March 16, 2021

In Memory of

Massage Parlor Outreach Project

按摩工人互助小组
We gather today on the unceded ancestral lands of the Duwamish and Coast Salish people. We acknowledge the historical and ongoing violence of colonialism and global imperialism towards the Indigenous peoples of this land and stand by their fight for sovereignty.

In remembrance of the eight lives lost on March 16, 2021, as well as other migrant massage parlor workers who died away from their homelands, victims of gendered colonial violence, white supremacy, and misogyny.
Program

Music Opening

"Eight"
Josh Hou - accordion
Leanna Keith - flute
Tai Taitano - drums

MPOP Statement

MPOP Worker Statements

MPOP Tributes
Song Yang 宋扬，age 38

[3.16.2021, Atlanta]
Park Soon Chung 박순정, age 74
Kim Hyun Jung Grant 김현정, age 51
Kim Sun Cha 김순자, age 69
Yoo Yong Ae 유용애, age 63
Tan Xiaojie 谭小洁, age 49
Feng Daoyou 冯道友, age 44
Delaina Ashley Yaun, age 33
Paul Andre Michels, age 54

[1.24.2022, Albuquerque]
Fang Sihui 方思慧, age 45

[2.15.2022, Albuquerque]
Mary Ye, age 55
MPOP organizes to build solidarity and safety among massage parlor workers in the face of gendered and racialized violence, classism, global imperialism, and criminalization. As such, we want to name White Supremacy as the root of violence that led to the Atlanta shootings. As we fight against racialized violence towards Asian communities, we simultaneously fight for Black liberation and Indigenous sovereignty.

In response to state and systemic violence, we build safety through community care, making sure that everyone has access to basic needs like food, shelter, health, and mental health care. Comparatively, the relentless sweeps of our houseless neighbors exacerbate individual and collective trauma and resource deprivation. Increased police presence and criminalization will not create the safety that we need.

We know that police presence is not only unreliable and ineffective, but actively harms those in our community with sex worker and massage parlor raids, encampment sweeps, and the criminalization and deportation of Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

Let us find safety and liberation through solidarity with each other as we fight against violence and oppression, and as we mourn the lives of those we’ve lost.
From Amy:

Time flies by so fast. It’s now approaching the first anniversary of the Atlanta spa shooting. The hearts of Chinese in the United States are bleeding. We are all in deep empathy.

Whose daughter, whose lover, and whose mother was she? How her loved ones have been grieving for a year, how they have been spending their days, how they have been suffering every day, and their hearts must have been broken! What is wrong with this world? Why is it so cruel to a person who works hard to make a living? Women working in massage parlors are great and worthy of admiration for their hard work and their willingness to provide for their families. No matter what industry they are in, no one has the right to deprive others of their lives, and those who do so must be severely punished!

There are also two recent cases in New Mexico. Why do vicious criminals kill the unarmed and those who are vulnerable? As I’m writing, snow falls from Seattle’s clear sky. The sky is crying.

May there be no pain, no fear, no tears in heaven!
May the living be well. Let’s cherish the moment.
From Coco:

A year ago, in Atlanta, several of our fellow citizens were murdered, and they lost their lives because they worked hard and were diligent. However, will the killers get the punishment they deserve? No one knows. They know our demands, they know our hopes, and they turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to our cries. They advocate for democracy while colonizing others, they want freedom while taking away the lives of others, they uphold the laws, yet the crimes are selectively unpunished, and the equality and justice we want are selectively ignored. They preach human rights, justice, equality, but blatantly condone racial discrimination, and they are hypocritical and unscrupulous.

We breathe the air of fear and anger, and they are indifferent. What they give us is always a blank check that cannot be cashed. Almost 60 years later, Martin Luther King's sorrow continues, and the seeds of racial discrimination are still growing. It all stems from their ignorance and irresponsibility. We wish they could truly fulfill their promise that all men are created equal, without discrimination and without killing. However, in the face of reality, our thoughts are just wishful thinking. Friends and compatriots, we should give up the illusion of those promises, and put our anger and efforts in fighting. Kindness should be first and foremost the ability to protect oneself, rather than be seen as weakness.
3.16.2021
By Diana Xin

When a stone plunged
to the water sinks,
the water swallows it, silent,
but the surface is disturbed.

In the wake of your absence...
Fear ripples out...
Rage ripples out...
Encircles us, ring after ring, after

Is it possible to mourn you when we did not know you?
Is it possible to grieve with those who did know you?
Is it possible to know anyone, each life as vast as the ocean?

