

# PART TWO

## UNEXPECTED CHALLENGES AND MOMENTOUS REVELATIONS

**THE ESSAYS IN PART II** discuss some of the unexpected challenges and unanticipated revelations mothers in academia have encountered. These unexpected circumstances include cultural relocation and acculturation; terminal illness; overt and covert forms of racism, sexism, and classism; and the encounter with a deeper understanding of how motherhood creates moments of enlightenment and power. We begin this part with Vanessa Adel's essay "Four Kids and a Dissertation: Queering the Balance Between Family and Academia," which deals with family dynamics and an ethics of care as she deliberates the politics of transracial adoption. As part of a lesbian couple, Vanessa shares in her story the juxtaposition of being an unremitting graduate student with doing intensive reproductive labor in a racially segregated society. Susana L. Gallardo similarly discusses the corporeal experience of mothering in "'Tía María de la Maternity Leave': Reflections on Race, Class, and the Natural-Birth Experience." Her essay examines the politics of natural birth from a Chicana feminist perspective by offering reflections on her own pregnancy and birth narrative as a forty-two-year-old first-time mom. She interrogates how the birth process and motherhood are political acts, particularly for women of color and unmarried women, and seeks to deconstruct the popular narrative of natural birth as individual privilege and to reexamine it as a "raced" and "classed" reproductive right that is overmedicalized by the medical establishment. "Threads That Bind: A *Testimonio* to Puerto Rican Working Mothers" by Maura I. Toro-Morn explores the inclusion of Latinas/os intellectuals in American universities in a

moment of increased corporatization and rising demands for more campus diversity. In that context, motherhood for Maura has meant trying to balance the growing workload in higher education with the challenges of raising a bicultural, bilingual son and the struggles of maintaining a transnational family. The intersections of race, class, and gender are also present in Olivia Perlow's essay "Parenting Within the Nexus of Race, Class, and Gender Oppression in Graduate School at a Historically Black College/University." She discusses how she developed strategies to help her overcome the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that challenged her ability to balance academic life and family life successfully. Yet she concludes that although individual determination is important, more institutional support is needed for student mothers to thrive. On the topic of support, in "*Sobreviviendo* (and Thriving) in the Academy: My Tías' *Counterconsejos* and Advice," J. Estrella Torrez weaves personal motherhood and activist narratives with critical interventions into academic perceptions of motherhood and "motherwork." She contends that Chicanas in the academia do not need to sacrifice raising families for a "successful" career in the academy. Our second section concludes with Allia A. Matta's chapter, "Revolving Doors: Mother-Woman Rhythms in Academic Spaces," where Matta shares her experience of returning to school at forty-two years old. She left job security, a rent-stabilized New York City apartment, and her sons to pursue her doctorate, a move many thought was not in her family's best interest. As an African American nontraditional graduate student, Allia contemplates how race, class, gender, and community are woven together and the ways in which the politics of mothering alter life-changing possibilities.

## FOUR KIDS AND A DISSERTATION

### Queering the Balance Between Family and Academia

*Vanessa Adel*

**IN THE FALL** of 2008, my partner and I were faced with a momentous decision: whether to welcome a fourth baby into our lives or not. We had three children, ages seven, six, and three at the time, whom we had adopted through social services. The youngest two shared the same birth mother, and she—a woman who had suffered a long history of drug abuse, violence, racism, and social and familial neglect—had just given birth to a baby girl, three months premature. Our social worker called us a little more than two weeks after the girl was born, asking if we would be interested in fostering and adopting our children's birth sister.

What to do? The first thing on our minds was the impact this new life would have on our routine: another mouth to feed, loads more dishes and laundry, additional doctor visits, less sleep, and the intensity of parenting a baby all over again. These concerns were compounded by the fact that she was a premature baby whose physical and developmental needs were unclear. How could we possibly manage this additional family member with our work, our careers, and our home? My partner has a taxing, more than full-time job as a sixth-grade social studies teacher in a nearby city. As a graduate student in sociology and a part-time lecturer with a full but flexible schedule, I shouldered the bulk of organizing and running the household. The mountainous bags of clothes that tumble down when I opened the closets in a frenzy to find sizable hand-me-downs every time one of my kids had a growth spurt became my visual symbol of being overwhelmed as I considered what welcoming a new baby would mean to me in our family