

11-2019

Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge

Katlin Marisol Sweeney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal>



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [International and Intercultural Communication Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Political Theory Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sweeney, Katlin Marisol (2019) "Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 9, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.9.1.1171>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol9/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Goldstein Center for Human Rights at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Dialogue by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



Review

Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge

Wael B. Hallaq. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 392pp.

Katlin Marisol Sweeney*

Wael B. Hallaq's *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* interrogates what he proposes are canonized misconceptions of Orientalism by examining the trends in discourse that have emerged since the publication of Edward Said's seminal work in 1978. It builds on Hallaq's other contributions to the field on the topics of modernity, politics, and Islamic law over the last forty years, most notably *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) and *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (Columbia University Press, 2013). In the paratextual material, Hallaq advises readers to treat *Sharī'a* and *The Impossible State* as required preliminary reading in order to gain the firmest grasp on the present monograph's claims, given that it functions as a sequel of sorts to these writings. Additionally, he suggests that readers engage with the contents of *Restating Orientalism* in chronological

***Katlin Marisol Sweeney** is a Ph.D. student in the Department of English at The Ohio State University. She received an M.A. in English & comparative literature from San Diego State University and a B.A. in literature & writing studies from California State University San Marcos. She researches how fictional narratives of Latinx women's pain and suffering in media either successfully or fail to generate space for these characters to work through their pain towards healing, which can culminate with the creation of pathways towards a sustainable futurity. She is the co-executive coordinator of LASER at OSU and is involved with organizing LASER's signature events: SÖL-CON and Latinx Role Models Day. She also served as the editor of the 2018 "States of La Frontera" issue of SDSU Press' *pacificREVIEW*.

order as his discussions of many concepts are developed over the course of multiple chapters and depend on the reader's familiarity with previous sections for these points to be effectively communicated.

A cardinal trait of Hallaq's argument is his proposition "that both the simple term and the complex concept of Orientalism have been severely misunderstood, that they have in effect been rendered, partly due to Said's writing, into rudimentary political slogans and catchwords that operate extensively in a field of ideological semantics" (4). In the opening chapters to *Restating Orientalism*, he importantly tracks the origins of academia's adoption of these misconceptions to claims and definitions put forth in Said's *Orientalism*. To provide context for his contributions to this discourse, in the introduction, Hallaq provides a succinct list of key criticisms that readers should be familiar with that have been directed at Said's project (7).

He emphasizes the importance of Said's work to the field while simultaneously calling for more scholarly inquiry into the larger modern knowledge structures that gave rise to Orientalism and that continue to flourish—many without criticism from either Said or those influenced by his writing. Hallaq emphasizes that among the key take-aways from *Restating Orientalism* is the following: "setting up Said's *Orientalism* for critique finds its reason, rationale, and conviction in the fact that the work's canonicity reflects not only its own power of argument but also its dominating effect on the whole range of discourse on the subject for almost four decades" (179). Throughout the book, Hallaq successfully demonstrates not only how Said's writings remain groundbreaking to knowledge production in the field, but also how these same writings contain issues that are often both overlooked and replicated by other authors.

Following the preface and introduction—both of which offer critical insights into the project's origins, trajectory, and aims—Hallaq organizes his project into five chapters. These chapters begin with a sustained, in-depth examination of claims that he proposes are underdeveloped in Said's *Orientalism* yet have since been canonized by the field. Chapter 1 in particular, titled "Putting Orientalism in Its Place" draws from the first chapter of *Orientalism* to emphasize Hallaq's desire to "*position* this discipline and its discourse in nothing less than the deep structures of the modern project," which he suggests is not accomplished in Said's respective writing (14). Much of the first chapter consists of his examinations of the failings and gaps of scholarship trends in the field in relationship to

concepts such as horizontality, paradigms and domains (particularly peripheral domains), and the hazy definitions of Orientalism itself.

Similarly, the second chapter, which is the book's longest section, extends Hallaq's discussion of paradigms and further develop his analysis of misconceptions of Orientalism. Central to his concerns in the chapter is his interrogation of "the links [Said] made between Orientalism as a scholarly discipline and political power" and how this connection presumably has "never produced such an intricate and inextricable association in any other place or time in the world" (72). This question drives the case studies featured in this chapter, specifically of Islam and of the existence of colonial projects in the Ottoman Empire, Algeria, India, and the Indonesian Archipelago. While chapter 2 offers an in-depth problematizing of how the field has adopted "the dichotomization of modern Europe and the rest of the world," chapter 3 builds on this discussion by conceptualizing "the subversive author's" role in knowledge production and within central paradigms as discussed in the previous two chapters (19). In doing this, Hallaq extends Foucault's theory of the author, which is a critical piece of claims made in subsequent chapters regarding how the connection between knowledge and power can be challenged. His theoretical groundwork between chapters 1 through 3 regarding the canonicity of Said's work and its related microcosmic misconceptions of Orientalism prepare the reader for his shift in analysis throughout chapters 4 and 5. In particular, his discussions focus on issues of sovereignty, structural genocide, transforming Orientalism, and collapsing the boundaries between Orientalism and other fields in modern academia. Taken together, the final two chapters of *Restating Orientalism* build from the foundation developed in the first few chapters and offers an in-depth look at Hallaq's proposed revisions to how Orientalism studies approaches key topics.

Chapter 4 signals Hallaq's transition in focus towards exposing the similarities between Orientalism studies and other modern academic disciplines. The discussion builds towards the author's ultimate project of "open[ing] up critical space for a scrutiny of the entire range of modern academia, leaving no escape route for even the fine arts and other aesthetic endeavors, however less incriminated these are in the violent and destructive projects of modernity" (25). In particular, he focuses on how business schools and economics departments within academia share qualities with corporations in what he identifies as "the exploitation of matter and people for the single but highest goal of profit" (187). Following this analysis, Hallaq turns his attention to other university departments,

including visual arts, the sciences, and literature while also attending to the ongoing relationship between knowledge and structural genocide. Finally, chapter 5 engages with the full range of relationships and systems that inform power and knowledge, which build towards his concluding assertion that “the study of history, Orientalism, philosophy, science, and any other field of intellectual inquiry is essentially an exercise in an ethical self-construction, a technology for ethicizing the self” (267).