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 gotta 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.”

“Those 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.”

"Nigger, your daddy was a Mexican."

I sat down on a cold concrete step. I struggled to follow what
they were talking about. A few of them seemed to think that I was
an advance scout from a Mexican gang, conducting reconnaissance
for a drive-by attack. From what I could glean, it seemed as if some
black gangs were aligned with certain Mexican gangs but in other
cases the black gangs and Mexican gangs were rivals.

They stopped talking when a small entourage entered the stair-
well. At the front was a large man, powerfully built but with a boy-

ish face. He also looked to be about my age, maybe a few years older,
and he radiated calm. He had a toothpick or maybe a lollipop in his
mouth, and it was obvious from his carriage that he was the boss.
He checked out everyone who was on the scene, as if making a men-
tal list of what each person was doing. His name was J.T., and while
I couldn’t have known it at this moment, he was about to become
the most formidable person in my life, for a long time to come.

J.T. asked the crowd what was happening, but no one could give
him a straight answer. Then he turned to me. “What are you
doing here?”

He had a few glittery gold teeth, a sizable diamond earring, and
deep, hollow eyes that fixed on mine without giving away anything.
Once again, I started to go through my spiel: I was a student at the
university, et cetera, et cetera.

“You speak Spanish?” he asked.

“No!” someone shouted out. “But he probably speaks Mexican!”

“Nigger, just shut the fuck up,” J.T. said. Then someone men-
tioned my questionnaire, which seemed to catch his interest. He
asked me to tell him about it.

I explained the project as best as I could. It was being overseen
by a national poverty expert, I said, with the goal of understanding
the lives of young black men in order to design better public policy.