

Not “For the Sake of Peace”: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred Body

*Sharon A. Bong*¹

Introduction

This paper explores the ways in which GLBTQ persons (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer) negotiate the tension between living out their sexuality and spirituality (beyond world religions) in same-sex partnerships. Through a qualitative analysis of four narratives selected from 30 GLBTQ persons interviewed, I interrogate their multiple definitions of ‘peace’ and its practice through ‘life experiments,’² of remaining closeted and coming out as both sexual and spiritual human beings. To what extent do they call into question the impetus to maintain the status quo for the sake of peace? Do their lived experiences merely challenge ideological and doctrinal prescriptions of heterosexuality and chastity in exemplifying ‘deviant,’ ‘sinful,’ ‘abnormal’ life choices or do they potentially offer transformative ways of being and becoming? By making sense of these postcolonial narratives of becoming, this study revisits highly ‘sensitive topics’ in the context of Southeast Asia—sexuality and spirituality—and in doing so, potentially offer not only a re-visioning of sexuality in spirituality but also spirituality in sexuality.

In the context of Malaysia within the region of Southeast Asia, researching on sexuality, particularly same-sex unions and religion constitute highly ‘sensitive topics.’³ A ‘sensitive topic’ is defined as ‘*one that potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or researched the collection, holding, and/or dissemination of research data (sic)*’.⁴ It encompasses research which intrudes into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience; where the study concerns deviance and control; where it is likely to impinge on the vested interests of the powerful or evoke the exercise of coercion (which does not preclude bodily harm) and where it deals with ‘things sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned.’⁵ And the investigation of how GLBTQs negotiate the tension between their sexuality and spirituality in same-

¹ Sharon A. Bong is Senior Lecturer at the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University, Selangor, Malaysia.

² Weeks, Jeffery, Heaphy, Brian and Donovan, Catherine, eds., *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments* (London: Routledge, 2001).

³ Renzetti, Claire M. and Raymond M. Lee, eds., *Researching Sensitive Topic*. (Newbury Park; London; New Delhi: Sage, 1993), 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

sex partnerships in the context of Malaysia and Singapore, well qualifies as a 'sensitive topic', even a highly contentious one. Although Malaysia is a secular state and not an Islamic one (with a Muslim majority accounting for more than 65 percent of its population), there is a deep conservatism with regard to sexuality. In Malaysia and Singapore, male homosexual acts are criminalised, same-sex marriages are not legal and sexual minorities such as transgendered persons are severely disenfranchised by state apparatuses.⁶

Data has been generated by in-depth, semi-structured, and audio-(digitally) recorded interviews with 30 persons from the GLBTQ community who are based in Malaysia and Singapore. Interviews in Malaysia were conducted from February to May 2007 and those in Singapore, February 2008. The criteria for sampling or selection of interviewees is heterogeneous in terms of their multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic backgrounds yet homogenous in terms of their being in same-sex partnerships who in their everyday realities negotiate the tension between their sexuality and spirituality. The criteria of exclusion for interviewees would therefore be heterosexual adults below 21 years of age who are either non-Asian or not residing in Southeast Asia because the cultural context of Asia presents its own unique challenges to 'living out' (as an extension of 'coming out') same-sex partnerships. Snowball sampling had commenced in January 2007 with a call for interviewees posted in e-networks for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and transgendered persons. The definition of partnership or 'union' is fluid: it is not based on number of years together, on whether or not the 'union' has been solemnized or legalised, if same-sex partners have the intention to marry or to have children. It is a partnership if they deem it to be one. This in part, constitutes ethics in researching as interviewees participate in meaning-making in this research because they are its stakeholders.

Through in-depth, face-to-face and audio-recorded interviews (digitally), GLBTQ persons were asked: a) "how do you experience your partnership in relation to your spirituality"; and b) "how do you experience your spirituality in relation to your relationship". The basis of my sampling similarly approximates (in not fully representing) a cross-section of this heterogeneity that is the hallmark of the multi-ethnic, multi-culture and multi-religious reality of Malaysia and Singapore.⁷ Identities as such are 'multiple, contradictory, fragmented,

⁶ Studies on (queer) sexuality and sexuality in religion in Malaysia and Singapore, *inter alia*, include: Teh, Yik Koon, *The Mak Nyahs: Malaysia Males to Female Transsexuals* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002), a quantitative research on transsexuals (*mak nyahs*) in Malaysia; Ng, Yi-Sheng, *SQ21: Singapore Queers in the 21st Century* (Singapore: Oogachaga Counseling & Support, 2006), on Singapore queers; Ng, King Kang, *The Rainbow Connection: The Internet and the Singapore Gay Community* (Singapore: KangCuBine Publishing, 1999); and National Council of Churches of Singapore, *A Christian Response to Homosexuality* (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2007), on the Christian response to homosexuality.

⁷ Malaysia and Singapore are neighboring nation-states in Southeast Asia. Malaysia's total popu-

incoherent, disciplinary, disunified, unstable, fluid.⁸ The proliferation of identity markers in relation to ethnicity (understood as synonymous with cultures in the context of Malaysia) and religions among the 30 interviewees are: Malay-Muslim (three; one gay and two lesbians), Chinese-Christian (14; eight gay men and six lesbians); Chinese-Buddhist (nine; four gay men and five lesbians), Chinese-non-believer (two; a gay man and lesbian), Chinese-New Age spiritualist and Hindu mystic (one queer: intersex and lesbian). Among the 30 individuals, there are two parents (a gay man and bisexual woman with children from previous heterosexual marriages) and a transgendered (female-to-male transsexual) person. As ‘desiring subjects (i.e. the creation of identities based on desire)’⁹ their bodies, sexualities and lives are sites of contestation where the tensions between their sexualities and spiritualities intersect and are played out.

