

Understanding renegade will in laurence ralph's renegade dreams

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



Response to Question: Without any context, it seems as if the definition of “renegade will” is the controlled choice to rebel against an organization’s set of policies. As a matter of fact, in America, this definition tends to be true as the core value of many gangs is to be rebellious and deviate from societal norms. However, Laurence Ralph, the writer of *Renegade Dreams*, has a very different outlook on the term “renegade will”, as he discovers the positive outlook that this concept has rather than regurgitating the negative connotation it carries. Ralph’s *Renegade Dreams* provides insight on a West Side Chicago neighbourhood called Eastwood, a community infiltrated with violence and injury, and he tries to decipher social bonds within this geographic area. “Renegade will” is defined by Ralph as the choice an injured Eastwoodian makes to fight for the betterment of his/her community via improving the emotional, physical, mental and spiritual state of people in Eastwood. It is critical to acknowledge that “injury” is not limited to physical disability, however, it considers financial, mental, emotional and spiritual oppression. Being injured emphasizes the sheer determination that Eastwoodians possess to willingly try to improve the injury-prone environment that children are being raised in.

Despite the numerous instances in which “renegade will” is present, Otis Ball comes to mind as he shows the “renegade will” in its most simplistic form - nostalgia. Mr. Otis is an ex-gang member who belonged to the Divine Knights gang and has been lucky enough to survive his gang affiliation days. Nevertheless, he reminisces about how the gang during his time had extremely different values than the modern Divine Knights. Mr. Otis’ nostalgic emotions is an injury as Ralph defines nostalgia as a longing for a

home which no longer exist or has never existed at all. Nostalgia, in Mr. Otis' case, can be clinically diagnosed as a mental disability which involves an emotional obsession to the past and is believed to be undisputedly superior to the present. Mr. Otis constantly discusses how the Divine Knights were much more conscious and benevolent than today's Knights. He then expresses his disdain towards the new generation of Divine Knights by stating that they should be titled " Anonymous Knights" as they choose to focus on violence rather than helping Eastwood (Ralph 2014). He then expresses his contempt towards the new generation of Divine Knights by stating that they should be titled " Anonymous Knights" as they tend to choose violence rather than helping Eastwood (Ralph 2014). Mr. Otis' fascination with the past proves that he has a psychological injury which is the first element of the term " renegade will".

Mr. Otis fulfills the second component of " renegade will", which is to fight for the betterment of one's neighbourhood, by simply regurgitating Divine Knight's community-care-based history. This is vividly displayed when Mr. Otis discusses the government funding the gang received back in the old days to build community centres for kids and to show that gangs do not have to be bad (Ralph 2014). He then proclaimed that today's Divine Knights are unaware of their history and that they fit into the stereotypical gang image which consists of violence and mischief. Mr. Otis' revulsion towards the behaviour of today's Divine Knights goes to show his longing for the old gang, which was obviously a gang that fought for the improvement of the Eastwood community. Furthermore, Ralph states that the Eastwoodian

Community Church is an institution that is widely believed to focus on redevelopment and Mr. Otis believes the church can help improve the community. This is shown when he recruits Laurence Ralph and two other individuals to wear black suits and become foot soldiers for Ray Stephens, the pastor for Eastwood's Community Church, when he meets the governor (Ralph 2014). This is in effort to make Pastor Ray look important, thus, making the governor think that he should invest into the Eastwoodian Church as Pastor Ray looks like he is responsible and has support. The fact that Mr. Otis is taking matters into his own hands and is trying his best to gain government funding for his community shows his renegade will. Despite suffering from nostalgia, Mr. Otis has a clear mind when it comes to what he wants to see his community become and that is a large family full of prosperity and happiness. The intersection of mental injury and the yearning to see community development makes Mr. Otis a very fascinating character to study as he lives a life engrained in renegade will. All in all, "renegade will" has been determined to be when an Eastwoodian resident has a permanent injury and then chooses to use that experience to help her/his community and this is seen in Mr. Otis.

Relation to Class: The overarching theme of poverty in *Renegade Dreams* is seen through the formation of the Divine Knights gang. Symbolic capital is important in Eastwood because the community is poverty stricken and thus, capital pertaining to financial circumstances is not prominent. In other words, one's name and respect "in the hood" is more important than how much money they have. Symbolic capital is also seen in Susana A. Phillips

Wallbanger's Graffiti and Gangs in L. A. Symbolic capital is obtained in Graffiti culture through tagging, the signature of a graffiti artist on work that they have done. The more tags an individual can execute, the more capital they harvest from their peers (Phillips 1999). In Eastwood, the longer one has been loyal to his gang, the more symbolic capital they will receive. This is seen when Ralph (2014) is told by Red that there once was a boy that was caught by the police for selling drugs and rather than going to jail, the boy ratted out everyone included in the sale, therefore, the boy is not loyal and has no symbolic capital. All in all, symbolic capital is synonymous with respect and is seen in gang culture, via being loyal, and in graffiti culture through tagging.

Dr. Winland suggests that Eastwood residents are victims to governmentality, a term coined by Michel Foucault. Governmentality describes the principle in which people voluntarily govern themselves in ways which continue the existing social order. This process mainly occurs in Eastwood due to the lack of education, which is a by-product of poverty. Due to the lack of money, loyalty to the Divine Knights is regurgitated through generations and maintains governmentality. Remaining loyal to the gang increases one's symbolic capital and increases their fondness of committing criminal acts. This is a prime example of governmentality because poverty remains in Eastwood and thus, crime rates will remain elevated, ergo, the social order will also persist.

Critique: At first glance, Renegade Dreams seems to be another weak effort in bringing attention to a violent and impoverished neighbourhood. However,

Ralph utilizes Renegade Dreams to prove that Eastwood, and other neighbourhoods, tend to be violent and impoverished because they are isolated and ignored by society. This is interesting as not many other ethnographies successfully use community residents as examples of individuals trying to change their current state. Nevertheless, Ralph's ethnography is heavily based on "renegade will" which highlights Eastwood's residents keen interest in change. Even though the desire to change is present, minimal and gradual change is occurring due to the mainstream society ignoring Eastwood. For this reason, I would have loved to hear Ralph's input as to why Eastwood is in a state of isolation and how can the community break free from it.? I believe the only way Eastwood can stop being isolated is through gentrification and they will then be reintroduced into the mainstream society. However, if this were to occur, the culture of Eastwood would vanish, thus, I question if there is a less invasive way of gentrification in which community residents maintain their agency?

A key theme throughout the ethnography is injury and although Ralph discusses the interplay between injury and renegade will, he failed to recognize the ways each injury can be cured. For instance, Mr. Otis is suffering from nostalgia and this makes him despise the new generation of his community which is unhealthy for himself and Eastwood. Even though the effort he makes for Eastwood to flourish may allow him to sleep at night, his disdain for the community's current state maintain his sickness. Thus, I question, to what extent does "renegade will" help injured community members heal? Moreover, I have realized that many people may be

unfamiliar with gang culture and may not have the privilege to read ethnographies such as *Renegade Dreams*. For this reason, how can we bring attention to social issues such as this and what impact would it have on communities like Eastwood? Lastly, it would have been interesting to have Ralph's input as to why most oppressed communities have the same social, political and financial problems. In conclusion, Ralph successfully introduces "renegade will" and illustrates the daily lives of Eastwoodians.