

*A Rogue Sociologist  
Crosses the Line*

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Stephen J. Dubner

I believe that Sudhir Venkatesh was born with two abnormalities: an overdeveloped curiosity and an underdeveloped sense of fear.

How else to explain him? Like thousands upon thousands of people, he entered graduate school one fall and was dispatched by his professors to do some research. This research happened to take him to the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, one of the worst ghettos in America. But blessed with that outlandish curiosity and unfettered by the sort of commonsensical fear that most of us would experience upon being held hostage by an armed crack gang, as Venkatesh was early on in his research, he kept coming back for more.

I met Venkatesh a few years ago when I interviewed him for *Freakonomics*, a book I wrote with the economist Steve Levitt. Venkatesh and Levitt had collaborated on several academic papers about the economics of crack cocaine. Those papers were interesting, to be sure, but Venkatesh himself presented a whole new level

of fascination. He is soft-spoken and laconic; he doesn't volunteer much information. But every time you ask him a question, it is like tugging a thread on an old tapestry: the whole thing unspools and falls at your feet. Story after story, marked by lapidary detail and hard-won insight: the rogue cop who terrorized the neighborhood, the jerry-built network through which poor families hustled to survive, the time Venkatesh himself became gang leader for a day.

Although we wrote about Venkatesh in *Freekonomics* (it was many readers' favorite part), there wasn't room for any of these stories. Thankfully, he has now written an extraordinary book that details all his adventures and misadventures. The stories he tells are far stranger than fiction, and they are also more forceful, heartbreaking, and hilarious. Along the way he paints a unique portrait of the kind of neighborhood that is badly misrepresented when it is represented at all. Journalists like me might hang out in such neighborhoods for a week or a month or even a year. Most social scientists and do-gooders tend to do their work at arm's length. But Venkatesh practically lived in this neighborhood for the better part of a decade. He brought the perspective of an outsider and came away with an insider's access. A lot of writing about the poor tends to reduce living, breathing, joking, struggling, sensual, moral human beings to dupes who are shoved about by invisible forces. This book does the opposite. It shows, day by day and dollar by dollar, how the crack dealers, tenant leaders, prostitutes, parents, hustlers, cops, and Venkatesh himself tried to construct a good life out of substandard materials.

As much as I have come to like Venkatesh, and admire him, I probably would not want to be a member of his family: I would worry too much about his fearlessness. I probably wouldn't want to be one of his research subjects either, for his curiosity must be exhausting. But I am very, very happy to have been one of the first readers of Venkatesh's book, for it is as extraordinary as he is.

I woke up at about 7:30 A.M. in a crack den, Apartment 1603 in Building Number 2301 of the Robert Taylor Homes. Apartment 1603 was called the "Roof," since everyone knew that you could get very, very high there, even higher than if you climbed all the way to the building's actual rooftop.

As I opened my eyes, I saw two dozen people sprawled about, most of them men, asleep on couches and the floor. No one had lived in the apartment for a while. The walls were peeling, and roaches skittered across the linoleum floor. The activities of the previous night—smoking crack, drinking, having sex, vomiting—had peaked at about 2:00 A.M. By then the unconscious people outnumbered the conscious ones—and among the conscious ones, few still had the cash to buy another hit of crack cocaine. That's when the Black Kings saw diminishing prospects for sales and closed up shop for the night.

I fell asleep, too, on the floor. I hadn't come for the crack; I was

here on a different mission. I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, and for my research I had taken to hanging out with the Black Kings, the local crack-selling gang.

It was the sun that woke me, shining through the Roof's doorway. (The door itself had disappeared long ago.) I climbed over the other stragglers and walked down to the tenth floor, where the Patton family lived. During the course of my research, I had gotten to know the Pattons—a law-abiding family, it should be said—and they treated me kindly, almost like a son. I said good morning to Mamma Patton, who was cooking breakfast for her husband, Pops, a seventy-year-old retired factory worker. I washed my face, grabbed a slice of cornbread, and headed outside into a breezy, brisk March morning. Just another day in the ghetto.

Just another day as an outsider looking at life from the inside. That's what this book is about.

## *How Does It Feel to Be Black and Poor?*

uring my first weeks at the University of Chicago, in the fall of 1989, I had to attend a variety of orientation sessions. In each one, after the particulars of the session had been dispensed with, we were warned not to walk outside the areas that were actively patrolled by the university's police force. We were handed detailed maps that outlined where the small enclave of Hyde Park began and ended: this was the safe area. Even the lovely parks across the border were off-limits, we were told, unless you were traveling with a large group or attending a formal event.

