QUEERING MADHYAMAKA

Nāgārjuna and the Post-queer Dialectic

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Applied Buddhist Studies)

Nan Tien Institute

Australia

January 2018

DECLARATION / STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I affirm that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to demonstrate how aspects of Madhyamaka Buddhism may be a useful tool to Queer Theorists. Queer Theory claims that distinctions such as gender and sexuality, as well as the essentialist identities they produce, are problematic social constructs which are temporary and transient, having no inherent reality. However, critics accuse it of subverting identity politics, erasing the hard-fought-for identity of LGBTIQ people; thus, it is often charged with nihilism. On the other hand, Madhyamaka Buddhism emphasised a 'middle way' between essentialism and nihilism, a non-acceptance of the two extremes of existence and non-existence. All phenomena, therefore, being devoid of an intrinsic nature are dependently co-arisen, the basis of its understanding of *śūnyatā* (emptiness), the 'things' we perceive as real having a conceptual and conventional existence only. It is this philosophical approach I offer to Queer Theorists forming the possible basis of a Madhyamaka-inspired Post-queer Theory.

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Introduction and Methodology

To the outsider, Queer Theory and the metaphysics of the Buddhist Madhyamaka tradition share a form of words and philosophical ideas which appear, at a brief glance, to be remarkably similar. This has not gone unnoticed in the halls of academia, so naturally scholarly interest has arisen in the contrast and comparison of these two philosophical systems. Such studies are still very much in their infancy and are to date somewhat sketchy.[1] Therefore, my thesis is designed to address this lacuna, presenting a dialogical space between these two philosophical theories.

In the early 1990s Queer Theory grew out of feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, and Postmodern thought. In contrast, the Madhyamaka school of Buddhist philosophy is based on the foundational teachings attributed to Nāgārjuna (c.150-250 CE), a south Indian monk and philosopher, some 1,800 years ago. He is considered perhaps the most important figure ever to have existed in Buddhist philosophy.

As a dialogical space, my thesis will be offered as an exercise in mutual speaking and listening, a hermeneutical and historical investigation, together with thoughtful analysis and comparison. Within this pedagogical space, I will compare both Nāgārjuna's understanding of *śūnyatā* (emptiness), and his two truths theory, with Queer Theory's critical approach to sexuality and gender: a theory which challenges what many modern western societies consider 'normal' or 'natural.' The method I propose to use in this dialogical encounter is best summarised by the words of Bernstein (1991, p.337):

> One begins with the assumption that the other has something to say to us and to contribute to our understanding. The initial task is to grasp the other's position in the strongest possible light. One must always be responsive to what the other is saying and showing … There is a play, and to-and-fro movement in dialogic encounter, a seeking for a common ground in which we can understand our differences. The other is not an adversary or an opponent but a conversational partner.

As an aspect of dialogue involves comparison, Collier (1993, p. 105) reminds us that:

> Comparison is a fundamental tool of analysis. It sharpens our power of description, and plays a central role in concept-formation by bringing into focus suggestive similarities and contrasts among cases. Comparison is routinely used in testing hypotheses, and it can contribute to the inductive discovery of new hypotheses and to theory-building.

Collier (1993, p.108) also cites the work of Skocpol and Somers (1980) who argue that one of the goals of comparative study is the 'parallel demonstration of theory. The use of comparison plays an important role in the process through which theories are developed.'

[1] See Corless, R (2004): this work attempts a queer dharmology based on a gay subject-subject consciousness, rather than a hetero subject-object consciousness, claiming that Buddhism itself is queer; also, Scherer, B (2017).

Clearly a thesis such as this will work predominately as an attempted juxtaposition of Queer Theory and elements of Nāgārjuna's teachings. The idea of a dialogical 'space' rather than a dialogue 'encounter' is more expansive by nature, suggestive of somewhere to go back to, somewhere to inhabit, and a space that can be built upon and enlarged. As Queer Theory moves beyond issues of sexuality and gender into other contemporary issues,[2] I consider this study a starting point for further enquiry, and not an end in itself.

Additionally, Shor (1992) speaks of a dialogical space as a 'third idiom' (p. 237), a 'learning space' (p. 203) that nurtures a mutual correlation, and a 'mutual reinvention' (p. 203), best described as a 'developmental borderland' (p. 204). In preparing for this process, notwithstanding areas of difference or incommensurability, the thesis will attempt to present the strengths of each discipline, and in the process, attempt to give voice to a new 'conjunction' of ideas and theories I will call, drawing on the work of David Ruffolo (2009), a 'Madhyamaka-inspired Post-queer Theory.' This will require a rethinking of what it means to live and identify as a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Questioning or Queer (LGBTIQ) person, but also as any individual regardless of sexual or gender identity living in the twenty-first century, particularly in view of the unjust circumstances which still remain in our world and the undue suffering they cause.

My interest in imagining a 'third idiom' or 'learning space' between Queer Theory and Nāgārjuna's teachings lies in the modern compulsion for the dialectic of the self (i.e., the discourses which exist around the problem of being a human being and how to live out a human life, involving discussions around the relationship between self and society and the relationship between personal and social transformation).[3] I identify as LGBTIQ, informed to some extent by Queer Theory, but also by modern identity politics,[4] and the possibilities offered through Madhyamaka metaphysics. Together, they provide a means for understanding my own human existence, the causes of my own suffering, and for me provide the conditions to create a personal 'culture of awakening.' This in turn, in my own view, is not just for my own personal benefit, but is presented here as an act of *karuṇā* (compassion), offered as a new philosophical approach, an insight into relieving the suffering of others, particularly those who identify as LGBTIQ.

[2] Cheng (2015, pp. 164-166) lists other areas of Queer Theory studies: (1) queer of colour critique; (2) queer post-colonial theory; (3) queer psychoanalytical discourse; (4) queer temporality; (5) queer disability studies; and (6) queer interfaith dialogue.' Queer Theory has also been subsumed into Queer Theology in the Christian traditions, Cheng (2011) being a leading author in this field. For him, Queer Theology, as a transgressive approach to talk about God, (p.29 of 249) 'erases boundaries by challenging and deconstructing the "natural" binary categories of sexual and gender identity,' thereby questioning societal norms and arguing that these are mere social constructs.

[3] Dialetical method is a discourse between two or more people holding differing points of view or meaning but wish to establish the truth through reasoned arguments.

[4] The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016) explains: 'The laden phrase "identity politics" has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination.'

This thesis will briefly map the development of Queer Theory, tracing its origins in Post-modern thought, particularly in the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984). His interest in Eastern religion has invited comparisons between his work and those of Madhyamaka philosophy (the Mādhyamikas), thus establishing the possible genesis and correlation of his philosophical ideas and parallel theories. Then I will undertake a short analysis and critique of Queer Theory through the pioneering work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1950-2009) and Judith Butler (1956-) who were inspired by the work of Foucault. Having presented the main tenets of Queer Theory, identifying some of its shortfalls as highlighted by its main critics, I will then turn to an examination of Nāgārjuna's philosophy of the middle way, in particular using the foundational text of the Madhyamaka school of Indian Buddhist philosophy known as the *Mūla-madhyamakakārikā* (MMK). A study of key verses from Chapter 15 of this text will establish his correlation between *śūnyatā* (emptiness), *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent co-arising), and *prajñāpti* (convention, i.e., designation). A study of key verses from Chapter 24 will also establish Nāgārjuna's understanding of reality, based as it is on the doctrine of two truths, *saṃvṛti-satya* (conventional truth/reality) and *paramārtha-satya* (ultimate truth/reality), and the relationship between the two. It is my premise that by focusing on this text in particular, and Nāgārjuna's theories contained therein, I can establish the necessary specifics to address the critical analysis of Queer Theory.

