Conclusion

The purpose of this book was an interrogation of the binary logic of dominant accounts of memory and forgetting and a search for concepts that could more accurately describe the dynamics between these two phenomena. This interrogation was necessary because in investigating the case of the 1904 photographs, I found that both the debate on Dutch colonial memory and memory studies as a discipline lacked a conceptual apparatus to address the particular nature of the site of memory that these photographs have formed over time. What was missing was an account of memory sites that regularly emerge and submerge and are therefore time and again semanticized as forgotten. In this book, a method of frame analysis was outlined which made it possible to move beyond the question of whether or not certain pasts are present to an analysis of the conditions of this presence.

The concept of emerging memory addresses on the one hand the ebb and flow along a diachronic axis of the debate on the violence in the Dutch colonial past, and on the other hand the position between semanticization and aphasia that the photographs from 1904 have had at particular moments in time. What became apparent was a continuing relevance of the photographs over the past century, connected both to later occurrences such as the decolonization and to questions of Dutch national identity, especially in relation to the rest of the world. What do these images say about the Netherlands and what are the Netherlands therefore in relation to countries such as Britain, Germany, and Indonesia?

Over the past century, no interpretive consensus concerning the photographs has been achieved. Instead, they have become battlegrounds on which different groups can mark their position both with respect to the Dutch colonial past and the Dutch postcolonial present. In this sense there is some sort of consensus, namely that the photographs are crucial documents concerning the Dutch colonial past and present. In the production of this convergence on these particular documents, both the scarcity principle in cultural memory and the photographs themselves have been of importance: the fact that others have reproduced and framed them plus the affective appeal that these images emit make them documents to which people return again and again.

The dissensus over the photographs makes apparent the continuing presence in the Netherlands of ideas that also played an important part in colonialism, particularly with respect to the production of brown people as objects of paternalist care. An important reason the Dutch cannot leave
their colonial past behind is that they are still living it. At the same time, colonialism is heavily criticized. It is this ambivalence that makes a return to the photographs necessary: they depict the undesirable outcomes of a way of thinking that still has appeal in certain respects because it positions the Dutch as guides and caretakers.

One of the consequences of this dissensus is that there is no account available about the 1904 photographs or the colonial period in general which authoritatively offers a moral verdict, like Loe de Jong had provided for the Second World War. This absence of a final verdict means that there is no sense of closure concerning them. The moments when the photographs are semanticized as forgotten can be read as appeals to the mnemonic community of the nation to review them and collectively produce a closing statement. As historian Vincent Houben (1997) has pointed out, this is also the point where there is a gap between academic production on the colonial past and the broader social debate: the latter is conducted in primarily moral terms, while the former wants to adopt a more analytical approach. Moral considerations, however, are inevitable in the public scene because the photographs are seen as connected to the core values of Dutch society.

While critical discourse on the photographs had been available since 1904, it was only since the late 1960s that it became more widespread. This marks an important change concerning the question of cultural aphasia: when this critical discourse was still marginal, addressing the 1904 photographs was difficult due to a lack of language, while when it grew as dominant as the various strategies of denial and compartmentalization, Dutch colonial memory became deadlocked because of a clash of meanings. Both a shortage and an excess of frames of semanticization have created obstacles in producing a shared understanding of what the photographs depict.

In the debate on the photographs in the Netherlands, Indonesian, Atjehnese, Gajo, or Alas voices were seldom included.181 In 1977, journalist Wiecher Hulst published two articles on the 1904 expedition in which he took up PD, KR2, and KR3 and for which he had traveled to Atjeh to interview people (Nieuwe Revu 15 and 22 July 1977). Jelte Rep’s 1996 documentary Atjeh! Atjeh! from 1996 starts with KR3, while later on Rep asks several Atjehnese how they look back on the Atjeh War, also in relation to this photograph. For the most part, however, Dutch people addressed the photographs, often on behalf of the people in them. Other groups that went through Dutch colonialism and its aftermath were strongly present in the country: former

181 For Indonesian colonial memory, see Bijl 2012.
KNIL soldiers, former prisoners of the Japanese, victims from the Bersiap period, and other Indisch Dutch people. As none of these groups identified themselves as victims of Dutch colonialism, the case of the 1904 massacres remained an orphaned memory in the Netherlands that was mostly adopted by critics of colonialism. These then met with mnemonic communities that told other stories, namely of pride, nostalgia, or their own victimhood which was sometimes seen to be in competition with Indonesian suffering. However, it is certainly not only Indisch Dutch people for whom the photographs represent uncomfortable truths, for they are disturbing for all who identify themselves as Dutch. The passing away of the first Indische generation, therefore, will not automatically produce consensus, and the colonial past will continue to be contested terrain and lead to painful silences.

