

# El Sol Y Los De Abajo

and other R.C.A.F. poems

por JOSE MONTOYA





# FOREWORD

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There he stands. A pachuco in a zoot suit: high-waisted tapering trousers held up by suspenders, wingtip shoes, and a wide-brimmed fedora. He holds his long dress suit jacket open, like a flasher in a trench coat, but reveals instead a dozen portraits of pachucos and pachucas attached to the inside of the jacket (fig. 1). There is also a drawing of a zoot suiter's clothing, showing just the detail where the pegged pants meet the wingtips, and another drawing of a barrio dog.<sup>1</sup> The artworks exposed here represent members of an out-group whose social visibility through public exhibition was considered obscene, shameful, and punishable by law or mob action. Indeed, both happened in Los Angeles during 1943, a year that saw the mass trial and conviction of seventeen young men in the "Sleepy Lagoon murder" case (later overturned due to judicial bias), followed by the zoot suit riots, in which sailors from the US Navy roamed East LA beating elaborately dressed Mexican American youths, tearing off their zoot suits, and cutting their hair.

The artist, José Montoya, was eleven at the time of the sailor riots. He was profoundly influenced by the pachucos and pachucas who were part of his everyday life in the Central Valley, where he worked alongside his family as a migrant farmworker. For him, these youths served as role models for cultural resistance through an excessively stylized self-presentation. Ironically, Montoya would himself serve in the US Navy during the Korean War, returning to study art under the GI Bill. He became a high school teacher and then a professor at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). There he established the Barrio Art Program, bringing his students into the community to teach art to youth and the elderly. By 1969 he also turned to poetry, writing one of the most anthologized poems of the Chicano movement, "El Louie." Over the next few years, Montoya and other artists and poets teaching at CSUS formed a collective they called the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF). The Sacramento-based art collective was a cultural and political force

Figure 1. José Montoya, untitled, undated drawing. Ink on paper, 11 × 8.5 inches.

in the region, setting up an arts center, bookstore, and gallery, creating silkscreen prints and murals, developing cultural and educational programs, and even establishing its own band. Throughout these years, the pachuco figure informed Montoya's sense of the arts as an integral part of community life. In the 1970s he helped promulgate the pachuco figure as part of a longer genealogy of cultural resistance: "Imagine all of the creativity that forms the daily aesthetics of barrio life. . . . It is easy to recognize that that energy, that creative force, has always existed. It had to be there to compel our ancestors to endure against such hardships."<sup>2</sup>

In this book, Ella Maria Diaz provides an in-depth study of the life and times of an artist, teacher, and community activist, and of the unique body of work that he created across poetry, prose, music, and visual art. Diaz gives close attention to artwork and poetry spanning Montoya's entire career, exploring the productive tension between memory and the archive, expression and action, and community and nation. She sets his work in the context of institutional matrices, dominant and alternative canons, and the general failure of "American" academic studies of literature, art, and social history to reckon with the challenge presented by Montoya's boundary crossing throughout his life. But above all, she provides us a history of "Montoya's mastery of storytelling" across mediums amid a period of profound change in both social relations and artistic practice in the United States, offering her study as a first step in "the recovery of a major figure in American art and letters."