The final part of the thesis will create the dialogical space and developmental borderland necessary to create a 'Madhyamaka-inspired Post-queer Theory.' I believe this new hybrid space can potentially illuminate my own spiritual practice and dialectic of the self, sustaining hope for the future and enabling a life free from harmful self-doubt and unnecessary suffering.

Post-modern and Foucauldian Thought

The first part of this study, will look at the development of Queer Theory through Post-modern and Foucauldian thought, in the process examining briefly the work of Wicking (2011) whose doctoral thesis examined the possible influence of Mādhyamika Buddhist philosophy upon Foucault's thinking. Wicking's pioneering findings, while outside the scope of this study, certainly deserve further attention in the Academy. They are presented here as they prompt a number of worthwhile questions for this thesis.

The 1960s, a decade of great social change in the West, saw the advent of 'Post-modernism,' a broad movement that began to develop across the arts, architecture, literary criticism and philosophy. However, it was not until the late 1970s that the movement came into its own. It is generally defined as a 'post-structuralist' and 'deconstructionist' movement largely suspicious of scientific certainty or objective efforts to explain reality. The prefix 'post' in Post-modernism refers to a reaction to the modernist movement, which held to the existence of unquestionable truths in the fields of science, philosophy and religion. Instead, Post-modernists are highly sceptical of any truth which claims validity for all individuals, groups, cultures or races. They typically reject grand narratives, ideologies, absolute truth and objective reality, asserting that any claim to knowledge and truth is conditioned by social, political, historical discourses. Such claims are therefore seen as contextual and socially constructed. Ironically, if Post-modernist scepticism places all truths under scrutiny, it must accept that even its own principles are not beyond questioning.

Interestingly, although he rejected the term 'Post-modern' to describe his own work (preferring to present his ideas as a critical assessment of modernity), Foucault is considered one of the best-known exponents of this movement. In his later work, he became interested in the relationship between knowledge and power, thus questioning the idea of any universal truth. What was assumed to be 'true' was for Foucault highly dependent on the language used by the society in which it was considered to be valid. In 1960 Foucault completed his *thèse principale* for his doctorate; in it he was able to illustrate this phenomenon by analysing the history of insanity and how different societies perceived the insane; the concept of 'insanity' itself was for him a social construct. This was illustrated by a comparison of various psychiatric disorders and their corresponding treatments throughout history. Insanity, he concluded, did not exist as a medical condition in its own right but was merely contingent upon social attitudes at a particular point in history. Thus, whether a person is insane or not, was for Foucault contingent upon the power structures of the society that person found themselves within.

His findings are summarised by Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010, p. 92):

> Truth is not to be considered in terms of a correspondence between a particular theory or idea on the one hand and an 'objective reality' on the other hand, but is constructed by institutions and social groups that have the power to 'define' particular ideas as true or not. Conceptions of truth are not necessary but relative: a specific form of knowledge which is true in a particular time or under specific social conditions can, depending on changing circumstances, be replaced by other forms of knowledge.

Oliver (2010) has reflected on the legacy left by Foucault on Post-modern thought: at one end of the spectrum there are those who attempt to explain the world in terms of broad all-embracing concepts and truths (as in the modernists), and at the other end there are those like Foucault who point out the flaws in such modernist theories as simplistic and futile. The former is an attempt to understand and interpret our surroundings and our place within it, and the latter is designed to ground us in a more realistic approach to the workings of society, the mechanics of power, and the effect this has on the individual living within it. Oliver (2010, p. 169) asks which is better, and concludes that perhaps it is neither. He writes:

> We may need both, on the grounds that the world is simply too complex to understand within a single social model or perspective. Perhaps the contribution of Michel Foucault is that he gave us an alternative vision: something to balance the sweeping schemes of the macro-theorists. That is no small gift.

Foucault and Madhyamaka Philosophy

Wicking (2011) has undertaken a study examining the relationship and correlation between Foucauldian ideas and *Madhyamaka* Buddhist teachings. Reading a number of rarely cited materials he discovered (p.45):

> Foucault's personal interest in Japan and Zen Buddhism documented by a series of relatively neglected secondary texts - namely interviews, speeches and newspaper articles - originally published in Japanese, Italian and French, which record Foucault's ventures in Japan over the period 1978-9.

Eribon (1991, p. 301), commenting on Foucault's visits to Japan, noted that on occasion he lived the life of a Zen monk, and that his conversations with the priests of the temple were subsequently published. However, Wicking (2011, p. 46) notes that previous scholarship has revealed that at that time a stated desire of Foucault to commence a research project with Asian scholars on Christianity, Confucianism and Zen Buddhism never came to fruition. He also believed that after his visit to Japan, any direct contact between Foucault and Buddhism ceased.

Despite evidence to the contrary, certain scholars have suggested and speculated about direct Mādhyamika Buddhist influence upon Foucault. Mishra (2004, p. 417ff) writes that:

> Michel Foucault was very deeply interested in Buddhist philosophy and felt that a philosophy of the future could only come out of the non-western world or be born in consequence of meetings and impacts between Europe and non-Europe.

Furthermore, Schaub (1989, p. 108) argued that Foucault appropriated 'Oriental lore in opposition to Western strategies of control.' However, this was questioned by Carrette (1999, p. 40):

> Schaub has gone as far as to argue that there is an Oriental subtext in Foucault's work, and that a correspondence can be established between Foucault's early writing and Oriental concepts, such as those in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition of Nagarjuna … and perhaps minor strands of Eastern thinking do emerge … but we need to be critical of the Orientalist assumption behind such tropes.

Despite such reservations, Carrette (1999) recognises similarities between Foucauldian thought and Nāgārjuna's teachings, and acknowledges Foucault's peripheral interest in Eastern religion.

Nonetheless, Wicking (2011), citing former works (Mrozik, S (2004); Konik, A (2009); Voyce, M (2009)) concerned with examining aspects of Buddhism through a Foucauldian lens, builds on the strength of this scholarship, but importantly 'departs from [them] in a significant way to argue a deeper substantive common ground between Foucauldian and Mādhyamika Buddhist thought' (p.1).

Wicking's hypothesis is that Foucault's brief encounter with Zen Buddhism was in part initiated by his disenchantment with Western ways of knowing, and that 'to trace this development might be to understand a point of affinity between the two domains' (p. 239). Foucault's turning away from Western metaphysics and its concept of the Other, i.e. the 'dismantling of the metaphysics of the subject' (p. 241) has led Wicking 'to an appreciation of a broad affinity between his line of inquiry and Buddhism' (p. 241). Wicking falls short of saying that Foucault was directly influenced by Madhyamaka teachings, as any direct evidence is scant, but it could be said that we see in the writings of Foucault the beginnings of certain parallels and the correlation of ideas in the demonstration of their respective theories. Nonetheless, Wicking (2011, p. 233) though does believe that:

> It could be argued that Buddhism is especially sensitive to the postmodern cultural shift which emphasises attention away from individual 'inner' structures and towards discursive processes between individuals.

Moreover, it is precisely this shift towards a contextualised view which Foucault has analysed in his work. Wicking (2011, p. 233) is convinced that this is:

> very much in line with the postmodern condition which itself warrants that traditions distant from each other in space and in time may blend and emerge in new understandings …. [and that] it could be argued that these political and social dimensions are simply different aspects, new articulated aspects, of the Buddhist soteriological 'project.'

Wicking (2011, p. 233) concludes that:

> *Mādhyamika* philosophy has the potential to be a valuable conceptual tool, for different purposes and different audiences. In recent years scholars in fields as diverse as cognitive science, women's studies and integral studies, although each pursuing different agendas, has [*sic*] turned to the resources *Madhyamaka* Buddhism has to offer to help push scholarly understanding on questions of self and embodiment.

Notwithstanding the substantive common ground identified here between Foucauldian and Madhyamaka Buddhist thought, it is the potential of Nāgārjuna's teachings 'to be a valuable conceptual tool' in field of Queer Theory that is of considerably more interest to this thesis.

