Commentary on 'Somewhere out there in a place no one knows: Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* and the literature of forgetting', by John Henning

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Abstract

The Memory Police is a disconcerting novel set on a mysterious island. Inhabitants of this island suffer objects being ‘disappeared’ and we follow our narrator’s journey as they try to navigate these disappearances. Henning (2022) in their recent essay suggests that the novel can be more fully appreciated by engaging with a literature of forgetting, and draws parallels between the events in the novel, and the course of the neurodegenerative process of Alzheimer’s disease. In this Commentary, I suggest that the progressive deterioration of conceptual knowledge described in the novel most closely resembles that seen in the rare neurodegenerative disease, semantic dementia.

Main text

In their recent essay, Henning suggests that Yoko Ogawa’s novel *The Memory Police* is better appreciated by engaging with a “literature of forgetting” (Henning 2022, 1). The paper argues, persuasively, that there are striking parallels between what is happening to the islanders featured in *The Memory Police,* and what happens to the brain in Alzheimer’s disease. I suggest that the insidious loss of conceptual knowledge featured here most closely resembles that seen in the neurodegenerative disease semantic dementia—the paradigmatic disorder of semantic memory that has helped us understand that humans have a dedicated memory system for knowledge about the world that we accumulate throughout our lifetimes. Henning further notes that the text itself is “generative of a plurality of meaning” (Henning 2022, 3), and in this Commentary, I highlight the multiple correspondences with semantic dementia that the book may generate for researchers, clinicians and people affected by this rare dementia.

Semantic dementia, also known as semantic variant primary progressive aphasia is typically a young-onset neurodegenerative disease that causes relatively circumscribed deterioration of the semantic memory system. Elizabeth Warrington described this selective impairment of semantic memory in three patients in 1975, defining semantic memory as a cognitive system that processes, stores and retrieves information about the meaning of words, concepts and facts. She argued that the cardinal property of information stored in semantic memory is that this is ‘common’ knowledge about the world that is accumulated throughout an individual’s life, but that is not unique to that individual, in contrast to information stored in experiential memory, which is unique to the individual (Warrington 1975, 635). People with semantic dementia progressively lose their store of knowledge about their world. Initially, the person will struggle to remember specific vocabulary, and will substitute more general terms instead (e.g. ‘bird’ for ‘parakeet’) in their conversational speech. A common history is for people to ask the meaning of words that were previously familiar to them, and as the disease develops, deficits of nonverbal knowledge emerge too, ultimately affecting all sensory modalities—the person will eventually have difficulties recognizing even common objects from their name, description, appearance, sound, touch, taste and/or smell.

In a sense, people with semantic dementia become isolated in an internal world analogous to that inhabited by the Islanders in *The Memory Police,* which “becomes more and more punctuated with each disappearance” (Henning 2022, 3). The opening line of the novel is, “I sometimes wonder what was disappeared first—among all the things that have vanished from the island” (Ogawa 2019, 3). This construct is unsettling, as a verb typically used in the active voice is made passive—perhaps analogously to the jarring sense of something not being right for somebody with semantic dementia who realizes that they no longer understand the meaning of a word they knew previously.

Over the opening pages of *The Memory Police*, our narrator goes on to describe a visual and tactile agnosia for several objects, namely a ribbon, a bell, an emerald and a stamp "The objects in my palm seemed to cower there, absolutely still, like little animals in hibernation, sending me no signal at all" (Ogawa 2019, 5)—something also experienced by people with semantic dementia who often receive 'no signal at all' from objects that they were familiar with previously. The narrator proceeds to describe an olfactory agnosia for perfume: "I thought it was some sort of sugar water, and I started to bring it to my mouth…I could tell that there was some sort of scent there—like the smell of toasting bread or the chlorine from a swimming pool, yet different—but no matter how I tried, no other thought came to mind" (Ogawa 2019, 6). Strikingly, these are quite wrong as descriptions for perfume (which is not edible or to be swum in). In the novel, the narrator's mother prevents her from imbibing the perfume ("'No it's not to drink', my mother cried, laughing"; Ogawa 2019, 5), and people with semantic dementia similarly require supervision or adaptations to prevent inappropriate consumption of inedible objects. For example, the carer of a research participant with semantic dementia once described their consternation at finding their partner in the kitchen drinking bleach straight from the bottle, highlighting the significant care needs associated with this disease.

