

Introduction: *Monuments, Museums and Murals: Preservation, Commemoration and American Identity*

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This issue of the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* is dedicated to the papers presented at the 39th International American Studies Conference held by the American Studies Association of Turkey (ASAT). The theme of the conference was “Monuments, Museums and Murals: Preservation, Commemoration and American Identity” and it was co-hosted by ASAT and Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, with the sponsorship of the United States Embassy, Ankara, between May 15 and 17, 2019. Our three-day conference consisted of dozens of panels and workshops dealing with all aspects of American Studies. It included presenters and attendees from all over the world, in addition to numerous students from Çanakkale University itself. A keynote speech by Native American artist and activist Heidi K. Brandow and a performance by local musicians were among the highlights of the conference.

The theme of our conference was inspired by the current controversies that are playing out in the United States today.* The American Civil War may have ended in 1865, but in many respects it is still being fought, over 150 years later. Ongoing battles over the Confederate flag and the recent Confederate monument controversy suggest that many of the wounds of the war, especially those related to race, class and gender, are still far from being healed. Clearly, what led to the Civil War is still dividing the nation: Americans are not only grappling with a future vision for the country, but are also struggling with the past. What are considered by some to be markers of cultural

* The following two paragraphs come from our call for papers, which can be found at: <http://asat-jast.org/index.php/previous-conferences/2019-asat-conference/2019-conference-information> (used with permission).

heritage are for many others painful symbols of the violent history of the United States, a nation that was built on the exploitation of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans and other minority groups. As William Faulkner expresses in his 1951 novel *Requiem for a Nun*, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” It lingers like a ghost over the present and the future, haunting Americans and urging them to come to terms with its countless meanings and manifestations.

If “we are what we remember” then who are Americans exactly? Is what we remember just as important as how we remember it? American identity is closely invested in commemoration; national holidays, for example, construct a common past in a country of immigrants without a common past. They help make sense out of distant events, reinforce collective “values” in the present, and theoretically map out a shared future. Yet, those aspects of “history” that are (or are not) chosen for display in a museum, preservation in an archive, depiction in a work of art, or narration in a work of literature also speak volumes about a nation and its people. They remind us that there are always many competing, and often contradictory, histories, and that the past is truly never dead.

Our conference brought together a diversity of papers on the practices of memory, monument building and mural paintings with a marked emphasis on nostalgia for the past, shared cultural, national, and transnational memories, and multifarious forms of commemoration and preservation. Over the past few decades, the term memory has been a resourceful framework for interdisciplinary studies in a variety of academic fields. Studies on acts of remembrance have offered critical venues for both authors and scholars to highlight questions about the ramifications of individual, public, local, national, and transnational memory. The term “memory” itself has also been problematized with respect to the manifold roles it has played in the struggles of nations and nation building throughout history. Though memory connotes struggles for recollecting the past, it also became an effort to define and give shape to the present and future of a nation. Monuments, museums, archives, murals, distinct written or oral forms of documentation, and other practices of commemoration and preservation, all appear as vital means of nation building and history making. In a Nietzschean sense, all of these practices take us to the complicated dynamic between remembrance and forgetfulness, or in a Freudian sense, remind us of the agonizing states of mourning and melancholia.

One of the greatest incongruities in US history is the prominence given to the idea of national identity and national unity at times when a range of divisions emerged in the nation's political agenda and social life. In the history of the United States, memory, as a collectively shared picture of the past, underlines attempts not only to construe the American national identity, but also to construct national recovery. This consciousness concerning memory has laid bare the agonizing wounds of wars, disintegrations, and separations in a multicultural society, where the past is molded largely by a recollection and rumination of wounds and conflicts around questions of race, gender, class, and the consequences of national identity. This very consciousness also introduced Americans to the process of attaining a collective psychological recuperation through distinct therapeutic means like erecting monumental representations of the past as epitomes of cultural heritage. Out of such paradoxes have surfaced national imaginings through which the people of the United States have built numerous institutions and intelligible forms of collective memory, varying from literature and film, to museums and monuments.

This issue of the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* features selected articles from our conference that meet at the intersections of American identity and memory, history, cultural, literary, and film studies. In the first article, "Troubling Memories?: The German-American Heritage Museum of the USA and the Memory of the Holocaust," Julia Lange examines German American heritage museums by providing detailed insight into German American self-presentations through the medium of museums. Her article questions the representation of the past at German American sites of memory and permanent exhibitions, as well as the politics of the German American Heritage Museum, including the museum's representational politics. Seda Şen's article, "Towards a Collective Memorial: American Poetry After the Attacks on the World Trade Center, NYC," explores poems written in response to the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001. She argues that these poems both document a crucial historical moment in the United States and construct spaces of commemoration. Her analysis exposes how these poems become therapeutic agents while recovering from this national trauma. In the third article "What are the Irish Catholics Fighting for?: The *Pilot's* Creation of an Alternative Archive to American Nativist Amnesia during the Civil War," Gamze Katı Gümüş investigates an Irish ethnic newspaper, the *Boston Pilot*,

as a critical institution in the formation of identity politics for Irish American people in the United States. Her article illustrates that the newspaper, replete with its own schemes of commemoration, acts as an alternative archival organization that opposes the hegemonic archive, especially in processes where the power of the archive imposes its influence on the perception of readers as a bulwark against amnesia.

In her article “Crossing the Boundaries, Blurring the Boundaries: The Museum of Jurassic Technology as a Postmodern American Space,” Ece Saatçioğlu emphasizes the subversive nature of the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, California. She argues that objects on display raise questions concerning their plausibility in relation to the concepts of the museum, history, art, culture, and science. Her analysis illuminates how ephemeral artifacts transform into precious sources of American identity, and in the process, blur and transcend the boundaries between reality and fantasy. İdil Didem Keskiner, in “(De)construction of American Masculinity Through Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Bobbie Ann Mason’s *In Country*,” questions the disruptive nature of normative gender roles in relation to constructs of American masculinity in Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel *In Country* (1985). Her analysis elucidates the destruction of the image of the American war hero in the Vietnam War and problematizes the possible healing processes suggested by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Finally, my article, “The Female Body and Female Spectatorship in the American Silent Movie *Love ‘em and Leave ‘em*,” analyzes phallogentric monumental representations of the female body in relation to the function of the male gaze and female spectatorship in *Love ‘em and Leave ‘em* (1926). The article interrogates the intriguing ways in which this American silent movie subverts the phallogentric cinematic diegesis in scenes of parody against patriarchal ideologies that aim to create oppressive gender constructs. Clearly, all of these articles in this issue help to clarify the collective memories of Americans in distinct terms. They critically examine the processes that compose the dynamics of remembrance, amnesia, commemoration, preservation, and therapeutic recovery, excavating them from the traumas of history.

Finally, I would personally like to thank the conference presenters and authors for their contributions to the larger discussion of the ways in which the United States remembers and preserves its past through the rituals of memory, commemoration, and forgetfulness. On behalf of American Studies Association of Turkey, I would especially

like to express our gratitude to all the anonymous peer reviewers for their input and contributions, to our previous *JAST* editors Özlem Uzundemir and Berkem Güreñci Sağlam and to the present *JAST* editors Defne Ersin Tutan and Selen Aktari Sevgi for their support of this, the fifty-third issue of the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*.