It turned out that the ivory tower was also an ivory fortress. I lived on the southwestern edge of Hyde Park, where the university housed a lot of its graduate students. I had a studio apartment in a ten-story building just off Cottage Grove Avenue, a historic boundary between Hyde Park and Woodlawn, a poor black neighborhood. The contrast would be familiar to anyone who has spent time around

an urban university in the United States. On one side of the divide lay a beautifully manicured Gothic campus, with privileged students, most of them white, walking to class and playing sports. On the other side were down-and-out African Americans offering cheap labor and services (changing oil, washing windows, selling drugs) or panhandling on street corners.

I didn't have many friends, so in my spare time I started taking long walks, getting to know the city. For a budding sociologist, the streets of Chicago were a feast. I was intrigued by the different ethnic neighborhoods, the palpable sense of culture and tradition. I liked that there was one part of the city, Rogers Park, where Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis congregated. Unlike the hilly-white suburbs of Southern California where I'd grown up, the son of immigrants from South Asia, here Indians seemed to have a place in the ethnic landscape along with everyone else.

I was particularly interested in the poor black neighborhoods surrounding the university. These were neighborhoods where nearly half the population didn't work, where crime and gang activity were said to be entrenched, where the welfare rolls were swollen. In the late 1980s, these isolated parts of the inner cities gripped the nation's attention. I went for many walks there and started playing basketball in the parks, but I didn't see any crime, and I didn't feel particularly threatened. I wondered why the university kept warning students to keep out.

As it happened, I attracted a good bit of curiosity from the locals. Perhaps it was because these parks didn't attract many nonblack visitors, or perhaps it was because in those days I dressed like a Dead-head. I got asked a lot of questions about India—most of which I couldn't answer, since I'd moved to the States as a child. Sometimes I'd come upon a picnic, and people would offer me some of their

soul food. They were puzzled when I turned them down on the grounds that I was a vegetarian.

But as alien as I was to these folks, they were just as alien to me.

s part of my heavy course load at the U of C, I began attending seminars where professors parsed the classic sociological questions: How do an individual's preferences develop? Can we predict human behavior? What are the long-term consequences, for instance, of education on future generations?

The standard mode of answering these questions was to conduct widespread surveys and then use complex mathematical methods to analyze the survey data. This would produce statistical snapshots meant to predict why a given person might, say, fail to land a job, or end up in prison, or have a child out of wedlock. It was thought that the key to formulating good policy was to first formulate a good scientific study.

I liked the questions these researchers were asking, but compared with the vibrant life that I saw on the streets of Chicago, the discussion in these seminars seemed cold and distant, abstract and lifeless. I found it particularly curious that most of these researchers didn't seem interested in meeting the people they wrote about. It wasn't necessarily out of any animosity—nearly all of them were well intentioned—but because the act of actually talking to research subjects was seen as messy, unscientific, and a potential source of bias.

Mine was not a new problem. Indeed, the field of sociology had long been divided into two camps: those who use quantitative and statistical techniques and those who study life by direct observation, often living among a group of people.

This second group, usually called ethnographers, use their first-



hand approach to answer a particular sort of question: How do people survive in marginal communities? for instance, or What makes a government policy work well for some families and not for others?

The quantitative sociologists, meanwhile, often criticized the ethnographers' approach. They argued that it isn't nearly scientific enough and that the answers may be relevant only to the particular group under observation. In other words, to reach any important and generalizable conclusion, you need to rely on the statistical analyses of large data sets like the U.S. Census or other massive surveys.

My frustration with the more scientific branch of sociology hadn't really coalesced yet. But I knew that I wanted to do something other than sit in a classroom all day and talk mathematics.

So I did what any sensible student who was interested in race and poverty would do: I walked down the hallway and knocked on the door of William Julius Wilson, the most eminent living scholar on the subject and the most prominent African American in the field of sociology. He had been teaching at the U of C for nearly twenty years and had published two books that reshaped how scholars and policy makers thought about urban poverty.

I caught Wilson just in time—he was about to go to Paris for a sabbatical. But he was also about to launch a new research project, he said, and I could participate if I liked.

Wilson was a quiet, pensive man, dressed in a dark blue suit. Although he had stopped smoking his trademark pipe long ago, he still looked like the kind of professor you see in movies. If you asked him a question, he'd often let several long moments of silence pass—he could be more than a little bit intimidating—before offering a thoughtful response.