Queer Theory

Queer Theory grew out of feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, and Post-modern thought;[5] the term itself was first coined by Teresa de Lauretis in the journal *Differences* (1991).[6] Like Madhyamaka thought, Queer Theory is a concept difficult to pin down and define because it is not a unified body of work and by its very nature it is constantly in a state of evolutionary flux and change. Cheng (2015, p. 154) points out that because it is 'a critical methodology that challenges the stability of identities (including sexual and gender identities), it resists attempts to reduce itself to an 'essence' or a core definition.'

The word 'queer,' as used in the term Queer Theory, was reclaimed from its later history as a term of abuse: a term particularly directed towards homosexual men by the late nineteenth century. The word 'queer' in the English language dates back to the sixteenth century and is related to the German *quer*, which means 'across,' 'at right angle,' 'diagonally' or 'transverse.'[7] It commonly meant something strange, unusual, out of alignment or askew. Although some LGBTIQ people avoid the word 'queer,' due to its former derogatory connotations, increasingly it has been used as a positive label because it embraces a transgressive approach to politics.

Cheng (2011, p. 24) points out that the term 'queer' is best understood as a verb or an action, noting that:

> to "queer" something is to engage with a methodology that challenges and disrupts the status quo … to "queer" something is to turn convention and authority on its head. It is about seeing things in a different light and reclaiming voices and sources that previously had been ignored, silenced, or discarded.

Inspired by the work of Foucault, and the 'queer' program which 'challenges and disrupts,' a new breed of 'queer' philosopher emerged. Sedgwick (1990), a pioneer of Queer Theory, questioned western culture's preoccupation with the construction and control of 'normative' sexual identities. Sedgwick (1990, p. 1) argued that modern western culture was not only incomplete, 'but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition.'

[5] For an overview of Queer Theory's origins and development see Wilchins, R (2004); Jagose, A (1996).
[6] See Cheng (2015, p. 156): 'Queer theory differs from gay and lesbian studies to the extent that the latter discipline treats the identity of 'gay' and 'lesbian' as a given and becomes the focal point for reflections about marginalised or non-normative sexualities. Gay and lesbian studies reflect the traditional ethnic studies model of thinking about race, and the contemporary LGBTI-rights movement has adopted such a model in arguing for LGBTI civil rights based upon immutable characteristics. Queerness by contrast, resists and challenges this essentialist way of thinking about sexual and gender identities.'
[7] See Oxford English Dictionary (2002).

Following the work of Foucault in his *The history of sexuality, vol.1, an introduction* (1990, p. 105), who understood sexuality not as 'a kind of natural given' but rather 'a historical construct,' Sedgwick rejected the binary construction of humanity into heterosexual or homosexual. Butler (1990), also drawing on the work of Foucault, examined the workings of gender, an area of enquiry lacking in his studies, arguing that gender, like sexual orientation, was not an essential truth derived from the matter of the human body, rather it was a regulatory fiction. Butler (1990, p. 33) noted that gender amounted to 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.' Sedgwick and Butler, therefore, rejected the essentialist view of sexuality and gender. As Queer theorists, they questioned the very notion of fixed sexual and gender identity.

Although Queer Theory was originally confined to the critique of normativity around gender and sexual orientation, as its body of literature developed, it eventually turned its attention to any order of difference which participated in heteronormativity,[8] rendering all social distinctions problematic: gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, nationality, disability, etc. and the identities they produce. In so doing, Queer theorists enquire into how these various categories of difference alter and transform one another. It is an approach that considers, in the words of Harper (1997, p. 24), 'all the disparate factors comprised in the registration of various social identities and in the adjudication against the standard of social normativity.' The object of Queer Theory, therefore, is to relativize and deconstruct these identities in order to show how ultimately they are meaningless because they only have form and validity in relation to a given socio-cultural context. It maintains all socio-cultural contexts are temporary and transient, and therefore there is no ultimate reality in any of the social category definitions and identities they create. Such thinking maintains a mode of critique and a subsequent political activism that insists on continually questioning society's 'norms' and anything that society constructs as a 'natural' given.

Although constant questioning and critiquing of society's 'norms' and 'givens' might be seen as a purely negative or reactive project, Halperin (1995, pp. 66-67) also points out its positive connotations for the LGBTIQ community:

> Resistance to normativity is not purely negative or reactive or destructive; it is also positive and dynamic and creative. It is by resisting the discursive and institutional practices which, in their scattered and diffuse functioning, contribute to the operation of heteronormativity that queer identities can open a social space for the construction of different identities, for the elaboration of various types of relationships, for the development of new cultural forms.

[8] Generally speaking, heteronormativity is a term that assumes that either everyone is heterosexual or that everyone ought to confirm to the dominant heterosexual 'identity.' Therefore a 'heteronormative' view involves an alignment between one's biological sex, sexuality, gender identity and gender roles. It is also often linked to heterosexism and homophobia. It can also contain the notion that everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender, must conform to a 'compulsory heterosexuality.'

However, I propose a caveat: while resistance to normativity can certainly be creative and constructive, there is an all-too-common mistake LGBTIQ people often fall into. Moving away from heteronormativity, can result in its replacement with homonormativity,[9] thus exchanging one oppressive identity potentially with yet another.

Like any theory, Queer Theory is not without its critics. Stuart (2003, p. 103) accuses it of 'patriarchal terrorism boring its way into gender politics and erasing the hard-fought identities of women and gay men in the name of liberation.'

The Queer Theorist's commitment to deconstruction, therefore, can make it difficult to speak of a gay or lesbian subject, since all social categories are denaturalised and reduced to discourse. Adam (2000) suggests that sexual identity categories, such as 'gay' can have the effect of expanding the horizon of what is imaginable in a same-sex relationship, including a richer sense of the possibilities of same-sex love and dyadic commitment. Other critics such as Green (2000) call into question the degree to which identity categories need be thought of as negative and the right of an individual to self-determination. He also argues that Queer Theory ignores to its detriment the social and institutional conditions within which lesbians and gays live. Jeffreys (2003, p. 3) has asked, where do women go if we transform the discourse from feminism to queer? If gender is nothing more than a performance, adopted or changed at will, then the edge is taken off feminist politics, also a key issue in feminist debates about the place of trans people in women's spaces. Indeed, if we can say this about women, certainly it applies also to LGBTIQ people in general.

Queer Theory, therefore, is seen by its critics as obscure and inadequate to serve the activist agenda, apparently stripping LGBTIQ people of the very identity they have spent their life fighting for. It is in this sense that Queer Theory, like some forms of Buddhism, is often charged with nihilism, and thus rendered politically ineffective. Undoubtedly this has led some like Ruffolo (2009) to reflect that Queer Theory has reached its peak and is now at the end of the line.

Ruffolo (2009, p. 167) has highlighted how 'contemporary notions of queer have in many ways reached a political peak because of an interest in identity politics and more specifically heteronormativity.' Furthermore, he refers to Queer Theory as 'stagnant,' 'dormant,' 'solidified,' and 'stale.' He therefore offers the potential for a new 'post-queer' movement in the following terms (p. 167):

> The vision of post-queer is to make new theoretical, philosophical, and practical connections that move away from Western and Eurocentric discourses of queer that are in many respects unable to account for the underbelly of neoliberal and global politics.

[9] Homonormativity refers to the conforming to a type or standard that is rendered 'normal' for LGBTIQ people. Such 'norms' have expectations and create stereotypes which can be detrimental both emotionally and psychologically. One can also question whether homonormativity is merely a pink bourgeois copy of heteronormativity, with the pink dollar, the adoption of marriage, monogamy, property, and respectability, i.e., the transformation of LGBTIQ into a form of ethnicity to fit within the voraciously inclusive capitalist market. Both homonormativity and heteronormativity create a 'normalcy' for both communities in society, which has the potential to create an artificial 'them-and-us' mentality.

