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Editors' Note: History's Shadow, Baldwin's Mirror, and the Long Undoing of American Innocence

JENNIFER A. REIMER

What do we see when we look away from the United States—and find it still staring back at us?

This thematic cluster of essays began as an invitation. We (Jennifer Reimer and Kevin Gaines, the editors of this special collection) asked scholars, poets, and cultural critics around the world to reflect on the 2024 US presidential election from the vantage points of elsewhere. What emerged was not a chorus but a constellation: sharp angles, haunted memories, historical callbacks, and global reckonings. Some responded in fury, others in resignation. Several turned to James Baldwin, whose work threads through this forum like a binding wire—sometimes epigraphic, sometimes analytical, sometimes ghostly.

If the 2016 election shocked the world into a state of anxious attention, and the 2020 election suspended us in a brief, gasping hope, 2024 feels like the confirmation of something we already suspected: The American experiment is not in crisis—it *is* the crisis.

The contributors here, writing from multiple nations and scholarly disciplines, respond to the reelection of Donald Trump and the rise of a transnational far right with a blend of rigor, anguish, and resolve. Together, their insights ask: What kind of reckoning does this political moment demand? And how might we resist despair without lapsing into denial or false nostalgia?

Across these contributions, three thematic threads emerge. First, the persistence of history—not as background but as driver. Second, the global disintegration of American exceptionalism. And third, the recurrence of Baldwin, whose language helps give form to the affective and ethical labor of watching the United States unmake itself in real time.

The Present Tense of History

The conversation opens with Remo Verdickt's "No Country for Illiterate Men?," which questions the assumptions behind the Western literary canon and the cultural innocence often claimed in its defense. The essay forms a subtle, searing meditation on how literary language can be co-opted for the political moment—or perhaps, how the moment refuses to be read. Beginning with J. D. Vance's misattributed tweet quoting *No Country for Old Men*—a line spoken by a fictional serial killer—Verdickt charts how Trump-era figures cannibalize cultural texts to obscure the line between truth and narrative. "Western literature," he writes, "has become an amalgam of key resources in posttruth politics—its various meanings obfuscated, oversimplified or wildly distorted to fit neoreactionary ideologies" (p. 7). From Borges to Baldwin, the essay details how New Right intellectuals like Vance and Curtis Yarvin weaponize literature not to elevate, but to confuse. "Reading fiction can energize, structure, and multiply modes of resistance," Verdickt concludes, "but only if literature is recognized for what it is: a complement and product of our everyday reality, not its substitute" (p. 9). His essay warns that the battle over reality itself is being waged, quietly and aggressively, in the realm of cultural interpretation.

Jas Colorado's poem "Cortex" follows with lyrical force, juxtaposing the televised rhetoric of American power with visceral memories of war, exile, and survival. The poem offers a brief, haunting meditation on what it means to exist in an El Salvadoran and migrant body before, during and after the recent election. While "[t]he man in the psychedelic spray tan mouths the buzzwords 'criminals, dictator, MS-13, keep America safe,'" the speaker reveals what "the white, weathered faces" don't say because they do not know: "CNN doesn't show the golden beer under the sun, and the old dads, red-eyed. Reminiscing about their daughters who marched to the woods and never came home." Instead, readers are offered the speaker's "flimsy grief" or images of "the moon splashing on us as we cross the shit-stained river." Here we encounter grief disguised as memory and indictment disguised as dinner. Layered with satirical distance and mournful intimacy, the speaker traces what slips between fork tines and into political oblivion—El Salvador, Kashmir, Sudan—alongside "whatever unspeakable cheesy sin I indulge in tonight" (p. 5). The poem distills a world of imperial residue and selective amnesia into a single evening's numb consumption. Both an indictment of the dehumanizing of im/migrant bodies and a celebration of their persistence, the poem grants us a moment to turn inward as we simultaneously consider a collective, into the bodily register of historical witnessing. Colorado's piece doesn't ask for empathy—it demands that we feel the weight of what US elections never mention. Her poem acts as a counterpoint to Verdickt's prose—a reminder that the shadow of American empire is not merely metaphorical but lived and embodied.