In this paper, I foreground the dialectical tensions that persist within the peace/conflict binary that are distinct in the spirituality-sexuality nexus of these four narratives of becoming: Peter (a gay Catholic), J and Janic (lesbian Christians) and Stephanie (a Tibetan Buddhist bisexual mother).¹⁰ Through a qualitative data analysis¹¹ of their interview transcripts (among 30), I show how in the first section of this article, peace is defined as the absence of conflict (war). The politics of peace as such, for GLBTQ persons is complying with ‘compulsory heterosexuality’¹² in becoming straight where non-compliance risks being made a social deviant (ideologically) and demonised (spiritually). Where conflict is perceived as the antithesis to peace, GLBTQ persons remain

lation is 27.73 million (in 2008) with a Malay-Muslim majority. See the Department of Statistics Malaysia, available at: <http://www.statistics.gov.my/eng/index.php>, accessed: 5 June 2009. Whilst Singapore’s total population is 4.84 million (in 2008) with a Chinese-Buddhist majority. See Singapore’s Department of Statistics available at: <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/keyind.html#demoind>, accessed: 5 June 2009.

⁸ Gamson, Joshua, “Sexualities, Queer Theory, and Qualitative Research,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd edition), ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks; London and New Delhi: Sage, 2000), 347-365.

⁹ Giffney, Noreen, “Denormatizing Queer Theory: More Than (Simply) Lesbian and Gay Studies,” in *Feminist Theory*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2004): 74.

¹⁰ All names are pseudonyms. As a pre-condition to securing interviewees’ informed consent, I had assured them that no identifying details excepting their sexuality and spirituality would be used in the write-up of this research project.

¹¹ Through a grounded theory methodology, theory is inductively generated from data which in this study comprises textual data (30 interview transcripts). I use a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software called ATLAS.ti as a data analyses tool, essentially working with codes which is the smallest unit of meaning. See Sharon A Bong, “Debunking Myths in CAQDAS Use and Coding in Qualitative Data Analysis: Experiences with and Reflections on Grounded Theory Methodology,” in *Historical Social Research*, ed. Günter Mey and Katja Mruck (Cologne: Center for Historical Social Research, 2007), 258-275, for an in-depth audit trail of the data analyses process.

¹² Adrienne Rich quoted in Dyer, Richard, “Heterosexuality,” in *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. A. Medhurst and Sally R. Munt (London and Washington: Cassell, 1997): 267.

closeted to their families and unquestioning within their faith communities. In the second section, the relational concepts of peace and conflict are re-defined: peace is realised paradoxically through conflict. On the other hand, the politics of peace for GLBTQ persons is resisting 'compulsory heterosexuality' in becoming queer, where they are ostracised and demonised. Where conflict is experienced as the long and narrow route to peace, GLBTQ persons such as Peter, J, Janic and Stephanie¹³, in coming out to their selves, families and faith communities, radicalise what it means to practise faith in recognising the inherent worth of the human person and integrity of other spiritualities. Their embodied narratives of becoming offer an 'epistemology of the broken body'¹⁴ as a site of suffering, resisting and healing. In doing so, they also offer an epistemology of the queer body in making sacred what others consider profane.

Peace as the absence of conflict

To maintain the status quo for peace's sake is both cause and effect of 'compulsory heterosexuality', the normalisation of heterosexuality and by extension, the denigration of homosexuality.¹⁵ Familial and religious institutions serve as vanguards of what Ahmed, a queer theorist, terms as 'the politics of the straight line':¹⁶ they not only naturalise but also make compulsory heterosexuality through offering (worldly and other worldly) rewards for compliance and sanctions against non-compliance. Ideological and doctrinal construction of heterosexuality ironically makes visible rather than masks the process of becoming straight: that one is not born straight, but becomes one,¹⁷ in these secular and sacred families (faith communities). Peace is achieved through the production of straightness when GLBTQ persons not only 'turn toward the objects given to [them] by heterosexual culture,' as Ahmed adds in conceptualising sexual orientation in phenomenological terms, but also 'turn away from objects that take [them] off this line.'¹⁸

Becoming sexually oriented as straight is learning to become desirous of the opposite sex (or heterosexual objects of desire) if one is born male/female and gendered masculine/feminine. One thus forecloses the possibility of being desirous of the same sex (or homosexual objects of desire) in adhering to Butler's ideological 'compulsory order of sex/gender/desire.'¹⁹ Doctrinally, the

¹³ Janic and Stephanie are partners and jointly mother the latter's 11-year old son

¹⁴ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle To Be The Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 104.

¹⁵ Rich quoted in Dyer, "Heterosexuality," 267.

¹⁶ Ahmed, Sara, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," in *GLQ* (Gay Lesbian Quarterly), vol. 12, no. 4 (2006): 555.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 553.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 554.

¹⁹ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London:

'compulsory order of sex/gender/desire' or complementarity of the sexes, is the divinely ordained order of nature: prediscursive (beyond question), objective (unchallengeable), fixed and immutable (unchanging). As such, the production of heterosexuality, as Ahmed says, 'becomes a field, a space that gives ground to, or even grounds, heterosexual action through the renunciation of what it is not, and also by the production of what it is.'²⁰ In other words, becoming straight is constituted not only by what it is—'[turning] toward' (heterosexual) objects of desire that are approved by the family and religious institutions—but also, by what it is not—'[not turning] toward' (homosexual) objects of desire that are disapproved of by the family and religious institutions.

