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Michelle Moyd
Indiana University

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Life, When It's All Ruin

Michelle Moyd

I. Immersion

There were times during the pandemic that I allowed myself to feel.

I had feelings, of course. Lots of them. So much rage. Dismay. Disappointment, too, in a society hell-bent on destroying and discarding the lives of Black people, Indigenous people, poor people, queer and trans people, immigrants, disabled people. So much fear and worry for distant relatives, elderly neighbors, immuno-compromised friends. So much self-directed anger at my belated recognition, once again, that I too am just a worker. Given my job security as a tenured professor, I had rarely thought about its potential precarity. The prospect of the pandemic destroying universities, my job thereby becoming an unnecessary luxury, descended upon me in a new way, surpassing any of the other times I had considered the inconceivable. I too can lose my job. What if I lose my job? If I do, I will become a different kind of worker. What would I do? What could I do? How can I care if I don't have care?

Fleeting, beyond those feelings, I sometimes let myself feel wonder.

One of these pandemic moments replays in my mind. A touchstone, a glimpse of beauty and possibility enabled by the specific dark coziness of that day early in the pandemic. In my mind, the moment evokes cinema. In real digital life, it's a still photo. My daughter twirls on the dining room hardwood, holding her precious well-loved blankie loosely in her hand. She twirls. I watch her from the kitchen, entranced. She is barefoot, looking down, lithe, elegant, the ratty heirloom blanket following her, flowing. Her flowered fuchsia leggings are paired with a white long-sleeved t-shirt emblazoned with a sparkly gold and pink unicorn. She loves pink.

I post the photo on Facebook, and my dancer-dance critic-anthropologist friend remarks that she, my daughter, could be a youthful Judith Jamison. She says the image is healing. I think so too.

I am in my kitchen, preparing fresh food purchased from the upstart new farmer's market in town, the People's Cooperative Market.¹⁵⁰ The city's long-standing market couldn't figure out how to dislodge a white nationalist from its midst. It's a long story, but also the same story that one might

¹⁵⁰ Ellen Wu, "Ethos of New People's Market Focuses on Food Justice, Mutual Aid," *Limestone Post*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.limestonepostmagazine.com/peoples-market-ethos-focuses-on-food-justice-mutual-aid/>; Ellen Wu, "Bloomington 2019: 'The Year of the Farmers' Market Controversy,'" *Limestone Post*, Dec. 20, 2019, <https://www.limestonepostmagazine.com/bloomington-2019-year-of-farmers-market-controversy/>.

find in any number of predominantly white, liberal midwestern college towns. The People's Cooperative Market is the counternarrative and antidote, and preparing food purchased from its vendors makes me feel like I'm doing something right.

While preparing food, I listen to music. Not just through my earbuds while walking our dog, but through a speaker, in the kitchen, for all of us to hear. I don't do this often enough, I say to myself. Because if I did, I would have to feel and acknowledge the wonder of immersion in the sounds, the lyrics, the grooves. And someone might see my immersion and ask me about it. Can't have that. I'm too busy being stoic, or angry, or sad. I resist joy.

Still, occasionally, I treat myself to the immersion. I treat myself to feeling more than my poker face gives.

My daughter immerses herself too, dancing. Or maybe I just remember her dancing. Maybe she was just spinning around for fun, playing with music. I recognize that we are both moved by the music. I share.

II. Life

The soundtrack is Frank Ocean's "Pink and White."¹⁵¹ On repeat in my own small world, on headphones, it haunted, comforted, moved me for reasons I still can't fully explain. After countless listens, it is a song that sends me into myself, nostalgic, feeling loss but also the warmth of beloved memories.

A short violin flurry, a flourish, introduces the song. Then, simple piano chords and their punctuating repeat, lilting, building, receding. The bass line is regular, but also produces a playful feel, like a child skipping, ambling. Or ocean waves lapping.

The lyrics come in.

That's the way every day goes, every time we've no control. If the sky is pink and white. If the ground is black and yellow. It's the same way you showed me.

Ocean's poetry evokes a strange skyscape (pink and white), a believable landscape (black and yellow).

"It's the same way you showed me." An incantation throughout the song that on this day tells me we will be alright.

Another two verses follow, gestures, north-south geographies, atmosphere, and an unequivocal statement about love, trust, and support during disaster.

*The way it is, we're on land
So I'm someone to hold true*

¹⁵¹ Frank Ocean, "Pink + White," *Blonde*, Apple Music, 2016, audio file, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzS3WG6__G4.

*Keep you cool in this good life
Won't let you down when it's all ruined*

And then, a bittersweet chorus.

You showed me love, glory from above, regard my dear, it's all downhill from here.

Ocean's song names love from another time, love lost, as well as care that taught lessons, showed glory, kept him alive. Perhaps not maternal love, but this may be why the song gets into my fearful soul during that uncertain time.

