
Preface: Crossing the Ocean

Lydia Plath, University of Warwick; Chair, British Association for American Studies

'The story of the ocean and the story of humanity
Are one and the same, a Great River that
Knows no borders and notes no lines,
Only ripples.'
Amanda Gorman, 'Ode to Our Ocean'¹

'We have to act now or the ocean and all it makes possible is done for.'
Surfers Against Sewage²

As Chair of the British Association for American Studies (BAAS), I am delighted to see this special issue on Environmental American Studies come to fruition. Originating as a panel organised by Green BAAS at the BAAS Annual Conference at Keele University in April 2023, it is a wonderful showcase of the work being done by early careers scholars in American Studies. BAAS's mission since its founding in 1955 has been to promote, support and encourage the study of the United States in the United Kingdom. As well as providing spaces for British scholars of the US to come together and discuss their research at conferences and events, BAAS has historically emphasised the importance of supporting our members to travel to the United States for archival research, to attend conferences, and to meet with US-based

¹ Amanda Gorman, 'Ode to Our Ocean' (2020), available at <https://www.lonelywhale.org/ode-to-our-ocean> [accessed 27 February 2024].

² Surfers Against Sewage, 'Climate Emergency,' <https://www.sas.org.uk/climate-emergency/> [accessed 27 February 2024].

scholars in our field. BAAS has also enabled its members to bring scholars based in the US (and elsewhere) to the UK to participate in our conferences as panellists, keynote speakers, and delegates, and has supported the development of archives of British-based research materials that have been visited by scholars from all over the world. For American Studies undergraduate and postgraduate students, exchange programmes – the 'year abroad' – have also been a fundamental aspect of our identity. All this is to say that transatlantic travel – crossing the ocean – has for many years been at the heart of the ways in which BAAS has supported the study of the US in the UK.

However, increasing awareness of the climate crisis, along with lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic, has forced BAAS to rethink the ways in which it can achieve its goals as a scholarly organisation. Founded in 2019, Green BAAS has had a significant impact on the ways that BAAS functions. The network has been instrumental in helping us to reconsider our priorities in the wake of environmental emergency, as its members have urged BAAS to 'promote low-carbon research and conferencing practices that do not involve frequent flying.'³ Largely as a result of Green BAAS's activism, we now offer awards that will fund research assistance as well as travel to archives, we conduct much of our day-to-day business online, and we host one in three of our annual conferences in a digital, rather than in-person, format. All of these efforts seek to reduce BAAS's carbon footprint whilst maintaining our mission to support American Studies research, scholarship, and teaching. Of course, we are by no means suggesting that scholars of American Studies based in Britain should never conduct research in the US, attend international conferences, or bring scholars based elsewhere to Britain in order to develop research networks and partnerships. Similarly, we would never suggest to our students that they should not seek to travel to the country they are studying. Rather, BAAS strives to find a balance between supporting our members to conduct their scholarly activities and doing our part for the survival of the planet. We hope to foster new ways of studying the United States without having to frequently cross the ocean.

³ Green BAAS, 'Digital BAAS 2024: And Just Like That... We Saved 80 Tons of CO2 Equivalent' (25 January 2024), available at <https://baas.ac.uk/community/green-baas/> [accessed 27 February 2024].

The need to balance conflicting priorities has had a long history in BAAS. The organisation was founded at a 1955 conference on American Studies funded by the United States Education Commission and the Rockefeller Foundation as part of US diplomatic efforts during the Cold War. At the outset, BAAS committee members were forced to consider what their relationship would be with the US government. While Dick Taylor, the cultural attaché at the US Embassy in London, sought to establish 'a highly visible association that would act as a center for the dissemination of information about America with which the general population could easily identify,' British scholars were concerned about maintaining autonomy, and emphasised research and teaching over public engagement.⁴ As such, the founders of BAAS had to find a balance between maintaining distance from the propagandistic efforts of the State Department whilst at the same time finding a way to accept the funding necessary to enable BAAS to function. Scholars vary on the extent to which early leaders of BAAS were able to achieve such a balance: Inderjeet Parmar argues that BAAS (and its continental European equivalents) were fundamentally complicit in the US postwar 'imperial hegemonic project,' whereas Ali Fisher and Scott Lucas note that it was not so simple for the US government to control British academics.⁵ As Richard Pells put it, 'the United States could not in the end determine what American Studies should be, or how it might be used, after it crossed the ocean.'⁶ As BAAS reaches its 70th anniversary, I think we can safely say that American Studies scholarship in Britain continues to challenge and critique American exceptionalism (and that British academics continue to refuse to be controlled).

