Migrating People, Migrating Data: Digital Approaches to Migrant Heritage

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Abstract

Migrants all over the world have left multiple traces in different countries, and this cultural heritage is of growing interest to researchers and to the migrant communities themselves. Cultural heritage institutions, however, have dwindling funds and resources to meet the demand for the heritage of immigrant communities to be protected. In this article we propose that the key to bridging this gap is to be found in new possibilities that are opened up if resources are linked to enable digital exploration of archival records and collections. In particular, we focus on the value of building a composite and distributed resource around migrants' life courses. If this approach is used and dispersed collections held by heritage institutions can be linked, migrant communities can have access to detailed information about their families and researchers to a wealth of data—serial and qualitative—for sophisticated and innovative research. Not only does the scattered data become more usable and manageable, it becomes more visible and coherent; patterns can be discovered that were not apparent before. We use the Dutch-Australian collaborative project "Migrant: Mobilities and Connection" as an example and case study of this life course–centered methodology and propose that this may develop into a migration heritage template for migrants worldwide.

Global migration is one of the defining characteristics of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As Alexander Betts noted in 2015, "There is greater human mobility than ever before. In 1970, there were 70 million international migrants; today there are well over 200 million" (Betts 2015). With globalization, the opportunity and

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inclination to move is greater than ever. In Australia, nearly half of the population now lives in migrant households, the third-highest proportion in the Western world (see Arthur 2018, 3). Successive generations of migrants have left material and immaterial traces of their culture and identity in multiple locations worldwide, forming deep etches in modern collective memory. However, the documents and evidence of the history of migration are spread very widely and, in most cases, remain almost entirely inaccessible for research purposes. These records are a vital resource for humanities and social sciences research on multicultural heritage, and they play a central role in fostering enduring, multicultural community identities.

Conceptualized as a case study on Dutch-Australian mutual cultural heritage, the Migrant: Mobilities and Connection (MMC) project set out to examine the archival, custodial, and digital challenges that researchers face in the quest to discover, collect, and preserve traces from the past and to propose an approach to managing such material. Considerable progress has been made on this study, which takes in a range of histories that the Netherlands shares with Australia, including maritime, military, migration, and mercantile history. Interdisciplinary in its approach, the project is a collaboration among Dutch and Australian historians and literary scholars from Huygens ING (Amsterdam), the Centre for Global Issues at Edith Cowan University (Perth), Western Sydney University Library (Sydney), and the Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute (Perth).

The history of migration is truly international in character. In his article "Global Migration, 1846–1940," Adam McKeown begins with the statement, "Mass long-distance migrations have been an important part of world history; but historians have been slow to acknowledge their global extent" (McKeown 2004, 155). Making a similar point, Barbara Lüthi points out that "scholars have begun to look beyond the normative model of 'global migration'—one that focuses solely on European migration and the Western world—to focus on the rich and complex migration patterns and circulations of the entire modern (and premodern) world" (Lüthi 2010). While this project focuses on a European example against the backdrop of this immense global phenomenon, the same approach could be used in other parts of the world. Vast population movements following the Second World War had a profound influence on people's lives in both their home and host countries. The impacts of those migrations continue into the lives of the migrants and of later generations (Arthur 2018, "Introduction," 11–12; Schrover and Van Faassen 2010, "Introduction", 3–14; see also Persian 2018, 151–76; Williams 2018, 177–200; Peters 2001, 2006a-b, 2016). However, with more than seventy years having passed since the end of World War II, the opportunities to gather firsthand postwar

accounts of immigration memories are receding, and pressure is mounting to find ways of recording histories relating to these migrant groups and making them visible and accessible.

