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## Dreaming Despite Despair

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## Dreaming Despite Despair

### **Abstract**

Laurence Ralph's (2014) *Renegade Dreams* presents a glimpse into the lived experience of Chicago's gang members. The author details that through various forms of injury people living in urban poverty hold dreams that motivate them through survival. This book review aims to provide an overview of Ralph's work while offering intriguing reflections.

### **Keywords**

Urban Poverty, Gangs, Gang Violence, Dream, Despair, Counter Narrative

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## Dreaming Despite Despair

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*Laurence Ralph's (2014) Renegade Dreams presents a glimpse into the lived experience of Chicago's gang members. The author details that through various forms of injury people living in urban poverty hold dreams that motivate them through survival. This book review aims to provide an overview of Ralph's work while offering intriguing reflections. Keywords: Urban Poverty, Gangs, Gang Violence, Dream, Despair, Counter Narrative*

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Ralph's (2014) book *Renegade Dreams* invites the reader into Eastwood, a West Side Chicago African-American neighborhood notorious for high unemployment, high violence, and its gang presence. In his ethnographic study of gang members living in urban poverty, Ralph creates a counter-narrative to the dominant notion of African-American game members.

Dr. Ralph presents excerpts of the lived experiences of gang members to draw the readers into the street life of Chicago. The Divine Knights, the pseudonym for the gang profiled in this book has a rich history in Chicago. From the Divine Knights' inception as civil rights activists to the present hierarchical drug organization known for violence, readers are submerged in the long history of some of its members. This book ignites sentiments of sorrow, fear, despair, and hope. Those all too familiar with the lived experience of gang membership in a large urban area *Renegade Dreams* will remind you of the injury one experiences, and resilience one must have to survive. "Renegades," as mentioned in the title, are the newer generation of gang members attempting to survive in a dilapidated neighborhood left barren by government and industry.

From 2007 through 2010, Dr. Ralph lived in Eastwood conversing with community members, drug addicts, gang members, HIV patients, clergymen, and gun hot survivors. He collected data through conversations, and participant observation, and framed the book from his extensive field notes. He selected participants through the snowballing method.

Dr. Ralph breaks the book into the five main chapters: Development Or, Why Grandmothers Ally with the Gang; Nostalgia Or, The Stories a Gang Tells about Itself; Authenticity Or, Why People Can't Leave the Gang; Disability Or, Why a Gang Leader Helps Stop the Violence; and Disease Or, How a Will To Survive Helps the Healing. Through thematic analysis the five overarching themes emerged.

In each of the chapters Ralph offers a glimpse into the injury inflicted upon the residences of Eastwood. Chronicling their fight to protect their neighborhood from gentrification, to learning to live through incurable chronic diseases, Dr. Ralph depicts the Eastwoodians' resiliency.

The purpose of Dr. Ralph's research is clear. His aim was to "access the political potential of the frame, both for scholars and non-academics who have dedicated their lives to addressing urban poverty" (p. 176). He sought to "reframe seemingly familiar narratives that, because of their familiarity, impede our understanding of how injury is experienced" (p. 169). Through the Divine Knight's narratives, the author gives voice to those in a socially isolated community. He changes the narrative of the constructed notions of gang members by "unearthing alternate frames" (p. 171), and deconstructing "how we understand social life in Eastwood" (p. 92). He did this by:

articulating another iteration of a theory of isolation, in the hopes of developing a successively closer approximation of what inner-city injury looks like at present, and to grapple with its interconnections with governmental and community institutions as well as its relationship to social and historical processes. (p. 171)

The book's framework is both interpretative, and emancipatory, although most of the book is interpretative. As he interprets the character's experiences, and deconstructs the socially constructed ideology of Black gang members. This book does not conceal or chide the violence occurring in this neighborhood. In a unique and liberatory manner he uses this violence to attest for both injury and resilience, and how one relates to the other. Through injury these people are able to dream, these "Renegade Dreams" offer them hope today of a better tomorrow. In other words, people living in despair still dream and hope for a tomorrow that seems impractical. The author relates the renegade's dreams to African-American's dreams and activism for social reform. For the author notes that in spite of immobilization from injury, dreams keep them moving (p. 8).

The author was conscious of his portrayal of those interviewed for this project. He crafted characters by combining participants' narratives, and creating pseudonyms for gang members. Additionally, he did not include photos of participants or the neighborhoods.

The findings of this study reflect the book's title. The author found that despite the injuries Eastwoodian residents experience they still hold their "Renegade Dreams." For Eastwoodians, injury is tied to their dreams (p. 6). He found hope, resiliency, and triumph in despair. Furthermore, he found the hidden connections that exist between the Eastwoodians lived experiences, the government, and community institutions. He brought to the forefront the dehumanization of Black urbanites, and highlighted their social isolation.

After reading this book, I found myself reflecting upon Eastwood, not only the Divine Knights. The author was able to tell more than the Divine Knight's experience. I finished the book reflecting on Eastwood as a neighborhood. I was able to position myself as a resident and empathize with the experiences of its residences. I reflected upon the interconnectedness of injury and how this neighborhood did not disinvest from itself. The economic, social, and political sectors have much responsibility for the condition of Eastwood and its residents.

I found Dr. Ralph's work both inspiring, heart wrenching, and thought-provoking. Through the contextualization of their narratives, he humanizes those societally dehumanized and criminalized. In this book, I appreciated the counter-narrative that depicts the gang's rich civil rights history and community involvement. The intended audience for this book are scholars and non-scholars that work to address urban poverty, those that work within and for those communities.

As much as I enjoyed this reading, the book left me wanting more. I desired more narratives from Mrs. Otis, Amy, and Justin. I wanted to know more about the progress of redevelopment project, and how it impacted the residences of Eastwood. Contrarily, the narratives presented are just enough to invest in this reading, and cause self-reflection of one's ideology of gangs and gang members.

I have limited personal experiences in urban neighborhoods, however reading this book I wondered for instance about the narratives of those who were able to see their dream become reality through social mobility. I considered those who live in these neighborhoods by choice, and how they come to understand urban poverty. Interestingly, I contemplated the police officers that patrol these neighborhoods. Are they all protectors of suburbanites and prosecutors of Black youth? For these varying reasons, I would recommend this book to academicians, college students. The theoretical framework and terminology may challenge the undergraduate

student, however with proper facilitation this book spur rich discussions. Readers alike would conclude this book with an alternative perspective of life in many urban areas.

### **Reference**

Ralph, L. (2014). *Renegade dreams*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

### **Author Note**

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