Ruffolo states that he is not suggesting the end of queer or an 'after queer' but (p.167) 'a new flow of production that emerges out of the limitations of contemporary queer politics.' He makes an interesting point that modern life has become more controlled through the complexities of contemporary politics and the mechanisms of information technologies and access to them. Therefore he writes (p.167): 'Post-Queer offers new ways to think about life and how life is played out in the realm of control societies that dividualize rather than individualize bodies through virtual productivities …'

Of interest to this study is Ruffolo's research which highlights the hetero-productive nature of much modern LGBTIQ identity politics. We see this in recent debates in most Western countries over marriage equality which show a remarkable interest in heteronormativity. It is the LGBTIQ desire of some to buy into heteronormative discourses which has perhaps led to Queer Theory's potential redundancy. This current proclivity of major elements of the LGBTIQ community, I believe merely replaces one identity with another, both being problematic as they are based on unstable socio-political constructs.

Identity and the compulsion for the dialectic of the self go to the very core of the human condition. In Buddhist terms, one of the three major elements of the human experience is defined by the Sanskrit word *duḥkha* (usually translated as suffering). It is this awareness of human suffering and the path to its cessation, which lies at the core of the Buddha's teachings. Presented in the form of a medical diagnosis, referred to as the *cattāri ariyasaccāni* (the Four Noble Truths), they include an examination, a prognosis, and a treatment plan; thus the Buddha is often referred to as a healer. The Four Noble Truths can be summed up in just four Sanskrit words: *duḥkha, tṛṣṇā, nirvāṇa* and *mārga.*

Duḥkha might be best defined, no so much as 'suffering,' but 'as a state of being which is always askew,' By a strange etymological coincidence, this translation of the term harks back to the derivation of queer mentioned above (from the German '*quer*' also meaning askew). *Tṛṣṇā* (literally 'thirst') can be named as the 'cause' here, the cause of our *duḥkha* being *tṛṣṇā* (thirst, craving or attachment). *Avidyā* is a Sanskrit word which describes our ignorance of such things, while *nirvāṇa* is the moment when *duḥkha* is finally ended. *Mārga* is the path leading to *nirvāṇa*, which is broken into a series of constituent parts, known as the *āryāṣṭānga-mārga* (the Eightfold Path),[10] whose main themes include the cultivation of wisdom, virtue and meditation: the path of a Buddhist practitioner.

Most certainly, the object of Buddhist practice is to reduce one's *duḥkha*, and ultimately to eliminate it altogether: the Buddhist critique radically disestablishes any views about the existence of an identity which goes to the very core of our identities as human beings. Nāgārjuna's philosophy of the middle way, based on the teachings of the Buddha, addresses the human condition, and examines the arising of suffering through erroneous attachment to an identity which is based on ignorance. Such a focus on

[10] The Noble Eightfold Path is often represented by a Dharma Wheel with eight spokes, each representing an element of the way: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

ignorance flies in the face of contemporary identity politics, particularly that which places an over-emphasis upon gender and sexuality which are ‘an artefact of cultural processes’ (Halperin, 1990, p. 53) and display an ‘interest in heteronormativity’ (Ruffolo, 2009, p. 1). To address these concerns, it is to the teachings of Nāgārjuna that we now turn.

Nāgārjuna and his Philosophy of the Middle Way

For the next section of the thesis, I will undertake an overview of relevant elements of Nāgārjuna's teachings, confining myself to the *Mūla-madhyamakakārikā* (MMK), attributed with his authorship around 150 CE. It is a foundational text of the Madhyamaka school of Indian Buddhist philosophy; there being scholarly consensus that this is a fundamental source for Nāgārjuna's teachings.[11] In my view, and within the limits of this study, its core teachings serve the dialogical space of this thesis, providing material to address some of the difficulties critics of Queer Theory have raised, particularly in light of Halperin's (1990, p. 53) comments that one cannot easily 'walk away from [one's] socialization and acquire a new cultural (or sexual) identity.' My own criticism of Queer Theory is that it does not often positively acknowledge (if at all) an identity, no matter what cultural forms it may acquire, thus concluding that as a theory, it is not adequately able to deal with personal identity and where people stand in their political and cultural struggles. While Nāgārjuna is a difficult philosopher to interpret, thus giving rise to a plethora of material in the Mahāyāna tradition interpreting his somewhat paradoxical, sometimes cryptic, and apparently contradictory views, I do believe that some of his thinking can help Queer Theory avoid leading people down the proverbial 'gang plank' with nowhere to jump. Queer Theory certainly needs a better handle on the conventional reality of identity (i.e., as experienced), one which can illuminate personal ethical and spiritual understandings, and, as this is to some extent also an autobiographical project, help me lead a life free from harmful self-doubt and unnecessary suffering.

Western philosophers traditionally saw the need for uniformity and consistency in thought, rational thinking being the only world view they understood and knew. However, Western philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault began to explore what is termed 'paraconsistent logic,' i.e., a logical system that attempts to deal with contradictions in a discriminating way.[12] It is a form of logic which is said to be 'inconsistency-tolerant.' What is interesting is that a Buddhist thinker such as Nāgārjuna was willing to explore paraconsistent logic (the contradictions which can and do arise at the very limits of human thought) and indeed the limits of language, long before such ideas were openly explored in the Western philosophical tradition. Some scholars who straddle both Western and Eastern philosophy, like Garfield and Priest (2003) are encouraged by the possibilities Nāgārjuna offers those who share their dialetheist approach: the view that statements can be both true and false simultaneously, or more precisely, that a true statement's negation can also be true at the same time. This offers, in the words of Garfield and Priest (2003):

> comfort with the possibility of true contradictions commanding rational assent, for Nāgārjuna to endorse such contradictions would not undermine but instead would confirm the impression that he is indeed a highly rational thinker.

[11] See Garfield, J (1995); Kalupahana, D (1991); Siderits, M & Katsura, S (2013).
[12] For further information on paraconsistent logic see Béziau, J, Carnielli, W & Gabbay, D (eds) (2007).

Furthermore, and most importantly for the purpose of this study, while Nāgārjuna's paraconsistent logic may find parallels in the dialetheist approach of progressive Western philosophers, we find in his writings a paradox only now being unlocked and made available to a Western audience. This means, in the words of Garfield and Priest (2003):

> We should read Nāgārjuna, then, not because in him we can see affirmed what we already knew, but because we can learn from him… Moreover, Nāgārjuna seems to have hit upon a limit contradiction unknown in the West, and to suggest connections between ontological and semantic contradictions worthy of attention.

The MMK along with five other works generally attributed to Nāgārjuna are referred to as the Yukti-corpus, but as Westerhoff (2009, p. 6) points out, 'apart from the MMK, where Nāgārjuna's authorship is taken to be true by definition, the attribution of every other one has been questioned.' Although Nāgārjuna never referred to himself as a Mādhyamika,[13] the name is most likely related to its close adherence to the MMK. It is not found as the designation of a specific school of philosophy until the seventh century with Candrakīrti's (c.600 - c.650) *Madhyamakāvatāra-vrtti*.[14] Over subsequent centuries, many debates developed in India, China and Tibet concerning the correct understanding of Nāgārjuna's treatise, one notable school being the Yogācāra, found in the fifth century. The Mādhyamikas accused the Yogācārins of tending towards essentialism, making the mind or consciousness an ultimate entity, while the Yogācārins accused the Mādhyamikas of being nihilistic.[15] Candrakīrti attributes Nāgārjuna in his *Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣya* as the one 'who understood exactly the scriptures, in his Madhyamaka treatise, employing reasoning and scriptural testimony' (Williams, 2009, p. 63). Madhyamaka is generally translated as the 'Middle Way.' Thus Madhyamaka is best translated as that which deals with the very middle or centre, in this instance, the middle or centre of a philosophical system. This middle or centre sits between two extreme views which were circulating among his co-religionists at the time: the two extremes of 'is,' known as eternalism, and 'is not' known as nihilism. The other point to make is that one should not misrepresent what Nāgārjuna was trying to do when presenting a 'middle way.' He certainly was not trying to present a synthesis or compromise between the two extremes; neither was he offering some balance between them. As for finding any appropriate definition of the middle way, this too is impossible, as any expression of what constituted the middle way between either extremes would itself merely create another reference point and a third extreme of its own. As Brunnhozl (2004, p. 34) points out:

[13] For a more in-depth overview of the Madhyamaka school see Musashi, T (1993); Williams, P (2009), pp.63-83.
[14] Candrakīrti, a commentator on the works of Nāgārjuna, was a Buddhist philosopher of the Madhyamaka school. For an overview of his philosophy and works see Huntington, C (1989).
[15] For an overview of the Yogācāra school see Harvey, P (1990), pp. 104-118; Williams, P (2009), pp. 84-102.