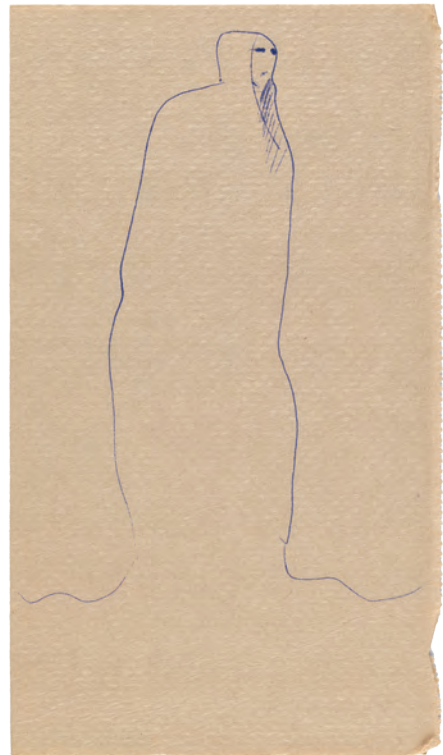
Montoya's pachuco drawing requires closer examination, since it offers a key to his work. The ink-on-paper work is from around the time of his exhibition, *José Montoya's Pachuco Art: A Historical Update (1977–78)*. But it also gives insight into the artist's broader career and artistic production from the late 1950s until his death in 2013. In particular, the artwork brings together different time periods and milieus from across Montoya's lifetime: the pachuco era, the Beat movement, the Chicano movement, and the present in which the work was made. The zoot suit clothing conjures a pachuco youth, while the figure's face and facial hair suggest a middle-aged beatnik. In fact, the figure closely resembles an adult Montoya then in his late forties, making the artist and his artwork a bridge across these different periods. In the drawing, both the pachuco figure

and the exhibition of Chicano art are equated, satirically, with obscenity—that is, with physical and verbal expressions that are *not* protected by the First Amendment. Indeed, Chicano artists were largely denigrated in the mainstream press and exiled from public art museums in the 1970s. As Montoya wrote at the time, “The man has gone berserk! And if we allow ourselves to believe what we read in the newspapers and what we see in the six o’clock news report, it would appear to be our fault. . . . We need to have creative Chicano and Chicana attorneys [*sic*] to defend our poets, our muralists, our performers, our musicologists and our filmmakers.”<sup>3</sup> Here, as an artistic response, Montoya’s drawing presents the zoot suiter’s jacket as the museum for Chicano art—the place from which it can be seen, preserved, and valued.

The body inside the zoot suit is central to understanding José Montoya’s work. You see it in Chicana and Chicano figures he sketched in thousands of drawings on letterhead, scrap paper, and multifold paper towels. The paper towels, a ubiquitous staple of restaurant kitchens, public schools, and artist studios, are fittingly described by manufacturers as “natural brown,” like the artist’s subjects and the artist himself. The drawings include portraits of individuals from the Mexican-descent community in the United States, some based on Montoya’s memories since childhood, others on personal observation in the present. These portraits represent a community that is understood as “multifold”—that is, numerous and varied. Each portrait occupies just one of six panels of a multifold towel, the unmarked sides suggesting the scale and limits of his project vis-à-vis such a diverse population. In each figure, one sees an individual and a type, as well as a specific place and the generic markers of a public sphere defined by barrio streets, cantinas, churches, and work sites, but also simply by the figure’s style of clothing or military uniform set against a blank page. In some portraits, Montoya explores the threshold between figure and line, rendering a pachuco’s face with six lines and the outline of a figure that seemingly emerges out of the ground with just three lines (figs. 2, 3). In Montoya’s work, his figures become public bodies, occupying social space, challenging a norm that does not include the working class, let alone the Mexican Americans who swell its ranks. As his son, Richard Montoya, explains about this oeuvre, “The biggest lesson perhaps is that there is

Figure 2. José Montoya, untitled, undated drawing.  
Ink on paper, 11 × 8.5 inches.

Figure 3. José Montoya, untitled, undated drawing.  
Ink on paper, 9 × 5 inches.



little objectification here.”<sup>4</sup> These are subjects, not objects, rendered in line and color to mark a social presence, while not offering the fantasy of knowing anything more about them. For that, you need to enter into a dialogue, and that will have to take place outside the work of art. The transformation on paper from object to subject occurs not through the aesthetic virtues of isolated works of art but through the artist’s lifelong commitment conveyed through a voluminous body of work that included drawing, screenprint, painting, poetry, essays, and performance. The body is not only in the work, or a body of work, but is also the artist himself, engaging with an audience through spoken word and song.

