

On Global Accountability, Victimhood Nationalism, and Mass Dictatorship.  
Jie-Hyun Lim, Review of *Global Easts: Remembering, Imagining, Mobilising*,  
Columbia University Press, New York 2022, pp. 329

**Introduction.** The turn of the last century was filled with anxiety and optimism. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc, followed by the expansion of neoliberal economic models, was accompanied by the rapid development of communication technologies. For many, this period held the promise of new modalities of intercultural exchange and global security. Even the critical voices seemed to be energized by the new opening, the increased mobility of populations, trade transactions and information flows. The world was in motion, holding a promise and a chance for new forms of global community.<sup>1</sup> Yet today, we observe a rise of nationalisms and an unprecedented pace of global militarization.<sup>2</sup> The narratives of the “migration crisis” cut across traditional lines of political

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<sup>1</sup> A. Appadurai, *Grassroots globalization and the research imagination*, “Public Culture” 2000, Vol. 12(1), pp. 1–19.

<sup>2</sup> M. Cserkis, *Descending into madness: The militarization of the twenty-first century* [in:] *The Palgrave handbook of global social problems*, eds. R. Baikady, S.M. Sajid, J. Przeperski et al., Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2023.

divisions, unifying elites and masses against the imagined “Other.” The discursive binaries inherited from the previous century no longer suffice to explain the contemporary world order, but they remain intellectual frameworks that hinder collective imagination.

In this context, Jie-Hyun Lim’s book *Global Easts: Remembering, Imagining, Mobilising* is an important intervention, which proposes rethinking the potential of global accountability by revisiting conceptual frameworks of twentieth-century historiography. Looking back at the near past aims to shed light on the contemporary revitalization of nationalisms. Jie-Hyun Lim is a prominent South Korean historian and memory activist, advocating for a transnational approach in historical and memory studies. The book is a rare contribution by an Asian author within the series “Asia Perspectives: History, Society and Culture” published by Columbia University Press.<sup>3</sup> It consists of essays published by Jie Hyun-Lim over the last twenty years, unified under the title-concept “Global Easts.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The second book by Jie-Hyun Lim, *Victimhood Nationalism: History and Memory in a Global Age*, is planned to be published within the same series in April 2025.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to differentiate Jie-Hyun Lim’s use of “Global Easts” from Martin Müller’s proposal to revive “Global East” as a category in contemporary geopolitics. While

Referring to David Scott's terminology, Jie-Hyun Lim describes "Global Easts" as a "problem-space"<sup>5</sup> that allows the deconstruction of an ethical crisis in the post-Second World War global memory space. As the author points out, "Global Easts" have been discursively constructed through nationalist historiographies operating within binary oppositions such as dictatorship and democracy, West and East (or more broadly West and "the rest"), modernity and traditionalism, socialism and nationalism, but also victim and victimizer.

**Remembering: Victimhood Nationalism.** The end of the Cold War in the 1990s marked a shift in the global memory space. National narratives on martyrdom and victimhood were no longer subordinated to binary geopolitical division; instead, they became a tool for consolidating isolated national identities that compete for recognition within the international context. Antagonistic politics of memory have become the most prominent marker of twenty-century politics.<sup>6</sup>

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Müller argues for the essentialist concept of "Global East" as a neglected geopolitical category, Jie-Hyun Lim perceives "Global Easts" in plural and in historical perspective as a discursive construct to be overcome. Cf. M. Müller, *In search of the global East: Thinking between North and South*, "Geopolitics" 2018, Vol. 25(3), pp. 734–755.

<sup>5</sup> D. Scott, *Conscripts of modernity: The tragedy of colonial enlightenment*, Duke University Press, Durham 2004, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> A. Assmann, S. Conrad, *Introduction* [in:] *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices, and Trajectories*, eds. A. Assmann, S. Conrad, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2010, p. 1.

In the first section of the book, entitled "Remembering," Jie-Hyun Lim proposes "Victimhood Nationalism" as an explanatory hypothesis for the contemporary regeneration of nationalisms in the global memory space. As he points out, the thawing of the Cold War allowed a multidirectional discussion on the legacy of the twentieth century. The Holocaust's status as an absolute historical trauma was joined by discussions on colonial genocides and Stalinist terror. The global memory space became an arena of competing discourses on collective victimhood viewed through the lens of the nation.