> The whole point of Madhyamaka is what is called “complete freedom from any extremes”… In fact, “extreme” is just another word for reference point. It is important not to misunderstand the freedom from all reference points as just another reference point or theory, a more sophisticated philosophical point of view, or some mere utter blankness. Rather the actual Madhyamaka stands for the unobstructed, supple, and relaxed openness of a mind in which all impulses of grasping at something have completely dissolved.

Murti (1960), although writing some time ago, was a scholar of the Madhyamaka system very well versed in parallel and related Indian systems of thought. He was a principal interpreter of Nāgārjuna’s writings when few in the West were interested, and as Westerhoff (2009, p. 9) points out, his work is somewhat a ‘Kantianization of Nāgārjuna’. Nonetheless, despite Murti’s drawbacks, he notes (1960, p. 212) that as a philosophical method, it sets out to:

> *de*conceptualise the mind and to disburden it of all notions, empirical as well as *a priori*. The dialectic is not an avenue for the acquisition of information, but a catharsis; it is primarily a path of purification of the intellect … Universality and certitude are reached not by the summation of particular points of view, but by rigidly excluding them; for, a view is always particular. It is the abolition of all restrictions which conceptual patterns necessarily impose. It is not nihilism, which is itself a standpoint asserting that nothing is. The dialectic is rejection of all views including the nihilistic.

For the Mādhyamika, such a system is non-dualistic (indeed the term ‘non-dualism’ may be a way to render ‘Madhyamaka’ into English) precisely because it ‘is the abolition of all particular viewpoints which restrict and distort reality’ (Murti, 1960, p. 214). As a consequence, the Mādhyamika attitude is not to become caught up in particular views or theories, but to observe the nature of phenomena (allegedly) without standpoints.

Due to the scholarly consensus that Nāgārjuna’s MMK is a fundamental resource which establishes the principal tenet of the Mādhyamikas (and because of limitations on space in this treatment) this study will limit itself to that text. Constituting 27 chapters, Nāgārjuna’s MMK sets out in this seminal work that all *dharmas* (phenomena) are ***śūnya*** (empty or devoid) of ***svabhāva*** (inherent existence), and of ***lakṣaṇa-śūnya*** (characteristics), which give them a solid or independent existence.[16]

In the MMK, Nāgārjuna shows a clear understanding of a number of different Abhidharma schools which arose in an effort to expand on the metaphysical details surrounding the Buddha’s core teachings on

[16] Translation of technical terms from subtle and ‘foreign’ systems of thought creates significant problems in understanding, these cannot be addressed in detail here and so I have not attempted to justify or expand in these simple and pragmatic renderings of these terms; further details are given in the standard works on the MMK and on the Madhyamaka in general.

no-abiding self (*an-ātman*), impermanence (*anitya*) and suffering (*duḥkha*).[17] Most scholars agree that the MMK was composed (at least in part) in response to the Sarvāstivāda Buddhist school's approach to Abhidharma issues.[18] Presented in verse form, the task of the MMK is to clarify the teachings of the Buddha, namely to refute the metaphysics and the philosophical positions circulating at the time around the *svabhāva* (inherent existence) of all *dharmas* (the interrelated elements or phenomena that for the Buddhist Abhidharma schools make up the empirical world), i.e., that those elements (*dharmas*) possessed a permanent and unchanging identity or substratum of their own. According to the Abhidharma systems, *svabhāva* was the unique characteristic (*lakṣaṇa-śūnya)* by which entities could be differentiated and classified. Regardless of whom Nāgārjuna's intended audience might have been, in the MMK his main focus of attack is the teaching that phenomena (*dharmas*) could have an inherent existence (*svabhāva*) of their own, thus declaring all phenomena (*dharmas*) dependently arisen and therefore empty (*śūnya*) of the independent existence imputed to them by the Sarvāstivāda and other Buddhist schools.

As the central philosophical position of Madhyamaka Buddhism is that of *śūnyatā* (emptiness), immediately there is the difficulty of defining what is it that is actually empty or not there. Therefore, the Madhyamaka school adopted the term *svabhāva-śūnya* to describe something as being 'empty of inherent existence.' Its purpose in Madhyamaka philosophy is fundamentally negative (but clarifactory), asserting that, contrary to what we might generally think, inherent existence (*svabhāva*) does not exist. Thus the notion of *śūnyatā* denotes the absence of *svabhāva.* Westerhoff (2009, p. 199) points out there are various difficulties when one is trying to understand the philosophical concept it entails; however, he believes that for Nāgārjuna *svabhāva* is best understood as 'substance,' i.e., that is when *svabhāva*:

> is taken to be any object that exists objectively, the existence and qualities of which are independent of other objects, human concepts, or interest, something which is, to use a later Tibetan turn of phrase, "established from its own side."

From MMK's chapter 15 we have a succinct presentation of Nāgārjuna's view, in which he establishes the correlation between emptiness (*śūnyatā*), dependent co-arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*), and convention (*prajñāpti*). Verses 18 and 19 offer the climax of the entire text, and as Garfield (1995, p. 304) has put it, 'can truly be said to contain the entire *Madhyamaka* system in embryo,' being 'perhaps the most often quoted and extensively commented on verse in all of Mahāyāna philosophy.'

[17] For a more extensive overview see Siderits, M & Katsura, S (2013), pp. 1-10.
[18] see King, R (1999), p.92; Murti (1960), p.69; Streng (1967), p.33. The relationship between the teachings in the MMK and the various Abhidharma schools is complex and ramified and not fully documented as yet.

18. Whatever is dependently co-arisen [*pratītya-samutpāda*],
That is explained to be emptiness [*śūnyatā*],
That, being a dependent designation [*prajñāpti*],
Is itself the middle way [*madhyamaka*].

19. Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing,
Does not exist. (tr., Garfield, 1995, p. 304)

Here all phenomena are presented as devoid of any inherent existence (intrinsic nature or substance) whatsoever, because all phenomena were stated by the Buddha to be dependently co-arisen. This is the basis for Nāgārjuna's presentation of *śūnyatā* in this way.

The Sanskrit term generally translated as emptiness is *śūnyatā.* However, it can just as easily be translated as voidness, or hollowness, and is the noun form of the adjective *śūnya*, which itself can be further translated as zero, nothing, empty or void. *Śūnya* comes from the Sanskrit verbal root *śūi-* meaning hollow. Olson (2006, p. 166) and Conze (1951, p. 130) suggest *śūi* can be translated as 'to swell,' and Olson uses the analogy of the blowing up of a balloon to make his point. He suggests that as a balloon begins to swell, if blown beyond its maximum capacity, it will eventually explode, thus 'revealing absolutely nothing.' Conze (1951, p. 130) too concurs with this analogy, saying:

> In the remote past, our ancestors, with a fine instinct for the dialectical nature of reality, frequently used the same verbal root to denote the two opposite aspects of a situation. They were as distinctly aware of the unity of opposites, as of their opposition. Thus, the root SVI … seems to have expressed the idea that something which looks 'swollen' from the outside is 'hollow' inside.

