What a Home Looks Like

"The first generation thinks about survival; the ones that follow tell the stories. I often try to weave the details of my parents' lives into a narrative. The things around them were like the raw materials for American identities, and they foraged as far as their car or the subway line could take them."— Hua Hsu, My Dad and Kurt Cobain

As a second generation Taiwanese immigrant, my New American experience is akin to grieving a version of my life that never existed, while still trying to simulate it the best I can in a seemingly parallel universe. My family was poor, with no stable home until I was thirteen. I did not feel a sense of place in America and there were no trips back to our heritage country growing up. Any nostalgia that I felt for Taiwan was second hand, borrowed from my mother's tales of her childhood and the experiences she recreated for me. The earliest memory I have of simulating my "Taiwanese" childhood was when I was six years old, witnessing my first snowfall in Michigan. My mother and I had just fled from my abusive father's house in California and were fortunate enough to seek temporary refuge in the basement of my Aunt's home in Michigan. Outside, fluffy, white snowflakes gently descended from the sky onto the earth's ground. It was the first moment of peace and calm. All I had ever known before was the violence and rage of my father. Deep in my recollections, my thoughts were interrupted by my mother's voice:

"Let's eat *tsua bing*."

My mother handed me a ceramic bowl and instructed me to scoop a generous amount of snow with it. At my aunt's kitchen table, my mother aligned an array of sweet condiments. She topped the mound of snow in my bowl with a dollop of sweet red bean paste, a spoonful of peanut soup and a drizzle of condensed milk. It was on this day that I first experienced the delightful taste of *tsua bing*. "It must snow a lot in Taiwan", I thought, imagining my mother as a child crouched in snow at least a foot high, making *tsua bing* from the "snowy" land of Taiwan. This imaginary memory I constructed about my mother's childhood gave me a sense of place for my mother's "home" I had never been to, and for just an instant, I felt like I knew what "home" was.

Physician and scholar, Esther Sternberg, writes in her book, *Healing Spaces*: "There is [an] essential ingredient in the formation of an image of a place, and this ingredient is memory…If you couldn't remember all of those sensations and locations, you wouldn't know where you came from or where you were heading. There are…many different kinds of memory processes that help us to integrate bits and pieces of the

outside world into specific images within our head- places we carry around with us wherever we go."

Seventeen years after that snowy day in Michigan, I was awarded two separate research fellowships to conduct research in Taiwan. I found myself wandering the street markets of my heritage country for the first time. In sweltering heat, drenched in subtropical sweat, with absolutely no snow in sight, I watched as Aunties and Uncles manned stalls and pushed carts around on the streets calling out the food items they were selling. I was drawn to the food stalls that called out familiar words.

"*Tsua bing*!"

A woman cranked a large ice cube in a machine and freshly shaved ice descended into a bowl like snow. She topped it with a dollop of sweet red bean paste, a spoonful of peanut soup, and drizzled it with condensed milk.

I always thought that going back "home" to Taiwan would allow me to feel a sense of belonging somewhere- a feeling that had not always been present for me in America. Instead, a bowl of Taiwanese shaved ice was forcing me to confront two decades worth of fiction I had written based on borrowed memories from my mother in my attempt to compensate for lost time. I felt silly. Of course I knew there was no snow in Taiwan, but I could not help but feel disappointed that the reality was so different from the fiction I romanticized and carried with me everywhere I went. Yet another reminder that I had been living in my own simulation. Sternberg's words resonated with me- I did not know where I came from, and I also did not know where I was heading.

Many children of diaspora often find their way back "home" through the familiar tastes of food of their heritage country. In Gabby Widjaja's beautifully designed cookbook, *Have You Eaten Yet?*, she uses food as a medium for cultural literacy: "Although broken Chinese cuts my mouth like glass, the taste of home always heals the wounds." For many of us, "home" is a taste or a feeling, not a place. These feelings have been the driving force of the decisions that have led me to where I am today.

I am a furniture fabricator and architectural designer by education. For the majority of adolescent years, my family lived with housing uncertainty, moving from state-to-state and county-to-county. Though I have spent time in a career that furnishes and builds homes, I have previously never understood the concept of "home" as a physical place. I naturally became drawn to these professions as it gave me the agency

to imagine new physical worlds- ones where I belonged and existed in. No seat at the table? No worries, I can make it. Not welcome at the table? That's fine, I can make the table too.

In Taiwan, my Fulbright research advisor, Kuei-Mei Liang, once told me: "Traditions are like a house. They give you foundation and structure. They make up the identity of the people within a culture and you cannot evolve a culture without knowing its history." Overtime, I have come to terms with belonging in multiple places at once. It is possible to have a foundation that exists across the world, and erect a mobile structure that stays and evolves with me wherever I go. Even though the path is not direct, every simulation, every discovery of the truth, is one step closer towards building a home.