This embodied knowledge threads through Cazmir Thomas-Jordan Zaborowski's essay "A Hard Truth," which reflects on disillusionment with political systems that repeatedly fail to deliver justice. The essay opens with a Baldwin epigraph

and closes with a warning. Watching the 2025 inauguration from Brussels, Thomas-Jordan Zaborowski experiences a déjà vu not of memory, but of historical repetition: "There is a certain painful irony in feeling a sense of déjà vu when watching a familiar historical cycle repeat itself for the first time in your life" (p. 13). Drawing from family histories of both Holocaust resistance and US enslavement, he frames Trumpism not as anomaly, but as the logical consequence of decades of erosion—of civic trust, political accountability, and moral seriousness. "Evil is cultivated and born from the ambitions of those who see an opportunity to exploit the real pain of those around them who do not accurately understand the sources of their suffering" (p. 15), he writes. In the face of resurgent fascism, partisan collapse, and empty centrism, Thomas-Jordan Zaborowski argues for reckoning over resignation. His essay reminds us that no electoral outcome can erase the foundational violences upon which US nationalism depends. His analysis offers a bridge to Sarah Fila-Bakabadio's "A View from France," which situates US political developments in dialogue with France's own struggle for abortion rights.

Sarah Fila-Bakabadio challenges readers to see American regressions not as isolated events, but as part of a global reactionary tide. She provides a transatlantic meditation on the rollback of reproductive rights and the symbolic divergence between the United States and France in the wake of Trump's reelection. While France met the news of a second Trump term with weary resignation, its attention was already turned inward—to rising far-right influence and the frailty of its own democratic institutions. Fila-Bakabadio frames the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 as the event that truly reverberated in France, sparking anxiety and action: "French women discovered that, in the most powerful democracy in the world, the law of the land is not enduring" (p. 21). Her essay traces a feminist lineage from le Manifeste des 343 Femmes through Simone Veil's 1974 speech to France's 2024 constitutional amendment enshrining abortion rights. "This historic vote … is of considerable importance in view of the worldwide decline in this essential right," Amnesty International's Agnès Callamard declared. "The enshrinement of this right is an important bulwark against increasingly virulent anti-rights movements" (p. 22). In a moment when the US aligns itself with authoritarian masculinism, France's legal turn signals another path—fragile, perhaps, but not foreclosed. Fila-Bakabadio's call for crossborder solidarity finds an echo in Pierre Mourier's analysis of alt-right memes and masculinist fantasies circulating between the US and France.

The Disrepair of American Exceptionalism

From Paris to Shanghai, contributors note the slow, visible erosion of US credibility—not just as a political actor, but as a symbolic anchor.

In "From the 'Island of Garbage' to Dark Maga," Pierre Mourier unpacks how reactionary politics—animated by nostalgia, irony, and machismo—transcend national borders. He traces the digital roots and ideological evolution of the 2024 Trump

campaign, arguing that it draws heavily from the lexicon and sensibilities of the Alt-Right, the manosphere, and Neoreactionary (NrX) politics. Mourier shows how Trump's rhetoric and media strategies—from podcast appearances to UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) alliances—are calibrated to reach a disillusioned demographic of young white men steeped in Red Pill ideology. Through figures like Joe Rogan and Elon Musk, Trump channels a brand of "reactionary views on both gender and race" (p. 26), leveraging digital subcultures to reassert an aggressive, masculinist political vision.

A central motif in Mourier's analysis is the rise of "Dark Maga," a mutation of Trumpism that merges authoritarian fantasy with youthful rebellion. As Musk put it: "I am not only MAGA, I am Dark Maga" (p. 27)—a line that exemplifies the performative extremism adopted by Trump's coalition. These discourses are no longer fringe; they've been repackaged as antiestablishment cool, blurring the lines between political theater, digital spectacle, and ideological radicalization.

Ultimately, Mourier contends that the 2024 election marks a dangerous maturation of far-right digital influence: "The 2024 election, therefore, serves as a crucial juncture in the ongoing battle for the soul of American politics, where the Alt-Right's vision of the future threatens to reshape the nation's political and cultural institutions in profound and lasting ways" (p. 28).

