

Catastrophe and Schizophrenia: Curing the Institution in a War-Shattered World

Matteo Pasquinelli and Elena Vogman

An elegantly dressed Black man walks in circles around the Strasbourg Saint-Denis metro station in Paris. Manifestly infuriated, gesticulating amidst intimidated passengers, he speaks loudly to an invisible interlocutor. His words remain almost indecipherable in this final sequence of the episode “Modernity–Capitalism–Schizophrenia” from Kader Attia’s *Reason’s Oxymorons* (2015). This scene follows an interview with a psychotherapist for refugees in Rwanda, Christine Uwimana, in which she discusses how “exile conditions” confront her patients with re-traumatization through devaluation and feelings of inferiority. In another episode, Uwimana reads her own nightmares as psychosomatic attempts to cope with traumatic experiences during the Rwandan Civil War in 1994. Attia’s multi-channel video installation is composed of conversations with psychiatrists, philosophers, psychoanalysts, ethnographers, and religious practitioners from Africa, Europe, and North and South America. Structured in episodes, such as “The Magical Sciences,” “Exile,” “Genocide–Colonization,” “The Unconscious,” or “Virtual Real,” it juxtaposes different approaches that various cultures have produced in their attempt to understand psychic afflictions.



Kader Attia, *Reason's Oxymorons*, 2015, video still

Investments in repair within present-day liberal politics operate within a material and psychic economy, which presupposes, according to Attia, reconciliation as a desire to fix and thus conceal the damage produced by centuries of colonial violence, alienation, and destruction. In his various works, Attia’s approach counters this rationale by exploring a different logic, one which he finds mostly in societies outside Europe, that proposes ways to incorporate, embody, and even embrace traces related

to colonial violence, objectification, and mental and bodily exploitation. In this way, *Reason's Oxymorons* unfolds the polyphonic complexity of ways of healing and therapy. It maps a geography of mental symptoms which resonate with and locate the geopolitical catastrophes of past centuries and the present one.



Christine Uwimana, a psychotherapist for migrants and refugees, in Kader Attia, *Reason's Oxymorons*, 2015, video still

There exists a deep historical relation between the wars of the twentieth century, with their extended traumas, and the different theories of mind and practices of psychotherapy that were developed coterminously, as French psychiatrist Jean Oury observed.¹ One could draw a parallel, for instance, between the First World War and the developments of psychoanalysis and holistic neurology, between the Second World War and institutional psychotherapy, between the Algerian War of Independence and anticolonial psychiatry, not to forget the relation between the social movements of 1968 and anti-psychiatry more generally.² Across the twentieth century and on both sides of the Mediterranean, several trajectories of psychotherapy and practices of decolonization gave life to processes of healing and repair that incorporate historical experiences of catastrophe into their methodology.

Branching out from both Oury's and Attia's observations, this text follows an alternative journey through psychotherapy, one that engages complex political readings of mental catastrophe and repair developed across neurology and philosophy, as well as forms of resistance against the annihilation policies of twentieth-century Europe. This journey begins with the poet and playwright Antonin Artaud, who encounters the militant psychiatrist and co-inventor of "institutional psychotherapy," François

Tosquelles, at the asylum in Rodez, where Artaud was a patient. It was in the nearby region of Lozère where Tosquelles developed his revolutionary practice of geo-psychiatry at the clinic of Saint-Alban.³ Here he hosted the anticolonial psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, and together they extensively studied mental catastrophe, in particular the work of the German-Jewish neurologist Kurt Goldstein. This journey culminates in 1930s Berlin, the center of twentieth-century catastrophe, where, at Moabit Hospital, Goldstein investigates a progressive model of mental healing and plasticity before being arrested by the Nazis and exiled in 1933.

Artaud: The Body Without Organs at the End of the World

Diagnosed with schizophrenia, Artaud spoke of his condition as an experience of the “end of the world which fills little by little [my] thought.”⁴ In June 1937, just after his return from Mexico, Artaud wrote his apocalyptic manifesto *Les nouvelles révélations de l’Être* (*The New Revelations of Being*), based on his interpretation of tarot cards and horoscopes. Here he predicts a total and infernal destruction of the world by fire, sharing in the preface his experience of alienation from the world and his feelings of traversing death: “Dead to the world; that which constitutes the world for everyone else—fallen at last, fallen, propelled upwards in this void that I had been refusing, now I have a body which undergoes the world, and disgorges reality.”⁵

Artaud’s divination escalates as he envisions the apocalypse that same year, 1937: “On November 3, the Destruction is illuminated. On the 7th, it bursts into lightning. The Tortured became for everyone the Recognized. The Revealed.”⁶ Soon, between August and September 1937, Artaud leaves for a trip to Ireland. “There is no rational explanation why he made the journey,” writes Stephen Barber, the editor of Artaud’s Irish letters, “other than that he went there to witness signs of the oncoming Apocalypse.”⁷ On 23 September 1937, Artaud was arrested in Dublin for vagrancy and public disturbance. Detained upon his return to the continent in Le Havre, he was taken to asylums in different parts of France, where he spent nine years, and thus the entirety of the Second World War, in confinement.

During the Occupation, more than forty thousand patients of psychiatric hospitals fell prey to the fascist extermination policy—a policy advanced by Nazism and endorsed by the Vichy regime. These measures of “soft extermination” (*extermination douce*) deprived patients of food, medication, and clinical care.⁸ As told in his correspondence, Artaud often faced starvation, beatings by asylum guards, and endured 51 electroshock sessions. On the impact of electroshocks, Artaud writes, “This treatment is moreover an awful torture because one feels with each application suffocating and falling as in an abyss from which your thought does not return any more.”⁹ Following the intervention of his friends, Artaud was finally released from the psychiatric hospital in 1946.