Poignant personal memories are recorded in physical documents such as manuscripts, letters, photographs, and objects that are now very widely dispersed and fragmented. Some may be housed in private and public collections, policy files, and records stewarded by the institutional archives of local, national, and supranational governments. Others may be under the care of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), museums, or libraries, or be in private possession in the homes of individual migrants and their families (Peters 2010a; Peters et al. 2017). Adding a high degree of urgency to the task is the fundamental problem of the blurring of memory with the long passage of time. History can be lost because of people's "extraordinary capacity to obliterate memory," but as Colin Tatz also recently explained, there is something "more benign but equally dangerous, and that is simple forgetfulness. The world moves on, history recedes" (Tatz 2018). This project uses as its starting point the individual life course and the stories it can offer through archived information, and also, where possible, through recorded memories. This approach is intended to stem the flow of forgetting in the case of this segment of history that forms an important part of the collective memory of each of the two countries (home and host land).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the total number of people on the move in Europe alone was estimated to be thirty million (Hoerder 2002). Of these, half a million were Dutch nationals—amounting to some five percent of the country's population—who migrated to various overseas countries of settlement, including Australia. There were comparable flows of migrants from other parts of the world—people seeking a temporary or permanent new home in response to many kinds of pressures, including political persecution, vilification, or conflict. Little has changed in modern times (see Ensor, Polak, and Van Der Merwe 2007). In fact, never before have there been so many people migrating across borders. In 2017 there were 258 million international migrants worldwide (3.4 percent of the world's population), up from 173 million in 2000. Of these, 65.6 million were forcibly displaced, 22.5 million were refugees, and 10 million remain stateless (United Nations 2017). In using the MMC project as an example, our intent is to present a methodology that can be applied in other arenas and across other kinds of migration to contribute toward the preservation of important cultural data in situations of displacement or disruption that have arisen as a result of the huge increase in human mobility in recent decades.

In this article we propose a life course–centered approach to finding, connecting, and opening up heritage collections—for migrant communities, for scholarly research, and for the general public. With a focus on Dutch-Australian migrants and what shaped the course of their lives, this method seeks to examine specific social and cultural connections and the interactions between individual migrants and institutions in both countries. Working across local, regional, and national scales of inquiry, the method goes beyond the macro or micro level of analysis typically adopted in migrant and migration research (de Haas 2014).

Given the highly mobile nature of modern global society, the sustainable preservation of migrants' cultural heritage has worldwide relevance, extending far beyond the Dutch-Australian case study, and yet to date this issue has not been adequately addressed (UNESCO 2002). Fundamental questions relating to how to digitally preserve and organize migrant materials and historical traces remain unanswered. Planning for digital preservation tends to be uncoordinated and irregular, leading to concerns about the loss of migrant communities' histories. With vastly improved digital tools and methods now available, there are opportunities to take positive action to digitally preserve heritage materials and maintain historical knowledge in ways that will enable them to endure beyond our generations and beyond the lifetimes of current technology formats. This project demonstrates how, through collaboration, and by confining the project to a well-defined group, this result can be achieved transnationally, drawing upon records from both the country of departure and the country of destination, to provide a more integrated and complete picture.

There is a growing awareness of and interest in the heritage of specific migrant groups in cultural institutions and within migrant communities. Seen from a worldwide perspective, migrants often belong to migrating ethnic groups and are a minority in the countries of settlement. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and recently the European Union (EU) have signaled an urgent need for preserving community heritage (UNESCO 2003; ICOMOS 2004; EU 2014). Museums face unprecedented pressures due to the difficulty and high cost of preserving ethnically diverse cultural heritage materials in a time of economic upheaval. According to the 2014 Digital Agenda Toolbox report, "The digitisation of Europe's cultural heritage and its preservation is a costly task. . . . With only a fraction (20%) of Europe's cultural heritage digitised, and only a small proportion of all digitised items accessible online, this work is still in its infancy" (Digital Agenda Toolbox 2014, 48). The digital processes and platforms used to collect and hold the cultural material are critically

important to ensure longevity and interoperability. The UNESCO *Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage* (2003) recommended the use of a template for the preservation of immigrants' cultural heritage as an effective tool for addressing challenges such as these, hence the approach selected for the MMC project. The value of cultural heritage to a country's economy and social capital is widely recognized for "turn[ing] … cultural resources into an important building block for the digital economy" and "stimulating innovation in other sectors" (Digital Agenda Toolbox 2014, 48), and yet the gap between growing societal demand for cultural services and diminishing resources is difficult to bridge.

