



Editor's Note: Jason Tseng attended a long-table discussion following a recent performance of [Pillowtalk](#) and provided the following response. Future long-tables will be held on January 18th and January 25th.

I have had the opportunity to track the development of Kyoung Park's *Pillowtalk* – from its first public reading at Ma-Yi Theatre as well as its workshop production at BRIC in Brooklyn. This latest iteration, the play's world premier as a part of The Tank's Exponential Festival marks a striking journey from the play's roots in intimate naturalism to its current shape: a complex and layered aesthetic which fuses theater, politics, and ballet into a magnificent chimeric creature. A quick summary: Sam and Buck, a recently married interracial couple, wrestle with their marriage's political and personal significance.

In this age of entertainment qua metadata, *Pillowtalk* refuses to be made easily legible, embodying a Butlerian queer ethos in its constant mercuriality – at one moment a private confession, another moment a carefully deconstructed pas de deux – and always subverting the audience's expectations of performance. One might call Park's direction almost contrarian in his utter refusal to take the straight forward route in presentation. However, I found this approach elevated the text from a mere examination of the inflection point between the political ideals of queer liberation and the logistical realities of gay life to a broader conversation about the systems of meaning and power which we all are complicit in reenacting, as well as our struggle to find our own identity outside of the cookie cutter identities presented to us.

Like the traditional opening ["I want" song](#) of a musical, Park has a Kushner-esque knack for using the political manifesto as a window into his characters' subconscious. Sam and Buck constantly betray their unspoken feelings by bemoaning their relationship with America's conflicted political tapestry. In *Pillowtalk*, second-wave feminism's slogan is inverted: the political is personal. Sam and Buck can't help but interpret their relationship and the newfound right to marry through the kaleidoscopic gauntlet of LGBT rights, Marxist ideology, and racial justice movements. The fact that Sam and Buck are black and Asian, respectively, further nuances their multi-layered dance of identities, privilege, and power. Buck's desire to reclaim his masculinity from the feminized Asian male eunuch stereotype conflicts directly with Sam's refusal to bottom due to his desire to avoid being re-traumatized by past racialized sexual experiences. Park fundamentally questions the white gay neoliberal notion that gay marriage would be a panacea for the gay community's sociological deficits. Marriage did not solve the fractures in the queer community, it magnified them.

Jan 17, 2018

The long table discussion after the performance, moderated by Geoffrey Jackson Scott, Creative Director of Peoplemovr, focused on the role of gay marriage through the generations and featured LGBT activist Ira Briones, psychologist and author Kevin Nadal, and actors Basit Shittu and JP Moraga, along with other members of the audience. Scott opened the conversation with a meditation on how marriage was the primary metaphor for which adults in his family were understood. This was made material in the collection of carefully arranged portraits of married couples in his extended family on his grandparents' wall – a collection Scott aspired to join once he married his husband.

Many participants brought up the idealization and romanticization of marriage as children, as well as the tragic adolescent realization that access to this privileged institution would be beyond them. Marriage, for most in attendance, seemed to be a means to some kind of end. For some, it was familial validation, others it was a logistical decision to expedite immigration statuses. Few described their marriage in the typical heterosexual halo of tradition and sacrament— save for Park, himself, who detailed how his marriage served a ritualistic role with his families as a mark of passage into adulthood.

Another theme which dominated the conversation was how queer marriages defied the traditional mold. Kevin Nadal echoed a line in *Pillowtalk* which declared that all gay marriages were open. Nadal described the fact that a majority of gay male marriages are non-monogamous as an open secret, and pondered how much he wanted straight people to be privy of this, lest the moralizing heterosexual masses diminish queer marriage for its hedonism: “Why do you even want to get married if you don't even love each other?”

