

By now I was sweating despite the cold. I leaned backward to try to get some light to fall on the questionnaire. The first question was one I had adapted from several other similar surveys; it was one of a set of questions that targeted young people's self-perceptions.

"How does it feel to be black and poor?" I read. Then I gave the multiple-choice answers: "Very bad, somewhat bad, neither bad nor good, somewhat good, very good."

The guy with the too-big hat began to laugh, which prompted the others to start giggling.

"Fuck you!" he told me. "You got to be fucking kidding me."

He turned away and muttered something that made everyone laugh uncontrollably. They went back to quarreling about who I was. They talked so fast that I couldn't easily follow. It seemed they were as confused as I was. I wasn't armed, I didn't have tattoos, I wasn't wearing anything that showed allegiance to another gang—I didn't wear a hat turned toward the left or right, for instance, I wasn't wearing blue or red, I didn't have a star insignia anywhere, either the five- or six-point variety.

Two of them started to debate my fate. "If he's here and he don't get back," said one, "you know they're going to come looking for him."

"Yeah, and I'm getting the first shot," said the other. "Last time I had to watch the crib. Fuck that. This time I'm getting in the car. I'm *shooting* some niggers."

"These Mexicans ain't afraid of shit. They kill each other in prison, over *nothing*. You better let me handle it, boy. You don't even *speak* Mexican."

"Man, I met a whole bunch of them in jail. I killed three just the other day."

As their claims escalated, so did their insults.

"Yeah, but your mama spoke Mexican when I was with her."