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**Introduction: Refracting History, Trauma  
and the Generations through the Prism  
of Dementia**

In public discourse and the day-to-day provision of health care, dementia – often used as an umbrella term for different forms of memory loss that may or may not meet neuropsychological criteria – is predominantly regarded as an illness afflicting individuals, and rightly so. Even though diseases of memory such as vascular dementia, Lewy body dementia and, above all, Alzheimer’s disease, have great impact on relatives, caregivers and communities as well as the person living with the condition themselves, dementia and the everyday stories that we tell about it are not commonly understood as entailing any wider political meaning in a socio-historical sense. Issues of care, its affordability and its practice are, of course, important questions of social justice and therefore inherently political. However, although the ideological implications of certain types of narrative that circulate about dementia, and of the language used in both medical and popular accounts, have been addressed (e.g. Zeilig 2013; Burke 2015, 2018), dementia is not usually considered in relation to questions of national or global history, that of wars, genocides, colonialism or other atrocities and events, even by scholars of the (medical) humanities. In the present volume, we aim to expand upon the notion of a politics of dementia by analysing the condition as represented in literature and theory in the context of just such political history. The fact that authors, artists and intellectuals increasingly write dementia into their narratives of central historical episodes of violence and trauma is taken to be the result of deliberate choices, with all the cultural and social benefits, yet also the liabilities, that this entails. As the essays collected in this volume show, the notion of dementia is used in order to represent the involuntary and often paradoxical aspects of looking back at troubled or contested historical eras, in ways which ordinary forgetting or conscious suppression would not achieve.

In Western societies at least, memory loss is not always depicted purely as a contingent, ‘neutral’ neurobiological process increasingly present in an ageing population; rather, it can also be understood within the context of larger societal issues and political debates. Memory theorists and cultural studies scholars have raised questions about the fact that our memory culture will undergo a significant change once the last eyewitnesses of twentieth-century catastrophes have died: living memory will turn into cultural memory (J. Assmann 1988). The impending loss of juridical, historical and moral witnesses (A. Assmann 2007) turns the individual

experience of the illness into one with wider repercussions, since it adds what we might consider to be an ‘untimely’ memory loss to one already anticipated. Even what Marianne Hirsch (1997, 2008) has called postmemory, by means of which the next generation receives the imprint of past affronts despite not experiencing them directly, is thrown into question by the eyewitnesses’ memory loss.

The increasing number of protagonists with dementia in recent fiction and film therefore seems related to millennial anxiety about the end of the “era of the witness” (Wieviorka 2006). Across a wide range of cultural productions, medical concepts of dementia are conflated with psychological assumptions, historical speculation and popular understandings of psychoanalytical concepts (successful coping mechanisms, denial, disavowal or the return of the repressed). We believe that it is precisely this amalgamation of the neurological and psychological or psychoanalytic with historical perspectives that has contributed to dementia having become, sometimes to the detriment of people living with this condition, a cultural “metaphor for wider social ills” (Zeilig 2013, 258). In the present volume, the contributors analyse examples where the detail of such an amalgamation is revelatory not only of political trends and events, but of attitudes towards the condition of dementia itself. The representation of historical events and their political interpretation responds to cultural discourses of dementia, and vice versa; each shapes the other. If, as the literary scholar Michael Rothberg (2009) argues, memory is multidirectional, in the sense that remembrance of events such as the Holocaust can reanimate that of other histories of genocide, war and colonialism, the same, we argue, may hold true for dementia and the dynamics of forgetting and remembering that it entails. That is, the image of an individual’s memory loss may cast new light on public political events, either by resembling their features of suppression, denial and sudden recurrence, or by constituting the content of what is forgotten yet intermittently recalled by the individual. In turn, historical occurrences may best be conceived in terms of, or in relation to, patterns of personal forgetting. This dynamic is multidirectional in several respects. First, in a more general sense of the term, the progression of disease is often erratic rather than steady or predictable, so that it may seem to change at different rates over time, and a person’s memory loss may even seem to stabilise for a while or indeed have periods of improvement. Dementia thus does not have a uniform direction of ‘decline.’ Second, as dementia tends to occur in old age, it is accompanied by reflections and assessment of the life course – by the person confronted with the diagnosis themselves or those close to them. Since any individual’s life is lived in relation to political and historical events, it is here that Rothberg’s concept of multidirectionality meets the dynamics of remembrance and forgetting entailed in dementia and its social repercussions. As cultural representations place the two in parallel, narratives of dementia try to shed new light on the ways in which

national and international atrocities are constructed, suppressed or selectively recalled.

