African American History

Preliminary Examination

Fall, 2010

Answer one question from Part I and two questions from Part II. You must do a total of three (3) questions. Be sure each essay has a clear line of argument, addresses as many dimensions of the question as possible, and offers relevant, persuasive evidence from specific secondary sources wherever appropriate. Good luck!

Part I, Choose One:

1. Discuss the African American sociohistorical experience from the 17th Century to the first decade of the 21st century by dividing it into 3-5 coherent sociohistorical periods. Your discussion should discuss your criteria for identifying your Periodization schema. Be sure to identify and explore major watershed events and historical turning points, i.e., from slavery to freedom, that is, the processes by which African American history transitions and/or transforms from one moment or historical period to another. It should also highlight major themes such as political economy, labor, women and gender, African American agency--community building and social movements. To distinguish agency from community building, you should stress resistance to racial oppression during your discussion. Also, it is important that you identify different ideologies used by African American activists, during each historical periods, however, for this examination, you should specifically tease out the particularities of Black radicalism in African American history. Your discussion of community building should emphasize the internal development of Black civil society, the construction of African American social and cultural capital.

2. Enslaved Africans came from an extremely large geographical area and were very diverse in terms of ethnicity/nationality and culture.
Africans were captured from an area that stretched from Senegambia in the north to Angola in the south, a distance of 3500 miles and often from regions two hundred miles inland. This expanse included many geographical and cultural zones. Slavery was a brutal system of racial oppression in which labor exploitation was its central rationale. The structural and physical violence of this system, many scholars argue, destroyed most if not all significant African cultural traits. For these and other reasons earlier generations of scholars argued that African captives transported to the thirteen North American mainland British colonies and the U.S. came from too diverse backgrounds to form a unified social or cultural group and given the contingencies of enslavement retain almost nothing of their African past.

Scholars, primarily historians, anthropologists, and sociologists that have engaged questions of African cultural survivals and their role in the making of African Americans can be divided into two contending schools of thought. Those that argue that African Americans retained a broad range of African cultural traits, albeit in modified form; and those that argue few if any African cultural traits survived the brutalities of enslavement. This debate can be traced back to the 1940s, when anthropologist Melville Herskovits and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier debated impediments to African Americans assimilation into U.S. culture and society. Since Herskovits and Frazier’s time, especially since the 1980s, the question of African cultural survivals has become an important question for historians. In one of the seminal works on this question, Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America, Sterling Stuckey posed two questions, which penetrate to the heart of what it means to be an African American. He asked, “How were a single people formed out of many African ethnic groups on the plantations of the south?” In the same vein he queried, “How was a single culture formed out of the interaction of African ethnic groups in North American slavery?”
The transformation of various African ethnicities into one people, African Americans, is a key theme and the subject of a rich historiographical debate in colonial and antebellum African American history that has been joined by historians such as Stanley Elkins, John Blassigame, and more recently Jennifer Morgan, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Linda Heywood, Ira Berlin, and James Sidbury. As the Moynihan report, conflicts on African American Vernacular English, and recent discussion about Hip Hop demonstrate this debate also has important implications for contemporary African American society. In your observation, were African survivals important in the making of African Americans and African American culture during the era of enslavement? Discuss their role or lack thereof in the creation of the African American people and their contributions to the formation of the culture of enslaved and quasi-free blacks and African American identity, and sense of community between 1700 and 1830. Be sure to keep in mind, law, agency, and various modes of resistance when you address the question, how were disparate African ethnic groups transformed into African Americans? Be sure to provide a thorough discussion of the creolization or the cultural transformation process, Africanisms or cultural retentions, and the role that gender played in the making of African Americans.

Part II, Choose two:

3. Historians have begun reconceptualizing the “Civil Rights” and “Black Power” movements. Many scholars have adopted the concept of the “Long Civil Rights Movement” as a way of expanding the movement’s standard boundaries and themes. How has using the terms “Black Freedom Movement” or “black freedom struggles” affected historians’ understanding of the scope and periodization of African American social movements since the 1890s? Discuss the major debates surrounding the thesis of a “long” movement, critically assessing recent trends (i.e., periodization, locality, women and gender, class, the focus on northern struggles, and internationalism) in the literature on post-World War II black social movements. Be specific in your references to key texts and
authors, drawing from both seminal and recent works in your response.

4. African American urban history when combined with urban studies is perhaps the largest single area of scholarship in African American Studies. Conceptual and methodological developments in this subfield often influence the theoretical paradigms and methodologies that come to shape African American history more broadly. Three such major concepts have been agency, community building, and proletarianization. Trace the development of these three concepts and their rise to paradigmatic status in the subfield of African American urban history from the publication of W.E.B. DuBois’s The Philadelphia Negro in 1899 to the contemporary moment. Be sure to critically discuss the dialogue among these different schools of thought, as well as highlight how categories of gender, class, region and place have influenced the field since the 1960s. How would you situate your own developing research interests within these debates, and the evolving literature more generally?

5. Provide a detailed discussion of how you would develop a syllabus for an upper division undergraduate course on African American history from 1877 to the present. Keep in mind that this syllabus should represent your knowledge of classic, pivotal, and recent debates, as well as critical moments in African American history. Please provide a rationale for how you would structure the course, i.e., chronologically or thematically, the texts you would use (you must select a minimum of 10 texts and 10 articles), and the assignments you would give.

Be specific in your references to key texts and authors, drawing from both seminal and recent workers in your response.