Wilson explained that he was hoping to better understand how young blacks were affected by specific neighborhood factors: Did growing up as a poor kid in a housing project, for instance, lead to

worse educational and job outcomes than if a similarly poor kid grew up outside the projects? What about the difference between growing up in a neighborhood that was surrounded by other poor areas and growing up poor but near an affluent neighborhood? Did the latter group take advantage of the schools, services, and employment opportunities in the richer neighborhoods?

Wilson's project was still in the planning stages. The first step was to construct a basic survey questionnaire, and he suggested I help his other graduate students in figuring out which questions to ask. This meant going back to earlier studies of black youth to see what topics and questions had been chosen by earlier sociologists. Wilson gave me a box of old questionnaires. I should experiment, he said, by borrowing some of their questions and developing new ones as needed. Sociologists liked to use survey questions that their peers had already used, I learned, in order to produce comparable results. This was a key part of the scientific method in sociology.

I thanked Wilson and went to the library to begin looking over the questionnaires he'd given me. I quickly realized I had no idea how to interview anyone.

Washington Park, situated just across Cottage Grove Avenue from the U of C, is one of Chicago's stateliest parks. Designed in the 1870s by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, it has a beautiful swimming pool, indoor and outdoor basketball courts, dazzling flower gardens, and long, winding paths that crisscross its nearly four hundred acres. I liked to go running on the clay track that encircled the park, a track that decades earlier had hosted horse and auto races. Until the 1940s the surrounding neighborhood was mainly Irish, but when black families started buying homes nearby, most of the white families moved away. I was always surprised that

the university actively dissuaded its students from spending time in Washington Park. I failed to see the danger, at least in the daylight.

After my run I sometimes stopped by the broad, marshy lagoon in the middle of the park. The same group of old black men, usually a half dozen or so, congregated there every day—playing cards, drinking beer, fishing for bass and perch in the lagoon. I sat and listened to them for hours. To this point I had had little exposure to African-American culture at all, and no experience whatsoever in an urban ghetto. I had moved to Chicago just a year earlier from California, where I'd attended a predominantly white college situated on the beach, UC San Diego.

I had been reading several histories of Chicago's black community, and I sometimes asked these men about the events and people of which I'd read. The stories they told were considerably more animated than the history in the books. They knew the intricacies of machine politics—whom you had to befriend, for instance, to get a job or a building permit. They talked about the Black Panther Party of their youth and how it was radically different from today's gangs. "The Panthers had breakfast programs for kids, but these gangs just shoot 'em and feed 'em drugs," one man lamented. I already knew a bit about how the Panthers operated in Chicago during the civil-rights era. What little I knew about modern gangs, however, came from the movies and newspapers—and, of course, the constant cautions issued by the U of C about steering clear of certain neighborhoods.

I was particularly intrigued by the old men's views on race, which boiled down to this: Whites and blacks would never be able to talk openly, let alone live together. The most talkative among them was Leonard Combs, a.k.a. Old Time. "Never trust a white man," he told me one day, "and don't think black folk are any better."

Old Time came to Washington Park every day with his fishing

gear, lunch, and beer. He wore a tired beige fishing hat, and he had lost so many teeth that his gums smacked together when he spoke. But he loved to talk, especially about Chicago.

"We live in a city within a city," he said. "They have theirs and we have ours. And if you can understand that it will never change, you'll start understanding how this city works."

"You mean whites and blacks will never get along?" I asked.

A man named Charlie Butler jumped in. "You got two kinds of whites in this city," he said, "and two kinds of blacks. You got whites who'll beat you if you come into their neighborhood. They live around Bridgeport and on the Southwest Side. Then you got another group that just won't invite you in. They'll call the police if you come in their neighborhood—like where *you* live, in Hyde Park. And the police *will* beat you up."

Charlie was a retired factory worker, a beefy man with tattooed, well-developed arms, a college football star from long ago. Charlie sometimes came to Hyde Park for breakfast or lunch at one of the diners where other blacks hung out, but he never stayed past sundown and he never walked on residential streets, he said, since the police would follow him.

"What about blacks?" I asked.

"You got blacks who are beating their heads trying to figure out a way to live where *you* live!" Charlie continued. "Don't ask me why. And then you got a whole lot of black folk who realize it ain't no use. Like us. We just spend our time trying to get by, and we live around here, where it ain't so pretty, but at least you won't get your ass beat. At least not by the police."

"That's how it's been since black folk came to the city," Old

Time said, "and it's not going to change."

