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## Interviews

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# INTERVIEWS

*Robert J.C. Young*

*Cheikh Anta Babou*

*Bartholomew C. Dean*

*Ania Loomba*

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In these interviews, academics from Penn and various universities across the United States discuss the issue of defining Postcolonial, Subaltern and Transnational Studies. These academic were chosen because of both their influence in their respective fields and the innovative work they are engaging in. The interviews were conducted separately.

**Dr. Robert J.C. Young** (D.Phil. Exeter College, Oxford 1979) is Silver Professor of English and Comparative Literature at New York University. Dr. Young focuses on the history of colonialism and anti-colonialism, as well as postcolonial literatures and cultures. He is the General Editor of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. Dr. Young's first book (*White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*) argued that Marxist philosophies of history were not world histories, as they claimed, but instead served as repositories of Eurocentric thought.

**Dr. Cheikh Anta Babou** (Ph.D. Michigan State University 2002) is Associate Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Babou focuses on francophone West Africa from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, as well as the African diasporas in France and the United States. His recent research includes work on the history of the *Muridiyyah*, an Islamic Sufi order based primarily in Senegal and The Gambia.

**Dr. Bartholomew C. Dean** (Ph.D. Harvard University 1995) is Associate Professor of Socio-Cultural Anthropology at the University of Kansas. Dr. Dean focuses on critical theory, kinship, symbolic forms and material culture of Amazonia and Latin America.

**Dr. Ania Loomba** (Ph.D. University of Sussex 1988) holds the Catherine Bryson Chair in the English department at the University of Pennsylvania. She is also faculty in Comparative Literature, South Asian Studies, Women's

Studies, and Asian-American Studies. Dr. Loomba focuses on Early Modern Studies, postcolonial studies, feminist theory and South Asian studies. She is currently editing an edition of Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra* and also writing a book on how global travel shaped theater in Shakespeare's time.

**Penn History Review (PHR):** *How would you define Postcolonial Studies? How would you define Subaltern Studies and Transnational Studies?*

**Dr. Robert J.C. Young (RY):** The first has a literary provenance, the second a history provenance, the third comparative literature.

**Dr. Cheikh Anta Babou (CB):** Postcolonial Studies is, as the name suggests, history as viewed at the end of colonialism. It is a discipline that moves away from the nationalistic discourse of the 1960's, and is also a result of disenchantment with post-colonial policies [enacted by African countries]. It no longer views history as simply a clash between a dominant Europe and weak Africa; rather it looks to the responsibility of Africans in making their history. Postcolonial Studies borrows from literary methods, and one also sees the impact of post-modernism through the use of scholars such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Postcolonial Studies brings new perspectives, in particular the importance of analyzing texts rather than simply sources. Often they will not look at archives or documents from European explorers. Instead, they believe that the reader itself gives meaning to the text. There is no embedded meaning; it is created by the reader. It also brings a kind of relativism that could be seen as a sort of nihilism.

Subaltern Studies came from India, of course. It had a precursor in England with E.P. Thompson – he tried to write 'history from below.' That is, that history is not only made by the powerful, but that it can be made by the powerless. His writings were shaped by Marxism. Subaltern Studies worked with not just the working class, but the peasant class – how they have their own history and way of resisting. And not just against Europeans, but against local bourgeoisie as well. The peasant class had their own way of waging resistance. Not simply through strikes, which is what much of the history of resistance focuses on – but when a peasant burns their house or sings a song that shames people, this is a form of resistance as well. Those who work in Subaltern Studies say that this way of fighting has the same value as striking [in industrial settings] does.

My understanding of [Transnational Studies] is that it is an outgrowth of the process of globalization. Identities are not bounded by borders, [neither] are cultures bounded by borders. Just as economies are becoming globalized, so too are cultures. It is trying to free [scholarship] from the nation-state. We've always done history this way, the history of France, the history of Senegal or Mali. It is trying to bridge the nation-state, and thus it is a major part of diaspora studies.

I think, though, that there will be a return to the classical method with regard to doing history. You have new theories, and then people get disillusioned and get back to the core method. Postmodernism is a good example, it was very hot 15-20 years ago, but it is subsiding and people are getting disillusioned with it.

