Being American means that I was educated in a system of American moral and cultural values and that I was instilled with an American conception of history and progress. I ingested all of this along with American food and American television. I speak American and I live an American life. In spite of all of this, I do not consider myself to be all-American and I do not feel a strong connection to my homeland. In fact, I
often feel homeless in my homeland. When I try to understand and explain this homelessness and locate myself and my position as an American intellectual, I find that my identity is incommunicable beyond this brief description. It seems that there is something about being American that undermines any attempt to verbalize what this really means in any specificity. Moreover, it seems that America as a concept is taken for granted. America was founded on a set of ideas, ideals, and desires that are always within reach, yet never realized. America is always, never yet what it is, or what it could be. The never-ending perfection of the union is at the heart of the American project. It seems I have trouble speaking of an American essence because America, has never yet really existed.

I will attempt to speak of American culture, which is a composite of many cultures that can be traced back to other places. Through the transition, or the move to America, these cultures become something else, they loose their shape and scope, they become empty shells of culture. However, the traces left serve as place markers. These traces of culture actually point to something no longer existent, but in this American non-culture, these factors become the means of social division. These differences have always been perpetuated by government and have become a main focus in the media.
American society is separated into easily identifiable and ingestible portions for the purposes of linguistic and political control.

The language used to speak or write of American culture has become a popular and accessible compendium of empty words or images, which are readily available in many media. But even as a simulacrum of culture and identity, America must be spoken of in this empty and simulated language, which is politically correct and historically accurate, and which all the while takes into account contradiction upon contradiction. Before even opening my mouth to speak about American culture, a process of inner reflection and self-doubt, which is monitored by the cultural and linguistic controls mentioned above, takes my country away and thus leaves me homeless. This is nothing new, because at base America, and here I refer specifically to the United States of America, is essentially a homeless and a rootless culture.
HOMELESS HOMELAND

America is a land of displaced people who have never been a product of the land that they call their own. But of course, the land has shaped the Americans, but only in so much as they have shaped it. Instead of being of the land, Americans have prided themselves on taming the Promised Land, conquering it, and in a reversal of genesis, making the land in their image, in some senses literally, such as by blasting the faces of our founding fathers into the sacred Black Hills of the Lakota. This cultivation and alteration of the land was a way to forge and proclaim a cultural identity in an attempt to evade the fact that the United States of America is empty and void of any indigenous culture. Because there is no valid primordial myth to root the people who call themselves Americans, the expansiveness, the vastness, the beauty and purity of the landscape have in some way come to be considered the basic characteristics of an American culture and its way of life. The natural diversity of the continental United States is a metaphorical representation of the heterogeneity of America, its abundance, and the productiveness of the American Spirit. Its vastness: a symbol of the unlimited possibilities inherent in the American experience. Its sublimity points to the vision of the good American, the world’s peace broker, and the underlying god-fearing spirit of this Puritan nation. The fact that we identify
with a landscape that has never been our own, one that has always been a land of escape and displacement, has over time only revealed and exploited the fact that the cultivation of the land has not necessarily led to a cultivation of a viable way of life. We Americans have done everything in our power to prove our importance, our dominance, our place and our control over the vast landscape, from colonization to Manifest Destiny up to the present day.

The obliteration of the indigenous people of the continent, which began with the arrival of the Pilgrims, was carried out in order to single-handedly and solely usurp the land and the immediate environment, to adapt and become of it, in order to have a place and cultivate a singular cultural identity matched to the landscape. For, this reason American colonization was never an assimilative project. Americans began to speak of the land as if it were their own; they created primordial ancestors to connect themselves to it and to give meaning to their identity, and they began to shape the land in ways that made manifest their civilizatory power. Slowly, over time, the vastness, expansiveness and sublimity of the landscape has been voided of its majestic potentiality. The identity derived from a landscape that is slowly being destroyed and consumed is itself under the threat of disappearance.

A culture of displacement is a culture of destruction and self-destruction.
American cultural identity and the American way of life have always been questionable and constructed categories, but now they have become blatantly imaginary; collectively kept alive through the repetition of empty slogans. This American litany is recited through the description of life in commercial advertisement and political propaganda. American culture is one that specializes in and relies on images and image making as a means to
claim that it exists. Life is lived according to the idea of life that is sold to those attempting to cover up their emptiness. There is an incessant filling up of empty space, there is never a silent moment, there is always something new. Popular culture and fragments of the Puritan aesthetic have been used to cover the cultural and spiritual void in America. Americans have collectively maintained an image of America that has been put forth through time as an idealistic near utopia of cultural understanding, progress and most importantly, moral goodness. However, due to a lack of vigilance and a collective complacency resulting from the comforts of the American way of life, along with a general lack of education and with this a loss of the ability to think deeply and critically, Americans have lost a sense of what America really has become: a dangerous non-place that acts in the world like a restless and militaristic poltergeist. It is an invisible and, perhaps, non-existent entity—a phantom—that has a considerable effect on the material world.

