

Exclusion by Design: Tracing Rhetorical Continuity through American Exceptionalism and Orientalism

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For wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are upon us.

—John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity”

Predating American confederation by over a century, Puritan leader John Winthrop’s well-known sermon encapsulates what would become a core tenet of American political mythology: American exceptionalism. The belief that the United States holds an inherent, divinely appointed moral and political supremacy has long justified imperial pursuits under the guise of civilizing missions and humanitarian interventions. When viewed through the lens of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, American exceptionalism and Orientalism can be understood as overlapping discourses that mutually reinforce Western dominance. Said describes Orientalism as “a discourse ... by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” (1785). Orientalism relies upon ideologically naturalized colonial binaries—West/East, civilized/uncivilized, self/Other—to discursively and authoritatively construct the Orient as knowable, controllable, and inferior. “Authority,” Said writes, “establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgements it forms, transmits, [and] reproduces” (1799). Similarly, American exceptionalism functions as a productive discourse, constructing superiority through these

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same binary oppositions and naturalized authority. However, even before formal engagement with the Orient, early U.S. discourse positions the nation as distinct and divinely ordained to reshape the world and, by extension, itself.

Because colonial systems construct and uphold both American exceptionalism and national identity, the logic of domination has not disappeared; the potential for exclusion, repression, and violence lies latent in the country's foundational structures. While Said focuses primarily upon Europe and America's representations of the Orient, his theory can be applied more broadly to any system reliant on institutionalized binaries and racialized hierarchies of power. American exceptionalism and Orientalism function not just externally, but also domestically, shaping the politicized power dynamics of race, identity, and belonging. Here, I argue that Donald Trump's nostalgic appeal to "Make America Great Again," alongside his "America First" isolationism, prejudiced policies, and populist rhetoric signals not a departure from American ideals, but a return towards their most violent and racialized roots. The Orientalist gaze turns inwards, reproducing familiar narratives of racial inferiority and danger to justify subjugation, displacement, and state violence. By tracing the relationship between Orientalism and exceptionalism from early imperial rhetoric to Trump-era populism, I aim to reveal that the actions of the Trump administration are not an anomaly and serve as a warning to other nations. As the narratives used to justify the threats to the rights and freedoms of marginalized groups echo those of empire and slavery, America's current state underscores the urgent need for systemic reform—without which, dominant powers will remain vulnerable to authoritarianism under the guise of moral superiority and prejudice-based fear.

Through historical documents, such as John Winthrop's aforementioned "A Model of Christian Charity," American exceptionalism emerges as a discourse of dominance rooted in the self/Other binary. Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, is often "called the father of American exceptionalism" (Mualim 92). By casting his colony as "a citty upon a hill," Winthrop evokes an image of elevated status and superiority (1). He further declares "the eies of all people are upon [them]," insinuating that others will aspire to replicate their ways of life. This rhetoric reflects Said's claim that "[European] culture [is] hegemonic," as it presumes a cultural superiority that demands reproduction (1788). In this case, the settler colonial Puritan identity is constructed through religion, which also serves as a legitimizing factor in their possession of land. Near the conclusion of his sermon, Winthrop states that "the Lord [his] God may blesse [them] in the land whither [they] goe to possesse it," reflecting the foundational logic of a divine right to ownership (1).

Although "initially related to religious matters," the phrase "a city upon a hill" has "extended to political, social, and economic issues," and remains a "hallmark of American culture" (Mualim 92). This lasting rhetorical construction foreshadows the justification for Westward expansion later found in discourses like John O'Sullivan's "Annexation." Published in 1845, O'Sullivan's essay argued for the annexation of Texas from Mexico into the United States. O'Sullivan is credited for coining the term *manifest destiny*: "the belief in the supposed inevitability of the United States expanding its borders westward across the North American continent to the Pacific Ocean and beyond" ("Manifest Destiny Key Facts," par. 1). O'Sullivan claims that it is the country's "manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of [their] yearly multiplying

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millions" (2) and that "it is time for common sense to acquiesce with decent grace in the inevitable and irrevocable" (1). O'Sullivan presents American expansion as certain and divinely sanctioned, echoing the entitlement seen in Winthrop's sermon, and reinforcing a throughline of religious-backed imperialism at the core of American exceptionalism.

O'Sullivan's assertive and demanding tone reflects Said's idea that "the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient themselves [reiterates] European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent, or more skeptical, thinker might have had different views on the matter" (1788). In this case, Mexico and Texas are rhetorically dismissed and subjugated. O'Sullivan begins his essay by declaring, "it is time now for opposition to the Annexation of Texas to cease" (1), eliminating the possibility of dissent and demanding compliance. Against a supposedly predetermined future of expansion for the United States, O'Sullivan deems Mexico "imbecile and distracted," claiming that "[the country] never can exert any real governmental authority" (5). The contrast between "common sense" and "imbecile" reinforces the self/Other binary, from which O'Sullivan bolsters the position of the United States and patronizes Mexico as incapable of leadership or authority. O'Sullivan's framing of Manifest Destiny also connects to Said's notion of "*positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (1788), thus securing ideological and rhetorical authority in all interactions.

