



Voices from the Gaps

Carmen Tafolla

“

*West Side-corn tortillas for a penny each
Made by an aged woman
and her mother. Cooked on the homblack of a flat stove,
Flipped to slap the birth awake,
Wrapped by corn hands,
Toasted morning light and dancing history-
earth gives birth to corn
gives birth to man gives birth to earth. Corn tortillas-
penny each. No tax.*

— Alli Por La Calle San Luis

”



Biography

Carmen Tafolla once said that her works are affected by her ancestors “whispering over her shoulders.” In unpublished autobiographical notes, Tafolla states that on her mother’s side, consists of “a long line of metalworkers, maids, nursemaids, and servantpeople,” and on her father’s side, “preachers, teachers, vaqueros [ranch-hands], and storytellers” (*Dictionary of Literary Biography*). Tafolla believes that is partly because of her consciousness of her ancestry that she has developed a clear awareness of her Chicano identity and history. Tafolla states in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 82: “The people of my family’s past, the myths and heroes and characters thy painted with their words and with their eyes are alive in me today, as are the people of my past and present. They are still alive in my mind, as they are in the lives of those today who reflect them and their actions. It’s no that my poetry is nostalgic- it’s prophetic. History is not there for history’s sake; it is there to help describe and decipher the present.”

Quick Facts

- * Chicana poet, playwright, novelist, and children’s book author
- * Writer of *Curandera* (1983)

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Carmen Tafolla

Biography continued

Tafolla is much more than an author; she is also a former professor and an educational counselor on topics ranging from bilingual education to writing and creativity. Her works began as a teenager, and have since been included in many textbooks, from elementary to college level. Tafolla, herself, was educated during her early years in exclusively Chicano schools before being awarded a scholarship to a private academically-oriented college preparatory high school. Tafolla received a B.A. in Spanish and French in 1972 and an M.A. in education in 1973, both from Austin College in Sherman, Texas. She also holds a Ph.D. in bilingual education from the University of Texas, Austin, which she received in 1982. The author has taught at both the college and the high school levels and has worked as an associate professor and visiting professor of Women's Studies, honors literature, and education at many colleges nationwide.

Tafolla is a native of San Antonio, Texas, where she still resides in a 100-year old house called Casa del Angel. She lives with her husband, Ernest Bernal, who is also an educator, her three cats, and her mother. Tafolla is among the chief Texas poets to come out of the post-1960s Chicano Movement. Like many writers of this background, she shares a "deep consciousness of social injustice, an identification with life in the barrio, and a thorough knowledge of her cultural heritage" (Yolanda Broyles Gonzalez, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 82).

Raised in the west side barrio of San Antonio, some of the author's most eloquent and distinguishing poems are those in which she includes and brings to life the personalities of barrio personas by using their own voices. In the poem "Curandera," Tafolla attempts to fuse her own voice with the views of the wise healer:

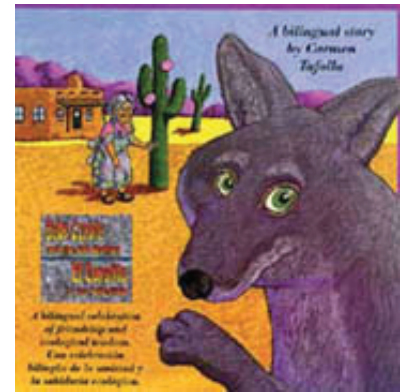
Curandera te siento arrastrado tus chanclas por los arcos-
portales
de mis venas,
bajando los botes de tu sabiduria del gabinete
de mi cabeza. (Healer woman
I feel you dragging
your worn shoes through the arches-portals
of my veins,
getting the containers of your wisdom from the cabinet
of my mind.)



Carmen Tafolla

Biography continued

Tafolla is not only known for the four books of poetry she has published, but also for the one volume of non-fiction, seven screenplays, a book on racism, sexism and Chicana women, numerous short stories, articles, and children's works. After obtaining the scholarship to a college preparatory high school, Tafolla came to realize the necessity for intercultural understanding and compiled a collection of Mexican American folklore gathered through interviews with the elderly Mexican Americans in her West Side. This would also provide for later inspiration for two other pieces of work, "Los Cortes 5" and "Ya No Voy Tomar." Another common theme Tafolla often includes in her works is the portrayal of many woman figures and the redefinition of the concept of strength and self-empowerment. The theme continuously portrays the poor woman who succeeds in spite of poverty. Even in the worst situations, her female characters show an undying will to survive and fight the adversity they are facing.



Tafolla's move from San Antonio to the state of California in 1983 had considerable influence on her writing. For the first time, she began work on a novel, which had the working title, "The Land of the Locos."

Tafolla has received much recognition for her works. In 1976 and 1977 she was selected nationally as one of the Outstanding Young Women of America. In 1977 and 1978 she was listed in the *Dictionary of International Biography* and the *International Who's Who of Women of America*. In 1987, her collection of poetry, entitled "Sonnets to Human Beings," won the first prize in the poetry division of the annual Chicano literary contest at the University of California, Irvine. In 1980 she was named vice-president for Operations and Chairman of the Board of Creative Educational Enterprises, a company she jointly founded with her husband to improve the quality of education for minority children. She has also been awarded the Art of Peace Award by the President's Peace Commission of St. Mary's University for "writing which contributes to peace, justice, and human understanding."



Carmen Tafolla

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