"You mean you don't have *any* white friends?" I asked.

"You have any *black* friends?" Old Time countered with a sly

grin. I didn't need to answer. "And you may want to ask your professors if *they* have any," he said, clearly pleased with his rebuke.

From these conversations I started to gain a bit of perspective on what it was like to be black in Chicago. The overriding sentiment was that given how the city operated, there was little chance for any significant social progress.

This kind of fatalism was foreign to me. When you grew up in affluent Southern California, even for someone as politically disengaged as I, there was a core faith in the workings of American institutions and a sustaining belief that people can find a way to resolve their differences, even racial ones. I was now beginning to see the limits of my narrow experience. Nearly every conversation with Old Time and his friends wound up at the intersection of politics and race. I couldn't follow all the nuances of their arguments, especially when it came to local politics, but even I could see the huge gap between how they perceived the world and how sociologists presented the life of urban poor people.

One day I asked Old Time and his friends if they'd be willing to let me interview them for Professor Wilson's survey. They agreed, and I tried for a few days. But I felt I wasn't getting anywhere. Most of the conversations ended up meandering along, a string of interruptions and half-finished thoughts.

Charlie could see I was dejected. "Before you give up," he said, "you should probably speak to the people who you really want to talk to—young men, not us. That's the only way you're going to get what you need."

So I set out looking for young black men. At the U of C library, I checked the census records to find a tract with poor black families with people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four.

The Lake Park projects looked good, at least on paper, and I randomly chose Building Number 4040, highlighting on my census printout the apartments where young people lived. Those were the doors I'd be knocking on. Old Time told me that I could go any day I wanted. "Most black folk in the projects don't work," he said, "so they don't have nowhere else to be." Still, I thought a weekend would be the best time to find a lot of people.

On a brisk Saturday afternoon in November, I went looking for 4040 South Lake Park, one of several high-rise projects in Oakland, a lakefront neighborhood about two miles north of the U of C. Oakland was one of the poorest communities in Chicago, with commensurately high rates of unemployment, welfare, and crime. Its population was overwhelmingly black, dating back to the early-twentieth-century southern migration. The neighborhood surrounding the Lake Park projects wasn't much of a neighborhood at all. There were few people on the streets, and on some blocks there were more vacant lots than buildings. Aside from a few liquor stores and broken-down bodegas, there wasn't much commerce. It struck me that most housing projects, even though they are built in cities, run counter to the very notion of urban living. Cities are attractive because of their balkanized variety: wandering the streets of a good city, you can see all sorts of highs and lows, commerce and recreation, a multitude of ethnicities and just as many expressions of public life. But housing projects, at least from the outside, seemed to be a study in joyless monotony, the buildings clustered tightly together but set apart from the rest of the city, as if they were toxic.

Up close, the buildings looked like tall checkerboards, their dull yellow-brick walls lined with rows of dreary windows. A few of the windows revealed the aftermath of an apartment fire, black smudges spreading upward in the shape of tombstones. Most of the buildings had only one entrance, and it was usually clogged with young people.

By now I was used to being observed carefully when I walked around a black neighborhood. Today was no different. As I approached one of the Lake Park projects, five or six young men stared me down. It should be said here that I probably deserved to be stared at. I was just a few months removed from a long stretch of time I'd spent following the Grateful Dead, and I was still under the spell of Jerry Garcia and his band of merry-makers. With my ponytail and tie-dyed shirt, I must have looked pretty out of place. I tended to speak in spiritually laden language, mostly about the power of road trips; the other grad students in my department saw me as a bit naïve and more than a little loopy. Looking back, I can't say they were wrong.

But I wasn't so naïve that I couldn't recognize what was going on in the lobby of the building that I now approached. Customers were arriving, black and white, by car and on foot, hurrying inside to buy their drugs and then hurrying back out. I wasn't sure if this building was Number 4040, and I couldn't find the number anywhere, so I just walked inside. The entryway smelled of alcohol, soot, and urine. Young men stood and crouched on plastic milk crates, a couple of them stomping their feet against the cold. I put my head down, took a breath, and walked past them quickly.

Their eyes felt heavy on me as I passed by. One huge young man, six foot six at least, chose not to move an inch as I passed. I brushed up against him and nearly lost my balance.

There was a long row of beaten-up metal mailboxes, many of them missing their doors. Water was dripping everywhere, puddling on the ground. Shouts and shrieks cascaded down from the higher floors, making the whole building feel like some kind of vibrating catacomb.

