# PETERS — Developing

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**Developing a Sustainable Model in Mutual Cultural Digital Heritage**

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Since 2013 the Migrant, Mobilities, and Connection project has consisted of a complementary and interlinked program of research and development between Curtin University (History of Migration Experiences, Sustainability Policy Institute, Perth), the University of Western Sydney (Digital Humanities Research Group), and the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, The Hague). The backbone of both programs is informed by a digital framework that reconstructs the life courses of migrants through correlating data from both countries within the context of mutual cultural heritage policies and research objectives. The goal is to reconstruct a history that simultaneously intersects with Australia and the Netherlands through accessing or digitizing birth documents; death lists; shipping lists; passport requests; health clearances; alien registration; citizenship papers; school and business records; diaries and letters previously held only in state, regional, national, and international archives; consulates; and other governmental organizations. Indeed, our pilot study involves 51,525 emigration registration records from the National Archives, The Hague, which contain pre-migration demographic facts for over 180,000 Dutch emigrants over the period 1946–1982. This includes ‘hard facts’ on composition of family, dates of birth, addresses, religion, marital status, date of arrival, carriers, port of entrance, and emigration scheme, and ‘soft facts’ on profession.

Migration is, by its very nature, a mutual heritage activity since all migrants leave documentary traces of their past in memory institutions from their country of origin or home, and move records of their present and future into archives and libraries of the receiving or host society. By maintaining, managing, using, and highlighting this heritage, we can foster a critical reflection on our shared pasts and acknowledge, integrate, and build awareness of the migration experience. This includes drawing attention to the right of dual belonging, the desire to find common ground and contribute to home and hostland identities, and the need to build knowledge about events that induced individuals—and refugees in particular—to leave their land. This paper will tease out the project’s progress within the context of how to best negotiate mutual heritage records in digital forms and enable access to the intersecting and interdependent histories they represent.

Like any form of data migration, which conventionally involves the process of transferring data between storage types, formats, and computer systems, here we have the additional load of mapping old and new datasets into meaningful assemblages that ‘talk’ to each other. This includes not only the differences between the Australian and Dutch provenance of data but also the information that exists digitally and information that is yet to be digitized. How, for example, do we join data in the Australian domain with data in the Dutch domain, or information that is embedded in dusty community-based storage attics with names on the ‘Welcome Walls’ at the Fremantle Maritime Museum in Perth and the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney? We bump up against these issues because the solutions are not easy and require a step change in how we conceptualise the digital repatriation of mutual cultural heritage materials.

While much digital research in the library and information field deals with the explosion of user-generated content online, which creates new challenges and opportunities for libraries as custodians of data as well as objects, our project is faced with the exact opposite issue: not the problem of struggling to decide what data to collect and document from the ever-growing content generated by new media environments, but rather the equally tremendous volume of untapped cultural heritage materials and the infeasibility of libraries to collect and save it. Furthermore, from a digital humanities research point of view and with regards to the current spatial turn, around this arises a challenge over whether the ascendance of humanities-focussed GIS mapping techniques that emphasize the stories of a place and their geo-located attachment to said places—otherwise known as sited narratives or histories—can be meaningfully utilised in the context of mutual cultural heritage, in which the human subjects carry the inheritance of two or more worlds with them throughout their life courses.

# Migrating People, Migrating Data

This short paper is part of two interlinked short papers that discuss the archival, custodial, and digital challenges that impact the discovery, collection, preservation, and content management of material and immaterial traces from the past that the Netherlands shares with Australia. (The other short paper is ‘Ruptured Life Courses: Institutional and Cultural Influences in Transnational Contexts’ by Marijke van Faassen and Rik Hoekstra.) In partnership with key institutional and community stakeholders, our pilot study on mobility between these two countries is about developing new understandings of the experience and representation of migration and how this has shaped an evolving sense of Dutch-Australian heritage—and with it, the consequences for the formation of cultural identities.

The deliberate play in the short papers’ linking theme, ‘Migrating People, Migrating Data’, is to signal the thematic content of the parent project, Migrant, Mobilities, and Connection—that is, the sociocultural material traces that append to the historical activity of people moving from one region to settle in another, in which the movement of bodies through space combines with information about their mobility through time. At the same time, it is also to signal the technical and conceptual challenges surrounding the consolidation of different data sources (both hard copy and digital) from a prior generation of technology to successive generations. For example, many Dutch community groups in both countries are actively collecting documents, artefacts, photographs, and maps to pass on to future generations. However, few have developed sustainable workflows to ensure the sustainability of their ‘collections’, and rarely are they familiar with cataloguing and metadata conventions that help describe an item’s provenance, role, and position in the world. Planning for digital preservation therefore is uneven, leading to concerns about a ‘digital gap’ in a community’s history. Mitigating the deleterious effects then of information loss and fading human recollection is an issue central to both the continued accessibility of cultural heritage materials and the digital preservation of historical knowledge beyond technology format lifetimes.

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