

# FORMS OF CULTURAL SUPERIORITY

## *An Introduction to Exceptionalism*

Decolonizing our choruses involves looking at four interrelated forms of cultural superiority: human exceptionalism, American Exceptionalism, white exceptionalism, and western exceptionalism. These habitual attitudes are not only inaccurate, morally suspect, and corrosive forces in **community building**, they are currently threatening our survival.

In writing this chapter, we have tried to be inclusive of both the U.S. and Canada who share significant histories of White Exceptionalism. We also note that the word “America” itself is an example of exceptionalism. Named for the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, the word is typically used to describe the U.S., however America actually includes both North and South America. Long before Amerigo Vespucci, Indigenous tribal nations referred to this land as Turtle Island, and still do today.

### Human Exceptionalism

The assumption that humans are separate from and superior to the non-human beings who share planet Earth. While humans are actually a subset of animals, and all beings on Earth are deeply interconnected, we are taught to view this relationship as a hierarchy. In fact, this human/animal hierarchy is the foundational hierarchy upon which other oppressions are built. It becomes much easier to harm humans—for instance, Black and Indigenous people—by calling them “animals” when it is already legitimate to harm animals.

### White Exceptionalism

The assumption that white people are the founders and carriers of civilization and that they are a Chosen People or superior race destined to rule the world. American Exceptionalism is a form of White Exceptionalism. The Canadian and U.S. origin myths portray an epic struggle between white civilization and the supposed “barbarism” of Indigenous peoples. Historically, the “taming of the frontier” represented

the victory of civilization over savagery.

### Western Exceptionalism

Related to this is Western Exceptionalism, the belief that predominantly white nations are the most advanced nations and represent the heights of human achievement. This presumes that non-western nations, labeled “underdeveloped” or “third world,” are backwards and in need of western help (leading to both the “white savior” and the “white man’s burden.”) Westerners are taught that the suffering in non-western nations is either a result of racial or cultural inferiority or is an “unfortunate tragedy,” rather than the result of centuries of looting and plundering of their natural and human resources by wealthy western nations and corporations. These actions are how western nations, including Canada and the United States, gained their wealth and power.

### American Exceptionalism

The assumption that the United States is inherently different from and superior to other nations, especially virtuous, and that American values, political system, and history are unique and worthy of universal admiration. It presumes that the U.S. is both destined and entitled to play a special role on the world stage, just as it was Manifest Destiny for the U.S. to expand through Indigenous nations to conquer the continent.

American Exceptionalism is built on Human Exceptionalism because it centrally involved the “taming of the frontier” and the transformation of Indigenous land into real estate that could be owned. When the genocide of Indigenous peoples is acknowledged, it is generally framed as an unfortunate outcome, rather than as an intentional policy throughout Canadian and U.S. history to eliminate Indigenous/First Nations peoples and to take over their land and resources, issues that are still ongoing in both nations today. 🌸