In the country of settlement, a migrant may be identified through a number of different official documents and registers. Government archives hold migration registrations that record departure, travel, or arrival plus documentation pertaining to security checks and health. Migrants can also be identified through their membership of groups of immigrants recruited for a particular purpose or under a known migration assistance scheme that has its own list of participants, or who settled as a recognizable group in the land that was their destination. Other kinds of documents are generated when individual migrants become members of migrant associations, where they may be listed as having served on committees or may be mentioned in newsletters describing events and activities; members may also be identified through grant applications submitted when these groups have sought assistance by applying for funds from governments. In addition to governments, numerous civil society organizations, churches, and other NGOs accumulate document trails through their interactions with individual migrants (see figure 1). They provide information about their families and social group and the governance systems that have intervened to manage their mobility and their citizenship. All migrants leave evidence of facets of their lives in their country of origin and in their host country within records and artifacts that can be joined up to tell their story of migration and form part of the overlapping cultural heritage of the two places. Each of these traces can be seen, in context, as a representative instance within the life course of a migrant that can be captured in a template designed to bring these facts, dates, and figures together to form the frameworks for narratives that can grow and change as more information comes to light.

In this project the central focus in the development of a migration heritage template is the individual migrant. The benefits of a migrant heritage template extend far beyond the arenas of family history and academic research. As the map in figure 1 illustrates, many stakeholders are involved, so a template of this kind has the potential

to have a wider societal impact. Most importantly, the template can help members of migrant communities better understand their own transnational histories.
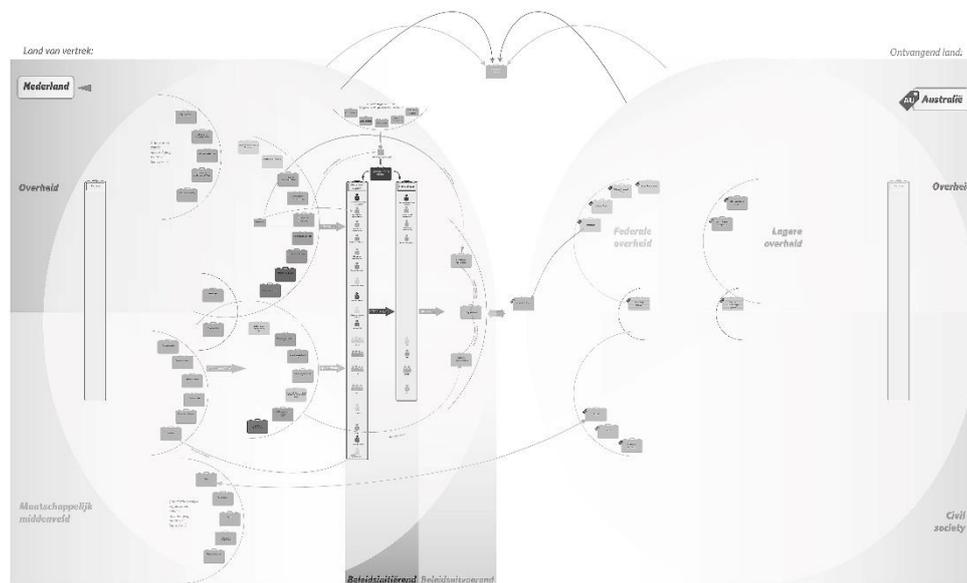
Figure 1. Scheme of the myriad cultural heritage institutions involved in a migrant life course.
Source: van Faassen 2014b.

The context and rationale for developing such a template focus on these key aspects, following the concept of a "data scope" (Hoekstra and Koolen, forthcoming):

Information held by the migrants themselves. Migrants are custodians of the cultural heritage of their families; as a result, the materials almost invariably exist as scattered fragments and remnants, disconnected from each other, even within a single family. Despite the practical difficulties, migrant communities increasingly want to safeguard their heritage objects through digitization. Although a great deal of work has to be done to achieve it, digitization enables not only preservation but also the potential to link materials to a wider ethnic context. Because migrant groups do not usually have the resources or technical skills to embark on this kind of project, the need exists to create an underlying digital infrastructure that can facilitate this effort and provide a model for doing so on a larger scale. A template designed for this purpose can provide both a tool and an incentive for migrants to contribute and make their own heritage accessible and thus help to supplement the official documents with voices from the migrant community.

