



# Chair's Address, BAAS 2022

CARA RODWAY

I was honoured to be invited by the coeditors of the *Journal of American Studies* to deliver the inaugural BAAS Chair's Address at the 2022 Annual Conference in Hull. The remarks I gave grew out of my own particular perspective as someone pursuing an “alt-ac” career. Whilst another Chair may in future choose to reflect on more intellectual topics, I wanted to use my tenure as BAAS Chair to think about and strengthen the organization and the community it serves, and my address picks up those themes. So I apologize in advance that this piece is light on academic theory, but I hope that my personal reflections on why I chose to get involved in BAAS leadership; what I see as the strengths of the community; the work that we've done in recent years to improve equality, access and sustainability; and areas requiring ongoing attention, will be of interest to those researchers and teachers who make up the UK Americanist community, both now and in the future.

I want to open my reflections on my three years as Chair of BAAS with a word of thanks. Undertaking a role such as this is very much a collaborative effort: I have been consistently inspired by the work of the colleagues on the Executive Committee as well as by those from the membership who have demonstrated creativity, resilience and kindness in their own work and fostered it in others. The support and camaraderie I have experienced has been invaluable to the work which I have been able to produce. My three years as Chair saw our members respond to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, pivoting to digital teaching and online research sharing. During this time the BAAS Executive Committee also made visible our collective commitment to diversifying the membership and taking action to make ourselves a greener and more sustainable organization. This address may come from a single voice, but the activities and accomplishments are certainly not mine alone.

As someone who, after a couple of postdoctoral years in university teaching, has followed an academically adjacent career path, much of it in the Eccles Centre for American Studies at the British Library, I have always found BAAS to be a welcoming space which enabled me to flex my own research muscles whilst building and maintaining my academic networks. It was the quality of this experience, and my desire to ensure that the organization

continued to welcome and support as many researchers as possible across career stages and routes, which made me want to get involved in the leadership of the organization. I was also aware that women had been historically underrepresented in BAAS leadership, as they had across academia more broadly: of the twenty chairs who preceded me, only four were women. This was something I wanted to do my own small part to rectify.

Whilst I recognized that my professional experience at the British Library allowed me to engage with a broad spread of Americanist researchers and to understand their needs, it was also a weakness: I was not currently teaching, and was insulated from the day-to-day experiences of colleagues in higher-education institutions. However, I knew that this could be ameliorated by having wonderful colleagues around me, who brought different experiences which complemented mine. As a volunteer-led scholarly society we all benefit from collaboration and camaraderie. I strove to lead BAAS in a collaborative way, both because that is how I like to operate and also because I think it is the only effective way to run an organization which seeks to represent and support over six hundred members.

As I look back across the last ten years or so, I can see many distinct strengths in the UK Americanist community. The community has faced the challenges of the contraction of American studies programmes and departments over the last decade, but as more of our members have come from traditional “home” departments, such as History and English, the intellectual project feels invigorated. Scholars approach the interdisciplinary space of American studies with a renewed vigour, seeking creative ways to bring this interdisciplinarity into their classrooms and research, enriching the home disciplines and departments in the process. The postgraduate American studies community in the UK is particularly vibrant, bringing new perspectives and new energy to the discipline and the community, suggesting that the continuing popularity of US-focussed courses in home departments at undergraduate level is inspiring students to pursue higher-level research under the broader banner of American studies.

In thinking about maintaining the vibrancy of the community and the intellectual rigour of the discipline, I would argue for the continued integration of more anthropological and sociological perspectives into our work. Political studies is an obvious example of an area with a strong tradition of Americanist research in the UK which has much to inform the historical, literary and cultural strands which have long been the backbone of British American studies, and vice versa. BAAS has a long practice of welcoming a broad church of disciplinary perspectives and I would like to see that continue to be fostered across the organization in the years ahead. Much intellectual energy goes into studying diversity in its many forms across our membership.

As the American experience testifies, diversity is a strength and I would like to see that in our community too, in both disciplinary and membership terms.

As the contraction of stand-alone programmes demonstrates, we need to continue to argue for the importance of our discipline in the twenty-first century. Whilst American studies may be a product of the American century, continuing to understand contemporary geopolitics, and America's role in the world, requires careful understanding of American history, culture and society. This also points to the continued importance of the internationalizing turn in American studies, which international organizations such as ours have been well positioned to consider. America's interactions with global forces have had an enormous impact on the country in the twenty-first century, from the impact on Muslim Americans or military service personnel of the 9/11 attacks, to continuing immigration patterns shaped by conflicts around the world and the reactionary politics that that has helped to breed.

I am proud to say that BAAS has worked hard as an organization to respond to these pressures and opportunities, although there is never room for complacency.

BAAS is an increasingly welcoming home for Americanists from all disciplinary trajectories. In 2017 the BAAS membership voted to make a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) part of the organization's new constitution, and the Executive Committee has continued to work to try to weave good EDI practices into the fabric of how BAAS operates. The founding of the Women in American Studies Network (WASN), also in 2017, was a visible and important step in acknowledging that societal and academic power structures continue to shape the experience of academic life in different ways for different colleagues. WASN is primarily for and welcoming to all who identify as women and those marginalized along the gender spectrum. The network exists to offer spaces to discuss the academic labour, challenges and opportunities for women working in American studies; to consider the intersection of race, class, sexuality and gender in shaping careers in American studies; to facilitate networks of women working in American studies through hosting and promoting training events, workshops, online forums and mentoring; and to promote the work of, and career opportunities for, network members. WASN operates separately of BAAS and its steering committee membership is drawn from across the sister UK Americanist organizations, but its collaboration with BAAS has been important to both organizations. The WASN networking and discussion sessions have become a welcome part of the BAAS annual conference. In its short life span it has created a space for women at major conferences and influenced debate in the field around issues of gender and diversity.

Growing from the conversations generated within the BAAS Executive Committee around equality, diversity and inclusion, BAAS began the

Targeted Research Panels (TRPs) project in 2018. This project gives dedicated funding for convenors to organize two successive annual conference panels that support, promote and feature the production of research by and about people of colour, LGBTQ+ communities and disability communities. Through the TRPs, BAAS seeks to provide opportunities to foster and forward research that attends to and includes historically marginalized communities, and supports scholars without regularized institutional support. The BAAS BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) network, founded in 2019, was developed as a space to connect BIPOC colleagues already active in BAAS as well as those new to the organization who had been involved in the TRPs. As well as providing a forum to network, there is a specific interest within the group in mentoring and supporting the pipeline of BIPOC students into further research in an attempt to improve the numbers of researchers of colour entering postgraduate study and then choosing to pursue academic careers. This is a sector-wide problem which has received increasing attention in recent years, for example through the Royal Historical Society's 'Race, Ethnicity & Equality Report' survey in 2018, which noted that underrepresentation was particularly stark for black historians, who made up less than 1 percent of UK university-based history staff.<sup>1</sup>

Continuing to support junior scholars from all backgrounds remains a priority for BAAS and one of the fortunate outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic and the embrace of digital networking was increased opportunities for postgraduate and early-career academic colleagues to connect regularly, outside the conference cycle, offering new opportunities for reading groups and work-in-progress sessions. The opportunities for easier access provided by digital meetings meant that geographically disparate colleagues, some with caring and other responsibilities, could build their networks and skills in ways which will hopefully complement in-person connections in years to come. BAAS has been extremely lucky to have had an energetic community of junior scholars for many years, seen, for example, in the excellent work of US Studies Online (USSO); and it was really wonderful to see the speed with which postgraduate and early-career reps on the Executive Committee embraced these new digital opportunities and worked with the broader community to define the most productive programmes.

As the ongoing commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, and the development of junior colleagues, suggest, BAAS continues to prioritize creating supportive and inclusive spaces for research sharing and networking for the benefit of all members. This was one of the areas I was most interested to

<sup>1</sup> "Race, Ethnicity & Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change," Royal Historical Society, October 2018, at <https://royalhistsoc.org/racereport>.

support when I became Chair. I was aware of historic and, disappointingly, occasionally ongoing issues around conference culture and individual member behaviour. There were a number of initiatives already in development when I took on the role, most noticeably a plan for a symposium on inclusive conferences, exploring best practice from across academia. In the end, these conversations took place as part of the Digital BAAS Conference in 2021, which then fed into the creation of a guide for conference organizers. The desire was to ensure not only that BAAS's own events were inclusive and welcoming, but also that any event organized with our support, such as those receiving funding from the BAAS/US Embassy Small Grants programme, or the BAAS Development Fund, were upholding the highest standards. The conversations generated around the inclusive conference project made the Executive Committee reflect in particular about the importance of ensuring high standards in all our activities, not just large-scale conferences, as well as reflecting on the importance of robust policies and procedures, and even sanctions if necessary. This led to a working group tasked with creating a Code of Conduct for all members, which was unveiled at the annual conference in 2022. This is very much a living document and the current Executive Committee are continuing to refine it and to put further processes in place, particularly a Code of Conduct Team to adjudicate complaints. It is my sincere hope that these actions continue to support members to develop and enjoy the enriching relationships that they are able to make through BAAS, of the type which I have found so personally helpful and inspiring through my time as a member.

