

Continental Drift: The Disjunction of North and Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

Research and popular imaginative views of Africa in the last few decades have tended to leave out the northern region, even when referring to the continent as a whole. In many academic disciplines, “Africa” and “The Arab World” are mutually exclusive labels, and separating between North and sub-Saharan Africa has become accepted to such an extent that it has shaped our perception of African Studies as a field. How have literatures of the two regions come to be separated and so rarely studied together despite strong links caused by geographic proximity? Why have scholars of African literatures focused largely on sub-Saharan Africa? To begin answering these questions, it is necessary not only to address literary matters—including issues such as the impact of the publishing industry in codifying a canon of African literature, but also to consider factors relating to the political climate of the twentieth century.

The products of research and popular imaginative views of Africa in the last few decades have tended to leave out the northern region, even when speaking of the continent as a whole. “Africa” now ostensibly stands for sub-Saharan Africa, whereas North Africa is considered in many academic disciplines to be part of the Middle East instead. There is hardly any consensus on the issue, and some do, in fact, deem North and sub-Saharan Africa to belong to the same area. However, distinguishing between the two regions is far more prevalent. Although African literature scholars necessarily draw boundaries and focus their work according to specific criteria, such as authors, periods, genres or areas, as do scholars of other literatures, the recurrent separation between North and sub-Saharan Africa has become accepted to such an extent that it has shaped our perception of the field.

Yet, evidence of the long-standing connections between the peoples on both sides of and through the Sahara desert is visible. The formation of trans-Saharan commerce and trade routes is related to the emergence of markets on the Mediterranean coast, which date back to the Carthaginian Empire in the ninth century BCE (Levtzion 63). These routes have facilitated cultural exchanges, and scholars can observe cultural connections between North and sub-Saharan Africa today. For instance, Ahmed Rahal and David Goodman have written about communities of sub-Saharan origin in Tunisia and Morocco, respectively. Conversely, Mukhtar Umar Bunza has researched the influence of North Africa on the practice of Islam in Northern Nigeria, and, similarly, Akin Euba has studied the Islamic roots of musical cultures among the Yoruba. Ali Mazrui has also emphasized the tremendous role of North Africa in shaping African identity with its contacts with sub-Saharan Africa through history in his 2005 article, "The Re-invention of Africa: Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Beyond."

Why, then, have scholars of African literatures focused largely on sub-Saharan Africa and neglected the Northern parts of the continent? How have literatures of the two regions come to be separated and so rarely studied in concert in spite of the strong links that geographic proximity has created between them? To begin answering these questions, it is necessary not only to consider literary matters, including issues such as the impact of the publishing industry in codifying a canon of African literature, but also to address the political climate of the twentieth century. It is possible to observe that current notions of North Africa's racial, cultural, and literary ties to the rest of the continent may in some ways reflect factors such as movements of decolonization and national independence throughout Africa, fluctuating inclinations of pan-Africanism and pan-Arabism, and conflicts in the Middle East. There were also distinctions made between North and sub-Saharan Africa predating the beginning of European colonialism, and going back much earlier. However, it is in the twentieth century that the study of African literature emerged as an academic discipline, and cemented the general marginalization of North Africa in that field.

This is not to suggest that the entire continent is uniform and free of diversity, and that any distinction between various areas of Africa should be obliterated accordingly. After all, there are also palpable differences between regions. However, proximity does play a role in creating cultural cohesion between peoples, even across the Sahara desert, which research often misconstrues as a boundary. The multitude of linguistic, literary, artistic, and cultural outputs in various parts of Africa makes any attempt at mapping them impractical because they do not always overlap neatly, nor do they necessarily fit perfectly into convenient geographical boundaries or rely on categories constructed by academic and governmental institutions. Since the separation between North and sub-Saharan Africa has endured in spite of well-known historical connections, compiling an exhaustive list of causes that contributed to this separation is ineffective. The separation between the literatures of the two regions does not stem simply from a widespread ignorance of specific links between them, and will not simply come to an end if a list of these links is revealed.

