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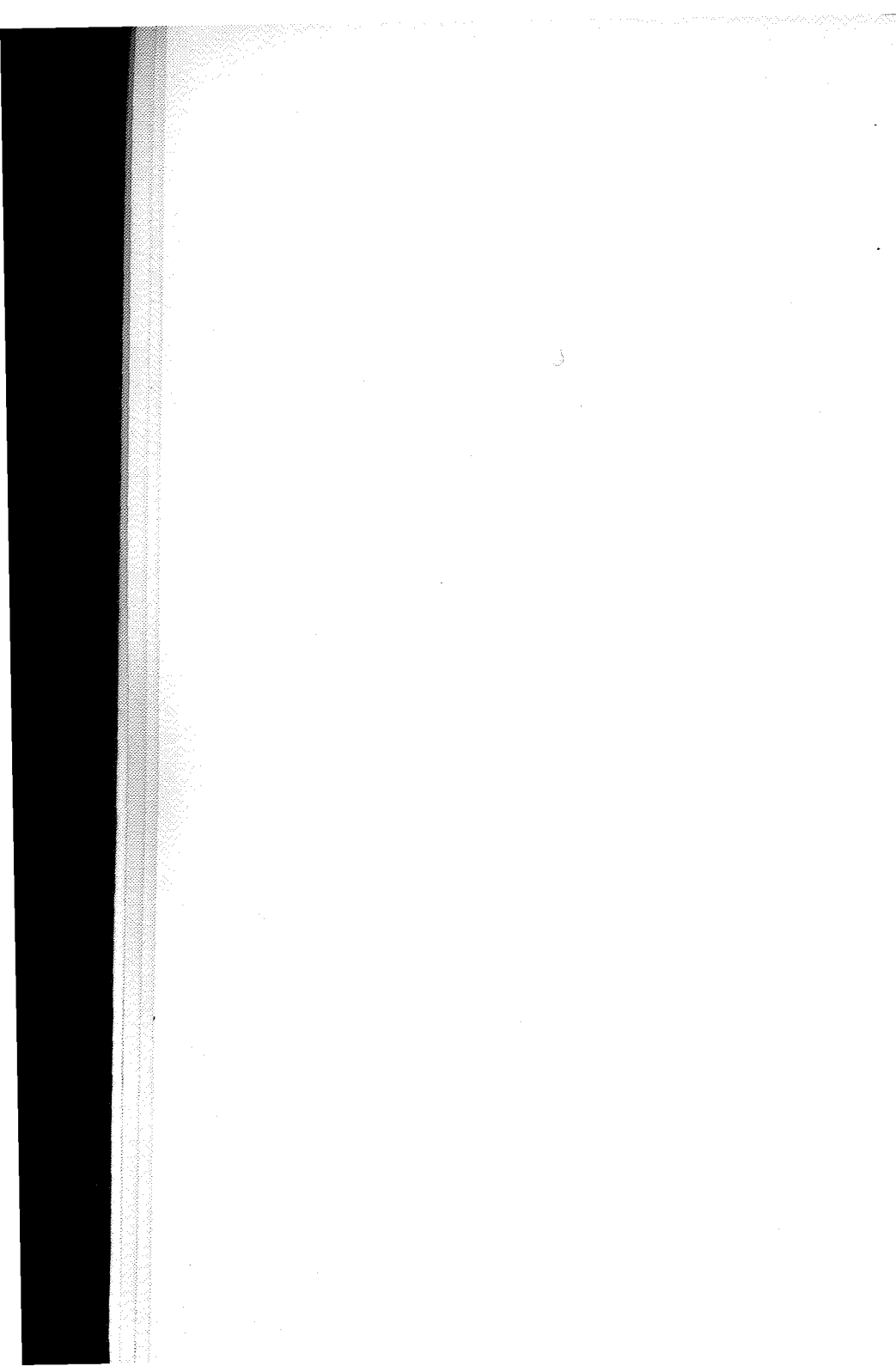
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For Rosa Bell, my mother—

who told me when I was a child that she had once  
written poems—that I had inherited my love of  
reading and my longing to write from her.



