NO PLACE LIKE HOME: EXPERIENCES OF THE NETHERLANDS EAST INDIES AS REAL, VIRTUAL AND POLITICALLY CONTESTED REALITY

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Introduction, Objectives and Methodology

The Dutch presence in South East Asia extended from the end of the 16th until mid 20th Century. Their presence in Australia was, however, not substantial until the outbreak of WWII when over 10,000 bureaucrats (including the Netherlands East Indies [NEI] Administration) and military personnel, comprised of ethnic Dutch and those of mixed blood (Dutch and Indonesians or Chinese) and political prisoners, were evacuated here from the NEI, ahead of the Japanese Occupation, to maintain the war effort and defend Australia. 1 At this time, habitually difficult relationships in the Asia Pacific region were eased by a collective fear of the Japanese Occupation, and a three and a half year alliance between the American, British, Dutch and Australian (ABDA) military began in the interests of the defence of Australia (Forde 1999).

When war finished in 1945, a further 6,000 NEI entered Australia. Exhausted, these survivors of Japanese POW and internment camps, evacuated for rehabilitation, were relieved to also escape life-threatening Indonesian youth freedom fighters, from the extremist faction of the Nationalist Independence Movement, on killing sprees directed at ex-interned Dutch (van Dulin et al 2002). By 1947, most evacuees had been repatriated to the Netherlands or NEI, apart from the few who had opted to stay permanently.

1 This paper was presented to the 17th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Melbourne 1-3 July 2008. It has been peer reviewed via a double blind referee process and appears on the Conference proceedings Website by the permission of the author who retains copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.
Postwar from 1951, approximately 150,000 Dutch, migrated to Australia from the Netherlands. They included 10,000 Indisch Dutch who chose to migrate to Australia, rather than resettle in the Netherlands, preferring to live in a warmer climate and closer to the NEI. Anthropologist Fridus Steijlen notes: ‘Although some research has been done to compare the experiences of such refugees, that very little of it focused on unravelling the complex human and cultural ‘grit’ thrown up by diasporas. Especially those caused by political conflict in which refugees do not flee to one country and/or do not stay in the first country they have fled to’.¹

In this paper I revisit the history of Dutch colonisation, war, revolution, evacuation, rehabilitation in Australia, repatriation to the Netherlands or NEI, decolonisation and migration to Australia, to determine the factors *Indisch Dutch Australians* (IDA) and evacuees to Australia invoke to construct their sense of self/place/homeland, identity and belonging.² Drawing on Basch et al’s (1994:7) ‘transnational perspective’ I define this *Indisch Dutch* diaspora to be:

∞ A continuous cultural process – and not a single act of relocation - by which migrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement; and

∞ In which people, termed transmigrants ‘take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks and relationships that connect them simultaneously to two or more nations states.

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses the term ‘mutual cultural heritage’ to refer to the above relationships that stakeholder countries want preserved.³ The Macquarie Dictionary (1997:831) defines cultural heritage as "that which comes or belongs to one by reason of birth; an inherited lot or portion; or something reserved for one". We often refer to material possessions in discussions about our cultural heritage, and in community historic buildings, archaeological sites and artefacts held in museums, archives and libraries. However, *Vasiliki Nihas* (1999:1), Chair of the Cultural Council of the ACT, contends that:

*The inheritance we most often receive and leave behind is our experience and our expression of culture, individually and collectively. Because ... it represents a*
metaphor for the human condition of growth and discovery, [and because] the stories it evokes are powerful and can create connections across cultural boundaries.¹

Gupta and Ferguson’s (1992:17) suggests that: ‘The ability of people to confound the established spatial orders, either through physical movement or through their own conceptual and political acts of re-imagination, means space and place can never be ‘given’ and that the process of their socio-political construction must be considered’. Ien Ang (1994:5), herself displaced from the NEI, asserts ‘It is the myth of (the lost or idealised) homeland, the object of both collective memory and of desire and attachment, which is constitutive to diasporas, and which ultimately confines and constrains the nomadism of the diasporic subject.

The present analysis of protagonists ‘cultural heritage’, ‘is based on data derived from: 26 semi-structured interviews with IDA; 42 participants of focus group discussions; insights gleaned from 1000 expressions of interest (via phone calls and letters) of informants wishing to participate in this study, and 10 oral history interviews with Indisch Dutch living in the Netherlands who as children were rehabilitated at Fairbridge Farm School at Pinjarra Western Australia before repatriation to the Netherlands (henceforth Dutch Fairbridgeans). The study is contextualised with reference to archival material about significant political and socio-cultural events from national and war archives in Australia and the Netherlands.

