Sample Oral Exam Questions, Postcolonial Field

**Senior Oral Exam Topics List, with Sample Questions**

**Postcolonial Field**

**Topic I. (Il)legitimate commerce: Women and colonial labor in French and British Sub-Saharan Africa**

“He got up in a rage and said that it was his own daughter, and if he sold her, he sold her, so I applied for a warrant against him.” — Gbedashi of Aferingbah vs. Yabua of Accra, Keta, 11 January 1886

Three court cases from the national archives of Ghana, Accra:
ADM 41/4/1. Fia Fofie vs. Bokor Gamashie, Keta, 3 August 1885
ADM 41/4/1. Sodohfu vs. Chief Antonio, Keta, 21 August 1885

Ousmane Sembène, *God's Bits of Wood* (1960)


**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. What relationships can we trace in your primary sources between women’s empowerment (or lack of it) and decolonization?
2. What aspects of women’s roles in Senegal have persisted from *God's Bits of Wood* to *Une si longue lettre*? What aspects have changed? How do you account for these similarities and differences?
3. Did gendered patterns of labor in French and British sub-Saharan Africa unify communities in the face of colonization, or serve as a source of tension?
4. Fred Cooper points out that one of the labor rights African railroad workers were demanding was the family wage. Do you think the female characters in the novels would have supported this demand? And do you think their views are representative of African women in sub-Saharan Africa? What critique do you think Tambu, the central female character in *Nervous Conditions*, might have made of Fred Cooper's account of the Railway Strike?

Transitional Question: What distinctions can you draw between instances of indigenous slavery and colonial slavery?
Topic II. Modes of resistance in the Atlantic Slave Trade and the American plantation complex

“He said, 'If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world.’” — Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845)
Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853)
C.L.R. James, *Black Jacobins* (1938)


SAMPLE QUESTIONS
1. All of these primary texts feature an individual or individuals who assert that their experiences represent a collective experience, that of slavery. What issues or problems of representation arise in these texts, if any? That is, are there instances where the individual voice may appear, or realize itself to be, inadequate to the task of representing/speaking for/speaking to a collective? In what ways might such issues or problems be endemic to the genres of the autobiography or memoir, and in what ways might they be endemic to the experience of slavery?

2. Does Morrison’s novel offer a “feminist” critique of slavery?

3. Which forms of resistance, intellectual or physical, were most effective in the fight against the dehumanizing nature of the slave trade and the plantation complex?

4. How do the differences between Toni Morrison’s Beloved, and Frederick Douglas’s Narrative illustrate broader differences in the slave experience and modes of resistance employed by men and women?

Transition Question: How did sex function as both a mechanism of oppression and resistance in Atlantic colonies?
Sample Oral Exam Questions, Postcolonial Field

Topic III. Domination and métissage: race, sexuality, and French colonialism in Algeria and Indochina

“One must apologize for daring to offer black love to a white soul.” — Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks

Dr Barot, “Colonisation through the Bed” in Guide Pratique de l’Européen dans l’Afrique Occidentale (1902)
Vu Trong Phung, Dumb Luck (1936)
Assia Djebar, Children of the New World (1962)
Habiba Muhammadi, “In the forests of sleep” (late 20th century)


SAMPLE QUESTIONS
1. In terms of the issue of métissage, how are the colonial situations of Algeria and Indochina comparable?
2. What defines the “new world” of Djebar’s title? Are the characters and writers of the other texts also participating in a new world/new worlds?
3. One might have to apologize for offering black love to a white soul but were sexual relations between colonizers and colonized always seen as transgressive?
4. Can the subaltern speak? How and when, according to these sources?
**Topic IV. No gratitude for Négritude: Depictions and reactions to the colonized subject in 20th-century France**

“I did not recognize you in your prison of sad-coloured uniforms.” — Leopold Sédar Senghor, “Aux soldats négro-américains (à Mercer Cook)”

Aimé Cesaire, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939)
---, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955)
Leopold Sédar Senghor, “Prière aux masques” (1964)
---, “Aux soldats négro-américains (à Mercer Cook)” (1964)
Léon-G. Damas, “Limbe” (1962)
---, “Solde” (1962)
Bernard Binlin Dadié, *Un nègre à Paris* (1959)
Ousmane Sembène, *La Noire de…* (1966)


**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**
1. Within this diversity of texts, can you observe any literary innovations that can be attributed uniquely to the négritude movement?
2. How does your epigraph from Senghor inform your readings of your secondary as well as primary sources?
3. Why was it so difficult to be black and French? In other words what drove the authors involved in the négritude movement to produce these depictions of the colonized subject?
4. What is the ’dette du sang’ and how has the concept been deployed by colonial subjects seeking full inclusion in French society?

Transitional Question: Compare and contrast blackness in mid-twentieth century poetry and late twentieth century fiction. What concepts of modernity / modernism and postmodernity / postmodernism does such a comparison suggest?
**Topic V. Blackness and the limits of the postmodern novel**

“His nose was flat, his skin the color of a Planter’s peanut. What is the geography of a spoon-shaped face? Was he Malanesian, Polynesian, Indonesian, Nepalese, Surinamese, Dutch-Chinese? Was he a composite? How many people came here for Dylar? Where was Surinam? How was my plan progressing?” — Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)
Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)
Michel Foucault, excerpts from *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (1976)

Cornel West, “Black Culture and Postmodernism” (1989)
bell hooks, “Postmodern Blackness” (1990)

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

1. What is the postmodern novel? Your topic title implies that blackness is one of the limits of the postmodern novel, or at least significantly related to its limits. Please clarify this relationship. Furthermore, is whiteness also a limit of the postmodern novel?

2. How do you justify reading Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* as a primary source?

3. What are the limits of the postmodern novel? Can they ever escape the discourse they critique?

4. Imagine you have caught bell hooks in a furious argument with two of the other thinkers here (one from pre-1980 and one from post-1980. What might you overhear?