Invoking public and historiographical discourses in Poland, Germany, Israel, Japan, and Korea, the author exposes unsettling practices of appropriating the status of the victim by historical perpetrators. As he argues, the suffering of actual victims is continuously instrumentalized for nation-state agendas for purposes that include the consolidation of national identity, the justification of discriminatory domestic and international policies, and, most uncannily, the absolution of individual perpetrators through collective and national self-exoneration.

Jie-Hyun Lim does not advocate for any of the historiographical discourses. Rather, he shows how historiography became a subservient discipline to the nation-state. Transnational scrutiny and listening to the voices of actual victims demystify official historical narratives and public discourses. Beyond the critique of historiography, Jie-Hyun Lim invokes examples of mnemonic

solidarity, such as the denunciation of the Nazi regime by Australian Aborigines in 1938 and the unexpected alliance between Korean activists for the commemoration of comfort women and the Armenian diaspora in the USA. The memories of these communities are entangled even if their histories are not directly connected. According to the author, multidirectional memory among non-national communities and transnational perspectives are necessary to counter Victimhood Nationalism and restore the global procedures of justice that are able to hold perpetrators responsible and honor experiences of the victims.

Imagining: Postcolonial Criticism. An impasse in the practice of global accountability is connected to the limits of imagination. Western domination over the world in the past few centuries created conditions in which Eurocentrism has become the horizon of human vision. Together with its satellite concepts, such as modernity and developmental world history, Eurocentrism positions the history of the West as the necessary point of arrival for the rest of the world. Specifically, the modern nation-state became the hegemonic form of the desired community across the globe. Edward Said observes that orientalism functions as a set of constraints, disallowing narratives that do not place the West at the center.<sup>7</sup> The postcolonial perspective exposes the fact that Western political oppositions,

such as conservatism and progressivism, socialism and liberalism, merge in their own versions of Eurocentric bias.<sup>8</sup>

Analysis of the so-called “Sonderweg” thesis allows Jie-Hyun Lim to scrutinize Marxist historiography for its West-oriented perspective. Treating the Western development of capitalism as a matrix of human development, the Marxist vision of history contributed to essentialism and orientalism in the Global East. By assuming that the West represents a “proper” model of capitalism and modernity, all other forms of social and economic life are rendered sub-political or premodern. Models for constructing modern nation-states within the imagined East are seen as deviations, described in terms of despotism or the “Asiatic mode of production.”

Even though Marxist theorists were more eager to recognize the role of violence in capital accumulation than their liberal counterparts, they still assumed the superiority of the West and denied the agency of non-European peoples. As Jie-Hyun Lim shows, postcolonial leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Julius Nyerere, Mao Zedong, and Kim II Sung embraced Marxist versions of Eurocentrism to push their countries toward a rapid and forced modernization, yet

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<sup>7</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York 1979, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> For comprehensive critique of modern subjectivity traversing different positions within Western philosophy, see: D. Ferreira Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2007.

another form of a “necessary” primitive accumulation of capital.<sup>9</sup>

Postcolonial criticism proposes to examine the history of modernity and capitalism as emerging from complex relations and interactions between different parts of the world, rather than the comparative model of developmental stages. It also permits one to notice Eurocentric bias within Marxist historiographies, which, in the end, solidifies the vision of history in which the nation-state is the necessary point of arrival for any society to survive. Counterintuitively, Jie-Hyun Lim argues that nationalism is essentially transnational, traversing antagonistic ideologies of modernity and their concomitant popular sentiments.

Mobilizing: Mass Dictatorship. A transnational perspective questions the factual content of binary positions which antagonize and mobilize national masses. Referring to his experience of witnessing the collapse of communism in Poland, Jie-Hyun Lim writes: “Anti-communist Korean right-wingers and Polish *nomenklatura* communists, leftist socialism-oriented South Korean dissidents and rightist anticommunist Polish dissidents counterintuitively converge.

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<sup>9</sup> For a critique of the notion of “primitive accumulation” as occluding the role of slavery and expropriation of the land in capitalist development, see: C. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London 2000, p. 157; D. Ferreira Da Silva, *Toward a Black feminist poethics: The quest(ion) of blackness toward the end of the world*, “Black Scholar” 2014, Vol. 44(2), pp. 1–97.

(...) In the transnational space, political rivals become bizarre mnemonic companions. Recognizing this frees from the demonology, whether right- or left-wing, of the Cold War” (252–253).

