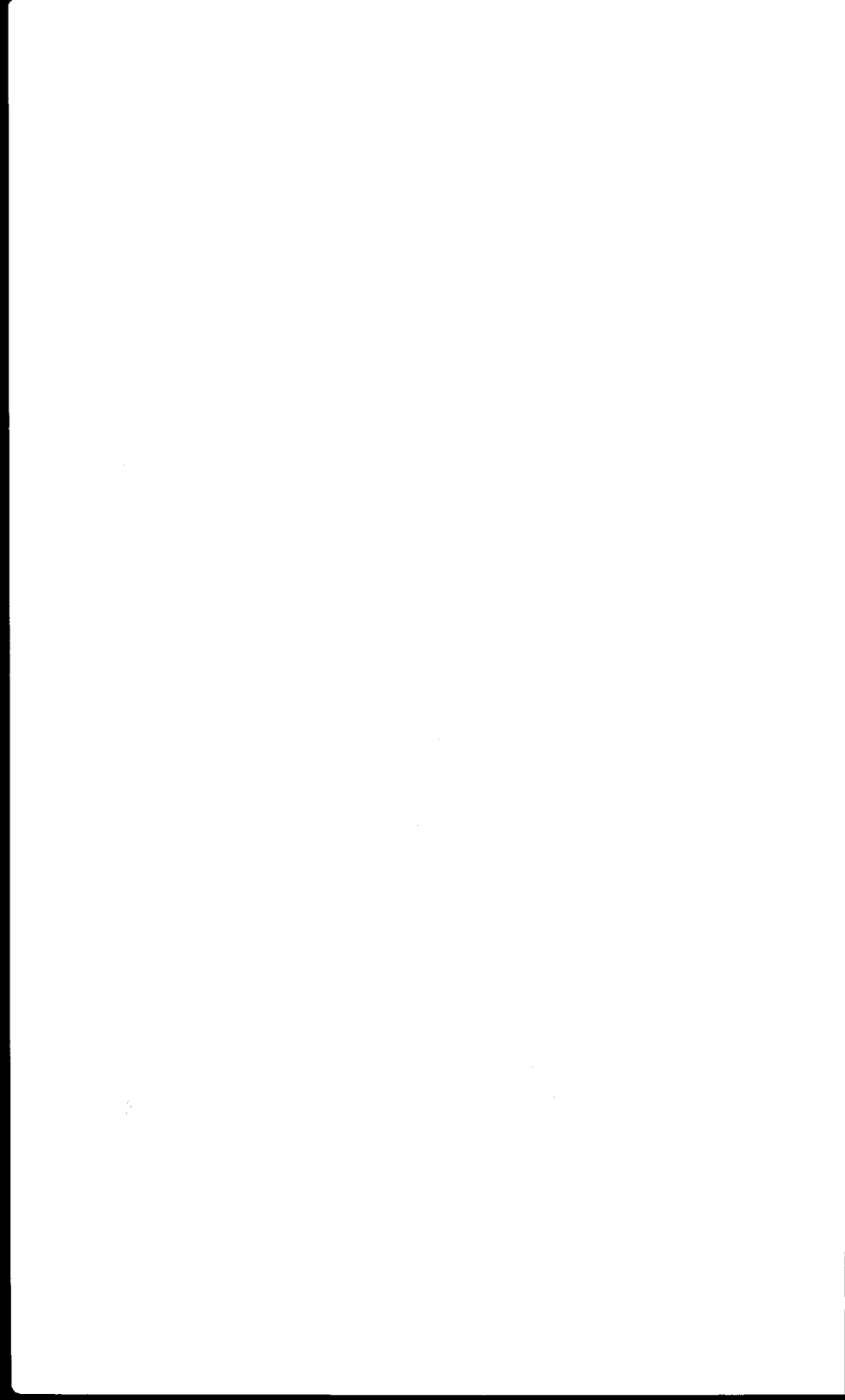


**THIS
BRIDGE
CALLED MY
BACK**

**WRITINGS BY
RADICAL
WOMEN OF
COLOR**



Children Passing in the Streets



The Roots of Our Radicalism



"I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes." – Maxine Hong Kingston*

We are women from all kinds of childhood streets: the farms of Puerto Rico, the downtown streets of Chinatown, the barrio, city-Bronx streets, quiet suburban sidewalks, the plains, and the reservation.

