Highlighting the work taking place at the crossroads of sociology, sexuality studies, gender studies, cultural studies, and performance studies, this series offers a platform for scholars pushing the boundaries of gender and sexuality studies substantively, theoretically, and stylistically. The authors draw on insights from diverse scholarship and research in popular culture, ethnography, history, cinema, religion, performance, new media studies, and technoscience studies to render visible the complex manner in which gender and sexuality intersect and can, at times, create tensions and fissures between one another. Encouraging breadth in terms of both scope and theme, the series editors seek works that explore the multifaceted domain of gender and sexuality in a manner that challenges the taken-for-granted. On one hand, the series foregrounds the pleasure, pain, politics, and aesthetics at the nexus of sexual practice and gendered expression. On the other, it explores new sites for the expression of gender and sexuality, the new geographies of intimacy being constituted at both the local and global scales.

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Preface

Lynn S. Chancer

Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York

Feminist scholars of diverse backgrounds who successfully pursued doctorates in the Department of Sociology at the Graduate Center (GC) of the City University of New York—why do the experiences of such scholars inspire, merit, a collection of essays all its own? For one thing, these scholars’ stories vividly illustrate early feminist interweaving of the political as personal. But if the volume brings to life why and how the political becomes personal (and vice versa), it also shows the sociological as intellectual, bringing to life C. Wright Mills’ insistence that our field can and should routinely couple the individually biographic with the collectively social. The political, the personal, and the intellectual—how do these dimensions come to be entwined?

First, politically: for women who have encountered class as well as racial, ethnic, and/or sexual biases in their lives, to earn a PhD in Sociology at the Graduate Center has represented a victory both for public education and a discipline that expresses, as one of its main motives, deep concerns about social injustices. Indeed, as many essays in this volume attest by documenting life experiences, many feminist scholars could not have gone on to inspire (by now) their own students and to write innovative dissertations without this public mission so defining of the City University of New York. They simply could not have afforded to do so, nor might they have thereafter been able to encounter well-known mentoring figures, teaching at CUNY themselves from passion and conviction. They would not have been able to meet and feel comfortable with other students, intellectual, and progressive compatriots, capable of understanding and validating their/our attractions to the field of sociology.

Second, personally: the openness and realistic possibilities of CUNY were inseparable, for me as with most of the authors here,
from the kind of work GC Sociology distinctively allowed one to pur-
sue. Having been radicalized after funding my own way through a
private university, I came to the Graduate Center with the express
hope of writing social theory—believing that changing frameworks of
thought had in the past, and could in the future, further social justice
as its own form of activism. To this day, I doubt strongly I would
have found support for this intention anywhere else in the country—
possibly at the University of California, Berkeley?—other than at the
GC’s Sociology Department. At the Graduate Center, though, I found
Stanley Aronowitz, Bill Kornblum, Bob Alford, Patricia Clough,
Cynthia Epstein, Barbara Katz-Rothman, later Jock Young, among
other inspired and inspiring faculty, all supporting of young scholars
who dared to be unconventional, as have the feminist scholars, almost
to a one, whose stories distinguish this volume and are related here.

For, my own experience at the Graduate Center through the 1980s
felt, as I think it was, unique. The Sociology Department ran the
Socialist Scholars Conference (SSC) (later renamed the Left Forum),
and I was closely involved with arranging panels and participating in
lively discussions within which politics and personal life comingled.
I remember writing about feminism and feminist debates in classes,
and then organizing panels on sexuality, gender, class, racism at the
SSC, each flowing into the other, rather than having rigid walls separ-
ating academic from activist commitments as prevalent elsewhere in
academia.