The tendency to focus largely on texts and authors from areas south of the Sahara in African literary studies is particularly evident in the abundance of anthologies, edited volumes, and surveys that contributed to the establishment

of a canon of African literature—especially in the nineteen seventies and eighties—but nearly always failed to include North African writers, while attempting to provide an overview of Africa's literary production. Examples of these surveys include Edgar Wright's *The Critical Evaluation of African Literature* (1973), Eustace Palmer's *The Growth of the African Novel* (1979), Samuel Omo Asein's *Studies in the African Novel* (1986), and Simon Gikandi's *Reading the African Novel* (1987), all of which contain numerous examples of works from the eastern, western, and southern parts of the continent, but rarely mention North African literature.

This tendency does not apply to scholarship on the African novel only; surveys of African drama and poetry also follow this trend, and so do reviews of African literature at large, such as O. R. Dathorne's *African Literature in the Twentieth Century* (1975) or Oyekan Owomoyela's *African Literatures: An Introduction* (1979) and *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures* (1993). On the rare occasions when North Africa is mentioned, it is typically to be dismissed in order to justify a focus on sub-Saharan Africa. Keith Booker, for instance, writes in the preface to his 1998 introductory study on the African novel that "the cultural traditions of North Africa differ substantially from those of sub-Saharan Africa," and includes only novels from south of the Sahara (ix).

Between *Research in African Literatures'* first issue in 1970 and the production of a special issue on Arabic writing in Africa in 1997 (28.3, edited by Farida Abu-Haidar), the journal published more than five hundred articles, and fewer than twenty of those were on North Africa and appeared mostly in 1992 as part of a special issue on the region (23.2, edited by Patricia Geesey). Subsequently, twenty-nine articles on North African literature appeared in *Research in African Literatures* between 2002 and 2007, not counting a special issue on Algeria in 1999 (30.3, edited by Danielle Marx-Scouras). Although this overview indicates an increase in the North African presence in African literary criticism, interest in that region remains slight in comparison with other areas of the continent. Moreover, the modest increase in visibility in *Research in African Literatures* is certainly not representative, as *African Literature Today*, for example, has published only three articles related to North Africa since 1968.

Initially, one of the most detectable justifications for the separation was racial. Indeed, the phrase Black Africa was widely used before sub-Saharan became the preferred term. Although essentialist racial distinctions are no longer, consciously or not, an explicit basis for academic categories, they are nevertheless at the root of partitions in African literatures, in part due to the importance of Negritude in African literary scholarship. In most African literature courses, especially introductory classes, significant time is allocated to the Negritude poets. Pius Ngandu Nkashama, for example, wrote a book in 2000 dedicated to the subject of Negritude in the teaching of African literatures. Even in classes with a scope wide enough to include texts from ancient and precolonial periods, Negritude poets are often connected to the beginnings of African literature as an academic subject. From the 1932, first and only issue of *L'Égitime Défense*, to "Orphée Noir," Jean Paul Sartre's introductory essay to Senghor's 1948 anthology of poetry, the literary and political momentum of Negritude is set as the theoretical foundation for the launching of African literary studies—especially their francophone aspects—in the second half of the twentieth century. Accordingly, the racial dimension at the heart of Negritude has contributed to the marginalization of North Africans.

From the outset, Negritude was shaped by an idea of a black race. It was the Harlem Renaissance and black writers of the United States who initially influenced founders of Negritude, such as Senghor, Césaire, and Damas, providing them with a sense of awareness and recognition of a black racial identity that binds African and Caribbean people (Kesteloot 80–82). The origin of African literature as the subject of an academic discipline was therefore construed initially along racial terms, with “blackness”—regardless of the various meanings allocated to the word by different people at different times—as a literary category. There has nonetheless been much criticism of essentialist readings of Negritude, and its founders have been open to the application of its theoretical framework to issues beyond racial considerations. In fact, they have generally been more open to inclusion rather than exclusion. In the global context of the struggles for independence and the waves of decolonization of the nineteen fifties and sixties, the designated status of “colonized” was a sufficient premise to be perceived through a race-based consciousness. In “New Ethnicities,” Stuart Hall identifies this as a “moment” in the black cultural politics of the second half of the twentieth century:

The term ‘black’ was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain and came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, amongst groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities. (223)

Although in this case Stuart Hall is referring to Britain, France and its colonies were in an analogous situation. Imperialist discourses of sameness and uniformity imposed on colonized people were appropriated by the latter in a political effort to unify, and were put to use as an idiom of decolonization across the empire. As a result of these political sympathies, the imperative of race briefly lost its priority in favor of an emphasis on the struggle for independence throughout Africa.

Yet, in spite of the role of the shared experience of colonialism in bringing together North and sub-Saharan Africa for the common cause of decolonization, as political concerns changed, unaddressed racial issues and the enduring pairing of “Africa” with “blackness” ultimately contributed to the lasting perceptions of North Africa as separate from the rest of the continent. When it came to North Africans, it was not a question of whether or not they are black. Instead, the overall racial classification of North African peoples is awkwardly vague and difficult to fit precisely into a white/black paradigm, whereas the situation in sub-Saharan Africa is less ambiguous.

The distinction between North and sub-Saharan Africa increased after the period of decolonization, reflecting the shifting political drives of pan-Arabism and pan-Africanism. It is noteworthy that periods of detachment between North and sub-Saharan Africa coincide with moments of rapprochements within the Arab World. The revolution of July 1952 in Egypt, which marked Gamal Abdul Nasser’s rise to power, came with a profound interest in strengthening the ties between Africa and the Arab world. Then, these were not necessarily seen as mutually exclusive entities. When Nasser wrote *Egypt’s Liberation: The Philosophy of the Revolution* in the nineteen fifties, he strongly believed in the strength and importance of the bond between Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa. As he outlined the three “circles”—Arab, African, and Muslim—that would frame the rise of Egypt, he wrote:

قلت دون استفاضة ودون إسهاب: إننا لن نستطيع بحال من الأحوال — حتى لو أردنا — أن نقف بمعزل عن الصراع الدامي المخيف الذي يدور اليوم في أعماق إفريقيا بين خمسة ملايين من البيض ومائتي مليون من الأفريقيين. لانستطيع لسبب هام وبدهي ، هو أننا في إفريقيا. (١١٢-١١١)

I may say without exaggeration that we cannot, under any circumstance, however much we might desire it, remain aloof from the terrible and sanguinary conflict going on there between five million whites and 200 million Africans. We cannot do so for an important and obvious reason: we are *in* Africa. (109)

The 1952 revolution set an inspiring precedent that validated decolonizing movements elsewhere in Africa. As Abdul Aziz Jalloh points out, Nasser was a spokesman for Africa at the Bandung Conference in 1955, and Radio Cairo started broadcasting in support of nationalist struggles across the continent (17–18). However, Egypt's role and influence in Africa had withered by the beginning of the next decade. This was due in part to the fact that Egypt became concerned with unification with Syria and with the creation of the short-lived United Arab Republic. There was as well as the rise of the new leader, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, who would take away from Nasser's dominant role as an anticolonialist hero. Quarrels over leadership in pan-Africanism and the emergence of rival groupings in the early nineteen sixties—the so-called Brazzaville Group, Casablanca Powers, and Monrovia States—also stood in the way of African unity (Legum 50–55), and contributed to widening the distance between North and sub-Saharan countries (Akinsanya 517). Subsequently, as most African states became independent, North African countries grew increasingly involved in Arab unity, and concerned with issues that the rest of the continent considered extraneous, the most significant of which being the conflict with Israel.