Information held by institutions. At the public-sector level, cultural heritage institutions—including archives, libraries, and museums—preserve those parts of migrant cultural heritage that are sourced from documents such as those recording historical government activities or the membership and activities of migrant associations, and also the artifacts and memorabilia of key individuals' estates and migrant newspapers (for example, the *Dutch Weekly* and *Dutch Courier*, digitized by the National Library of Australia). Increasingly, but only selectively, collections are being made available digitally. Collections are typically exhibited in isolation from one another, even when they contain information about the same individual or events. The cross-national dispersion of materials that can be linked to the same people exacerbates the problem and leads to fragmentariness in cultural heritage understanding. The template approach offers practical steps toward a solution to this aspect.

Synthesis and analysis. Academic research organizations can provide the analytical skills to connect different documents together and link materials to the wider history of global migration. By guiding researchers toward a variety of sources and collections that they might not otherwise have considered, the template approach can add new dimensions to research. While using the individual migrant as the starting point, this approach also allows analysis across groups and thus supports the construction of broader, evidence-based, representative stories of the experience of migrant communities.

In the MMC project, the overall aim is to reconstruct migrant cultural heritage to show how the histories of Australia and the Netherlands have intersected and flowed into each other through the lives of migrants. Many preparatory steps are required for such a project. The first requirement is to set up a collaborative relationship between relevant organizations in the two countries. The next step is to set up processes to identify the documents that are to be accessed and, if they are in analog forms, to plan for them to be digitized. Official papers include emigration and immigration records, passenger lists, passport requests, health clearances, alien registration documents, and citizenship papers, as well as school, business, and employment records. Where possible, diaries and letters held in state, regional, national, and international archives, consulates, and other governmental organizations are also being accessed, and plans are underway for these to be digitized and linked. While this process is labor-intensive and time-consuming, it is important to recognize that archives themselves have cultural and political dimensions that are governed by underlying institutional priorities and emphases in each country; as a result, historical knowledge and a critical perspective are

required when searching the archives, as is an awareness of the lives behind the simple factual data. Archives are themselves "already stories" (Haebich 2018, 37). Archives can provide insights into social attitudes through their recording and preserving principles. A notorious example is the archive of the West Australian Department of Indigenous Affairs (DIA), which documents seventy-four years of state control of Aboriginal people from 1898 to 1972 in the state of Western Australia. As the DIA archive vividly demonstrates, archives are cultural artifacts that reflect, express, and consolidate the prevailing social structures and systems of regulation; they are not "immutable artifacts of the past" but can be adaptive and open to change through new interpretations (Haebich 2018, 37). For this reason, digitizing archives achieves much more than simple transfer. It enables archives to be searched for patterns that may stay hidden when they are in analog formats. Through the life course approach, such patterns may reveal themselves through formerly invisible common threads or links across individual lives (on the Dutch in Western Australia, see Peters 2016).

The MMC project started out with a pilot study that involved the registration system of the post–World War II Dutch consulates in Australia, consisting of 51,525 emigration cards now held by the Dutch National Archives, The Hague. These contain pre-emigration demographic data for over 180,000 Dutch emigrants over the period from 1946 to 1992. The material includes "hard facts" such as composition of family, dates of birth, addresses, religion, marital status, date of arrival, carriers, and port of entrance, as well as some "soft facts," such as nature of employment or profession. From this information a basic picture of the life courses of migrants can begin to be constructed and some key questions can be identified. The lives of migrants differ structurally from the lives of most other people, as their life courses are divided very clearly into the periods before and after migration. Continuities and discontinuities are very visible across this divide, raising questions such as which institutions, in the countries of origin and destination, were influential in the emigrants' enrollment for migration. The life course approach can, for example, facilitate the tracing of influences via churches or local community organizations (Green 2005; Green and Weil 2007; Schrover and van Faassen 2010; Peters 2010b; see also Elich 1987).

