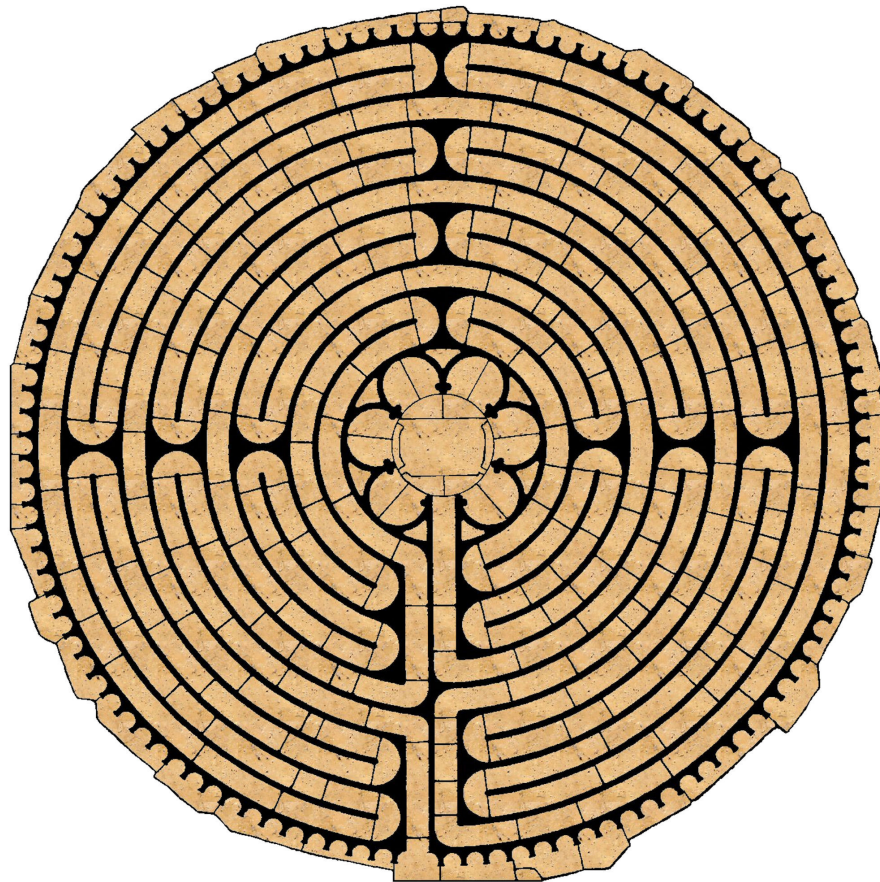


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David William Foster. *Picturing the Barrio: Ten Chicano Photographers*.
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David William Foster, whose latest works have focused primarily on the visual arts genres of graphic narrative and photography, recognizes in the introduction to this 2017 study of Chicano photographers and their works that the “sheer volume of artistic production generated by those who self-identify as United States Latinos, or Hispanics, or Mexican Americans, or Chicano, as well as an impressive range of alternative designations, has now generated a significant infrastructure of critical institutions and scholarship” (3). Concomitantly, Foster, who was Regent’s Professor of Spanish and Women and Gender Studies at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona up until his death in 2020, notes the rather significant lack of criticism focusing on the expressive photography produced within these communities, especially academic studies that focus on the high visibility of such photography and how it has provided a sense of legitimacy to the Chicano community. Foster corrects this specific academic lacuna by analyzing the vital, visual, linguistic, and cultural Chicano expressions captured by ten photographers, through what he calls “the multiple languages of photography” (3).

In ten chapters, Foster explores and analyzes imagery produced by a grouping of photographers—his grouping—from various barrios of the U.S. southwest, framing his analyses through thematic referents that are divided into three categories. Chapters 1-4 focus on the importance of the barrio to the Chicano culture; Chapters 5 and 6 analyze the subjectivity of self-image; and Chapters 7-10 explore photographic expressions of Chicano cultural perspectives. Within these, Foster analyzes themes presented in these works, such as women’s bodies and nature, homosociality and *vatos*, Chicanos and mariachis, low riders and masculinity, women’s bodies and expressions of clothing, and—perhaps most timely—the lynching of Mexican American men and other minorities.