In this first section, you will find voices from our childhoods, our youth. What we learned about survival – trying to-pass-for-white, easy-to-pass-for-white, "she couldn't pass in a million years." Here, we introduce to you the "color problem" as it was first introduced to us: "not white enuf, not dark enuf", always up against a color chart that first got erected far outside our families and our neighborhoods, but which invaded them both with systematic determination.

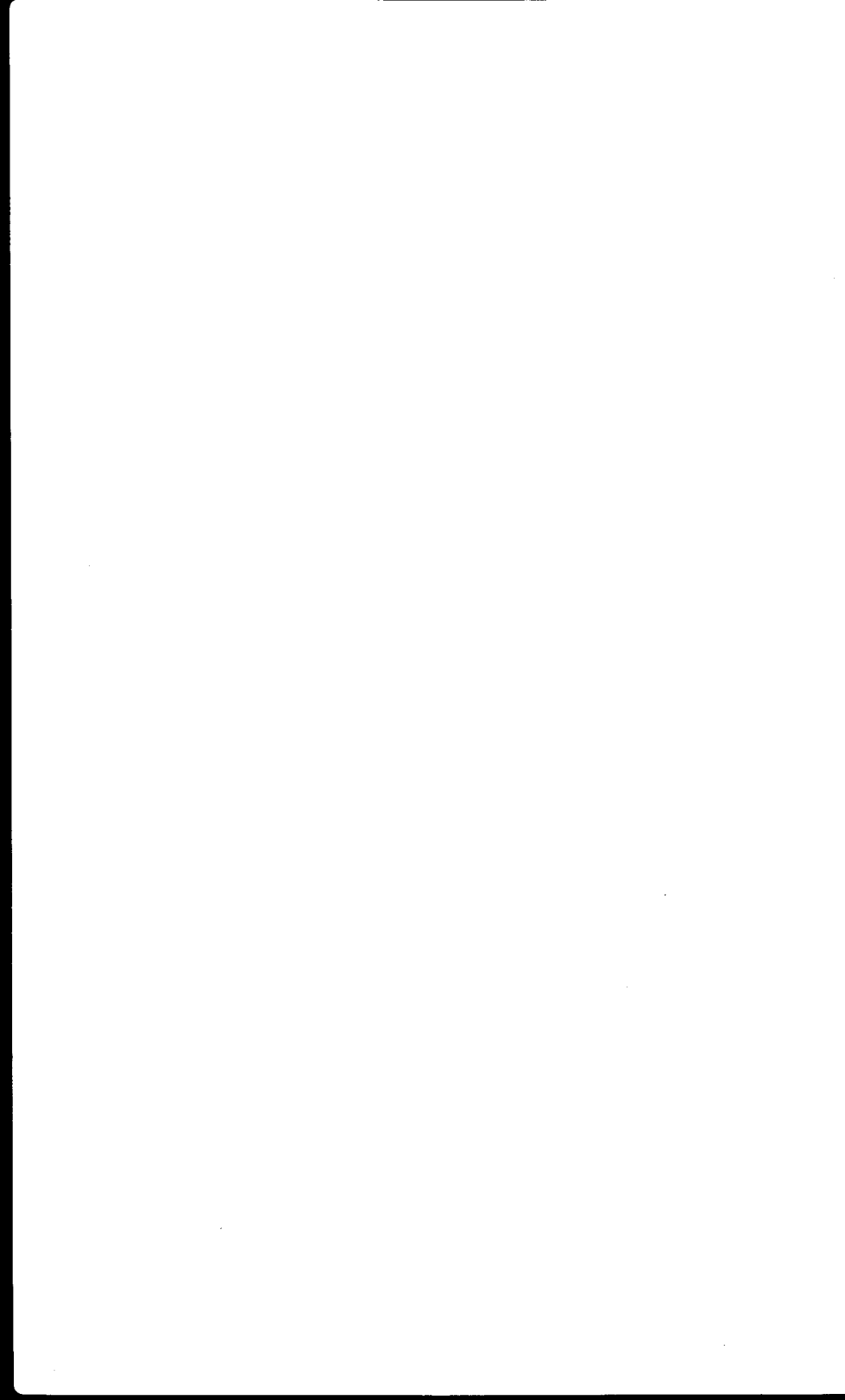
In speaking of color and class, Tillie Olsen once said: "There's no such thing as passing."** Here are women of every shade of color and grade of class to prove that point. For although some of us traveled more easily from street corner to corner than the sister whose color or poverty made her an especially visible target to the violence on the street, *all* of us have been victims of the invisible violation which happens indoors and inside ourselves: the self-abnegation, the silence, the constant threat of cultural obliteration.