The familial space (in the home and places of worship) becomes the predetermined stage upon which becoming straight is performed. 'Sexual orientations,' as Ahmed adds, 'are also performative: in directing one's desire toward some others, and not other others, bodies in turn acquire their shapes.'²¹ One is not born straight but becomes straight through the repetitive acts of sustaining the foreclosure of being attracted to homosexual objects of desire. The queer subject inhabiting the familial and heteronormative space of a 'straight culture,' attempts to mask his/her desire for homosexual objects to avoid being 'made socially present as a deviant'²² within the home and even spiritually deviant within faith communities. In the name of peace where the binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality is reinforced, the queer subject becomes straight by opting for the straight path (through the discipline of desire) and celibacy (through the repression of desire).

Stephanie, a thirty-something Tibetan Buddhist bisexual woman, "for the sake of peace" remains closeted to her parents, as she says: "I think if I could improve anything, it would be that my parents knew, or rather, my parents accepted because that is my only restriction at the moment...family events that [Sam] (her partner) can't come [to]...or let's say if my dad was ill in hospital and I would go and visit him and she can't come...So I think it's probably inevitable but just for the sake of peace, I just let it be as long as I can."

Within an Asian context in particular, as shown by Stephanie, filial piety often takes the form of fidelity in preserving 'compulsory heterosexuality.'²³ As a bisexual woman, Stephanie passes as straight in consideration of her parents' sensibilities as "they're also very much into face", the antithesis of which is shame. This "restriction" prevents her from openly acknowledging her sexuality, her relationship with Janic and the latter's co-parenting role in her son's life (from a previous heterosexual marriage) on joyous "family events"

Routledge, 1990), 6.

²⁰ Ahmed, "Orientations," 558.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 557.

²² *Ibid.*, 554.

²³ Rich quoted in Dyer, "Heterosexuality," 267.

(festivities) and moments of crisis (hospital visitations, funerals, etc) alike. Deferring the "inevitable" need to come out, despite her intent to "improve" her situation—to make visible her sexuality and relationship—the reward of "[letting] it be" is "peace"—the deferment of familial conflict. Through masking her desire for homosexual objects, the binary of peace/conflict is maintained, which in turn, reinforces not only the binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality (with the latter bringing on loss of "face") but also, the binary of parent/child. She is out to her 11-year old son as a mother but closeted to her parents as a daughter. The assumption of parental non-acceptance—"I think if I could improve anything, it would be that my parents knew, or rather, my parents accepted"—reinstates the complicity of the family in maintaining 'compulsory heterosexuality'.²⁴

Whilst queer subjects like Stephanie passes as straight, her partner Janic, initially took on being celibate as a coping strategy in reconciling her sexuality and spirituality. Becoming lesbian and Christian are deemed ontologically incompatible as these are mutually exclusive subjectivities. As she says: "it took great effort to put the other side of me (her sexuality) on hold". As a Christian missionary in her past, Janic recalls "[trying] to not stir waves" with "many Christian friends whom [she] actually was in the field with...and [who] supported [her in her ministry]". Within the limits of religious tolerance where the exhortation to love the sinner but not the sin prevails, Janic recalls her aged godparents admonishing her: "whatever it is we still love you but this is not acceptable". The repression of desire in being celibate was soon substituted by a regulation of desire, as she says: "it's quite a pity I can't really share what is important to me you know, with them. So maybe I try to not stir waves as well. If I were to go all out (be totally open with them) you know, then maybe I will get more troubles". Like Stephanie, "for the sake of peace", the sanctity of heteronormativity—naturalising and making compulsory heterosexuality—within the home and "field" (an extension of the church) is sustained by disavowing her sexuality. Her compliance with heteronormativity is partial: she did not 'turn toward the objects given to [her] by [both] heterosexual [and homosexual cultures]'.²⁵

Within the spirituality/sexuality nexus, evident in these narratives is the preservation of the binary of sacred/profane²⁶ that accounts for the privileging

²⁴ See Yip, Andrew K. T., "Religion and the Politics of Spirituality/ Sexuality: Reflections on Researching British Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Christians and Muslims." in *Fieldwork in Religion*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2005): 271-289, on problematising 'being-closeted-to-being-out' narratives as a Westernised 'one-dimensional trajectory' in discounting mitigating factors that matter for most Asians such as respect for parents and maintaining family name and honour.

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²⁵ Ahmed, "Orientations," 554.

²⁶ Durkheim quoted in Edwards, Jane, "'Marriage is Sacred': The Religious Right's Arguments Against 'Gay Marriage' in Australia," in *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2007): 254.

of heterosexuality and the concomitant demonising of homosexuality that destabilises the equilibrium of sexual complementarity as society-sanctioned and God-willed. As J, a twenty-something Christian lesbian says, “you’re constantly at war with yourself” in managing the tension between self-castigation and self-acceptance in the struggle to reconcile being queer and a woman of faith. Within the limits of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, the absence of peace in being “constantly at war with yourself” is an effect of daring to make ‘profane’ things (heteronormativity) held ‘sacred’ by others. J, similar to other youth leaders in church interviewed, ingest being morally polluting agents as they are deemed to be and hold back from more meaningful participation in their (mainstream) churches. The pain of having to hide her deep involvement in the gay-friendly church that she is now part of, from her parents, leads J to add: “And they know that I attend this like weekly cell group for women. But they don’t know [laughs] the extent of it. And they don’t know anything about the church or anything that I do for the church which sometimes I feel a bit sad because if it was in a straight church, they’ll be very proud of me. But because I’m not in, in a straight church, then everything that I do will be wrong... even though...I start something for the kids in church, it’s still wrong. So that’s something that I’m still hiding from my parents and I don’t know how long more [laughs] until they find out.”