Part I, “The Barrio: A Chicano Anchor,” begins with analyses of photographer Ricardo Valverde, whose works document the Chicano barrios of east Los Angeles. Foster notes how the photographer, who also worked closely with the Los Angeles arts community, rendered imagery of

both sides of the border, especially that of quotidian individuals inhabiting these spaces. Foster clarifies the role of geography in the artist's oeuvre: "In this fashion, Valverde, whose photograph is always attuned to the experience of geographical space, demonstrates not the discontinuity between one and another side of the border, but the continuities between them to the degree to which the inhabitants of the barrio must always be aware of the contingencies of the collapsible space they inhabit" (19). Foster emphasizes the temporality, ephemerality, and frailty of the Chicano barrio on both sides of the border by alluding to two different concepts of collapsibility specific to California: seismic activity and urban planning, both of which can eradicate a barrio practically overnight. Foster also underscores Valverde's valuable contribution to the visual documentation of the Chicano queer body (28).¹

While Valverde's work, and indeed that of the majority of photographers covered in this book, are documentary in nature, the imagery of the second photographer, Kathy Vargas, is categorized by Foster as more composed, at once artistic, intimate, individual, and even painterly. The photographer is famous for colorizing black and white photographs—particularly portraits—and as Foster observes, Vargas's oeuvre moves beyond documenting life to create art: "Vargas situates the photograph clearly in the same context as any constructed artistic object, one in which transparency of meaning is replaced by complex visual textures that induce speculative and open-minded interpretations" (31). Yet Vargas's photography *does* document members of the Chicano barrio through her artistic compositions, especially those that portray family members, inspiring the beholder to appreciate not only their lives and history, but also their very limited and treasured time with us on Earth. Foster underscores how Vargas's focus on modifying such images through the inclusion of still life objects does not take away from the metonymic significance that these images represent to past and present Chicano lives. Foster is clear: Vargas's work is not kitsch; rather, it is profound, elaborate, and complex. Her focus on humanistic issues such as AIDS, *las desaparecidas*,

¹ Regarding Chicano gender, queer, and feminist criticism, Foster refers the reader to Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales's poem *I am Joaquín* (1967) and Cherrie Moraga's essay "Queer Aztlán: The Re-formation of Chicano Tribe" (1993) (156).

the Alamo and other vitally important sociohistorical Chicano themes frames her creativity.

Henry Gamboa, Jr., the third photographer in this study, juxtaposes urban and suburban spaces as framed by exile and protest. While Gamboa's work is complex, performative, and even parodic in nature, he focuses on rendering individuals within larger group struggles and protests in Chicano urban life. Foster clarifies: "When one examines the dozens of images included in Gamboa's *Urban Exile* [...], it is evident that the emphasis is on the recurring ways in which the group parodies the contexts and actions of confrontational protest. That is, the images are mostly about the group itself rather than the situations they are repudiating" (46). Foster builds upon Chon A. Noriega's study of Gamboa's work and further classifies the photographer's overall oeuvre as divided into three modalities: 1) a record of Gamboa's and the group ASCO's "guerrilla art," protests, and "art ins;" 2) photographs that provide considerable sociocultural and historic context, such as portraits; and 3) the elaborately staged photographic compositions, which provide testament to the complexity of urban Chicano life (44). Other framing referents that Foster reveals regarding Gamboa's work include cultural assimilation, (in)visibility, masculinity, Hispanophobia, and especially, protests. The reader of this chapter will likely formulate a thematic link with the ongoing Black Lives Matter protests throughout the world.