Once I got past the entryway, it was darker. I could make out the elevator, but I seemed to be losing any peripheral vision, and I couldn't find the button. I sensed that I was still being watched and

that I ought to press the button fast, but I groped around in vain. Then I started looking for the stairwell, but I couldn't find that either. To my left was a large barrier of some kind, but I was too nervous to go around it. To my right was a corridor. I decided to go that way, figuring I'd come across a stairwell or at least a door to knock on. As I turned, a hand grabbed my shoulder.

"What's up, my man, you got some business in here?" He was in his twenties, about as tall and dark as I was. His voice was deep and forceful but matter-of-fact, as if he asked the same question regularly. He wore baggy jeans, a loose-fitting jacket, and a baseball cap. His earrings sparkled, as did the gold on his front teeth. A few other young men, dressed the same, stood behind him.

I told them that I was there to interview families.

"No one lives here," he said.

"I'm doing a study for the university," I said, "and I have to go to Apartments 610 and 703."

"Ain't nobody lived in those apartments for the longest," he said.

"Well, do you mind if I just run up there and knock on the door?"

"Yeah, we do mind," he said.

I tried again. "Maybe I'm in the wrong building. Is this 4040?"

He shook his head. "No one lives here. So you won't be talking to anybody."

I decided I'd better leave. I walked back through the lobby, bag and clipboard in hand. I crossed in front of the building, over an expansive patch of dead grass littered with soda cans and broken glass. I turned around and looked back at the building. A great many of the windows were lit. I wondered why my new friend had insisted that the building was uninhabited. Only later did I learn that gang members routinely rebuffed all sorts of visitors with this line: "No one by that name lives here." They would try to prevent social work-

ers, schoolteachers, and maintenance personnel from coming inside and interrupting their drug trade.

The young men from the building were still watching me, but they didn't follow. As I came upon the next high-rise, I saw the faint markings on the pale yellow brick: Number 4040. At least now I was in the right place. The lobby here was empty, so I quickly skirted past another set of distressed mailboxes and passed through another dank lobby. The elevator was missing entirely—there was a big cavity where the door should have been—and the walls were thick with graffiti.

As I started to climb the stairs, the smell of urine was overpowering. On some floors the stairwells were dark; on others there was a muted glow. I walked up four flights, maybe five, trying to keep count, and then I came upon a landing where a group of young men, high-school age, were shooting dice for money.

"Nigger, what the fuck are you doing here?" one of them shouted. I tried to make out their faces, but in the fading light I could barely see a thing.

I tried to explain, again. "I'm a student at the university, doing a survey, and I'm looking for some families."

The young men rushed up to me, within inches of my face. Again someone asked what I was doing there. I told them the numbers of the apartments I was looking for. They told me that no one lived in the building.

Suddenly some more people showed up, a few of them older than the teenagers. One of them, a man about my age with an oversize baseball cap, grabbed my clipboard and asked what I was doing. I tried to explain, but he didn't seem interested. He kept adjusting his too-big hat as it fell over his face.

"Julio over here says he's a student," he told everyone. His tone

indicated he didn't believe me. Then he turned back to me. "Who do you represent?"

"Represent?" I asked.

"C'mon, nigger!" one of the younger men shouted. "We know you're with somebody, just tell us who."

Another one, laughing, pulled something out of his waistband. At first I couldn't tell what it was, but then it caught a glint of light and I could see that it was a gun. He moved it around, pointing it at my head once in a while, and muttered something over and over—"I'll take him," he seemed to be saying.

Then he smiled. "You do *not* want to be fucking with the Kings," he said. "I'd just tell us what you know."

"Hold on, nigger," another one said. He was holding a knife with a six-inch blade. He began twirling it around in his fingers, the handle spinning in his palm, and the strangest thought came over me: *That's the exact same knife my friend Brian used to dig a hole for our tent in the Sierra Nevadas.* "Let's have some fun with this boy," he said. "C'mon, Julio, where you live? On the East Side, right? You don't look like the West Side Mexicans. You flip right or left? Five or six? You run with the Kings, right? You know we're going to find out, so you might as well tell us."

*Kings or Sharks, flip right or left, five or six.* It appeared that I was Julio, the Mexican gang member from the East Side. It wasn't clear yet if this was a good or a bad thing.

Two of the other young men started to search my bag. They pulled out the questionnaire sheets, pen and paper, a few sociology books, my keys. Someone else patted me down. The guy with the too-big hat who had taken my clipboard looked over the papers and then handed everything back to me. He told me to go ahead and ask a question.

