

Black Women and Black Power

The phrase “Black Power!” usually evokes inspiring, or frightful, images of black men in the late 1960s. They wore black berets, Afros, dark sunglasses, and slick leather coats. Maybe they sat kingly in high-backed rattan chairs. Perhaps they carried guns or shouted rancorous and aggressive “Black Power” slogans that threatened to turn the world upside down.

Such spellbinding masculine images of Black Power dominated not only public attention in the late 1960s and 1970s, but also the history recalled, told, and written about the era—despite black women’s presence in the visual record (1). However, as the historiography of the post-World War II black freedom struggle continues to expand, and within it the nascent field of “Black Power Studies,” scholars are complicating what has become an obfuscating and incomplete visual and historical narrative of the Black Power era (2). Unfolding at a time in the historical profession when feminist scholars and analyses of race, gender, and class have helped to destabilize and complicate male-centered histories, Black Power Studies is simultaneously being shaped and enriched by research attuned to women and gender.

Within the last decade, numerous scholars have begun the important historical work of exploring black women’s engagement with black nationalism in the twentieth century and Black Power in the post-World War II United States (3). This essay discusses three foci guiding the scholarship: 1) black women’s relationships to nationally recognized Black Power organizations; 2) black women’s grassroots activism in cities during the Black Power era; and 3) black women’s radical responses to Black Power politics. This foundational scholarship highlights the varied battles and social protest traditions of black women during the Black Power era, as well as exposes a scholarly literature still in the making.



Young women raise their fists in the Black Power salute at a civil rights rally, ca. 1960s. (Copyright © Flip Schulke/CORBIS. photographer: Flip Schulke.)

The 1966 public cry of Black Power by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC) Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks in Greenwood, Mississippi, was heralded for declaring a new mood—one that “served notice to white America that a new black man *and woman* had been born and that their subordination would be, if necessary, violently resisted” (4). While acknowledging that Greenwood signals a watershed moment, historians are currently engaged in a conversation about the roots and human sparks behind an eclectic Black Power movement. Did Black Power emerge in the aftermath of the public cry? Or did it emerge some time in the previous decade? The answers to these questions—in terms of not only chronology, but also identified progenitors, ideas, traditions, and activist strategies—will significantly shape our understanding of when and where black women enter into the historical narrative of Black Power (5). Sharon Harley’s examination of Gloria Richardson and the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee is one of few scholarly works that addresses the linkages between black women, civil rights, and Black Power in the pre-1966 years (6). According to Harley, Richardson’s activism in 1963 and her “radical

political ideology and leadership style” foretell the shift from a non-violent civil rights movement seeking integration and legal equality to a militant Black Power activism that supported self-defense and formidably challenged poverty and economic injustice. Far from settled, the historical excavation and narration of Black Power struggles will expose the complicated and multiple ways that black women shaped Black Power as well as navigated the 1960s and early 1970s—years rich with social movements.

However, if we do start with the public cry in 1966 as the movement’s origins, there is no doubt that black women were present at its launching and initiated significant internal and public debates about gender and Black Power politics. Cynthia Griggs Fleming tells us that SNCC’s executive secretary Ruby Doris Smith Robinson was electrified

in “the crowd that day” in Greenwood and “raised her fist and shouted ‘Black Power’” (7). What Fleming found “curious” was not Robinson’s support of Black Power, but her statement in *Ebony* magazine. A “powerful female administrator” who clearly believed in black women’s effective leadership, Robinson argued that “black men should be given more leadership responsibility” (8). Uttered at time when debate raged about a “black matriarchy” emasculating black men and undermining black familial stability, the statement was not necessarily out of step with black men and women’s political concerns in the mid-1960s. Moreover, given women’s leadership in SNCC, a call for more male leadership did not necessarily augur women’s subordination. Unfortunately, numerous black male activists, in harnessing black nationalism and laying claim to white patriarchal privilege, envisioned their leadership that way. Alas, for contemporary historians, cancer claimed Robinson in October 1967 before she had the opportunity “to confront the most problematic aspects of Black Power”—male chauvinism (9). SNCC’s founder, Ella Baker also responded to the public cry for Black Power by affirming what she envisioned as a call for “intensified struggle, increased confrontation, and even sharper, more revolutionary rhetoric” while remaining steadfast against nationalist agendas that embraced separatism and patriarchal privilege (10).