The refrain of not knowing between parent-child, is marked: “they don’t know [laughs] the extent of it. And they don’t know anything about the church or anything that I do for the church...I don’t know how long more [laughs] until they find out”. Hiding becomes a corollary to ignorance or the refusal to know, where knowing potentially breaks peace in heteronormative spaces within the family and the “straight (synonymous with mainstream) church”. Yet knowing between God as parent and J, as child of God is apparent: she demarcates a “straight church” from the “weekly cell group for women” of the gay-friendly church (which she facilitates with others). J gradually weans herself off the rewards for compliance with ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ where her parents who would “be very proud of [her]” only if her talents were offered in a “straight church”. In becoming queer and Christian, she reclaims the second (de-privileged) category in the binaries of “straight church”/gay-friendly church, peace/conflict and not knowing/known in her daily preparedness to come out to her parents (as she says elsewhere in the interview).

Peace through conflict

In becoming queer, GLBTQ persons show how peace paradoxically becomes the effect of dismantling ‘compulsory heterosexuality.’²⁷ Some familial spaces (within the home and faith communities) become the enviable stage upon which becoming queer is also performed. Becoming queer is un-

²⁷ Rich quoted in Dyer, “Heterosexuality,” 267.

becoming (straight) and making this evident, primarily through coming out to oneself and to others. This significant rite of passage marks the refusal of the queer subject to comply with the 'politics of the straight line':²⁸ in not '[turning] toward the objects given to [them] by heterosexual culture,' and not '[turning] away from objects that take [them] off this line.'²⁹ In daring to do so (in risking worldly and other-worldly sanctions), queer subjects de-stabilise binaries of heterosexuality/homosexuality, sacred/profane and pure/impure by extension, upon which the foundations of being a person and a person of faith are premised on.

J, a twenty-something lesbian Christian, describes her coming out to herself:

So that's when after much thought then I realised that I could come to terms with it. And when you can come to terms with it, that God made you the way you are...you can just feel God like slipping back into your life. And you allow yourself to be used for His purpose. And so that's when I started like setting up Sunday school for the kids. And, you allow yourself to be involved. You don't feel that you're being hypocritical or anything like that. And that's when you actually can feel...happy, pure, purely at peace with yourself. And in all honesty, if you don't feel that it's right, if the guilt is still there, you cannot, never feel that. So that's when you know that the guilt is gone already...obviously it's not something that happens overnight-lah...it can be quite a tough process. Yeah.

Peace for J, is the effect of "[coming] to terms with it"; desiring homosexual objects in being lesbian and desiring God in her life. Coming out for J, marks her coming out of her spiritual wasteland in the early years where she was conflicted in not being able to fully reconcile her sexuality and spirituality in her "walk with God". Her acceptance of self as created in God's image, "that God made you the way you are", contravenes the doctrinal complementarity of the sexes that is the ideological basis of 'compulsory heterosexuality'. In moving from "guilt" which is the prescribed effect of non-compliance with 'compulsory heterosexuality', she receives the gift of happiness for non-compliance with 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Her being "purely at peace with [herself]"; is testament for J that peace is not the antithesis of conflict but rather, borne of it. J, in "[allowing herself] to be used for His purpose", radicalises praxis in destabilising the binaries of heterosexuality/homosexuality, sacred/profane and purity/impurity which is a "tough process" and one that does not "[happen] overnight".

Peace becomes the effect of resisting the pressure not only to inhabit heteronormativity but also to reproduce it, as demanded by most families and

²⁸ Ahmed, "Orientations," 555.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 554.

faith communities. As Ahmed says:³⁰ “Considering the politics of the straight line helps us rethink the relationship between inheritance (the lines that are given as our point of arrival into familial and social space) and reproduction (the demand that we return the gift of the line by extending that line).”

‘Considering the politics of the straight line’ translates in various ways for queer subjects. Firstly, it is to question what is positioned as an ‘objectivist epistemology’:³¹ the unchangeable and unchallengeable body of knowledge (mediated by societal conventions and religious teachings) that underlies ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ and by extension, the sanctity of marriage reserved only for heterosexuals. J affirms her coming out of her almost “wasted” and “ignorant” 20-year “Christian walk with God” where she started to question. In questioning, she risks making profane what others consider sacred. And where questioning is still “taboo”, she not only resists “being told what to do” but also queers theology which borders on sacrilege through her involvement in the women’s cell group (FEM) of the gay-identified church that she belongs to. She says: “FEM taught me to read the Bible...in a very different way where you take into consideration the context...of which the passage has been written. So when you interpret something, you must always remember that, how I am interpreting it is very different from how others are interpreting it. So it’s like, you just suddenly see this whole transformation of how the Bible relates to you. And you don’t feel guilty about it anymore. Yeah. The best thing is when you don’t feel guilt. And you can actually feel God in your life. So that’s like the greatest miracle I guess that has happened.”³²

Queer theologising extends the ‘relationship between inheritance and reproduction’ when you eschew ingesting bodies, sexualities and desires in “black and white” as symptomatic of exclusive categories of normal/ abnormal, chaste/sinful and sacrosanct/shameful. Christian lesbians like J within the radical space of FEM, ‘[return] the gift of the line’ not only by ‘extending that line,’³³ in turning to the Bible as the Word of God but also in offering a queer hermeneutics. In doing so, what is held as inviolate and objectively true, is re-imagined as it is contingent on ‘life experiments’³⁴ of becoming queer and Christian. J, as a woman who loves a woman (she’s in a committed relationship with another lesbian Christian and FEM co-facilitator), resists perpetuating the ‘relationship between inheritance and reproduction’³⁵ of an

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 555.

