

The barrios which weren't incorporated, including Las Lomas, became self-contained and forbidden, incubators of rebellion which local media, generally controlled by suburban Whites, labelled havens of crime.

5 For years, nobody ventured into Las Lomas unless they had to be there. Buses refused to provide residents there any service. Sheriff's deputies entered it with full firepower and ample backup, hardly ever alone.

10 One of the county's most devastated increases in gang activity centered on Las Lomas.

We didn't call ourselves gangs. We called ourselves clubs or *clicas*. In the back lot of the local elementary school, about a year after Tino's death, five of us gathered in the grass and created a club – "Thee Impersonations," the "Thee" being an old English usage that other clubs would adopt because it made everything sound
15 classier, nobler, *badder*. It was something to belong to – something that was ours. We weren't in boy scouts, in sports teams or camping groups. Thee Impersonations is how we wove something out of the threads of nothing.

"We all taking a pledge," Miguel Robles said. "A pledge to be for each other. To stand up for the *clica*. Thee Impersonations will never let you down. Don't ever let
20 Thee Impersonations down."

Miguel was 11 years old like the rest of us. Dark, curly-haired and good-looking, he was also sharp in running, baseball and schoolwork – and a leader. Miguel was not prone to loudness or needless talking, but we knew he was the best among us. We made him president of our club.

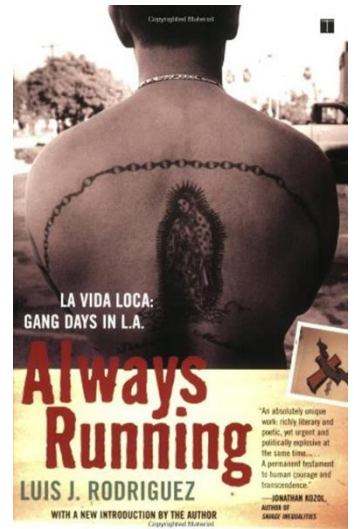
25 Thee Impersonations was born of necessity. It started one day at the school during lunch break. A few of us guys were standing around talking to some girls – girls we were beginning to see as women. [...]

Older dudes from junior high school, or even some who didn't go to school, would come to the school and give us chilled looks as they scoped out the young
30 women.

That day, a caravan of low-scraping cars slow-dragged in front of the school. A crew of mean-looking *vatos* piled out, armed with chains, bats, metal pipes and zip guns.

"Thee Mystics rule," one of them yelled from the other side of the school fence.

35 Thee Mystics were a tough up-and-coming group. They fired their rigged .22s at the school and broke a couple of windows with stones. They rammed through the



gate and front entrances. Several not-so-swift dudes who stood in their way got beat. Even teachers ran for cover. Terror filled everyone's eyes.

I froze as the head-stomping came dangerously my way. But I was also intrigued.
40 I wanted this power. I wanted to be able to bring a whole school to its knees and even make teachers squirm. All my school life until then had been poised against me: telling me what to be, what to say, how to say it. I was a broken boy, shy and fearful. I wanted what Thee Mystics had: I wanted the power to hurt somebody.

Police sirens broke the spell. Dudes scattered in all directions. But Thee Mystics
45 had done their damage. They had left their mark on the school – and on me.

Miguel and the rest of us started Thee Impersonations because we needed protection. There were other clubs popping up all over, many challenging anybody who wasn't into anything. All of a sudden every dude had to claim a clique.

Some of these clubs included Thee Ravens, The Superiors, Latin Legions, Thee
50 Imitations, Los Santos and Chug-a-lug (a curious mix of Anglo and Mexican dudes). These were the "Southside" clubs (for South San Gabriel). The biggest on the Southside then were Thee Illusions and their allies: Thee Mystics.

Over in San Gabriel, other cliques were formed such as Thee Regents, The Chancellors, Little Gents, The Intruders and Little Jesters.

Most of the clubs began quite innocently. Maybe they were a team of guys for
55 friendly football. Sometimes they were set up for trips to the beach or the mountains. But some became more organized. They obtained jackets, with their own colors, and identification cards. Later a few of the cliques became car clubs, who invested what little they had in bouncing lowriders, streetwise "shorts," splashed with colors, which
60 cruised the main drags of local barrios or the main cruising spot we called *the boulevard*: Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles.

Then also some of the clubs metamorphosed into something more unpredictable, more encompassing. Something more deadly.