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Jose Montoya dies at 81; leading figure in California Latino culture

Jose Montoya, the former Sacramento poet laureate, became a leading figure in California Latino culture of the post-World War II era.

By Reed Johnson

8:43 PM PDT, October 4, 2013

The little farm towns of Central California held a poetry all their own for Jose Montoya.

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From childhood he knew their people, mostly immigrant laborers like his own family. He knew the labyrinthine rows of fruit trees, the dirt-floor houses and trailer camps. He knew the hardship and humanity of places named Del Rey and Fowler and Laton, Yuba City and Delano.

"He just marveled that they had such a singsongy ring to them," said the poet's son, actor-playwright Richard Montoya of the L.A. performance group Culture Clash.

As a man, Jose Montoya would translate his knowledge and affection for those landscapes and their *campesino* residents into poems like "The Resonant Valley" and "El Sol y Los de Abajo" — The Sun and Those Below, or, colloquially, the Underdogs — as well as into drawings, prints and paintings etched in fierce empathy.

He also would channel his awareness of migrant workers' harsh living conditions into a lifetime of political activism and union organizing that would link his name with those of close friends like Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, co-founders of the United Farm Workers.

And he would synthesize his various roles and concerns — community organizer, Chicano-rights advocate, Central Valley bard — as a co-founder of the Rebel Chicano Art Front (RCAF), the slyly subversive Sacramento art collective later re-christened the Royal Chicano Air Force.

Montoya, a leading figure in California Latino culture of the post-World War II era, died Sept. 25 at his Sacramento home. The former Sacramento poet laureate, who had been battling lymphoma, was 81.

Montoya's best-known poems, many written in a fluid, un-self-conscious blending of English, Spanish and Chicano slang, and frequently delivered at public readings, express what one scholar characterized as "a deep concern and love for his people ... with a sense of barely muted outrage at their social mistreatment."

Although his work drew on folkloric sources of inspiration, it also reflected his urbane and analytical sensibility, honed during his decades as a teacher, including more than a quarter-century as a professor of art, photography and education at Cal State Sacramento.

An admirer of John Steinbeck, Dylan Thomas and Walt Whitman, Montoya displayed a love of bicultural

wordplay, weaving together pachuco street idioms and Beat cadences, Mexican *corrido* lyricism and modernist poetics, into works that possessed both a roughneck elegance and a visceral sense of place.

"There was the element of his artistic practice that was about being very much engaged with a local community," said Chon Noriega, a professor at UCLA and director of its Chicano Studies Research Center. "And it's at that very local level where it ultimately comes down to human interaction, and helping people, or helping an area and a community, to find a voice."

Born May 28, 1932, on a ranch near Albuquerque, Montoya moved with his family to California after his father took a job as a farm laborer in the San Joaquin Valley. By age 9 he was working in the fields alongside his relatives.

Encouraged by teachers, he began to write essays, including one about the humiliating time his father spent in prison for making illegal liquor during Prohibition. After graduating from high school — the first member of his family to do so — he served on a U.S. Navy minesweeper during the Korean War. He went on to college under the G.I. Bill, earning a bachelor's degree in fine arts from the California College of Arts and Crafts and a master's degree in fine arts from Cal State Sacramento, before finding his way into teaching high school.

One of Montoya's earliest poems, an homage to his mother titled "La Jefita" (an affectionate term meaning "little boss"), distills the idea of how communal bonds and familial love can offset the difficulties of life among the disadvantaged:

When I remember the camps / And the nights and the sounds / Of those nights in tents or / Carts I remember my jefita's / Rolling pin / Klik-clok; klik-clak-clok / And her small cough. / (I swear she never slept!)

Another of his poems, "El Louie," is an ode to a pachuco who, returning to California after serving in the Korean War, struggles to reassimilate and to tame his inner demons. The central character is modeled after a Fresno zoot suiter, a member of the Chicano and African American subculture that sported high-waisted trousers and long coats, whom Montoya had known from his youth.

By the early 1960s, he began working on behalf of immigrant and farmworker rights and exploring ways to use art to advance social causes. In a statement last week, Dolores Huerta said Montoya had "utilized his art and activism in the name of social justice."

"His creativity and sense of humor illuminated our struggle and always motivated us to keep pushing forward," she wrote.

In addition to his son Richard, Montoya is survived by his other children Gina, Joe Jr., Carlos, Malaquias, Vincent, Tomas and Qianjin; his second wife, Juanita Jue; her daughter, Maya; 19 grandchildren and one great-granddaughter.

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