

Preface

People often ask me where my interest in studying nudity ‘up-close’ came from, suspecting me of having hidden quirks and inklings towards exhibitionism. The truth is that when I was searching for an appropriate topic for my doctoral study, I was enthusiastic about sociology and yet at the same time feeling rather disillusioned about the world in general. I could see how hard it was to influence any sort of positive change. Instead, I decided to find a topic that would keep me curious and interested for the next four to five years of my life – not something policy-orientated that would make me feel helpless and depressed. So off I went to join a local naturist club for a year, and more or less ‘guinea-pigged’ myself through my fieldwork. Am I a newly converted naturist? No. At the same time, I came to understand how pleasurable swimming could be when the water on my own bare skin wrapped the body in its silky cocoon. Or the feeling of a warm wind dancing all over my naked body on a sunny day, without a sweaty piece of Lycra or some similarly awful contraption supposedly designed to protect my modesty. As a woman, paradoxically, I would feel less sexually objectified when lying naked on a naturist beach than when wearing a bikini on a ‘textile’ beach. It is something I shall try to explain in my book; but, to fully grasp what I am talking about, everyone should try it for themselves at least once in their life. Is this an ethnographic study? I don’t think so. I like to see it as an honest sociological account, using carefully balanced levels of involvement with the topic in order to engage with it and understand it better. It was not an easy study to do; it took a lot of facing up to my own strong emotions and fears, followed by quite a bit of distancing from the data gathered. The more strongly I felt about it, the more I was convinced of how important it was to keep at it and how little we still know about our hang-ups concerning naked bodies. I can only hope that readers will be able to appreciate the levels of honesty here, both on the part of the respondents and of the investigator, and will not cringe at the sometimes embarrassingly detailed descriptions.

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during this particularly difficult last year while I have been revising this book for publication. He has made me the sociologist I am today and I hope this book will make him proud. I would also like to thank Barbara Menell for her hospitality and her help in copy-editing this book.

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