Observing parallel processes, in which two post-totalitarian democracies, Poland and South Korea, were coming to terms with their past, Jie-Hyun Lim coins the term Mass Dictatorship as an explanatory device for the study of political regimes within “Global Easts.” Through this term the author aims to deconstruct one of the major axes of Cold War Era narratives, an antagonism between the “dictatorial East” and the “democratic West.”

Traditionally, dictatorship is seen as the rule of the minority over the majority through means of terror. Introducing Mass Dictatorship as an analytical tool emphasizes the active and passive participation of the masses in totalitarian regimes. The term is, thus, aimed at revisiting the assumption of “innocent people” victimized by political elites. Acknowledging the role of complicity, consent, and conformism, if not active support and enthusiasm, is no less important in understanding dictatorship than the analysis of its coercive strategies. Treating the national majority as a collective victim of such regimes renders experiences of real victims abstract. Those who subscribed to the majoritarian culture of the dictatorship benefited from it and, in exchange, turned their backs on the harm experienced by those cast out of the nation.

Pointing out the agency, but also the complicity of the masses and the

oppressive character of majoritarian culture, suggests that Mass Dictatorship and Mass Democracy are not opposites, but two different strategies of mobilization within the modern nation-state. In a democratic order, the majority benefiting from welfare and limited freedom is eager to ignore the harm perpetuated by the state apparatus to those who do not comply with or simply do not fit into the vision of national unity. Post-colonial criticism reveals the genocidal foundations of Western democracies, hidden behind their own versions of Victimhood Nationalism.<sup>10</sup> The ethical antagonism between democracy and dictatorship is, thus, historically inaccurate, and has to be seen as a method of collective exoneration that enables the continuous oppression of minorities within the nation.

Reconstructing the role of the Bolshevik Revolution for the developmental strategies of peripheral countries explains the preference of postcolonial leaders for Mass Dictatorship as a developmental strategy of catching-up with the West. From this perspective, the history of dictatorship must be analyzed not merely as a struggle between modern and pre-modern forces, but as a complex entanglement of consent, conformism, and resistance, which condition everyday practices of self-mobilization and self-empowerment within

the quotidian circumstances of a given historical moment.

**Conclusion.** The essays collected in *Global Easts* present a consistent argumentation for a transnational approach within history and memory studies. Such a perspective is aimed against essentialism and orientalism, which continue to govern contemporary international politics and intellectual discourses. “Global Easts,” presented as a problem-space, successfully dismantles the dichotomy between East and West and creates a transnational space for dialogue among different historical experiences. An important question, signaled by the author, is how this conversation is relevant for the contemporary polarization between the Global South and Global North and its urgent issues resulting from this polarization, such as the unequal distribution of global warming effects, migration policies, global racism, and neocolonial exploitation.

To answer this question, the book must be situated within a larger context of decolonial perspectives and critical race theory. *Global Easts* resonates strongly with comprehensive critiques of world history and the global hegemony of Western subjectivity, presented by authors such as Teshale Tibebu,<sup>11</sup> Denise Ferreira Da Silva,<sup>12</sup> and Sylvia Wynter.<sup>13</sup> It also engages in the discus-

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<sup>10</sup> C.J. Robinson, *Fascism and the Intersection of Capitalism, Racism and Historical Consciousness*, “Humanities in Society” 1983, Vol. 3, pp. 325–349.

<sup>11</sup> T. Tibebu, *Hegel and the Third World: The Making of Eurocentrism in World History*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 2011.

<sup>12</sup> D. Ferreira Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race...*

<sup>13</sup> S. Wynter, K. McKittrick, *Unparalleled catastrophe for our species? Or, to give humanness a dif-*

sion of questioning the foundations of Western critical theory and its investment in Marxist historiography, referring to such authors as Cedric Robinson and Chen-Kuan Hsing.<sup>14</sup> In particular, Jie-Hyun Lim shares with these two authors an attention to nationalism as the main trait of modernity, a perspective neglected by Western critical theory.

Seen as one of many voices in global conversations, the proposal of *Global Easts* is an important contribution to dismantling conceptual frameworks still lingering within the space of the Global North. Centering the historiography of Poland, South Korea, and North Korea as a means to understand global processes shifts the typical frame of reference and provincializes the Western experience. The lack of a more enunciated perspective of the Global South is striking in some of Jie-Hyun Lim's essays. It is especially lacking in the context of the discussion of Korean comfort women and of sexual slavery as a military strategy within the Japanese imperialist project of the Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Southeast Asian countries affected by sexual slavery are barely mentioned despite the solidarity and collaboration between activists from the region, which led to the organization of the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military

ferent future: Conversations [in:] *Sylvia Wynter: On being human as praxis*, Duke University Press, Durham 2015, pp. 9–90.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. C. Robinson, *Black Marxism...*; K.-H. Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*, Duke University Press, Durham 2010.

