

# ACCEPTANCE SPEECH FOR Lifetime Achievement Award

## TIL AWARDS BANQUET MAY 4, 2024

By Carmen Tafolla

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *Carmen Tafolla, former San Antonio poet laureate, was honored on May 4, 2024 with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Texas Institute of Letters. Her acceptance speech follows:*

Thank you, Presidenta Diana, Council, & members of the TIL (Tx Institute of Letters), for this award. It's kind of hard for me to believe that I'm up here at this podium, when I'm standing in this room full of amazing writers—so many of you out there that are incredible artists of the written word, crafters of thought and vision, of passion and dreams, of understandings and entire universes created on the pages of your writings—there are so many people out there tonight that I admire so much, and of whom I stand in awe...

I was truly shocked when the Texas institute of Letters informed me that I would be receiving this award. I almost hadn't made the meeting. Diana kept calling and asking if I was coming in person or on zoom, and I kept telling her I hadn't decided yet. It'd been a busy month, full of deadlines, and I wasn't sure I wanted to drive out of town to the meeting that Saturday. Finally, I told her I'd join them on zoom. But when at the last minute my neighbor, (only 10 minutes down the road) and resident Texas Institute of Letters Senior Elder (& Patron Saint of all things writerly), Bob Flynn, couldn't get his computer to connect to the zoom, I offered to go pick him up, drive him to my house, and we could connect to the zoom together there, so I was a little LATE getting to the meeting. And when they told me who they'd picked to receive lifetime achievement, I almost asked, Could you say that again? In fact, on the way back to drop Bob Flynn off at his house after the zoom, I asked him something along the lines of "Did that really happen??" Or... are they just thinking about it?" (He informed me that it was a done deal and I was just gonna have to accept that fact!)

I see y'all's faces here tonight and I see people that have a deep respect for communication. There are so many writers doing heroic and significant work in this struggling and conflicted world of bannings and silencings, assertions of "post-truth realities" and artificial fabrications, divisiveness and inhumanity, that it's truly a very humbling moment to be recognized by this group of dedicated writers. I also feel that the selection of this barrio kid with such a non-traditional career path represents a recognition

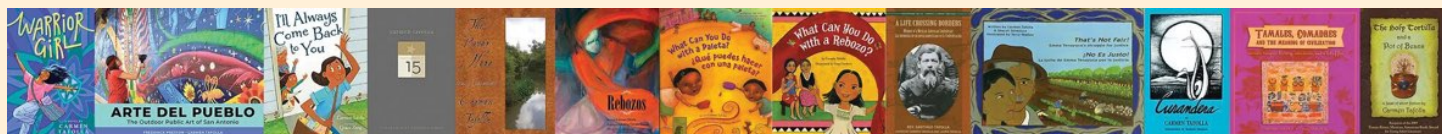
of the power of the printed word, the spoken word, the performed word, & the invented word. As a writer who has chosen not to stay within the borders of one genre or one language or even one target age audience, I feel it's a recognition of those who choose to go beyond borders, to create new paths, new interlanguages, and to empower readers of all ages and all backgrounds to hear their own voices and their own realities reflected in the universality of the human story.

You see, MY native language (and my favorite language still) is TexMex, a melding of the two languages of my social, cultural and historical heritage. As children, of course WE didn't consider it a melding. It was all one superlanguage, with edges that reflected different parts of our realities, and colors that expressed



Carmen with Reyes Cárdenas and Cecilio García-Camarillo, co-authors of her first book, *Get Your Tortillas Together*, in front of the Westside tortilleria, *El Titán* in 1975.

different facets of this diverse world we lived in. It wasn't till we started school that we would realize that half of our superlanguage was against state law and that WE were, AUTOMATICALLY, little outlaws, forbidden to pronounce our names correctly, and punished and paddled & forced to undergo indignities for transgressions we were not even aware of committing.... But twelve years later, in my senior year of high school, when the law outlawing Spanish language was finally removed from state law books, and with the creative explosion of the Chicano LITERARY movement, we could FINALLY READ AND WRITE AND





CELEBRATE LITERATURE in my native tongue, laughing at translanguaging inventions like “Knock Knock, who’s there, Chata. Chata who? Chata door!”

or doubling the alliteration possibilities by calling the moon “a vanilla canela crescent.” We could PUBLISH in that fusion native language (even if it meant gathering on Cecilio Garcia Camarillo’s kitchen floor with a small printer he had bought by pawning his sofa, and telling Max Martinez, Hey you were an English major, You write the blurb for this boo; telling Mia, YOU draw some art stuff for the front cover; and to Cesar Augusto Martínez, Will YOU take an author foto of us? You seem to have a good eye for that kind of stuff. – [Photo of group in front of soda sign at tiendita]

In that joyously inventive world where we felt that if WE could publish our own books in our own language, ANYTHING in the UNIVERSE was possible, we would then meld Spanish to English to Nahuatl- have trilingual contests, where a young 20-something Juan Felipe Herrera would add —Que Locotl! --to his trilingual poem. It was adventurous, intoxicating, had infinite possibilities, and spurred all kinds of bold ventures into creating new words, new formats and styles, new fusions of theater and poetry, or of fiction and folklore and song.