Photographer Louis Carlos Bernal concludes Part I, whose work offers the spectator a peripheral perspective of the barrios of Arizona; that is, they are peripheral in the sense that the historically significant barrios of East Los Angeles and the culturally rich history of New Mexico represent sociocultural epicenters of the Chicano communities.² Bernal, who passed away in 1993, left an extensive collection of works whose compositions Foster considers a presage to current anti-Hispanic mindsets: "Although Bernal's death in 1993 meant that his work preceded the alarming growth of anti-Hispanic sentiment in the past decade, it was nevertheless certainly

² Readers specifically interested in the barrios of the Phoenix, Arizona region will find Foster's previous work, *Glimpses of Phoenix: The Desert Metropolis in Written and Visual Media* (2013), particularly insightful. In this text, Foster lovingly explores the cultural, historic, yet now-paved-over Chicano barrios in and around Phoenix.

dedicated to the unique existential qualities of Chicanismo that he felt were often masked by the misleading term *Mexican American*" (60). Such an existentialism is reflected in the way Bernal composed renderings that reflect a profound relationship between the photographer and his subjects (71). His focus on quotidian rituals and customs, especially related to the Catholic Church, blossomed once he transitioned from black and white to color photography. Through color, Foster notes, Bernal captured the "essence of Barrio life and the overarching human quality he felt sustained it" (60).

Part II, "Individual Subjectivities," showcases the photography of Laura Aguilar, whose imagery focuses on queering women's bodies. Foster approaches the photographs analyzed in this chapter by addressing the optic of lookism, through which the obesity of the women photographed is considered grotesque (76). Yet it is the manner by which Aguilar places women's bodies within nature, especially in the desert of the U.S. Southwest, that Foster considers definitive of the photographer's deconstructivist compositions, specifically through a semiotic attack on the heteronormative gaze (78). Foster remarks: "[I]n the case of Aguilar's photography I would propose that it be understood to mean that even the grotesquely different [...] body is present in nature, even when we must access it through a shift in our understanding of the natural beauty, whether the natural beauty of the desert or the natural beauty of radically nonconforming human bodies" (86).

Foster next explores the term *vatos*, which represents a colloquial term for "dude, guy, pal, brother" (Luis Alberto Urrea, cit. 87) and which represents another deconstructivist optic by Tucson, Arizona photographer José Galvez. The first Chicano photojournalist to win the Pulitzer Prize for his work in 1984, Foster notes that Galvez now lives in North Carolina where he continues to document the Chicano experience there. Foster also comments on an important demographic trend that is happening all over the U.S., especially in North Carolina. Migrant farm work, which used to constitute the majority of jobs occupied by Hispanics, Chicanos and Mexican Americans, has since been replaced by a movement towards service industry work, especially in large urban centers. This is a particularly important area of study for medical interpreters, for example, who anticipate regionalisms, slang, and other cultural and linguistic variants,

along with anticipating injuries and other potential medical conditions related to previous and current occupations.

More important to Foster, however, is that this demographic shift represents nothing less than an exodus from the barrio into mainstream Anglo life, after which the memories of the barrio are subsequently romanticized. Within this scope, Foster analyzes Galvez's photographic renderings of the poem "Vatos" by Luis Alberto Urrea, categorizing them as "the reenunciated language of barrio that the (Anglo) world has made him forget" (89). The unifying referent for Foster here is the essentialist and masculinist concept of homosociality and the foundational code of Chicano machismo as "ground zero" to the culture, which Galvez deconstructs in his photography (98). Such a homosocial grouping of men usually ensures the efficacy of the patriarchy and masculinist core identity of Chicanos (98), particularly at the expense of weak men, feminized men, and especially women (90). Anyone who follows Foster's work understands that he considers that there exists a fine line between homosociality and homoaffectivity, which is at times only a moment away from homoeroticism, and which is made possible only through the essentialist exclusion of women (91). Foster considers the two dossiers from this section as integral to the ongoing study of photography within the Chicano cultures.