Because of the notorious Scholar and Feminist Conference at
Barnard College in the late 1980s, as well as Socialist Scholar panels
with which I was involved, I participated in debates over “sadomas-
ochism” that led me to write a dissertation—later turned into a book—
on Sadomasochism in Everyday Life (1992), focusing on dynamics of
power and powerlessness that too often permeate gender, race, and
classed relationships. Looking back, I tend to doubt this dissertation
could have been written anywhere else than at the GC’s Sociology
Department. It was largely theoretical, and my advisor, Stanley
Aronowitz, provided ample support for the initially challenging task
of developing my own ideas and creativity—my own “sociological
imagination” indeed. By the end of my dissertation, I actually felt
that my goal of coming to the Graduate Center to write theory to
“say something” and have even a small degree of influence, had been
realized. Paradoxically, given the fears people felt of not finding jobs
in the late 1980s and as recently in the 2010s, I believe my employ-
ment prospects were improved by having been allowed to develop my
own ideas and to exercise a strong authorial “voice.”
Third, and, finally, intellectually: was it just supportive faculty, or also the public character of CUNY and the Graduate Center, that made possible works like *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life* (1992) and the fascinating writings and explorations of scholars chronicled here? Just as feminists tend to stress both/and rather than either/or solutions, so the best reply strikes me as “both”: certainly the Graduate Center as a public institution has for decades smacked not of elitism but its opposite. And it is precisely for this reason, that is because the Graduate Center, as a public university has fostered a widely democratizing rather than narrowly excluding “mission,” that arguably an atmosphere of intellectuality tends to prevail, to persist in nooks and crannies “relatively more” for its own sake than it may elsewhere. One does not go to the Graduate Center so much for status and to move up the academic hierarchy [a la Pierre Bourdieu’s *Homo Academicus* (1990)] per se but to pursue passions, from desires to use sociology so as to further thought and insight and transformations. Not surprisingly, this has meant that scholars interested in making a difference amidst their/our own differences have been comfortable here—feminists of myriad persuasions wanting to argue newly for affect theory or perhaps for human rights perspectives, or scholars of race and class taking new stances on intersectionality or reductionism, or theorists dismantling the historical dominance of some forms of sexualities over others, or people intent on combining (say) sociology and psycho(analytic) perspectives, or activist-researchers working in the field.

And it shows: all one has to do is peruse the essays that follow and it is hard not to want to keep the Graduate Center’s sociological traditions of nontradition alive, as has clearly happened in recent decades until now, even as scholars have become understandably more worried and insecure, making intellectual bravery ever more difficult. Still despite the odds, read on: the feminist scholars represented here would make both Simone de Beauvoir and C. Wright Mills proud with their political and personal insights, and their commitments to both public sociology and private liberations.
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This project emerged as an attempt to address the value of public higher education at a time when it is under attack on a variety of fronts; more generally, it is also a time of relative social, economic, and political tumult, as we experience the greatest inequality in US society since the Great Depression, technological transformation, and renewed movements for civil rights. We, the recipients of public higher education, believe the attacks on public higher education are misguided and detrimental to our democracy and arrive as wide swaths of our society still struggle for access to quality education. To address these concerns, we wanted to share our perspective as graduates of CUNY’s Graduate Center, and to more closely examine the social role of public higher education, by critically reflecting upon our lives and building upon the relationships and networks we have developed through our experiences at the Graduate Center. We especially wanted to highlight the voices of women, who have only been fully integrated into academia in the last generation or two. Our experiences at the Graduate Center were shaped by relationships with women who shared their rich life stories then. The candid, self-reflective insights of the writers, as expressed in their essays, make the book what it is. It is such a privilege to include the writings of women whose work we admire. We are so grateful to Ayse Akalin, Grace M. Cho, Deirdre Conlon, Melissa Hope Ditmore, Laura Fantone, Jean Halley, Angelique Harris, Robin G. Isserles, Hosu Kim, Jennifer Pastor, Michelle Ronda, and Alia R. Tyner-Mullings. We are humbled by the wisdom shared by the women who have contributed to this book, and feel fortunate to have learned from, and with, these women.

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