My poetry, I had been told, was too “Chicana”, too theatrical, too performance, and not at all the “visual layered upon visual” style of the East Coast poetry of the US. But I kept WANTING my poetry to be auditory, not just visual, and performed in the voices of our people. Shortly after Curandera was published, I received a reaction from Alex Haley, who said he loved it, read the whole book that night he received it, and that it reminded him of the Africanist poet, Leopold Sedhar Senghor. It was, said Haley, world-class literature. (Much later, I was to see an interview of Senghor in The American Poetry Review, in which he emphatically stated that the essence of poetry WAS auditory, and that he and the Africanist poets, too, had been criticized for the oral nature of their writing. Poetry is song, and story, and human voice, he stated.) You see, Our Chicano movement poets in the 1970s and very early 80s were self-trained, theatrical, experimental, and drunk with liberation, infused with the determination to achieve civil rights on all fronts—racial, cultural, national origin, sexual, gender identity, socio-economic. It spilled into every corner of our creativity and engrained itself into our identity... When people asked me who were the writers that had most influenced me, I cited the viejitos of the barrio, who had told the rubbed-smooth 500-year-old stories of La Llorona y El Cucuy,

and declaimed poems in Spanish passed down from generation to generation for a century. We were in an act of rebellion against strict borders between two languages— We were told by the major publishers, and by most folks connected with publishing that we needed to avoid ANY mixing of the languages. Write in One Language, Write in One Language!, they said. I turned that into a poem entitled Right in One Language, whose last verse gleefully declares:

*There are 2 many colors in the marketplace to play modest,*

*When Mexico and Gloria Rodriguez both say,*

*Estos gringos con su match Match Ya mi me gusta Mix-Mix.*

*There are 2 many cariños to be created to stay within the lines,*

*2 many times when I want to tell you there is room here for two tongues inside this kiss.*

We were in protest of anything that would limit, stereotype, or seek to narrowly define our creativity or our potential.

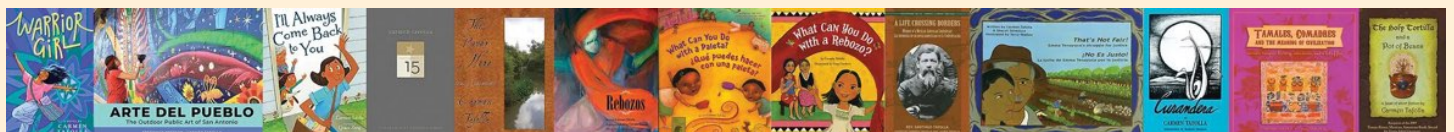
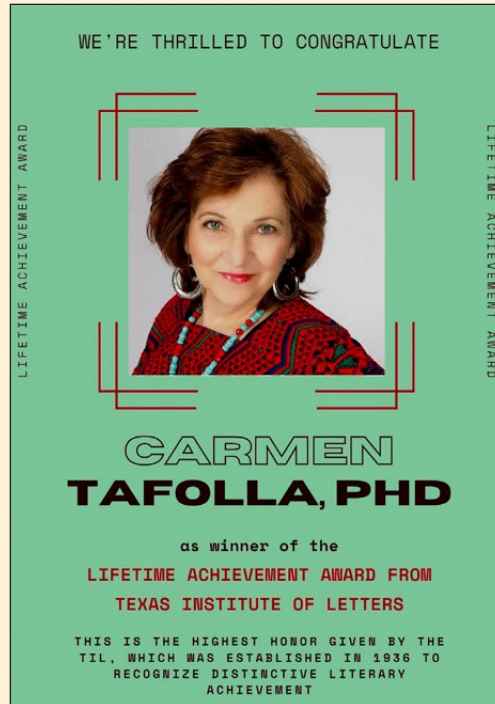
Fast Forward 50 years—and today we find stereotypes of who we are stated clearly from the highest podiums of this nation, we find book bannings (again), we

are fighting the KuKlux Klan (again), we are trying to diffuse and refuse the imposition of walls and lines and borders between groups (again)... Still, we live in a world where we are dismissed. Erased, silenced, shrugged at with “Whatever.”

But Words are not whatever...