Dutch and Australian migrant registrations from both nations' National Archives contain the core information on the migrants' life courses. While these are accessible through databases, up to now it has only been possible to search them separately. The backbone of the current research program is the development of a digital platform that links records from the Netherlands and Australia to create a connected resource with data relating to the life courses of virtually all Dutch-Australian emigrants from 1945 to

1992 (van Faassen 2014b; Hoekstra 2005). The longer-term intent is to extend the linked archives to other cultural heritage collections to understand aspects of migration that could previously only be viewed in isolation or were not visible at all (see fig. 2).
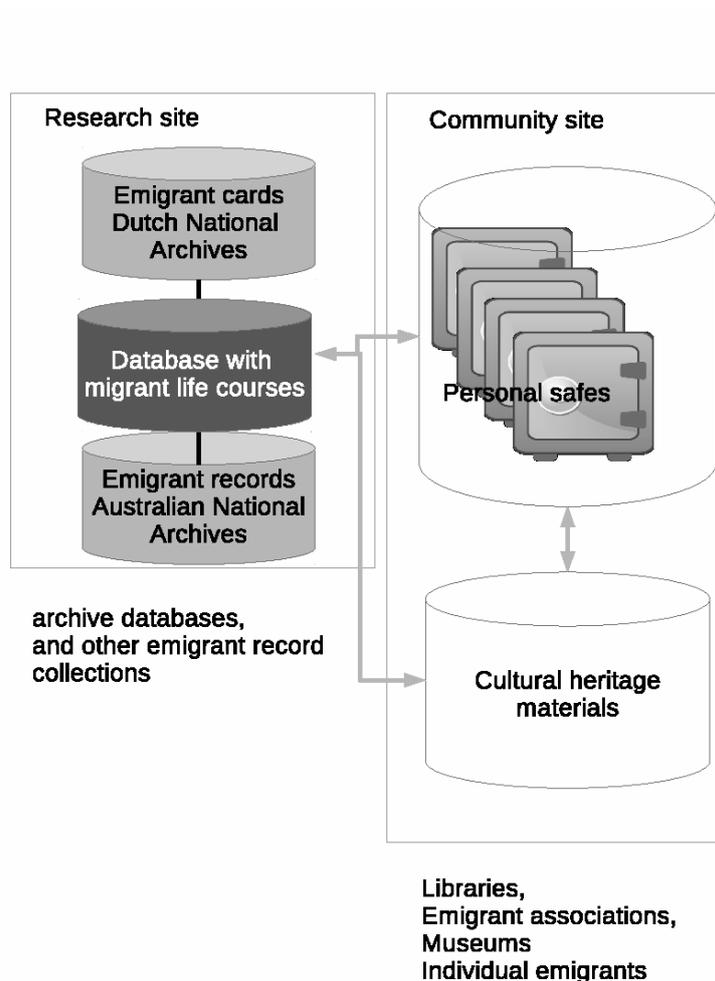
Figure 2. Scheme for research and community (web) access to migration data

The study of life courses has tended to focus on either the micro level or the macro level. The micro (close-reading) historical approach is predominantly qualitative in nature, relying on biographical interpretations of the lives of individuals. The macro (distant-reading) historical method is serial in nature and distinguishes patterns in the lives of groups of people but is less personalized. The current project breaks down the barriers between these approaches. It enables the study of groups of migrants in much more depth than conventional macro approaches to the individual records in a database

would allow. The groups selected may be arbitrary or identified through a specific question. The research is organized around a new comprehensive dataset, blending the computer-assisted heuristics of the digital humanities with traditional archival sources (Ensor 2009). This organization enables the micro and the macro approaches to be connected into what we call *serial qualitative research*, a method that makes it possible to find patterns while retaining access to details, to make representative selections for case studies, and to generalize and quickly test representative coverage of the findings from case studies (see fig. 3).
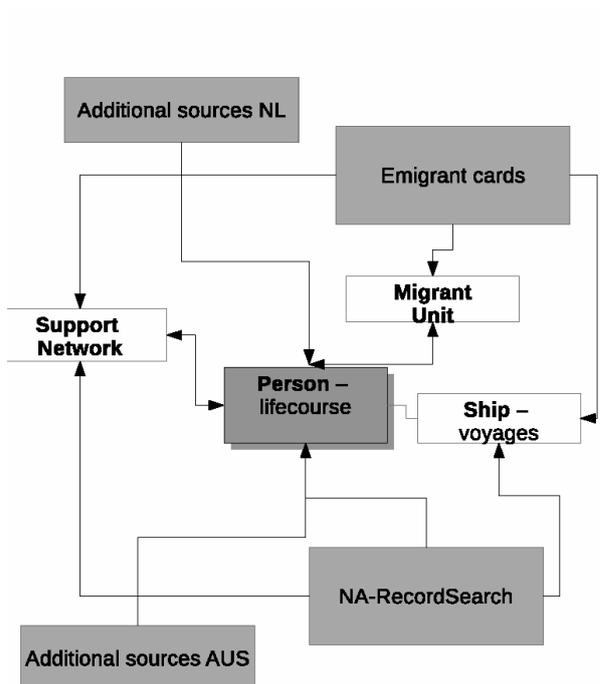
Figure 3. Scheme for a Dutch-Australian migrant database