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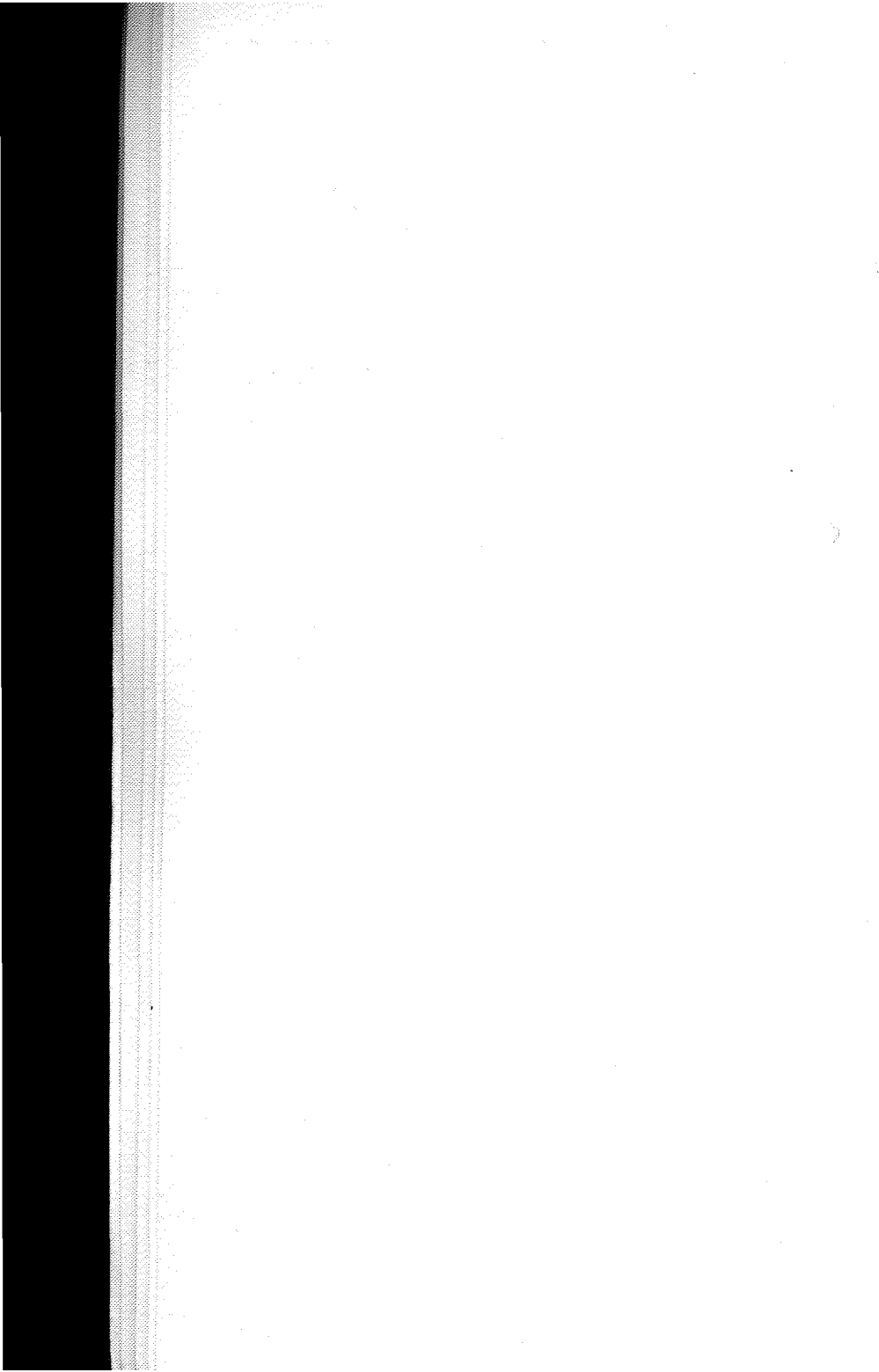
## acknowledgements

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Eight years ago, when I first began research for this book, discussions of "Black Women and Feminism" or "Racism and Feminism" were uncommon. Friends and strangers were quick to question and ridicule my concern with the lot of black women in the United States. I can remember a dinner where I talked about the book and one person, in a big booming voice choking with laughter exclaimed, "What is there to say about black women!" Others joined the laughter. I had written in the manuscript that the existence of black women was often forgotten, that we were often ignored or dismissed, and my lived experience as I shared the ideas in this book demonstrated the truth of this assertion.

In most stages of my work I had the help and support of Nate, my friend and companion. It was he who said to me when I first returned home from libraries angry and disappointed that there were so few books about black women that I should write one. He also searched for background information and assisted me in a number of ways. A tremendous source of encouragement and support for my work came from fellow black women workers at the Berkeley Telephone Office in 1973-74. When I left there to attend graduate school in Wisconsin, I lost contact with these women. But their energy, their sense that there was much that needed to be said about black women, and their belief that "I" could say it, has sustained me. During the publication process, Ellen Herman of South End Press has been a great help. Our relationship has been political; we have worked to bridge the gap between public and private, making the contact between writer and publisher an affirming experience rather than a de-humanizing one.

This book is dedicated to Rosa Bell Watkins who taught me, and all her daughters, that Sisterhood empowers women by respecting, protecting, encouraging, and loving us.