Others questioned the historicity of so-called “traditional” marriage. For the majority of the institution's existence, it served mainly as a tool of the elite for consolidating wealth and securing lines of inheritance. The idea that marriage is about love, much less fidelity or even equality, is a decidedly modern convention. And even in this context, the majority of heterosexual marriages end in divorce, leading the panel to inquire if no marriage is truly “traditional” in that the idealized version of marriage is ultimately unobtainable and illusory.

The one topic that I felt the discussion neglected to address is the natural subsequent question to marriage: divorce. Divorce is brought up more than once in *Pillowtalk*, as Sam and Buck's relationship buckles under the weight of their dysfunction. While it is clear the two love each other a great deal, they also are incapable of communicating with each other in a safe and productive way. In all the rosy discussions of marriages consummated and aspired for on the panel, no one confronted the very real possibility that the play's protagonists may end as divorcés. The play is actually quite ambiguous as to whether or not Sam and Buck ever truly reconcile their differences. Given the amount of existential agita and self-imposed political weight the characters experience being in a marriage, one wonders what political self-recriminations might emerge from a gay divorce. Would they feel like political frauds for discarding the rights the community had fought so hard for them to be able to partake in? Would they be relieved to be able to return to the libertine hedonism of the pre-AIDS crisis sexual liberation made possible once again by PrEP? As the first generation of legally married queers matriculates, the inevitable first generation of divorced queers will need to find their place in a post-gay-marriage world. Perhaps a sequel is in order.

Mieke D Responds To PILLOWTALK's 2nd Long- Table: On Queer and TransMagic in the Workplace



Editor's Note: Mieke D attended a long-table discussion following a recent performance of [Pillowtalk](#) and provided the following response. The final long-table will be held on January 25th.

Not too long ago, I participated in a small workshop reading of a play in which all the characters are women. Each performer, however, had very different relationship to that identity – and to gender in general – which Kyoung Park (the writer of that play) invited into the process very actively. I saw this approach as a little bit of devising – working with what the actors were already bringing into the room with them – and also a queering, complicating, and questioning of what it means to tell “women’s stories” as a queer male playwright. The few times I have gotten the chance to work with Kyoung as an actor over the years, there’s one thing I have always appreciated: the way he captures contradiction and incongruity within his plays, the way he makes the space for his actors (and his characters) to be many things at once.

Contradiction and incongruity abound in PILLOWTALK as well, which plays at The Tank through this Sunday. Characters contradict themselves, each other, and the many incongruous expectations being piled on their bodies and their relationship as queer brown men. They try to speak plainly about their desires, the daily struggles they face and what to do about them. And, at the same time, their words divide, obscure.

They desperately try to speak their way back to understanding, even as language continues to fail them. “Poor word choice,” they repeat often, as they tumble into truths they would rather not confront, at least not tonight. PILLOWTALK takes place over the course of one, long night of processing between Buck, an Asian man, and Sam, a black man, who are in an open marriage. They are two queer brown people trying to love each other, and they also seem to be two sides of various arguments about how to get free as queer brown people. And work – ugh, work – continues to invade their space, as does the topic of white people, as they try to figure out how to be together in this world, in this moment.

Jan 25, 2018



Mieke D Responds To PILLOWTALK's 2nd Long- Table: On Queer and TransMagic in the Workplace

After this performance of *PILLOWTALK*, the audience was invited to stick around for a long table discussion about Queer and TransMagic in the Workplace. The discussion featured artist-activists Zavé Martohardjono, Azure D Osborne-Lee, Pauline Park, and members of the production: Kyoung, the two actors, JP Moraga and Basit Shittu, and Assistant Director Shannon Matesky. A couple audience members (including Kyoung's husband, Danny Lim) joined the conversation later. Each of the special guests brought a different relationship to work: Zavé is an interdisciplinary performance artist and a Digital Campaign Manager at the ACLU; Azure is a grant-writer, a playwright, and a magic-worker; Pauline Park is a multi-talented activist-scholar with accolades on accolades on accolades (see them [here](#)).