Too easy to reduce a person to their last struggle,
To their last smile captured on camera.

We did not know you but we honor the depth of your stories.
We send our thoughts and prayers to those who hold them now.
We did not know you, but let your fear and rage suffuse us,
make use of us.

We did not know you but we know this land has failed you,
that we have failed you.
Hall of Nine Goddesses
By Shuxuan Zhou

*In Chinese stories passed down through generations, women who passed away — the poor, the compassionate, and the resistant — were remembered and transformed by those who worshipped them. Because of the living persons’ blessings, these women became immortal, and their different lived experiences transformed into their unique divine power, with which they could continue caring for the underdogs and resisting the powerful.*

*Song Yang, Tan Xiaojie, and Feng Daoyou became the new members of the Hall of Nine Goddesses on November 25, 2017, and March 16, 2021.*

你纵身一跃，便羽化登仙。[i]  

Pink hearts, warm sun,  
float your spirit up the clouds.  
40th Road, 15 months,  
box your ashes in a red cloth.  

You squeeze mama’s shoulder  
and let her tears wet your chest.  
You open didi’s fists  
and stroke his fingers in circles.  

“回家吧[ii]  
不要担心，我很好。”  
saying it, the last of a thousand times.

*Three sticks of incense,  
palms and eyes closed, food fingers touching my nose.*

Will you shelter me from the ocean’s anger?

Between two lands, I flowed through an island.  
When blue water mist blew on my face, I knew  
Ma Zu would protect me, as well as you.

Will you protect my child's health?

I, too, pray for my nephew,  
whom I shipped milk formula and chocolates to, in front of  
Xian Fu Ren on the opposite side of the hall.

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[i] You leap forward, becoming immortal.  
[ii] “Go home. No worries. I’m doing well.”  
[iii] You take root, nurturing the surrounded.
I will
give you power when the powerful pour gasoline over your dream,
give you clarity when the crafty drop bloody blades in your purse.

I too can, 
only if you pray :)

cook the malevolent with potato noodles and cabbage.

你落地生根，遂润泽一方.[iii]

Osmanthus sapling, peony seeds, 
perfume you heretofore in red clay. 
7 days, 14 hours, 
farewell your destiny with neon lights.

You forgive white men’s oration, pitying your ceased Asian-style American dream. 
You duet with a sister’s recollection, praising your courage of breaking imprisonment of the past.

“努力吧，
掌握自己的命运。”[iv]
letting go of your mantra, the first of a lifetime.

Three sticks of incense, 
palms and eyes closed, food fingers touching my nose.

Will you treat my chronic illness?

I am also a mastermind in business but 
Zhang Yu Gu is niche marketing her medication for your invocation.

Will you alleviate the drought?

My colleague, together with whom I eye-roll the cult of marriage, 
He Xian Gu pours soaking rains.

I will
nurture your floating roots once you stay and sprout, 
nurture connections amid isolation and competition.

I too can, 
only if you pray :) 

break snail shells of distrust and extend your heart out with spicy rice noodles.
你遗世独立，即幻化成仙。[v]

Absent paper, stony face,
seek your identity for the legal process.
30 years, 8000 miles,
trace your story from village to city, from home to overseas.

You frown at the enlarged, cropped selfie,
and the one hundred strangers at your funeral.
You tore up newspapers inked with lies:
“sex addiction” … “eliminated” … “friendly and quiet” …

“安息吧，
你的人生是珍贵的。”[vi]
embracing a stranger’s praise, the first of a thousand in your afterlife.

Three sticks of incense,
Palms and eyes closed, food fingers touching my nose.

Will you answer my questions about the future?

We both came from the subaltern,
transformed into immortals by collective compassion.
Zi Gu guides your decision with a strainer and a broom in a latrine.

Will you bless my regime’s prosperity?

Neither country viewed me as more than a nail in the machine of the capital,
I refuse to labor for any to rule.
Wei Hua Cun blessed yet lost faith in politicians,
now she focuses on sending out health & peace.

I will

protect you from vanishing when others spit on your meaning
protect you from drowning when others spill their suffering

I too can,
only if you pray :)

burn the palace of borders to steam rice noodle rolls.

