African American History
Preliminary Examination
Fall, 2012

Answer any three questions. Please 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. Best of luck!

1. Scholars of slavery in the United States have focused on various aspects of the “peculiar institution,” for instance, origins (Jordan, Breen, Allen, Morgan, Bennett, Wood); crop production, work organization and labor management (Phillips, Stamp, Genovese, Fogel and Engerman, Owens, Wood, Littlefield, Gutman, Carney, Berlin and Morgan); African ethnicity, cultural retentions, and African American identity (Elkins, Blassingame, Rabatou, Levine, Stuckey, Mintz, Holloway, Gomez, Hall, Wilder, and Sidbury); resistance (Aptheker, Bauer and Bauer, Wood, Genovese, Mullin, Franklin and Schweninger, Frey and Camp); and women and gender (White, Brown, Morgan, Camp). Using Ira Berlin’s generational framework develop an essay that explores how the scholarship on slavery has addressed the four categories identified above from the work of Ulrich B. Phillips to contemporary scholars of the peculiar institution.

2. Divide the African American experience into historical periods and discuss the historical development of African Americans from the 17th century to the first decade of the 21st. Your discussion should highlight major themes such as Black agency, women and gender, and community building. To distinguish agency from community building, you should stress resistance to racial oppression during your discussion. Also, it is important that you identify the role of violence in the black community, you should specifically tease out the particularities of individual, structural, and resistance-based violence throughout African-American history. Be sure to identify and explore major watershed events and historical turning points (e.g., from slavery to freedom) through which African American history transitions and/or transforms from one moment or historical period to another.

3. Historians of late have begun reconceptualizing the “Civil Rights” and “Black Power” movements. Critically assess recent trends (e.g., locality, women and gender, black class relations, the focus on northern struggles, etc.) in the scholarship of post-World War II black social movements. In your response, discuss how using the term “Black Freedom Movement,” and referring to the existence of a “long” movement, affect scholars’ understanding of the scope of black social insurgency in the 20th Century. Critically discuss, also, how the recent reconceptualization of the early Cold War has conditioned the popularity of the “long” movement paradigm. Be specific in your references to key texts and authors, drawing from both seminal and recent works.

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 and Black Studies more broadly. Three such concepts are agency, community building, and proletarianization. Sometimes they are used collectively but often scholars utilize one or two but not all three concepts. Trace the development of these three concepts and their rise to paradigmatic status in the subfield of African American urban history since the publication of W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1899 to the contemporary moment. Be sure to chart the seminal works, major historiographic trends, and to highlight the dialogue between advocates of agency, community and/or proletarianization and other scholars and schools of thought.

5. Africans enslaved in North America came from an extremely large geographic 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 geographic regions and cultural zones. Slavery was a brutal system of antiblack 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 that became the U.S. came from too diverse a background to form a unified social or cultural group and given the contingencies of enslavement could not possibly retain much 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 1990s, the question of African cultural retentions 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, Steven Wilder, and James Sidbury. As the Moynihan report, conflicts over African American Vernacular English, and recent discussions 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 including their contributions to the formation of the culture of enslaved and quasi-free blacks, and African American identity, and 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 creolization or the cultural transformation process, Africanisms or cultural retentions, and the role that gender played in the making of African Americans in the context of changes in the system of slavery from what C.L.R. James called “precapitalist patriarchal slavery” through the “King Cotton” period of factory-like production during the 19th century. Also, be sure that you frame your answer in the context of the historiography on slavery from U.B. Phillips to scholars writing in the new millennium.