Montoya’s poetry also “sketches” its subjects with the same economy as his drawings, only here the *lines* are short and the *color* is found in the interlingual space between English, Spanish, and, often, the caló of the pachuco. Looked at as a visual object, his poems are often quite *flaco*, the lines sometimes just one word long, forming a stack of words, as in “Beautiful Performance at Evening Time” (1977), where the longest line offers a clue to how to read the poem aloud: “Antics performed in slow motion—.” There is no easy scansion here, no taming his poetry through a formulaic, sing-song incantation in iambic pentameter, and also no assurances that art can always make sense of the world. This poem is about nature, with humans merely a subset of nature; it is about life as a performance that ends; and it is about the poem itself, poetry, and art. There is a playfully ironic gesture to the “infinite” and the “universe,” while the beauty signaled in the title resides in impermanence, change, and death. And also laughter! Montoya’s poetry engages not only cosmic ironies but also what could be called the bawdy politic: the witty slights received and given that structure our daily life and that allow us to laugh at ourselves, collectively. In “A Moco Poem” (1972), the poet laments the small bit of snot on his mustache that no one pointed out to him. In “The Faceless Wonder” (1975), Montoya chides a friend who shaved off his beard, since it now reveals his fat cheeks, making him too ugly for even his own hand to pleasure him. The bawdy politic is in the value of communication, no matter how awkward its message, or as Montoya demands at the end of “A Moco Poem,” “Tell me about it!”

In Montoya’s work one encounters a poetry and visual art wherein the politics is at ground level, not the realist sense of

life “as it is,” but rather the impressionistic memories, experiences, and stylish acts of resilience that inform the witty linguistic presence of the marginalized. As René Yañez noted, “José had an ability to get along with and capture stories from everybody, *tecatos*, *motos*, *borrachos*, and street folk. He treated the pain of others with respect, which earned him their trust.”<sup>5</sup> Montoya eschews the grand leap into abstraction, rationalism, and ideological certitude, making fun of such a leap instead and sticking with troubling details and aphoristic fragments derived from everyday life. Such is his recurring warning that the “us” fighting for social justice during the Chicano movement can also come to occupy the place of the oppressors. In his poem “Los They Are Us” (1977), he observes, “Only the system remains the same, / But the faces are our faces!” His aphoristic approach, then, becomes an alternative to “the system” and to systemic thinking, serving instead as “a micro-model of empirical inquiry”—after all, aphorisms and their visual counterparts are immediate and tangible, and can be tested against our own experiences and observations.<sup>6</sup> This is the scientific method found in daily life and on the margins. It is in these allusive phrases that Montoya begins the search for knowledge about the world.

In this regard, Montoya’s public role as an artist and activist must be seen as working hand in hand with his concurrent lifelong role as a teacher. In both instances, his function is not to provide the solution but to bring others into the process of working the problem. Earlier I mentioned dialogue, and that remains key to understanding his artwork. For those of us who knew José, who spent time in dialogue with him, it is hard to escape the sense that the artist himself was the artwork and that his numerous poems, songs, drawings, screenprints, and paintings are just one part of the archive through which we must now approach the artist and his times. That is not to say that his art does not demand close attention through rigorous formal and contextual analyses. Quite the contrary. But the artist’s presence, his body, his social being matter. As his son wrote:

Paradoxes: The public man whose very public life was about being at the center of many great Chicano moments. They could be chaotic times, yet his lens was astonishingly selfless. Still. Calm. His steady hand, his drawing was very intimate, almost private, yet carried out in large public spaces.<sup>7</sup>



When I started as a graduate student in an interdisciplinary PhD program at Stanford University in 1987, I quickly learned that José Montoya had visited the campus eight years earlier, flying there from Sacramento in an “adobe airplane” of the Royal Chicano Air Force. His 1979 presentation at the First Annual Chicano Film Series at Stanford, “Thoughts on la Cultura, the Media, Con Safos and Survival,” became one of the major manifestoes of the Chicano movement, notable for its attention to both the arts and the role of mass media in the struggle for social justice.