It was during the years of Artaud's confinement in Rodez that he received visits from Tosquelles. Artaud received treatment from doctor Gaston Ferdière, who was also a Surrealist poet, and his assistant José Solanes, a Catalan psychiatrist and Tosquelles's friend. Exiled from Franco's Spain to the clinic of Rodez, Solanes made the notion of exile—with its vicissitudes and sense of amputation—the center of his theoretical and clinical preoccupations. His lecture given in Rodez on “Exil et troubles du temps vécu” (“Exile and disturbance of lived time”) received a positive response from Artaud. In his letter addressed to Solanes, the poet expresses a deep feeling of “grief” vis-à-vis his state of *exilé*: “I felt through every page, every phrase a suffering, that of a man under the weight of an illness he wishes to be free of at any price but for whom the illness has been so powerful that it has paralyzed him even to the depths of his revolt.”¹⁰

Importantly, Artaud's empathic tone not only diagnoses Solanes's experience of exile in terms of “illness,” thereby reversing the usual roles of doctor and patient, but also associates political exile with his own experience of schizophrenia, as both manifest as states of being “*exiled* from one's soul.”¹¹ From this perspective, Artaud's encounter with Tosquelles, who, like Solanes, was also a refugee in France, was marked by a similar alliance. “When I knew him, he was mute,” Tosquelles states in a long interview: “A mute, with explosions, inarticulate cries, that called his invisible gods.”¹² In order to “demuticize” Artaud, Solanes and Tosquelles started playing chess with him. Tosquelles recalls a Rorschach test done with Artaud, where upon showing him the second plate—where a red dot, “red, like the soft watches of Dali,” in the form of flowing water appears—Artaud reacted in an unexpected way, heavily gesticulating with his hands, placing them under his nose. “Then, he looked at me, like a fool who does not understand anything,” Tosquelles writes. “‘When brains start to melt—like mine—well, it flows out of the nose, and you catch it here, and if you can catch your snot, that's the thought.’ This is almost the most coherent first act that Artaud could have said!”¹³

Artaud subjects the medical instrument of the Rorschach test—a semi-otic machine of images par excellence—to a brutal failure. He associates it with formlessness, with snot, which simultaneously becomes the figuration of mental processes. The organ of highest mental functions, the brain, is liquefied, flowing out of the nose. Experiencing a double apocalypse—his visions of the end of the world and the physical toll of the psychiatric treatment—Artaud's response speaks for a collective body which refuses semiotization. It is not by chance that Tosquelles attributes exceptional coherence to Artaud's concrete and monstrous visions.¹⁴

In a 1946 text titled “Aliénation et magie noire” (“Alienation and black magic”), which became part of *Artaud le Môme* (1947), Artaud describes the “*thérapeutiques intempestives*” (untimely therapies)—those violent

instruments directed toward mental health patients, including electroshock treatments, insulin cures, and orchestrated famine. In his literary testimony, from the outset Artaud reverses the perspective between the psychiatrists and the patients, between madness and cure:

Insane asylums are conscious and premeditated receptacles of black magic, and it is not only that doctors encourage magic with their inopportune and hybrid therapies, it is how they use it. . . . If there had been no doctors, there would never have been patients, no skeletons of the diseased dead to butcher and flay, for it is through doctors and not through patients that society began.¹⁵

Artaud parallels here the effects of electroshock with that of black magic, inducing a slow death by means beyond all logic. The formless image of the flowing brain that Artaud identifies in the Rorschach test returns here as a devastating effect of the electroshock: “a puddle state through which everyone traumatized passes.”¹⁶ In this way, Artaud reverses the notion of *aliénation*, which in French refers to a psychological disorder depriving an individual of their mental faculties, revealing the violence inflicted upon the patients and their resulting alienation.¹⁷ It needs to be noted that electroshocks were not exclusively measures of fascist psychiatry. Tosquelles, Fanon, and later Oury and Félix Guattari had not only positively theorized this electrically induced therapy of “annihilation”—or the “Bini method” as it was termed, after its Italian inventor, Professor Lucio Bini—but they also used it at Saint-Alban, Blida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital in Algeria, and the clinic of La Borde. However, as Tosquelles emphasizes, the shock therapy “was preceded and followed, under very precise and careful conditions, by ergotherapy and psychoanalytically-inspired institutional psychotherapy, highly ‘dramatized’ by the nursing staff.”¹⁸ In an article co-authored by Tosquelles and Fanon, the question becomes one of “situating” the “annihilation therapy through repeated shocks within an institutional therapeutic performance.”¹⁹

As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, Artaud’s experience in face of the war can be characterized as that of a “body without organs,” an expression as legendary as it is obscure, which Artaud introduced in his 1947 radio piece “To be done with the judgement of God.”²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari adopted this concept to signal that subjectivity is freed from the higher unity of the organism as much as from any Hegelian dialectics. Artaud’s body underwent the trauma of war and the torture of electroshocks, but rather than searching to reconstitute the unity of the injured body, he actually rejected such unity as a strategy of resistance against the violence of war and the horizon of apocalypse. In this sense, his testimony speaks against the *de-struction* of war, with a strategy not just of *re-construction* but *de-construction* or *anti-construction*, witnessing his own multiple deaths. In the face of the catastrophe of the war, Artaud’s response can be considered as *hyper-catastrophic*.