This idea is further developed by Conze (1951, p. 131) by explaining that if something is deemed hollow it may at the same time be 'filled with something foreign' as in the case of a pregnant women, said to be 'swollen,' but in fact, is carrying a baby inside her. It would be to our detriment if we were to lose these connotations of *śūnyatā* if by the translation 'emptiness' we were to imply a in fact a mere nothingness, which is not the case (this would indeed be to misinterpret *śūnyatā* as entailing nihilism). Thus Olson (2006, p. 167) is able to say of *śūnyatā*:

> As revealed by its Sanskrit etymology, emptiness is not a thing; it is neither something that a person can point to and say there it is, nor is it something that one can grasp and hold in one's hand. To assert that entities are empty means that they lack inherent existence or essence.

Śūnyatā, therefore sits right in the middle (*madhyama*) between affirmation and negation, between existence and non-existence, an important point to remember when we consider its implications in conjunction with Queer Theory: a matter to be discussed below. Furthermore, in MMK chapter 15, verse 18, Nāgārjuna is asserting that whatever is dependently co-arisen is emptiness. Thus, as Garfield (1995, p. 305) writes:

> Nāgārjuna is asserting that the dependently arisen is emptiness. Emptiness and the phenomenal world are not two distinct things. They are, rather, two characterizations of the same thing. To say of something that it is dependently co-arisen is to say that it is empty. To say of something that it is empty is another way of saying that it arises dependently.

To understand these concepts better, and in defence of their position, as Harvey (2013) points out, we note that the Madhyamaka schools hold that confusion arises over the nature of all phenomena because some people do not understand 'how' the Buddha taught. This, as noted by Harvey (2013, p. 119) was 'according to two levels of truth or reality: *saṃvṛti-satya* (conventional truth/reality) and *paramārtha-satya* (ultimate truth/reality).'

We see Nāgārjuna's explanation of the two levels of truth/reality, conventional and ultimate, in the following verses of the of the twenty-fourth chapter of the MMK:

8. The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma,
   Is based on two truths:
   A truth of worldly convention,
   And an ultimate truth.

9. Those who do not understand,
   The distinction drawn between these two truths,
   Do not understand,
   The Buddha's profound truth.

10. Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
    The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
    Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,
    Liberation is not achieved. (tr., Garfield, 1995, pp. 296, 298)

Garfield (2015, Loc 1717 of 10144) states that:

> In this series of verses, Nāgārjuna emphasizes the distinctness of the two truths, the necessity of each of them for a coherent ontology, and the dependence of the ultimate on the conventional.

It is true to say that a strong theme among Madhyamaka schools is that the concept of conventional reality is pedagogically needed in order to have any understanding of ultimate reality. This is explained in another text attributed to Nāgārjuna known as the *Bodhicitta-vivaraṇa* (v.57 and 67cd-68):

> As sweetness is the nature of sugar and hotness that of fire, so [we] maintain the nature of all things to be *śūnyatā* (emptiness) … The true (reality) is not an object separate from the conventional. Convention is explained as *śūnyatā*; convention is simply *śūnyatā.* For [these two] do not occur without one another, just as created and impermanent [invariably concur] (trans., Lindtner, C (2018)).

This is an important distinction to make here, particularly in light of this thesis and my enquiry into Queer Theory, a theory which in my view needs to get a better handle on the conventional reality of identity. Such a reading implies that the basis for any understanding of ultimate reality rests (of necessity) on the conventional, and there can be no proper understanding of the ultimate without a true understanding of the conventional. Madhyamaka schools, therefore, see no reason to replace conventional truth/reality with ultimate truth/reality, an approach I encourage Queer theorists to perhaps better appropriate. As Newland and Tillemans (2011, p. 11) rightly explain:

> Indeed, the conventional becomes exactly what is important to get right, and the ultimate, emptiness, is vital precisely because it strips away false superimpositions so as to allow right understanding of the conventional.

Indeed, as Newland and Tillemans (2011) the editors of *Moonshadows: conventional truth in Buddhist philosophy* point out, the essays and authors contained therein have taken the view that their priority has been 'to take the conventional seriously, seeing it as interesting and important' (p. 11). I concur with this view.

Samvṛti-satya (conventional truth) is best described in terms of the empirical world, that is, by a world which is verifiable through observation rather than logic. Here we have a slight problem with the English translation of the word *satya* which can be ambiguous. It can mean either 'reality', as in what something is, or it can also mean 'truth,' that is, what we say about it. Candrakīrti believes his use of the term *saṃvṛti-satya* is ambiguous in three ways. These are summarised by Garfield and Priest (2003, p. 5) as:

1. Ordinary, everyday truth, what we would ordinarily assent to, 'common sense augmented by good science.'
2. Truth by agreement, for example driving on the left side of the road in Australia, while another country may agree to drive on the opposite side. This form of conventional truth can therefore be quite relative.
3. Nominal truth, that is, 'to be true by virtue of a particular linguistic convention.' Something is called a table by linguistic convention because we have agreed that a flat surface raised with three or more legs is a table.

However, these three distinctions for *satya* stand against the meaning of the word *saṃvṛti*, which is not only translated as the word 'conventional' but can also mean concealing, obscuring, hiding and occluding.

Furthermore, drawing on the works of Candrakīrti, Garfield and Priest (2003, p. 5) remind us that the Madhyamaka tradition:

> makes creative use of this ambiguity, noting for instance, that what such truths conceal is precisely the fact that they are merely conventional [as outlined above] … or that an obscured mind is obscured precisely by virtue of not properly understanding the role of convention in constituting truth.

This means, of course, that the word 'conventional' should be understood through not just one, but through a variety of connotations, all present in Nāgārjuna's use of the word.

Conventional truth is arrived at through a series of commonly accepted practices and conventions, which Westerhoff (2009, p. 220) refers to as 'our linguistically formed conceptual framework.' However, he cautions against 'denigrating these conventions as a distorting device which incorporates our specific interests and concerns' (p. 220). Furthermore Westerhoff (2009, p. 220) notes:

> The very notion of "distortion" presupposes that there is a world untainted by conceptuality out there (even if our minds can never reach it) which is crooked and bent to fit our cognitive grasp.

Mādhyamikas argue, therefore, that we only have our linguistic and conceptual framework with which to investigate the world and ourselves. This leads Westerhoff (2009, p. 200) to conclude that:

> To speak of conventional reality as distorted is therefore highly misleading, unless all we want to say is that our way of investigating the world is inextricably bound up with the linguistic and conceptual framework we happen to employ.

Huntingdon (1989, p. 136) I believe offers a useful summary of how Nāgārjuna's insights can be of immeasurable help to Western philosophy and the work of Queer Theorists:

> The Mādhyamika is radically deconstructive, pragmatic philosophy designed to be *used* for exposing, defusing and dismantling the reifying tendencies inherent in language and conceptual thought… All it does is dissolve the old questions which are seen to have been misguided from the start, leaving behind nothing other than a dramatic awareness of the living present - an epiphany of one's entire form of life. No form of conceptual diffusion remains, and no questions begging for answers that reinforce a deep-seated resistance to acceptance that this life, as it is now lived, is the only arbiter of truth and reality.

Madhyamaka teaches that the things we perceive as 'real' have a conceptual and conventional existence only; according to the MMK conventional reality is a designation for what is dependently arisen. This is not to say that they do not exist at all, but rather, that they do not exist in the way we usually think, as independent reality. The shortcomings of Queer Theory identified earlier could be overcome by this metaphysical approach, thereby adopting a middle way between the essentialist approach of Identity Politics and the nihilist approach favoured by Queer Theorists.

