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Jack Halberstam

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# Unworlding

**Jack Halberstam**  
Columbia University

I recently taught a class titled “World’s End.” In the class, we read both postapocalyptic literature, standard zombie fare, as well as more speculative works that imagine how worlds end and how other worlds emerge. The category of ‘world’ is itself under scrutiny here, and “end,” as in “end of the world,” is itself a rather loose temporal marker. But the idea of “world’s end” is designed to break with the continuity of history, the forward momentum of progress and the endless focus on individual survival. Many of the novels and films on my syllabus actively imagine the collapse of the world crafted by global capitalism, and a few offer alternatives to it. The power of the speculative work I have assembled under the heading of “world’s end,” however, is not that it serves as an archive for world-building according to a feminist or queer agenda, but instead, most of it advocates very forcefully and specifically for world-breaking, world-unbuilding and for a dismantling of life as we know it.

While an earlier moment in queer studies made its investments firmly into the utopian project of world-making, I am thinking about how to unmake this world. *Unworlding* is a philosophy and an anti-anti-utopian idea that breaks with earlier world-building projects, and charts a course for queer and trans art that skews towards violence, acts of undoing and dismantling, and the embrace of entropic unraveling. *Unworlding* is not antiutopian. It is a project that understands that utopia is delayed until we unmake the world that we are currently living in. I have been exploring an archive of work begun

by an earlier generation of activists who wanted to smash dominant systems (smash patriarchy!) and bring oppression structures down.

What might *unworlding* look like in terms of a politics of representation, particularly one oriented around trans and queer bodies? I myself have looked towards anarchitectural practices of unmaking as promulgated by the American artist Gordon Matta-Clark (1943–1978), extending the ideas of unbuilding and creative destruction that characterize his work.<sup>1</sup> The concept of “anarchitecture” is attributed mainly to Matta-Clark, whose inventive site-specific cuts into abandoned buildings demonstrated approaches to the concept of the market system of real estate that were anarchistic, creatively destructive, and full of queer promise. Anarchitecture, Matta-Clark wrote in an exhibition description in the early 1970s, means “working with absence” and “opening spaces to redistribute mass” and “emphasizing internal structures through extraction.” How might these relations to space and absence describe very different orientations? When we sit with disorder, mess, and the erotic values of those modes, we are observing multiple orders of thought that have been rejected or denied.

In order to build on Matta-Clark’s conceptual anarchitecture, I propose to use the vocabulary, with terms and aesthetics—collapse, undoing, and dismantling—to develop a politics of collapse and dereliction that opposes the logic of repair and rebuilding. Intuitively, in worlding transitions, we think in terms of repair. Repair is part of neoliberalism. If this world

is as shitty as we think it is, then why repair it! Bring the structure of real estate capitalism to its knees. That would be a politics of collapse, of many things falling together.

## **Unworlding—Spinning, Falling, Entropy**

*Weathering* by Faye Driscoll is a wild and complex performance by a motley crew (in the best sense) of dancers and performers who are all perched precariously on a spinning platform, nominally a bed, that moves slowly at first, but that accelerates throughout the performance until it reaches a vertiginous climax. *Weathering* is a gestural statement about unworlding, climate collapse, and its uneven impact on Black, brown and Asian queer and trans bodies. The bodies themselves begin to lose coherence. Clothes fly off, bodies lean into one another or fall from the platform, and generally speaking, entropy sets in—the loss of control becomes evident as the bodies leap on and off the spinning platform that we now recognize as a globe, a globe that is unraveling and coming undone under the pressure of human presence. The performance, a total ensemble piece with no solo dancer and with performers who depend on each other for moments of stability and focus when they are in the eye of the storm, is a testament to what I have been calling Unworlding.