Juan Luis Toribio Vazquez builds on this in "Second Time as Farce," where he situates Trump's resurgence within the global rise of authoritarian populism. Toribio Vazquez casts the 2024 election not as rupture, but as historical rhyme—a return of the repressed under new guises. Drawing on a genealogy of cyclical historiographies from Karl Marx through Giambattista Vico to Ray Dalio, Toribio Vazquez places Trump's return within a broader arc of imperial decline and ideological regression. But if history, in Marx's phrasing, repeats "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce," the farce carries grave consequences. This time, the staging includes tech oligarchs in the halls of power and an open disdain for democratic norms. "What is indeed new is the blatant barefacedness of this relationship," Toribio Vazquez writes, describing the public alliance between Trump and Musk, who wielded influence without electoral accountability (p. 30).

The essay catalogs a chilling sequence: birthright citizenship threatened, the press intimidated, federal agencies hollowed out, social media platforms skewed to favor the right. "The White House's decision to name Elon Musk … a 'special government employee' … sparked a cascade of headlines … describing his actions as a 'taking over' of the US government," notes Toribio Vazquez, quoting coverage from *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera*, and *The Hindu* (p. 30). But the implications extend beyond the US—this regime's export of far-right ideology to Europe and its alignment with neofascist parties position the US less as democracy's champion and more as its saboteur.

If history rhymes, Vazquez warns, it also offers foresight. The erosion of liberal democracy, the consolidation of wealth and media under the few, the recoding of

populism as plutocracy—these are not new, but their scale and shamelessness are. "We are not so much cursed to repeat the past," he writes, "as blessed with the knowledge of the repercussions that come with kicking the same stone once again" (p. 33).

Rich Cole's "Revisiting US Electoral Impacts on Migrants" complements this perspective with a sobering look at how US policies ripple across borders, particularly for Latin American migrants. Cole uses Stuart Hall's formative analysis of Thatcher-era Britain to examine how far-right narratives have once again taken hold—this time in the United States. Through examples like Immigrant and Customs Enforcement's media manipulations and Kristi Noem's publicity stunts, Cole shows how immigration rhetoric in 2024 echoes the symbolic tactics Hall identified: the strategic casting of migrants as existential threats to national identity, employed not for governance but for political gain.

Cole reminds us that such rhetoric operates not on truth, but on structural contradictions already present in society. "The representation itself is patently false," he writes, "but the economic conditions that precipitate it operate 'on the ground of already constituted social practices and lived ideologies'" (p. 38). Reclaiming the representational field, then, becomes urgent political work. "This is exactly the terrain on which the forces of opposition must organize, if we are to transform it" (p. 38).

In "Italy, Trump, and the Global Right," Alice Ciulla reveals how US right-wing rhetoric is both borrowed and adapted abroad, revealing the permeability of political imaginaries. Her essay explores the deepening ideological alignment between Donald Trump's America and Giorgia Meloni's Italy, two right-wing populist governments united by exclusionary rhetoric and nationalist policies. Drawing on Italy's long history of political experimentation—from Berlusconi's media-driven populism to today's hardline stances on migration—Ciulla argues that Italy functions as a bellwether for global populist trends. Meloni's outreach to Trump, particularly during a diplomatic visit to Mar-a-Lago, suggests the emergence of a transatlantic axis shaped by shared priorities: securitization, anti-immigration policy, and rhetorical appeals to cultural purity.

Yet this alliance is not without friction. Differences in foreign policy—particularly Italy's ties to the EU and diverging views on Russia—may strain deeper coordination. Meanwhile, Trump's influence continues to embolden far-right actors within Italy, further marginalizing migrant communities and deepening social polarization. Ciulla warns that this convergence could accelerate illiberal transformations in both countries, while also presenting a strategic challenge to progressive movements that must now reassert democratic values in the face of a resurgent, global right.

In "Times of Great Insecurity," Shahd Qazzaz offers a deeply personal reflection on how nationalist narratives sharpen social division; specifically, how fear shaped the 2024 US presidential election more than any one policy platform or party line. While both the Trump and Harris campaigns attempted to respond to the electorate's

unease, only one effectively translated that insecurity into political action. MAGA's messaging channeled fear into a forceful, if often distorted, narrative of cultural decline and internal enemies. Democrats, by contrast, hesitated—first in replacing Biden with Harris, then in articulating a compelling vision that acknowledged voter anxieties. As Qazzaz observes, the Democratic Party "offered Trump as the singular threat to American democracy," while failing to act as if they truly believed that threat required confrontation (p. 47).