But the independence so valued by many Americanist scholars based outside of the US has left others feeling adrift. In a roundtable for the *American Historical Review* published in 2014, a number of Americanist historians based in Britain and Europe

⁴ Ali Fisher, *Collaborative public diplomacy: How transnational networks influenced American studies in Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), pp. 168-169.

⁵ Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 122; Ali Fisher and Scott Lucas, 'Master and Servant? The US Government and the Founding of the British Association For American Studies,' *European Journal of American Culture* 21:1 (2002), p. 24.

⁶ Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, And Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (London: Hachette, 1998), p. 133

explained the challenges of researching the United States from across an ocean.⁷ They expressed their sense of distance not only as a case of the practical difficulties of access to archives and conferences, but a more existential dislocation and isolation: 'We are situated at the intersection of two sets of scholars who do not engage in routine communication: historians of the colonies and United States (mostly Americans) and our respective national peer groups of historians (rarely Americanist),' explained Nicolas Bayerre, Max Edling, Simon Middleton, Sandra Scanlon and Irmína Wawrzyczek.⁸ In response to what he described as the somewhat 'defeatist' tone of these essays, Sven Beckert suggested, amongst other things, that scholars based outside of the United States could make more use of 'languages, access to sources hidden in European archives, theoretical traditions, methodological insights from local historiographies, and a view of American history not tainted by nationalism.'⁹

Beckert could have been reading the minutes from an early BAAS committee meeting. The goals of the BAAS founders (again, in some tension with those of the State Department) were to facilitate scholarship that both avoided 'propaganda activity' and did not require transatlantic travel, in part by maintaining an index of American Studies-related resources in Britain.¹⁰ In the 1950s, British Americanists had focused primarily on 'the Atlantic connection,' pursuing questions of migration, colonialism, and diplomacy.¹¹ However, after the 1960s, when, as Michael Heale puts it, 'scholars took to crossing that ocean by air' (as there were more opportunities to access American archives and research fellowships), British-based scholars were drawn—or at least sought to be situated—'more completely into the American orbit'.¹² Perhaps,

⁷ 'AHR Roundtable: You the People', *American Historical Review* 119:3 (2014), pp. 741-823.

⁸ Bayerre et al., "'Brokering" or "Going Native": Professional Structures and Intellectual Trajectories for European Historians of the United States', *American Historical Review* 119:3 (2014), p. 760.

⁹ Sven Beckert, 'Comment: The Travails of Doing History from Abroad,' *American Historical Review* 119:3 (2014), p. 822.

¹⁰ Fisher and Lucas, 'Master and Servant?' p. 20.

¹¹ Michael Heale, 'From American History to American Studies? A Snapshot of British Writing on American History in the 1980s,' in Brian Holden Reid and John White (eds), *American Studies: Essays in Honour of Marcus Cunliffe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1991), p. 324.

¹² Heale, 'From American History to American Studies?' p. 325. Since then, of course, the 'transnational turn' has become embedded in American Studies, and the consideration of

as we now seek to be mindful of the catastrophic impact of regularly 'crossing that ocean by air', American Studies scholars based outside of the US might consider how to make the most of the sources in our local archives, and to reevaluate the potential benefits of our physical distance from our subject of study whilst making use of digital technologies to maintain our intellectual connections with our peers located oceans away.

Of course, these challenges and imperatives in American Studies are shared by all scholars of Area Studies. In order to understand how it feels to 'be there', we feel we have to go there: we have to cross the ocean, both literally and figuratively. This is why it is vital that American Studies scholarship appears in journals like *New Area Studies*. The specifics of the development of American Studies in Europe can be found in the minutes of committee meetings and letters between scholars and members of the State Department and philanthropic organisations as they wrangled over objectives and finances, but American Studies was just one of the many Area Studies initiatives coming into being during the postwar period. Whilst American Studies in Britain has over time increasingly inclined towards history, literature and cultural studies, Area Studies more generally has tended to be dominated by the social sciences. I am therefore particularly gratified to see the New Area Studies embrace the humanities as a way to find meaning and understanding; to bring about 'a better world'.¹³ There is much that the New Area Studies can learn from the past seven decades of British American Studies scholarship, just as there is much that British Americanists could learn from dialogue with scholars of other places and spaces. I very much look forward to these continuing conversations.

comparative, hemispheric, transatlantic, and transpacific approaches to the study of the United States have become central tenets of our field. See Shelley Fisher Fishkin, 'Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004,' *American Quarterly* 57: 1 (2005), pp. 17-57.

¹³ Susan Hodgett and Thomas Ruys Smith, 'Welcome', *New Area Studies* 1:1 (2020), p. 9.