Epilogue

This dissertation has, at least to my mind, raised more questions than it has answered, and I find it impossible to provide a sense of closure at the end of this text. As poststructuralist common sense would have it, this is certainly the case for any text – there can be, after all no final word, ever. Yet in the case of slavery and its memory or heritage, this sense is perhaps in particular ways owed to the subject matter itself. Slavery, as I have tried to show, is not so much an ‘unfinished’ history – after all, what history is ever ‘finished’? – but a history that has left traces in the present in particular ways. Notions of a ‘break’ with the past, of ‘repairing’ what has been destroyed in the past, of ‘including’ what has been ‘excluded’ (for example in historical or heritage canons), or of revealing ‘the truth’ about slavery express a desire for closure that, as experience shows, has consistently been unsatisfied. This desire for closure has paradoxically created hope for potential futures without a past while simultaneously bringing up the past on a massive scale, both in scholarship and in the public sphere at large (recently, a lecture I gave was introduced with the words: ‘There is a huge discussion about slavery now because it is not talked about.’). I do not believe that this desire for a future in which the past is finally ‘left behind’ will ever be fulfilled. I agree with David Scott’s view, who understands the postcolonial present as a tragic, rather than romantic condition of agony that we have to live with. Colonialism and slavery cannot be undone.

My notion of the trace is an attempt to capture the simultaneous desire for and lack of closure conceptually. The trace offers a way to address a tension between the search for a final word and the perpetual murmur of discourse. I understand the trace as a thing that has been left or made by someone or something, and that can be followed by people with the necessary skills to recognize the trace in a series of clues. By following the trace, the follower maps a particular route in social and physical space, and by moving through these spaces, the follower also moves in time. I think such a model can address several issues arising with the formation of slavery-as-cultural-heritage.

There have been repeated calls to reveal the truth about slavery, which raise the question of knowledge. What can be known about slavery is clearly subject to a particular épistème or the conditions of possibility of knowledge that emerge through particular relations of power. Yet such knowledge is not arbitrary. Knowledge about the past, and knowledge about slavery in particular, is not arbitrary, entirely constructed, or even ‘invented’. The trace suggests an ontology of
the past, for instance that somebody actually walked here, and left prints or clues. While the dots are clearly there, it is up to the follower how to connect them and how to understand intersections with other series of clues.

The notion of the trace can provide at least a partial answer to one of the central question in the heritage dynamics project of which this dissertation is a part. The project had argued that ‘the appeal of cultural heritage rests on its denial of being a fabrication, on its promise to provide an essential ground to social-cultural identities’ (Meyer, van de Port, and Roodenburg 2008). With the trace, I draw attention to the observation that cultural heritage is never entirely fabricated, but that fabrication is unthinkable without thinking the actual event. Even George Orwell’s notion of Doublethink, arguably one of the most extreme forms of fabrication, relies on a play of lying and truthfulness.

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget, whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself – that was the ultimate subtlety; consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word ‘doublethink’ involved the use of doublethink (Orwell 1949, 32).

Even this most extreme form of fabrication necessitates a constant engagement with the things people know about the past. Perhaps one might even say that the more extreme the fabrication, the more attention needs to be paid to make people un-know the knowledge they have of the past. The trace refers to this doubleness, taking seriously the relations of power through which the past is perceptible precisely by looking at the ways in which clues and evidence are pieced together, reassembled, and arranged in new formations.

The trace, I think, is a particularly apt model to grasp the unfinishedness of slavery. The trace, although it comes from somewhere, does not have a proper beginning. And, from the point of view of the present, it leads somewhere (in the past), but it does not have a proper terminus. It may become unreadable, it may fade, or it may be broken. Yet there is not one singular point to which it leads or where it originates. The notion of the trace thus moves beyond a dilemma of constructivism and positivism by investigating the processes of meaning-making as a (re-)combination of existing parts.

That is, the trace, or rather the activity of tracing, is a political activity. Politics, understood as the process of forming associations, can emerge through particular
modes of tracing. The trace thus captures not only the articulation or connection of the present with the past, but also the kinds of association taking shape while doing so. As I have shown in part two of this dissertation, such associations can take the form of affective formations or particular structures of feeling that provide the very modes in which slavery can be perceived. As my historical sketch in chapter two has suggested, slavery may not have been ‘erased’ from the historical record. Rather, it may have been present in what Ann Laura Stoler has called ‘affective states’. As Stoler argues, the colonial state has operated through affective registers, exercising its rule by shaping particular structures of feeling through which the state was perceived. Rather than a rationalistic idea of bureaucratic rule, authority was exercised by gaining access to the subjects’ private sentiments. If this is true for the colonial state in Indonesia, the material I presented in chapter two suggests that it may hold for metropolitan projects of nation building in the Netherlands, as well. In such projects, slavery may have figured as a necessary rhetorical device which, by graphically displaying the cruelties of slavery, threw into relief the greatness of the nation. These depictions of cruelty were necessary to create the image of a caring and compassionate nation, which rescued the enslaved from their brutal masters. The way in which the national slavery memorial project was framed by the grassroots organizations and discussed in the public sphere suggests that compassion continues to be an important aspect of a Dutch sense of self. Yet a notion of causal or linear connections between colonial politics of compassion and the postcolonial present cannot grasp the complexity of the situation. As I have argued, we need to take into account that we live in a neoliberal world in which for instance issues of solidarity have become an affective disposition rather than a question of political organization. Not taking these historical shifts into account will deliver a weak analysis of the traces of slavery and colonialism.