**Dr. Bartholomew C. Dean (BD):** Postcolonial studies inquiry into the contested construction of socio-cultural identity in colonized regions. This entails comprehending the creation of an “imagined” national or supra-local identity following “formal” independence; exploring the nature and consequences of nationalism as an ideological construct, socio-cultural and discursive set of practices; and understanding the ways in which society and cultures have reacted to and resisted colonial “intrusions.”

**Dr. Ania Loomba (AL):** There are no precise definitions possible because these terms have different meanings in different parts of the world. In the US they have become institutionalized to a greater degree than anywhere else which is ironic because they supposedly arose from, and pertain to, the study of what we can call the Global South. Postcolonial Studies now generally refers to the study of literatures, histories, and the cultural and political processes which tell us about European colonization, the challenges to it, and its global legacy. The legacy would include the ongoing imbalances of power today, which are often understood as neo-colonial, so the term “post-colonial” in “postcolonial studies” does not refer to any simple demise of colonialism. So for example, since the events of September 11, 2001, and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, questions of “empire” are more urgent than ever, as advocates of the “new American empire” exhort the US to learn from European imperialism, while its critics warn that the murderous history of colonialism is being whitewashed all over again. Postcolonial studies would include attention to these aspects of our contemporary reality.

Subaltern Studies is a term that derives from the work of a group of Indian historians who formed a collective of that name. “Subaltern” was orig-

inally a military term used for officers under the rank of captain. This origin is somewhat inconsistent with its current usage, borrowed from Antonio Gramsci, as a shorthand for any oppressed person. In this context, an important document was Ranajit Guha's "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" which announced the agenda for the Subaltern Studies volumes on Indian history. It accused the dominant historiography of Indian nationalism of excluding "the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the laboring population and the intermediate strata in town and country—that is, the people." Guha's essay inaugurated the widespread use of the term "subaltern" in postcolonial studies, which he defined as "the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those we have defined as elite." Today, the word can be used for a variety of oppressed groups—women, indigenous peoples, gays, or the racially marginalized, or lower classes. Thus work on any of these could at one level be seen as Subaltern Studies. But of course, the validity of such usage would depend on context. Not all women are "subaltern" for example, although in relation to men, a great many of them can be seen as oppressed. Of course, it is not the case that only the very lowliest of the low can be understood as "true" subalterns, worthy of being "recovered". At the same time, we should keep in mind that those who, following Gramsci, revived the term "subaltern" in historical studies, did so in order to draw distinctions *within* colonized peoples, between the elite and the non-elite. Finally, the term has also been extended beyond South Asia to analyzing histories of Africa and Latin America.

Transnational Studies works with units larger than the nation-state, and shows how this focus illuminates history, literature, culture, politics, economics in ways that are otherwise obscured. These units can be obviously larger—such as empires, or multinational corporations—but they could also be those that are conventionally seen as smaller—such as the family. So, families are split up by migration, by slavery, by partitions of countries (such as that of Indian and Pakistan in 1947, or European nations in the last two decades). Some of the best work in recent years tracks transnational circuits by focusing on particular families—I am thinking of Amitav Ghosh's novel *Shadow Lines*, for example.

Women's lives are transnational in very special ways—in feudal systems, they were sent across great distances to marry men who would form alliances with their families. Today, many are sent as domestic workers, or sex workers. Studying the lives of these women is a form of transnational

studies. Transnational Studies is actually not that new, for people working on empire have been doing transnational work for some time. For example, Antoinette Burton's 1994 book, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* which showed how British feminists strengthened their own authority by claiming the necessity of representing Indian women, whom they continued to think of as their "mute sisters."

**PHR:** *How do these studies connect to minority studies in the US?*

**RY:** They overlap at certain points without merging into them.

**CB:** If you look at Subaltern Studies – it certainly appeals to people, particularly in Africa. A colleague of mine that writes about America slavery told me that what he reads in Subaltern Studies, concerning everyday resistance, resonates well with the struggle of slavery. The strategies of survival show similarities and commonalities with Subaltern Studies.

