

## Poeta de la Gente:

### A Few Biographical Notes on Carmen Tafolla

by Bryce Milligan

Carmen Mary Tafolla was born on July 29, 1951, at Santa Rosa Hospital in downtown San Antonio, Texas. She grew up in a small house at 3535 San Fernando Street, in the westside neighborhood known as Barrio de la Tripa. Her Tafolla grandparents lived not far away at 2014 Buena Vista Street, in the area called Prospect Hill. The Tafolla family had lived in San Antonio since the 1850s, but other family connections relate Carmen to the very beginnings of San Antonio. One of Carmen's forebears—actually her great-great-great-great grandfather—was Domingo Flores de Abrego, a soldier who helped build the original presidio over a decade before the “first” 55 civilian settlers from the Canary Islands arrived in San Antonio on March 9, 1731. It is likely that Domingo Flores de Abrego arrived in 1717-1718, when the Presidio was founded. In 1719, Domingo and his wife, Manuela Treviño, had a child, Pedro Flores de Abrego, one of the very first Spanish-Mexican children to be born in what would soon become San Antonio de Béxar. In May of 1738, Domingo Flores de Abrego — by then retired from the military and described at that time as “one of the earliest settlers of this place”—was granted a house site on the south side of the Plaza de Armas.

The history of the Tafolla family in the Americas goes even further back. The first Tafolla born on this side of the Atlantic was Juan de Tafoya Altamirano (b. 1640). His great grandson, General Felipe Tafoya was the Alcalde of Santa Fe, New Mexico in the 1770s. Felipe's great grandson was Santiago Tafolla Sr., born in 1837, who brought the family name to San Antonio when he moved here in the 1850s. Santiago Sr. was a writer, and his memoir of his life as a scout, Indian fighter, Confederate soldier and Methodist minister, and as a victim of racism, is one of the most important documents of its era. One of Santiago's sons, Santiago Jr.—Carmen's great uncle—was an early activist, and was among the founders of the School Improvement League, the Cruz Azul Mexicano, and other Mexican American organizations in the 1920s and '30s.

Visitors to San Antonio in the nineteenth century routinely praised the city for its charm and cosmopolitan atmosphere. Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, almost all of whom were *mestizos* (a blend of Spanish and Mexican Indian), mixed with the indigenous Coahuiltecan Indians as well as Spaniards (mostly *isleños* from the Canary Islands), and the American, Irish, and German immigrants who began arriving in the 1820s. By 1854, the city was, as New York journalist and landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted wrote, a “jumble of races, costumes, and languages.” By the early twentieth century, there were large and thriving black and Chinese communities as well.

Like many other American cities, San Antonio was also in a century-long process of geographically separating races and classes. By the time Carmen Tafolla was growing up in the 1950s, the westside barrios of San Antonio were exclusively Mexican American. Many streets were unpaved, there were no public libraries, schools were under-funded and over-crowded, and drainage and many other city services were poorly maintained or lacking altogether. Mexican Americans were definitely second-class citizens. A long struggle for equality under the law was just beginning in America, and Carmen Tafolla and her poetry would be a part of that struggle.

## EDUCATION

Growing up on the westside of San Antonio in the 1950s and '60s was not easy for a young Chicana, but apparently Carmen's commitment to community improvement began early. We find a photograph of Carmen on the front page of the *San Antonio Light* newspaper—at the tender age of four years old—measuring the depth of a pothole with a yardstick! At Ivanhoe elementary school, Carmen recalls that there were “no contests, no library, no opportunities.” In middle school, she took advantage of the few opportunities that were offered, and she won the school spelling bee two years in a row, although the chief skill she learned was probably survival. Rhodes Middle School was reputedly the “roughest school on the westside” and she memorialized it in her poem, “When I Dream Dreams.”

By an odd coincidence, her future husband, Dr. Ernesto M. Bernal, was at that time the young assistant principal of Keystone School, a private school for gifted students on the other side of town. Dr. Bernal was instrumental in getting Keystone to expand its diversity by offering full scholarships to students selected from testing done among the top students at San Antonio's “disadvantaged schools.” Dr. Bernal went on to become a specialist in educational testing, especially as it related to the Latino population. Carmen Tafolla was one of the recipients of Keystone's largesse (that scholarship program only lasted a few years). It was difficult, and she was definitely “a fish out of water,” but she excelled, and was awarded scholarships from Texas Lutheran College in Seguin and Austin College in Sherman, Texas, where she earned her B.A. and M.A. degrees. In 1979, Carmen married Ernesto Bernal, some 15 years after they first met. Tafolla received her Ph.D. in Bilingual and Foreign Language Education from the University of Texas in 1982.

## WRITING AND CAREER

In 1973, Carmen became the first Chicana faculty member to direct a Chicano Studies Center in the United States, at Texas Lutheran College in Seguin. She was also the head writer for “Sonrisas,” a pioneering bilingual television show for children. By the mid 1970s, the *movimiento Chicano* was in full flower, and Carmen was publishing poetry in Chicano literary magazines like *Caracol*. Her first book was published in 1976. *Get Your Tortillas Together* was a collaboration with two other South Texas poets, Reyes Cardenas and Cecilio García-Camarillo. A

photograph of the three poets included in the book was taken by César Martínez, later to become one of the most recognized Chicano painters in the country.

