

FROM A “FAR EAST COAST COUSIN”:
QUEER ASIAN REFLECTIONS ON ROGER A. SNEED’S
REPRESENTATIONS OF HOMOSEXUALITY

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author comments on Roger Sneed’s *Representations of Homosexuality* from the perspective of a queer Asian American theologian. Cheng appreciates how Sneed lifts up the experiences of LGBT African Americans. He also challenges Sneed to explore theological alternatives to liberation theology as well as dialogue with LGBT people of color from other racial and ethnic groups.

Keywords: Asian American theology; Black theology; womanist theology; queer theology; LGBT African Americans; LGBT Asian Americans; race and sexuality; sexual racism; gay male cyberspace.

It is a privilege to be part of this conversation in *Black Theology: An International Journal* regarding Roger A. Sneed’s groundbreaking book, *Representations of Homosexuality: Black Liberation Theology and Cultural Criticism*.² Like the other contributors, I spoke on a panel about Sneed’s book at the 2011 American Academy of Religion (AAR) annual meeting in San Francisco. The panel was sponsored by the Black Theology Group, and I was the only participant who did not self-identify as African American. As such, I want to preface my comments

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2. Roger A. Sneed, *Representations of Homosexuality: Black Liberation Theology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

with a few words about my social location and why I think I was invited to be part of this conversation.

First, like Sneed, my scholarship involves the intersections of sexuality, race, and religion. We were both on a panel sponsored by the Gay Men and Religion Group at the 2010 AAR annual meeting in Atlanta on "Exploring Gay Male Desire," and our presentations had a lot in common with respect to race, notions of beauty, and the marketplace of desire in gay male cyberspace. As a queer Asian theologian, I'm interested in exploring how lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Asian Americans are not only marginalized by a largely homophobic Asian American culture (especially among Asian American evangelical Christians), but also how we are marginalized by a predominantly White and often racist LGBT community.³

All too often, particularly in debates like same-sex marriage, sexuality and race are seen as mutually exclusive categories, and White LGBT people are pitted against straight Asian Americans.⁴ Unfortunately, those of us who are both queer and Asian are caught in the middle of these two poles, and we end up having nowhere to lay our heads.⁵ So it seems to me that the LGBT Asian American experience may have a number of helpful parallels with the same-gender-loving African American experience.

Second, I had the privilege of working for over a decade with Dr James H. Cone of Union Theological Seminary in New York City as my master's and doctoral adviser. While at Union, I also had the privilege of working with Dr Delores Williams. Thus, although my own work focuses on queer Asian American theologies, I have a particular fondness and admiration for Black liberation and womanist theologies. I have often said that Dr Cone helped me to find my theological voice and gave me permission to unleash my inner rage

3. See, for example, Patrick S. Cheng, "A Three-Part Sinfonia: Queer Asian Reflections on the Trinity," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 3, no. 2.9 (2012): 1–23; idem, "Gay Asian Masculinities and Christian Theologies," *CrossCurrents* 61, no. 4 (2011): 540–48; idem, "'I Am Yellow and Beautiful': Reflections on Queer Asian Spirituality and Gay Male Cyberculture," *Journal of Technology, Theology, and Religion* 2, no. 3 (2011): 1–21; idem, "Reclaiming Our Traditions, Rituals, and Spaces: Spirituality and the Queer Asian Pacific American Experience," *Spiritus* 6, no. 2 (2006): 234–40; idem, "Multiplicity and Judges 19: Constructing a Queer Asian Pacific American Biblical Hermeneutic," *Semeia* 90–91 (2002): 119–33.

4. For example, Hak-Shing William Tam, a leader of a Chinese American evangelical Christian group, was an official sponsor of California Proposition 8, the initiative passed in November 2008 that prospectively eliminated the right of same-sex couples to marry in California.

5. See Matt. 8:20; Lk. 9:58. For some anthologies about the LGBT Asian experience, see Russell Leong, ed., *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996); David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom, eds, *Q&A: Queer in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); and Song Cho, ed., *Rice: Explorations into Gay Asian Culture and Politics* (Toronto: Queer Press, 1998).

at a racist and homophobic world, while Dr Williams helped me to find theological language for dealing with my multiple intersecting identities and to recognize the power and importance of doing theology in community.