To which urgent need do these silences respond? An answer to this question leads back to Dutch colonial culture, when certain grids of intelligibility were set up that have been working their way into Dutch society ever since. Crucial in this respect is a broadly held conception that the Dutch had a different, better type of colonialism than the larger European nations – particularly, of course, England and France. Imperialism, the Dutch Ministers of the Colonies used to say, was something for other nations, and it was only in the 1980s that Dutch historians began to accept the concept of imperialism as a useful term to discuss the Dutch colonial past.

Dutch self-fashioning as small-scaled (in a positive sense) or mediocre (in a negative sense) has been part of national discourse since the early nineteenth century, when writers started constructing a national identity that could distinguish this small country from its larger neighbors (see Johannes 1997). Embracing this smallness, these authors imagined their community as not participating in the international power games of the big nations, but as consisting of modest mediators that did good works in the margins of the globe. As recently as 2003, historian Hermann von der Dunk wrote that it seemed hard for him to deny that “aversion to war and violence, not only in principle and theory – that goes of course for most peoples – but in practice characterizes Dutch history and society as a whole”. It is only in the colonies, he writes, that we encounter a different Netherlands, but this is in his estimate “a separate chapter” (2003: 20).

On 10 July 2012, 108 years and one month after Koetö Réh’s destruction, the national newspaper de Volkskrant published two photographs on its front page accompanying an article entitled “First Picture of Executions in the Indies” (Figure 4.6). As I have shown with this book, however, Dutch colonial violence is not absent from the public sphere in the Netherlands, and never has been. The nevertheless often expressed concern that it is
forgotten stems from the fact that dominant frames of remembrance do not produce colonial violence as memorable in a national framework and make the dead and abused of the Dutch East Indies difficult to fit in a larger narrative. This is not the place to elaborately go into which elements from the Dutch past have, in fact, proven to be memorable, but the images of the Dutch as resilient and independent (e.g. against the Spanish in the
Eighty Years’ War), as victimized (by the Germans in World War II, and in more recent times by Muslim immigrants), and as tolerant and leading in international human rights affairs (e.g. as founders of the European Union and hosts of the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice in The Hague) are strongly present in the education system and the public sphere in general. Remembering the dead of Dutch colonial violence, by contrast, also implies remembering Dutch perpetratorship, and that historical subject position is hardly available.

Two further factors, pointed out by Stoler for the French case, are strongly applicable to the Netherlands. Firstly, histories of the Dutch nation and the Dutch empire are mostly treated as separate matters. What we see happening is that there is a group of critics who wish to give colonial violence a prominent and structural position in Dutch cultural memory, yet it fails to convince the nation that this should be the case, because this compartmentalization of national and colonial history makes it impossible for this violence to become memorable within a national framework. Secondly – and strongly related to this compartmentalization of history – the Netherlands are seen by many Dutch as an essentially white country and culture, with
the result that the nation’s non-white population is often excluded from notions of Dutchness. The regularly criticized yet still widespread usage of the binary opposition between autochtonen and allochtonen, literally meaning “from here” or “from elsewhere” but in practice used to denote white and brown people, makes this distinction evident. One connection between the slippage of critique of colonial violence and of this ‘multicultural’ terminology is unacknowledged racism in the Dutch past and present. In other words, the Dutch aphasic condition produces an inability to see the nation as the former metropolis of a colonial empire and to acknowledge the lasting racial hierarchies stemming from this past, leading to a structural inhibition of the memorability of colonial violence. The fact, however, that documents of colonial violence keep on being ‘discovered’ – that is: covered and uncovered – points towards their haunting power over Dutch society.\textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{182} See Bijl 2012.