In *Lethe: The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, Harald Weinrich (2004, 134) states, in the wake of Sigmund Freud's concept of meaningful errors and slips<sup>1</sup> and his conceiving of the unconscious as "something previously known that has been forgotten but has not thereby disappeared from the world," that "forgetting loses its innocence." While Freud and Weinrich address how individuals deal with difficult memories, the historian Ulrike Jureit (2019, 144) extends this claim to cultural memory, arguing in almost identical terms that, after Auschwitz, "forgetting has lost its innocence."<sup>2</sup> While echoing Weinrich's psychoanalytically determined phrase, Jureit does not insinuate a generalised notion of 'collective amnesia,' nor does she direct blame at individuals with dementia, but, rather, addresses the question of how societies remember the Second World War and the Holocaust adequately, with the viability of practices of 'forgiving and forgetting' cast into question. Against this backdrop, the present volume analyses how forms of individual and cultural forgetting, as envisaged in contemporary literary texts and other works of art, tie into cultural concepts of pathological memory loss, how globally diverse experiences of violence and trauma are represented as relating to dementia (its reality, its spectres, its flashes of unexpected recall), and in what ways this affects our understanding of the fraught and entangled histories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In line with recent developments in memory studies that shift focus from acts of remembrance of, for instance, moments of national pride or mourning to considering processes of forgetting and their meaning for the future (Erl 2017, 117), this volume examines how different media and genres – novels, auto/biographical essays, documentary as well as fictional films, graphic memoirs and comics – represent dementia for critical explorations of memory, trauma and contested truths. In ten essays and one piece of graphic art, the contributors analyse the ways the diseases of dementia are only seemingly individual or ahistorical. Rather, the condition of dementia is used in contemporary cultural texts to represent or respond to violent historical and political events – such as the Holocaust, the Argentinian dictatorship of the years 1976–1983 or post/colonial conditions in settings that range from Australia and Singapore to Europe and the Americas – all of which are, in one way or another, difficult to remember. They therefore fall victim to forms of individual or societal suppression and denial. When artists enlist the notion of dementia in such contexts, this does not function as a means of apportioning blame

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<sup>1</sup> As developed in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud 1962 [1901]).

<sup>2</sup> Orig.: "Das Vergessen hat seine Unschuld verloren."

or judgement on the individuals living with that condition for their difficulties with memory or cognition but is, rather, a way of approaching and exploring the ‘multi-directional’ paths that forgetting can take, ranging from the organic or age related to politically willed or socially endorsed forms. By joining approaches from literary studies with insights from memory studies, trauma studies, the critical medical humanities, media, film and comics studies, anthropology and disability studies, the following essays seek to examine the politics of dementia.

## 1 Dementia and meaning making

Although links between dementia and questions of political and moral responsibility may be particularly prevalent in the context of the Second World War and the Holocaust, they also appear in cultural negotiations of other traumatic experiences disrupting the social fabric, such as racial discrimination, sexual violence, forced migration and natural or nuclear disaster (Tan 2001; Chariandy 2007; Ozeki 2013). Francesca Melandri’s novel *Sangue giusto* (The rightful blood; 2017) interrelates dementia with Italy’s colonial history (especially in relation to Libya and Ethiopia), its fascist past, the corruption of the Berlusconi years and present-day migration from the African continent to Europe. Against the backdrop of these examples, the ‘dementia turn’ in recent literature, film and comics may best be understood – to quote **Kirstin Gwyer**’s contribution to this volume – as “an illustrative paradigm for a far broader cultural sense in which neoliberal global-capitalist societies experience themselves as existing in a twilight zone of (post-genocidal, post-conflict, postcolonial, post-nuclear, post-terrorist) post-traumatic aftermath” (p. 18). Examining the growing prevalence of dementia as a narrative trope in twenty-first-century fiction, Gwyer explores the specific twist that memory loss adds to the discourse of postmemory by giving the first generation licence to forget and the later born licence to fill in, but also to preserve, their blanks.