The contrast between the two campaigns was stark: Trump named enemies and promised retribution; Harris evoked unity but avoided specificity. Gestures toward bipartisanship, such as inviting prominent Never-Trump Republicans to the Democratic convention, only muddied the waters. "What good is a threat," Qazzaz asks, "if its main defendants have no qualms shaking hands with the ones perpetrating it?" (p. 47). The result was a vacuum of urgency that MAGA filled with reactionary resolve—offering bans, deportations, and scapegoats to voters who craved answers more than nuance.

Kasper Grotle Rasmussen grounds his analysis of the transatlantic echo chamber in historical memory and cultural critique, revealing how American exceptionalism morphs into global pathology. He tracks the evolution of conspiracy theories in Denmark, revealing how "America" has become both a model and a metaphor in Danish political culture. While American popular culture long symbolized freedom and modernity, its conspiratorial undercurrents have increasingly shaped Danish public discourse—especially since 9/11. Figures like Niels Harrit adapted American narratives of "'controlled demolition'" (p. 42) and elite deception to critique Denmark's role in the War on Terror, echoing conspiracy theories about the "Deep State" and corporate tyranny. Over time, Danish conspiracy culture began to mirror its American counterpart not just in content but in tone, framing political grievances in globalized, often English-language terms.

By the time of the 2024 US election, this Americanization of Danish conspiracy theories had intensified. Rasmussen shows how slogans like "it's not about a virus, it's about control" migrated directly from US protests into Danish streets during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figures on Denmark's populist right—such as Lars Boje Mathiesen and Vibeke Manniche—have openly adopted American frameworks to delegitimize domestic institutions in Denmark, from public health to foreign policy. As Rasmussen writes, "'America' provides Danish conspiracy theories a language that allows the expression of dissatisfaction with political decisions and cultural trends" (p. 44). In a polarized media landscape, Americanized conspiracism has become a powerful vehicle for Danish political actors to stir dissent, challenge consensus, and promote right-wing populism.

Justice, Reflection, Refusal

The subsequent essay section offers a pivot from diagnosis to prescription, urging readers to reject carceral logics and instead embrace local, community-based strategies for accountability. A few pieces move toward reconstruction—not with optimism, but with fierce clarity.

Standing at a transatlantic distance, David Struthers reflects on how US political volatility reverberates abroad—distorted through media, magnified by memes, and repurposed in global right-wing discourse. From Copenhagen, he observes how Trumpism isn't just reshaping domestic institutions but also exporting a chaotic, anti-intellectual ethos that destabilizes norms and hijacks public conversation. Yet Struthers cautions against reducing this phenomenon to an American export alone. "Trump did not invent American racism any more than Alternative für Deutschland did within their national borders," (p. 48), he writes, urging readers to resist flattening complex local politics into US-centric frames.

Struthers's current work on transformative justice in Kalaallit Nunaat offers an alternative political model—one rooted in community accountability and environmental equity rather than coercion or colonialism. As Trump renews his ambitions to claim Greenland and gut regulatory structures, Struthers underscores how "the United States is the greatest threat to peace and stability in the world." Against this backdrop, he advocates for redistributing power to Indigenous communities and applying transformative justice as both a historical remedy and a proactive framework for environmental decision-making. With stakes high in the Arctic's rare earth race, Struthers's call is clear: let those who bear the brunt of past harms shape the future on their own terms.

What happens when democratic hope collides with political reality? Writing from Poland in the days following the election, E. Antoszek captures the disorientation of waking up to a Trump victory many had convinced themselves was unlikely. But as she reflects, this shock was born of epistemic bubbles—media, friendships, and cultural echo chambers that obscured just how deep the polarization runs. Drawing on George Packer's framework of four fractured American narratives—Free, Real, Smart, and Just America—Antoszek emphasizes how today's ideological divides "more resemble a rupture that can hardly be sutured" (p. 52). The election, in her view, not only mirrors similar populist trends in Europe but also legitimizes them.