During this time Carmen began to develop her talents for dramatic readings, and she presented her poems at the important Chicano literary gatherings called *Floricultos*. The Chicano movement in the 1970s was still male dominated, and women had difficulty not only being published, but even being included in readings and programs. M&A Editions, a Texas Chicano/a micro-press run by poet Angela De Hoyos and her husband, Moises Sandoval, helped to break down the gender divide by publishing writers like Inés Hernández, Evangelina Vigil, Carmen Tafolla, and De Hoyos herself. As Carmen said later, “I wanted to focus on la pachuquita, la viejita, la madre, la curandera, la rebelde, on full, living breathing females.” Carmen’s first full length collection of poetry, *Curandera*, did just that. It came out in 1983 from M&A Editions.

*Curandera* filled a cultural and linguistic void. The author applied a poet’s eye and a scholar’s mind to employing the natural Spanish and English code-switching of her westside San Antonio barrio as a literary language, not unlike great poets of the past—Dante and Chaucer, among them—who shaped their own languages through innovative multilingual poetics. Carmen has long been regarded as one of the masters of this type of poetic code-switching and *Curandera* is considered by scholars to be a core document in this regard. *Curandera* was re-published in 1987 and 1993 by Lalo Press/Santa Monica College, and a 30th Anniversary Edition was published by Wings Press in 2012, with an introduction by Dr. Norma E. Cantú, along with historical photographs. It is still cherished by many readers. The fact that it was banned in 2012 in Arizona, along with many other fine multicultural books, is a testament to its enduring significance. As a result, the now-famous Librotraficante caravan “smuggled” hundreds of copies of *Curandera* into Tucson, where it was given away to students and teachers.

The year after *Curandera* was published, Carmen’s first nonfiction book appeared, *To Split a Human: Mitos, Machos, y la Mujer Chicana* (San Antonio, Mexican American Cultural Center, 1984), one of the earliest Chicana books to address directly the racism-sexism dynamic.

Many other books followed *Curandera* and *To Split a Human*. Books of poetry, collections of short fiction, books for young children and young adults. But poetry has always been at the center of Carmen’s writing. Her *Sonnets to Human Beings & Other Selected Works* (Lalo Press/Santa Monica College, 1992; McGraw-Hill, 1995; Wings Press, 2000) included not only the title selection (winner of the University of California at Irvine’s 1989 National Chicano Literature Contest) and other poems and short stories, but also several essays on Tafolla and her work. It is thought to be the first “critical edition” published on any Chicano/a writer. *Sonnets and Salsa* (Wings Press, 2004) is a widely-praised collection of poetry that is the basis of Tafolla’s one-woman show, “My Heart Speaks a Different Language” (also performed as “Las Voces de mi Gente” and “Las Voces de San Antonio”). Tafolla has developed a new performance derived from her newest collection of poems, *Rebozos* (Wings Press, 2012).

Tafolla is also the author of several award-winning books for children and young adults, including *The Holy Tortilla and a Pot of Beans: A Feast of Short Fiction, That’s Not Fair! Emma Tenayuca’s Struggle for Justice / ¡No Es Justo! La lucha de Emma Tenayuca por la justicia* (written

with Sharyll Teneyuca), *Baby Coyote and the Old Woman / El Coyotito y la Viejita*, (all published by Wings Press) and *Fiesta Babies, What Can You DO With A Rebozo?* and *What Can You DO With A Paleta?* (all published by Tricycle Press). Her children's and young adult titles have earned her such prestigious awards as the Americas Award, two Tomás Rivera Children's Book Awards, two International Latino Book awards, and inclusion in the Top Ten Books for Babies list (2010).

The author of *Roots*, Alex Haley, called Tafolla "a world class writer." Ana Castillo called her a "pioneer of Chicana literature." Dr. Tafolla has been featured—along with other important Latino politicians, musicians, educators, filmmakers, writers and artists—in the HBO series, "Habla Texas," in director Manuel Medrano's documentary series, "Los del Valle," and other video documentaries.

Tafolla has held a variety of faculty and administrative posts at universities throughout the Southwest, including Associate Professor of Women's Studies at California State University at Fresno, and Special Assistant to the President for Cultural Diversity / Visiting Professor of Honors Literature at Northern Arizona University. She has been a freelance educational consultant on bilingual education, writing and creativity, and cultural diversity issues for almost four decades. She even founded and directed a short-lived school for gifted children. Currently she is the Writer-in-Residence for Children's, Youth & Transformative Literature at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

Among the most anthologized of all Latina writers—and thus among the most often taught and studied—Carmen Tafolla has performed her poetry all over the world, and her literary honors are numerous. Perhaps the two honors she values most were both given to her in her hometown of San Antonio. In 1999, St. Mary's University presented her with its "Art of Peace Award" for writings that contribute to "peace, justice, and human understanding." In April 2012, Tafolla was honored to be named the first ever poet laureate of San Antonio.

But wherever she has gone, Carmen has always called San Antonio home, and her poetry and stories have always celebrated the city, its river, its people, its barrios, and its *cultura*. In the 1990s she returned to San Antonio for good. Today she lives here with her husband, Dr. Ernesto M. Bernal, her daughter, her 95-year-old mother, several pets and, as she says, "two computers, one typewriter, a house full of books, a yard full of *hierbitas*, many dreams, some *remedios*, and a *molcajete*."

One of her most well-known poems is "This River Here." Referring to the San Antonio River, she wrote, "This river here / is part of you and me." The words of Carmen Tafolla have become a part of us all as well.

Note: The major collection of Carmen Tafolla's papers are held in the Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, the University of Texas at Austin.