

Thoughts on *Renaissance in the Belly of a Killer Whale*

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What do Harlem, Belmont-Devolliers, and the belly of a killer whale have in common? If you were one of those who attended the Harlem KW Project's *Renaissance in the Belly of a Killer Whale* Friday evening at Pensacola State College, you know. If not, you missed a thought-provoking performance of substance.

The Harlem KW Project consists of four young African American women writers from New York, three of whom are actresses. Their energetic presentation addresses the issue of gentrification, its negative as well as positive impacts. In the process of improving a community, must it sell its soul? One must be aware of the issue before one can address it. While less crime, more business and entertainment, cleaner streets and parks, and renovated buildings are improvements that make a community more valuable, its heart, and in some cases art, must be preserved.

Gentrification is defined as "the movement of middle class families into urban areas causing property values to increase and having the secondary effect of driving out poorer families." Gentrification is a process that many American cities are experiencing. It began in Harlem in the 1980s and is culminating now. The point made in the play is the African-American middle class who buy into the social status are regarded by many other African-Americans as sell-outs. More whites can afford the up-scaled residences than blacks, and the displacement is cause for resentment.

Harlem has a rich cultural history, important and meaningful enough to be studied in social studies and literature courses, in high school as well as college. The Harlem Renaissance produced the fine poetry of Langston Hughes, art of Jacob Lawrence, the music of Billie Holiday and Louie Armstrong and the famous Apollo Theatre where celebrities such as Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and Jimi Hendrix performed.

From Friday's performance I learned about Harlem. Immediately, my thoughts went to Pensacola's own Belmont-Devolliers community. In recent years, I've enjoyed the Belmont-Devolliers Art Center, Five Sisters Café, and Sonja Griffin Evans' Gumbo Gallery. But it never occurred to me that the residents of that area might be concerned about changes or may no longer afford the taxes on their homes. I've driven down those streets and noticed renovated homes with perked up yards and picket fences but gave no thought to the loss of anything or anyone. The play made me aware of those issues and the people behind those fences and doors. No history, no culture should be lost.

I am a child of the sixties. I lived in Jackson, Mississippi when Medgar Evers was murdered. I remember the Civil Rights Movement well. The most passionate papers I wrote in high school were on integration and equal rights. I graduated from Escambia High School (the same year Jerry Maygarden did) when the mascot was still the Rebel, before it was changed to the politically correct Gator. Although

there's much left to be reconciled, our country and its communities have come a long way. There's much to be said for assimilation. However, no one's ethnicity or culture should be diminished.

As a teacher of high school English in an all black school in the suburbs of Atlanta, I received a great education myself in black literature, black history, black art and black music for which I am grateful. I'm a big fan of Zora Neale Hurston, ironically someone whom Harlem rejected during her lifetime. Let us thank Alice Walker for rediscovering Zora. "At certain times I have no race, I am me. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance" (Hurston, Zora Neale. *How It Feels to be Colored Me*). I feel like Zora too. I am lucky to be a part of this country, this community, this time.

So as I reflect on the performance of this talented and dedicated group of young women, I do not reflect on race. I think of the issues they care about: community and the preservation of culture. Pensacola cares about these issues as well. We need to keep them in mind as we revitalize communities such as Belmont-Devilliers. And what do Harlem and Belmont –Devilliers have in common with the belly of the killer whale? There is this round white belly surrounded by black, and when the prey looks up from beneath it is confused, and the killer whale sucks them in . . .

Yes, Friday brought abysmal rain and flooding, but the evening sky partially cleared as the sun was setting. Thanks also to Gael Frazier at Pensacola State College for bringing *Renaissance in the Belly of the Killer Whale* to Pensacola.

www.HarlemKWProject.com

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