

Cantando Bajito/ Singing Softly

By Carmen de Monteflores

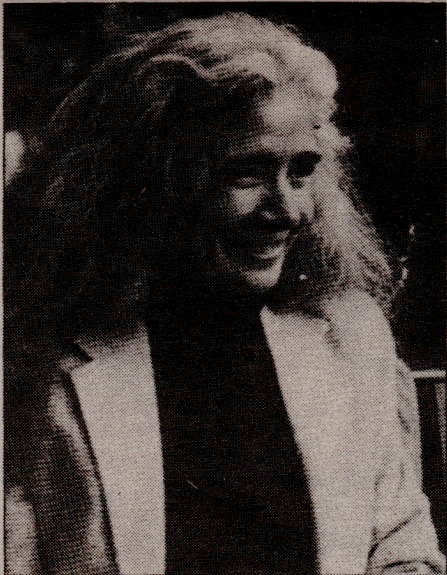
Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1989, \$8.95

REVIEWED BY SHEILA KOREN

“**C**uentame, cuentame.”
Tell me, tell me.

In the best tradition of mysterious and intimate Latin American storytelling, coupled with an intriguingly inventive, cross cultural method of literally subtitled her novel (the characters actually speak Spanish, followed by an italicized translation, the narration in the adopted English of its author), Berkeley psychotherapist Carmen de Monteflores reveals a multi-generational story of her Puerto Rican homeland in the lives of a few peasant women there.

Spanning at least 50 years of this century, time is amorphous in *Cantando Bajito*, skipping though memory, triggered by association. Stories undulate through time like the waves of the omnipresent and very influential ocean in the lives of its characters, climbing slowly if not steadily through generations. The story shifts from a focus on Marta, the unkempt, barefoot wife of a sugar cane cutter, through the upscale merchant-class life into which her beautiful daughter Pilar elopes, and back along a downward economic spiral brought on by misogynist circumstance, taking Luisa on the wings of her mother's misfortune, and finally into the life of young Meli, narrator and presumably the author's persona, who goes off



Carmen de Monteflores

to school in America.

Stories unfold slowly like the petals of the myriad flora that bespeckle and make aromatic their landscape, and according to the needs of each woman to know explanations, to understand motivations, to evoke the wisdom of experience, to learn about her mother, her past, to go on into the future. It's about these women's relations with each other, with particular attention paid to the special affection each woman had for her abuelita, her grandmother. *Cantando Bajito* tells of connections with children, men; the island itself figures prominently, as does the sugar cane that grows from it, not just as commodity, but as a locus of activity, a place of hiding, the scene of crime.

Puerto Rico is all too frequently categorized as either a vacation spot or political cause, its native population reduced to a singular and often demeaned race. While reading this book about country life there, I realized that the photographic images I had of the place were of either enormous and impersonal looking luxury hotels or of enormous and impersonal looking housing projects. It was only during coverage of hurricane Hugo's recent devastation there that glimpses of individual homes and life began to emerge for me.

What a treat it was, therefore, to read a novel about its native people's lives, country people, the jibaros, mountain people, village folk, some black, some brown, some white skinned from Spain ("Whites got too soft skin. They're afraid of everything,.." Sena Alba, the town healer, gossip and drunk at one point proclaims). Of course, one could also read James Michener's *Caribbean* for this purpose, but I suspect *Cantando Bajito/Singing Softly* is more personal and simple, and perhaps clearer about the politics of the situation.

Pilar sighed as her mother's dark face emerged in her mind. Poverty had made her mother old. She wore herself out worrying. Poverty was the worst kind of sickness. And not having schooling was a big part of it. Look at her father. It was not that he didn't like to argue with the foreman at the sugar mill; he couldn't argue because he couldn't keep track of how much he worked. He couldn't read the ledgers at the mill's office.

Much to its credit, *Cantando Bajito/Singing Softly* evokes the powerful spectre of colonialism without ever so much as mentioning a white American, let alone having a colonialist ever appear as a character in the book.

But the island's physical beauty, the proliferation of sweet smelling flowers, the omnipresence of the ocean's rhythms, and the wisdom that comes from living close to the earth in some ways compensate the harsh realities of living in a poor colonial society. And the values that literacy, schooling and so-called culture bring to successive generations

are certainly questioned. "Rich folks have a room in their houses to shit in and to wash! Lord! Don't know why they have to shit in the house. Must be why they have to wash so much." Sena Alba continues in her illiterate but acutely perceptive class analysis.

Cantando Bajito/Singing Softly is a wonderfully evocative story of how women cope with oppressive circumstances, as well as flourish in each other's love and support, including that of their mother earth. Sena Alba says early on: "People smell different from living in houses. The ground don't know them. Like they are strangers. She don't help them. And people forget the ground too... The herbs I burn when somebody going to have a baby is to make women smell like the ground. Then she help them. She make childbirth easier."

Nor is psychological wisdom lost on these women, like the value of tears: "Different kind of quiet after you cry. Washed clean on the inside. Like a baby wake up in her mother's arms after sleeping."

Cantando Bajito/Singing Softly seemed to end prematurely, like a dream interrupted, still satisfying, filled with meaning, and spirit, and depth, yet still frustratingly unfinished. I want to know what happened to Meli, who I presume at some point comes out as a lesbian. As with the gentle chants of a lullaby adaptable to change and to additions, I hope Carmen de Monteflores will continue telling this story.