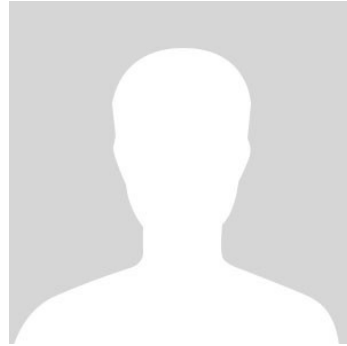


# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: North Carolina's Biltmore Estate*

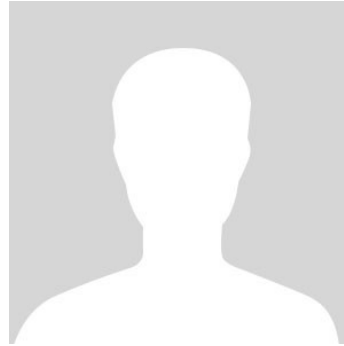
### Participants:



**Host**

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**Host**

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### Links and References:

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Intro Music

Fleet Foxes "Blue Ridge Mountains"

10 seconds, 5 second fade out into speaking

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: North Carolina's Biltmore Estate*

### Transcript

#### Introduction (75 words- 30 seconds)

This is "A House on the Hill", a podcast about deconstructing settler colonial narratives in architectural history. My name is Piao Liu and my name is Elena M'Bouroukounda and today we invite you to join our conversation about the 19th century American Biltmore Estate. In this episode, we will examine the critical relationship between Appalachia, the Biltmore estate, and French Renaissance architecture by considering the role of folk identity in the construction of settler colonial narratives.

#### Section Transition

3 second sound

#### Definitions (75- 30 seconds)

As a point of departure, we will define the theoretical framework that we will work within.

We will be working with Loomba's definition of settler colonialism, as an extension of an empire that

To differentiate settler colonialism from classical colonialism, the settler colonialism do not merely exploit indigeneous people and lands for labor and economic interests; they displace them through settlements, in order to establish themselves as the new rightful inhabitants.

#### Transition Chime

1 second

#### Abridged Project Bio/ Framing (150- 1 minute)

In this podcast, we will analyze the Biltmore Estate built in 1889 for the Vanderbilt family in Asheville, North Carolina, and discuss how this private property had transformed the land and redefined the identity of the region from the following aspects: the management of forestry and the architecture design.

The Biltmore Estate is located At the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Asheville, North Carolina Owned by: George Vanderbilt, heir to the Vanderbilt shipping and railroad empires

Built in 1889 - 1895, the estate, designed by American architect Richard Morris Hunt and landscape architect Fredrick Law Olmsted, was built in the short lived Chateaesque style, a French Renaissance revival style of architecture.

The 8000-acre estate, which touts 250 rooms, was such an extensive project that local industry was built as the more economical alternative to shipping in materials. Biltmore as a construction project, hosted brick kilns, lumber yards, 1000 laborers and 60 stone masons over the six year duration of the project.

#### Section Transition

3 second sound

#### Part I: Folk Identity and Landscape

##### The Blue Ridge Mountains (1 minute)

George Vanderbilt first conceived of Biltmore as he looked out upon the wide expanse of the Appalachian Mountains with his mother, struck by the beauty of the landscape. From this moment, in 1888 through the beginning of the home's construction, the heir to the industrial shipping and railroad fortune purchased over 125,000 acres of that landscape with intentions of transforming it into a properly aristocratic estate.

In December of 1895, the year that the Biltmore Estate opened its doors to members of the family, the home was described in an article published in the New York Times. "The 'Biltmore House' stands upon a splendid terrace, overlooking the French Broad and Swannanoa Valley, and from its turrets are to be seen no fewer than fifty mountain peaks, having an altitude of 5,000 feet and over. Driveways have been constructed at an enormous expense, and wind over rustic bridges, besides artificial lakes and natural water courses; while of either hand mountain sides, so attractive in their native ruggedness, have been aided by the art of landscape artists, and enriched in foliage from the arboretum until they from never-ending, beautiful surprises."

Here, as in later descriptions of the estate, an image of the grandiose estate is painting across a sprawling and picturesque landscape of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Always positioned as a backdrop for the Biltmore Estate, a picturesque wilderness contrasts the aristocratic legacy of the architecture. The distinction between the foreground/background dichotomy of the Biltmore estate and its Appalachian context begs the question, what happens when we collapse the two? What reading might we produce when we begin with the premise that Biltmore is in fact, not legible at all without consideration of its surroundings?

#### Transition Chime

1 second

#### Folk Culture- The Geographical Domain of Identity (390- 2 .6 minutes)

the  
**RACE** &  
podcast

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: North Carolina's Biltmore Estate*

We begin this reading by identifying the foreground and the background and by breaking down the image of Biltmore as a construction on the edge of the mysterious and distant Blue Ridge Mountains. Records note that much of the labor used to construct the home were hired locally, after being displaced or bought off the land. These communities were earlier settlers of the regions, who had settled in the region as the indigenous population of the Appalachian region, the Cherokee, were displaced from the region. These settlers, which included post-reconstruction free black populations and ethnic white groups, built up communities in the region decades before Vanderbilt arrived.