The exchange between academic generations is one of the most valuable elements that an organization like BAAS can contribute to members' professional development and I was personally inspired by the many excellent senior role models I encountered in BAAS, particularly women in leadership. I firmly believe that the visibility of women in senior roles within BAAS over the last ten years has had a beneficial impact on organizational membership and culture. Across the six years I was a BAAS officer (the officers are the Chair, Treasurer and Secretary), I worked in all-female officer teams for three of those years, and majority-female teams for the other three.

Alongside improvements in representation and other important aspects of inclusivity, I was very proud to be involved in the evolution of the types of support BAAS gives its members. Whilst BAAS has always excelled at providing forums for supporting and sharing research, there was a need to more accurately reflect the experiences of members and support the full spectrum of their professional development. There has been increasing space made for these conversations in events targeted at junior colleagues, for example publishing workshops at postgraduate conferences. However, conversations around teaching, which forms a major part of the workload of many academics, not

just those on teaching-focussed contracts, had not been the subject of sustained conversation in BAAS programming. This lack was rectified in 2020 with the creation of the Teaching American Studies Network (TASN). TASN coordinates teaching-related panels at conferences, publications, higher-education academy mentoring and other stand-alone events and conversations devoted to supporting and celebrating excellence in teaching. This work has helped colleagues from across the country, and across professional stages, to reflect on their own teaching practice, and to improve the learning experience of students nationally.

Just as bringing discussions of teaching into regular BAAS activities has expanded BAAS's intellectual remit, so too has there been important innovation in BAAS's core activities, helping make manifest the organization's core values. Working in tandem with the BIPOC network and the TRP project, described above, the Executive Committee has made use of the slate of awards that BAAS offers to acknowledge excellence by junior scholars of colour through named BIPOC essay awards. It is hoped that by supporting and mentoring these young winners through the BAAS BIPOC network, they will be more likely to pursue successful research careers in American studies.

Sitting alongside the development of BAAS's diversity, equality and inclusion work, a second significant theme of my time as Chair has been nurturing BAAS's sustainability agenda, designed to make the organization and its members reflect on their own contribution, and possible solutions, to the climate emergency. Growing from conversations with members, we created a sustainability role on the Executive Committee in 2019. An initial focus was exploring the impact of conferencing on the environment, examining issues around waste and the emissions caused by conference travel. These conversations further produced concrete proposals for BAAS to support change in academic working practices, once again through the awards programme, by changing our Research Travel Awards to Research Assistance Awards, allowing recipients to use the funds to pay a remote research assistant to conduct archival research on their behalf, if desired. Not only does this change mean that recipients no longer have to use carbon-intensive methods of travel, but it also has welcome benefits in terms of access for colleagues with caring responsibilities or physical requirements which make lengthy travel itineraries unworkable. This is a significant cultural change and one where BAAS as an organization is leading the way. This work was quickly complemented by the establishment of a wider Green BAAS network for members, which is interested in supporting organizational and sector change, as well as promoting research and teaching in environmental American studies.

The Green BAAS initiative forced us to think critically about the environmental impact of the organization in the broadest sense. One of our first

efforts was to reduce the number of in-person committee meetings, making use for the first time in early 2020 of this exciting professional videoconferencing platform, Zoom, which few of us had heard of (cue rueful laughs). It was hardly as if anyone in the audience for the address at Hull needed reminding, but one of the defining features of my time as Chair was helping BAAS respond to the pandemic. Given the painful decision to cancel the Liverpool conference in 2020, I remain proud that we managed not only to keep the organization going through the pandemic, but also to innovate and develop.

Making use of our Zoom account and our growing skills for online working, we were able to pivot to the digital space for sharing research and for community connection. We ran our Digital Dialogues Series in the summer of 2020, giving a platform to some of the presenters from the cancelled April 2020 conference as well as creating new networking opportunities. We also decided to make the most of the situation to bring forward our digital conference plans, which we had been considering for the medium term as part of our sustainability and inclusion agendas. This saw us hold a fully digital conference for the first time in April 2021. Whilst it met the needs of the moment and allowed international colleagues to participate in ways they had not been able to before, one of the major revelations of the COVID period was how much members valued the opportunities for in-person connections provided by the conference. This was not just the social side, but also the opportunity for dedicating time to exploring research-based conversations away from the normal routines of work and home life. Trying to create a balance between the mixed in-person and hybrid model was the enormous challenge presented to our 2022 organizing committee at Hull, which was generally felt to be successful, although it required a huge amount of work for the conference team.

I hope that the mixed model will be what we strive for going forward: aiming to balance the professional and personal benefits of in-person interactions, with the access advantages (time saved, caring responsibilities met, reduced costs) and sustainability gains of meeting remotely. Whether we continue to try hybrid meetings or decide on a mixed in-person and digital-only schedule will be questions for the next Chair and Executive Committee but I sincerely hope that the success of Digital BAAS 2021 will provide a springboard for embedding different meeting practices.

In addition to trying to create and support cultural change, I am very proud to have been involved in BAAS's work bringing greater funding into the community at a difficult time, both through our own funding streams (such as the BAAS Development Fund and our awards programme) and particularly through our partnership with the US Embassy, who, between 2016 and 2022, awarded BAAS over half a million dollars to distribute in support of American studies in the UK. The BAAS/US Embassy Small Grants programme has awarded funds to a wonderful array of projects from academic

conferences and lecture series through to supporting art exhibitions and dance and theatre projects, as well as schools and education work, all with the express purpose of supporting the understanding of the US in the UK. The US Embassy has been a long-term partner to BAAS, going back to our early years. The fact that they have given us the enormous responsibility of distributing this funding as we've seen most appropriate and effective is a testament not just to the professionalism of the BAAS colleagues involved over the years, but also to the Embassy's respect for us as an intellectual organization. I thank them for their trust in us and their continued support for our activities, such as our annual conferences.

Reflecting on all this work, I hope it is apparent what a collaborative effort this all is, drawing on the expertise, interests and time of many different colleagues filling many different roles. In terms of organizational collaboration one of the most vital relationships BAAS has is with the *Journal of American Studies*. Following the renegotiation of the CUP contract in 2014 (for which all members owe an enormous debt of gratitude to then Chair Sue Currell and Deputy Chair Bridget Bennett), BAAS has taken on a closer role in the management of the journal and has also reaped impressive financial benefits from royalty payments which we were not receiving before. It is worth stating again, both for those with long experience of BAAS, and for newer members, but it wasn't so long ago that the organization was in an increasingly difficult financial position. The new income stream from the journal has stabilized the organization and for that we should all be very grateful.

But beyond that, the journal has also been a vital intellectual partner. As one of the most visible faces of UK American studies, we have benefited from the excellent work of recent editors to hone the intellectual vision of the journal and to reflect on how they can use the platform offered by the journal to uplift scholars, and areas of scholarship, that have previously been underrepresented in academic publishing.

Like the work undertaken at the *Journal of American Studies*, I have been constantly impressed by the creative energy colleagues on the Executive Committee and in the wider community have brought to our core activities. There has been so much creative innovation in recent years in ways that have really profound consequences for the way the organization operates and how we are able to manifest our values in our work.

So what do we still need to do to ensure we are fit for the future? There are two major areas where I would humbly like to suggest those who come after me focus their efforts. First, we need to continue to help postgraduate and early-career Americanists, but in particular those who want to forge professional paths away from traditional academic models. I'd like to see BAAS provide more careers support and mentoring, but also make more space for



independent and alt-ac scholars to continue to participate in the intellectual life of the organization.

Second, we need to connect more with teachers and students at school level to nurture interest in studying the US at a higher level. Good work is being developed in this regard by the BAAS Schools Working Group, through projects such as the Bridging the Resource Gap, and through improvements being made to BAAS's digital communications platforms and strategies.

These two areas are both important if we are to nurture the next generation of scholars of the US in the UK. We also cannot afford to rest on our laurels with regard to the work we've done to support equality, diversity and inclusion within the community. These are ongoing challenges which require vigilance and creative responses. Similarly, the climate emergency is not going away: it is our responsibility as scholars and global citizens to do our bit.

So, in closing, I'd like to thank once again the many colleagues I have been lucky enough to work with during my time as Chair and in my earlier roles. BAAS has given me so much, both personally and professionally, over the years. The death of former BAAS Chair Professor Richard King, just before the conference at Hull, drew into sharp relief the fact that we as scholars and community members are part of a long stream of people, ideas and actions which shape us and which we are constantly shaping. I encourage all of you to think about how your work and service can benefit those around you and those who come after you, and please consider getting involved in the work of BAAS. It is YOUR organization after all. Thank you for putting your trust in me: it was truly a pleasure to serve.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Cara Rodway served as the twenty-first Chair of the British Association for American Studies from 2019 to 2022, having previously served as Treasurer (2015–18). She is Head of Research Development at the British Library. She was Deputy Head of the Library's Eccles Centre for American Studies from 2015 to 2022. She holds a PhD in American studies from King's College London.