Words have power: books, magazines, newspapers, songs have power. The bedtime stories we whisper to children, the stories our children read or hear as they are forming their sense of self, the sonnets we sing into lovers’ ears, the news reports we scream sometimes with tortured but still stubborn breath, have power, and that is why we are banned, we are denied, that is why they attempt to disempower us, to drown us out, to trade us for artificially produced translations untouched by human hearts. Words have power. They are the messenger birds of the human voice, the human spirit. And we, the writers, are the keepers of those words. We feed them and dress them and imbue them with our deepest messages, to be passed on, in every way possible—through lullabies, through fables, through newspapers and magazines, through speeches, through folk sayings and dichos & jokes, through films, through ballads, through whispers, through prayers, and through books.

Groups like TIL, and all gatherings and networks and projects of writers, of librarians, of scholars, of students, of shamans, of readers, of healers and blessers, of songwriters seeking to reveal





the truth, are the proof, that in this digital world of soundbites, of so-called “Artificial Intelligence”, and distorted lenses on reality, the human voice has still not been lost. These awards tonight (this one and all those other awards around the room tonight, or that have been awarded to you in the past, or will be awarded to you in the future) are proof of that. The human voice has power, and that power can liberate people and remind us of our innate and irrepressible equality.

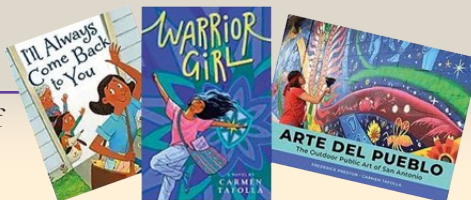
The human voice is what we, as writers, seek to document, to reveal, and to honor.

Thank you all – my friends who drove through the rain and the flood warnings to get here, my family members, who make me so proud to be a Tafolla Duarte Sanchez Moreno Hernandez Rodriguez Marroquin de Bernal, my high school classmates, still putting up with me, 55 years after graduation, but especially THANK YOU to my fellow writers, whose words and visions are filled with power. Who every day and every hour, strap on their weapon of words and build their courage to create – under the names and voices of all our characters and themes, and sometimes under our own names -- Gracias!

The poem Porfiria, about the mythical no-nonsense revolutionary Porfiria in our midst, is written to you, and about you. Here are just the last lines of it:

*Porfiria sat on a few committees, was quiet a lot,  
occasionally mumbled,*

*And once in a while let loose an “Y que pendejos,  
¡ porque no!”*



*Or even worse, a just plain, Why?  
Got criticized for lack of finesse,  
and answered, for those soflameros,*

*I handle too much SHIT to use a dust rag and  
furniture polish on it.*

*Shovels work just fine.”*

*Porfiria doesn't exist, in the usual way,*

*Has no photograph, social security number, or  
signature.*

*But Porfiria has just so damn much to say that we  
will, every one of us,*

*Take a picture, invent a number,*

*Sign a declaration for her*

*Even if it has to be*

*With our very own names.*

Keep on writing and speaking and healing the world around you with communication, because (and I quote this from what is perhaps the most important genre of all, children's literature, from *Warrior Girl*) because “when you find ... a reason to sing or dance or paint or play or laugh or write ... they haven't taken EVERYTHING away from you.” \*

\**Warrior Girl*, Nancy Paulsen Books/Penguin, 2023, now also available in Spanish as *Guerrera*.)

## La güerita



Carmen Tafolla at 4 years of age appeared in the December issue of the *San Antonio Light* drawing attention to chugholes in Westside streets that were never fixed.

who appeared in the *San Antonio Light* in 1955 could have taken any number of paths as she grew up, except for one thing. With her red hair, fair skin, green eyes—she could have passed on to another world and become completely assimilated into the traditional anglo american culture leaving behind her community and roots in San Antonio's Westside. But, *hija del Westside*, Carmen Tafolla, San Antonio's first newly appointed poet laureate, had already, at 4 years of age, experienced community activism and the spirit of vecindad with neighbors banning together to get things done for the common good.

She already had a command of two languages and a sense of literacy and poetry. She had sat in the lap of her tias *delcamando en Español* and heard her mother reciting poetry in English. As she developed a love of books, she was able to discern the omission of her own experiences in those books. Fortunately for us, she chose to write about her own cultural observations and experiences contributing to the correction of that omission. If Carmen had not had that solid cultural grounding as a young child, we might not have had in San Antonio, the exceptional poet laureate that continues to inspire so many youth and young children.

Cultural grounding had already marked Carmen's path to poetry and activism by the time she was 4. By the time she had reached her 20s, she was part of the Chicano movement where arts and literature became hallmarks of the movement. Our children deserve to read literature that reflects their own lives and to have their names written in history. Congratulations to Carmen Tafolla on her *Texas Institute of Letters Lifetime Achievement Award*. And thank you for the contributions you've made that will live in literary history!

—Gloria A. Ramirez

