America is impossible to conceive as a whole; only through an examination of its parts does the patchwork begin to materialize. But to conceive of a Tocquevillian survey of America’s parts, towards a better understanding of the whole, is daunting at this point in the country’s history, because geographically there are too many places and culturally the word ‘America’ signifies too much. For this reason ‘America’ is always understood as an imagined place, evoked from the memory of what one has read, pictures one has seen, stories one has heard, and places where one has lived. Often, the many places that lay claim to American culture, whether imagined or experienced, are overshadowed by the largeness and appeal of the major metropolises of the United States: New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. These large urban areas, with all of their glamorous dirt and crime and their mythologized histories, have come to
be paradigmatic examples of the American experience. Life in these cities, though a major part of what gives shape to America and its culture, cannot be understood as representative of this experience. Existence in the smaller places, the backwater towns of the Midwest, the expansive network of Bible Belt villages in the South, and the dying Rust Belt cities of the Northeast must be included in the general understanding of America.

America as a multicultural experience is to be witnessed and lived in the metropolitan cities. But, America, in all of its provincial glory and in its search for a providential identity, can be most intimately experienced elsewhere, on its cracked roads and highways, in rest stops along the way, in border towns, in places that seem like the end of the world, isolated by nature, by education or lack there of, or perhaps isolated by the pervasive existence of god. However, the dichotomy of rural and urban American culture is a false one. The metropolitan cities are the organizational power centers that manage the money and production that ensures the existence of America. The rural places are the productive part of the machine, intricately tied to the metropolis through the monoculture farming system, as the site of the atrocities of the food industry, as the place where the city can be reflected and sustained as an opposing force. This tension demands the separation of urban and rural existence and, at the same time, it allows for the overall sum of urban and rural to represent the unified contingent of Americans. The metropolis provides its inhabitants with the unique identity of a city dweller, a New Yorker, for example, or an Angeleno. Citizens of metropolitan cities tend to be more socially progressive and more multi-culturally aware. In rural areas, due to the lack of an identifying metropolis, people tend to identify themselves as simply Americans. National characteristics become the main identifier in rural America, which tends to be more socially and politically conservative. Often it is from these rural places that an extreme sense of patriotism can be seen to emerge. This
combination and interplay of rural and urban results in the production of what can be deemed American culture.

America is also a country of many in-between places. Smaller cities that lack in any cosmopolitan or even metropolitan sensibility but that are not rural in any sense. These are cities in which an identity cannot be constructed from the place itself, as these places are living ghost towns, bereft of real characteristics, or even an important function in the national machine. However, they are also places from which it is difficult to cultivate a sense of home in nation. It is in these in-between places where one can truly feel the emptiness of American identity. The in-between places are often forgotten, always decaying and dying, yet never changing, they are the constants in American culture. Are in-between places the control in a great experiment? These places remain constant in their decline. Destined to be inhabited by those always thinking of what was and what should have been, these are cities that exemplify the nostalgia for what never was.

I come from an in-between place. Not a metropolis, yet a city, not rural country, but pervaded by a rural sensibility. I come from a dying place, a place where everything is being torn down, where everything around is crumbling: people, houses, streets. It is not just a result of the cold, the snow, or the humidity off the lake. It is the failure of short-sighted American dreaming. It is the pressure of hasty decisions made in response to the fear of social and civic action. The pressure of being a city dependent on one type of industry, the steel industry, combined with that of being a city dependent on the hope of slow technological development. A city built on a lake, a city fed by a canal from the lake to the sea.

The area of the country nourished by the steel industry turned into the rust belt. Buffalo, a rusted rust belt city on a lake. The lake, the canal, waterways inaccessible to the inhabitants of
the city, a brief glimpse only when driving on strips of cracked highway, a flash of blue. My city, perhaps named by the French after the beautiful Niagara River it follows, beau fluve, or the buffalo that once roamed the forests drinking from this beau fleuve, Buffalo. I grew up in this city and played on its cracked sidewalks. From a young age, I understood cities as dying places, places built and left to deteriorate. I understood the city to be a fragmented place that I would never understand. The fragmented nature of my city was for me a microcosmic reflection of my fragmented country, a cracked mirror reflecting the world. My city left me bereft of a nation.

America is full of dying, in-between cities, cracking under the pressure of an improvident history making process. The buildings crumble to the ground because whatever America is cannot be held down in a specific design, or concept of space. All aesthetic attempts to concretize a sense of place are destroyed, in many cases by time, but otherwise they are demolished and newer, yet even more fleeting structures are set in their place. Buffalo is a prime example of a city doomed to die forever due to an American dream that promises a constant state of decay and at the same time instills a perpetual hope that things will one day get better, that things can change just as quickly as they are destroyed, that nowhere will one day become somewhere.

Decay and deterioration are not absent from the metropolitan areas of the nation. Big cities, such as New York, are always falling down, but there is also the appearance of constant repair, a façade of renewal. In large cities, buildings may be torn down in preparation for new constructions. However, there is always the consciousness of historical place and the preservation of landmarks, along with destruction and dismantlement come renovation and renewal. This is not so in the smaller cities. There the death process is plainly visible, it is not
denied by the presence of any cranes, of scaffolding, or of layers of paint covering over cracks and chips in deeper, older layers. In the in-between places, buildings are torn down and, most often, gaping holes are left in their place. They are torn down due to being neglected and uninhabited. The history or architectural significance of the structures rarely takes precedence over the need to tear them down because of fire and safety hazards which result from their decadence. Metropolitan degradation adds charm; it is glamorous decay that serves as a melodious counterpoint to construction and progress. In-between cities wear their death in a quaint way, but it is in no way glamorous. To read the architecture of these in-between places can be telling of the process of identity formation of Americans who have neither an overall sense of place within the national fabric of society, or a comprehensive set of defining characteristics derived from the local community.