As Black Power matured, the statements and behaviors of different male activists exposed their preoccupation with shoring up black manhood by controlling the reins of power within the black community. This often resulted in black women’s subordination and their elision when establishing agendas. For instance, in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967), the published manifesto that helped to define (without unifying) the Black Power movement, Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton provided “a political framework and ideology which represents the last reasonable opportunity for this society to work out its racial problems short of prolonged destructive guerrilla warfare” (11). The authors rarely mentioned women—not even in their critiques of the U.S. social welfare system (12). And yet, it is within this realm—among many others—that many black women forged a politics of liberation.

Focusing on black women—where they are both visible and absent—exposes not only internal power dynamics, but also the diverse contours of black women’s political participation in Black Power organizations within the United States (13). Some of the earliest scholarly works examine the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP)—the era’s most iconic organization, formed in October 1966 in Oakland. The pioneering essays of historians Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest’s and Tracey Matthews appeared in *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]* (1998) (14). Placing BPP women in the “long tradition of African American women steeped in social service and political activism,” LeBlanc-Ernest documented women’s participation in, and leadership of, grassroots educational and community campaigns within the Black Panther Party from 1966 to 1982 (15). In her essay, Matthews explores the relationships and “place” of women and men in the revolution by analyzing the manifold constellations of gender within the Black Panther Party and how they structured women’s, and men’s, participation (16).

These scholarly essays, alongside the published memoirs of Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown, document black women’s critical contributions to Black Power as well as how masculinism often relegated them to familial, reproductive, or supporting roles (17). Brown discussed in her autobiography how she led the Black Panther Party in 1974 after Huey P. Newton fled to Cuba. But her recollections almost two decades later also reveal “the gender, sexual, and power dynamics at work,” including how black men’s support and resistance to her leadership gave her “a taste of power” tempered by misogyny (18). Similarly, Ula Taylor’s historical research on the Nation of Islam (NOI)

after Malcolm X’s assassination exposes the way masculinism operated daily through the NOI’s religious-political assumptions and organizational practices. Focusing on “African American identity, political subjectivity, gender prescriptions, and nation building during the peak of the modern Black Power movement,” Taylor argues that the NOI “re-gendered” social relationships by configuring “a masculine man and feminine woman” that positioned “real men” as the heterosexual heads of the household and black nation and “real women” as protected, respected, and emotionally supportive intimates (19). In this particular case, loyal NOI women did not contest patriarchal assumptions; they accommodated to them.

Undoubtedly, as Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar has written, and the scholarly studies and memoirs above show, “the movement clearly lionized black men as hypermacho leaders, fighters, and defenders of black people, and the bravado, militant rhetoric, and general character of Black Power were decidedly male-oriented,” but neither was it monolithic (20). In Black Power organizations, black women occupied leadership positions, ran community based programs, contested misogyny, and accepted male dominance in the battle for liberation. At times, masculinism also coexisted with antisexist stances. For instance, the Black Panther Party aligned itself with the women’s and gay liberation movements—exposing a complex gender politics that was not totally determined by conservative patriarchal assumptions.

While certainly groundbreaking and enlightening, the published works discussed up to this point have primarily focused on traditional Black Power organizations. And while much more historical research remains to be done on women and gender in these types of organizations, historians do an injustice to the historical moment and impoverish the historical narrative if we prematurely limit which organizations and, therefore, which forms of social protest, we choose to position within the realm of Black Power. Obviously this is not a call for an uncritical expansion, but for a broader interrogation of the political landscape. Nationally recognized Black Power groups and their members, while a primary indicator, cannot be the sole indicator of the reach of Black Power culture and politics—or ultimately of its shortcomings and legacies (21).

Keeping the focus on black women, while moving beyond traditional groups, has exposed unsuspected or overlooked Black Power formations, sympathies, and alliances, particularly in cities (22). In “Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power” in *The Black Power Movement* (2006), I maintain: “In the age of rights, anti-poverty, and power campaigns, black women in community-based and often women-centered organizations, like their female counterparts in nationally known organizations, harnessed and engendered Black Power through their speech and iconography” as well as activism. I focus on low-income black women’s self-images and rhetoric, public housing tenant councils, welfare rights groups, and a black women religious order in the southern border city of Baltimore (23). Just as important, the essay argues that an examination of such urban neighborhood-based organizations, which are often run or empowered by women, will force us to think more deeply about the “precursors, influences, overlaps, and coexistence with other activist traditions,” the sentiments undergirding 1960s and 1970s Black Power activists’ agendas, and the local manifestations of Black Power politics and grassroots struggles in the era (24).