Like anarchitecture, *Weathering*’s aesthetic gestures are a seemingly negative set of activities that oppose the making up of a self or the imagining of a world that can hold that self in place. Instead, *Weathering* throws the bodies from the world



Figure 1. Jesse Darling, Gravity Road, 2020.

and into space and forces them to feel the velocity of global rotation, the weight of gravity, and the falling apart of things. The entropic motion that propels *Weathering* towards chaos is precisely this orientation towards formlessness that opens onto other anarchitectural vocabulary. Anarchitecture, however, allows us to look at a collapsing wall and to see not simply downfall but the process of entropy itself, a winding-down geometry in which cement gives way, bricks fall, rooms fold in upon their own emptiness, new shapes appear and then shape itself gives way to aesthetics of shapelessness. Entropy, the coming undone of everything, has been neatly hidden or occluded by systems of power that invest in and then generate order, stability, and production, and cast such states as proper to a natural order of things.

Entropy, the second law of thermodynamics, dictates that disorder and randomness intensify over time,

and no amount of building or political stasis can change that. When we look closely at structures coming undone, we no longer see collapse only as a prelude to a new build: we can instead discern an entropic aesthetic or even an antiaesthetic. What is collapse (detumescence?) when it is not cast only as the end of something (desire?) but as an erotic event in and of itself? Collapse stages nothing, sets the stage for nothing, delivers nothing. And yet, like tea leaves left over after drinking the tea, the rubble created by collapsing structures reveals patterns of futures occluded. These futures are not the shiny or new futures that imaginative acts of world-building promised and foregrounded in their advertising, but rather, dim outlines of a gritty, dirty, messy, disorderly unworld to come.

#### **Unthinking the World—Time Travel, Collapse, Demolition**

If we are to unworld, we need to unthink the unity of things that has emerged out of a Western philosophy

focused on the singular subject and committed to his own centrality. This critique of Western philosophy has most urgently emerged from radical Black thought. Not surprisingly, then, the idea of unthinking the world comes from Black philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva, who questions the notion of a totality that holds us all in place. Her monograph *Toward a Global Idea of Race* rejects the prevailing view that social categories of difference such as race and culture operate solely as principles of exclusion. Da Silva presents a critique of modern thought that shows how racial knowledge and power produce global space and total worlds that make it impossible for people of color to resist current formulations of power without using the languages with which those systems have been crafted. And so, she proposes, we must engage the process of “unthinking the world and releasing it from the abstract forms of modern representation and the violent juridic and economic architectures they

support.”<sup>2</sup> In this sense, “unthinking world” is a philosophical project that does not build upon a clear genealogy of thought from Plato to Heidegger to Žižek, but one that exploits the openings and contradictions in this tradition to lay bare the violence that sustains any concept of world. But world is also the result of that philosophical tradition—we think of world as a totality, as a system centered on the human, and as a still site of endless resources precisely because the tradition of Western philosophy—as produced mostly by white male subjects—has theorized the subject and the world as rational, good, and antithetical to violence. As da Silva comments, modern forms of representation have built this thing called World, and as I am saying, we must unbuild it.

Can science fiction offer us some clues as to what unworlding may look like? Da Silva uses *Kindred* (1979) by Black science-fiction author Octavia Butler as her example of the relation between world and the Black body. In this novel, a Black woman, Dana, travels back and forth in time between 1976 in LA and a plantation in the South where her great-grandmother is a slave. The novel is not exactly about time travel, but it is about the way in which World does not hold Dana, a Black woman married to a white man, in time and space with the same level of stability and continuity as it holds her husband, Kevin. Time opens up and swallows Dana and she shuttles back and forth through the wall of a house that she and Kevin have just bought in Alta Dena, Louisiana, between the antebellum South and the supposedly liberated era of interracial marriage. For da Silva, the novel represents “the unpayable debt” that white worlds impose upon Black people, and when Dana comes back through the wall for the last time, and loses her arm to that wall, the debt is paid in blood—her body is property, she is not world, she has been swallowed by the world, kicked back and forth through time and returned to the present in fragments.<sup>3</sup>

In my archive, I turn to the work of Black lesbian artist Beverly Buchanan for another version of this same process. Buchanan was making sculptures around the same time that Butler wrote *Kindred* and, like Butler, she was preoccupied with walls, with the logic of collapse—time travel is the collapse of temporal frames and the implosion of the systems that hold the world rigidly in place. Butler’s fantasy of time travel launches a Black woman into the void and shuttles her back and forth between slavery and homeownership, revealing in the process how, and in what ways, the two modes are economically continuous. Homeowning is the afterlife of slavery, slavery is the ur-text of property.