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."

"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 stairwell. At the front was a large man, powerfully built but with a boyish 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 mental 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 mentioned 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.

My role, I said, was very basic: conducting surveys to generate data for the study. There was an eerie silence when I finished. Everyone stood waiting, watching J.T.

He took the questionnaire from my hand, barely glanced at it, then handed it back. Everything he did, every move he made, was deliberate and forceful.

I read him the same question that I had read the others. He didn't laugh, but he smiled. *How does it feel to be black and poor?*

"I'm not black," he answered, looking around at the others knowingly.

"Well, then, how does it feel to be *African American* and poor?" I tried to sound apologetic, worried that I had offended him.

"I'm not African American either. I'm a nigger."

Now I didn't know what to say. I certainly didn't feel comfortable asking him how it felt to be a *nigger*. He took back my questionnaire and looked it over more carefully. He turned the pages, reading the questions to himself. He appeared disappointed, though I sensed that his disappointment wasn't aimed at me.

"Niggers are the ones who live in this building," he said at last. "*African Americans* live in the suburbs. African Americans wear ties to work. Niggers can't find no work."

He looked at a few more pages of the questionnaire. "You ain't going to learn shit with this thing." He kept shaking his head and then glanced toward some of the older men standing about, checking to see if they shared his disbelief. Then he leaned in toward me and spoke quietly. "How'd you get to do this if you don't even know who we are, what we're about?" His tone wasn't accusatory as much as disappointed, and perhaps a bit bewildered.

I didn't know what to do. *Perhaps I should get up and leave?* But then he turned quickly and left, telling the young men who stayed behind to "watch him." Meaning me.

They seemed excited by how things had turned out. They had mostly stood still while J.T. was there, but now they grew animated. "Man, you shouldn't mess with him like that," one of them told me. "See, you should've just told him who you were. You might have been gone by now. He might have let you go."

"Yeah, you fucked up, nigger," another one said. "You really fucked this one up."

I leaned back on the cold step and wondered exactly what I had done to "fuck up." For the first time that day, I had a moment to ponder what had been happening. Random thoughts entered my mind, but, oddly, none of them concerned my personal safety: *What the hell is Bill Wilson going to do if he finds out about this? How am I supposed to know whether to address an interview subject as black, African American, or Negro? Did every Ph.D. student have to go through this? Can I go to the bathroom?* The sun had set, and it was getting colder. I pulled my jacket tighter and bent over, trying to keep out of the wintry draft.

o! Freeze, you want one?"

An older man walked in with a grocery bag full of beers and offered a bottle to one of the young men guarding me. He passed out beers to everyone there. Pretty soon they were all in a better mood. They even gave me a bottle.

By now it was well into the evening. No one seemed to have anywhere to go. The young men just sat in the stairwell telling one another all kinds of stories: about sexual conquests, the best way to smoke a marijuana cigarette, schoolteachers they'd like to have sex with, the rising cost of clothing, cops they wanted to kill, and where they would go when their high-rise building was torn down. This last fact surprised me. Nothing in our records at the university suggested that these projects were closing.

"You have to leave?" I asked. "What kind of neighborhood will you be going to?"

"Nigger, did someone tell you to talk?" one of them said.

"Yeah, Julio," said another, moving in closer. "You ain't got no business here."

I shut my mouth for a while, but some other men stopped by, and they were more talkative. I learned that the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) was indeed tearing down the Lake Park projects in order to build condominiums and town houses. Some residents were staying on as squatters, and the gang was helping them by pirating electricity.

It was clear to me at this point that the young men I'd stumbled upon in this stairwell were junior members of a broad-based gang, the Black Kings, that sold crack cocaine. The older members explained that the gang was trying to forestall demolition but that it wasn't a pure act of charity: When this building was torn down, they would lose one of their best drug-selling locations.

Once in a while, I tried to interject a research question—What kinds of jobs did the people who lived here have? Why weren't the police in the building?—but they seemed less interested in answering me than in talking among themselves about sex, power, and money.

After a few hours, J.T. returned with a few other men, each of them carrying a grocery bag. More beer. It was late, and everyone seemed a little punchy. The air was stale, and some of the young men had been wondering when they might be able to leave. For the moment, however, the beer seemed to settle them down.

"Here," J.T. said, tossing me another bottle. Then he came closer. "You know you're not supposed to be here," he said quietly. He

seemed to feel sorry for me and, at the same time, curious about my presence. Then he, too, began talking about the scheduled demolition of the Lake Park projects. He explained that he and his men had holed up in this building partly out of protest, joining the residents to challenge the housing authority's decision to kick them out.