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[v] You step out, transforming into a fairytale.
[vi] “Rest in peace. Your life is precious.”
Spell for the Living

written in conversation with Amy and Coco’s workers’ statements

By Ching-In Chen

for you who raised your hands
each morning to clear
each ache

we remember
you too now
who offered candy
sticky light to visitors /
paper dissolving in our mouths
as we asked how you unwrapped
our new year

for you who stay
on your feet waiting
for bell signaling newcomer
through threshold

we remember
you too now / bringing
our small gifts and gossips
hoping to catch small
morning breaths

for you who wanted more honey from clear sky
did you dream of fish / to be pinned by sky’s limit
we remember
you too now / lit
by your own lantern
floating in your own sea of dreams

i’m dreaming of two
smoky ducks learning / to swim with oranges
i wonder who and what
you carried over water / who
into mornings remained
overflowing with plenty
of blossom to share
A Tribute to Feng Daoyou,
Victim of the 2021 Atlanta Massacre
By JM Wong


Rest in peace.

***

If I had asked, “家鄉在哪裡?” (“Where is your hometown?”), what might she have said?

She might have said she was from a small village in Guangdong province, a Southern coastal region and known colloquially as “the factory of the world.” She might have shared about her youthful departure from home, to experience city lights and adventures instead of a lifetime of marriage and womanly duties in the village. She might have shared, too, that she dove headfirst to Shenzhen, the Pearl River Delta, the earliest special economic zone in China, to work in the many factories dotting the region as an assembly line and garment worker.

She might have added that she found her way up North, to arrive in Shanghai, attending cosmetology school. Along the way, she met a sister, who laid out the workings of parlors in New York. It takes a particular concoction of fantasy and realism to imagine a meaningful life that is also fixated on non-negotiable, time-draining goals – of making enough money to build a home for an ailing mother, no less, one massage at a time. Tales from New York, Los Angeles, laden with the centuries-long legacy of Gold Mountain, western decadence and wealth, would rightly conjure that imagination. And so, she arrived.

I lie.

She wouldn’t have shared that many details, not in our first encounter. She could have said,

I’m from Guangdong province.”
“To which, Shuxuan, my outreach team partner, would have asked, oh, did you arrive in Atlanta from Guangdong?

She might have added then, “No, I went to L.A. and then to New York.”

To which, I might have followed with, oh, what made you decide to leave those cities?

Depending on the moment when we interrupted her workday, she may or may not have responded.

If her hands were oily and slathered, palms held upright, away from the body, taking care not to stain her clothes or furniture while she leaned her body with one side on the door frame and a slippered foot on the other, pushing against the door to stop it from closing, she might have quipped,

“小妹, 我现在有客人呀。你当会儿再来吧，OK? 谢谢喔。Bye bye.” (My dear, I have customers now. Come back later, OK? Thank you. Bye bye)

*

The day the shootings took place, March 16, 2021, I received a text from Chandan, “Dear, did you hear?”

It took me a moment, in my post-vaccine drowsiness, to pull up the live reports of a gunman on the rampage to deal with his sex addiction by eliminating the guilty seducers, who were full of vice and lies, and also Asian. He was having a “bad day” and took eight lives before the day was over.

I found myself at Shuxuan’s house, a bowl of hot soup cupped in my hands. I am not a massage parlor worker, nor a rural migrant from inland China who had left everything she knew to come to this continent. I am an immigrant, a nurse just off work, freshly vaccinated, unable to decipher where the fatigue of vaccine side effects ended and where the weight of tragedy began. Seeking solace with a friend who mourns and also might know how it feels to live with the tug of homeland and the fear of a lonely distant death.
For days, no one knew her name. Coco, was what her customers knew her by. Coco, as in Coco Lee 李纹, the beautiful, sultry, Taiwanese Canadian singer who sang “A Love Before Time,” in Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon, known for her bilingual ballads belting high notes in smooth English with no accent to betray her roots.

Or, Coco, the title of Pixar’s newish animation movie that hit the Chinese box office by storm. Who knew that the film centering Indigenous and Mexican cultural themes--of eternal bonds between family members that transcend death--would resonate so strongly with traditional Chinese norms of family, belonging and legacies. Coco.

Coco, whose real name we did not know for seven days. Anonymity as a mechanism for traipsing through oceans and cities, and many places far from home. Home, as distinct from places. Places connected to home only through the phone’s call logs and old text messages, a thin thread of metaverses dug through by strangers seeking an origin, a name, a family to notify. Solid bonds that exist in virtual form, undetectable to the uninitiated. Her body laid in a morgue while Chinese social media frantically searched for a connection, in the current life, across the continents, for a name, a home, a household, a lineage, a tangible physicality.