Against the backdrop of portrayals such as these, **Pieter Vermeulen** takes a different stance in criticising cultural attempts to convert figures of suffering and exclusion – including, more recently, portrayals of individuals with dementia – into embodiments of moral and historical truths. Vermeulen interrogates the ways in which literary texts by Will Self, Emma Healey and Johan Harstad negotiate the temptation to accord dementia a certain epistemological or moral privilege. Challenging scholarly discussions of dementia that rely on Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2000), Vermeulen argues that dementia should not be (mis)used to lose ourselves in critical abstraction at the expense of socioeconomic issues, and that

representations of dementia can also help foreground issues around care, inequality and the decline of the welfare state.

To many, dementia's most prevalent feature is memory loss. However, in the case of elderly protagonists in narratives about traumatic injustice and violence, the altered workings of the brain due to old age, disease or both may also reveal events that were previously 'forgotten' because suppressed or seemingly overcome – as indeed psychologists have found (Shmotkin et al. 2011; Quindeau 2019). In other words, dementia may paradoxically enable remembering, with the potential to complicate a person's previously 'clear' perpetrator or victim status, as notions of chronological time dissolve for the ill person and the potential safe distance from past atrocities melts away. There is a tendency for fictional stories of dementia narrating a breakdown of short-term in favour of long-term memories to draw on the detective story (Burke 2018; Falcus and Sako 2019, 114–143) as well as crime fiction more generally or to offer otherwise unusual combinations of plot elements and genre citations. This is the case in, to name but a few, Elie Wiesel's novel *The Forgotten* (1992), Martin Suter's *Small World* (1997), Nicole Krauss's *Great House* (2010) and Young-ha Kim's short story "Diary of a Murderer" (2020). In examples such as these, dementia reveals rather than further conceals uncomfortable truths – as several of the contributions to this book also argue. In her review of medical dementia scholarship and literary dementia narratives from the 1980s to the 2010s, **Martina Zimmermann** discusses how bestselling fiction by J. Bernlef, Debra Dean, Alice LaPlante and Emma Healey represents dementia in terms of that historical moment's scientific knowledge about the condition. She interrogates how these novels employ elements from detective fiction in their exploration of memory, post-war trauma and historical amnesia, and how, by giving agency to protagonists with dementia, they promote empathy and person-centred care. Zimmermann's argument, therefore, returns the focus of analysis to the individual living with memory loss.

## 2 Dementia's paradoxical relation to buried truths: Detective plots and conceptual fallacies

In perpetrator or former colonising societies, dictatorships and tyrannies around the globe, dementia-induced memory loss can be represented or interpreted as a wilful refusal to remember, and so individuals of certain generations might be understood as strategically using their status as ill people or succumbing to their disease at a particular moment to avoid confrontations with disturbing aspects of their past. These can be memories that torment the victims of violence or those

that haunt the perpetrators. Equally, the image of a neurobiological forgetting, characterised by recall of early life at the expense of recent experience, might suggest the inevitability of confronting a problematic or repudiated past. Just as childhood memories might be accessible to the person living with dementia whose memory is otherwise unreliable, so recall of past atrocity might resurface despite a lifetime spent trying to forget or suppress those very events. Fictional texts – especially in the genre of metamemory (Neumann 2008), which combines individual memories with critical reflections on the functioning of memory – are one way to inspire debates on these political aspects of dementia and the questions implied by it, about who bears what kind of moral responsibility for remembering the past.