I want to begin by saying how much I loved *Representations* and how excited I was to read it. As Dwight Hopkins and Linda Thomas wrote in the introduction, Sneed's book is only the second major monograph—after Horace Griffin's *Their Own Receive Them Not*⁶—to address the important and timely issue of LGBT African Americans and the church.⁷ Although queer Black voices have been emerging in secular academic circles for some time (see, for example, Dwight McBride's *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch* and Roderick A. Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black*),⁸ the religious academy still has a long way to go in terms of catching up.⁹

I also love how *Representations* weaves together many different sources from the Black same-gender-loving community, and how it does not limit itself to traditional theological sources. For example, Sneed draws upon literary works by Black queer authors such as Langston Hughes, Essex Hemphill, and E. Lynn Harris. He is equally comfortable, however, drawing upon online hookup ads from BGCLive.com,¹⁰ a self-described social network for “Black and Latino Brothas/Sistas.”¹¹ Happily, according to BGCLive.com's website, their “Far East Coast [*sic*] Cousins from China and India” are also welcome.

Finally, I appreciate the autobiographical aspects of *Representations*, including a story in which Sneed tells his fellow students in a course on the Black church at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta that he did not believe that the Bible was the “inerrant word of God,” to which the class reacted “viscerally” and

6. Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006).

7. Sneed, *Representations*, ix. For an overview of homosexuality and the Black church, see Victor Anderson, “African American Church Traditions,” in Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 48–50.

8. Dwight A. McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (New York University Press, 2005); Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

9. Some early works of LGBT Black theology included Renee L. Hill, “Who Are We for Each Other? Sexism, Sexuality and Womanist Theology,” in James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. 2, 1980–92* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 345–51; and Elias Farajaje-Jones, “Breaking Silence: Toward an In-the-Life Theology,” in Cone and Wilmore, eds, *Black Theology, Vol. 2*, 139–59. For a more recent essay on Black LGBT liberation theology, see Roland Stringfellow, “Soul Work: Developing a Black LGBT Liberation Theology,” in Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson, eds, *Queer Religion: Homosexuality in Modern Religious History*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 113–25.

10. See www.bgclive.com.

11. Sneed, *Representations*, 169.

sparked a "spirited exchange."¹² Not only do I admire Sneed's courage in writing about his own social location—which is something that I think more theologians, ethicists, and religious studies scholars should be doing—but I also appreciated his honesty about his views and evolving beliefs about the Christian faith.

Let me now move to my constructive comments about the book. As I understand it, Sneed's central argument in *Representations* is that Black liberation theology is ultimately a problematic discourse for Black gay or same-gender-loving men. Why? Because, according to Sneed, Black liberation theology depends upon the binary of the "oppressor" and the "oppressed" in order to function properly. In other words, in order to sustain this binary, Black same-gender-loving men are often caricatured in Black liberation theologies as victims or tragic figures, such as the conflicted Black gay man who is on the "down low."

As an alternative, Sneed proposes a turn away from Black liberation theology (and, indeed, a turn away from theology altogether). Specifically, he argues for a humanist *ethic of openness*.¹³ It is this ethic of openness—an openness that affirms Black gay life in all of its richness and complexity—that is ultimately life-giving to the LGBT Black community. Based upon my understanding of Sneed's central argument, I have five questions or comments for his consideration that might be addressed in his future work.

First, is it really true that Black liberation theologies cannot provide a space for authentic LGBT Black voices? Over the course of the last two decades, there have been a number of works—including anthologies—about the LGBT Black religious experience that seem to do exactly that, and yet they were not mentioned in Sneed's book. These works include Gary David Comstock's *A Whosoever Church*;¹⁴ Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins's *Loving the Body*,¹⁵ and G. Winston James and Lisa C. Moore's *Spirited*.¹⁶ In fact, James Cone himself is interviewed in *A Whosoever Church*, and he not only talks about his own evolving consciousness about the struggles of LGBT people, but also about the unique struggles of LGBT African Americans.¹⁷ So I would be curious to hear more from Sneed on what he thinks about these sources.