Tosquelles: Institutional Psychotherapy as a Practice of Resistance

Institutional psychotherapy was a psychiatric reform movement and method that employed group therapies and a radical restructuring of psychiatric institutions, as part of a process in which patients were themselves actively involved. It emerged during the German Occupation of France as a practice of resistance and institutional “overturn,” to use philosopher and novelist Sylvia Wynter’s terminology.²¹ Initiated by Tosquelles alongside resistance fighters and authors such as Georges Canguilhem, Nusch Éluard, and Paul Éluard, the Saint-Alban clinic in Lozère was the birthplace of this movement. Institutional psychotherapy was also crucial for Guattari’s method of institutional analysis.²²

Located in rural southern France at an altitude of one-thousand meters, Saint-Alban was a periphery vis-à-vis the occupied zone, far from Paris and difficult to access. This geographical location favored its transformation into a place of refuge and resistance. Jewish intellectuals, Surrealist artists, Marxists, and partisans from all over Europe came to Saint-Alban during the years of Occupation and the Second World War. Tosquelles, together with the psychiatrist Emilio Mira y López, had already developed an experimental method of “extensive psychiatry” in Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, bringing psychiatry beyond the walls of the clinic.²³ He continued this innovative method at Saint-Alban within the experimental work collective of *Société du Gévaudan*, which rejected the racist nosographic categories of medical pathology in favour of “social therapy” as a set of environmental, social, and cultural practices.

As Tosquelles later stated, this experience of migration as a consequence of political catastrophes was crucial for the formation of geo-psychiatry as a method: “It was the reception of refugees in the hospital that brought this life from the outside, a teeming life, an atmosphere of catastrophe and universalization of suffering, which made the most authentic madness almost derisory in the face of the general panic.”²⁴ The hospital became an “open site,”²⁵ porous to the region, inviting patients, migrants, doctors, and refugees into the common endeavor of survival and therapy. Patients as well as hospital staff worked with peasants in the fields, helping with the harvest; they assisted the clandestine press developed in Saint-Alban, and collaborated with local schools, churches, and priests, with other hospitals in the villages, and with local cinemas and cine-clubs, all for the common goal of resistance and complot against the Nazi regime.²⁶

In 1948, not long after the end of the war, Tosquelles defended his second doctoral dissertation, later published under the title *Le vécu de la fin du monde dans la folie: Le témoignage de Gerard de Nerval* (The lived experience of the end of the world in madness: The testimony of Gerard de Nerval).²⁷ In this work, Tosquelles took up the challenge of thinking

through the experience of catastrophe in at least three dimensions: in its clinical expression as a form of schizophrenia; in its political and historical scope as an inscription of war; and in its atmospheric and poetic manifestation through a subtle analysis of writer and poet Gerard de Nerval's novel *Aurelia* (1854), written shortly before his suicide. Tosquelles introduces the German notion of *Erlebnis*—as Jacques Lacan had also done earlier through his doctoral thesis as well as his publications in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure*²⁸—from phenomenology and existential philosophy. It conceptualized the relation between the singularity of an experience and the world it engenders. *Erlebnis* etymologically inscribes “life” (in German, *Leben*) into experience, highlighting for Tosquelles the irreducible dimension of the lived temporality of “the end of the world,” and at the same time its complex, paradoxical continuity. Most of the patient accounts that Tosquelles cites were recorded during the Second World War, an experience of historical catastrophe which is partly reflected in their visions.



Hélène Álvarez Tosquelles and François Tosquelles, *Société lozérienne d'hygiène mentale, Institut Jean Vigo* — Cinémathèque de Perpignan, 1954–1957, film still, courtesy Michel Tosquelles

The theory of trauma that Tosquelles articulated was entangled in a collective practice of resistance. It allowed for institutional psychotherapy to situate mental health disorders not beyond history, but, crucially, in the complex temporality of the individual and collective experience of catastrophe. From this perspective, the therapeutic practice his theory developed can be understood as an *institutional catastrophic reaction*:

an overturn of the institution in a collective effort of resistance against the state. This is why institutional psychotherapy considered psychotherapeutic treatment to be impossible without a critical analysis of the milieu—that is, of the institution itself. This insight would later guide an array of experimental psychotherapy practices of milieu design— theater, pottery, drawing, and printing workshops, film clubs, and an intra-hospital journal—through which patients could develop as full a life as possible. The psychiatrist Lucien Bonnafé and Tosquelles coined the term “geo-psychiatry” to describe their “migrant work” outside the hospital—a work of “disalienation” of the patient, which Fanon also theorized in similar terms.²⁹ It constituted an effort to reinscribe the patients into a “human geography” that sought to assist them both during and after institutional care. Geo-psychiatry understood the hospital no longer as an isolated and guarded island, but as a social and mental bridge between worlds—as a support for the patient to reestablish their connections.