In the article "Appalachian Fables and Facts: A Case Study of the Shenandoah National Park Removals," Charles and Nancy Perdue describe the stereotype associated with the region writing, "A major assumption..., regardless of the extent of the geographic bounds used to define the region, has been that the people of Appalachia constitute a culturally homogeneous group, most often said to be Scotch-Irish and English, mostly Presbyterian, independent, fatalistic, and culturally and geographically isolated." Despite the complex and heterogeneous origins of the settler population in this region, notions of Appalachian identity were homogenized and characterized as "folk" in more urbanized areas of the United States.

The geographic isolation of people living in these regions did lead to the development of distinct cultural identities. Introduction to Human Geography describes the relationship between place and the development of cultural identity. "Folk is ultimately tied to an original landscape/geographic location as well. Folk cultures are found in small, homogeneous groups. Because of this, folk culture is stable through time, but highly variable across space." Because these customs are transmitted through corporeal proximity, "passed through the generations by word of mouth," it follows that there is a geography associated with folk.

It is because these identities are associated with geography, that they are posited as indigenous "originating or occurring naturally in a particular place; native." The concept of "folk geography," extends into the invention of neo-native subjects in North America. Ultimately, is against this new native identity, the Appalachian identity as opposed to the indigenous Cherokee identity, that the Biltmore reacts. At the edge of Blue Ridge Mountains and Appalachian country, the Biltmore estate challenges the geographical domain of the folk by adopting its scenography for that of the estate. Vanderbilt's reverence for geography seeks to redefine the culture associated with it.

Transition Chime

1 second

Model, Colonizing the Mythic/Exotic Landscape (3 minute)

Starting with the intensive management of the land and the development of forestry management, to the educational programs that sought to moralize and socialize local residence.

(At Biltmore, Olmsted found an exhausted landscape. He proposed to manage the forestry as a means of restoration, production, recreation, and education,

"The soil seems to be generally poor. The woods are miserable, all the good trees having again and again been culled out and only runts left. The topography is most unsuitable for anything that can properly be called park scenery....Such land in Europe would be made a forest; partly, if it belonged to a gentleman of large means, as a preserve for game, mainly with a view to crops of timber... My advice would be to make a small park into which to look from your house; make a small pleasure ground and garden, farm your river bottom chiefly to keep and fatten live stock with a view to manure; and make the rest a forest, improving the existing woods and planting the old fields" [2].

Olmsted and Gifford Pinchot have three goals for the Biltmore forests: to generate profit; to be self-sustaining; and to improve the health of the forest. The first thing they did was a thorough survey of the existing trees with their ages, conditions, values as products, and so on. The existing Biltmore Forest is composed for the most part of deciduous trees: "Of these the White Oak is in all respects first. Second to it numerically, but of inferior quality, are the Black, the Scarlet, and the Spanish Oaks, in the order named. These are followed by the Short-leaf Pine and the Chestnut, and these again by the Hickory, Chestnut Oak, Black Gum, Maple, and Tulip Tree." Then, a plan of improvement cutting was conducted to clear trees based on areas, ages, values, recreational experiences, etc. Following the clearing is the replanting of selective species of trees. Both American and foreign trees are planted one next to each other in order to add many important species to the forest flora: "While it is true that in general native trees are best there are, nevertheless very important instances where exotics have been exceedingly useful."

Biltmore was not Olmsted's first forest commission, nor his first proposal for scientific land management. In 1876, Olmsted wrote to the president of the Central Park Commission to propose that the park operate as a form of forestry laboratory. However, the park board did not act on Olmsted's recommendation, and it would require private, not public lands for Olmsted to enact his vision of a national forestry laboratory.

Even though Olmsted believed that lands should be preserved as public lands by states or federal government against the "false taste, the caprice or the requirements of some industrial speculation of their holders", the private property of Biltmore Estate offered an opportunity for Olmsted to implement a long-term forest management project.

The questions raised here is the issue of conservation: "for whose benefit shall our natural resources be conserved"? And for whose decision and preference shall our land be designed as? Dr. Charles S. Sargent, director of the Arnold Arboretum, and founder of the influential weekly publication *Garden and Forest* [19], believed that the national forests should be preserved as wilderness; while Pinchot believed they should be managed productively for multiple services and functions.

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: North Carolina's Biltmore Estate*

The concept of resource management can be considered within a larger context of self-sustenance. Descriptions of Biltmore's agricultural, ecological and economic ambitions position it as a self-sustaining estate. The Biltmore re-presents the concept of self-sufficiency to a population already practicing this type of living,

Section Transition  
3 second sound

The Chateausque (2 minutes)

Part II: Folk and French Renaissance

The Biltmore estate operates across scales, from the environmental and landscape to the architectural to the corporeal. Architecture as the keystone for its settler endeavour. Having discussed the self-sustaining model of the estate, we turn to consider the role of the architectural style.

