compilation of works by LGBTIQ persons of color. Needless to say this is helpful as – like queer theory – queer theology’s efforts to destabilize identities results in the continuation of white (especially male) privilege and concomitantly the invisibility of unique theological perspectives of queer persons of color. I suspect many readers and queer theologians will embrace this book as a much-needed contribution to the field.

Rainbow theology’s contribution starts with Cheng defining those key terms used throughout the book: queer of color, race, sexuality, and spirituality. Since each of the two sections of the book is constructed exploring these concepts, doing so allows the novice in queer theology to enter the conversation with a modicum of appreciation for the work that follows.

¹ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2011).

What may not be as appreciated is Cheng's decision to organize the chapters along social constructs of race and ethnicity, each segregated from the other, in order to "explore certain shared themes – and differences – within each subgroup" (xix). Notwithstanding this nettlesome aspect of the book's layout, Cheng's intention in both sections is to avoid conflating race and sexuality as is often the case in what Cheng calls "monochromatic theology" (those attending to singular oppression, the choosing of sides, and the sense that there is a singular home/context for those who face the same singular oppression) (xviii).

What is refreshing about Part I is that it highlights the interests of queer theologians of color, showing their rich participation beyond the well-worn critiques of the exclusive practices of the Church to refreshingly incorporate their attention to matters of social justice such as immigration, settler colonialism, and racism.

Cheng then moves on, in Part II, to answer his own question posed in chapter 1: "So is it possible to construct a queer of color theology?" (4).

Cheng's concept of rainbow theology is not unlike other liberation theologies, in that it draws on the experiences of people who have been consigned to the margins of life. Its point of departure attends specifically to the experiences and theological conceptualizations of LGBTQ people of color, yet as Cheng puts it, "rainbow theology is a broader methodology and critique that can be applied to all forms of theological reflection" (85).

Using the metaphor of the rainbow, Cheng demonstrates to the reader how race, sexuality, and spirit are shared themes among queer people of color, as well as the shared experiences of multiplicity, middle spaces, and mediation. Unlike several other queer theology writings, Cheng *gifts* the reader by bringing his discussion to a close with an example of how a queer of color Christology – a rainbow Christology – might look. Including this sample, which uses Cheng's methodology, is a superb end to a thoroughly fascinating book.

I do recommend this book to readers, convinced that it is particularly useful not only for members of the LGBTQ community and allies, but among a broad scope of readers. It is my hope that the insight it provides will support the work of queer theologians of color in the academy, Church and local communities.

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