The Dialogical Space

As the purpose of this thesis is to attempt to create a dialogical space between two philosophical theories: namely Queer Theory and Madhyamaka metaphysics, this final section will turn its attention to a study made by Yip and Smith (2010) undertaken among a variety of UK LGBTIQ Buddhist groups, as the basis for a developmental borderland.

Modern Western psychology informs us that to lead a full and healthy life, both emotionally and spiritually, at the psychological level, one's full experience of self and acceptance of one's sexual identity and gender is necessary and essential. However, by following their spiritual practice and the insights such practice facilitates, LGBTIQ Buddhists can be led to the paradoxical discovery that indeed there is ultimately 'no-abiding self.' Immediate comparisons can be made here between Buddhist metaphysics and Queer Theory's commitment to the deconstruction and critique of normativity around sexual orientation, gender and other social distinctions.

As noted before by Stuart (2003), the problem arises when LGBTIQ people struggling for acceptance in a heteronormative environment accuse Queer Theory of 'erasing hard fought identities of women and gay men in the name of liberation' (p. 103). Here I believe the pioneering research and findings of Yip and Smith (2010) can be of immeasurable help in addressing these concerns. To date there have been few studies with Buddhist communities in this area of identity politics; in fact, the efforts of Yip and Smith remain the only source identifiable. Nonetheless, their findings raise important issues for this thesis.

Whitney (1998) has something quite simple and yet profound to say about identity politics with regards to those who wish to follow a spiritual path. Believing that LGBTIQ people have for far too long focused on their 'difference' from heteronormativity, thus affirming a unique and separate identity as something to be celebrated and encouraged, Whitney believes this can be a distraction from spiritual practice. Yip and Smith (2010), while highlighting that some Buddhist communities have been formed in the West specifically as safe spaces for LGBTIQ Buddhists to practice, have suggested that in fact the (p. 137) 'anti-essentialist stance of Buddhism means that LGBTIQ people can de-emphasise sexuality and gender identity issues; in fact identity *per se*.'

Some participants in the research of Yip and Smith (2010, p. 117) rejected any focus on 'difference' and were thus able to say they felt their:

> LGBTQI identity was subsidiary because of their desire to enact and obtain 'normal lives.'[19]
> A few were opposed to the politicisation of their sexual identities, as something that might mark them as different/other and even marginalised.

[19] Admittedly, the term 'normal lives' used in this context remains ambiguous.

Yip and Smith (2010, p. 137) were also able to report that:

> Participants tended to describe Buddhism as being more or less the central axis of their lives to the point that it became an overarching framework for their positions of identification. Their understanding of Buddhist teachings of a lack of a fixed, essential self led them to de-emphasise their LGBTQI identities relative to their being practitioners of Buddhist techniques of the self.

This led Yip and Smith (2010, p. 138) to conclude that to a large extent LGBTIQ people appeared attracted to western forms of Buddhism because within its philosophy they were able to 'find a place where identity can be put to one side if not jettisoned altogether.' Buddhist theories of the no-abiding self offered a way to transcend 'otherness' or a 'unique' or 'alternative' identity, moving away not only from heteronormativity, but also homonormativity. In this regard, Buddhism shares the anti-essentialist stance in common with Queer Theory, an 'identity without essence,' a term first coined by Halperin (1995, p. 62). However, as Cheng (2015, p. 155) paradoxically reminds us:

> the word 'queer is commonly used as a shorthand or umbrella term for LGBTI persons or other sexual and gender minorities. However, the notion of queerness as 'identity without essence' is actually at odds with these equal and gender identity categories.

The contemporary LGBTIQ-rights movement has certainly adopted a unique identity for itself (or more accurately a cluster of identities gathered under the one overarching LGBTIQ banner), and thus an essentialist approach to its politics, to fight for equality and civil rights under the law in a heteronormative world, frequently entailing using the same categories of that world (e.g., 'marriage'). While some would argue in favour of such a stance, ironically, as in the case of Western same-sex marriage debates, for example, they have in the process bought into the hetero-productive structuring and nature of much modern identity politics. This is due, as discussed in the case of the LGBTIQ Buddhists earlier, to 'their desire to enact and obtain normal lives.' But of course the question to raise here is, what is 'normal' for LGBTIQ people and does it differ from other hetero-accepted forms of normal?

In Yip and Smith's (2010) study, LGBTIQ Buddhists de-emphasised their sexual and gender identities in order to de-politicise them. This challenges and resists essentialist ways of thinking, despite their desire for 'normal' lives. However, I suggest 'normal' in this sense is actually a form of 'normal' based on a much deeper perspective: a normal which acknowledges diversity but de-politicises all difference, erasing not only heteronormativity, but also homonormativity, and any forms of normativity which are socially constructed or politicised, making them in turn problematic. I believe the de-politicisation of all socially constructed categories, represents an alternative way forward for the civil rights, equality and social acceptance of all minority groups, but a way forward which actually benefits all in society who struggle with identity and the compulsion for the dialectic of the self at the very core of one's human existence.

The Madhyamaka's presentation of *śūnyatā*, teaching no fixed identity, and Queer Theory's critique of identity as a complex multiple of unstable positions, offer all people the framework to potentially transcend identity categories. This is highlighted by a comment made by, Yip and Smith (2010, p. 116) who reported that for LGBTIQ Buddhists, because of their teaching of a no-abiding self, 'led them to place more stress on their identities as 'human beings,' rather than anything else. In terms of identification, this led one participant to describe herself as 'a human being first… A Buddhist second and 'gay'… further down the line' (p.116). Miller (2008, p. 3) referring to the Madhyamaka teaching of *śūnyatā*, but using a comment that can equally be applied to Queer Theory explains:

> The aim of this philosophy is not to leave us utterly bereft of all thoughts or views, or lacking in concepts or beliefs about reality, for then we would not be able to function! Rather, the aim is to empower and enable us, by way of our reasoned enquiry and self-developed critical understanding, to be non-addicted or non-attached in relation to our language, thoughts, views, concepts and beliefs about the nature of reality.

Certainly the Buddhist approach to identity politics, aimed at empowering and enabling, and based on a clearer understanding of reality, offers a way out of *duḥkha*. As the research by Yip and Smith (2010) suggests, for many LGBTIQ Buddhists, the anti-essentialist approach of Buddhist metaphysics (devoid as it is of entrenched categories of the 'male' and 'female' found in many Abrahamic traditions) encourages many to put aside their LGBTIQ identity and attachment to it, creating a level playing field, where all identities are transcended in favour of our common humanity.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that as Yip and Smith were working exclusively with Western Buddhist communities accepting of LGBTIQ adherents, would such 'identities' be as easily put aside in a more homophobic or transphobic form of Buddhism? Marin (2016, p. 196) in his own study of religion and the LGBTIQ community (while narrowing his discussion almost exclusively to the Christian traditions) has noted that:

> *100 percent* of the participants who either practice Buddhism or are interested in learning about Buddhism were raised in a theologically conservative Christian faith. And *100 percent* of them have also not returned to any other Christian community.

Furthermore, he raises the question why such people attached themselves to such a religion when in 2006, in an interview in *The Telegraph*, the Dalai Lama was quoted as saying: 'The purpose of sex is reproduction, according to Buddhism. The other holes don't create life. I don't mind - but I can't condone this way of life' (p. 196).[20] Despite such statements, Marin's research found that (pp. 196-197):

[20] *The Telegraph* was later to report in 2014 that the Dalai Lama suddenly supported same-sex marriage saying it was a matter of 'individual business.' Condemning homophobia, the article reported that in an interview with Larry King he said, 'If two people - a couple - really feel that way is more practical, more sort of satisfaction, both sides

> Having concluded that Christianity is no longer an option for their life, LGBT people see Eastern religions like Buddhism as the only remaining religious outlets available to them, the only remaining connections to the spiritual realm.