In Part III, "Chicano Cultural Perspectives," Foster explores the work of four photographers, a grouping Foster approached as based upon the fact that their works are comprised of individual photographic projects. Photographer Miguel A. Gandert's work reveals a gaze upon the music of mariachis in Los Angeles, specifically in and around Hotel Mariachi, its performers and spectators, and its subsequent recuperation from ruin. Foster expounds the value of mariachi music within Chicano culture as a way of maintaining "traditional Mexican values" through the masculine national image so emphatically enforced after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 (101). With the mariachi serving as a thematic tether to Mexican culture in Gandert's collection, Foster emphasizes both nostalgia and affirmation of Mexican customs and traditions through the photographic documentation of the fifty-year plus recuperation of the famous Los Angeles hotel.

Foster next explores the parallel phenomena of lowriding and the associated displays of masculinity as defiant expressions of resistance to

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incorporation and assimilation of Chicano society into Anglo society and culture. The photographs produced by Art Meza engage the beholder through what Foster considers “ostentatious” imagery, or that which engages the senses. Profane and sacred imagery is juxtaposed in vehicle decorations, for example, and the “open carburetors,” which create loud noises, suggest an aggressive presence. Yet Foster underscores how the lowrider phenomenon represents nothing less than a significantly high level of visibility of Chicano masculinity, especially through expressions of their presence in Anglo streets and, more importantly, having prospered in Anglo society. They possess that which their fathers and grandfathers could not: American cars decorated and personalized in a manner that at once defies assimilation and anti-Hispanic racism (114-16).

Foster considers Delilah Montoya’s perspective on female Chicana boxers a unique addition to the visual iconography of the Chicano experience, especially as framed by the expected social scripts regarding femininity, masculinity, *marianismo*, and sexism in sport. Montoya’s photography renders the individual, not necessarily the industry, a quality Foster considers integral to the photographer’s oeuvre. The theme of female masculinity is carefully approached by the photographer, who challenges stereotypical female gender roles and the expectation that female boxers are lesbians. Foster notes that the photographer calls her photographic subjects “*malcriadas*,” who “defy feminine propriety, passivity, demureness as typified in the Mexican/Chicano community by the protagonist of *quinceañera*” (sweet fifteen) celebrations and its core meaning of Daddy’s good girl being offered to a coterie of young, male suitors [...]” (126). Foster concludes: “[T]he way in which Montoya is careful to give them individual identities and not to yield to deleterious commonplaces about masculinized bodies and disrupted or displaced sexual preferences very much ensures an exemplary stature for these twelve women” (137).

The final chapter of this study focuses on author and photographer Ken Gonzales-Day and represents perhaps one of the most urgent contemporary themes facing Chicano communities: the lynching of Mexican American men and other minorities. Foster immediately identifies the paradox faced by Gonzales-Day: on one hand, to fundamental need to document these lesser-known cases of lynching, and on the other, to avoid the perpetuation in his work of a “public spectacle” surrounding the images of executions (140). Foster explains that, while Gonzales-Day’s

photography documents the details of lynching of people of color in the Southwest, it can also serve as a source of fetichism and voyeurism, which has the potentiality to convert the photographs into souvenirs. Foster observes that Gonzales-Day instead creates a visual record that serves to correct nonrepresentation, while avoiding the effects of fetichism that can result from overexposure to this act of racial violence (151). Foster concludes:

Yet herein lies the paradox of Gonzales-Day's work. Because, on the one hand, if he wishes to energetically challenge the tradition of the postcards and mementos of the practice of lynching in the postbellum South and the frontier West, Gonzales-Day also wishes to correct the demographic record of the practice by bringing to the fore its use in the frontier West, most especially since it predominantly affected people of color, as it did in the postbellum South. In the pursuit of this instance of erased history, Gonzales-Day must recover both the written and the visual record of the presence of lynching in the frontier West and, in the confection of his historical treatise on the subject, engage in the reproduction of pertinent images [...]. (146)

While Foster clarifies that the goal of this book is not to establish a list of canonical artists or their respective oeuvres within the genre of Chicano photography, it will serve the reader with a solid introduction to highly visible photographers from the U.S. southwest whose works have documented their respective Chicano experiences. Foster concludes that he hopes the study will stimulate academic conversation and "the scholarly interest it richly deserves" (157).

Daniel Holcombe
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