The fieldwork with protagonists centred on their recollections about:

∞ Their country of origin; how it was devastated by war, Occupation and a revolution that forced them to abandon it forever;

∞ The social organization, frameworks of meaning (symbols, culture) and of relationships (networks, memberships) from which they emerged and on which they draw to locate themselves in the world; and

∞ The linkages between countries of sojourn, country of origin and country of resettlement that continue to impact on their lives.

My interpretation relied overwhelmingly on protagonists’ ‘memories of the past’. ‘Memory’, according to philosopher James Booth (2006) [accepting its limitations], “is
centered on an absence, tries to make it present, and in this doing so answers the call of the trace.” Archivist Eric Ketelaar, calling these traces “memory texts”, contends that in any form, be it a map, a story, a landscape, a building, a monument, a ritual, a performance or a commemoration, they are usually a space of ‘contestation’. A space that “different people have different perceptions of…[that] they want to focus on different historical truths or myths [about].” The NEI as ‘homeland’ is such a space as this research shows.

**Homeland**

‘Homeland’, became a ‘contested reality’ in the wake of the great voyages of exploration, discovery and colonisation. ‘Sense of place’, has come to mean an organic relationship between inhabitants and their particular homeland. John Hughes (2005:4) contends that in Australia we think and talk a lot about ‘home’ because our personal heritage and sense of identity relate to a place and a history not really our own. The fact that our sense of self-discovery and self-realisation takes place in foreign lands is the [uniquely] rich and complex ironies of being Australian! His views are relevant to IDA who as previous inhabitants of the NEI, are bonded to it, yet not indigenous to it.

Why do we become attached to a place? Bender (2001:4) argues that we are only capable of understanding the world around us, at least initially, from what we have learned, been exposed to, and received in the way of narratives, traditions and beliefs. Norberg-Schulz, (1979) claims it is the process of creating the man-made environment - nodes, paths, edges and districts that marks out a sense of place, creating an understanding of one’s environment, that at least in navigational terms, engenders a “sense of emotional security”. Therefore, he would say that ‘place’ is defined more by its ability to serve as a ‘habitat’ for its residents than by its physical properties. This lead Norberg-Schulz (1979:5), to describe the connection between humans and their homeland as more spiritual in essence, relying on senses, memories and beliefs!

Experiencing a place fully enables us to bond with a place, to develop connections, emotional attachments and meanings that are relevant in regards to developing our sense of belonging and identity.

Experiencing ‘place’ through the body is also central to de Certeau’s philosophy, who argues that “the opacity of the body … in movement, gesticulation, walking, taking its pleasure, is what indefinitely organises a ‘here’ in relation to an abroad, a ‘familiarity’ in relation to a ‘foreignness’.” (Leach, 2002:283). Nell van de Graaff’s
experiences, on her first visit back to the NEI, her birthplace, after 30 years of exile, are powerful and representative:

The plane landed in Jakarta at sunset. It had been raining heavily, the tarmac, was glistening, and the dark clouds drifted by as the setting sun glowed on the western horizon. The warmth and humidity enveloped me as I emerged from the aircraft and the sounds and the smells of Indonesia made me feel I was coming home. In a flash I realized how much I had missed all this since I had left the country more than twenty years ago. I felt emotional, close to tears, and I could suddenly understand the grand gesture of expatriates who, returning to their homeland, kissed the ground on which their first faltering steps had fallen…I smelt the Chinese bread in the basket and the freshly brewed coffee, and I heard the distant calls of street vendors selling *sateh* and other delicacies from their mobile stalls. The sweetness of it all was almost too much to bear. How I loved this country – I felt I had come home…I sighed and felt blessed, and asked the [taxi] driver to take me next pass the house I had lived in as a girl and the church where my father had been a minister. They were both still there, although in need of repair.

Nell’s sentiments, full of de Certeau’s ‘familiarity’, also portray, *Norberg-Schulzian style* (1979:5), how childhood bonding with the NEI continues to impact on all her senses despite her abandonment of its shores. De Certeau’s ‘familiarity’ is also the central experience described by *IDA* of the benefit they derive from membership of the social clubs they established in the 1980s. They evolved largely from nostalgic imagining and the communicating of *Tempo Doeloe* - the collective memories of the good old times of colonial life:

When I first went to a meeting with other people from the Indies I straightaway felt at home. The people were familiar, the accent, everything was familiar. It feels like we are related. We have the same background, we went to the same schools, we like the same kind of food, tell the same kind of jokes. The first time was a sort of a ‘homecoming’.
You know what is so lovely about meeting another *Indisch* person? They know what I mean when I say *pisang*, *babu* or *bottle tjebok*... We don’t have to explain our past to each other. We share our past. That is what makes it so special.