We were born into colored homes. We grew up with the inherent contradictions in the color spectrum right inside those homes: the lighter sister, the mixed-blood cousin, being the darkest one in the family. It doesn't take many years to realize the privileges, or lack thereof, attached to a particular shade of skin or texture of hair. It is this experience that moves light-skinned or "passable" Third World women to put ourselves on the line for our darker sisters. We are all family. From those families we were on the one hand encouraged to leave, to climb up white. And with the other hand, the reins were held tight on us, our parents understanding the danger that bordered our homes.

We learned to live with these contradictions. This is the root of our radicalism.

*Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 35.

**From a talk given at The Women's Building sponsored by The Feminist Writers' Guild. San Francisco, November 1979.



When I Was Growing Up

Nellie Wong

I know now that once I longed to be white.
 How? you ask.
 Let me tell you the ways.

when I was growing up, people told me
 I was dark and I believed my own darkness
 in the mirror, in my soul, my own narrow vision

when I was growing up, my sisters
 with fair skin got praised
 for their beauty, and in the dark
 I fell further, crushed between high walls

when I was growing up, I read magazines
 and saw movies, blonde movie stars, white skin,
 sensuous lips and to be elevated, to become
 a woman, a desirable woman, I began to wear
 imaginary pale skin

when I was growing up, I was proud
 of my English, my grammar, my spelling
 fitting into the group of smart children
 smart Chinese children, fitting in,
 belonging (getting in line)

when I was growing up and went to high school,
 I discovered the rich white girls, a few yellow girls,
 their imported cotton dresses, their cashmere sweaters,
 their curly hair and I thought that I too should have
 what these lucky girls had

when I was growing up, I hungered
 for American food, American styles,
 coded: white and even to me, a child
 born of Chinese parents, being Chinese
 was feeling foreign, was limiting,
 was unAmerican

when I was growing up and a white man wanted
to take me out, I thought I was special,
an exotic gardenia, anxious to fit
the stereotype of an oriental chick

when I was growing up, I felt ashamed
of some yellow men, their small bones,
their frail bodies, their spitting
on the streets, their coughing,
their lying in sunless rooms,
shooting themselves in the arms

when I was growing up, people would ask
if I were Filipino, Polynesian, Portuguese.
They named all colors except white, the shell
of my soul, but not my dark, rough skin

when I was growing up, I felt
dirty. I thought that god
made white people clean
and no matter how much I bathed,
I could not change, I could not shed
my skin in the gray water

when I was growing up, I swore
I would run away to purple mountains,
houses by the sea with nothing over
my head, with space to breathe,
uncongested with yellow people in an area
called Chinatown, in an area I later learned
was a ghetto, one of many hearts
of Asian America

I know now that once I longed to be white.
How many more ways? you ask.
Haven't I told you enough?

on not bein

mary hope lee

be a smart child trying to be dumb . . .
 not blk enuf to lovinly ignore . . .
 not bitter enuf to die at a early age . . .

– ntozake shange*

she never wanted
 no never once
 did she wanna
 be white/to pass
 dreamed only of bein darker
 she wanted to be darker
 not yellow/not no high brown neither
 but brown/warm brown
 she dreamed/her body
 moist earth brown
 she prayed/for chocolate
 semi/sweet/bitter/sweet
 dark chocolate nipples crownin
 her small chested tits
 2 hersheys kisses
 sittin sweet like top of
 2 round scoops of smooth
 milk chocolate ice cream



momma took her outta
 almost all black lincoln high
 cuz she useta catch hell
 every day in gym class
 the other girls reactin to her like
 she was the cause of some
 kinda gawdawful allergy they all had
 contact could be fatal
 survivors would be scarred
 with kindness