The nature of such metamemorial reflexivity is evident in fictional texts that display a kind of multidirectional memory. For instance, in his novel *Ohnehin* (Anyway), set in 1990s Vienna, the Austrian author and son of Holocaust survivors Doron Rabinovici (2004, 25) introduces the character of the former *Untersturmführer* (second lieutenant of the SS) Herbert Kerber who – after becoming stuck, mentally, in the year 1945 – is diagnosed with Korsakoff's syndrome, a memory disorder caused by severe thiamine (vitamin B1) deficiency, often a result of alcoholism. While the novel's main protagonist, the neurologist Stefan Sandtner, believes that the disintegration of Kerber's short-term memory brings to the fore long-term memories that he had kept secret, Kerber's son suspects that the ex-SS officer is feigning both his dementia and his being stuck in the era of the war's last days to avoid interrogation at a possible war crimes trial. *Ohnehin's* exploration of the medical condition of dementia in relation to Austria's Nazi past and reluctant post-war engagement with it can be understood as literary commentary on the Waldheim affair of the years 1986–1988, triggered by the events surrounding the presidential election campaign of Kurt Waldheim, former secretary-general of the United Nations, “during the course of which it emerged that [he] had lied about the extent of his involvement in the Nazi war machine, which did not stop him becoming president” (Krylova 2017, 3). In a pun on Alzheimer's, Waldheim's ‘condition’ of not being able to remember his Nazi past was satirically called ‘Waldheimer's disease’ by Austrian contemporaries who were left dissatisfied with the politician's justifications of his past and who objected to the antisemitism inherent in his defence.

While Rabinovici's novel never reveals the truth about Kerber's dementia, instead withholding a definitive answer on the precise nature of and reason for the old man's faltering memory (see Garloff forthcoming), one might assume real-life historical examples to be less ambiguous. This is not so in a famous case in Germany from the first decade of the twenty-first century: Walter Jens, a rhetorics professor and influential post-war public intellectual, developed dementia around the same time the media uncovered the fact that he had applied

for membership of the Nazi Party and published an antisemitic essay while still a university student. **Nina Schmidt** discusses whether his son Tilman Jens's 2009 memoir *Demenz: Abschied von meinem Vater* (Dementia: A farewell to my father) suggests that pathological memory loss is imbued with an aspect of 'free will.' Schmidt asks to what extent this idea can be understood as a moral reproach on Tilman Jens's part or as a (perhaps desperate) attempt by the son to trade contingency for individual choice and responsibility, even – or especially – in the face of his father's dementia. Schmidt argues that the generational conflict played out so publicly in the case of the Jens family speaks beyond this one example, revealing the different meanings dementia can assume in a post-war and post-unification German context.

**Kristina Lucenko** analyses Susan Faludi's 2016 memoir *In the Darkroom* on the feminist author's fraught relationship with her father, Stéfanie (formerly Steven, and before that István). Lucenko explores the complexities of remembering, forgetting, inventing, faking, validating and confessing within the dynamics of the child-parent relationship and against the backdrop of transgender and transsexual politics, the history of the Holocaust and Jewish history in Hungary. She argues that throughout her auto/biographical account, Faludi foregrounds the political and ethical dimensions of listening and speaking across divides, especially when Stéfanie's dementia triggers disquieting hallucinations rooted in traumatic personal memories and first-hand experience of what is today part of collective memory.

### 3 Dementia as catalyst and plot device: Urgency and contestation

Cultural representations of Holocaust survivors have established a template for other representations of the dynamics of forgetting and remembering, to the extent that Wulf Kansteiner (2017, 305) describes Holocaust memory and memory studies as "intertwined." This takes the form in the cases under discussion here of making the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) overlap with the ways in which dementia is imagined to uncover 'intact' painful memories of violent experiences. However, it is not clear that there is a causal connection between early trauma and later memory loss: even at a clinical level, researchers are divided about whether traumatic events predispose individuals to dementia in later life or protect them from it: Sperling et al. (2011) argue that trauma is likely to entail dementia, while Ravona-Springer et al. (2011, 709) cannot find evidence to support this link. What is more, the latter speculate that



“individuals who survived concentration camps and then lived into old age may carry survival advantages that are associated with protection from dementia and mortality,” so that their survival of the earlier atrocity is a sign of resilience. In novels like Harriet Scott Chessman’s *Someone Not Really Her Mother* (2004), Kristin Harmel’s *The Sweetness of Forgetting* (2012) and Jillian Cantor’s *The Lost Letter* (2017), fictional Holocaust survivors with dementia seem to serve as a symbol designed to convey the idea of a transition from living to historical memory, rather than represent a medical reality. In each of these three novels, a younger female relative’s discovery of the survivor’s suppressed or forgotten history is at the heart of the plot. The focus is therefore not necessarily centrally on the survivor, who is not yet dead yet cannot remember and is relegated to the narrative’s background, but on the next generation, embodied by a child, grandchild or younger carer who seeks to come to terms with their own identity in light of a ‘new’ past unveiled by the dementia of someone they are close to. Against this backdrop, several of the contributions to the present volume ask how and to what end dementia is used as a plot device or as a catalyst for new versions of the bildungsroman, and how, when used in this way, such fictional or auto/biographical narratives conceptualise the interrelations between ‘real,’ repressed and re/imagined memories.

