

The Place of the Arts in the Movement -- We asked renowned satirist, playwright, screenwriter, actor, and co-founder of the Teatro troupe Culture Clash, Richard Montoya to serve as an Advisor to the book series and lend his voice to sharing the legacy of his father, the late maestro Sacramento Poet Laureate, Jose Montoya. Jose along with his contemporaries such as Malaquias Montoya, Corky Gonzales, Lalo Guerrero, Guillermo Gomez Peña, Ester Hernandez, and Luis Valdez, are credited with using the broad realm of cultural arte in the Chicano movement and renaissance as an instrument of education, advocacy, organizing, building community identity, solidarity, and agency towards effecting change in the human condition. Cultural artiste can be found up front and integral to the movement arenas of our time; civil rights, the farmworkers struggle, workers' rights, education reform, anti-war efforts, race relations, humane immigration reform, violence and gang prevention, juvenile and criminal justice reform. *We gleaned the following narrative regarding the place of cultural arte in the movement from a conversation with Richard.*

Legacy of Cultural Arte and Activism – Commentary: Richard Montoya

The impact of Teatro, artists, and poets like my father, Jose Montoya, are intimately interwoven in virtually every front of movement history. As a playwright and filmmaker, I came out of the 1980's when there was a truly thriving Chicano Teatro; at one point in California, there were some 70 active Teatro groups. It was like each barrio had its own troupe. This was really the outgrowth of the 1960's and 1970's Movimiento which gave rise to Teatro and the cultural arts as a potent tool. Artists, muralists, poets, and musicians such as my dad, had become part of the movement communal voice, conscience, and memory. There was an explosion of Teatro that had come in waves, such as El Fin del Mundo, part one, two, five; giving rise to the monumental phenomenon that was Zoot Suit; el Mundo was always the homeboy. El pachuco, y el vato loco del barrio.

By the time we formed Culture Clash in 1984 (i.e., along with fellow founders Ric Salinas, and Herbert Sigüenza), a lot of these troupes were gone. Groups like Teatro Campesino, Teatro Esperanza, Teatro Denver, and maybe ten other groups stayed vibrant. Collectively, these artistas planted the flag: the performing arts, music, and poetry became the voice of authentic Chicano, Latino, Indigeno experience and identity, preserving history, tradition, expression, and celebration, rooted in cultura. These many expressions through Teatro, music, poetry, artwork, and murals, were brilliant portrayals, sharp as a blade, it was us, by us, for us. Our sharing with the world of our beauty and sacredness as people.

I was exposed through my father and his lifetime of work. His involvement in the struggle included joining Cesar in the fields. In 1969, my dad and his colleagues Esteban Villa, Juanishi V. Orosco, Ricardo Favela, and Rudy Cuellar were teaching art in Sacramento, Frustrated with the marginalization of Chicano artists, they formed an art collective which blossomed into a movement to support the budding farmworkers' union. Artists producing many of the iconic art, posters, and images associated even today with the UFW, including the famous "HUELGA" eagle flag. The collective named themselves the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF). I am proud of the historical legacy of my father, to be counted among his contemporary cultural warriors, Malaquias Montoya, Corky Gonzalez, Lalo Guerrero, Guillermo Gomez Peña, Ester Hernandez, and Luis Valdez.

So many amazing men and women who used the broad realm of cultural arte as an instrument of education, advocacy, organizing, and building community agency to support change in the human condition. Cultura and arte became a point of authority for the Movimiento; proclaiming our sovereignty, preserving our true history, expressing our diverse identity, and realizing justice. I remember one time my father leaving the house at 3am in the morning with fellow members of the RCAF. They had designed a giant thematic mural for unveiling at a September 16th rally outside of Folsom Prison. They wanted their incarcerated brothers (as well as the Prison authorities) to wake up and see they were remembered and supported in their rights to hold ceremony and sweat-lodge while incarcerated.