Initially, few sub-Saharan African countries took a position regarding Israel. As Ali Mazrui remarks:

But in general from 1957 to 1970 the deep ambivalence of black Africa towards the Arabs and the Israelis remained. Ideological differences among the Black Africans themselves helped to divide loyalties and sympathies. Even those Africans keenly sympathetic to the Arabs continued to have diplomatic and economic relations with Israel in spite of all. ("Africa" 77)

Since the 1970s, however, sub-Saharan countries have become increasingly supportive of the Arab side in the conflict with Israel. Critics such as Mazrui have argued that this support was unrelated to the oil crisis of 1973. Although the increase in Afro-Arab solidarity was already suggested by the fact that the 1972 Organization of African Unity Summit was held in Rabat, Morocco, economic pressures certainly played a role in influencing the position of African states on the Israel issue (Peters 44).

Besides the question of Israel, other issues further contributed to the separation between North and sub-Saharan Africa. They include the conflicts in Somalia and Sudan, countries that are members of both the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union) and the League of Arab States, as well as the dispute over Western Sahara, which caused Morocco to leave the Organization of African

Unity in protest after it recognized the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in 1984 (Jensen 33), and the delicate positions of both Arab and African leaders in the tense context of the 2003 US attack on Iraq (Muchie 324). Therefore, in spite of a series of attempts by Libyan president Muammar Qaddafi to lead movements of African unity, and an enduring strand of pan-Africanism that rejects the separation between North and sub-Saharan Africa, to which Kwame Nkrumah, for example, adhered (Esedebe 229), trans-Saharan political ties never became as strong as the solidarity between countries on either side of the Sahara during the period of decolonization. These political tendencies find an echo in the general separation between North and sub-Saharan Africa in academic research, and the category in which North African literature fits today is not obvious.

One example of the impact of North Africa's oscillating identity politics and indecisive position between Africa and the Arab World on literature can be seen in the trajectory of the Moroccan magazine *Souffles*. Established in 1966 by a group of Moroccan poets and intellectuals including the writer Abdellatif Laâbi, the magazine started with a will to foster literary expression and cultural debates. Although *Souffles*'s most significant contribution was the instigation of a dialogue between French and Arabic literary publics by often juxtaposing texts in the two languages, the magazine also quickly introduced subjects of a broader postcolonial scope through articles on topics such as Negritude or Third World nationalism. However, starting with the Arab defeat in the six day war with Israel in 1967, the magazine became increasingly focused on the Arab World. In 1969, after dedicating its fifteenth issue to Palestine, *Souffles* adopted a new, more politicized orientation until its ban in 1972. The case of *Souffles* illustrates the fact that the North African literary community in the second half of the twentieth century was intimately tied to politics. By the end of the nineteen sixties, however, national independence was no longer a pressing issue in North Africa and most of the rest of the continent, which caused a shift of attention towards Palestine and the Middle East, thereby causing ties with sub-Saharan Africa to be neglected.

However, while political frictions in the twentieth century are reflected in scholarship, the separation between North and sub-Saharan African literatures at that time is also related to factors connected more directly to literature and literary studies. One of these is the rise of English as the major language of African literary criticism. When Keith Booker wrote that "the cultural traditions of North Africa differ substantially from those of sub-Saharan Africa," he also admitted, to his credit, that if he chose not to include North African authors in his book on the African novel it was "not because they are not African" (ix). Rather, it was because he felt that his targeted readers were mostly English-speaking students who would be more comfortable reading books by authors from the former British colonies of Africa. Additionally, the adoption of postcolonialism as a theoretical framework for African literary criticism contributed to the separation between North and sub-Saharan Africa due to the English language being, as Madeleine Dobie has called it, the lingua franca of postcolonial theory (32). According to her, postcolonial theory, initially shaped in English departments in British and American universities, is founded on key texts in English, and has generally centered on the former British colonies (32). Consequently, North Africa became a neglected area in English-oriented African literary scholarship.