Matesky, who also moderated, opened the discussion: "In your journey seeking fiscal security or sustainability, what has it gained you or cost you?" Very quickly, a theme of contradiction emerged, between ideals and practice, mission statements and lived realities. Zavé said, "I have seen small radical organizations do dirty by their employees in ways that mirror some of the worst corporations." Another works at an organization committed to cultivating "safe spaces for youth," while it remains an unsafe space for the adults who work there. One speaker shared a story of sexual harassment within an organizing space, in which all parties involved were queer people of color. "The harassers and the victims were both marginalized," they explained. When the perpetrator isn't a straight white man, someone with obvious structural power, the issue becomes "less convenient to address." Pauline Park described her three careers: first in the corporate world ("very instructive"), then academia ("also instructive, and so far from its ideals"), and now as an activist and cultural worker. "[Once] you see how these social justice organizations *actually* work," it is, so often, "nothing like [their] mission statements . . . No space is untouched by these behaviors."

Taken all at once, these stories can be overwhelming – especially when coupled with my own experiences of hypocrisy, being pushed out of once-beloved jobs by unchecked power grabs, the pain of losing spaces that once seemed like an island of calm within the windstorm of intersecting oppressions. But "we are all embodied spirits," Pauline reminded us. "It would be lovely if we were disembodied. But we have to eat, sleep," and make compromises. "There's no environment in which we escape all these things," Zavé added. "There's no other place that will be better."

What tools, then, do we draw upon to navigate these never-ending contradictions? How do we learn to make reasonable compromises? What *are* reasonable compromises? Or, as Zavé asked, "Where do you want to put your energy?"

Azure suggested, "If you're the first to get fired, you have no choice but to follow your dreams, follow your path... You might as well do what you're called to do." And, "You need to know yourself and know your trade... and *make* a way, to imagine and discern what feels livable for you and what does not . . . I can't tell you what your path is, because I can't tell you what is livable – we are all different." Pauline Park may not always make a living as a writer, but she doesn't always have to answer to anyone when she writes either. A number of people mentioned this – the value of making money through non-artistic means – as a kind of freedom. In other words, give what you have and keep more for yourself. "If I wanted to make that guy's salary" – a younger, less skilled, and white new hire making more than most of his superiors – "I would have to sacrifice my art career." Then again, as Zavé remarked earlier, no one's going to pick up the tab. "Too big in either direction, and something would have to give."

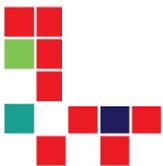
So, "Money is not the root of all evil. The love of money is the root of all evil." We need money, but money is not the only way to define our value. We have to know our worth and value, and ask for it. But we also need to cut "our addiction to the capitalist sense of value." We need to recognize that value is relational and positional. One possible model: charging more to work with organizations with greater access to wealth and economic power. Expecting less in terms of economic gain – but more in terms of connection, relationships, and community power – for making your own artwork, or working with a community-based organization, led by people of color. "That's the magic," said Danny Lim. "Knowing our worth and value and asking for it."



Editor's Note: QUEERING MARRIAGE is the concluding essay documenting the long-table process around Kyoung's Pacific Beat's production of PILLOWTALK at the Tank. You can read about the previous conversations [here](#) and [here](#).

I have the privilege of sharing out PILLOWTALK's third, and final long-table, addressing "Love's Power & Microinvisibility," which was discussed by performance artist Nic Kay, writer/performer/cultural worker Kirya Trabor, and facilitated by Prof. Stephanie Hsu—Board Member of CUNY's Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies. This conversation felt like a summary of a month-long conversation hosted by Kyoung's Pacific Beat at The Tank, and the conclusion of our multi-year engagement with QPOC communities throughout the creation of PILLOWTALK.