The reflections of protagonists were not all positive. However, even negative experiences tended to bear out the continuing importance ‘sense of place [of origin]’ holds for *IDA*:

I have been living in “DENIAL” for a long time about my young informative years in the NEI... However, I know it is part of me, my upbringing, and it just doesn’t disappear. I keep going back for more info and I understand the significance of the part it played and the shaping of the man. I am now proud to be a person with such a complex background.

Travel sociologist Adler (1989:58) identifies the ‘familiarity experiences’ of *IDA* – the arena on which they construct social meaning and subjectivity. This is perhaps best illustrated by an extract from the epilogue of Andreas Flach’s (2003:68) autobiography. Andreas Flach, writing for his Dutch Australian children to tell them about his life in the Netherlands East Indies, it portrays a deep lasting attachment:

…the brutal Japanese Occupation of the Dutch East Indies and …’The Bersiap period’ are the darkest episodes in my life. A time I like to forget not only because of the many intense and traumatic experiences I had to go through but also in the light of the, hard to accept, fact that I, and with me most of the *Indische* people, have lost forever our country of birth, a country I grew up in, a country and a people where part of our blood comes from. I had to write this paragraph to let you know my hidden deepest feelings, may be you understand your father now when he asks in his will that his ashes be returned to [his] mother country’.

The NEI Dutch children evacuated to Western Australia for rehabilitation before repatriation to the Netherlands, and accommodated at Fairbridge Farm School Pinjarra, are not as clear about whether the Netherlands East Indies is their motherland, fatherland or homeland. The response from Ernst, a boy of eleven-years-old when his
family fled the NEI, is based on his ‘assumptions’ about what it means to be a ‘real Dutch person’:

In my feelings I am a Dutchman from Dutch East Indies origin (*Ik voel me Indisch!*). How does that appear in daily life? I am less nationalistic as the common Dutchmen. I am feeling myself more as a world-citizen with Dutch nationality. Maybe this originates from having my roots in Dutch East Indies and having lived a long time abroad. In many situations I recognise the same habitats in…[others] of the Dutch East Indies community in Holland... I have been abroad before the war in Java as a European citizen living in perfect conditions and good relationship with the native people who partly nursed me. That is why I considered the Dutch East Indies as my homeland. The Japanese invasion destroyed my homeland and I became a foreigner in my homeland and had to leave it [behind] what did seriously hurt. After [my sojourn in] Australia (11 Months) I came in Holland and felt myself a foreigner in between the Dutch people, however after having lived their for almost two decades Holland became my Homeland though I still considered myself as an “*Indische jongen*”.

Ernst adds that in disputes with good Dutch friends, about wartime, this ‘difference‘ still pops up. Ernst’s reference to his ‘good relationships’ with Indonesians, especially those that nursed him, is another common theme of interviews and life histories. In contrast to the other Dutch Fairbridgeans, Winnie de Vries’ deliberations about the NEI, feature aspects of history, race, class, ethnicity and culture:

My very first and perhaps most honest answer is: my roots are in the Netherland East Indies - *Indië* to me. The family history shows it. My father is from a mixed family. I'll try to tell it in short: In 1829 an ancestor coming from Germany went to Holland as a missionary and travelled by sailing ship to Indonesia. In Celebes he married a woman from high Indonesian birth. (1831). He once was begged to come to a very sick son of a *Radjah* - a ride on horseback of three days. He managed to cure the boy. The father was very grateful and offered him a daughter in marriage! As there were almost no Dutch women 'available' he accepted the offer and married her in 1831. They had seven children - so that was the start of 'my' family told by my old aunt,
our 'walking history book. It is not strange I think, that I always felt that the NEI was my homeland (fatherland). I feel very at ease with people from that country. Going to Australia for about ten months was a wonderful experience. If circumstances had been less difficult we would have gone back from Australia to Indonesia, where we had lived for such a long time. My mother was Dutch. Being in Holland now for over 50 years - yes this is a good country to live in. Still there are so many things in my daily life that remind me of my land of birth. Is Holland my motherland, Indië my fatherland? I think so. In fact my roots are in both countries; my life is in fact bi-cultural.