Sexual Slavery (or the Tokyo Tribunal) in 2000. The Tokyo Tribunal was organized by East and Southeast Asian women's organizations, and included representatives from North Korea, South Korea, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Netherlands, and Burma.<sup>15</sup>

Jie-Hyun Lim focuses on telling a different story of the Global North. Still, his contribution is essential to create a foundation for further interventions that could scrutinize the relations between the Global North and the Global South based on the already deconstructed binary of East and West. Moreover, concepts such as Victimhood Nationalism and Mass Dictatorship have a strong appeal for understanding the contemporary crisis in holding global actors accountable for their actions, despite the existence of international organizations and legislative frameworks. Jie-Hyun Lim presents extraordinary scholarship in Central-Eastern European and East Asian historiographies, as well as their public discourses. This approach allows him to freely choose references from contemporary commentators and connect their opinions to past historiographical policies. As such, his intervention goes

<sup>15</sup> Asian Centre for Women's Human Rights (ASCENT), *Toward The Tokyo Tribunal 2000 & Public Hearing On Crimes Against Women: A Primer On The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal and Public Hearing On Crimes Against Women in Recent Wars And Conflicts*, 2000, <http://www.iccwomen.org/wigjdraft1/Archives/oldWCGJ/tokyo/primer.html> (access: 26.03.2025).

beyond the disciplinary boundaries of history, memory studies, or developmental studies. Jie-Hyun Lim seems to draw from earlier discussions in Western anthropology, which questioned the centrality of the West for sociological and historical research.<sup>16</sup> In this context, the position of Jie-Hyun Lim, a postcolonial historian specialized in the semi-peripheral history of socialist Poland, resembles a position of a “postcolonial anthropologist in other places,” as described by David Scott in 1989.<sup>17</sup> Emphasizing the importance of the everyday for global procedures of justice, Jie-Hyun Lim’s proposal urges interventions within the quotidian reality of cultural hegemony and is, therefore, aligned with the foundational goals of cultural studies.<sup>18</sup> The intervention of the Global Easts is thus relevant not only to academic fields of cultural, literary, media, and discourse studies, but also to contemporary cultural practitioners.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example: J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts 1988; G.E. Marcus, M.J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1986.

<sup>17</sup> D. Scott, *Locating the anthropological subject: Postcolonial anthropologists in other places* [in:] *Traveling theories traveling theorists*, eds. J. Clifford, V. Dhareshwar, series *Inscriptions*, Vol. 4, Group for the Critical Study of Colonial Discourse & the Center for Cultural Studies, Santa Cruz 1989, pp. 75–84.

<sup>18</sup> S. Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, eds. J. Slack, L. Grossberg, Duke University Press, Durham 2016.

In search of procedures of justice that could follow Jie-Hyun Lim’s proposal, I would like to reference Denise Ferreira Da Silva, Sadiya Hartman, and Sylvia Wynter. These three authors theorize from the perspective of the Black body show that within a reality built on excessive violence, one can seek justice in works of fiction,<sup>19</sup> critical fabulation,<sup>20</sup> and narrative.<sup>21</sup> From this perspective, the deconstruction of “Global Easts” as a “problem-space” constitutes a semi-regional intervention, a turn in narrative that may free the subjectivity constructed on inherited categories of East and West from geopolitical limits of imagination. Revisiting the historiography of East Asia and Eastern Europe may signify different things to different people, but the commitment to come to terms with one’s own history represents a grounding gesture to allow oneself to imagine, fabulate, and narrate an alternative modality of experiencing the everyday, in alignment and solidarity with the world’s memories of injustice and a transnational desire for global accountability.

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<sup>19</sup> D. Ferreira Da Silva, *Toward a Black...*; *idem, Unpayable Debt*, Sternberg Press, London 2022.

<sup>20</sup> S. Hartman, *Venus in two acts*, “Small Axe” 2008, Vol. 12(2); *idem, Wayward lives, beautiful experiments: Intimate histories of social upheaval*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2019.

<sup>21</sup> S. Wynter, K. McKittrick, *Unparalleled catastrophe...*, pp. 9–90.

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