The works of historians Christina Greene and Matthew Countryman provide two examples; they explore the local logic of Black Power by examining black women’s political expressions and grassroots activism within their broader studies set during the civil rights-Black Power era in a southern city and a northern city respectively (25). In *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North*



Protestors on Boston Common demanding an end to the Vietnam War and the release of Angela Davis, Boston, Massachusetts, 1970. (Photograph by Nicholas DeWolf, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.)

Carolina (2005), Greene argues that by the end of the 1960s “a new form of hypermasculinized Black Power politics had obscured the critical contributions of women to Black Power projects, particularly those undertaken at the local level” (26). In particular, Greene documents the internal gender and class conflicts of Durham’s Black Solidarity Committee, a local Black Power organization, which was led by black middle-class men, but empowered by mostly poor black women. According to Greene, without “poor women’s collective strength and perspective,” the boycott campaign of 1968-1969 would not have been as successful (27). In *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (2006), Countryman examines the gender politics of economic and community control, particularly “the contradiction between masculinist ideologies and the commitment of organizations . . . to the principles of community organizing and indigenous leadership development” (28). Countryman writes:

It is the irony of the Black Power era in Philadelphia that a movement committed to the restoration of black masculine leadership in both the community and the home also contributed to the emergence of a very new kind of leadership in black Philadelphia: working-class and predominantly female neighborhood activists who for the first time emerged as city-wide leaders on issues from welfare rights to police brutality (29).

As in the studies on Baltimore and Durham, poor black women, who engaged in housing, welfare rights, anti-police brutality, and other

community based battles in Philadelphia, emerge as central actors in his discussion of Black Power politics (30).

Black women’s engagement with Black Power politics, as well as in the social struggle during the Black Power era, also spurred a fiery independence that led to the emergence and expansion of black radical feminism. In two recent essays on black feminism and Black Power, Kimberly Springer and Stephen Ward chart black women activists’ paths toward staking out parallel, alternative, or oppositional responses, thereby illuminating the varied routes black women took to fight multiple oppressions. Kimberly Springer’s essay in *The Black Power Movement* (2006) argues that independent organizations such as the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA)—as well as the literary art of black feminists such as Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shange, and Michele Wallace—provided critical “example[s] of defining, if controversial, moments in coming to a public discussion of gender discrimination within black communities.” In doing so, Springer concluded that: “Despite limited organizational contact, black feminists added ideals of gender equality and antisexism to the social activist milieu of the Black Power era” (31). In his essay in the same volume, Stephen Ward provides a detailed examination of the New York-based TWWA, paying particular attention to its progenitor Frances Beal. In tracing the group’s intellectual and activist roots, Ward argues that “black feminism is a component of the Black Power Movement’s ideological legacy.” He writes that “black feminists were not simply challenging expressions of male chauvinism, but were also advancing arguments for deeper revolutionary purpose, theory, and commitment” and “in effect, applying and extending Black Power thought” (32).

By 1970, Toni Cade's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (2005) had given public literary voice to black women's beauty, diversity, tenacity, intellectual contributions, and political struggles. The compilation, which featured an Afro-wearing brown-skinned black woman on the cover, included the study papers of poor black women in Mount Vernon, the writings of Fran Beal, poets Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, novelist Maya Angelou, jazz singer Abbey Lincoln, and many more black women. According to Farah Jasmine Griffin, this collection represents "one of the first major texts to lay out the terrain of black women's thought that emerged from the civil rights, Black Power, and women's liberation movements" (33).

Overall the scholarship on black women and Black Power provides rich descriptive and analytical starting points for framing our historical understanding of the era. The current research is exciting. And I, for one, am looking forward to more essays, and book-length studies, on these topics. Ultimately, if "Black Power Studies," and those of us who teach it, are to convey the multilayered, variable, and complicated history that undergirds a critical phase in the domestic and international struggle for black life and liberation, building on this foundation is a scholarly necessity. □