This neglect is also largely due to the role played by British publishers in classifying the literatures of the empire. Following the success of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the development of the Heinemann African Writers series, with Achebe as its first director, was crucial in establishing the canon of postcolonial African literature. Although there were other venues for the publication of African literature in English, such as Longman's own African Writers series and Oxford University Press's Three Crowns series, Heinemann's African Writers series, as Becky Clarke notes, seems "to possess a greater canonizing power in African academia" (165–6). Clark also reminds us that "when Heinemann, alongside other publishing companies, came to Africa, it was largely, if inadvertently, to fulfill a colonial mission" (163), as the imposition of the British system of education throughout the colonies opened a new market for British publishers. The African works that Heinemann published were thus predominantly written in English originally (although several works in translation were included), and came from the same former British colonies where Heinemann hoped to sell its books. Because of the limited colonial presence of Britain in North Africa, the literature of the latter was not considered a high priority. In the early years of the series, the very few works originally written in Arabic that were published by Heinemann were predominantly by authors from Egypt, which is the only country in North Africa with colonial ties to Great Britain. Even though more Egyptian authors were later added, the British publisher showed an inclination towards mapping its African literature publications according to a narrow view inherited from the colonial experience.

In the case of former French colonies in Africa, although the Parisian publishing houses Présence Africaine and L'Harmattan are to an extent the equivalent of the Heinemann African Writers Series, many francophone African authors were in a different situation from their English-speaking counterparts in that they were published by houses in France that did not specialize in African literature exclusively. According to Bernard Mouralis, many West African authors were published by French publishers such as Julliard, Plon, Seuil, and Gallimard who did not focus on any single literature (149). In *L'édition africaine en France*, Elsa Schifano also notes that sub-Saharan African authors have had their works published by specialized houses, as well as nonspecialized ones such as Hatier, Le Serpent à plumes, and Albin Michel (81–107). Similarly, francophone writers from the former French colonies in North Africa, that is, the Maghreb, have had their works published by various houses that did not necessarily specialize in the literature of that area. According to Mouralis:

Ce phénomène d'intégration à la vie littéraire française apparaît avec beaucoup plus de netteté lors des rééditions en séries "de poche." En effet, dans ce cas-là, si elle assure à l'œuvre africaine une audience que l'auteur n'imaginait guère lors de la publication initiale et dont on ne peut d'ailleurs que se féliciter, la diffusion massive, de quelques œuvres africaines disperses et noyées dans des collections comportant plusieurs milliers de titres, contribue en même temps à masquer aux yeux des lecteurs le lien qui peut unir entre elles ces œuvres.

This phenomenon of integration into French literary life appears all the more clearly with re-editions in mass-market paperbacks. Indeed, in such a case, the African work is given an audience that the author could never have imagined at

the time of the first edition. However, although this is praiseworthy, the mass distribution of a few African works dispersed and buried within series that include thousands of titles contributes at the same time to hide from the eyes of readers the link that these works could share. (149)

If, as Mouralis argues, the links between various sub-Saharan African works are overlooked, the possible links between North and sub-Saharan African books are all the more unnoticed. Consequently, although the role of the metropolitan publishing industry in establishing a canon for regional literatures is less obvious in the case of France than it is in that of Britain, the distinction between North and sub-Saharan Africa is nonetheless extremely marked among French publishers. Moreover, in the case of those who do specialize in African literature, the focus is typically on sub-Saharan Africa, or, in the rare instances when North African authors are included, they appear in a separate series. L'Harmattan, for example, the publishing house and bookstore founded in 1975 that specializes largely in African subjects, does publish North African works but usually includes them in a separate series on the Middle East and the Arab World, regardless of whether they have been translated from Arabic or written originally in French.

In comparison with African literature in English, nevertheless, francophone African literature lends itself more readily to scholarly approaches that do not distinguish between north and south of the Sahara due to the linguistic connection between the Maghreb and West Africa. It should be noted, therefore, that generally speaking the few who do view North African literature as relevant to the study of African literature as a whole are mostly scholars of francophone literature who specialize in the Maghreb and approach the subject from a perspective based on the French language. Hédi Bouraoui, Mildred Mortimer, and Hélène Tissières, for example, have conducted comparative studies of North and sub-Saharan African literatures. Although the pairing of the Maghreb and West Africa on a francophone basis is commendable, and should be encouraged given the far more widespread tendency to separate the two, the fact that it almost inevitably fails to deal with significant nonfrancophone aspects of each area is problematic because a wide body of literature in other languages from these francophone areas remains unstudied.