Antoszek connects America's populist resurgence to a broader erosion of intellectualism and the entrenchment of patriarchal values. Trump's reelection signals, she argues, a reinforced machismo culture that affects both foreign policy and domestic life—especially for women and marginalized groups. Immigration, too, remains a volatile flashpoint, with Trump's rhetoric threatening mass deportations and further normalizing cruelty. "Even if [his promises] are not fulfilled entirely," she warns, "few people will be left unscathed" (p. 53). As Antoszek surveys US and European politics side by side, she concludes with a fragile optimism that legal

safeguards might still hold—but admits the pendulum has swung, and that it will take "years, even generations" to repair the damage (p. 53). Antoszek warns that populism feeds on anti-intellectualism, nostalgia, and gendered resentment, noting that Trump's rise reflects a broader Western pattern. Her insight—that "American society is highly patriarchal" and that matters in elections (p. 52)—links closely with Mark Rice's dismantling of American exceptionalism.

Mark Rice offers a clear rebuke to the myth that the US holds a special moral status among nations. He interrogates the persistent myth of American exceptionalism, tracing how its moralized form—"the idea that the United States has desirable qualities that other nations lack and has a special, chosen, superior role in human history" (p. 65)—continues to shape both public discourse and political identity. Drawing on David A. Bell's chapter in *Myth America* and his own past work debunking statistical claims of US superiority, Rice argues that the myth's endurance stems less from evidence than from its emotional and ideological appeal. Despite moments when Donald Trump appeared to reject the term, Rice shows how Trump ultimately embraced and rebranded exceptionalism in slogans like "Make America Great Again" and "Keep America Great," invoking the concept as both a nostalgic fantasy and a nationalist project.

According to Rice, the danger lies in the illusion that American distinctiveness is not just real but redemptive. Whether expressed through calls for educational reform or inauguration speeches lauding a country "full of compassion, courage, and exceptionalism" (p. 67), this rhetoric blinds citizens to the more pressing task of aspiring toward "mere goodness" rather than presumed greatness. He contends that Trump's rise is not an aberration but part of a global authoritarian trend—and thus anything but exceptional. As Rice concludes, unless Americans abandon their belief in a singular national destiny, "the United States will continue to be caught in a trap of its own making" (p. 68). Rice does not mourn the myth—he buries it. Such an account challenges the moralizing strain of nationalism from the inside, while Adam Grydehøj and Qi Pan's "Chinese Reflections" reverse the gaze.

Writing from Guangzhou, Adam Grydehøj and Qi Pan examine how Donald Trump's political presence and the 2024 US election have registered with Chinese publics—emphasizing that, for most in China, the answer is: not much. While Chinese familiarity with American culture has grown, detailed knowledge of US politics remains uncommon. For those who do engage, opinions are shaped not by Western left–right binaries but by uniquely Chinese social, cultural, and ideological contexts. Some admire Trump's "ideal businessman" image or see his chaos as a mirror to what they desire—or fear—in Chinese governance. Others reject his populism as destabilizing, viewing him as proof of the fragility of American democracy. Still, the article insists, even politically active Chinese observers rarely frame their views in American ideological terms.

At its core, the essay is a call to decenter the US from global political analysis. The authors challenge the idea that the world's political developments should be

interpreted through American lenses, cautioning against exporting US binaries like democracy vs. authoritarianism to systems that operate differently. As they assert, "Chinese political thought must be interpreted from Chinese perspectives" (p. 64). Trump's resurgence may feel globally significant in Western discourse, but in China, the US is just one actor among many—and its claim to exceptionalism is seen as unearned. Rather than universalizing American frameworks, Grydehøj and Pan urge political scholars and publics alike to recognize diverse epistemologies, and to resist the gravitational pull of what they ironically call "the political center of the universe" (p. 64).

Magdalena J. Zaborowska returns us to Baldwin's mirror in "A Touch of Evil," drawing on his work—and that of Toni Morrison—to mourn America's moral collapse. The essay locates its moral compass in Baldwin, whose enduring insight—"one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength" (epigraph)—serves as both touchstone and challenge. Writing as a naturalized US citizen and Eastern European immigrant, Zaborowska channels Baldwin's call for vigilance and heart-centered resistance in the face of what she sees as a digitally fueled drift toward fascism. The 2024 election, she argues, was lost not just at the polls but in the minds of a populace seduced by spectacle and poisoned by disinformation. "Make-believe wins the battle for our attention" (p. 70), she writes, lamenting a media culture that rewards outrage and erodes democratic norms.