Alongside his criticism of Mexico, O'Sullivan's logic extends to issues of race within U.S. borders. In a disturbing and telling passage, he describes the Black, enslaved population as a burden to later be expelled from the country. O'Sullivan writes that "the

Spanish-Indian-American populations of Mexico, Centra America and South America, afford the only receptacle capable of absorbing that race wherever we shall be prepared to slough it off" (4). The language here reaffirms the self/Other binary by presenting Black Americans as incompatible with the vision of American expansion. While asserting U.S. entitlement to boundless growth, O'Sullivan defines southern nations by their perceived utility: containing the displaced and racialized Other. In doing so, O'Sullivan constructs a racial hierarchy, establishing whiteness as synonymous with destiny, and naturalizing the exclusion and removal of racialized peoples.

As Said states, understanding the strength of Orientalist discourse necessitates an evaluation of "its very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions" (1788). As the narrative of white entitlement and supremacy manifests in culture and policy, O'Sullivan's vision of America finds continuity throughout American history. For instance, Daniel S. Lucks argues that Ronald Reagan (president from 1981-1989) "revived an American exceptionalism, which had always overlooked the baneful legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and structural racism embedded in the fabric of every institution" (5). Reagan capitalized on white fears about the perceived threat of Black upward social mobility to secure support for his economic policies; his deployment of myths such as the "welfare queen" or the "dangerous Black male youth" produced narratives that framed systemic poverty and inequality as personal moral failure, undeserving of state support (Lucks). This mirrors Said's idea that Orientalism produces knowledge about the Other to justify subjugation and exclusion. From Jim Crow laws to the "new racism" of the Reagan era and beyond, the discourse that situates the white American subject as the default bearer of freedom, progress, and opportunity has at times dissipated, but never fully disappeared. As

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a result, the internalization of the self/Other binary within American racial politics illustrates how the logic of Orientalism functions both across and within borders.

The ideological legacy of American exceptionalism and Orientalism persists well into the modern era. Nowhere is this more evident than in the political discourse of Donald Trump, whose presidency proliferated exclusionary and nationalistic rhetoric. Trump's 2016 road to presidency was defined by an "American style populism [that brought] [him] to the White House on a wave of anti-immigrant and nationalist sentiment" (Bucy et al. 635). One of the core features of populism is the creation of an 'us versus them' narrative, which Trump employed throughout his 2016, 2020, and 2024 presidential campaigns by suggesting "'others' as threats to a better life and depicting the present in dark terms" (637). This is especially evident in Trump's rhetoric surrounding immigration.

Trump's descriptions of immigrants recycle harmful tropes from traditional colonial ideas, depicting racialized Others as impure, invasive, dangerous, and sub-human. A list compiled by *NBC News* outlines Trump's inflammatory comments, including—but not limited to—calling immigrants "animals" who "[poison] the blood of [the] country," referring to Haiti and African countries as "shithole countries," and repeatedly and erroneously linking undocumented immigrants to crime (Terkel and Lebowtiz, pars. 6, 9). These descriptions parallel the racist tropes of the Reagan era, O'Sullivan's dehumanizing statement that Black people in America are "of confused and mixed blood," and O'Sullivan's claim that "it," not *they*, need to be "sloughed off" (4). The rhetorical continuity between Trump, Reagan, and O'Sullivan reveals an abiding, prejudiced logic that frames non-white people as incompatible with the nation's identity and progress. As Said writes, "Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-

intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (1793). Said compels us to consider how dominant powers construct and weaponize difference to consolidate power. As with nineteenth-century American exceptionalism, Trump’s populist nationalism relies on conjuring up fears over racial and cultural differences, and redefining them as threatening impurities to legitimize exclusion, control, and displacement in both rhetoric and policy.

Trump’s “America First” policies reflect a modern manifestation of internal Orientalism. In his January 2025 inaugural address, Trump proclaimed that “the golden age of America begins right now” (qtd. in Allen, par. 1). For Trump, this “golden age” is centered around his “America First Priorities,” which are delineated on the official White House website. Under the heading, “Make America Safe Again,” the page includes plans for “ending asylum for illegal border crossers” and “suspending refugee resettlement” (“America First,” pars. 2, 4). Listed under the heading “Drain the Swamp” is a commitment to “[ending] the onslaught of useless and overpaid DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] activists buried into the federal workforce” (par. 16). The “America First Priorities” page presents migrants, asylum seekers, and even progressive civil servants as threats or contaminants that must be removed to protect America. Following his inauguration, Trump quickly moved to institute measures that allow the “[rapid...deport[ation of] immigrants who entered the United States through recently established legal pathways” (Gedeon, par. 1), and he justified doing so through the flawed conflation of migration and crime.

