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Book Review

Abdelmajid Hannoum, *The Invention of the Maghreb: Between Africa and the Middle East*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. x, 320; maps. $29.99 (paper).

In 1966, the celebrated anti-colonial historian of the Maghreb, Charles-André Julien published a book entitled *Histoire de l'Afrique blanche* [*History of White Africa*] that offered an overview of the history of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt to 1945. What is notable about this title is that it combines two categories that most readers tend to put in opposition. Even today, North American and European publics tend to categorize "blackness" and "Africa" together under one rubric. By modifying "*Afrique*" with "*blanche*," Julien suggests that Europe does not have a monopoly on "whiteness."

However, in his review of Julien's book, historian Roger Le Tourneau argued that *Histoire de l'Afrique blanche* dealt with two different subjects entirely: the Maghreb and Egypt. To Le Tourneau and most other Euro-American historians, Egypt is not part of Africa—it is part of the Middle East. Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, on the other hand, are neither part of the Middle East nor of Africa; they are the Maghreb. Libya is unique, often split between regions. Cyrenaica, and its capital, Benghazi, have close connections with Egypt and the rest of the Middle East; Tripolitania, with its capital in Tripoli, is linked closely with Tunisia and the rest of the Maghreb; Fezzan, in the south, is a thoroughly Saharan space that has a strong relationship with Chad, Niger, and the Algerian Sahara. Yet, when we look at a map, we can clearly see that these countries are geographically part of Africa and, culturally, they are also part of the so-called "Arab world." With this imaginative geography in mind, Abdelmajid Hannoum asks: How did the Maghreb—particularly Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia—become defined as a discrete region separate from Africa and the Middle East?

In 1830, when French soldiers invaded Algeria, such a geographical formulation would have been unthinkable. Yet, by the age of Julien and Le Tourneau, it was received wisdom. In *The Invention of the Maghreb*, Hannoum argues that the Maghreb was invented in a specifically French context by institutions established by colonial officials. They invented it through the "reconfiguration of lands, reordering of history itself,

recategorization of populations, restructuring of [North African] modes of life, and redefinition of [North African] modes of thought and ways of being" in order to make the cultures and societies of the Maghreb understandable from a European perspective (5).

Hannoum's *The Invention of the Maghreb* consists of five chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. The first four chapters are based around specific academic disciplines in which scholars and other practitioners constructed the Maghreb; specifically, cartography, archaeology, anthropology, and history. The fifth chapter examines the way that North Africans absorbed French ideas of the Maghreb by the mid-late twentieth century, and the conclusion suggests that the post-independence "Maghreb" has major weaknesses as a concept.

In the first chapter, the author analyzes the way that French cartographers constructed the Maghreb. While earlier geographers framed the Maghreb as an island caught between the Mediterranean and the Sahara, nineteenth century French cartographers came to see the Sahara as a wall--rather than a sea--that separates "civilization" (Europe) from "savagery" (Africa).

In chapter two, Hannoum discusses the importance of archaeology to the French construction of the Maghreb. When the French arrived in Algeria, the only points of reference they had for the past was a mixture of Roman ruins and Islamic knowledge, which religious scholars called marabouts, generated and disseminated. Through Roman ruins, the French claimed historical rights to the region; rather than the French being conquerors, Arabs were the true conquerors, and the Maghreb was basically a Roman space.

Chapter three is about the construction of race through language and ethnicity. Because French administrators and scholars saw Arabs as historical conquerors, they defined the Maghreb as Amazigh (pl. Imazighen, "Berber"), pitted in opposition to both Arabs, who were representative of the Middle East, and black Africans who were representative of the lands south of the Sahara. What French officials missed is that "black African," "Arab," and "Amazigh" are not discrete categories. Indeed, as in the case of the Tuareg or Morocco's Haratin population, it is entirely possible for a group or an individual to be all three.

In chapter four, Hannoum examines colonial historiography and argues that French colonials defined a new historical narrative. In their view, the Maghreb, since the eighth century, had faced racial conflict between Arabs and Imazighen, and that it required a "superior but benevolent" force (i.e., the French) to put an end to this racial struggle (204). To justify colonization, the French argued that they were intervening to establish a Maghrebi civilization. Although they claimed to speak on behalf of the Imazighen, the language they imposed was French.

In the fifth chapter, the author finds that North African scholars took up French ideas about the Maghreb, further reifying French logics. Before the French arrived,

members of the *'ulama*, religious scholars who fixated on religious studies, literature, and philosophy, produced the bulk of North African knowledge. However, French officials brought new forms of scientific knowledge that the '*ulama* were unfamiliar with, and they responded by borrowing French geographies while simultaneously distancing themselves from France, the larger Middle East, and the rest of Africa. By the 1920s, they had produced a new, Arab Maghreb out of the nineteenth-century French Maghreb.

Hannoum concludes his book with a study of cracks in the idea of the Maghreb. Although today it is often viewed as a cohesive region, it continues to have a profound level of disunity. As the peoples of the Maghreb fought for independence from France, they relied on the region's coherence to coordinate. Yet, Libya, as a non-Francophone country, and Mauritania, which was governed as part of France's West African federation [*Afrique-Occidentale française*], were excluded from the whole. Other conflicts within the Maghreb include the status of the Western Sahara, which Sahrawi and Algerian activists argue should be independent, while Moroccan authorities claim it to be properly Moroccan; the level of autonomy given to Amazigh people; and the position of the French language within each country.

The Invention of the Maghreb is an insightful and welcome contribution to the historical and geographical literature on North Africa, Hannoum makes clear that the "Maghreb" is a historically specific, colonial category that drew on older Greco-Arab geographies and pushed them in a new direction. Above all, this text will appeal to historians of the Middle East and North Africa, those interested in knowledge production, and world historians interested in challenging received Euro-American geographical wisdom. However, this text may be difficult to use in the high school or undergraduate classroom because of its dense writing style and the niche subject of the book. Nevertheless, instructors who are interested in incorporating North African history into their courses will find it illuminating for the way that it challenges received geographies.

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