"How did you get in my living room?" asked Kirya Trabor, which is a question we've often heard from our audience members. Whether queer, straight, Asian, Black, Latinx, White, Jewish, single, partnered, married, or divorced, we knew from our project's initial responses that our very queer, POC characters were dealing with love and marriage in ways that tapped into universal questions. "I'm engaged with the core argument: love versus marriage," shared Kirya. "Is marriage about pragmatism and survival? Is love the fearless embrace of the revolution?"



In a two-character play where Sam (Basit Shittu) and Buck (JP Moraga), two married queer men of color, go long into the night, Nic shares how what sticks with them is “when words don’t work anymore” and PILLOWTALK becomes a dance. “Queerness is hearing your body,” adds Stephanie. “The body can’t lie.”

James McMaster, one of our audience members, joins the speakers on-stage and states how he was struck by Bucks’ recognition that “marriage makes your problems private”—marriage becomes a survival tactic that encloses your problems at home.

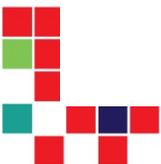
“Is marriage destructive to the revolutionary tendency?” asks Kirya. Has gay marriage provided the LGBTQ community with an opportunity for assimilation, when there is a potential to change marriage? Is there a way to use marriage both as a political cover for our Otherness, while normalizing and protecting oneself?

Nic points out how “queer radical spaces” are meant to provide safety—from the urgent need to provide homes for queer youth, those abandoned due to HIV, to creating relationships that go beyond the gender binary. How do we destabilize the normativity of “marriage” and recognize polyamory, open relationships, and complex family structures? Later in the discussion, Nic would further these questions by reminding us that “we have survived ancestrally through community, feeling love outside the system... It was fun to not look for the one relationship to fulfill all your needs.”

As the conversation continued, two women in the process of divorcing shared with us their experiences of marriage. One woman said: “marriage was not rooted in love.” It was about God, taxes, insurance. Marriage became both a contract and a covenant. The second woman added how her marriage was with her partner/ artistic collaborator/ best friend/ business partner, and how their marriage was about “all the contracts.” While she refused to marry at first—she said no three times—she began asking herself: “how did I end up in this cis heteronormative arrangement? I didn’t believe in marriage until I committed, then everything shifted.” And now that she was divorcing, society says: “I failed.”

The first woman later shared more about her interracial marriage, which was also polyamorous and open to co-parenting. All the conversations held in the long-table, and in PILLOWTALK, were ongoing in her life, but her White husband would become exhausted by these conversations and ask: “do I need to think about race/gender all the time?”

The exhaustion of White partners who cannot engage in these conversations has been a complaint we’ve personally heard from multiple members of our artistic community and audiences, and we are reminded of how the White experience becomes the default in interracial relationships, and White Supremacy becomes the invisible power structure that debilitates queer, interracial relationships.



“As a person of color,” adds Nic, “to love another person of color is to love myself. This is the most revolutionary work when we were meant to be objects and labor. How do we build relationships beyond sexual desire, when we were trained to be shallow objects?”

“When we are harassed in public, I cannot experience the same thing at home,” adds Stephanie. “Marriage can be a healing refuge from the environment I live in, if we are politically aligned. I need to be able to talk to you. That’s heaven for folks of color.”

“Here we are, starting our own family,” adds Shannon Matesky. When she witnesses the characters of Sam and Buck considering divorce, she wishes she could tell them: “Don’t let those white people break you up! Freak the form, queer the family model! Divorce is the death of a portion of your life, be reborn.”

“Why do people get married?” asks Daniel Lim, my husband, who has been at all three long-tables. “Where is this model in nature? Is marriage in nature? Monogamy is in birds—married people are birds,” he states. “Humans, primates, are not good for marriage, it’s not biological.”

And because PILLOWTALK was born from our bed talk, before it became a public talk, I let my #radicallove have the final words: “How do you expand marriage? Not queer marriage for myself, but for everyone? How do we queer the way we live, the way society is arranged? Be anti-nuclear family, embrace co-parenting, co-housing? Queerness is upending the social order for everyone.”