Beverly Buchanan’s goal was ruination and collapse, and she built shacks obsessively, later in her career, but worked with fragments early on. Her first show in 1972 consisted of drawings of Black walls with mottled surfaces; the walls were undefined and in a state of decay. Of these early works, which she called “City Ruins,” she said:

My interest in walls involves the concept of urban walls when they are in various stages of decay; walls as part of a landscape. Often, when buildings are in a state of demolition—one or two structural pieces (*Frustula* series) stand out that otherwise never would have been “created.” This state of demolition presents a new type of “artificial” structural system piece that by itself (its undemolished state) would not exist. These “discards” or piles of rubble can be pulled together to form new systems. These new systems are very personal statements to me. They are inspired by urban ruins but are created, “in my own image” by me, in concrete and painted with dark paint. Deceptively, they appear to be black. (One of my dreams: to place fragments in tall grass where a house once stood but where, now, only the chimney bricks remain.)<sup>4</sup>

This is an extraordinary statement and one that speaks directly to the potentiality that lies coiled in scenes of collapse, in the fragmentation and the new shapes that emerge. When something comes apart, Buchanan proposes, we are confronted with a new sign system, with different points of support, new entryways and exits; the rubble and rejected matter become the foundation for something else, something that could not be created but must just show itself. If we think of this alongside *Kindred*, we could say that Dana loses an arm in the wall and comes undone as a result, but also that she and the wall fuse and become another kind of material being. Buchanan sees the Black body as ruined, part flesh, part concrete, derelict and odd. Buchanan explored demolition sites in the city to find the shape of its breaking, patterns of coming undone, and new geometries of being that flicker in and out of the debris.

#### **Trans Unworlding—Rollercoasters, Goofy Forms, the Cut**

I want to end by thinking about these themes of unworlding, entropy, and collapse in relation to trans art. In 2023 the Turner Prize, an annual British award that usually goes to younger, innovative British artists, was awarded to transgender artist Jesse Darling. The jury praised the artist’s ability to manipulate commonplace materials and objects “to convey a familiar yet delirious world invoking societal breakdown.”<sup>5</sup> They felt that Darling’s practice was “exposing the world’s underlying fragility and refusing to make oneself appear legible and functioning to others.”<sup>6</sup> In various interviews, Darling has confirmed his interest in the vulnerability and precarity of the object and in “[potential]failure-as-process.”<sup>7</sup>

I offer this image of Jesse Darling’s work, *Gravity Road* (2020), to set up the stakes of the terrain of unworlding and the aesthetic of collapse and its utilization by queer and trans artists. In *Gravity Road* we see a sort of deconstructed roller coaster that Darling set up



Figure 2. Jesse Darling, *Gravity Road*, 2020

in a German exhibition space, a converted Third-Reich-era swimming pool, to offer a critique of fascist investments in pure and heroic forms. Darling's sculpture reckons with the history of the space in which it sits. His antimonument focuses on the goofy and twisted aesthetic associated with the rough and tumble activities of a children's playground. The "road" here, pushed and pulled by gravity and entropy, sets up a platform for speed,

collective thrills, and—inevitably, given its precariousness—collapse. In a review of Darling's work, artist and art critic Francis Whorrall-Campbell notes that the "deformed steel track, held together with bandages and sandbags, seems to issue from an apocalyptic future-present while also signaling the origins of the amusement ride in the mining shaft and railroad."<sup>8</sup> *Gravity Road* is a roller coaster governed by, rather than in defiance of, entropy.

In an interview in *Ocula* in 2022, Darling says:

For me, it's quite a hopeful feeling to know that even empires fall, kings topple, and governments are overthrown. To know that everything has its end, even when it seems like the reign will be endless. Vulnerability is a given in everybody. It's what makes us alive. It's not that vulnerability is a strength per se, but our physical fragility as organisms and propensity to suffer in love, conflict, under structural violence, and our animal need for nourishment and warmth are what we share.