Ça change
grâce à l'effort de tous

Hélène Álvarez Tosquelles and François Tosquelles, *Société lozérienne d'hygiène mentale*, Institut Jean Vigo — Cinémathèque de Perpignan, 1954–1957, film still, courtesy Michel Tosquelles

Experiences of deportation and forced migration were thus a foundational moment for the making of geo-psychiatry. If psychiatry had codified isolation and imprisonment based on the withdrawal of the individuals from their environment, geo-psychiatry was a practice of

restituting their integration within a living milieu. Tosquelles introduced the notion of an “anthropological clinic” in reference to psychoanalysis and the early writings of Lacan—especially Lacan’s link to French ethnography and the idea of “social genesis” of mental processes.³⁰

From this insight into the social genesis and constitution of mental symptoms, even for the most severe “nuclear psychoses,” which psychoanalysis abandoned as incurable, a reinvention of an analytical treatment had to emerge. In this perspective, psychoanalyst Gisela Pankow directed attention to the ambivalence of psychotic experience as a *loss of the body*.³¹ Pankow was—alongside Tosquelles, Guattari, Josée Manenti, Ginette Michaud, and many others—part of the *Groupe de travail de psychothérapie et de sociothérapie institutionnelles* or GTPSI (Working Group on Institutional Psychotherapy and Socio-therapy), the laboratory for the theory of institutional psychotherapy.³² In her book on the “analytical psychotherapy of the psychotic experience of the world,” Pankow elaborates upon what she calls “dynamic structuring in schizophrenia” (*structuration dynamique de la schizophrénie*).³³ The experienced loss of the body, which Pankow analyzed particularly in relation to female patients, is not regarded in terms of a pathological aberration but as a fundamental component of a “human potentiality” (*menschliche Möglichkeit*) to inhabit other “modes of existence.”³⁴ This was, among other things, a theme of Pankow’s intense exchange with Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, German-Jewish psychiatrist and later psychoanalyst who, along with her mentor Goldstein, had ran a clinic for war traumas and brain injuries during the First World War, and later immigrated to the US, where she worked at the Chestnut Lodge clinic in Rockville.

Goldstein: Neuroplasticity Beyond Trauma

In his analysis of war neuroses and catastrophic symptoms, such as Artaud’s schizophrenia, Tosquelles found pivotal inspiration in the work of the often forgotten yet influential neurologist Goldstein, who contributed a sophisticated idea of neuroplasticity and brain catastrophe that would also cast a deep influence on French thought more broadly. Goldstein, who was close to the Gestalt School and the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, was a prolific neurologist active in the treatment of war-traumatized people at hospitals in Frankfurt and Berlin, before being arrested and expelled from Germany by the Nazi government in 1933. His main monograph, *Der Aufbau des Organismus* (literally “the structure of the organism,” published in English as just *The Organism*) was printed in 1934 during his exile in Amsterdam, just before he fled the continent to join the European intellectual diaspora in New York. His main ideas were summarized in 1940 in the book *Human Nature in Light of Psychopathology*, which directly aimed, even in its title, to reverse the traditional hierarchy between the definitions of the normal and the pathological. In this geo-psychiatric trajectory, Goldstein presented a sophisticated and progressive paradigm of neuroplasticity that was censored by Nazi

Germany and expelled both from science and from Europe.³⁵

According to Goldstein, the brain adapts to its environment in a continuous creative process that expresses an affirmative power of self-realization, even in what are usually defined as “pathological” states. Goldstein should be remembered, principally, for making this paradigmatic shift in the neurology and psychiatry of the age: he advanced an interpretation of psychopathology not as a negative drive, but rather as a manifestation of *the affirmative power of the mind's self-actualization*. His understanding was that the abnormal behavior of a patient suffering a brain trauma, for instance, is not a matter of their lack of capacities but a symptom of the drive to actualize the general configuration (*Gestalt*) of the organism. Goldstein did not regard this drive as a conservative one—as an inclination to reinstate the prior normal condition of the organism—but rather as the organism's positive endeavor toward a new condition: a sign that the organism is struggling to find—or to *create*—a new equilibrium.

For Goldstein, both normal and abnormal behaviors result from one's adaptation to their environment: so-called “abnormal” states of mind are an expression of adaptation as much as normal states. The normative power of the organism—its drive toward self-actualization—is the ability to invent, modify, and disrupt the organism's own rules, norms, habits, and behaviors in order to adapt to everyday milieus, particularly in cases of illness and traumatic incidents, and in those conditions that challenge the survival of the organism. That the normative and creative power of the organism arises out of its constant antagonism with its environment is also a typical schema of German *Lebensphilosophie* and idealism, which can be traced back to Hegel. Goldstein's originality did not lie in the recognition of this antagonism *per se*, but rather in conceiving sickness and all that is usually labelled “psychopathological” and socially “abnormal” as a manifestation of an affirmative and constructive normative process. This intuition would bear a profound influence on French philosophy—in the way, for instance, that philosophers Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault define the abnormal. Canguilhem himself echoes Goldstein in his famous dictum: “The abnormal, while logically second, is existentially first.”³⁶

In Goldstein's holistic neurology, the “healthy” organism finds itself in a continuous process of creative transformation, and this includes any pathologies, injuries, traumas, or catastrophes being experienced. An organism (or a person) is truly “sick” when it is incapable of facing and adapting to these conditions—when it is incapable of changing, of exploring new configurations, of deviating from norms or inventing new norms, when it is unable to make mistakes, to break, to fail (which could, incidentally, be an apt diagnosis of the authoritarian character and fascist personality). Goldstein stated that “The sick person has the tendency to avoid catastrophic reactions, and therefore has a special tendency to remove abnormal tensions.”³⁷ In fact, Goldstein's analysis of

mental catastrophes was not only restricted to cases of psychopathology but aimed at explaining the behavior of the brain in general, such as the development of cognition in children. Goldstein concluded that the “normal” brain is continuously in a state of active shock, and even arranges “minor catastrophic reactions” in the act of coming to terms with the world: “All the minor catastrophic reactions to which the organism is continually exposed thus appear as inevitable way stations in the process of its actualization, so to speak, as the expression of its inescapable participation in the general imperfections of the living world.”³⁸