**Sue Vice** explores the recent appearance of dramatic and fictional texts about former Kindertransport refugees who are portrayed as suffering from dementia, asking why the historical rescue operation should be associated with memory loss and how such narratives relate to British and North American national memory and identity. Vice argues that plays by Wendy Graf and Rose Lewenstein as well as fiction by Linda Newbery respond to anxieties about the contemporary threshold moment, as living Holocaust memory turns into history, ambivalently representing the refugees’ return to a painful past even in the context of their adopted homes.

**Irmela Marei Krüger-Fürhoff** analyses how, in a short story by Irene Dische and an animated webcomic by Stuart Campbell, Alzheimer’s disease brings knowledge to the fore that had hitherto been prey to disavowal or repression, in ways that benefit from and are even symbolised by the innovative use of narrative and visual techniques. Drawing on Freud’s concept of screen memories, Krüger-Fürhoff argues that both works turn dementia into an unexpected as well as unpredictable accomplice in the process of unveiling the past and offer their readers insights that exceed the protagonists’ grasp. In these fictional narratives, memory loss enables belated disclosures and re-evaluations of the past, leading to a new kind of knowledge.



## 4 Dementia and genocide: An artist's approach

While this volume consists mainly of academic analyses, it also includes an artistic contribution by the writer, visual artist and anthropologist **Dana Walrath**. Building on the graphic memoir *Aliceheimer's: Alzheimer's through the Looking-Glass* (2016), on caring for her late mother; the poetic fiction of *Like Water on Stone* (2014), set during the Armenian genocide; and the art installation *View from the High Ground* (2016), which draws viewers' attention to the process of dehumanisation that is the precondition of genocide, the graphic narrative presented here reflects on connections Walrath sees between intergenerational trauma, her mother's individual experience of dementia and the sociohistorical phenomenon of collective amnesia. At the same time, Walrath's contribution celebrates the power of visual-verbal storytelling to bring buried or denied elements of the past to the fore and to connect the need for reconciliation on an interpersonal level (here: the reconciliation of an artistic daughter with her late mother) with political imperatives of acknowledging the past and learning from it for the future. The comic demonstrates once more the fact that we may "have left the 20th century but we have not yet left it behind,"<sup>3</sup> as Aleida Assmann (2012, 37) aptly puts it.

## 5 Dementia as ethical challenge: Vulnerable subjects, (post)colonial concepts and political imperatives

Individuals who develop dementia after having survived forced migration may return to their childhood language and re-experience memories of their earlier life and deracination. This can challenge their successful integration into the country of destination – or, indeed, that country's narrative of multiculturalism and equal prospects for all. Such is the case in J. Bernlef's 1984 novel *Out of Mind* (or *Hersenschimmen* in Dutch), which presents an elderly man's Alzheimer's-related misinterpretation of events in the present day as recurrences of disturbing experiences with US immigration after the Second World War (Krüger-Fürhoff 2015). In a similar vein, David Chariandy's 2007 *Soucouyant: A Novel of Forgetting* deals with the aftereffects of Caribbean migration to Canada via the portrayal of an immigrant mother's dementia, sounding out "the in-between space of (un-)belonging,

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<sup>3</sup> Orig.: "wir dieses Jahrhundert zwar verlassen, aber noch nicht hinter uns gelassen haben."

‘between countries and belonging to neither,’ [. . .] where one is under pressure to recall roots and cultural fragments and to forget them at the same time” (Minto 2010, 887).

A novel which seems to follow in the footsteps of Bernlef’s and Chariandy’s work is Fiona McFarlane’s *The Night Guest* (2010). In her reading, **Emily Thew** draws on Sara Ahmed’s concept of strange encounters to explore the affective relationship between dementia, hospitality and acts of meaning making in a post-colonial context. McFarlane uses free indirect discourse to convey the viewpoint of Ruth, a widow living in Australia brought up as the daughter of missionaries in Fiji, whose present confusion and memory lapses hint at dementia. Ruth imagines that she is visited by a tiger, while she is in actuality visited by Frida, a mysterious carer, meaning that either could be the novel’s eponymous ‘night guest.’ Thew reads Ruth’s reactions to both tiger and carer as her memory falters as a mixture of violent projections and the return of the colonial repressed.