Baldwin's belief in literature as a connective force—"You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented … but then you read"—grounds her faith in the humanities as tools of resistance (p. 70). Zaborowska contrasts this ethos with an electorate increasingly detached from historical memory and allergic to nuance. Recalling her own upbringing in Communist Poland, where clandestine reading and hard truths shaped political awareness, she worries that today's American youth are unarmed for the fight. Still, in Baldwin's tradition, she refuses despair. "Bruised and worn out" (p. 72), she pledges to keep reading and reaching across generations, guarding the heart as both sanctuary and battleground.

The section closes with a darkly comedic resurrection: "Mark Twain on 'idiot' Politicians and Our Current Predicament," edited by Shelley Fisher Fishkin, rails against "idiot politicians" and the long tradition of American buffoonery. Mark Twain's scathing reflections on political corruption, partisan loyalty, and civic apathy feel eerily prescient in today's political climate. Drawn from writings across five decades, Twain's words—compiled and edited by Fisher Fishkin—form a coherent indictment of American public life: its "mutilated morals" (p. 77), performative patriotism, and tolerance for unqualified leadership. His satire spares no one: party-line voters, morally flexible officeholders, and the broader public that accepts dishonor in politics as routine.

At the heart of Twain's critique is the idea that true patriotism lies in loyalty to the country itself—not to parties, institutions, or officeholders. He condemns a culture that rewards bluster over competence, elevates duplicity, and treats "party

expediency" (p. 77) as a higher virtue than honor. "Reader, suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself," he quips, underlining a central theme: that the absurd has become the norm (p.77). Yet Twain's commentary also carries a call to action, urging Americans to reclaim their agency through the ballot box and demand better. Institutions may fray, but the republic, he insists, belongs to the people—if they dare to claim it.

A Mirror We Did Not Ask For

Together, these pieces insist that critical thought is not a luxury but a necessity—especially when the dominant narrative demands obedience, forgetfulness, or despair. Baldwin asked us to keep our hearts free of hatred and despair, but not of clarity.

No, these contributions do not resolve. They do not console. They refuse resolution in favor of clarity, confrontation, and the unflinching gaze.

History is not a backdrop here—it is an actor. American exceptionalism is not eroding—it is mutating. And Baldwin, always Baldwin, hovers like a lantern-bearer in a house that insists it is not on fire.

Kevin Gaines's Afterword, "Seduced and Abandoned," returns us to this burning house with the force of indictment and lament. Grappling with the reelection of Donald Trump, Gaines probes why so many voters—particularly from marginalized communities—ceded power to a regime committed to their dehumanization. He highlights the complicity of media narratives, the racialized and gendered misrecognition of harm, and the strategic apathy that allowed authoritarianism to gain ground. Drawing on Michelle Obama's warnings and data on shifting Latino and white female voter blocs, Gaines outlines how disinformation, racial resentment, and economic anxieties were manipulated to override concerns for democracy, human rights, and collective welfare. His account exposes not just authoritarian ambition, but the electorate's dangerous tolerance for cruelty, disinformation, and erasure. How could citizens remain unmoved by clear evidence of harm, and how came the seductive narratives of grievance and economic anxiety to eclipse any sense of moral or collective responsibility? Indeed, the Afterword closes with a Baldwinian challenge: Will Americans abandon their illusions and rise to the moral responsibility of citizenship—or continue to trade justice for grievance? Echoing Baldwin's challenge to "innocents," Gaines offers one final mirror. Not to flatter, but to fracture. His is a demand—not for optimism, but for accountability.

If there is a lesson in this forum, it may be this: what we call crisis is often a crisis of recognition. Not of what the US is becoming, but of what it has long permitted itself to be. Our contributors ask what happens when the mirror cracks—not to the image, but to those of us who were already looking elsewhere.

Let this collection of essays serve not as warning, but as weather report. The storm is not coming. It is already here.

And yet—still—we fight.