So, why is Americanization so pervasive if America is rootless and in effect empty of culture? What sets America apart as place of cultural production? Homelessness and displacement? The world has become small and accessible through technology, people can move so easily from place to place and home is no longer defined by one’s place of birth, but instead by
wherever one feels the feeling of being at home. The search for a homeland has always been a fundamental starting point of cultures everywhere: displacement and a loss of origins are main components of the human condition and the catalyst for cultural development. Civilization is a rejection of homelessness. But, it seems that America epitomizes this homelessness, as well as the universal cultural and historical void which results from centuries of exploration and conquest, the absence of a sense of spiritual origins, a loss of language, an incessant filling up and shrouding of emptiness. Taking this into account, Americanization then is not a process of acculturation or cultivation; it is not a spreading of culture, but instead of non-culture. And this lack of depth and nothingness is what makes Americanization so easy to assimilate and this is also what makes it so dangerous.

**AMERICAN EMPTINESS**

I have attempted to speak of American culture, but instead I have been speaking of its emptiness of culture. This emptiness is not unique to America, but it is through the constant struggle against it in many senses; in the shaping of the landscape and history, the culture, the religion, the mentality of America, that this emptiness has come to be the central, or
perhaps the only honest aspect of being American. An example of this emptiness can be seen in the fact that Americans have always looked towards the heartland or “Middle America” as the source of its moral values and cultural way of life. “Middle America” is equated with a preeminent moral landscape that permeates the American psyche. Even though the majority of Americans do not live in the comparatively sparsely populated heartland—the Midwest plains inhabited by organized rows of corn and soy—it has always been considered representative of what it means to be American. However, it has never been a place of cultural production, but of agriculture. It is not known to be populous, but deserted. It is from this culturally vacant, yet expansive agricultural heartland that the American masses assume a mythic narrative of empty All-American moral and cultural values.

To be all-American seems to imply middle class economic status, a sense of fervent patriotism, a belief in the American Dream, a healthful habit of hard work and just enough education. But this is a propagandistic oversimplification that allows for many races, many belief systems and many cultures to disappear when they do not meet the above criteria. Deeper examinations of American culture often fall into the oblivion, either of ignorance or aporia. One often recovers from this speechlessness by naming
typical American institutions and cultural constructions as representations of culture. Where does one begin? Where can one begin? Is it McDonalds? Is it the Pilgrims, Thanksgiving and Puritanism? Is it the dollar and all of its Masonic symbolism? Is it the landscape from sea to shining sea? All of these things are epitomizations of an emptiness that permeates America, which is then covered up and shrouded in an attempt to control and reverse this emptiness. McDonald’s, often seen as the symbol of Americanization, a temple of empty calories, a place where one overeats and leaves hungrier than before. The dollar, the symbol of wealth, power and permanency, is just a piece of paper, backed by nothing, its symbols emptied by time. Thanksgiving, a holiday of overconsumption and of giving thanks for the ability to do so, was originally intended to honor the Indians that helped the Pilgrims survive the first winter by sharing their wisdom of the land and survival, and who were subsequently killed in a systematic genocide, or were euphemistically displaced, by those same Pilgrims and their descendants. This act of giving thanks, and general Puritanical graciousness, is made void by this hypocrisy.
AMERICAN NON-BEING

So, is there such a thing as an American Emptiness? Is this what sets America apart? When looking deeper into the meaning of emptiness, I realize that this cannot be used to describe the non-culture of America. The concept emptiness can be traced to the Sanskrit term Ṣūnyatā, which is the state arising from the realization of the impermanent nature of form and the fact that nothing can be ascribed a concrete identity, or “self.” A state of Ṣūnyatā, or emptiness and nothingness, acknowledges the constant flux and
movement of the universe and the interconnectedness of everything in it. Therefore, in this conceptual context emptiness is impermanence, it is also non-attachment and non-obstruction, it is everything unrelated to the “self”. American culture, with its desire to concretize an identity and a position in the world is in opposition to this concept. America has not attained emptiness as a culture, its focus is on fullness and concrete meaning, and it is not unique in this sense either. America and its non-culture are not singular, but exemplary of a universal lack of spiritual and historical awareness. If anything can be described as unique it would be the American obsession with individuality and its need to set itself apart. It is unique in that it has made a culture out of its epic struggle against its mundanity and commonality. America has become exemplary of the obsessive and incessant filling up of all space, which is representative of a universal condition: the struggle against emptiness, which eventually leads to the vacuum of non-being. The American focus on progress and change is actually anti-progressive in that it installs concrete and permanent cultural values to life. The American way of life is an official religion of sorts with its core values centered on consumerism, a desire for fullness and set meanings for material things, and an obsession with the physical form. Following this logic, the spirit of America, in fact, epitomizes a spiritual
vacuum, as it is mundane and illusionary and rejects the fluidity of emptiness and the impermanence of the universe. America is a young country with a relative lack of extensive history, but with a tumultuous and eventful history nonetheless. The foundation of the nation coincided with the industrial revolution, and as a result it developed rapidly in many senses. Because of the lack of an extensive American history and the intensity and speed with which America has developed and risen to power, it has become a model for the study of the development of Western civilization. It is the condensed version and its ultimate expression. America has also become an exemplification of the historical, cultural and spiritual vacuum that follows closely behind the process of Western civilization due to the obsession Americans have always had with laying claim to the land, and with being American.