

BOOK REVIEWS

**KILLING GROUND:
Photographs of the Civil War
and the Changing American Landscape
by
John Huddleston**

Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002
200pp. 86 halftones and 77 color photographs
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Reviewed for PAS by Devon M. Akmon

John Huddleston's book *Killing Ground: Photographs of the Civil War and the Changing American Landscape* explores the intermingling themes of change, the American way of life, and sense of place by examining the transformation of the nation's historic Civil War battlefields. The landscapes, altered both by environmental and human modifications, offer the reader an opportunity to reflect on the direct and indirect changes that have occurred since the conclusion to the intense national war. Huddleston's exploration begins with a succinct historical overview of the war in the section aptly titled "About the War." This concise introduction offers facts and figures relating to the war, thus providing the historical background while simultaneously evoking the social impact of the national conflict. Huddleston reminds the reader that the issues raised during the Civil War era, including race and economic development, remain significant in today's society.

In "About the Work," Huddleston, a professor of visual arts at Middlebury College in Vermont, explains how he began exploring the grounds of the Civil War sites as a youth growing up in North Carolina. The profound effects of witnessing these hallowed battlefields with a father serving in the military provided an emotionally enriching experience that helped to shape the young Huddleston's perception of the landscapes. Revering these environments and the rich history associated with the sites, Huddleston ponders the "resonance of history in the landscapes" and challenges the reader to reflect on the ways in which the landscapes have been altered with time (p.7).

Huddleston's conceptual body of work juxtaposes historical Civil War photographs with contemporary images photographed at the same locations as the originals. In an attempt to "provide whatever visual correlates remained in the light and foliage," Huddleston composed his images at the same time of the day and year as the historical image accompanying it on the opposite page (p.9). As Huddleston suggests, both he and the earlier Civil War photographers searched for traces of war by photographing the landscapes in a reflective manner; contemplating the events that had taken place at the sites. In capturing the modern landscape images, Huddleston relied upon a wooden, eight-inch-by-ten-inch, large-format camera similar to those used

by Civil War photographers. It is through this intimate experience with his predecessors, their equipment, and subject matter that Huddleston connects the reader with the past, ultimately transcending a mere then-and-now series of photographs.

Precision and a penchant for historical accuracy are at the root of Huddleston's composition. In this extensively researched body of work, each pair of photographs includes information pertaining to the historic battle, including the date, number of casualties, city and state, and a brief note on the location. Displayed alone, Huddleston's images would appear unimportant and mundane. It is only when paired with their historical counterparts that Huddleston's seemingly banal subject matter begins to convey a poignant visual affect, reflecting on the changing shape of the American landscape. For example, the historical Civil War image on page 39 depicts the bombproof quarters of Fort Sedgwick, located in Petersburg, Virginia. On the preceding page, a prosaic image detailing a Kmart façade completes the pair. The image of Kmart, a big box retailer often associated with suburban and exurban sprawl, provides the viewer with a stark reminder of the rapid degradation of the consecrated battlefields. The desecration of these sites has become an imminent concern of historians, environmentalists, and preservationists alike.

Huddleston's photographs serve a descriptive purpose and document the current condition of the land. His static imagery of the built world fails to actually depict a single human and permits the viewer to reflect more on the nature of the changing environment. Contrasting an image of war casualties spread across the Gettysburg battlefield, a picture of a high school football field, littered with training equipment, creates an ironic take on the modern battle.

Additionally, Huddleston explores secondary themes in this body of work. One such reoccurring topic concentrates on race, depicting the various contexts and attitudes of African-Americans in society. In coupling images taken in Jonesboro, Georgia, the historical photograph displays a slave market while the counterpart image reveals "die nigger" scrawled into the concrete road of a newly developed parcel of land. In another diptych, a historical photograph of slaves at a wedding ceremony juxtaposes Huddleston's photograph of a black lawn jockey positioned on the edge of a hotel patio. The content presented in these images serves to remind that, although the nation has progressed from slavery, significant social and racial conflicts remain to be resolved.

All in all, Huddleston's book offers a little for everyone. Environmentalists and preservationists will relish the way Huddleston compares and contrasts these modern-day spaces with what they once were. Photographers will value his attention to detail and the manner in which he pays homage to the photographers of the past. Historians will appreciate Huddleston's refusal to permit these historically significant spaces and the memories of what happened in them to be erased by the constant march of "progress" and development. Indeed, Huddleston implores all readers to contemplate the social and historical significance of the changing American landscape.

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