One of Goldstein’s most significant intuitions is that anxiety is the *modus operandi* of cognition itself: “[We] assume that the ‘coming to terms’ with the world must proceed by way of constantly recurring catastrophic situations, with concomitant emotions of the character of anxiety.”³⁹ This is an important insight that should be read within the legacy of institutional psychotherapy and its practices of self-healing and self-repair, as it seems to suggest that no healing and repair is possible without being somehow aware of the mind’s internal strategies of catastrophic self-organization: this tendency toward actualization is primary, but it can achieve its end only through a conflict with the opposing forces of the environment. This never happens without shock and anxiety. Thus we are probably not overstating the facts if we maintain that these shocks are essential to human nature and if we conclude that life must, of necessity, take its course via uncertainty and shock.⁴⁰

The catastrophic condition and the phenomenon of anxiety, in short, have a special significance for life. We feel that we are correct in assuming that both of them are to be found in all living creatures, in animals as well as in man—that they belong to life itself.⁴¹

The “shattering” (*Spaltung*) process of the catastrophic reaction that is so often recorded in schizophrenic subjects (such as Artaud, for instance) was viewed by Goldstein not as negative but as a protective and creative mechanism, constituting, as Tosquelles explains, a “decisive moment in the dialectical evolution of the organism,” a “fertile moment in the transition from biological to psychological structures.”⁴² Following Goldstein, Tosquelles deciphers schizophrenic symptoms not as a passive loss of the world but rather as an active attempt at reconstructing a new and expanded *Gestalt* of the organism: an effort to repair a shattered world. For Tosquelles, as for Goldstein, madness is not a passive condition but an expression of a creative and affirmative power of the human mind.⁴³

As noted above, Goldstein was no secondary figure in the history of science and philosophy, but maintained a deep influence on French thought. Goldstein’s organicism, for instance, was the main polemical target of Foucault’s first book in 1954, *Maladie mentale et personnalité* (reedited in 1962 as *Maladie mentale et psychologie*, or *Mental Illness and Psychology*), and a focus of critique in Deleuze and Guattari’s

Anti-Oedipus (1972).⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the body without organs should be understood as the life of organs liberated from the unity of the organism:

We come to the gradual realization that the [body without organs, or] BwO is not at all the opposite of the organs. The organs are not its enemies. The enemy is the organism. The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism. It is true that Artaud wages a struggle against the organs, but at the same time what he is going after, what he has it in for, is the organism: *The body is the body. Alone it stands. And in no need of organs. Organism it never is. Organisms are the enemies of the body.* The BwO is not opposed to the organs; rather, the BwO and its 'true organs,' which must be composed and positioned, are opposed to the organism, the organic organization of the organs.⁴⁵

Goldstein provided quite a progressive interpretation of such unity, but even though Goldstein's holistic paradigm of brain plasticity may appear a simplification compared to the semiotic sophistications of Lacan and the visionary ruptures of Deleuze and Guattari, it is nevertheless worth considering it as a key conceptual engine of institutional psychotherapy.

Fanon: Mental Catastrophes in Anticolonial Practices

The incorporation of Goldstein's idea of "catastrophic adaptation" into Fanon's work outside of France was equally significant and equally overlooked. Fanon criticized the French colonial and racist ethnopsychiatry of the early twentieth century, and initiated an innovative practice of "social therapy" that examined the effects of colonialist "alienation" as seen through the prism of mental illness.⁴⁶ The vector for his political and psychiatric work in Algeria, and later in Tunisia, as announced in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), posited that "the black man's alienation is not an individual question. Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny."⁴⁷ However, before embarking on his trip to Algeria, where Fanon led the psychiatric clinic of Blida-Joinville, he worked for 15 months across 1952 and 1953 in close collaboration with Tosquelles at the Saint-Alban clinic.

Tosquelles's redefinition of madness in his 1948 dissertation "Le vécu de la fin du monde dans la folie" ("The lived experience of the end of the world in madness"), taking into account Goldstein's catastrophic reaction, can also be traced in Fanon's practice. In the context of the colonial war in Algeria, Fanon would adapt and transform Tosquelles's milieu-oriented, politico-environmental vision of mental symptoms, witnessing mental disorders which he ascribed to the "pathology of atmosphere."⁴⁸ In colonial Algeria this meant a degree of violence and alienation, giving the impression that "people are caught up in a veritable Apocalypse."⁴⁹ Fanon's patients and their symptoms had the tonality of an "unfinished

death," a culture caught in a state of an "unending agony." Analyzing these states as simultaneously being "a symptom and a cure," Fanon deciphered a complex entanglement of psychosomatic suffering and resistance amidst the catastrophic horizon of colonial violence.⁵⁰

In his introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon quotes from the poet and politician Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950): "I am talking of millions of men who have been skillfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement."⁵¹ This points to an entirely different scope of the problem of colonialism. It exposes the artificial, the socially and culturally constructed—the "injected"—nature of racism. Throughout his work, Fanon showed the entwined relation between colonial alienation and the racist, economic, and epidermal factors of psychic alienation. Reading Fanon a few decades later, Wynter located this shift from "the family situation" as the origin of the individual to "the overall social order (of whose reproduction the family itself can now be seen as being but a proximate function)"—a redefinition of the human as that of "*human skins, cultural masks*."⁵²