Other parallels are also present. Firstly, as people with semantic dementia lose their store of vocabulary, speech typically becomes more and more 'empty' as more general words (such as 'thing') are employed, and the patient circumlocutes around words that they have forgotten. This mirrors what the narrator feels is happening to her island: "…the island will soon be nothing but absences and holes, and when it's completely hollowed out, we'll all disappear without a trace" (Ogawa 2019, 53). Secondly, the protagonist in the novel is still able to derive comfort from tunes played on the harmonica, and even able to perform some herself. Musical abilities are relatively well-preserved in semantic dementia, and indeed a number of people with this disease will develop 'musicophilia'—a striking love or obsession with a particular genre or band (Marshall et al 2018, 1483). Thirdly, as the novel develops, the concepts that are disappeared become more and more fundamental (see Table), which is also true of the insidious deterioration seen in semantic dementia.

There are also major differences, however, including the fact that entire concepts are 'disappeared' acutely for the islanders (e.g. the concept of 'fruit'), whereas in semantic dementia this is more of a gradual deterioration, with less familiar representations of a concept (e.g. "pomegranate") being lost before more common instantiations (e.g. "apple"). Similarly, as described above, in semantic dementia, whilst all modalities of conceptual knowledge will eventually be affected, this loss manifests initially for word-meaning, before progressing to affect object recognition in multisensory domains. For the islanders, however, the 'disappearance' of an object represents an acute lesion of multisensory conceptual knowledge for that item.

Intriguingly, there is a rich clinical neurological history of semantic dementia in Japanese scientific literature—where the term *Gogi* (or 'word-meaning') aphasia (Imura 1943, 196) has been used to describe patients with difficulties understanding the meaning of words, similarly to those difficulties faced by the Islanders in *The Memory Police*. More recent research suggests that in fact, deficits in *Gogi* aphasia patients develop to affect more than just understanding of words; and it is now fairly widely accepted that the terms *Gogi* aphasia and semantic dementia describe the same clinical entity (Ikeda et al 2011, 133)..

Ogawa's writing shares similarities with that of Gabriel García Márquez, whose depiction of semantic memory loss in '*One Hundred Years of Solitude'* predated the first formal observations of semantic dementia outlined above (Rascovsky et al 2009, 2609; Lees 2022,

2). Given the rarity of semantic dementia (it is thought to affect around one in every 100,000 people in the UK; Marshall et al 2018, 1473), it is perhaps similarly unlikely that Ogawa would have been aware of this condition. The ability of both authors to deliver such faithful and insightful descriptions of a brain disorder that they are unlikely to have had any personal experience of is therefore quite remarkable: are they elaborating on something that they have come across only in passing somewhere? Or intuiting a more general property of human behaviour, perhaps extrapolating from 'semantic satiation'—the phenomenon whereby prolonged repetition of a word leads to the subjective experience of loss of meaning for that word—and something that we all experience transiently in the course of our lives?

Whatever the answer, like Márquez, Ogawa's writing masterfully evokes the fundamentality of our knowledge about the world—something we so often take for granted—and the tsunami of devastation caused when those concepts decay. Perhaps ironically, the concept of semantic dementia itself can be extremely difficult to comprehend, and the sympathetic engagement and immersion in lived experience afforded by the novel form may be valuable for those trying to understand the condition.

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Table. Concepts that 'disappear' from the Islanders in *The Memory Police*