When the Tunisian writer Albert Memmi was compiling the *Anthologie des écrivains maghrébins d'expression française* in 1964, his opinion was that Maghrebi literary production in French was not apt to endure. In fact, Memmi felt that the emergence of a generation of autochthonous North African writers in French—as opposed to French writers like André Gide or even Albert Camus whose North African background was almost incidental—deserved to be anthologized precisely because it was likely to vanish as history took its course. Memmi's position at the time is consistent with contemporary postindependence sentiments in the Maghreb, as well as with the ensuing rise of Arabization, the policy of promoting Arabic language and culture in reaction against the colonial cultural aftermath, which has been studied in great detail by Gilbert Grandguillaume in *Arabisation et politique linguistique au Maghreb*. Yet, although Arabic-language literature in the Maghreb has been growing since the nineteen sixties, Maghrebi literature in French has endured, despite Memmi's prediction. As it happens, francophone Maghrebi texts are better known outside of North Africa than Arabic-language

ones, which accounts for why francophone North Africa has received significant critical attention on the part of literary scholars, especially in Europe and North America, whereas Arabic-language Maghrebi literature has not.

The focus on the francophone dimension of the Maghreb is due to a variety of factors ranging from the scarcity of scholars who are equally proficient in French and Arabic or Berber, to the simple fact that many literary works are unavailable or difficult to obtain. For instance, in the introduction to *Maghrebian Mosaic*, Mortimer acknowledges the growth of Arabic language literature in the Maghreb since the independence of those countries, but notes that works written in French and published in Paris are better distributed (4). In her article "Francophone Studies and the Linguistic Diversity of the Maghreb," Madeleine Dobie deplored such French-centered approaches to studying the Maghreb, suggesting that comparative literature is a field where the study of both French and Arabic language Maghrebi texts can increase, and that Francophone Studies programs should break new ground by teaching Arabic alongside French, in order to overcome the language barriers that remain in place in higher education in North America and Europe, as well as in North Africa (38–39).

The fact that Arabic today is not a language typically associated with African literature further contributes to the marginalization of North Africa from African literary studies. For specialists of Africa, Arabic is a heritage language that is usually of interest only to historians, especially those who specialize in the Sahel region of West Africa. Even those African authors who write in Arabic and who have received some critical attention, such as Nawal El Saadawi or Tayeb Salih, owe their reputation mostly to the translation of their works into European languages. In view of the scarcity of scholars of Arabic in African studies, and the fact that it is not considered an African language among academic institutions, the study of North African literature within that framework is crippled. Although the linguistic link between the former French colonies on both sides of the Sahara is a legitimate foundation for a field of study, it does not account for the Arabic and Berber literary productions that rarely benefit from critical attention, in spite of the importance of these languages to francophone authors from the region. Moreover, it also excludes Libya, and Egypt focusing solely on Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.