Then he asked me where I was from.

"California," I said, surprised at the change in topic. "Born in India."

"Hmm. So you don't speak Spanish."

"Actually, I do."

"See! I told you this nigger was a Mexican," said one young gangster, jumping up with a beer in his hand. "We should've beat his ass back then, man! Sent him back to his people. You know they're coming around tonight, you know they *will* be here. We need to get ready—"

J.T. shot the young man a look, then turned back to me. "You're not from Chicago," he said. "You should really not be walking through the projects. People can get hurt."

J.T. started tossing questions at me. What other black neighborhoods, he asked, was I going to with my questionnaire? Why do researchers use multiple-choice surveys like the one I was using? Why don't they just *talk* with people? How much money can you make as a professor?

Then he asked what I hoped to gain by studying young black people. I ticked off a few of the pressing questions that sociologists were asking about urban poverty.

"I had a few sociology classes," he said. "In college. Hated that shit."

The last word I expected to exit this man's mouth was "college." But there it was. I didn't want to push my luck, so I thought I'd just keep listening and hope for a chance to ask about his background.



By now everyone seemed fairly drunk and, more alarmingly, excited at the prospect of a gang war with the Mexicans. Some of the older men started talking logistics—where to station the gang members for the fighting, which vacant apartments could be used as lookout spots, and so on.

J.T. dismissed their belief that something was going to happen that night. Once again he ordered two of the younger men to stay with me. Then he left. I returned to my seat, sipping a beer now and then. It looked like I would be spending the night with them, so I tried to accept my fate. I was grateful when they said I could go to the bathroom—which, as it turned out, was another stairwell a few floors up. Considering that water, and probably urine, were constantly dripping onto our own landing, I wondered why they didn't use a lower floor instead.

he young men stayed up in the stairwell all night, drinking and smoking. Some of them strayed out to the balcony once in a while to see if any cars had pulled up to the building. One of them threw an empty beer bottle to the ground six stories down. The sound of broken glass echoing through the stairwell gave me a fright, but no one else even flinched.

Every so often a few new people came in, always with more beer. They talked vaguely about gang issues and the types of weapons that different gangs had. I listened as attentively as I could but stopped asking questions. Occasionally someone asked me again about my background. They all at last seemed convinced that I was not in fact a Mexican gang member, although some of them remained concerned that I "spoke Mexican." A few of them dozed off inadvertently, sitting on the concrete floor, their heads leaning against the wall.

I spent most of the night sitting on the cold steps, trying to avoid the protruding shards of metal. I would have liked to sleep also, but I was too nervous.

Finally J.T. came back. The early-morning sun was making its way into the stairwell. He looked tired and preoccupied.

"Go back to where you came from," he told me, "and be more careful when you walk around the city." Then, as I began gathering up my bag and clipboard, he talked to me about the proper way to study people. "You shouldn't go around asking them silly-ass questions," he said. "With people like us, you should hang out, get to know what they do, how they do it. No one is going to answer questions like that. You need to understand how young people live on the streets."

I was astounded at what a thoughtful person J.T. appeared to be. It seemed as if he were somehow invested in my succeeding, or at least considered himself responsible for my safety. I got up and headed for the stairs. One of the older men reached out and offered me his hand. I was surprised. As I shook his hand, he nodded at me. I glanced back and noticed that everyone, including J.T., was watching.

What are you supposed to say after a night like this? I couldn't think of anything worthwhile, so I just turned and left.

As I walked back to my apartment in Hyde Park, everything seemed fundamentally different. Crossing from one neighborhood to the next, I speculated about gang boundaries. When I saw a group of people huddled on a corner, I wondered if they were protecting their turf. I had a lot of questions: Why would anyone join a gang? What were the benefits? Didn't they get bored hanging out in stairwells—and how could anyone possibly stand the smell of

urine for that long? The surveys in my bag felt heavy and useless. I began to worry about my relationship with Professor Wilson. He certainly wouldn't approve of my experimental journey, done without his approval, and I wondered whether he would pull me off the project if he found out what I'd done. The voice of my father—a professor himself—entered my head. He had always given me advice about education. Throughout my college years, he stressed the need to listen to my teachers, and when I shipped off to Chicago, he told me that the key to success in graduate school would be to develop a good relationship with my advisers.