Wim Plink, another Dutch Fairbridgean reflects on his family’s attachment to the NEI, highlighting further complexities of ‘homeland’:

I am Dutch my parents are Dutch and my ancestors so my ‘fatherland’ is the Netherlands. But I am born in Indonesia so Indonesia is my ‘motherland’. So it is not easy to say what is my ‘homeland’, it is very emotional. I have my roots in Indonesia …so it is my ‘homeland’ (?) But now I stay in Holland since 1947, so Holland is now my ‘homeland’. For my mother, who was also born in Indonesia, it was her ‘fatherland and homeland’. When she got to Holland the ‘fatherland became Holland’ but not in her feelings and emotions. For my father born in Utrecht, Holland was his - fatherland, motherland and homeland-. His stay in Indonesia, in the army, was a period in his life. It was obvious that he would go back to Holland with wife and children eventually. In Australia as Dutch Fairbridgeans it was for me a ‘guestland’ that had comforted me well. But it is not a ‘homeland’ because in the time we were there it was obvious we would stay for only a short time.

The extracts above imply the existence of a continuing strong attachment and self-conscious identification with the NEI despite banishment from it. The extracts below are representative of the responses from IDA whose stories remain largely unacknowledged:

After receiving your request regarding my experiences during the war, it was as if the load was lifted from my shoulders. At last someone is interested in what that
time was like. I’m 80 now, but those awful happenings are as clear in my mind as yesterday.

Nobody cares about the East, but they do care about what happened in the Holocaust. They don’t know how much we suffered. When I say starved, we really starved. We were bleeding and we had *beri beri*.

Nobody knows about evacuees, and people do not know what you’re talking about. My doctor tells me that I need to talk about my experiences, but there is nobody to talk to who has a clue about our lives in the Indies.

This situation has created problems for ageing IDA for whom post-traumatic stress symptoms manifest for the first time and need treatment from informed professionals. Why had these stories never been told?

**Australians Contest Sovereignty of the NEI**

The main reason for this major breach in knowledge about wartime in the NEI is the stance of powerful Australian(s) organisations, *contesting* its sovereignty, following Sukarno’s declaration of Indonesian Independence on 17 August 1945, two days after Japan capitulated, when a period of unrest began with guerrilla warfare. Groups of Indonesian nationalists youth freedom fighters called *Pemuda*, screaming *Merdeka* and banging their improvised weapons (bamboo spears and machete’s) against anything they could find to warn of their might, but also armed with firearms attacked internees and others considered disloyal to their cause. An estimated 3,500 Europeans were killed and 20,000 went missing presumed to have befallen the same fate.

Many IDA voiced concerns about Australia’s active indifference to the predicament they were in at that time. Mary Briggs-Koning (2004) put it this way:

"While people around the world celebrated the end of the war, we ... who had survived [Japanese concentration camps] were now at risk of being killed as we were thrust into a civil war - The Indonesian Nationalist Revolution.

Consequently the banning of Dutch ships in Australian ports by the Australian
Rupert Lockwood (1982:231) estimates that a total of 559 vessels were held up over a three-year period 1945-1947. Why was this action taken? In 1945 the Waterside Workers’ Federation (WWF) Federal Council received an appeal from Indonesian trade unionist comprised of merchant seamen stranded in Australia for three years by the Japanese Occupation (Bennett 2003); and Dutch political prisoners transported here by the NEI Administration:

We appeal to all democratic and peaceful peoples everywhere, and especially to the working class in all countries of the world, to boycott all that is Dutch in all harbours, stores, roadways and other places throughout the world, in the event of the outbreak of warfare in Indonesia.\(^5\)

The boycott of Dutch ships was inspired by the Indonesian Political Exiles Association in Mackay and the Brisbane based Central Committee for Indonesian Independence (CENKIM); organized by the communist-led Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) and Seamens’ Union; and supported by 30 other unions. The WWF and 13 other Australian Unions also sponsored a documentary Indonesia calling by Joris Ivens, (Beasley 1996:127-130). The WWF and Communist Party also activated Australians sympathetic to an Indonesian Republic, such as university students, to organize street demonstrations in capital cities around Australia (Peters 2006).

The struggle received widespread if sensational coverage in Australian newspapers. The personal careers of individuals also played their part. Menzies, opposition leader at that time, denounced the shipping ban and claimed the unions were running foreign affairs. This was also the opinion of the mainstream press who were simultaneously printing articles about the revolutions and its impact on innocent NEI Dutch civilian internees and POWs. In contrast the Australian Labor Government supported the Indonesian Republic, at least at UN level set up after the war, in which Chifley and Evatt played a key role, because they were keen to be seen supporting the rights of newly emerging nations. In this same landscape, Aboriginal Australians had to wait another 20 years to get the vote! White Australia remained intact for another 30 years; and children born to Australian women and Indonesian men were denied entry to
Australia if their mother died and Indonesian father didn’t want them (Peters 2006:124-125).