³¹ Edwards, Jane, “‘Marriage is Sacred’: The Religious Right’s Arguments Against ‘Gay Marriage’ in Australia,” in *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2007): 256.

³² Queer hermeneutics of suspicion are applied to the following six Biblical passages: Leviticus 18:22, 30:13, Genesis 19, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6: 9-10 and 1 Timothy 1: 9-10.

³³ Ahmed, “Orientations,” 555.

³⁴ Weeks *et al.*, *Same Sex Intimacies*.

³⁵ Ahmed, “Orientations,” 555.

'objectivist epistemology' from her parents and pastor.³⁶ Instead, she embraces a 'nominalist perspective'³⁷ and celebrates the living faith of theologising from the lived experiences of the sexually marginalised, including her own. Where she was blind—in "just [taking] whatever that the pastor says as the Word from God"—she now "[sees] this whole transformation of how the Bible relates to [her]"; ironically through questioning what is unquestionable. Where she was lost, she is found in "[feeling] God in [her] life". Where she was shackled, she is now liberated. And this is indeed "the greatest miracle" that has happened in her life.

'Considering the politics of the straight line' for J, secondly, is made manifest by rethinking her unquestioned zeal to proselytise. In considering how wrong she was to convert others, retrospectively, including her Muslim ex-lover, she comes to respecting the integrity of other spiritualities. As she says:

It was something that I suppressed for a very long time from young. I always felt that how can God be so unfair. Like He created other people and...why would their paths be so much more difficult compared to me? Like I've got the easiest path. I got born into a Christian family you know. I don't have to do the whole conversion thing and all that. So it didn't make sense to me that it'll be so unfair to all these other people. And, whereas obviously, I didn't voice it out at all growing up as a Christian. But when I went to [the gay-affirming church], then I started thinking about this issue through. And right now, I'm still thinking about it. I'm still building up upon my confidence in, in this area because it's not an easy thing to believe in. But I feel more, whenever I know that...I'm going the right direction, I will feel at peace with my heart. And this is something that I do feel. So I don't believe that I'm going the wrong direction-lah. I just believe that God shows people different things in different ways.

Being "born into a Christian family" for J, constitutes the "easiest path" as she is by default a Christian and does not "have to do the whole conversion thing". In "thinking about this issue", by questioning the hegemony not only of becoming straight but also becoming Christian (within her home and faith community), she gradually discovers that she is called to a different conversion; that of the heart. Whilst destabilising binaries of straight/queer and Christian/non-Christian is unsettling "because it's not an easy thing to believe in", she "[feels] at peace with [her] heart". Peace becomes an effect of extending the 'relationship between inheritance and reproduction'³⁸ in "[voicing] it out" as an adult Christian where she was silenced "growing up" in her "Christian family".

³⁶ Edwards, "Marriage is Sacred," 256.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 253.

³⁸ Ahmed, "Orientations," 555.

And she ‘[returns] the gift of the line by extending that line’³⁹ by becoming a living witness to the fluidity of God’s grace—who “shows people different things in different ways”—as manifest in the lives of persons, both straight and queer, and persons of faith, beginning with her own.

That she has transformed her faith in self and God within the refuge of the gay-affirming church that she belongs to, is testament to the resilience of a minority of faith communities in transgressing what is deemed to be “taboo” in departing from ‘compulsory heterosexuality’. J’s gay-affirming church as such, departs from being the monolithic institutional vanguard of ‘the politics of the straight line’⁴⁰ by queering the ‘straight line’: it eschews naturalising and making compulsory heterosexuality through not withdrawing rewards for non-compliance or deviation. The construction of homosexuality is made visible through the recognition and loving acceptance (without self-blame and castigation) that one is not born queer, but becomes one, in faith communities.⁴¹ Queer members of the faith community are therefore not mere examples of ‘failed orientation (in becoming straight)’⁴² and merely tolerated. Gay-affirming churches succeed in the production of queerness when its members are able to freely and openly ‘turn toward the objects given to [them] by [homosexual] culture.’⁴³

‘Considering the politics of the straight line’ for J, is “[learning] to accept that it’s OK to not have structure” that is corollary to the dismantling of hierarchies that feed binaries of male/female, straight/queer, Christian/non-Christian and those who lead/those who are led. She adds that, this entails a process of discernment as, “you cannot be too liberal as well. And that is when you have to make a decision for yourself... [because] previously, it’s always like the church that makes the decision for me”. Where queer subjects like J experience the threat of being criminalised (legally) and the ignominy of being infantilised (in hiding from her parents), she is recognised and affirmed as a mature Christian in her church; one who answers the call to “find [her] own balance cause it’s [her] responsibility, with [her] own walk with God”. Ownership of her faith is paramount in her becoming Christian that she translates into action: her resolve to not do unto others what others have done unto her, as she adds: “And I try to get rid of that biasness...because...I mean if you believe that God loves everybody, then God must definitely be in that (mainstream) church as well [both laugh]. But I just can’t feel it. And it’s something that I’m working on still currently. And I’m trying and hoping that one day I can, I can like worship God anywhere basically. And not judge like the people in that church even though

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 555.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 553.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 560.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 554.

they you know, they don't accept me. I shouldn't do the same to them. Yeah."