**MaoHui Deng**’s analysis of Royston Tan’s feature film *3688* (2015) shows that the representation of dementia can serve to negotiate contested political issues in former colonial settings through popular culture. Deng argues that the memory loss and language confusion of an elderly character known as Uncle Radio shines a light on the past linguistic diversity eradicated by the Singaporean government’s 1979 Speak Mandarin Campaign, launched with the aim of forging a new sense of postcolonial national identity from the top down. In Deng’s reading, *3688* offers the possibility of remembering and re-presenting the nation’s multilingual past by way of a character with memory loss. At the same time, Deng weaves a valuable critique of Western-centric understandings of time into his analysis, with repercussions for how we view the person living with dementia.

Psychology, narratology and public discourse seem to agree that as human beings we are what we remember – an understanding that, at its worst, leads to ableist or even disablist thinking; at the same time, we are also steered in our actions by what we have forgotten, and by that which intrudes into our memory or consciousness anew, once we forget that we have forgotten. Addressing the collective level, Aleida Assmann (2012, 35) writes in relation to historical injustices and, more specifically, acts of genocide: “Forgetting protects the perpetrators and weakens the victims, which is why acts of remembrance in the form of testimony have become an ethical duty and a form of belated resistance.”<sup>4</sup> This

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4 Orig.: “Vergessen schützt die Täter und schwächt die Opfer, weshalb inzwischen das Erinnern in Gestalt des Zeugnisses zu einer ethischen Pflicht und einer Form des nachträglichen Widerstands geworden ist.” Apart from the concrete historical context which gave rise to it, this development seems to be a logical consequence also of the age-old tradition of regarding

is consensus in the West, at least – if not universally across the globe today. In individual cases, however (and notwithstanding questions of juridical responsibility), forgetting may also have liberating and healing qualities for those who have been subject to violence in the past (Shmotkin et al. 2011; Erl 2019, 55). This is suggested by Deng’s and Raquel Medina’s critical readings of fictional and documentary films in the context, respectively, of colonial legacies in Singapore and the Argentinian dictatorship’s human rights violations.

**Raquel Medina** analyses the 2015 Mexican documentary *Tiempo suspendido / Time Suspended* by Natalia Bruschtein, which deals with the historical memory and legacy of the military dictatorship in Argentina (1976–1983). The film focuses on Laura Bonaparte, one of the co-founders of the protest movement Madres de la Plaza de Mayo that campaigned for relatives who were ‘disappeared’ during the military dictatorship of Jorge Rafael Videla and his successors. Now an elderly woman – the filmmaker’s grandmother – living with Alzheimer’s disease, she is repeatedly confronted with the now-forgotten loss of several close family members during the shooting of the film. Medina asks whether this forced and forceful way of reminding and remembering should be read as a form of violence in itself, exerted on Laura by her granddaughter. By investigating the film’s aesthetics and the interaction between the protagonists, Medina critically explores the ethical boundaries of representation for the sake of preserving the past at the crossroads of individual and collective remembrance and forgetting.

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the act of remembering as something positive and forgetting as essentially negative (Brockmeier 2002, 16). Brockmeier traces it back to antiquity and examines the reasons for and effects of these connotations up to the present day.

with portraits of ‘racial types’ which circulated in Nazi Germany, thus overlaying historical devastation with individual experience; at the same time, the obliterated faces may hint at psychic dynamics such as forgetting and disavowal. Last but certainly not least, we wish to thank all of our workshop participants and contributors to this volume. Their sustained interest in the ways dementia – as a specific set of illnesses, a concept and a cultural metaphor – is employed to produce meaning on individual and communal as well as political levels drove our work on this book. As it refracts history, trauma and the generations through the prism of dementia, *The Politics of Dementia* seeks to stimulate new debates on memory culture, adhering at the same time to issues of patient care and the lived reality of people with dementia.

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