Media coverage in Australia of the revolution was considerable: therefore unions could hardly claim ignorance of the revolution in the NEI, yet in their documentary *Indonesia Calling* they scoff at the idea that the ships they are holding up are in fact ‘Mercy ships’ needed to supply food and refuge to ex Dutch POWs and internees.⁶

The *Melbourne Herald*, 29 November 1945, quotes, Mr McMahon Ball, the Australian Government representative in Batavia, who described as critical the food situation in Java, the prospect of widespread starvation by February 1946, the considerable disorder generally in Java and Batavia (Djakarta) and the sporadic violence, and that matters had been worsened by the lack of efficient local administration, which was resulting in sickening atrocities taking place; and that approximately 190,000 persons hitherto internees of the Japanese, in dire need of recuperative care from their three and a half year long sojourn, needed temporary asylum somewhere, their condition pitiful. McMahon Ball who urged Australia to send all the food ships it could get to the NEI, notes:

..their is a humanitarian appeal of the most urgent and genuine kind. …Australia should at least provide a temporary home for some of them. Some British authorities have asked that Australia should receive at least 50,000 ex-internees in order to enable them to recuperate. Apart from helping Europeans there is a strong case for providing shipping to move from Batavia to the outer Indies some 10,000 Ambonese who have incurred the hostility of the Javanese.⁷

The British *Ghurka* Command, who had been charged with restoring order and civilian government in Java (the Netherlands was unable to return to the NEI as a significant military force until March 1946), did not land on Java to accept the Japanese surrender until late September 1945. The hiatus between capitulation, the uprising and the arrival of troops spelt disaster for the internees and POWs for it left them at the mercy of the *Pemuda*. Ghurka Command decided it would be better for ex-POWs and internees to remain in concentration camps, with their Japanese oppressors now their carers as it would be more convenient for food distribution and easier to defend them against the lawless bands of ‘Indonesian’ youth on killing sprees.

Ex-internee Dutch women now in fear of their lives from *Pemuda*, appealed to the
mothers of the many Australian sons they had given succour at the Allied canteen the women had established for these men’s benefit on their stop-over at Batavia on route to fight war in the Malaccas. Until now the women had felt secure in the thought that Australia was so near at hand. The following extract is from a letter to Australian women from Mrs Zulog, the founding president of the Allied canteen:

…Where are the men who liked us, and where are the men who remember us. Is this Australia? Where they keep the food we need so badly and encourage the Indonesians with their murdering of women and children. Why should a man’s war be fought against women and children. And is there a war? Is it not over then? Why should all those prisoners of war, women suffer still six months after the war is over. What have they done except endure impossible degradation, unspeakable humiliation, starvation, sickness and death. Is it for that, that the world calls us free, to have a war, when they felt so full of trust and friendship. It is a stab in the back. I appeal to any woman of all the women of Australia to clear this up, to do something for women in Java. There are still hundreds in danger of their lives, treated worse than any enemy of ours ever did us. We could take camps and prisons, we know our enemy and expected nothing better. We can take this underground work of the Japanese. God will judge them and the Indonesians. But we cannot take this attitude of Australia. It is worse than anything that happened to us. It is a deep psychological error from the people who are responsible. I hope fervently that you may be able to do something for the women and children in Java who are still prisoners of war (Peters 2006:130).

Following pleas from women’s groups for Prime Minister Chifley to help the Dutch in Java; Australia accepted 6,000 refugees for rehabilitation with the proviso the NEI Administration picked-up costs. The first arrived in November 1945.

In Summary
The research uncovered imagined (remembered) and real cultural heritage and psychological attachments and political actions that emphasize, following Ketelaar (2008), the NEI as ‘contested space’. It also identified the social organizations and
relationship networks in countries of sojourn, country of origin and country(s) of resettlement from which protagonists emerged and on which they continue to draw to locate themselves in relation to homeland, identity and belonging.

The research findings demonstrate, following Gupta & Ferguson (1992:19), how ‘homeland’ remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced people’ and while ‘deterritorialisation has destabilised the fixity of ‘ourselves’ and ‘others’ it has not thereby created subjects who are free floating Nomads.

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**NOTES**

1 Fridus Steijlen pers. Com.
I use *Indisch* Dutch to include all Dutch who have a relationship with the NEI.


6 *Indonesia calling* [www.ivens.nl/upload/?p=118&t=2&k=2&film=53&details=ja](http://www.ivens.nl/upload/?p=118&t=2&k=2&film=53&details=ja)