It was many WeChat searches later, that her name was revealed. Feng Daoyou. And more WeChat messages later, a brother was identified as kin.

*

“Can you tell me where we are?”

I recall the small talk that took a turn with the Chinese masseuse who rubbed soap suds into my back, vigorously exfoliating dead skin cells. Me, half asleep, settling into the ease of relaxed muscles soothed by warm water.

She whispered in our mother tongue, a language unfamiliar to the Korean masseuses and customers around us, speaking stealthily in our seemingly private code.
How does one respond? What did she not know of where she was? The exact cross streets? The city? The state? But, why did she not know her whereabouts?

I fumbled with a list of cardinal directions – we are at the northwest of the United States, bordering the south of Vancouver Canada, west of China, sharing the same latitude as Harbin, China, south of Seattle, west of I-5... There are many places that any location, much less a massage parlor studded in the suburbs of an American city, inhabit.

Anonymity is a circular, self-fulfilling process – one is anonymous to, and made anonymous – for a particular kind of survival seeking continent traipsing.

*  

“I’m from Guangdong. I have been to L.A. and New York. Here in Atlanta.”

I would have tried to make small talk, asking, how do you think the east coast compares to the west coast?

But in my mind, I understand. This country is many places, not a home. The land of the Tongva, the Lenape, and the Cherokee, overlaid with suburbs and freeways, are relevant for her, today, most prominently in the remittances they allow one to send back and to save up. One is not making home here, and details are mostly irrelevant.

There is home, and then there are places.

*
We say often that a fallen leaf returns to the root, marking a tribute to lands that once nourished us, recycled into a circuit that will birth new life. Our bones once fortified by the calcium of the water and food break down; the protein masses decompose into nitrates in the soil; carbon released into the air, cycled, churned to be inhaled and absorbed. There is a particular sentimentality in the longing for a return to the origins. Evolution has wired these traits into salmon, known to spawn in their birthplaces after a long struggle upstream, where they then die, the ultimate price to pay for a homecoming. For humans, evolution is ingrained in language and passed off as culture, left to withstand the changing landscapes of history and capital. Who gets to die at their place of origin is a navigation of history, of capital, of gender: forces beyond our biology.

Sustaining life in the afterlife in an unconscious surrender, allowing nature to take her course on our bodies. Sustaining life in the present life is a choice conducted with a relative level of agency, even if obligatory.

Filial piety is the measure of commitment to sustaining life as a Chinese daughter. It is to make the family a centerpiece and offer your joy, stature, comfort, reputation to its sustenance. Coco, Feng Daoyou, played her part by remitting $46K of her savings, acquired one massage at a time, to the family’s new home for her elderly mother to live in.

The circuit of capital smoothly cycling American greenbacks into Chinese RMB, accumulated through a body expended in labor, one massage at a time, moves with ease. Meanwhile, a body lifeless and limp, expended in labor, targeted in essence, terminated of breath, struggles to complete its circuit back home.

Coco, the newish Pixar movie with Mexican and Indigenous themes of family and belonging into the afterlife, hit the Chinese box office. Who knew that realizing such exalted values would be so arduous.
Coco, Feng Daoyou, of Atlanta’s massage parlor shooting, unable to be buried in her village because she was unmarried. There is no place for unmarried women in the old village home. Home is an origin, not merely a place, and for those who are unbetrothed, not a root welcoming return.

Coco, Feng Daoyou's funeral was held in Atlanta where she was cremated. Her ashes in a pink urn. Her funeral was attended by kind strangers who had encountered her merely as a name, post mortem. She was new to Atlanta, having just arrived from New York, or LA.

The body laments how the cycle of capital accumulated through expended bodies move, with more ease and comfort, than the body itself.

* 

In her last conversation with her brother, Feng Daokun, he recalls that she wanted him to buy fresh flowers for 清明节, the yearly Tomb Sweeping Festival. She wanted to celebrate a day to honor lineage, ancestry, connection. In the service of the future, in the service of hope, stability, and health.

Our past is woven into how we imagine the future, lineages that even transpacific crossings cannot sever.

Ancestors command tribute. Ancestors once known become unknown, as bearers of the past. You can’t scold an ancestor, or a spirit. You can only acknowledge, flatter, or appease them. Being a bearer of the past affords one some power and dignity and respect.
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