Following the traces of slavery, as I argue in part one, can be seen as a political act or rather activity that draws a political map and articulates political subjectivities in that territory. Traces of slavery are present in the racial geographies that are fundamentally shaped by colonialism. Race, I have suggested, may be present in the very notion of the Dutch soil, and Amsterdam Zuidoost is entangled in these spatial distributions of racialized bodies. Yet I have also shown that these geographic and political maps have no straight lines. The postcolonial cannot be used to describe a linear process from colonialism to its demise. Empire lingers on, but as my analysis of Amsterdam Zuidoost has shown, the legacies of empire need to be analyzed in tandem with urban restructuring, the local microgeographies of race, and the neoliberal present. The goal cannot be an indictment of the present on the grounds of its bearing the traces of empire. What is needed in my view is a fine-grained analysis of the entanglements of the present with empire, without re-inscribing quasi preordained positions, but certainly with sensitivity for historically grown and racialized hierarchies, both implicit and explicit.
The notion of the trace also addresses the realms of the secret and of the silenced. It points to presences not fully perceptible – as in chemical trace elements – or actively concealed – as in those who do not wish to be found. It captures both the ways of silencing and ventriloquism (see chapter two), as well as the strategies of concealment and veiling that both characterize the memory of slavery. The material I presented about Afro-Surinamese music and its reappraisal as cultural heritage in the context of the memorial projects has demonstrated how the dynamics of the heritage domain interact with the cultural codes and practices that have so fundamentally been shaped by slavery and colonialism. Whereas cultural heritage is an inherently public form, such a form has to be articulated with regards to the ambiguous status of publicity in Afro-Surinamese culture. I have called this an aesthetics of reticence to describe my observation that cultural knowledge cannot in all cases easily be shared. Some things, Afro-Surinamese cultural codes suggest, are better left unsaid. A different kind of silence emerges here that is more fundamental than the metaphors of censorship circulated in the wake of the memorial projects may suggest. A basic kind of incompatibility with the late modern public sphere, in which expressions of belonging are increasingly articulated in the transparent and almost surgical forms of cultural heritage. The aesthetics of reticence signals a degree of unease with this kind of publicity, where questions of ownership can easily be taken out of one's hands once cultural objects begin to circulate.

In short, I have proposed to understand slavery as a fundamental presence whose entanglements with the very foundations of modernity, nation, and Dutchness cannot easily be ruptured. The sense of disappointment as to what the memorial projects have achieved, evidenced most prominently by the discontinuation of NiNsee, perhaps derives from the realization that monuments are not incisive enough to effect change on such a fundamental level. Indeed, change itself may usefully not be understood in terms of a rupture, but, to summon David Scott once more, as a tragically endless process.

I have begun to develop a conceptual approach that is by no means a finished product. However, my proposal to view the presence of slavery as a matter of tracing seeks to address the multiplicity of relations to the past, and the myriad ways of dealing with the 'historical present', to speak with Lauren Berlant.

The difficulty of capturing slavery is also reflected in my method. The methodology I have employed for this project may also be likened to a trace. Throughout the entire research process, I have found it difficult to concentrate my focus on one aspect of slavery's presence in the Netherlands today. I felt that the presence of slavery is simply too pervasive, too variegated, and too fundamental to be approached in neatly delimited and researchable compartments. The text reflects this lack of a clearly delineated subject matter. There is not one overarching conceptual framework, no decision to clearly delimit the research, but instead conceptual and methodological eclecticism, and a desire for holism. I have not made it easy for myself. If this has caused major anxieties and insecurities for me, I could
not have found a different way of doing it, no matter how hard I tried. And try I did. If this process has taught me anything, it is that this lack of coherence is programmatic, and fundamentally inherent in the subject under investigation itself.

My methodology, then, can be said to be itself a form of tracing. I approached the field with a broad question, in order to piece together myself the kinds of traces that people would direct me to, or that I would track down myself. I have advocated an ethnographic perspective on slavery, precisely because I wanted to complement the focus on representation with a view from everyday life. I wanted to know what people make of the new formation of cultural heritage of which slavery is becoming a part, not in terms of reception research, but from the perspective of the cultural codes and practices that people live by.

If this dissertation remains unfinished, it’s unfinishedness ought to be seen as programmatic. What I hope to have achieved is to open up new fields of investigation, for example the politics of compassion, but also the articulation of race and affect. I think these lines of inquiry can build on and contribute to the pioneering work that has been done on colonial memory in the Netherlands. We are only at the beginning of these investigations, and there is a lot that remains to be done.