The absence of Arabic among acknowledged languages of contemporary African expression stands in the way of the study of North African texts. While francophone connections between the Maghreb and West Africa have been studied, North African authors who write in Arabic receive little attention from critics in the Middle East. While most francophone North African authors found avenues to publish their works in France, the Arabic literary production of the region often turned to publishing houses in countries such as Egypt and Lebanon, and had to cater to an audience with less familiarity with culture and society in the former French colonies of North Africa. This impacted literature in Arabic in North Africa, and contributed to widening the gap between French and Arabic literary production in the Maghreb. Further research still needs to be done concerning the Arabic publishing industry. Nevertheless, although Arab publishers are not as obviously tied to a colonial project as is the case in Britain, the fact that the most prominent of them are located in the eastern Mediterranean contributes to diffuse the African identity of Maghrebi literature.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, the Maghreb had become known primarily for producing a literature in French. As a result, the region's literatures have acquired the reputation of being less authentically Arab, and that reputation has extended to works in Arabic. This view is illustrated by Roger Allen's seminal survey *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (1982), where the question of language is advanced to explain the absence of works from the Maghreb. Allen argues that the influence of French on the region contributed "to retard the development of a narrative prose tradition in Arabic" (44). Consequently, any ties that proximity or a shared experience of French colonialism may have created between the Maghreb and West Africa for example rarely found their way in Arabic North African literature successfully. The case of the Moroccan author Leila Abouzeid, for instance, is telling in that regard. Her first novel, *ʿĀmal-fil* (1983), did not draw the attention of critics in the Arab World until it had been translated into English as *Year of the Elephant* (1989) and garnered interest among Western academics. Abouzeid has deplored this, attributing it to a sense of superiority among the Middle Eastern literary community that looks down on Maghrebi literature (*al-Fasl al-Akhīr* 10). However, French culture and its particular impact on Moroccan society are central themes in *ʿĀmal-fil*, which made the novel initially seem less pertinent to Arab readers who had not experienced French colonialism, even though it was written in Arabic, and the author, in fact, condemns the use of French.

The factors listed above—from twentieth century politics to publishing and language issues—do not constitute a definitive list of reasons why North and sub-Saharan Africa have often been separated. They do indicate, however, that the grounds for this separation are mostly related to international relations or the economics of literary industries and academic institutions, rather than motivated by strictly cultural considerations or any intrinsic difference between the two areas. The ensuing conventional perception of Africa that does not include its Northern countries is still too often transmitted by area studies programs, and results in inoperative classifications that act as a limiting barrier for scholars. Although including North Africa in African Studies is certainly desirable, the fact that academics have had conflicting opinions on this issue so far suggests that it is unlikely that a consensus will be reached now, especially considering the improbability of immediate change among the factors that contributed to separating the two regions in the first place.

Nevertheless, provincialisms are gradually diminishing in some academic institutions today (Zezele; Robinson; Quayson), and deeply rooted geopolitical assumptions are becoming problematic. Correspondingly, current trends in African Studies suggest an increasing will to bridge the divide between North and sub-Saharan Africa. One example that is indicative of this inclination is the fact that the American Institute for Maghrib Studies (AIMS) and the West African Research Association (WARA) have co-organized a two-part conference that took place in 2009 and 2010 in Tangiers, Morocco, and Dakar, Senegal, respectively. This conference, entitled "Saharan Crossroads/Carrefour Saharien," reveals an increased interest in linking North and sub-Saharan Africa. Its purpose, as indicated in the call for papers posted on the AIMS website, is precisely to counter the fact that "Africa has traditionally been viewed through a bifocal lens in which the Sahara Desert has been perceived as an impenetrable barrier dividing the continent."

Ultimately, the classification of North African literature has to do with the limitations of the way that we view and categorize cultures. The benefit of asking whether North Africa is Arab or African is that it leads to questioning the extent to which a part of the world can be defined as a single place. The fundamental issue is not to discover whether North Africa is essentially African and belongs in that continent instead of the Arab World, or if it has more affinities with the Middle East instead. Rather, it is a question of the extent to which “African” and “Arab” are not mutually exclusive labels. In order to avoid placing North African literature into a paradigm where it fits with the rest of Africa only as an alternative to the Arab World, it is equally necessary to cultivate a broadened view that comprises the inclusion of North African works in the study of African literatures, and seek to connect North African literatures to other literary traditions. Challenging the dictate that the Sahara is an inflexible academic boundary opens up the possibility for future research to take a further step and consider not only North Africa but also the rest of the Arab World to be equally relevant to analyses of African literary cultures, and vice versa. In other words, we should eventually be ready to reconsider not only the validity of the Sahara as a cultural frontier, but that of the Red Sea as well.

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