Reading the catastrophe in the omnipresent, vast environmental character of cultural mummification, Fanon ascribed it to the phenomenon of "atmosphere": an atmospheric death or a symptom "enveloped in vagueness," as he writes in "The North African Syndrome."⁵³ ("Where do you have pain?" 'Everywhere, *monsieur le docteur*.') This difficulty of localizing the symptom corresponds to the degree of entanglement between the social, environmental, and somatic dimensions of colonial alienation. In the last chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), titled "Colonial War and Mental Disorders," Fanon includes two series of cases he was treating structured according to this logic of an all-embracing "atmosphere": one series refers to symptoms caused by an "atmosphere of total war which reigns in Algeria," and another one by the "pathology of atmosphere." While the first series reports on brutal causation of some even non-psychiatric cases, such as the murder by 2 young Algerians, aged 13 and 14, of their European playmate, the second focuses on psychosomatic disorders like "intense sleeplessness" or "menstruation troubles."⁵⁴ In the latter case, Fanon explains that although its origin is psychic, the disorder manifests itself somatically. It presents itself simultaneously as a symptom and a cure: "More precisely, it is generally conceded that the organism . . . resolves the conflict by unsatisfactory, but on the whole economical, means. The organism in fact chooses the lesser evil in order to avoid catastrophe."⁵⁵

This complex temporality of the organism's somatic catastrophic response refers back, via Tosquelles, to the milieu theory of Goldstein. Goldstein serves Fanon here to describe those psychosomatic reactions that the body adapts as a "lesser evil"—that is, as a protective

mechanism in a situation where the “bloodthirsty and pitiless atmosphere” and the “generalization of inhuman practices” provide the ground for a “veritable Apocalypse.”⁵⁶

Desiring Machines That Break and Self-Repair

“Desiring-machines make us an organism,” Deleuze and Guattari write in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972):

... the body suffers from being organized in this way, from not having some other sort of organization, or no organization at all. ... ‘No mouth. No tongue. No teeth. No larynx. No esophagus. No belly. No anus.’ ... Artaud discovered this one day, finding himself with no shape or form whatsoever, right there where he was at that moment.⁵⁷

Deleuze and Guattari continue, writing: “Desiring-machines work only when they break down, and by continually breaking down as they run, and in fact run only when they are not functioning properly.”⁵⁸ What is actually breaking when the Self breaks, when desire breaks? According to some, it is the structure of the organism; for others, such as Lacan, it is the “law,” the “symbolic,” and the “signifier.” In their anti-structuralism and anti-organicism, Deleuze and Guattari affirm the autonomy of ruptures, especially ruptures of the various processes of communication, semiotization, and linguistic expression in general. Behind and beyond Hegelian dialectics, ruptures establish their own order and constellations.

The discussions between Artaud, Tosquelles, Fanon, Lacan, and Goldstein on brain catastrophes, traumas, anxiety, and curiosity are a historical record of some crucial stages of institutional psychotherapy. In particular, Goldstein’s research on neuroplasticity is a key contribution that can also partially illuminate the making of major notions of institutional psychotherapy, such as “transversality,” that can be located in between the transformations of the Freudian *Übertragung* and the breaking of up the “configuration” (*Gestalt*) of the Self after Lacan. The breaking up of the configuring of the self and its environment expands in Oury’s “transferential constellation,” and through Guattari’s “schizoanalysis” and Fanon’s “sociogenesis.”⁵⁹ The development of critical thought and institutional psychotherapy across the European wars of the twentieth century can be seen as a continuous process of geo-psychiatric drifting.

Indeed, the notions of a break, of a rupture or trauma, need to be understood and situated against the experiences of displacement, migration, colonialism, and extermination wrought by Europe’s fascist and colonial wars. For these experiences are what shaped the formation of institutional psychotherapy as a practice of resistance and repair. Tosquelles referred to his psychiatric practice, which incorporated the experience of

wars and forced migration, as a form of “thinking by the feet.”⁶⁰ This form of thought involves drifting, walking, or taking flight, which decenters one’s perspective and de-territorializes the subject.



Kader Attia, *Reason's Oxymorons*, 2015, video still

To return to the walking figure in Attia’s *Reason’s Oxymorons*, their gestures can be understood as a psychosomatic practice of rereading established geography, thus providing a link to its crucial modulation. In the chapter “10,000 B.C.: The Geology of Morals (Who Does the Earth Think It Is?)” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari state that “it is an illusion to believe that structure is the earth’s last word.”⁶¹ Referencing Artaud once again, they associate “stratification” and the given order with “the judgement of God,” while “the earth, or the body without organs constantly eludes that judgement, flees and becomes destratified, decoded, deterritorialized.”⁶² For Tosquelles and the founders of institutional psychotherapy—as well as in the constellation that Attia unfolds through *Reason’s Oxymorons*—trauma, flight, and migration propose a practice of repair that does not efface catastrophe—mental nor (geo)political—but configures resistance out of the catastrophic horizons of history and the present alike.

Like Attia’s practice of opening art to therapeutic, political, and social dimensions, geo-psychiatry necessarily exceeds the frame of psychiatry to other disciplines and experiences. Such a psychiatric work had been developed by Tosquelles and Mira y López through the transdisciplinary methods of “extensive psychiatry” (as well as with psychoanalysts and Gestalt-psychologists who had fled to Catalonia from Nazism and antisemitism).