On the one hand, '[c]onsidering the politics of the straight line' for J, lies in disengaging herself from "that church" which is the church of her parents and where she cannot "feel" the presence of God in. On the other hand, she continues her struggle to "worship God anywhere" including faith communities that are overtly homophobic at worst or tolerant at best. In doing so, she '[returns] the gift of the line by extending that line'⁴⁴ in practising peace: "not [judging] the people in that church even though they...don't accept [her]". She opens up the limits of religious tolerance inherited from her parents where only those who walk the "easiest path" in being straight and Christian, are taken into the fold—where loving the sinner but hating the sin is as good as it gets.

Persons like J who queer 'the straight line' in redefining the 'relationship between inheritance and reproduction',⁴⁵ challenge faith communities to love not only the sinner but also the 'sin' with the moral and political imperative to love and love unconditionally.⁴⁶ In doing so, we realise not only the transformative potential of religion, Christianity in particular, where her narrative is concerned, but also the resilience of the family, in becoming the 'ground of sexual freedom, rather than the *justification* for sexual regulation'⁴⁷ and the actualisation of the GLBTQ person in families and faith communities.

Stephanie's self-identification as a bisexual woman similarly queers 'the straight line' in redefining the 'relationship between inheritance and reproduction'.⁴⁸ Her sexuality is both regulated and celebrated by her newly found fidelity to Tibetan Buddhism as an atheist who had received a Christian education abroad.⁴⁹ As she explains: "I know that [the] Dalai Lama does not condone homosexuality but our Lama (based in Malaysia) believes that it doesn't matter. Sexuality is just an outside; it's like our bodies. What's important is our mind. So whoever you're sleeping with, as long as you don't hurt anybody, i.e. [you commit] sexual misconduct—is one of the vows [that] you take refuge [in]. Sexual misconduct is defined as being unfaithful to your partner, so it's [regardless of] whether [s/he is] male or female, right. So if you're single and if you want to sleep around, that's your prerogative as long [as] you don't hurt people along the way which sounds good to me [laughs]."

Far from an anything goes sexuality, Stephanie is now subject to behavioural

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 555.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 555.

⁴⁶ National Council of Churches of Singapore, *A Christian Response to Homosexuality*.

⁴⁷ Jakobsen, Janet R. and Pelligrini, Ann, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 16.

⁴⁸ Ahmed, "Orientations," 555.

⁴⁹ See Rinpoche, Tsem Tulku, *Nothing Changes, Everything Changes: Living with New Perspectives* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Kechara Media and Publications, 2006), on the ideology and practice of this Malaysian-based strand of Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhists in Malaysia traditionally adhere to Theravada Buddhism.

codes in taking the vow to avoid “sexual misconduct,” which is interpreted as hurting others and not ‘deviant’ sexualities such as “homosexuality” or bisexuality. Paramount to a Tibetan Buddhist, as taught by her spiritual mentor,⁵⁰ is one’s mind, which is substantive, where one’s body, like sexuality, is merely a temporary vessel. As Stephanie explains elsewhere in the interview, “our mind is the most important thing. [Where] Buddhists believe that we reincarnate, the only thing that goes with us is our mind. We can’t take our money, we can’t take our loved ones, we can’t take our children”. In relation to Stephanie, the impermanence of relationships is paralleled by the transience of living—the accumulation of “money”, “loved ones” and “children”—in general. The fulfilment of desire is paradoxically liberated from containment through being contained by the meaning of existence. That this “sounds good to [her]”, an effect of being at peace with herself, marks her willingness to spiritualise her sexuality as a sexual and spiritual other in the context of Malaysia.

Her self-regulated sexuality finds further expression in the “exercise [of] non-attachment [where] you can love completely, [culminating in a] 100 percent love”. As she rationalises: “So if you exercise non-attachment, you will not suffer when that person goes or if the relationship dies. See, a lot of our sufferings actually... [happens] because we cannot have something we want”. So for Stephanie, the paradox of “100 percent love” is actualised through “non-attachment”. In terms of applying this principle of “non-attachment” to her partner Janic, Stephanie candidly comments: “I think it would be sort of emotion fighting logic, you know. I’m quite liberal-minded anyway. In fact I like it when people actually hit on her [laughs]. If we go out and a guy tries to pick her up, I’m thrilled to bits. So I don’t have this jealousy issue anyway. Or if she wanted to kiss somebody, it wouldn’t bother me. I don’t know how I’d feel if she fell in love with somebody else. But again, to apply the Dharma⁵¹ principles ...that would be my way of coping with anything that happens, yeah.”

The fluidity of her bisexuality as a Tibetan Buddhist is manifest in her inhabiting an ambivalent space that straddles “100 percent love” and “non-attachment”, “logic” and “emotion”. Recognising that these are not mutually exclusive categories in becoming both sexual and spiritual, Stephanie concedes their limitations amid the comforts of turning to “Dharma principles” as a coping strategy for suffering the inevitability of pain yet experienced “when [Janic] goes or if the relationship dies”. Yet again, Stephanie’s, “I don’t know how I’d feel [if she fell in love with somebody else]”, resonates with the recurrent refrain of becoming that accompanies her as she expresses herself as follows: “I didn’t

⁵⁰ See McLeod, Stuart, “The Benefits and Pitfalls of the Teacher-Mediator Relationship,” in *Contemporary Buddhism*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2005): 65-78, on the intensity of the teacher-mediator relationship with disciples of Tibetan Buddhism relative to Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions.