12. Sneed, *Representations*, 5.

13. Sneed, *Representations*, 175–92.

14. Gary David Comstock, ed., *A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men Into African American Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

15. Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins, eds, *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

16. G. Winston James and Lisa C. Moore, eds, *Spirited: Affirming the Soul and Black Gay/Lesbian Identity* (Washington, DC: RedBone Press, 2006).

17. Comstock, ed., *A Whosoever Church*, 205–17 ("Rev. Dr. James H. Cone").

Second, is it possible that the Black liberation theology paradigm of the “oppressor” and the “oppressed” might actually still be valid and useful in certain areas of the LGBT African American experience? I am thinking in particular of the predominantly (White) gay male sexual marketplace of desire, for example, in online hookup sites such as Manhunt, or in mobile phone apps such as Grindr, and online porn sites. These are arenas that still treat people of color as segregated and second-class citizens. For example, I frequently see blatantly racist statements like “No Blacks, no Asians” in the gay male cyberspace world.¹⁸

In the early 1990s, the gay Asian Canadian film critic Richard Fung wrote a seminal piece called “Looking for My Penis” in which he decries the virtual absence of Asian men in mainstream gay porn.¹⁹ I do not think much has changed in the last two decades. As a gay Asian man, I have found that I am often either completely erased and ignored on the one hand, or completely fetishized and objectified on the other hand. Very rarely am I ever seen just for who I am. To me, Black liberation theology might be a helpful way of addressing this oppressive dynamic of sexual apartheid within the gay male sexual marketplace of desire. I am wondering, therefore, if Sneed might be writing off the usefulness of Black liberation theology a bit too quickly.

Third, does Sneed move too quickly from theology to ethics? That is, are there alternative discourses *within* the field of theology that might be helpful to Sneed’s work? Even if Black liberation theology does not provide an adequate space for authentic LGBT Black voices to emerge, I would argue that there are other theological paradigms, such as queer theology and postcolonial theology, that might address Sneed’s concerns about binaries and distortions of the Black gay experience. Although I do not rely solely upon the classical liberation paradigm in my work in queer Asian American theology, I do find theological tools such as queer theology and postcolonial theology to be helpful in terms of challenging the very binaries—for example, the oppressed vs the oppressor binary—which Sneed finds problematic in Black liberation theology.²⁰

For example, what might a Black queer postcolonial theology look like, particularly if we examine the horrific colonial implications of the Middle Passage? What if we used postcolonial concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and the subaltern to describe the LGBT Black experience as a twice-colonized

18. See Cheng, “I Am Yellow and Beautiful.” For examples of online sexual racism, see the “Douchebags of Grindr” website at www.douchebagsofgrindr.com.

19. Richard Fung, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” in Eng and Hom, eds, *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*, 115–34.

20. See, for example, my discussion of hybridity and the queer Asian experience in Cheng, “Gay Asian Masculinities.”

community (that is, as a colonized queer community within the larger colonized African American community—or, vice versa, as a colonized African American community within the larger colonized LGBT community)?²¹ Theologically speaking, I think there are many exciting possibilities here.²²

Fourth, how might Sneed's work be enriched and deepened by engaging with a greater diversity of voices within the queer Black community, including lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Black voices? This is particularly important because these groups are often disproportionately impacted by hate violence. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, even though violence against transgender people occurs with "chilling frequency," statistics show that "transgender people of color are targeted *even more frequently* for violence and discrimination."²³

Sneed acknowledges that he focuses on the Black gay male experience because of his familiarity with Black gay male literature as well as not wanting to tokenize the Black lesbian experience.²⁴ This is certainly a fair move in light of the groundbreaking nature of his work. However, I would like to have seen more dialogue with womanist and Black feminist voices (beyond that of Renee Hill and Kelly Brown Douglas),²⁵ such as Irene Monroe, Traci West, M. Shawn Copeland, and Emilie Townes.²⁶ The latter have all lifted up same-gender-loving issues among Black women in recent years. Furthermore, in November 2009 there was a panel at the AAR annual meeting in Montreal chaired by my

21. See, for example, C. Richard King, ed., *Post-Colonial America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Amrit Singh and Peter Schmidt, eds, *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

22. For an example of the intersections between postcolonial discourse and the LGBT African American experience, see Elias Farajajé-Jones, "Holy Fuck," in Kerwin Kay, Jill Nagle, and Baruch Gould, eds, *Male Lust: Pleasure, Power, and Transformation* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2000), 327–35.