The inclusion of psychoanalysis of subjects and groups, Gestalt-psychology, biomechanics, but also mythology and archaeology into the realm of psychiatric treatment radically reconfigured the organicist reductionism of psychiatry and the psychoanalytic frame of an individual or two-body psychology. Moreover, it revealed modernity's project of "reason" to be an "oxymoron," or an instrument of colonial destruction—a mental and social alienation of subjectivities, their erosion, and their extraction.



So I had patients saying
"I feel as tortured as I was back there,"

Christine Uwimana in Kader Attia, *Reason's Oxymorons*, 2015, video still

- 1 Jean Oury cited in *Underbrush Of The Senseless*, directed by Martine Deyres (Lightdox, 2015), 89 min.
- 2 Deyres, *Underbrush Of The Senseless*. See also Lucien Bonnafé, Georges Daumézou, Jean Oury, and François Tosquelles, "Saint-Alban," *Recherches* 17 (March 1975), 80–95; Carles Guerra and Joana Masó, eds., *La Déconnatrerie—Art, exil et psychiatrie autour de François Tosquelles* (Paris: Arcadia, 2021); Camille Robcis, *Disalienation: Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021).
- 3 On "geo-psychiatry" see also the pioneering work of artist and researcher Angela Melitopoulos, "Ways of Meaning: Machinic Animism and the Revolutionary Practice of Geo-psychiatry" (PhD diss.; London: Goldsmiths, University of London, 2016), 50–51; and Joana Masó, "Du collectif aves des femmes: Soins et politique autour de l'hôpital psychiatrique de Saint-Alban, 1930–1960," *Cahiers du genre* 73 (2022), 233–262.
- 4 Antonin Artaud, *L'Art et la mort* (Paris: Denoël, 1929), 9; cited by François Tosquelles in *Le vécu de la fin du monde dans la folie. Le témoignage de Gérard de Nerval* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2012), 101.
- 5 Antonin Artaud, "The New Revelations of Being," *Artaud 1937 Apocalypse: Letters from Ireland by Antonin Artaud*, trans. and ed. Stephen Barber (Berlin–Zurich: Diaphanes, 2019), 11–12.
- 6 Antonin Artaud, "The New Revelations of Being."
- 7 Stephen Barber, "Postface," *Artaud 1937 Apocalypse*, 69.
- 8 Max Lafont, *L'Extermination douce: La cause des fous* (Bordeaux: Bord de l'eau, 2000); Isabelle Von Buelzingsloewen, *L'Hécatombe des fous. La famine dans les hôpitaux psychiatriques français sous l'Occupation* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009).

- 9 Antonin Artaud, "Letter to his mother from August 23," and "Letters written from Rodez," in Antonin Artaud, *Œuvres*, ed. Évelyne Grossman (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 951.
- 10 J. Dickson, "Artaud / Exile: Letter from Rodez," *SubStance* 3, no. 8 (Winter, 1973–1974), 61–63.
- 11 Ibid. On Solanes, Artaud, and Tosquelles, see also Mari Paz Balibrea, "Finding Josep Solanes: mobilizing the legacies of Republican exile in Spanish cultural studies," *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2021).
- 12 François Tosquelles, "École de la liberté. Vagabondage avec François Tosquelles" ("Vagrancies: A School for Freedom"), interview recorded on 28 and 29 August 1987 by Alain Dupont and others, transcription by Marie-Noëlle Piednoir and Jacques Tosquellas. The authors would like to thank Jacques Tosquellas for having shared this not yet published and more complete version of the interview. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the authors.
- 13 Tosquelles, "École de la liberté."
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Antonin Artaud, "Alienation and Black Magic," in Antonin Artaud, *Artaud The Momo*, ed. Stephen Barber, trans. Clayton Eshleman (Zurich/Berlin: Diaphanes, 2020), 91. For the original French, see Antonin Artaud, "Aliénation et magie noire," *Artaud le Momo*, in Artaud, *Œuvres*, 1138.
- 16 Antonin Artaud, "Alienation and Black Magic."
- 17 See also Jean Oury, *L'Aliénation* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1992).
- 18 François Tosquelles, *Le travail thérapeutique à l'hôpital psychiatrique* (Paris: Editions du Scarabée, 1967), 60. The authors would like to thank Felix Meyer for sharing the forthcoming English translation of Tosquelles's book.
- 19 Frantz Fanon and François Tosquelles, "On Some Cases Treated with the Bini Method," in Frantz Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, ed. Jean Khalfa and Robvert J. C. Young, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
- 20 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 8.
- 21 In her work, Wynter reads Fanon's sociogeny as an almost cosmogonic power, capable of shifting the focus on the constitution of mental illnesses from biology and neurology toward social and cultural factors. In this "overtun"—an act of resistance to the hegemonic dominant foundation—Wynter sees a crucial redefinition of "who-we-are as humans." Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtun, its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extra-territoriality of (Self-)Cognition," in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 184–252; Sylvia Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of 'Identity' and What it's Like to be 'Black,'" in *National Identity and Sociopolitical Change: Latin America Between Marginalization and Integration*, Mercedes Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 30–66.
- 22 Not by chance, Guattari relates the psychiatric revolution to the anti-concentrationist movement when he speaks of Saint-Alban as follows: "After the prison camps and concentration camps, a few nurses and psychiatrists started to look at the problems of psychiatric hospitals from an entirely new angle. Incapable of supporting concentration camp institutions, they undertook to transform services from top to bottom, knocking down fences and organizing the fight against famine." Félix Guattari, *Psychoanalysis and Transversality: Texts and Interviews 1955–1971*, trans. Ames Hodges (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), 60. For this question see also the special issue of *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, "Sur Analysis: Institutional Psychotherapy and Institutional Analysis," ed. Anthony Faramelli, vol. 17, no. 2 (May 2023).
- 23 Tosquelles's work in Catalonia and later France was featured in a pioneering traveling exhibition titled *Francesc Tosquelles. Like a Sewing Machine in a Wheat Field*, curated by Carles Guerra and Joana Masó. The authors saw it at Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona in 2022 where the reflections on this essay began. See also the catalog: *La Déconnitrie: Art, exil et psychiatrie autour de François Tosquelles*, Carles Guerra and Joana Masó, eds. (Paris: Arcadia, 2021); Joana Masó, "Les institutions dans la petite Vienne: Reus et Barcelone/1929–1936," in François Tosquelles, *Soigner les institutions*, ed. Joana Masó (Paris: L'Arachnéen, 2021).
- 24 Lucien Bonnafé, Georges Daumézou, Jean Oury, and François Tosquelles, "Saint-Alban," *Recherches* 17 (March 1975), 83.
- 25 Ibid., 86.
- 26 See also Dominique Mabin and Renée Mabin, "Art, folie et surréalisme à l'hôpital psychiatrique de Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole pendant la guerre," *Mélusine*, October 7 2017, <https://melusine-surreal-isme.fr/wp/art-folie-et-surrealisme-a-lhopital-psychiatrique/>.
- 27 Tosquelles defended his first dissertation, "A propòsit de l'anàlisi d'una personalitat anormal" (1935), in Catalonia. The initial title of his second dissertation was "Essai sur le sens du vécu en psychopathologie: le témoignage de Gérard de Nerval" (1948). The authors refer to the later published title, François Tosquelles,

