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US history highlighted at Northumbria

American history and culture will be placed under the microscope during two landmark events at Northumbria University, Newcastle next week.

The University's American Studies programme is holding a conference marking the 50th anniversary of the Selma protests and Voting Rights Act of 1965 on 8-9 April. The two-day 'Shadow of Selma' event will be immediately followed by a gathering for the 60th annual conference of the British Association for American Studies (BAAS). Running from 9-12 April, it is the first time that the BAAS event has been hosted by Northumbria University and it will be attended by leading international scholars.

The 'Shadow of Selma' conference commemorates the momentous Selma campaign which many people consider the peak of the African American civil rights movement. It culminated in the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, arguably the most important piece of legislation passed by the US Congress in the Twentieth century. The conference takes place at a time when Hollywood film, *Selma*, which focuses on Dr Martin Luther King and this momentous turning point in the African-American freedom struggle, has received critical acclaim and an Oscar nomination.

Conference delegates will hear from world-renowned academics including Northumbria's Professor Tony Badger, as well as distinguished scholars from Ohio State University, Spelman College, and the Universities of Alabama, Mississippi and Virginia.

Gary Younge, author, broadcaster and award-winning columnist for *The Guardian*, will close the Selma conference and launch the BAAS event with a lecture at The Sage Gateshead at 5pm on Thursday 9 April. Gary's most recent book, *The Speech: The Story Behind Dr Martin Luther King Jr's Dream*, focuses on the civil rights leader's powerful 'I have a Dream' speech in 1963, which endures as a defining moment in the struggle for racial equality. Gary will be speaking on the issue of identity and equality in the modern United States.

The three-day BAAS conference will feature over two hundred speakers from around the globe. Founded in 1955, BAAS exists to promote, support and encourage the study of the United States in the Universities, Colleges and Schools of the United Kingdom, and by independent scholars.

Academic papers delivered during the event will touch on a diverse range of topics relating to American history, culture and society. Keynote speakers will include Sarah Churchwell (University of East Anglia) and Dana Nelson (Vanderbilt University). Several Northumbria academics and postgraduate students will also share their research spanning subjects such as eugenics, religion, gender and race.

Dr Joe Street, senior lecturer in American History at Northumbria University, is the conference organiser. He said: "Hosting both of these significant conferences is a great opportunity to bring together leading academics and share a wide array of knowledge and research in the field of American Studies. Northumbria has launched the biggest initiative in American Studies in the UK for more than a generation. The University holds numerous major

resources that are of interest to American Studies scholars, including the papers of the Black Panther Party and the Records of Students for a Democratic Society.”

Northumbria’s American Studies programme was launched in 2013 and has already become internationally recognised as a leading centre for research and teaching on US history, culture, literature and politics.

Follow the BAAS 60th annual conference on Twitter @BAASconf2015 or #BAAS2015.

To find out more about American Studies at Northumbria, visit <http://northumbria.ac.uk/americanstudies>.

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Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences

rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk

07923 382339



Andrea Slowey

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences

andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk

07708 509436



Rachael Barwick

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk

07377422415



James Fox

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



Kelly Elliott

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



Gemma Brown

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk