

failed earlier struggles, Widener argues that the emergence of the “Watts Renaissance” was indigenous to Los Angeles and suggests “the need to see the ideas of self-determination associated with black power as *arising alongside, rather than in response to*, the more familiar struggle for civil rights.” (120, emphasis mine) Widener effectively concludes his study in the early 1990s with the municipal government’s flawed efforts under Mayor Tom Bradley to build a multicultural arts program that resulted in systematic displays of token diversity while harnessing elite patronage to civic renewal projects that all but excluded Los Angeles’ working class and minority communities. This failure on the cultural landscape reflected the socio-economic catastrophes provoking the Los Angeles’ drug wars and, of course, the 1992 Rodney King riots.

Widener draws on a rich theoretical legacy but much of his work builds on Michael Denning’s concept of the labouring of American culture in the 1930s and the formation of a cultural front allying the creative labour of the culture industries with the organized Left; in fact, some of the best moments in *Black Arts West* come when he focuses our attention on class. Widener points out that after World War II, the preserve of the visual arts shifted from a middle class preoccupation to that of a working class bohemia empowered through GI Bill education subsidies and labour activism. This is a fascinating narrative thread that could have been further developed, as could the connections between the black cultural politics of the 1930s and those that followed the war. That said, by complicating our understanding of the black arts movement, *Black Arts West* makes a significant contribution to the history of art and activism in Los Angeles and highlights the city as a landscape of possibility upon which deeply meaningful cultural battles can be fought.

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Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

In 1942, Dorothy Porter [Wesley] read a paper at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in which she said of David Ruggles: “Through a queer arbitrary ordering of things or through unfortunate oversight of the historians, his memory has been almost wholly neglected, and his activities as a tireless fighter in the cause of abolition virtually forgotten.”¹ Porter, the much-esteemed bibliophile, archivist, and librarian at the Moorland Spingarn Research Center, argued that “no keener, nor more articulate advocate of human rights ever lived,” though she acknowledged that “the life and deeds” of Ruggles would have to be “recovered with great difficulty from dark obscurity.”²

Graham Russel Gao Hodges has diligently mined the primary sources to bring David Ruggles (1810-1849) into the light. The result is this fine book that demonstrates why Ruggles was held in such high esteem by others in the abolitionist movement and the effort to rescue and protect Freedom Seekers popularly known today as the Underground Railroad. In *Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict*, Samuel J. May wrote: "David Ruggles first became known to me as a most active, adventurous, and daring conductor on the underground railroad. He helped six hundred slaves to escape from one and another of the Southern States into Canada, or to places of security this side of the St. Lawrence."³ Frederick Douglass, himself a beneficiary of Ruggles's bravery when Douglass showed up in New York City as a fugitive from slavery, praised Ruggles as "a whole-souled man, fully imbued with a love of his afflicted and hunted people, and took pleasure in being to men as was his wont, eyes to the blind and legs to the lame. This brave and devoted man suffered much from the persecutions common to all who have been prominent benefactors."⁴ Given how much he was admired by many of his colleagues, one wonders why it has taken so long for historians to give Ruggles his due.

Thankfully Hodges has done so. At long last we have a better understanding of a man who seems to have run full throttle during his brief life. Mariner, grocer, bookshop operator, publisher, essayist, and so much more, Ruggles was born free in Connecticut but spent most of his public life in New York City. Here he embodied the principle of "practical activism" as perhaps no other abolitionist, for he threw himself into the fight against bounty hunters and kidnapers, often at great risk to himself. As secretary of the New York Committee of Vigilance, Ruggles was constantly in motion, moving from one crisis to another with the result that his own physical health deteriorated. Almost blind, Ruggles was forced to give up his work helping fugitives and foiling kidnapers and move to Massachusetts where he established himself as hydropathist and set up a water cure hospital.

Hodges does well to chronicle Ruggles's "brave writings and deeds" as he seeks to demonstrate "the paramount place he [Ruggles] occupied in the creation of the black intellectual tradition." (9) This is a benchmark biography, but it does overreach at places. Ruggles may have been an important link between black and white abolitionists, between the Underground Railroad narrative and the abolitionist story, and far in advance of his peers in his attitudes toward women. He was indeed a pioneering black activist journalist. But he was one man. His public career was but two decades, and his influence was lessened by quarrels with more conservative African American leaders such as Samuel Cornish. Hodges judiciously acknowledges: "Although Ruggles was but one man, I have placed the burdens of many interpretations on his shoulders." (9)

Though this reviewer finds great merit in this ground-breaking biography, there is one aspect of the book to quibble about. The University of North

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Carolina Press has set the text in a minuscule font. The reader who struggles with this aspect of the book can empathize with Ruggles, whose eye illness plagued him at a relatively young age. Hodges speculates that “the onset of cataracts that would eventually blind him” was the cause (113).

Hodges, the George Dorland Langdon Jr. Professor of History and Africana and Latin American Studies at Colgate University, has given us a long overdue biography of Ruggles that would have pleased Dorothy Porter Wesley.

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NOTES

¹ Dorothy B. Porter, “David Ruggles, an Apostle of Human Rights,” *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (January 1943), 23.

² *Ibid.*, 24.

³ Samuel J. May, *Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, & Co., 1869), 285.

⁴ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1855), 341.

Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season that Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2010).

Among the most compelling moments in the unfolding of the long civil rights movement was the SNCC initiated campaign to bring one thousand mostly white northern college students to Mississippi in the summer of 1964. As an admission of the dangers and difficulties of mounting a movement for voter registration with limited and often begrudging help from the federal government and in the face of intractable and violent white supremacist state authorities, the mostly black SNCC staff wrestled with the impact, both positive and negative, that such a large contingent of young northerners would mean for both short-term and long-term goals. Those in SNCC, like Bob Moses, who had seen supporters among the indigenous African-American community in Mississippi terrorized and killed with little national attention, eventually persuaded others in the organization reluctant to cede the slow-building development of confident local black leadership to outsiders, even well meaning northern allies. Ultimately, the impact of what was called “Freedom Summer” did influence the internal and external politics of SNCC, as well as challenging the state and nation to recognize the full citizenship rights of Mississippi blacks.

The great strength of Bruce Watson’s gripping narrative of Freedom Summer lies in his ability to portray this episode as a dramatic confrontation that changed the lives of those who participated while acknowledging the contribution it made to the realization of a civil rights agenda. Watson is particularly adept at incorporating the stories of the volunteers, adding immeasurably to those studies