Le vécu de la fin du monde dans la folie. Le témoignage de Gérard de Nerval (Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon et Jacques Tosquellas, 2012).

- 28 Jacques Lacan, "Le problème du style et la conception psychiatrique des formes paranoïaques de l'expérience," in *Minotaure* 3–4 (1933–1934).
- 29 Bonnafé, Daumézon, Oury, and Tosquellas, "Saint-Alban," 80–95.
- 30 Tosquellas, "École de la liberté."
- 31 Gisela Pankow, *Gesprengte Fesseln der Psychose* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1984), 45.
- 32 On the role of group activity in institutional psychiatric psychotherapy, and in Guattari's practice in particular, see Susana Caló, "Collective Militant Analysis," *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 17, no. 2, 283–300.
- 33 Gisela Pankow, *Structuration dynamique dans la schizophrénie—Contribution à une psychothérapie analytique de l'expérience psychotique du monde* (Bern: Huber, 1956).
- 34 Pankow, *Gesprengte Fesseln der Psychose*, 45.
- 35 See also Stefanos Geroulanos and Todd Meyers, *The Human Body in the Age of Catastrophe: Brittleness, Integration, Science, and the Great War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018).
- 36 Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 243.
- 37 Kurt Goldstein, *Human Nature in the Light of Psychopathology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), 140.
- 38 Goldstein, *The Organism*, 392.
- 39 Goldstein, *Human Nature*, 109.
- 40 Ibid., 112.
- 41 Ibid., 91.
- 42 Tosquellas, *Le vécu de la fin du monde dans la folie*, 96–98.
- 43 "La folie est une création, non une passivité." Ibid., 98. It is worth noting that in the same years of Goldstein's early research, around 1920, Sigmund Freud was developing the theory of the death drive, in which primacy is granted to inorganic matter over biological life, and trauma is defined negatively as the drive to restore a previous inorganic state of nature (a reading in which the physical dimension of thermodynamics ended up over-coding psychodynamics). It should be remembered that the term psychoanalysis was chosen to replace psychodynamics, which was coined after thermodynamics as a study of the energetic expenditures of the mind.
- 44 For the paradigm shift from organicism to structuralism, see Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).
- 45 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 158.
- 46 Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*.
- 47 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; repr., London: Pluto Press, 1986), 13.
- 48 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 289.
- 49 Ibid., 251.
- 50 Ibid., 290.
- 51 Aimé Césaire cited in the epigraph to the introduction of Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 9.
- 52 Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle."
- 53 Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 22.
- 54 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 291–292. See also Elena Vogman, "Counter-Cosmogony and the Psychotherapy of Catastrophe," in *Ceremony (Burial of an Undead World)*, Anselm Franke, Elisa Giuliano, Denise Ryner et al., eds. (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2022), 305–315.
- 55 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 290.
- 56 Ibid., 251.
- 57 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 34.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Goldstein believed that a trauma may affect the brain's power to manage complex and chaotic *Gestalten*, that is very "abstract" configurations of the Self and the environment. This translation of the German notion *Gestalt* with configuration equally alludes to Oury's concept of "transfential constellation" (*constellation*

transférentielle), which the psychiatrist used to relate the psychoanalytic notion of “transference” to a more complex situation such a milieu, an institution, and a collective. Tosquelles spoke of “multi-referential transference” to describe “transferential investments which can equally develop amidst objects and spaces.” Oury developed from it the notion of “transferential constellation.” Pierre Delion, *La constellation transférentielle* (Toulouse: Éditions érès, 2022), 26–27.

- 60 François Tosquelles cited in *Déconnage*, a video essay by Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato (2011), 62 min.
- 61 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 41.
- 62 Ibid., 40.