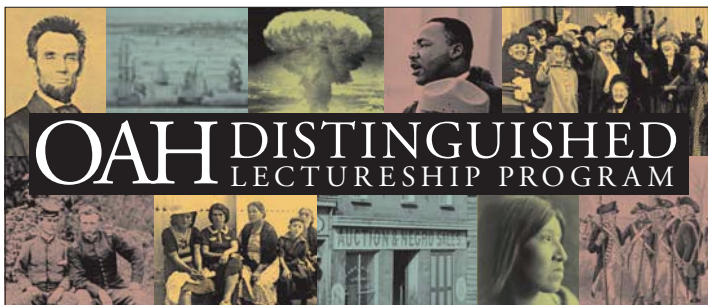
Endnotes

1. Kathleen Neal Cleaver maintains of the civil rights movement that "The visual record always documents the presence of women, but in the printed texts of academic accounts women's participation tends to fade." Kathleen Neal Cleaver, "Racism, Civil Rights, and Feminism," in Adrienne Katherine Wing, ed., *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 36. The same can be said about black women in the Black Power movement and during the Black Power era, which she also briefly discusses in her essay. For such visual examples, see, for instance, pictures inside Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006) and the cover of Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, eds., *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), as well as the covers and images in Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, and Elaine Brown's memoirs.
2. Peniel E. Joseph first called the emerging field on the new Black Power history, "Black Power Studies," as guest editor of two special issues of *The Black Scholar*. See Peniel E. Joseph, ed., "Black Power Studies I," *The Black Scholar* 31 (Fall/Winter 2001) and "Black Power Studies II," *The Black Scholar* 32 (Spring 2002).
3. See, in this issue, "Historians and Black Power" (8-15) for examples.
4. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., Introduction, *Is it Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 4. Textual emphasis added.
5. The phrase "when and where black women enter" is a play on Anna Julia Cooper's nineteenth-century statement and the title of Paula Giddings's book, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984). For information on black women's antiracist and antisexist battles most relevant to this essay, see Giddings, 299-335.
6. Sharon Harley, "'Chronicle of a Death Foretold': Gloria Richardson, the Cambridge Movement, and the Radical Black Activist Tradition," in Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, eds., *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights—Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 174-96. Peniel Joseph places Gloria Richardson as an early Black Power activist and argues the same about Lorraine Hansberry. See, Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Owl Books, 2007), 26-28, 88-89. For other examples of studies that explore the roots of Black Power, see Sundiata Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *Journal of African American History* 92 (2007): 265-88; Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio-Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

7. Cynthia Griggs Fleming, "Black Women and Black Power: The Case of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee," *Sisters in the Struggle*, 198.
8. *Ibid.*, 206.
9. *Ibid.*, 210.
10. Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 351.
11. For historical accuracy, I use Stokely Carmichael instead of Kwame Ture. Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) & Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), xi.
12. For instance, Carmichael and Hamilton write: "Many of the social welfare agencies—public and private—frequently pretend to offer 'uplift' services; in reality, they end up creating a system which dehumanizes the individual and perpetuates his dependency." See, Ture and Hamilton, 18, emphasis added.
13. Much work is needed on the international dimensions of black women's activism in the Black Power era. For a starting point, see, Kathleen Cleaver, "Back to Africa: The Evolution of the International Section of the Black Panther Party (1969-1972)," in Charles E. Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 211-54. Kathleen Cleaver, a professor of law, is a former SNCC member and served as the Black Panther Party's Communications Secretary.
14. Tracey Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is': Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," 267-304, and Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, "'The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job': Black Panther Party Women, 1966-1982," 305-34, both in *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]*.
15. LeBlanc-Ernest, 306.
16. Matthews, 269.
17. Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Pantheon, 1992); Angela Davis, *An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1974); Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1987).
18. The quote appears in Margo V. Perkins, "'Inside Our Dangerous Ranks': The Autobiography of Elaine Brown and the Black Panther Party," in Kimberly Springer, ed., *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women's Contemporary Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 92.
19. Ula Taylor, "Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam: Separatism, Regendering, and a Secular Approach to Black Power after Malcolm X (1965-1975)," in Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 178, 191-92.
20. Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, "Brown Power to Brown People: Radical Ethnic Nationalism, the Black Panthers, and Latino Radicalism, 1967-1973," *In Search of the Black Panther Party*, 276; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 150-51, 271-75.
21. For a discussion on the interconnectedness of culture and politics, particularly with regard to historicizing the Black Panther Party, see Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, "Introduction: The Black Panthers and Historical Scholarship: Why Now?" *In Search of the Black Panther Party*, 1-12.
22. Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), chapter 5; "'We're Tired of Being Treated Like Dogs': Poor Women and Power Politics in Black Baltimore," *The Black Scholar* (Fall/Winter 2001): 31-41; "Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power," *The Black Power Movement*, 79-103.
23. Rhonda Y. Williams, "Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power," 81.
24. *Ibid.*, 82. Robert O. Self's work also traces the roots and concrete conditions that led to activist principles and agendas. See Robert O. Self's richly detailed essay, "'To Plan Our Liberation': Black Power and the Politics of Place in Oakland, California, 1965-1977," *Journal of Urban History* 26/6 (September 2000): 759-92, as well as his book, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). Self's book, however, falls short of providing substantive or sustained focus on women or gender. Rhonda Y. Williams, "Exploring Babylon and Unveiling the 'Mother of Harlots,'" *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 297-304.

25. Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 258-94; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 165-93.
26. Greene, 165.
27. *Ibid.*, 166.
28. Countryman, 260.
29. *Ibid.*, 260.
30. Felicia Kornbluh, while calling for "a new, more expansive, and more generous view of the history of civil rights in the United States," also exposes how the struggle of poor black mothers who were welfare recipients seeking "black buying power" through their consumer credit card campaigns in Philadelphia reflected economic concerns "central to movement activists" aligned with Black Power. See, Kornbluh, "Black Buying Power: Welfare Rights, Consumerism, and Northern Protest," in *Freedom North*, 215.
31. Kimberly Springer, "Black Feminist Respond to Black Power Masculinism," *The Black Power Movement*, 108, 118.
32. Stephen Ward, "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics," *The Black Power Movement*, 119-144.
33. Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Conflict and Chorus: Reconsidering Toni Cade's *The Black Woman: An Anthology*," *Is It Nation Time?*, 116.

Rhonda Y. Williams is associate professor of history at Case Western Reserve University. She is author of the award winning *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) and the coeditor of two volumes: with Karen Sotiropoulos, *Women, Transnationalism, and Human Rights*, *Radical History Review* 101 (Spring 2008); and with Julie Buckner Armstrong, Susan Hult Edwards, and Houston Bryan Roberson, *Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement: Freedom's Bittersweet Song* (New York: Routledge, 2002).



Great Speakers, Fascinating Topics

The OAH Distinguished Lectureship Program connects you with more than 300 outstanding U.S. historians, perfect for public programs, campus convocations, lecture series, teacher workshops, History Month observances, and conference keynotes.

The lectureship website at <www.oah.org/lectures> contains a complete list of participating speakers as well as information on scheduled lectures. Visit today!

www.oah.org/lectures

American History

GLOBAL CONTEXT



"This fine book is a source of encouragement as well as enlightenment. Some of the foremost historians in the country have teamed up with a talented group of secondary school educators to consider international perspectives on some of the key issues in American history. It is one of the most imaginative efforts I have seen recently to bridge the gap between academic research and high school instruction. Bravo to all concerned!" —Sean Wilentz, Princeton University

Recognizing the urgent need for students to understand the emergence of the United States' power and prestige in relation to world events, this volume reframes the teaching of American history in a global context. Each essay covers a specific chronological period and approaches fundamental topics and events in United States history from an international perspective, emphasizing how the development of the United States has always depended on its transactions with other nations for commodities, cultural values, and populations. For each historical period, the authors also provide practical guidance on bringing this international approach to the classroom, with suggested lesson plans and activities. Ranging from the colonial period to the civil rights era and everywhere in between, this collection will help prepare Americans for success in an era of global competition and collaboration.

Contributors are David Armitage, Stephen Aron, Edward L. Ayers, Thomas Bender, Stuart M. Blumin, J. D. Bowers, Orville Vernon Burton, Lawrence Charap, Jonathan Chu, Kathleen Dalton, Betty A. Dessants, Ted Dickson, Kevin Gaines, Fred Jordan, Melvyn P. Leffler, Louisa Bond Moffitt, Philip D. Morgan, Mark A. Noll, Gary W. Reichard, Daniel T. Rodgers, Leila J. Rupp, Brenda Santos, Gloria Sesso, Carole Shammas, Suzanne M. Sinke, Omar Valerio-Jimeenez, Penny M. Von Eschen, Patrick Wolfe, and Pingchao Zhu.

320 pp. Illus. 2008. Cloth 978-0-252-03345-2. \$65.00.
Paper 978-0-252-07552-0. \$25.00

 UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS
Publishing Excellence since 1918 www.press.uillinois.edu