23. See http://transequality.org/Issues/hate_crimes.html (emphasis added).

24. Sneed, *Representations*, 20.

25. Hill, "Who Are We for Each Other?"; Mary L. Foulke and Renee L. Hill, "We Are Not Your Hope for the Future: Being an Interracial Lesbian Family Living in the Present," in Robert E. Goss and Amy Adams Squire Strongheart, eds, *Our Families, Our Values: Snapshots of Queer Kinship* (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 1997), 243–49; Renée Leslie Hill, "Disrupted/Disruptive Movements: Black Theology and Black Power 1969/1999," in Dwight N. Hopkins, ed., *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 138–49; Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999).

26. Comstock, ed., *A Whosoever Church*, 59–71 ("Rev. Irene Monroe"); Traci West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 141–79; M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 73–84; Emilie M. Townes, "Washed in the Grace of God," in Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune, eds, *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 60–70.

Episcopal Divinity School colleague Joan M. Martin that showcased up-and-coming womanist lesbian voices.²⁷ How might Sneed's work be enriched by examining the very same sexism within the gay Black male community that first-wave womanist theologians such as Jacqueline Grant, Katie Canon, and Delores Williams had criticized in James Cone's Black (male) liberation theology?

Fifth, and finally, how might Sneed's work be enriched and deepened by a more intentional engagement with, as the BGCLive.com website puts it, his "Far East Coast [*sic*] Cousins"? As an openly gay Asian American man, I would love to hear more about the parallels, as well as the differences, between the Black same-gender-loving community and the queer Asian community. As I discussed earlier in this article, both groups often experience racial apartheid in the sexualized cyberspace world of White gay men. So, how do Black gay men and Asian gay men experience the world differently in terms of how our masculinities are constructed?

As Richard Fung notes in "Looking for My Penis," Black men may be hypersexualized, but the sexuality of Asian men are erased. As Fung puts it, whereas the Black man becomes the penis, for Asian men, "Asian and anus are conflated."²⁸ That is, gay Asian men are characterized as bottoms with small penises and fetishized by rice queens (that is, White gay men who date and sleep exclusively with Asian men).²⁹ In cyberspace, our depictions are mostly limited to racialized niche porn.

What do these differences teach us about the constructed nature of sexuality?³⁰ What are the theological and ethical implications of these differences? Why is it that BGCLive.com is expressly for both Black and Latino men, but East Asian and South Asian men require a separate note of welcome? Is there any room in the public imagination for Black and Asian interracial couples—beyond, say, Tiger Woods' parents—in the same way that there are depictions of Blatino culture? (Perhaps we could call it "Blasian" or "Aslack" culture!) I hope that my voice in this conversation about Sneed's book might serve as an

27. The panel was held on November 9, 2009, at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Montreal, Canada. The panel was called "Hidden and Invisible in Plain Sight: Queer and Lesbian in the Black Church Community," and the individuals participating in the panel included Elonda Clay, Malu Fairley, Renee L. Hill, Pamela Lightsey, Joan M. Martin, Raedorah Stewart, and Thelathia "Nikki" Young.

28. Fung, "Looking for My Penis," 121. See also David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

29. Justin Chin, "97-Chink, or Baby, How Do I Look Tonight?," in Cho, ed., *Rice*, 23–32.

30. For a discussion of the "ethnosexual frontiers" of sexuality and race, see Joane Nagel, *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

example of the rich possibilities for deepening the conversation among different LGBT communities of color.

In sum, I am deeply grateful for how Sneed's book advances the religious studies and theological conversations about the intersections of race and sexuality, and, in particular, lifts up the voices and experiences of the LGBT Black community. My hope is that Sneed's future work will explore theological alternatives to liberation theology, such as postcolonial and queer theologies. It is also my hope that he will continue to dialogue with the lived experiences of other groups and voices, both inside and outside the same-gender-loving Black community. I close with a note of gratitude to Sneed and the organizers of this conversation for their warm welcome to—in the words of BGCLive.com—this Asian "Far East Coast Cousin."

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