⁵¹ ‘Dharma’ literally means ‘Right Conduct’ in attaining happiness (or being freed from suffering which is premised on desire) and bringing benefit to others. See Rinpoche, *Nothing Changes, Everything Changes*, 101.

know I had to be [monogamous for my husband]”, “I knew nobody (when she first realised she was bisexual)”, “I just didn’t know what to do”, “I didn’t know who to talk to” and “I didn’t know what was happening”. So Stephanie’s ways of relating to Janic is “an evolving” one; in transitioning from being “thrilled to bits” to not knowing “how [she’d] feel”.

Spiritualising sexuality is further manifest in “doing Dharma work.” As Stephanie explains: “I’m not a nun. I still like to go out [partying]. And the good thing is that our Guru understands that...He says ... ‘Yes, I know you guys are not going sit there and meditate in a cave’ which is why he tells us to do work ...planning the building or decorating the building, that is Dharma work, instead of sitting there and praying which is not really my thing. So he tries to find ways ...because Buddha gave [us] 84 000 ways of achieving enlightenment, so he finds a way that will make people like us more conducive to practic[ing] Buddhism. But I find that because there are 84 000 ways, we actually have a lot of flexibility. It’s not like it’s either my way or the highway.”

Through applying the Dharma principles “that would be [her] way of coping with anything that happens”, Stephanie’s dedication to her sexuality and spirituality are mutually sustaining (her partner Janic shares this spirituality and Dharma governs their lives together). The diversity of sexualities that she had explored finds parallel expression in the plurality of “84 000 ways of achieving enlightenment” given by Buddha. As such, she is not faced with the limitation of an either/or way of “achieving enlightenment”—either the asceticism of “[sitting] there and [meditating] in a cave” or the worldly engagement of doing “Dharma work”. Where she has the option of both-and “ways of achieving enlightenment” amid the “84 000 ways”, paramount is the exhortation by her Guru to do “[her] thing”. The hierarchical distinction of “nun”/laywoman is ameliorated as she could opt to crossover from laywoman to nun,⁵² as the mutual exclusiveness of these categories remain. As such, the breadth of spiritual praxis offered coheres with the scope of sexualities lived out where routes chosen by Stephanie are liberatory. They elide, to an extent, binary oppositions of “either my way or the highway”. Essentially, ‘Right Conduct’ or Dharma is proliferated through Buddha’s “84,000 ways of achieving enlightenment”. It is a refreshing departure from the edict of either-adhere-or-leave-the-faith of spiritualities, namely Christianity and Islam (as is practised in Malaysia), that overtly condemn homosexuality.

Where sexuality is spiritualised in the above textual analysis, spirituality is also sexualised for Stephanie within Tibetan Buddhism, as she remarks:

⁵² There are religious communities in Buddhism, i.e. nuns and monks and these are hierarchically positioned above laymen and laywomen. On a tangential note, the ordination of Buddhist nuns is a contested one and one that is promulgated by Asian feminist Buddhists. See Falk, Monica Linberg, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Copenhagen, Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2007).

“we actually use sexual energy. But we transform it. So it doesn’t tell you to suppress this energy”. Just as their Lama or Guru is, as Janic, Stephanie’s partner remarks, “fully accepting” of Stephanie and Janic as women who love women, so for lay devotees such as Stephanie and Janic, the mind/body split (as previously alluded to by Stephanie), neither translates to a blanket valorisation of spirituality (as an extension of the mind or rationale), particularly the ascetic variant, nor to a blanket devaluation of “sexual energy” (as an extension of the body or embodied self). Prior to immersing herself in Tibetan Buddhism, Janic, as previously discussed, had to “shelve that part of [her]”, by renouncing her sexuality as a Christian missionary in imposing celibacy upon herself. Happily, now, like Stephanie, Janic is more fully reconciled with her sexuality and spirituality. Rather than “suppress” one or the other, “sexual energy” is transformed into the daily practice of “non-attachment”. For Stephanie, becoming sexual and spiritual are mutually inclusive states, for she draws upon her spirituality to sustain her self-regulated desire for monogamy. As she quips: “karma’s going to bite you in the ass. You better behave yourself...I wish I could have a karma holiday”. For Stephanie, the spiritual/sexual binary is deferred as sexuality which is spiritualised, and spirituality which is sexualised, in becoming bisexual as a Tibetan Buddhist.

For both Stephanie and Janic, as Tibetan Buddhist bisexual and lesbian, they queer the ‘straight line’ or heteronormativity in redefining the ‘relationship between inheritance and reproduction.’⁵³ They do so by challenging their faith community of Tibetan Buddhists to accept indeed embrace their differences. They regulate their desires for each other by restraining their mutual affection for one another for Stephanie’s son’s sake. Yet they also celebrate their bodies and sexualities as one of Buddha’s “84,000 ways of achieving enlightenment”. Within these public/private spaces that are both familial and sacred, they exemplify the resilience of being and doing family—in being closeted to their parents (for the sake of peace) yet out to their son. In doing so, they show how sexuality can be spiritualised and spirituality sexualised.

Towards An Epistemology Of The Body

“Am I gay... and that was just after 9/11 actually...where people were starting to think better do something, what is life all about”.