Honoring the Legacy -- Arte is also a medicine for our community, particularly the healing of young ones, their restorative education, character, social, and political development. In my early work with Teatro de la Calle and later with Culture Clash, we carried on these activist arte traditions of performing in the fields, on the streets, in schools, colleges, churches, and prisons – where ever the message takes us. Arte is a powerful non-violent weapon capable of transforming hearts and minds. Even when shared in the “mainstream,” political satire, poetry, song, filmmaking, and the various expressions of arte delivers painful truths about social ills told in a palatable yet honestly incisive communique. Cultura Clash plays have always tried to honor arte as a catalyst force, taking on such issues as the unhealed wounds of conquest, racism, corporate greed, police abuse, immigration policy hypocrisy, political corruption, worker’s rights, and gentrification.

In a screenplay I wrote that just was released in full length Indie Film, tells a story of real politix, power, culture, and the often unseen face of Los Angeles when told through Latino eyes and experience. Presently, Culture Clash is performing a revival of its play, Chavez Ravine. An original and true storytelling evoking the dark American legacy of Manifest Destiny. The play is the account of modern day annexation of land, destruction of community, and forced uprooting of poor people of color in “building” of Los Angeles. An original gentrification LA Story! Under the arbitrary powers of eminent domain, three beautiful barrios were forcibly taken away from poor people of color; ostensibly, to make room for a large public housing project. After the land lay dormant for 10 years, the land was sold to make way for what is now Dodger Stadium. A dark time in Los Angeles history. As social anthropologists, Culture Clash seeks to unearth those untold stories and history of multicultural communities that are otherwise erased or ignored. Painful human experiences -- poetically, spiritually, and satirically presented in the spirit of truth and reconciliation; America’s historical anathemas told in a good way. The goal of the play was not to stage a comprehensive critical history, but to open hearts, evoke conscience, and provide an altar to find mutual understanding of honest history.

There are so many challenges facing our communities, inter-generational trauma from poverty and injustice, forces of division, and miseducation; we use our art form to fight back. This is what I was taught and witnessed as the son of a cultural warrior and now as a culture warrior in my own right. I appreciate the groups and organizations that embrace arte as a strategy of La Cultura Cura. Groups like Barrios Unidos, Tia Chucha’s Cultural Center, Corazon del Pueblo, Self-Help Graphics, the Compadres Network Circulos, Homeboys Industries, Homies Unidos, and other art programs, traditional or contemporary music, hip hop, spoken word, drum

circles, ceremonies, and danza troupes that have taken root in the community. Danza troupes like Izcalli have grown right out this cultural renaissance.

That is what I appreciate the most about my father's and his contemporary cultural warriors, their art, poetry, music, Teatro, and writings hinged on organic connection to the heartbeat of the people, the authentic representation of their experiences and hopes. Through arte they humanized those people who were demonized or discarded by the dominant culture society the most; the immigrant, the pachuco, homeboys, the farm worker, laborers, the prisoner; our objectified women and vilified young ones. They portrayed the beauty of the least powerful, capturing their sacredness, dignity, and their humble elegance. The power of movement arte is that it lifts up the true beauty of our cultura, our truth, our place in the human family, la causa. It creates a collective consciousness, inter-connectedness, a pathway to explore the origins and evolution of our diverse authentic identity and purpose as la Raza cosmica.

In my father's passing, he wrote a final three books with his last breaths – three long poetic breaths to last a lifetime. A breath: like a poem or a book of humility. Another breath: a book of courage. The final breath: a book of surrender and dignity.... He taught me by his life example that it is in our being genuinely Chicano, Latino, and Indio, that we manifest our true gifts for the world. A true multiculturalist. Our culture is the river tributary that carries us to join that place of universal humanity. We need to encourage this sentimiento or world view in our young and emerging poets, writers, artists, musicians, storytellers, and social advocates. I hope that the people who read this book, those who breath in its poems, writings, and arte, are moved to see their own sacredness and connectedness in the lives of those this society has discarded, removed, and locked away in prisons from family, community, and society. A collective spirit, heart, and voice calls out to us from these pages.