I took a shower and thought about the rest of my day. I had books to read, papers to write, some laundry to do. But none of that seemed very significant. I tried to sleep, but the rest was fitful. I couldn't get the previous night out of my head. I thought of calling someone, but whom? I wasn't close with any other members of Wilson's research team—and they, too, would probably be upset to find out what I'd done. I realized that if I truly wanted to understand the complicated lives of black youth in inner-city Chicago, I had only one good option: to accept J.T.'s counsel and hang out with people. So I headed back to the Lake Park projects to see if I could once again find J.T. and his gang.

wasn't really scared as I walked north along Cottage Grove Avenue. A little nervous, certainly, but I was pretty sure that J.T. didn't see me as any kind of a threat. Worst-case scenario? Embarrassment. He and his gang would ask me to leave or they'd laugh at my desire to get to know them better.

It was maybe two o'clock in the afternoon when I arrived. This time I came bearing a six-pack of beer. There were about a dozen young men out front of Number 4040, standing around their cars.

Some of them began to point at me. A few others were playing handball by throwing a tennis ball against the building. As I drew close, all of them turned to watch me.

"You got to be kidding me," I heard someone say. Then I saw J.T., leaning back against a car, smiling and shaking his head.

"Beer?" I said, tossing him a bottle. "You said I should hang out with folks if I want to know what their life was like."

J.T. didn't answer. A few of the guys burst out laughing in disbelief. "He's crazy, I told you!" said one.

"Nigger thinks he's going to hang out with us!"

"I still think he's a Latin King."

Finally J.T. spoke up. "All right, the brother wants to hang out," he said, unfazed. "Let him hang out!"

J.T. grinned and opened up his bottle. Others came around and quickly grabbed the rest of the beers. Then, surprisingly, they all went back to their business. They didn't seem to be discussing anything very pressing, nor were they talking about any criminal activities. They mainly talked about what kind of rims to put on their cars. A few of them took care of the drug customers, handing vials of crack to the people who walked over from nearby buildings or drove up in run-down cars. In the distance I could see a few churchgoers on a Sunday stroll. A handful of gang members stood guard in front of Number 4040, and after a time some of the guys hanging out near the cars relieved them.

J.T. had a lot of questions for me: *You always use those surveys? Can you get a good job after you finish with this research? Why don't you study your own people?*

This last one would become one of his favorites. I felt a strange kind of intimacy with J.T., unlike the bond I'd felt even with good friends. It would have been hard to explain then and is just as hard now, but we had somehow connected in an instant, and deeply.

I tried to act nonchalant when J.T. asked me these questions, but inside I was overjoyed that he was curious about my work. I had a feeling that I was talking to someone about whom most people probably knew little. I didn't know exactly where our conversations might lead, but I sensed I was getting a unique perspective on life in a poor neighborhood. There were plenty of sociological studies on economically disenfranchised youth, but most relied on dry statistics of unemployment, crime, and family hardship. I had joined Bill Wilson's team in hopes of getting closer to the ground. My opportunity to do just that was standing right in front of me.

Every now and then, J.T. went inside the building to meet in private with someone who had driven up in a car.

I played a little handball and, showing off my hard-won suburban soccer skills, bounced the tennis ball off my head a few dozen times. Some of the older gang members were curious about my identity; my role at the university; and of course the reason I had returned. They all looked as tired as I was, and it felt as if we were all taking some welcome comic relief in one another's presence.

In general, I said very little. I asked no "meaningful" questions—mostly about their cars, why they were jacked up so high and whether they changed their own oil—and quickly saw that this strategy might actually work. I had learned the night before that they weren't very receptive to interview questions; they probably had plenty of that from cops, social workers, and the occasional journalist. So I just made small talk, trying to pass the time and act as if I'd been there before.

When J.T. returned from a trip into the building, everyone straightened up a bit.

"Okay!" he shouted. "They're ready, let's go over there." He ordered a few younger members into the building's lobby and mentioned the others to get into their cars. He looked at me in a funny

way. He smiled. I could tell that he was wondering what to say to me. I hoped he was going to invite me along to wherever they were going.

"You got balls," he said. "I'll give you that. We have to run. Why don't you meet me here next week. Early morning, all right?"

This offer took me by surprise. But I certainly wasn't going to turn him down. J.T. put out his hand, and I shook it. I tried again to think of something witty to say. "Yeah, sure," I said, "but you're buying next time."

He turned and hustled toward his car, a shiny purple Malibu Classic with gold rims. All of a sudden, there was no one left standing around but me.