III. In the wake of a hurricane

*In the wake of a hurricane
Dark skin of a summer shade
Nosedive in the flood lines
Tall tower of milk crates
It's the same way you showed me
Cannonball off the porch side
Older kids trying off the roof
It's the same way you showed me¹⁵²*

The sound is ethereal, the lyrics recalling children's play and swimming pools. The steady bass line and recurring piano accents push the song along, insistent. A strumming guitar comes in, breezily, and the song takes on a new feel, lightness, movement.

At the end, the multi-tracked background voice of Beyoncé sings "take it easy," lifting, soaring, taking the song ever skyward. If the sky is pink and white.

Remember life, remember how it was...

The final lines of the song shout out to friends, family, cigarettes, transgressions, tragedy, commodity. Immersion in nostalgia for an ominous time, but still a time of connection. Fond memories backlit by menace.

"Bitch, I might like immortality," Ocean sings, and I raise my eyebrows, nod, smile.

IV. When it's all ruin

I made this memory at the start of the pandemic lockdown. I looked up the date of the memory, and I was surprised to learn that it hadn't happened later in the summer or fall. From my current vantage point, it already felt like a much older memory. Technically, it was spring, but the cold temperatures and dreary rain suggested winter hanging on interminably. Fueled by many sources, my

¹⁵² In a 2012 interview, Ocean described a childhood memory of the aftermath of flooding in New Orleans using nearly the exact same language and imagery. See Matthew Trammell, "Soul Caliber: Frank Ocean," *Wax Poetics*, 50 (Winter 2012): 82.

multidimensional anger permitted little space for feeling otherwise. A few months later, I would write about the cruel system that refuses to care for people in a time of emergency long in the making, urgent in its deadliness. I would write about the cruelty and selfishness that animates a significant portion of this country's population. I would speak to administrators, colleagues, and family about the cruelty of expecting productivity in a time of ruin.¹⁵³

It didn't matter.

I had to work, my partner had to work, and we cared for our child at home while working.

For a time, this felt like the worst thing. But in truth, the worst things never touched us. We had jobs. We didn't have to worry about how to care for our child. How to keep her safe from the unending dangers afoot in the United States in 2020. We worried anyway.

Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor had already been murdered, though most of us didn't know it yet. George Floyd and Dreasjon Reed were still alive. So many others were still alive.

Over the next few months, the worst things happened to so many people. Hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands died of COVID-19. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets to protest the police murders of Taylor, Floyd, Reed, and others. Thousands were arrested, brutalized, gassed, harassed for protesting. We watched *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country* and saw the horrors of history on new filmscapes, with new eyes.

Frank Ocean grew up and lived in New Orleans until Hurricane Katrina disrupted his life as a college student and destroyed his recording studio. "Pink and White" recalls a time before disaster, as well as survival in its aftermath.¹⁵⁴ When he sings "in the wake of a hurricane," listeners glimpse possibilities beyond the catastrophe. Nostalgia shades his poetry, warming me, just as the sun warms the youthful inhabitants of his lyrics.

V. Pink and White

Over a year later, memories of survival, domestic closeness, and simple truths learned during a year of unacknowledged grief intermingle with the current fantasy of the catastrophe's end. My daughter still loves her blanket. It was once white, once my underused baby blanket, stored lovingly in my parents' attic until my daughter was born, then passed along as an heirloom. Now it is gray with the years of my daughter's fierce love and laundering. Gray like much of my hair. Gray like the rain that day.

She still loves pink despite my past futile efforts to stop her from loving pink. I refused pink for her as an infant, and now it's all she wants. My feminism includes pink now.

¹⁵³ Michelle Moyd, "You Need Devotion: A Syllabus," Digital Feminist Collective blog, Sept. 8, 2020, <https://digitalfeministcollective.net/index.php/2020/08/28/you-need-devotion-a-syllabus/>

¹⁵⁴ About Hurricane Katrina, Ocean told an interviewer, "I can't credit it with too much. I can credit it with being the reason I moved to L.A. Ultimately, the reason I'm successful might be attributed to Katrina. I don't think I would have moved if it hadn't been for that storm, and I don't think I'd have been successful if I'd stayed in New Orleans." See Trammell, "Soul Caliber," 82.

Her favorite color and her beloved blanket, Frank Ocean's poetry. More than a year later, I still love "Pink and White." I still hear the catastrophe, the recovery, the potential in the song, and that allows me to see it in our lives. The memory of that day, my daughter twirling, the care of preparing food, the beginning of a new visceral experience of care in its many dimensions, as work, as life. In "Pink and White," I feel it all.

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I dedicate this essay to recently deceased family and friends: Ada Moyd, James A. Wilson, Jr. Denise E. Brown, and Theodore Douglas Wilson. And to my parents Henry Louis Moyd and Heather Ann Moyd for their uncommon strength, and for teaching me to feel through music.

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