So, what exactly is the Chateausque style? The short lived Chateausque style of architecture, a revivalist style that recalls the French Renaissance within a 20th century American context. The style is particularly associated with the architect Richard Morris Hunt, who spent his career developing the revivalist style in North America. Though some of Hunt's earlier work show a progressive inclination towards 17th century French architectural elements, the Biltmore Estate is considered to be the fullest form of its expression, complete with tourettes and elaborate finials.

In the publication "American Architecture: 1860-1976" Marcus Whiffen credits the architectural historian Bainbridge Bunting with coining the term, used to describe the short lived North American style. The precedent given, the Biltmore. In a brief but telling passage from the 1969 publication, Whiffen writes, "The expansive landscaping gives the house an appropriate detachment denied to this in (the local town of) Newport. Drawing heavily on the chateau of Blois, Biltmore stands as the grandest house in America."

The chateau of Blois, which serves as the visual reference for Hunt's design, was constructed in the 15th century in the Loire Valley, in central France. While the Château Royal de Blois did serve as reference for the

facade of the Biltmore, Hunt also looked to the Château de Chambord and Château de Chenonceau as references for the design. Considering that the later of these examples were completed into the 17th century, the Biltmore is in some ways a caricature of an architectural style that developed over multiple centuries, an idea of French Renaissance architecture as opposed to a replica of it.

In fact, the architectural reference for this project, the Loire Valley, is not known for a single structure but rather for its network of grand chateaus, with over 42 that are included in the designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. Though through the borrowed figure of the monumental chateau position the Biltmore as an icon in the landscape, the broader history of this type suggests that it is within a larger network of architecture, status, and power.

So, it would be naive to dismiss the effects of Hunt's precedent as Whiffen ultimately does when he writes in "American Architecture," "Hunt was at heart a knowledgeable eclectic rather than a rigorous theorist." Beyond the borrowed aesthetic, embedded within the chateausque are transnational relationships between heritage, architecture and power. The Chateausque style used for the Biltmore estate can be seen as the visual remnant of what Lorenzo Veracini refers to in his book *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* as a "geographically diversified system of intertwined colonial forms."

Transition Chime  
1 second

The Double Settler Colonial Narrative- isolation and selective inclusion

While the architecture of Biltmore borrows from existing historiographic models of socio-economic and political hierarchy, it is the sourcing of local labor in the construction of the estate that activates this model.

If we think back to the labor statistics noted in the beginning of the podcast, records from the six year construction of the estate require upwards of 1000 laborers and craftsmen, most of whom were local to the area.

An article discussing Vanderbilt land acquisition for the project provides the following description. "George W. Vanderbilt built the Biltmore Estate, displacing numerous old Shiloh residents off the property west of Hendersonville Road. Many skilled laborers hired to build the house remained in Asheville to work at the estate and live in the New Shiloh community east of Hendersonville Road."

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: North Carolina's Biltmore Estate*

The Biltmore provides a framework for what Lorenzo Veracini describes as “the “probationary” settlers, waiting to be individually admitted into the settler body politic.” It is the Appalachian, “the new native,” that is to be colonized and subsumed by the Biltmore Estate and the industrial empire that it represents. If as Veracini writes, “the main trend is towards a process of selective inclusion for individual exogenous Others that have entered or are entering the population economy,” then one could place the labor demand for the project as the point of entry into the population economy. In the case of the Biltmore, one trades labor for movement out of the folk identity and into the new Biltmore identity of the American industrial aristocracy.

The expanse of this project which at its outset included more than 125,000 acres of forest land, could be seen as a model for the vision of transformation across the landscape. In this scenario, the house is the index case for a settler colonial framework embedded in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

### Section Transition

3 second sound

### Conclusion (160- 1 minute)

#### “The Myth of the Frontier”

We intended to understand the Biltmore Estate through the perspective of settler colonialism, by analyzing its process and methodology to control, manage, design, and benefit from a land and certain indigenous culture and decipher its goal to establish themselves as the rightful and official inhabitants. While the architectural language of Biltmore draws upon both the cultural prestige of Europe it constructs conflicting narratives of ‘homeland’ in a settler colonial context. A landscape of dissonance in which both the native and the settler hail from similar European traditions, but different socio-economic classes. In this way, the hierarchies that are established through constructing in a French Renaissance tradition, are transnational as well as transhistorical.

“In “logic of elimination,” Patrick Wolfe shows that settler colonialism is a system, not a historical event, and that as such it perpetuates the erasure of native peoples as a precondition for settler expropriation of lands and resources, providing the necessary conditions for establishing the present-day ideology of multicultural neoliberalism.”

### Transition Music to Outro

3 seconds, 3 second fade out into speaking

### Outro (30 seconds)

Thank you for joining us, we hope you enjoyed this episode. If you are interested in revisiting today’s discussion or continuing your own exploration of this topic, please be sure to check out our show notes and resource catalogue provided below

### Outro Music

Cont. 10 seconds, 5 second fade out