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Wael B. Hallaq. *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*. Columbia UP, 2018. Pp. 392. US\$40.

As the subtitle to Wael B. Hallaq's *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* suggests, his latest book leverages its extended engagement with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) to offer a broader theorization of the limitations inherent in the structures of modern Western knowledge production from which the text emerged. Hallaq traces and unsettles the assumed centrality of liberal humanism as the locus of knowledge production and argues that "the problems underlying Orientalism are so expansive and profound that the entire discipline, along with the emerging critique and defence of it, has functioned as a discursive mask to cover up serious crises in late-modern epistemology" (8). The result is a densely technical but satisfyingly thorough reappraisal of Said's benchmark work as well as contemporary academia.

This critique of Western epistemology, which is central to Hallaq's project, follows directly from *Orientalism* itself, in which Said sets out to describe how "the general liberal consensus that 'true' knowledge is fundamentally non-political . . . obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced" (Said 10). Both Said and Hallaq concern themselves with the political conditions in which the production of academic knowledge about "the Orient" takes place. Said, however, attempts to render the inherently political nature of knowledge production legible by means of a thorough accounting of the specific positionality and material interests of the authors responsible for his vast archive of Orientalist texts. Hallaq argues that, without a more robust theorization of the relationship between those authors and the structures of political power they ostensibly work to support, this overemphasis on individual texts and writers reinscribes Said's work within the same "liberal consensus" of apolitical knowledge production he intends to critique. Hallaq submits that, "aside

from its collusion with power and colonialism,” Said regards Orientalism “as a discrete category, largely unrelated to the wider intellectual and materialist environment that produced Orientalism in the first place. . . . There is nothing in *Orientalism* in the way of critiquing modern science, technology, capitalism, materialism, liberalism, the doctrine of progress, philosophy, and the like” (160). In this way, Hallaq makes a compelling case for the limitations that Said’s commitment to liberal humanism imposes on *Orientalism*.

At its core, Hallaq’s critique of Said’s text focuses on Said’s insistence that Orientalism is uniquely and anomalously invested in Western epistemic domination rather than representative of a larger impulse in Western academia to understand itself and the knowledge it produces as dispassionately objective. It is worth noting, though, that at least in this respect Hallaq’s own project seems to fit comfortably in a longstanding tradition of theorists working within Western academia while seeking to better situate Western modes of knowledge production alongside non-Western modes. Even within post-colonial studies, for instance, a critique of the assumed centrality of the West as subject has long figured as a central concern in the work of Gayatri Spivak, who is by no means a marginal figure in contemporary academia. Hallaq’s resistance to acknowledging figures like Spivak and academia’s longstanding critical engagement with Western knowledge production feels like an especially curious omission given his investment in better situating the discipline of Orientalism among other Western modes of knowledge production. If Orientalism’s tendency to privilege Western modes of knowledge production is, as he describes, best understood as a feature of Western academia more generally, then his argument may have been strengthened by examining how other academic disciplines have engaged with and critiqued their own biases toward Western modes of knowledge production.

Despite the fact that *Restating Orientalism* primarily concerns itself with the legacy of a now forty-year-old text, Hallaq’s larger argument generates a tangible sense of urgency through its extended consideration of the threat of environmental catastrophe, the root causes of which he convincingly weaves into the same modern Western tendency toward a kind of epistemic myopia: as he describes, the assumed position of centrality that skews Western academia’s engagement with non-Western cultures is mirrored in Western environmentalism’s anthropocentric approach to the present environmental crisis. He suggests that liberalism’s bifurcation of humanity and nature as distinct ontological categories traps environmentalist discourse within a narrowly anthropocentric framework, which in turn obscures the fundamental relationship between humans and the rest of the world: “Environment is all that surrounds the human agent[,] . . . but the crisis within and challenge to the

modern world consist precisely in the recognition of that which has been excluded from the very processes of thinking” (248). Hallaq contrasts the anthropocentrism of the modern Western conception of nature with that of classical Islam, wherein humans are figured not as solitary actors imposing their will on an inert natural world but rather as stewards of environmental sustainability: “The presumptive basis of [classical Islamic] rationality is that humans live in the world, not above it, just as anyone or anything else, sentient or not, does, except that humans are exceptionally charged with the burden of custodianship. . . . [Classical Islam] refuses, on strict principle, to accept the modern premise of man’s domination over nature” (81). In this sense, he argues, premodern Islam provides a model of a fundamentally nonanthropocentric social order that can be productively juxtaposed against the anthropocentric tendency of modern liberalism: whereas Said’s analysis in *Orientalism* traces the link between academic knowledge production and power, Hallaq’s analysis works to demonstrate why this link between knowledge and power emerged as a uniquely useful tool for the West. Hallaq’s contention echoes an argument put forward by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*, his recent book on climate change. Ghosh examines Pope Francis’ environmentally focused encyclical *Laudato Si’* to demonstrate how the similarly premodern ethical framework of Catholicism, with its cognizance of the “limits that circumscribe human agency” (Ghosh 158), can be employed to challenge the efficacy of the dominant Western environmentalist discourse.

Ghosh ends up advocating for a tactically problematic (and practically dubious) resurgence of premodern religious institutions as a driving force of political activism, wherein “religious groupings around the world can join hands with popular movements” (Ghosh 161). Hallaq presents the premodern framework of classical Islam, on the other hand, primarily as an epistemic challenge to the assumed centrality of modern Western knowledge; this challenge, in turn, provides a critical vantage point from which we can better understand the contingent nature of knowledge production. Hallaq observes: “If we assume, as we should, that knowledge is never innocent of the social, conceptual, material, political, and power networks within which it is cultivated, then engaging in knowledge production . . . comes with a grave ethical and moral responsibility, but one that can no longer be formed through the liberal tradition” (264). And herein lies the central insight of Hallaq’s *Restating Orientalism*: in order for Western academia to meaningfully engage with the world at large, it must refuse the impulse to understand itself as the self-justifying centre of objective knowledge production and instead seek to negotiate the limits of the narrow and anthropocentric framework of modern liberalism. In this way, Hallaq argues, we will “be on our way to articulating

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a healthier conception of the value of human and nonhuman life as embedded in a complex environment not only that sustains this life but also that instructs us in our ‘study’ of the Other” (267). Hallaq’s extended critique of the assumed centrality of modern liberal modes of knowledge production is an important contribution to an ongoing struggle within academia to de-centre Western anthropocentrism. While Hallaq’s argument may have been strengthened by acknowledging other scholars already engaged in this struggle from within academia, his particular attention to the link between the West’s liberal anthropocentrism and the present environmental catastrophe makes *Restating Orientalism* a timely re-interrogation of Said’s classic text.

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### Works Cited

- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. U of Chicago P, 2016.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage, 1978.