**AL:** They can connect in a variety of ways. At the simplest level, the very identities and cultures of many Americans, and especially racialized identities have been shaped by colonialism, migration and dispossession — the subjects of these schools of scholarship. Thus, to take one example, Paul Gilroy's important 1993 book *The Black Atlantic* discussed the movements of black people from Africa to Europe and the Americas which created what Gilroy calls "a black Atlantic," or an "intercultural and transnational formation." Gilroy shows the extent to which African-American, British and Caribbean diasporic cultures mold each other *as well as the metropolitan cultures with which they interacted*. A book like this shows the obvious connections that can be made between postcolonial studies and minority studies. More recently, several scholars are working on the connections between African American activists with their counterparts in Europe; W E B DuBois, for example, was deeply shaped by events of World War II, especially the Holocaust. Beyond that, if the US is now a global empire, minority studies needs to go beyond the nation state to think about how this shapes the discourses of race here. Thus all Arabs, and all Muslims have become racialized in increasingly terrible ways since 9/11. We cannot understand this without thinking transnationally, and also remembering the histories of previous empires.

**PHR:** *Can one do Postcolonial Studies/Subaltern Studies/Transnational*

*Studies within one discipline, or are they inherently interdisciplinary?*

**RY:** No, they are inherently interdisciplinary in approach. However, in practice most people have to be in one discipline institutionally

**CB:** Interdisciplinary. They have to cut through borders.

**AL:** I think they are inherently interdisciplinary. One can approach these subjects from within particular disciplines of course — so postcolonial studies was shaped by its initial home in literature departments, and subaltern studies was initiated by historians, but the best work in all of these has often crossed disciplinary boundaries. Besides, different disciplines have themselves changed radically, quite apart from these issues. So literary studies or historical studies are not what they were when I was a graduate student!

**PHR:** *Can you name an issue or controversy critical to one of the studies above, and your response to it?*

**BD:** The crisis of the Westphalian “nation-state”

**CB:** The enthusiasm about the end of the nation-state. It is viewed as no longer meaningful. I think this is a misconception. What globalism does is strengthen national feeling. Mixing people of different races, nationalities and cultures creates a consciousness of one’s own culture and oftentimes a feeling that one’s culture is being diluted. We see this in the United States. The push to make English the official language because people feel threatened by Spanish. The fear of Muslims is brought about through globalization. People are comfortable with those that dress like them, eat similar foods, think the same ideas. And they fear those that are different. There is a nice book, called *Fear of Small Numbers* that talks about this. Paradoxically, then, globalization is strengthening national feelings. Today it is harder to get a visa, and Europe is erecting anti-immigration laws.

**AL:** I would suggest reading an essay of mine that traces the question of widows burning themselves on their husband’s funeral pyres in India, which was both controversial and important to postcolonial studies. You can find out my own “take” on it there! The essay is called “Dead Women Tell No Tales: Issues of Female Subjectivity, Subaltern Agency and Tradition in colonial and post-colonial writings on widow immolation in India,” *History Workshop* 36, 1993. It has been reprinted, Sue Morgan edited, *The Feminist*

*History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

**PHR:** *Why do you think Transnational Studies is so “fashionable” now?*

**CB:** It is because of the era. It is fashionable, yes; it is ‘sexy.’ It captures ‘une temps du monde’ – we live in an interconnected world. A global village as some people say. People live very fast. We can travel anywhere in the world in 24 hours. Transnational Studies captures the speed at which people and ideas are moving. You have people that are transnational citizens. They may relate to a nation emotionally and physically, but they are citizens of the world. Saskia Sassen writes about this, as does Arjun Appadurai.

**BD:** Gone are the days of the study of “closed corporate communities;” we must understand rather the processes underpinning glocalization.

**AL:** At one level it is because it’s becoming increasingly clear that the nation-state is not enough to understand even what goes on in the nation. But all fashions are also to be taken with a pinch of salt because they can simply recycle previous knowledges without acknowledging them — they have to pose as something “new.”

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