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California arts figure José Montoya remembered for his contributions

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By [Tony Castro](#)



José Montoya — educator, poet, artist and Chicano political activist. (Twitter)

Poet and artist José Montoya, a foundational figure in California Latino culture in the decades after World War II, is being remembered as an activist whose name is linked with Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, co-founders of the United Farm Workers.

“His creativity and sense of humor illuminated our struggle and always motivated us to keep pushing forward,” Huerta has recalled as Latina arts leaders in the Golden State gathered Thursday to celebrate Montoya’s life in Sacramento.



Montoya's poems were known for their fluid, "un-self-conscious" blending of English, Spanish and Chicano slang. (Twitter)

Huerrta, [Edward James Olmos](#) and "Zoot Suit" playwright Luis Valdez were among those at the public gathering memorializing the life, art and times of the former Sacramento poet laureate, who had been battling lymphoma when he died last year. He was 81.

"My father's sensitivity to all people, and especially to people of modest means, meant to us that we had a mandate to present a large, free, public event," said Gina Montoya, the oldest of Jose Montoya's eight children, which is why the family waited so long for an open tribute.

Montoya's poems

Montoya's poems were known for their fluid, "un-self-conscious" blending of English, [Spanish and Chicano](#) slang that he often delivered at public readings and that one scholar described as filled with "a deep concern and love for his people... with a sense of barely muted outrage at their social condition."

"There was the element of his artistic practice that was about being very much engaged with a local community," said Chon Noriega, director of the [Chicano Studies Research Center](#) at UCLA.

"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."

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

Montoya was born May 28, 1932, on a ranch near Albuquerque, and moved with his family to California after his father took a job as a farm laborer in the San Joaquin Valley.

By the age of nine, Montoya was toiling in the fields alongside his family. By the 1960s, said Huerta, he was working as an activist for immigrant and [farmworker rights](#) and using his art to advance social causes.

Montoya authored three collections of poetry, among them “In Formation: 20 Years of Joda,” and he co-founded the Royal Chicano Air Force, a collective of Chicano artist-activists.

His work included poems about the farmworkers and their lives such as and “El Sol y Los de Abajo” and “The Resonant Valley,” and many of his paintings and drawings showed the plight of the hard work in the fields.

“(Montoya) utilized his art and activism in the name of social justice,” said Huerta.

But Montoya was also a strong patriot, serving on a U.S. Navy minesweeper during the Korean War.

He found time to read the works of John Steinbeck, Dylan Thomas and Walt Whitman, using their influence for his own work that often mixed [Mexican corrido lyricism](#) and pachuco street idioms with traditional American literary modernism.

Montoya studied at San Diego City College and the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, then began a teaching career in Northern California before becoming an art professor at Cal State University Sacramento.

“Jose taught us how to be bold, how to be courageous, how to be clear, how to be strong and that example empowered many people, generations of farmworkers who were subjugated and oppressed,” said Juan Carrillo, former director of the California State Arts Council.

“In 1967, there was no Latino caucus in the Legislature, no Latino political presence, and Jose Montoya absolutely helped politicize Latinos.”

At the end of his life, recalled his daughter Gina, “he would roll his eyes and say, ‘Get the horses, I have to get into the sun.’”