

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 for researchers and the migrant community alike. Cultural heritage institutions, however, have dwindling funds and resources to meet this demand. In this article we propose that the key to bridge this gap is to be found in the use of new possibilities in digital collection exploration and resource linking. Building a composite and distributed resource around the migrant's life courses can connect dispersed collections of heritage institutions, provide the community with detailed data about their families and researchers with serial and qualitative data for sophisticated and innovative research. We begin with the Dutch-Australian collaborative project 'Migrant, Mobilities and Connection' as a use case and propose that in using this life course-centered methodology may develop into a migration heritage template for migrants worldwide.

Introduction

Global migration is one of the defining characteristics of the 20th and early 21st century. 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, and are arguably indispensable for fostering enduring, multicultural community identities.

Conceptualized as a case study on Dutch-Australian mutual cultural heritage, the 'Migrant, Mobilities and Connection' project (MMC project) set out to examine the archival, custodial and digital challenges that impact the discovery, collection, preservation and content management of traces from the past of the maritime, military, migration and mercantile history that the Netherlands shares with Australia. This interdisciplinary project is supporting collaboration between Dutch and Australian historians and literary scholars from Huygens ING, the Digital Humanities Research Group at Western Sydney University, and the History of Migration Experiences at Curtin University (cf. Nyhan & Duke-Williams, 2014).

The history of migration is truly international in character. The vast migration movements following the Second World War had a profound influence on people's lived experiences in both their home and host countries. Poignant personal memories are recorded in physical documents such as manuscripts, letters, photographs and objects that are now very widely dispersed and fragmented in private and public collections, policy files and records stewarded by the institutional archives of (supra) national and local

governments, and others under the care of NGOs, museums, libraries and individual migrants. In the second half of the twentieth century, the total number of people on the move in Europe was estimated to be 30 million (Hoerder, 2002), of which half a million Dutch nationals 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 political or economic vilification. Little has changed in modern times (Ensor et al., 2007).

In this article we suggest a method for finding, connecting and opening up migrants' heritage collections for migrant communities, scholarly research and the general public. With a focus on what shaped the lives of Dutch-Australian migrants, this method seeks to take into account specific social and cultural relations 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).

The Global Challenge of Migration

Given the highly mobile nature of modern global society, the sustainable preservation of migrants' cultural heritage has worldwide relevance beyond the Dutch-Australian case study, and yet to date this issue has been inadequately addressed. Fundamental questions relating to how to digitally preserve and organize migrant materials and historical traces remain unanswered. Planning for digital preservation therefore is irregular, leading to concerns about a 'digital gap' in these communities' histories. 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, a problem not localized to Australia only.

In view of the recent comments by Vint Cerf, current Vice President of Google --- that if 'we're thinking 1,000 years ... ahead in the future, we have to ask ourselves, how do we preserve all the bits that we need in order to correctly interpret the digital objects we create?' -- then the oft-assumed salve of digital preservation becomes even more important. Yet the way forward is not yet clear, not even for Google (Cerf 2015).¹

There is a growing awareness of and interest in the heritage of migrants in cultural institutions and within migrant communities. Seen from a worldwide perspective, all migrants form part of ethnic groups and are always a minority in the countries of settlement. UNESCO, ICOMOS, and recently the European Union signaled an urgent need for preserving community heritage. (UNESCO, 2003; ICOMOS, 2004; EU, 2014). Museums face unprecedented pressures due to the difficulty of preserving ethnically diverse cultural heritage resources in a time of accelerated economic upheaval. Crucially, the UNESCO charter noted that a template aimed at the preservation of immigrants' cultural heritage would be key to confronting these challenges. The importance of cultural heritage to a country's economy and social capital is widely recognized, yet the gap between growing societal demand for cultural services and the increasingly insufficient resources is difficult to bridge.

Joining Data

A migrant may be identified in government archives by way of migration registrations recording departure, travel or arrival. Migrants can be identified as members of groups that were recruited for migration or settled in the land of destination. Migrants can become members of migrant associations, and they may also apply for help from governments or funds of assistance. In turn, government and civil society organizations, churches and other NGOs interact with migrants. All these actions leave evidence in artefacts that form part of the cultural heritage of a single migrant, their social groups, migrant communities at large and the governance systems that have intervened to manage their mobility. Each of these traces can be seen as representative instances of the life course of a migrant in context.

Fig. 1 Scheme of the myriad of cultural heritage institutions involved in a migrant life course.

Source: <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/emigratie/qids/map>

In our opinion, the central focus in the development of a migration heritage template must be the migrant. The interest of a migrant heritage template is not confined to just research contexts, but has a wider societal impact, as there are different stakeholders involved, as the above scheme illustrates:

1. At the migrant level, members from these communities are custodians of the cultural heritage of their families in analogue and sometimes digital form. Increasingly these communities are interested in safeguarding their heritage objects through digitization in addition to tracing their family, cultural identity and linking

their materials to a wider ethnic context – and yet few have the technical skills to do so, pointing to a need to create an underlying infrastructure that can facilitate this on a larger scale.