Undoubtedly, the new forms of Buddhism found in the West are generally more accepting of LGBTIQ people. Yip and Smith's study appears to suggest that the Buddhist practice of putting aside 'identity' *per se* was one of its 'redeeming features' while Marin suggests (in the West at least) Buddhism for some is a 'last resort' religion. Possibly the truth lies somewhere in the middle, but certainly these new forms of western Buddhism provide an 'identity' (in a conventional understanding of this word) which renders it adherents 'normal' and therefore more socially acceptable within the circles LGBTIQ Buddhists live and move.

As for Queer Theory, its anti-essentialist approach to identity politics has resulted in certain drawbacks, as highlighted earlier by scholars such as Adam (2000), Green (2000), Jeffreys (2003), Stuart (2003) and Ruffolo (2009). I believe, however, that a closer look at Madhyamaka metaphysics, bearing in mind the similarities already established between these two theories, will address many of these concerns.

As this study has shown, the Madhyamaka theory of a no-abiding self establishes the correlation between *śūnyatā* (emptiness), *pratītya-samutpāda* (dependent co-arising), and *prajñāpti* (convention, i.e. designation). All phenomena are presented, therefore, as void of any inherent existence, including identity (in whatever form that may take in the conventional world), because all phenomena are dependently co-arisen. This becomes the basis for Nāgārjuna's presentation of *śūnyatā*, based on a paraconsistent logic, a term which sits between affirmation or negation, between existence and non-existence, best understood by his explanation of the two levels of truth/reality, the conventional and the ultimate, set out in the MMK. Pedagogically speaking, one needs to grasp the concept of conventional reality in order to understand ultimate reality. Conventional reality, therefore, needs to be taken seriously, because without it, there can be no understanding of ultimate reality and thus, according to the Four Noble Truths, no way out of *duḥkha* and the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. As quoted by Newlands and Tillemans (2011, p. 11) earlier:

> the conventional becomes exactly what is important to get right, and the ultimate, emptiness, is vital precisely because it strips away false superimpositions so as to allow right understanding of the conventional.

fully agree, then OK.' *The Telegraph,* 7 March 2014, viewed 8th January 2018, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/tibet/10682492/Dalai-Lama-supports-gay-marriage.html.

For the system of Nāgārjuna, misapprehension of either of the extremes causes problems. The difficulty many face with a Post-modern critical approach such as Queer Theory is that it asks too much from them, to walk away completely from one's social and political identity. This is not something easily achieved or even possible.[21] However, I believe that Madhyamaka's two truths doctrine can assist Queer Theory with its inability to maintain a credible voice in modern identity politics.

The study of Yip and Smith (2010) has highlighted that the de-politicising of identity, avoiding as Ruffolo (2009) puts it, the hetero-productive nature of modern LGBTIQ identity politics, gave LGBTIQ Buddhists a space to transcend 'otherness' or a 'unique' or 'alternative' identity, moving away from both heteronormativity and homonormativity. This strips away false superimpositions allowing a clear and right understanding of conventional reality. Here is where Madhyamaka metaphysics can address the major difficulty Queer Theory faces: its ultimately nihilistic tendencies. Queer Theory, learning as it can from Madhyamaka metaphysics, needs a better grasp on the truth of conventional reality; that is, a better handle on the conventional reality of the individual or community struggling with any form of identity and the *duḥkha* it entails. From Nāgārjuna's point of view, through understanding we awaken to the existence of ultimate reality, but at the same time we acquire a more correct (or 'right') understanding of conventional reality. As we remain under the influence of conventional reality in our day to day lives, then with an awakened mind, we can act accordingly.

As Lamotte (1984, p. 93) has pointed out:

> Without having lived everyday life according to conventional standards, profound identity cannot be perceived in order to reach Nirvāṇa. It is therefore necessary, at the starting point, to bow to convention, because it is the means of reaching Nirvāṇa, just as whoever wants to draw water makes use of the receptacle.

If Queer theorists could make better 'use of the receptacle' and 'bow to convention,' instead of destroying it (as they have been found guilty or accused of), then like Mādhyamika Buddhists, they too could find a middle way between nihilism and essentialism. This I believe could save Queer Theory from irrelevance and redundancy and make it a more helpful ally for LGBTIQ activism. Why? Because we are living in this world, in this time, and in this political and social context. Nonetheless, this does not stop us from acknowledging that these social constructs are fluid, can be deconstructed, will continue to change and ultimately do not exist. 'We draw water but use the receptacle,' but we certainly cannot throw the receptacle away when we are still breathing.

[21] Indeed, the Buddhist path does not ask this, but instead, when one has enough 'understanding,' identity will be seen through and vanish.

Conclusion

Certainly this study follows the Post-modern trend, a ‘condition which itself warrants that traditions distant from each other in space and in time may blend and emerge in new understandings’ Wicking (2011, p. 233). It too has been a project in theory building, noting the similarities between Foucauldian thought, Queer Theory and Nāgārjuna’s teachings, acknowledging the natural affinity between these domains. Indeed, to ‘queer’ something is ‘to engage in a methodology which challenges and disrupts the status quo’ (Cheng, 2011, p. 24), recognising that things are ‘out of alignment' or ‘askew.’ This is not so far from the teaching of the Buddha, who understood the human condition by the Sanskrit word *duḥkha*, best defined not so much as ‘suffering,’ but as a life which is always ‘askew.’

This study has followed the lead of the post-queer vision of Ruffolo (2009, p. 167), one which makes ‘new theoretical, philosophical, and practical connections that move away from Western and Eurocentric discourses of queer.’ It looks towards the metaphysical theories of Nāgārjuna and Madhyamaka philosophy, as a ‘valuable conceptual tool for different purposes and different audiences’ Wicking (2011, p. 233). It offers these metaphysical teachings to Queer Theory, as a means of potentially breathing new life into a somewhat moribund academic field of study. This process creates a potentially new Madhyamaka-inspired Post-queer Theory, one which demands a right understanding of conventional reality, particularly as we remain under its continual influence in this world. Importantly, this study establishes that the affirmation of the socio-political construction of one’s sexuality and gender ought never imply it is in any way superficial. As Halperin (1990, p. 53) writes:

> Just because my sexuality is an artifact of cultural processes doesn’t mean I’m not stuck with it … I don’t mean that I can’t inquire into, criticize, or try to understand how I came to be what I am, but no amount of conscious reflection will enable me simply to walk away from my socialization and acquire a new cultural (or sexual) identity.

A new Madhyamaka-inspired Post-queer Theory demands not a denial of our socialisation, but a right view of it, a philosophy of the middle way which addresses the human condition, examining a cause of one’s suffering through attachment to a false identity based on ignorance; a new-found freedom which can transform and emancipate.

And while my project may seem to some rather idealistic, until society can find a way to overcome its manufactured divisions, based on hate, avarice and injustice, and find a normalcy which transcends race, class, sexuality, gender, colour, disability and creed, no individual or community will be able to escape the constant suffering such prejudice inflicts. In a speech entitled, ‘Our God is marching on,’ Martin Luther King Jr. (King, 1965) offered these prophetic words addressed to all who seek a normalcy based on non-attachment to false truths and the reality of our common humanity:

> The only normalcy that we will settle for … is the normalcy that recognizes the dignity and worth of all of God's children. The only normalcy that we will settle for is the normalcy that allows judgment to run down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream ... The only normalcy that we will settle for is the normalcy of brotherhood, the normalcy of true peace, the normalcy of justice.

In the spirit of this thesis attempting to open a dialogical space, I would invite others to explore, build upon and enlarge these findings, as Queer Theory moves beyond issues of sexuality and gender into a Post-queer era.

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