Part IV
Au Pairs in the New World

It is exciting in this collection to be able to move beyond the traditional ground of au pairing in Europe, to include chapters which examine au pairing in the USA and Australia. Despite being the ‘New World’ the two countries included in this section have little in common in terms of the way their au pair schemes are regulated. Australia has one of the least regulated au pair sectors in the world; like the UK it actually does not officially have an au pair scheme. By contrast, the USA has the most highly organised and regulated scheme, with rules governing many practices (such as induction) which are absent in other national contexts. These two regulatory environments may differ, but the chapters in this section suggest that au pairs in the two countries may still have quite similar experiences.

Australia, like Ireland, is a country where au pairing has been mapped onto existing migration and employment practices without any official definition of au pairing or au pair policy being put in place. The result is a scheme which produces high levels of risk for au pairs, cheap childcare without any risk of prosecution for hosts and the maintenance of the image of Australia as a country which does not use guestworkers for low wage labour. It is agencies in Australia who have been important in ‘inventing’ au pairing and producing an au pair sector where none officially exists. The example of Australia highlights a possible growing trend in au pairing worldwide, where the concept of the ‘au pair’ is adopted in new settings without any concomitant policy to regulate the sector or protect au pairs.

The USA has had an au pair scheme since the mid-1980s and is an important destination for au pairs from both the global north and south, but surprisingly, given the rich literature on paid domestic work in North America, it has not been widely studied (see Macdonald 2010;
Yodanis and Lauer, 2005 and Zarembka, 2003). The US scheme is different to all other national au pair schemes. It is the most regulated, but it contains the strongest elements of both work and cultural exchange. The contradictions of au pairing are nowhere clearer than in the US programme. The chapters by Aguilar Pérez and Geserick both show the effects of these contradictions, first in au pair motivations for moving to the USA (Aguilar Pérez) and then in the ways that they leave – sometimes with a bang, but more often with a whimper (Geserick).

References