2. At the public sector level, cultural heritage institutions (such as archives, libraries, and museums) preserve those parts of migrant cultural heritage that are sourced from historical government activities, the documents of migrant associations, and the artefacts and memorabilia of key individuals' estates. Increasingly, collections are being made available digitally but only selectively. 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 linking to the same people reinforces the fragmentary nature of cultural heritage understanding and provides justification for this research.
3. At the academic level, researchers have the analytical skills to connect different documents together and link materials to the wider history of global migration. Their aim is often to present a representative story of migrants (not per se individuals) but they are not always aware of the existence and variety of alternative collections that may add a different angle to their research.

Previous Work and suggested Methodology

In the MMC project, we aim to reconstruct a history that simultaneously intersects with Australia and the Netherlands through accessing or digitizing birth documents, death lists, passenger lists, passport requests, health clearances, alien registration documents, citizenship papers, school and business records, diaries and letters previously held only in

state, regional, national and international archives, consulates and other governmental organizations.

We started out with a pilot study that 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 1946-1992. This includes 'hard facts' on composition of family, dates of birth, addresses, religion, marital status, date of arrival, carriers, port of entrance, and 'soft facts' on profession. They describe part of the life courses of migrants. It is acknowledged that the lives of migrants differ structurally from the lives of most other people, as their life courses are divided in a period before and a period after migration.

The life courses approach centres on questions of continuities and discontinuities in life, habits and lifestyles. What e.g. were the influences of both sending and receiving states, the emigrants institutions of both countries, their own communities and the churches on their enrollment for migration (Green, 2005; Green and Weil, 2007; Schrover and Van Faassen, 2010; Peters, 2010, see also Elich 1987)?

Fig. 2 Scheme for research and community (web)access to migration data

Dutch and Australian migrant registrations from both National Archives contain the core information on the migrants' life courses, accessible through databases. It is possible to digitally link the Dutch and the Australian records. The backbone for the current research program is the development of a database that combines records from the Netherlands and Australia to create a resource with data relating to the life courses of virtually all Dutch-

Australian emigrants from 1945 to 1992 (Van Faassen, 2014b, Hoekstra, 2015). It is our intention to extend the linked archive to other cultural heritage collections in order to understand aspects of migration that could previously only be studied separately.

Fig. 3 Scheme for a Dutch-Australian migrant database

Studying life courses has tended to either focus on the micro level or on the macro level. The micro (close-reading) historical approach is mostly qualitative in nature, reliant on the biographical approach to understanding individuals; the macro (distant-reading) historical method is serial in nature and distinguishes patterns in the lives of groups of people but with less personalised nuance. In the current project it is possible to study (arbitrary) groups of migrants in much more depth than only the individual records in a database would allow. The organization of the research around a new comprehensive dataset, blending the computer assisted heuristics of the digital humanities with traditional archival sources (Ensor, 2009), enables the connection of micro and the macro approaches into what we would call *serial qualitative research*. This method makes it possible to find patterns while keeping access to the details, to make representative selections for case studies and to generalize and quickly test representative coverage of the findings from in-depth case studies.

For all manner of groups and selections it is possible to investigate the life courses 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 the environment of their new homes in Australia

(Peters, 2000,1,4,6a,6b,6c,9,10,12). It is also possible to identify the different influences on the social networks as they evolved, combining pattern recognition of diverging lives and Dutch community formation and forms of assimilation in Australia with the influences of changing social context (Peters, 2001; Hoekstra, 2005; Tilly, 2011; Brettell and Hollifield, 2014; White and Houseman, 2002). Which institutions were involved and what were their influences on the lives of the emigrants both during their time in the Netherlands and after their emigration to Australia? The institutions include the Dutch and Australian governments, but also the church, employers, and trade unions or other civil society organizations (Peters, 2000; Van Faassen, 2014a). In this way it becomes possible to answer questions as to whether the cultural background of the people (places of provenance and religion) contributed to the lives they led in their new country. This can be complemented by many other questions, for instance how new identities were forged with literary culture transfer and the use of literary texts in the broadest sense of the word (Douma, 2014; Arthur, 2014, 2009).

Concluding Remarks

The study of migration seeks to contextualize the movement of people across space and time – historically, culturally and systemically – and explicate the interconnected social, material and temporal dimensions of private and public migrant archival holdings around the world. The dynamic links and interdependencies to be discovered among collections, practices and the fragmentary records of migrant social arrangements and activities can unearth new analytic focuses and understandings regarding the history of global migration. For this, we need a new conceptual vocabulary and toolkit to unpack the multiple, shifting

configurations of migration that occur on multiple scales and time frames. 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, (digital) humanities scholars and computer science researchers. Use cases such as the MMC project with its sound base of coherent core data can help with developing such a toolkit and vocabulary.

Notes

1. The quote is in many news items; ironically the original 2015 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science where he spoke these words no longer seems to be online.

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