A group of trans artists including Jesse Darling, Yve Laris Cohen, and Cassils all utilize anarchitectural vocabularies on behalf of theories of trans embodiment that emphasize the cut of surgical transformation, the demolition of the binary, the twisting of bodily forms away from the perfect and the true. Indeed, trans theorist Eva Hayward has argued that "the cut is possibility" and part of an "ongoing materialization." She continues: "my cut is of my body, not the absence of parts of my body."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the trans body eschews repair for the cut, and the cut, the sutures, the disassembled and reassembled body represent a kind of anarchitectural relation to being and unbecoming. This notion of an unspooling model of being, a body that entropically loses momentum, allows for new understandings of the trans body as fundamentally at odds with capital and the commodity form.

In his Turner Prize acceptance speech, Jesse Darling took the time to criticize narrow conceptions of art, market dynamics, and elitism and then pulled a Palestinian flag out of his pocket. Making clear connections between elitism, art markets, prizes, global capital, ableism, apocalypse and militarism, Darling's gesture reminds us about what is at stake in recalibrations of the meaning of falling, collapsing, demolishing, and destituting. While Israel, backed by the US and Germany, brutally removes Indigenous people from their land, wastes the land in order to resettle,

rebuilds and wipes away all traces of the original inhabitants, it becomes increasingly important to counter these brutal operations not just with protest and noise but with our own demolition operations. We need, Darling's work proposes, to unmake the institutional structures that make political speech so hard right now, that line up powerful governments behind conquerors and that force us to accept poor governance over alternative modes of sociability.

From *Weathering* to Jessie Darling, we have been thinking about unworlds that embrace the second law of thermodynamics, according to which the total entropy of a system either increases or remains constant in any spontaneous process; it never decreases. In other words, heat cannot travel from a colder body to a warmer one. Order cannot resolve brokenness. Entropy or disorder increases over time. If you fall and break, you cannot be put back together in the way you were. Worlds break and we must resist the urge to put it back together, to pull the shards into passable shapes, to form facsimiles of unbroken life. Instead, these installations lead us into the break itself and ask us to find a spot among the loopy steel rails, the fallen figures, the debris, and the junk. Once in the heart of the demolition, we see that the future is not ours—we cannot take it, dream it, buy it, or occupy it. It is now, it is here, and it is over.

## Notes

- 1 Jack Halberstam, "Unbuilding Gender: Trans\* Anarchitectures In and Beyond the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark," *Places Journal*, 2018, [https://placesjournal.org/article/unbuilding-gender/#ref\\_5](https://placesjournal.org/article/unbuilding-gender/#ref_5).
- 2 Ferreira da Silva, "In the Raw," *e-flux Journal* 93 (2018), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/>.
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- 4 Beverly Buchanan, Artist's Statement, "WALL FRAGMENTS – Series Cast in Cement," 1978. Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Artist File, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N.Y.
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- 7 Giampaolo Bianconi, "Artist Profile: Jesse Darling," Rhizome, 2012, <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2012/nov/05/artist-profile-jesse-darling/>.
- 8 Francis Whorrall-Campbell, "Jesse Darling's 'No Medals No Ribbons,'" *e-flux Criticism*, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/456787/jesse-darling-s-no-medals-no-ribbons>.
- 9 Eva Hayward, "More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36:3/4 (2008): 64–85.

**Jack Halberstam** is professor of gender studies and English at Columbia University. Halberstam is the author of seven books including: *Trans\*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variance* (University of California Press, 2017), *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Beacon Press, 2012), *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), *In A Queer Time and Place* (New York University Press, 2005), *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998), and *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Duke University Press, 1995). Halberstam's latest book is titled *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Duke University Press, 2020). *Places Journal* awarded Halberstam its Arcus/Places Prize in 2018 for innovative public scholarship on the relationship between gender, sexuality, and the built environment.