Peace rests on a continuum with conflict, and in the case of Peter, a forty-something Catholic gay man on coming out late to himself—already married with two kids—with war, on the cataclysmic scale of 9/11. The terrorist act of 9/11 affords the violent backdrop against which Peter comes to terms with how peace had been the absence of conflict for him. Maintaining the status

⁵³ Ahmed, “Orientations,” 555.

quo in staying married when he had come out to himself is both cause and effect of Peter's compliance with 'compulsory heterosexuality';⁵⁴ further reinforced by the Catholic Church's injunction against severing the holy bonds of matrimony. Getting a divorce for Peter and his wife, both Catholics, was as painful as continuing to inhabit a passionless marriage. Becoming queer for Peter ("Am I gay?"), is paradoxically through becoming straight, strikingly precipitated by his questioning "what is life all about". "[Doing] something" about it, in response to the call to action that comes from within, led him to eventually initiate divorce proceedings.

In becoming queer, GLBTQ persons like Stephanie, Janic, J and Peter, show how peace paradoxically becomes the effect of dismantling 'compulsory heterosexuality'.⁵⁵ 'Considering the politics of the straight line [in rethinking] the relationship between inheritance and reproduction'⁵⁶ for these GLBTQ persons, show us how the reward for non-compliance with 'compulsory heterosexuality'—the 'straight line' ideologically and doctrinally inherited from their families and faith communities—is peace. As Janic says in view of her life-long struggle to reconcile their sexuality and spirituality as a former Christian missionary; "to slowly integrate that...and look at it in [the] eye you know, it took a while...before I totally felt...totally at peace". To "look at it in [the] eye" demands courage and fortitude in making 'profane' what others deem 'sacred'. That this is not a romanticised call to dissent for its own sake is evident in the painful narratives of becoming elucidated above that afford an '*epistemology from the broken body*';⁵⁷ bodies that suffer, resist and heal, in memory of Christ's broken body at the cross of redemptive suffering. This knowledge and praxis—the moral and political imperative to love and love unconditionally—find expression in upholding not only the inherent worth of the human person, but also, essentially, the integrity of sexualities and spiritualities.

GLBTQ persons like Stephanie, Janic, J and Peter show us how religion can become the 'ground of sexual freedom, rather than the justification for sexual regulation',⁵⁸ as persons of faith. For Peter, he looks to his Catholic faith as a wellspring from which he is nourished, where for him, there is no disjunction between his sexuality and faith. In asserting "what is so blessed about the oppressed" including sexual minorities, he says:

I think from a faith perspective...if the core of Christianity is following Jesus and if you look at the person of Jesus who fights, who actually was one with those who are marginalized and then was killed because of that, in a way...being one with the marginalized group itself is a faith

⁵⁴ Rich quoted in Dyer, "Heterosexuality," 267.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Ahmed, "Orientations," 555.

⁵⁷ Chung, *Struggle To Be The Sun Again*, 104.

⁵⁸ Jakobsen and Pelligrini, *Love the Sin*, 16.

experience. And...wanting to change...for a better world, for equality... so questioning the status quo. So these would...be in consistent with the values of Jesus, I think...[also] questioning the church's teachings about sexuality is helpful because it...[digs] to the very core of what faith is, to help people to really understand what the Bible actually is rather than what people say it is. And to link it to real life... [and] you have to understand what love is.

The “faith experience” of GLBTQ persons serves as the standpoint from which an ‘epistemology of the sacred body’ is theorised and theologised. Their knowledge integrates a queering of hermeneutics of the Word of God and Tibetan Buddhist Lama (view from above) and the ways in which they, as Peter puts it, “link it to real life” (view from below). They are accorded epistemic privilege⁵⁹ as subjects who know because they do: they “[question] the status quo...[that is] consistent with the values of Jesus [and Buddha through the Lama’s teaching and living example]”. In doing so, they offer knowledge that is situated in lived experiences of marginality in the home and faith communities. This knowledge, ways of knowing and becoming that negotiate the tension within the peace/conflict binary in their everyday lives goes beyond meta-narratives of Truth that have become complicit with preserving ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ as divinely ordained and culturally normal. Where becoming Christian as gay and lesbian is a life-long struggle to better “understand what love is,” becoming a Tibetan Buddhist as a bisexual, is a life devoted to Dharma or ‘Right Conduct’.

These narratives of becoming show how peace is an absence of conflict, where GLBTQs such as Stephanie, J, Janic and Peter comply with ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, for the sake of peace and family name (face). These narratives of becoming also show how peace is realised paradoxically through conflict in offering a living and liberating praxis of love, peace and hope for themselves and those whose lives they touch. They make profane what others hold as sacred in subverting the inviolability of heteronormativity and by extension, heterosexism (the discrimination of the sexual other). In doing so, they inadvertently make sacred what others hold as profane—the queer body. Through their fidelity to their bodily integrity, they become the embodiment of the sacred and persons

⁵⁹ I draw from feminist standpoint epistemologies, such as: Brah, Avtar, “Difference, Diversity and Differentiation,” in *Race, Culture and Difference*, ed. James Donald and Ali Rattansi (Open University London: Sage, 1992), 126-145; Collins, Patricia Hill, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Cambridge: Massachusetts: Unwin Hyman, 1990); Haraway, Donna J., “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 183-201; Harding, Sandra, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is “Strong Objectivity?,” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 49-82; Hartsock, Nancy, *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays* (Boulder, Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press, 1998).

capable of attaining enlightenment. Essentially, they not only offer a re-visioning of sexuality in spirituality but also spirituality in sexuality.

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