For all manner of groups and selections it is possible to investigate the life course of each member in detail. This approach allows for the identification of social networks of and around the migrants and offers a means to follow their individual and group trajectories as they migrated from a Dutch setting to their new environment in Australia (Peters 2000, 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2009, 2010b, 2012). It is also possible to identify the different influences on the social networks as they evolved, using pattern

recognition to show links between life courses. Such identification allows better understanding both of community formation in the homeland and of forms of assimilation in Australia with the influences of a different and changing social context (Peters 2001; Hoekstra 2005; Tilly 2011; Brettell and Hollifield 2014; White and Houseman 2002). The combined Dutch-Australian resource allows important new questions to be asked and explored, such as which institutions were involved, and what their influences were on the lives of the emigrants during their time in the Netherlands and then after their immigration to Australia. The institutions include not only the Dutch and Australian governments but also the church, employers, trade unions, and other civil society organizations (Peters 2000; van Faassen 2014a). It becomes possible to answer questions as to whether specific aspects of the cultural background of the people, such as original home locality or religion, contributed to the lives they led in their new country. Did they seek a similar community? Did they join a church? Many new questions can be identified and pursued now and into the future as a result of the foundations this project has laid. The connected transnational resource allows access to data in a way that crosses the chasm that has traditionally existed between the old world and the new, making it possible to better understand how culture was transferred both ways and new identities were forged. In addition to basic factual data, other kinds of information and written texts can be integrated into the database, including literary texts, which are a rich resource for migration history (Douma 2014; Arthur 2009, 2014).

Concluding Remarks

This collaborative transnational study of migration has many dimensions. First, it seeks to develop a postwar Dutch-Australian migration database, using a template approach to capture a wide range of archival and other information in digitized form from both countries, that will enable seamless searching across institutional and national barriers. The overall purpose of the combined database is to preserve and better understand the important and extensive Dutch heritage that has been transferred to Australia as a result of migration and that has been changed by this process, but continues to have cultural and historical value in both countries. Importantly, the project seeks to discover hitherto hidden connections and patterns that may cast light not only on this specific set of transitions across geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries but also on processes of cultural transition or displacement anywhere, something that is critically important in the current era of unprecedented levels of global mobility. In other words, the project has value in itself as a specific study of Dutch-Australian cultural heritage intersections, but it also has representative value as a model to be used in other transnational contexts.

The project is particularly timely because of the dwindling numbers of post–World War II immigrants from Europe who have firsthand memories of migration or of their home country. The project recognizes and addresses the fact that, across the world, archival materials are dispersed, fragmented, and in many cases endangered. Creating linked digital resources greatly enhances the usability and value of the separate resources, and linking them across countries opens up completely new possibilities for the interpretation of the experience of migration. It allows the movement of people across space and time to be more effectively contextualized, and it provides a framework for accessing the interconnected social, material, and temporal dimensions of private and public migrant archival holdings around the world. There are dynamic links and interdependencies to be discovered among collections, and among the scattered fragmentary records that are incorporated into the databases and given a safe haven for potential future deeper analysis, when connections may be made with other migrant stories or other relevant databases. This approach will inspire as well as facilitate new research that can unpack the multiple shifting configurations of migration that occur on and over multiple scales and time frames. Fundamental to its success is collaboration. In addressing the challenges of connecting dispersed collections from many different libraries, archives, and museums as well as private collections from the community, a joint effort is required from cultural heritage owners, cultural heritage experts, humanities and digital humanities scholars, and computer science researchers. The MMC project—with its sound base of coherent core data and its strong history of transnational research collaboration and mutual support—is an example that points to multiple possibilities and has already engendered pride and community awareness in the intertwined Dutch-Australian history of migration.

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