

A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTERPRETING ORDINARY LANDSCAPES: LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY'S COURTHOUSE SQUARE*

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ABSTRACT. This article examines Lexington, Kentucky's Courthouse Square as a racialized landscape in order to illustrate a methodological framework for landscape interpretation that relies on historical geographical understanding. That framework ultimately calls for interpreting the place of landscape in everyday social practice by drawing on consideration of landscape's role in facilitating or mediating social practice and in expressing personal and regional place-based identities, and on historical description of the tangible, visible scene as the foundation for such interpretations. The framework and the example take inspiration from D. W. Meinig, through his work concerning the interpretation of ordinary landscapes as well as his more extensive considerations of historical geographies of the American experience. *Keywords:* *cultural landscapes, historical geography, Lexington, D. W. Meinig, methodology, race.*

Geography and History are rooted in the basic stuff of human existence.

—D. W. Meinig, 1978

A historical marker on the back side of the Courthouse Square in Lexington, Kentucky, at the intersection of North Upper and West Short streets, refers to the site's place in a historical geography of slavery redolent of southern antebellum practice more widely considered (Figure 1). The marker is fairly new, having been emplaced in 2003. The plaque and the site finally acknowledge a long-standing absence, perhaps even a suppression of slavery, race, and racism in the city's public culture. The plaques have helped to restart local conversations about these practices, which linger throughout the city and the region. Those conversations rely, in part, upon the physical or material presence of this space, as well as its visual and spatial order—not only as something from the past but also as a material representation of the past and the present commingled, both looking toward the future. The site is filled with tension, forgotten by many, remembered almost viscerally by some, and inevitably caught in the web of “race relations” in this southern city. It is also part of a landscape that provides an entry into a method for systematically interpreting cultural landscapes in the United States and their place in everyday life without losing sight of the landscape's very particularity: the “basic stuff of human existence” (Meinig 1978, 1186).

In this article I present a methodological framework for addressing U.S. cultural landscapes and an empirical explication of that framework's utility through the example of a racialized landscape, Lexington's Courthouse Square. First,

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