**Nappy Edges*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978).

cuz she wasn dark enuf
 was smart enuf
 wasn rowdy enuf
 had a white girl friend
 cuz none of them would be

beige or buff/ecru or chamois
 jus wasn color/ed enuf
 to get picked for the softball team
 wasn sufficient protection
 'gainst gettin tripped in the shower

she wondered/
 would they have treated florence ballard
 so shabbily



but she envied them all
 felt every once now and then
 they just mighta been
 righteously justified
 since/after all
 they was brown like
 the sun loved they skin special
 cuz it warmed 'em

chestnut
 bronze
 copper
 sepia
 cinnamon
 cocoa
 mahogany

her/she was drab faded out
 yellow like a scorched july sky
 just fore it rains & rinses
 away the hint of brown from the smog

she wasn/
 no maureen peal

no 'high yellow dream child'
not/dichty
 a hex muttered
not/hinkty
 a curse let fly
not/saditty
like girls was spozed to be
did they went to catholic school or
was they from germantown or
baldwin hills or
valencia park



(the man she married/cuz he was the first one to ask/her
bein afraid no body else would/said he thought he was gonna
hafta marry hisself white cuz/he couldn find him no colored
girl was/in-tel-li-gent e-nufff/but with her bein the next
best thing to white . . .

For the Color of My Mother

Cherríe Moraga

*I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother
speaking for her through the unnamed part of the mouth
the wide-arched muzzle of brown women*

at two
my upper lip split open
clear to the tip of my nose
it spilled forth a cry that would not yield
that travelled down six floors of hospital
where doctors wound me into white bandages
only the screaming mouth exposed

the gash sewn back into a snarl
would last for years

*I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother
speaking for her*

at five, her mouth
pressed into a seam
a fine blue child's line drawn across her face
her mouth, pressed into mouthing english
mouthing yes yes yes
mouthing stoop lift carry
(sweating wet sighs into the field
her red bandana comes loose from under the huge brimmed hat
moving across her upper lip)

at fourteen, her mouth
painted, the ends drawn up
the mole in the corner colored in darker larger mouthing yes
she praying no no no
lips pursed and moving

at forty-five, her mouth
bleeding into her stomach
the hole gaping growing redder
deepening with my father's pallor
finally stitched shut from hip to breastbone

an inverted V

Vera

Elvira

*I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother
speaking for her*

as it should be
dark women come to me

sitting in circles

I pass through their hands
the head of my mother
painted in clay colors

touching each carved feature

swollen eyes and mouth

they understand the explosion the splitting
open contained within the fixed expression

they cradle her silence

nodding to me

I Am What I Am

Rosario Morales

I am what I am and I am U.S. American I haven't wanted to say it because if I did you'd take away the Puerto Rican but now I say go to hell I am what I am and you can't take it away with all the words and sneers at your command I am what I am I am Puerto Rican I am U.S. American I am New York Manhattan and the Bronx I am what I am I'm not hiding under no stoop behind no curtain I am what I am I am Boricua as boricuas come from the isle of Manhattan and I croon Carlos Gardel tangoes in my sleep and Afro-Cuban beats in my blood and Xavier Cugat's lukewarm latin is so familiar and dear sneer dear but he's familiar and dear but not Carmen Miranda who's a joke because I never was a joke I was a bit of a sensation See! here's a real true honest-to-god Puerto Rican girl and she's in college Hey! Mary come here and look she's from right here a South Bronx girl and she's honest-to-god in college now Ain't that something who would believed it Ain't science wonderful or some such thing a wonder a wonder

And someone who did languages for a living stopped me in the subway because how I spoke was a linguist's treat I mean there it was yiddish and spanish and fine refined college educated english and irish which I mainly keep in my prayers It's dusty now I haven't said my prayers in decades but try my Hail Marrrry full of grrrace with the nun's burr with the nun's disdain its all true and its all me do you know I got an English accent from the BBC I always say For years in the mountains of Puerto Rico when I was 22 and 24 and 26 all those young years I listened to the BBC and Radio Moscow's English english announcers announce and denounce and then I read Dickens all the way thru three or four times at least and then later I read Dickens aloud in voices and when I came back to the U.S. I spoke mockdickens and mockBritish especially when I want to be crisp efficient I know what I am doing and you can't scare me tough that's why I am what I am and I'm a bit of a snob too Shit! why am I calling myself names I really really dig the funny way the British speak and it's real it's true and I love too the singing of yiddish sentences that go with shrugs and hands and arms doing

melancholy or lively dances I love the sound and look of yiddish in
the air in the body in the streets in the English language
nooo so what's new so go by the grocer and buy some fruit
oye vey gevalt gefilte fish raisele oh and those words
hundreds of them dotting the english language like raisins in the
bread shnook and schlemiel suftik tush schmata all those
soft sweet sounds saying sharp sharp things I am what I am and I'm
naturalized Jewish-American wasp is foreign and new but Jewish-
American is old show familiar schmata familiar and its me dears its
me bagels blintzes and all I am what I am Take it or leave me
alone.

Dreams of Violence

Naomi Littlebear

I was awakened by the sound of school children screaming at each other. I thought I heard them beating some one. Loud solid thumps quivered in my ears, a hoarse voice, horribly chanting in rapid succession, "oh my god, oh my god" . . .

I closed my eyes and sunk into the panic that terrorized my morning. I flew back in time, somewhere in grade school, walking home with my cousin Virginia . . .

I

There was an unmistakable bitter taste in the air around us, forewarning. It was the moment before the actual sight of them coming that froze our hearts with fear. Suddenly like a stampede of wild bulls they plummeted towards us. A half dozen or more boys, a frenzied blur of leather jackets, screaming wild devils, thrashing at us with the harsh stiff leather, metal teeth zippers battering our bewildered bodies. We ran on rubber band legs; I could hear Virginia calling, "Mama, Mama." In my ears was a sound like the beating of wings, barbed wings that stung my skin, that made my lip swell in pain, we ran hard thru the obstacle course of confused bodies, their horrifying shrieks of rage thru the rain of leather.

By some miracle they scattered, the same force that brought them seemed to snatch them up again and they were scattered to other dark corners of the barrio.

My face was hot and swollen, i felt my tears burning rivers down my cheeks. I could still hear Virginia crying for her mother, though now she was just a mass of pain & crying. I could remember my own silence thundering thru my body.

As we neared home, my fear increased. I knew what would await me there. I could close my eyes and see the vision a hundred times over.

I would slowly approach the door and before my entire body entered, she could smell the mischief, sense the energy – my grandmother immediately stopped whatever she was doing and demanded a full story. But always my story would be cut in mid-sentence. Because whatever state i was in, i provoked it.

"Why are you Dirty?" "Have you been fighting?" "Did you tear your dress?" – a volley of quick demands and accusations came threateningly to me, making me feel scared, watching her come towards me, reaching over to the door where the razor strap hung "her bonito" as she called it. Reaching towards me, strap in hand. My feet turning to lead. Trying to run away, backing into a corner.

II

But where the strap couldn't reach me, a vicious pinch could. I flew thru the door being chased by more leather stings.

I ran far, sometimes two blocks away, my skin boiling, red criss-crosses atop the scratches that the leather jackets had made. I cried alone barely able to make out the shapes of people and cars thru my tears.



I am awake now, my lover still sleeping beside me, wondering how we can blend our two worlds. How to mend the holes in our pasts, walk away bravely from the nightmares.

Her attacks were more subtle, hidden within the false shelter of her home; instead of gangs of boys chasing her, her brother was the nightly intrusion, using her young child body to masturbate with, as she closed her eyes too numb and scared to speak.

We both have no choice but to be survivors though the fears are still there. Whenever i see a crowd of men, my heart sinks to my feet, whenever i hear sudden noises, sudden crashing, anger, male noises, their very laughter is abrasive to my ears. I shrink inside, walk close to the walls of my soul, i look for a place to hide.

He Saw *Chrystos*

his roots/went back to the reservation old
 pain/old hunger
 None of the ghosts were there
 He went fishing caught
 one or more every
 day The fishing is what he needed to do
 Gathering wild rice, remembered after years of suits, ties, clocks
 adjustments
 what he began
 & left
 He writes me about the fish
 I grow hungry

 He gave me all the whitest advantages
 square house, football school, white mother baking white bread in a
white oven

 He wanted to spare me his pain
 didn't
 Silently our misunderstandings shred rage clouds our blood ties
 I stare at his words wonder who he is
 Lonely red daddy cradling ghost of his mama died when he was nine
 pretending he was born without a father without straightjackets
 Daddy you write in a painfully practiced scrawl
 you learned learned learned beaten down a dying fish
 You go back & can't stay
 Bring me a sack of rice
I want your wildness, want the boy who left on a freight car
 I want a boy who cried because his mother is dead
 & his daddy's gone crazy
 I want the one who gathered water & wood
 I don't want this man who cut off his hair
 joined the government
 to be safe

We are both in danger
of your ancient fear
I learned to fish on my own
stopped
Now I'm learning to weave nets