The rhetoric used on the White House website further demonstrates the lineage of white entitlement, as it states that “President Trump also signed an Executive Order ending radical and wasteful DEI programs and preferencing” (“Removes DEI,” par. 3). Note here,

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how DEI programs are termed “radical” and “wasteful.” The implication is that state-sanctioned equal opportunities—vital measures intended to address systemic inequality—are in direct opposition with the Trump administration’s platform. Trump has also stated his intention to “terminate every [DEI] program across the entire federal government” (par. 14). Framing DEI as a threat mirrors the Reagan-era fears of Black upward mobility, as well as O’Sullivan’s claim that “‘prejudices’ ... forbid the social amalgamation which [could] alone elevate the Negro [sic] race” (3). As mentioned, Said notes that Orientalism operates not just through representations, but also through the political and socio-economic institutions that are moored to state power. Through exclusionary language and policy, the Trump administration reproduces the self/Other binary within its borders, creating an outsider against which traditional American identity and belonging can be reasserted. In this context, they construct a purified vision of America to justify marginalization and state violence in the name of national restoration.

As Donald E. Pease accounts, a defining feature of American exceptionalism is the belief that “the United States is exempt from the ‘laws of history’ that lead to the decline and downfall of other great nations” (par. 1). To my mind, these “laws of history” include the rise of leaders who provoke and exploit fear, dehumanize racialized groups, deny accountability, and slowly weaken democracy through censorship, suppressing dissent, and policing identity. There are clear parallels to Hitler’s rise in 1933 Germany. Consider, for instance, the similarity between Trump’s dehumanizing rhetoric about immigrants and the racist Nazi ideology that labelled Jewish people “parasitic vermin,” while also targeting “Roma, people with disabilities, Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, and Black people” (“Racial Ideology,” par. 1). This is not to suggest that Trumpism is identical to the Nazi regime, but

rather that they both rely on similar rhetorical strategies. Like early Nazism, Trump's populism weaponizes national identity to justify the removal of civil rights and protections and provokes a sense of victimhood in his supporters.

After losing the 2020 presidential election, "prominent religious supporters of the Trump Administration framed electoral defeat as an anti-religious conspiracy," leading to a violent takeover of the United States Capitol building on January 6, 2021 (Armaly et al. 938). In a study designed to explore the key factors in supporters of the attack, Armaly et al. identified high levels of perceived victimhood, white identity, and engagement with conspiratorial information content as the driving factors in "the relationship between Christian nationalism and support for political violence" (937). As seen in Winthrop and O'Sullivan's works, religious justification for violence and subjugation is not a new concept in American discourses of power. Importantly, Armaly et al. points out that "victimhood and white identity can be cued and strategically employed by political elites" (955). Given that "several of Trump's most prominent Christian supporters," as well as Trump himself, insisted that his electoral defeat was anti-religious conspiracy (941), those conditioned by Trump's nationalist rhetoric were especially vulnerable to provocation. Even more, Trump's pardoning of rioters criminally charged in the attacks reinforces the lineage of white entitlement and supremacy; by pardoning acts of violence, including those done by "groups that espouse white supremacy" (945), Trump implies that acts of racial and religious violence are permissible—so long as they are committed in support of his vision of America.

Christopher R. Browning's *Ordinary Men*, which offers an unsettling reminder of how atrocities such as the Holocaust unfold, should provoke concern and caution regarding

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the series of decisions and messages that take place surrounding events like the capitol attacks. Through his account of how 500 “ordinary men” were recruited to carry out the mass shooting of 80,000 Jews in Poland during World War II, Browning reveals that authoritarian violence often operates through bureaucratic means. Browning warns us that it is not just heinous individuals, but our ordinary systems and narratives—intensified by economic and political unrest, peer pressure for conformity, and the insidious normalization of violence and unchecked obedience—that produce the conditions for cumulative radicalization. In this sense, the already executed and projected trajectory of the Trump administration’s actions are not anomalous, but alarmingly familiar.

Tracing the discourses of American exceptionalism and Orientalism throughout American history illuminates the ideological presence of harmful colonial binaries. Engaging in rhetorical analysis from John Winthrop’s divine city upon a hill to Trump’s crusade against DEI and immigrants reveals a striking continuity: the construction of a national identity that depends upon the exclusion and dehumanization of a racialized Other. Rather than a complete deviation from the norm, Trump’s campaign and presidencies bring the nation’s foundation of authoritative superiority, subjugation, and violence into clear view. Yet, as Said reminds us, Orientalism is “a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture” and, therefore, is not so much about the Orient as it is about “‘our’ world” (1793). It is imperative, then, that in times such as these, academic, political, and educational work begins to confront the naturalized binaries and hierarchies of power that sustain structural oppression and remain vulnerable to authoritarianism. From 1933 Germany to 2025 United States of America, history has shown we never believe it will be us until it is. More than just recognition, real change demands active resistance to

the narratives of prejudice-based fear and superiority. If democratic nations wish to live up to democratic ideals, we must first reconcile the violence already committed in our nations' names.

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