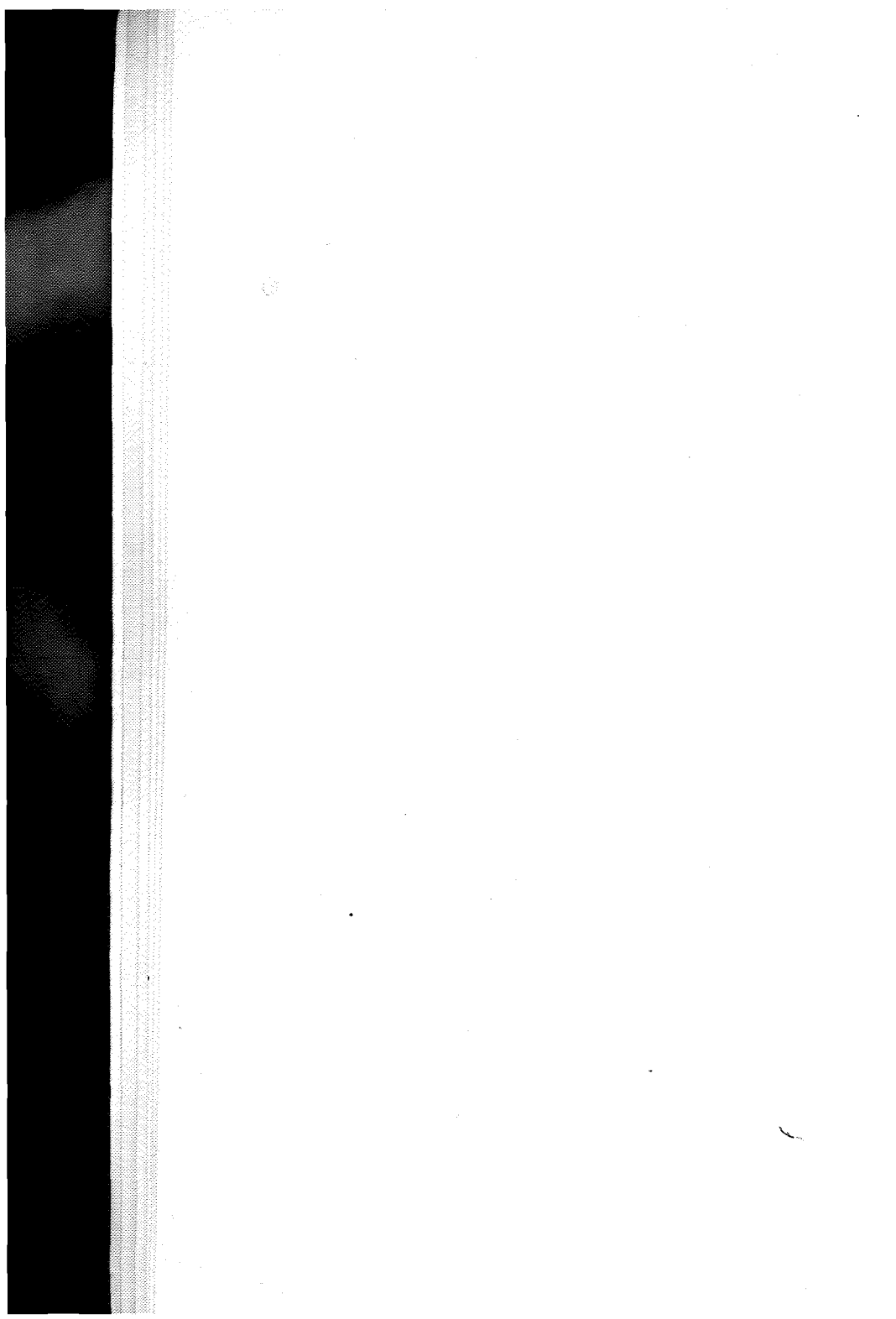


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# Introduction

At a time in American history when black women in every area of the country might have joined together to demand social equality for women and a recognition of the impact of sexism on our social status, we were by and large silent. Our silence was not merely a reaction against white women liberationists or a gesture of solidarity with black male patriarchs. It was the silence of the oppressed—that profound silence engendered by resignation and acceptance of one's lot. Contemporary black women could not join together to fight for women's rights because we did not see "womanhood" as an important aspect of our identity. Racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and to regard race as the only relevant label of identification. In other words, we were asked to deny a part of ourselves—and we did. Consequently, when the women's movement raised the issue of sexist oppression, we argued that sexism was insignificant in light of the harsher, more brutal reality of racism. We were afraid to acknowledge that sexism could be just as oppressive as racism. We clung to the hope that liberation from racial oppression would be all that was necessary for us to be free. We were a new generation