Page	'Disappeared' item	Quote
144-148	Music box (*Orugōru*)*	It's disturbing to see things that have disappeared, like tossing something hard and thorny into a peaceful pond. It sets up ripples, stirs up a whirlpool below, throws up mud from the bottom. So we have no choice, really, but to burn them or bury them or send them floating down the river, anything to push them as far away as possible.
3-5	Ribbon* Bell* Emerald* Stamp*	*Ribbon, bell, emerald, stamp.* The words that came from my mother's mouth thrilled me, like the names of little girls from distant countries or new species of plants. As I listened to her talk, it made my happy to imagine a time when all these things had a place here on the island. Yet that was also rather difficult to do. The objects in my palm seemed to cower there, absolutely still, like little animals in hibernation, sending me no signal at all. They often left me with an uncertain feeling, as though I were trying to make images of the clouds in the sky out of modeling clay.
5-7	Perfume*	My favorite story was the one about 'perfume,' a clear liquid in a small glass bottle. The first time my mother placed it in my hand, I thought it was some sort of sugar water, and I started to bring it to my mouth. "I could tell that there was some sort of scent there—like the smell of toasting bread or the chlorine from a swimming pool, yet different—but no matter how I tried, no other thought came to mind.
9	Hats*	When the hats were disappeared, the milliner who lived across the street began making umbrellas.
16	Ferry*	The ferry has been tied to the dock for a very long time and is now completely covered with rust. No passengers board it and it can no longer take them anywhere. It, too, is among the things that have been disappeared from the island.
209-219	Ticket for the ferry*	One was a rectangular piece of paper, folded over a number of times. It had yellowed and was ripping at the creases. There were letters and numbers barely visible on it.
209-219	Harmonica*	The second was a metallic square about the size of a chocolate bar. Tiny holes covered one side of it. Then he played several tunes, some I knew and some I didn't, but they seemed to calm me either way.
209-219	Lemon-flavored candy (*ramune*)*	And finally there was a plastic bag that contained several white tablets that looked like medicine.
230-243	Un-named objects*	Now, in the middle of the night, I would stare at them. And when I tired of that, I touched them, smelled them, opened their lids, wound their springs, rolled them about, held them to the light, blew on them. I had no idea how they were really meant to be used.
9-11	Birds	Then I spotted a small brown creature flying high up in the sky. It was plump, with what appeared to be a tuft of white feathers at its breast. I had just begun to wonder whether it was one of the creatures I had seen with my father when I realized that everything I know about them had disappeared from inside me: my memories of them, my feelings about

		them, the very meaning of the word “bird” – everything…This bird, which should have been intertwined with memories of my father, was already unable to elicit any feeling in me at all. It was nothing more than a simple creature, moving through space as a function of the vertical motion of its wins.
45	Green beans	When I was a child, I was fond of a salad with lots of green beans. It had potatoes and boiled eggs and tomatoes, all dressed with mayonnaise and sprinkled with parsley. Mother would ask the man at the market whether he had fresh beans. ‘Fresh ones, so crisp they break with a snap!’ she’d say. It’s been a long while since we stopped eating such a salad, and I can no longer recall how green beans looked or tasted.
46-52	Roses	A rose garden without roses was a meaningless, desolate place…In years past, I had carefully studied the stems, leaves, and branches and had read the tags that identified the different varieties, but I realized now that I was already unable to remember what this thing called a rose had looked like.
95,124	Photographs	Nothing comes back now when I see a photograph. No memories, no response. They’re nothing more than pieces of paper. A new hole has opened in my heart, and there’s no way to fill it up again. “Photographs?” I said, not understanding what he meant. Then, after repeating the word to myself, I finally realized I had a vague memory that there had once been smooth pieces of paper that captured someone’s image.
95-96	Fruits of all sorts	The disappearance of fruit was much simpler. When we woke in the morning, fruit of every sort was falling from trees all over the island…Some were as big as baseballs, some small as oceans, some covered in shells, some brightly colored—fruits of all kinds.
133-135	Calendars	The next morning, when I woke up, the calendars had disappeared. Think about it. With the calendars gone, no matter how long we wait, we’ll never get to a new month…so spring will never come.
175-177	Novels	Novels have disappeared. Even if we keep the manuscripts and the books, they’re nothing more than empty boxes. Boxes with nothing inside. You can peer into them, listen carefully, sniff the contents, but they signify nothing. The word ‘novel’ itself is getting harder to pronounce. That’s how you know the disappearance is taking hold. It won’t be long now until I’ll have forgotten everything. Remembering is impossible.
246-247	Left legs	I pulled back the quilt and made a bizarre discovery—something was stuck fast to my hip. And no matter how much I pulled or pushed or twisted, it would not come off, just as though it had been welded to me.
255-256	Right arms	By the time their right arms disappeared, people were less troubled than they had been with the disappearance of their

		left legs…To be honest, we had been certain that something like this would happen sooner or later.
270-274	Entire bodies	They seemed more coherent now that they had fewer parts, and they adapted easily to the atmosphere of the island, which was itself full of holes. They danced lightly in the air like clumps of dried glass blown along by the wind.
273-274	Voices	“Good-bye…” The last traces of my voice were frail and hoarse. “Good-bye.”

*Indicates an item that is described by the narrator or other character as having disappeared previously, before the beginning of the novel. These items have been moved to the top of the Table in order to give a sense of the progression in terms of the concepts that are ‘disappeared’ over time.