This manifesto was crucial for me in my own research on Chicano cinema, since it raised issues not in the specialized languages of academia, the entertainment industry, and media policy, but in the vernacular of a politicized minority community. And it was soulful and humane, not doctrinaire. At the time, I was on the fence about continuing as a graduate student—and really had no thoughts whatsoever about becoming a professor—since it seemed so removed from the world. I was the first person in my family to earn a BA, so I had no role models. Fortunately, there were nonacademics at Stanford who filled in the gaps and provided support (Cecilia Burciaga, Tony Burciaga, and Roberto Trujillo); a fellow student whose experiences and outlook were similar to mine (María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, now a professor at New York University); and also the professor who became my mentor and whose own career exemplified how one could move between academia and other communities (Tomás Ybarra-Frausto). Ironically, when I started tracking down “Thoughts on la Cultura” in the campus library, I seriously thought it was an elusive academic presentation that I had seen cited somewhere. What I eventually found was a mimeographed manifesto published by the Galería de la Raza, a community-based art space in San Francisco. But the essay actually fulfilled both roles: as both secondary and primary source, and as theory and practice. In this way, José had created a vital link between a private research university and the Chicano community, one that helped guide me toward academia as much as the pachuco had guided him in his career as an artist and teacher.

Needless to say, I continued my graduate studies and eventually wrote a very academic dissertation. That *was* the imperative and I was motivated to do it well. But I also began writing for

film festival brochures, exhibition program notes, advocacy newsletters, and other public venues. As a professor starting in 1991, I turned my attention from cinema to the arts more broadly, and José provided not just a model but also invaluable encouragement for me to develop my own voice. In particular, I will always treasure a conversation we had over lunch in Santa Barbara in January 2001. We were there for a public program around the opening of the exhibition *¿Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California*. I was one of the curators and was also editing the catalog, which was to be released in August that year.<sup>8</sup> I was thrilled that José had just agreed to allow us to publish his keynote presentation that day in the catalog as the opening artist statement, which would follow my introduction. After all, as he had just demonstrated in his presentation, José was a powerful inspiration through his words, his art, and his cultural presence. His expansive body of work brought much-needed dignity, compassion, and humor to a difficult world. Yet as our lunch made clear to me, such things spring from a simple and oh-so-rare act of recognition.

Indeed, to my surprise, what we talked about over lunch was an essay that I had written a year earlier for *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900–2000*, an exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In that essay I drew upon the strategies used by artists to challenge historical thinking, asking, “But what if our commonsense history was wrong, not as a matter of interpretation, but simple chronology?” I went on to examine three works of Chicano art, including a 1966 Beat film-poem by Fresno native Ernie Palomino called *My Trip in a '52 Ford*. In my introduction to the film, I summed up the history it captured as a lost moment: “The connection between the Beat and Chicano art movements—one that can still be heard, for example, in any poem by José Montoya (“El Louie” being the most famous)—never made it into the history books, as scholars of each movement articulated self-contained and sui generis borders.”<sup>9</sup> I had not expected José to talk about, or even *know* about, this essay, but he explained that he and other RCAF members had read it aloud as they flew their adobe airplane down to Santa Barbara. And when they got to the section on *My Trip in a '52 Ford*, they had phoned up Ernie Palomino so he could listen in as they read! I was astounded, honored, then embarrassed, and immediately started to apologize. I mean, my

essay was neither academic nor political, neither high theory nor vernacular manifesto, but some strange conceptual hybrid that I could not help but produce. It was certainly not what the museum editors had expected. José smiled and waved off my apology and in the kindest yet most direct way told me that each of us had to contribute in our own way. And he seemed to really like the piece! His thoughtful insights about the essay and his encouragement to me as a writer meant the world to me as a young scholar trying to be true to the spirit of the Chicano movement while finding my own voice in my own time and place.

Going forward, I carry with me the gift of that lunch, of José's continuing presence in my life, and of the most valuable image an academic could have to illustrate his career: the image of José Montoya reading my essay out loud in the RCAF adobe airplane as it flew along the California coast, Esteban Villa at the controls, and an adobe cell phone set on speaker with Ernie Palomino listening on the other end in Fresno. May you enjoy the journey this book offers as an introduction to José Montoya's body of work as told through archives, memories, and the stories shared through his poetry and visual art.