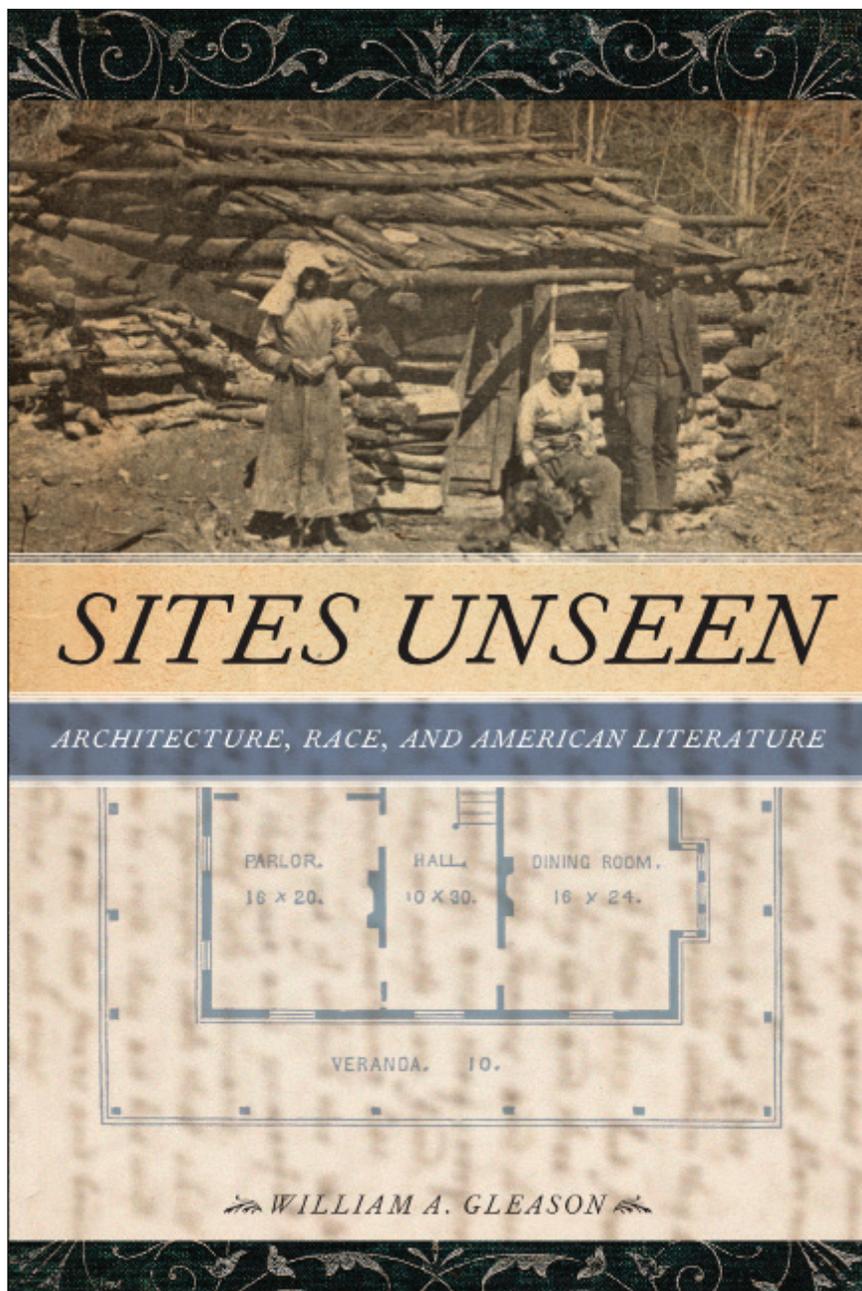


# SITES UNSEEN

ARCHITECTURE, RACE, AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

## TEACHER'S GUIDE



In *Sites Unseen: Architecture, Race, and American Literature*, William A. Gleason examines the complex intertwining of race and architecture in nineteenth and early-twentieth century American culture, the period not only in which American architecture came of age professionally in the U.S. but also in which ideas about architecture became a prominent part of broader conversations about American culture, history, politics, and—although we have not yet understood this clearly—race relations. This rich and copiously illustrated interdisciplinary study explores the ways that American writing between roughly 1850 and 1930 concerned itself, often intensely, with the racial implications of architectural space primarily, but not exclusively, through domestic architecture.

In addition to identifying an archive of provocative primary materials, *Sites Unseen* draws significantly on important recent scholarship in multiple fields ranging from literature, history, and material culture to architecture, cultural geography, and urban planning. Together the chapters interrogate a variety of expressive American vernacular forms, including the dialect tale, the novel of empire, letters, and pulp stories, along with the plantation cabin, the West Indian cottage, the Latin American plaza, and the “Oriental” parlor. These are some of the overlooked plots and structures that can and should inform a more comprehensive consideration of the literary and cultural meanings of American architecture. Making sense of the relations between architecture, race, and American writing of the long nineteenth century—in their regional, national, and hemispheric contexts—*Sites Unseen* provides a clearer view not only of this catalytic era but also more broadly of what architectural historian Dell Upton has aptly termed the social experience of the built environment.

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*Introduction**Race, Writing, Architecture*

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## SUMMARY

This introductory chapter argues that the built environment is always shaped in some way by race, whether such shaping is explicitly acknowledged or understood. Even structures appearing to have no racial inflection whatsoever cannot be understood apart from the racial circumstances that helped create them. The chapter shows how ideas about race and architecture in the long nineteenth century were embedded not only in architectural publications and pattern books but also in the broader culture, finding their way even into parlor games, trade cards, and children's books. After examining a few of the most important ways—and some of the most fascinating texts and objects—in which race, architecture, and representation have been inextricably linked in the U.S. in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the introduction provides a summary of the book's main argument and an overview of its four main chapters and brief coda.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why does the book focus primarily on vernacular forms, rather than more grand and genteel” plots and structures?
- What is the “social experience” of the built environment? Is literature a useful medium for understanding this experience? Why or why not?
- Why are mid-nineteenth century architectural pattern books frequently “evasive” about slavery?
- Do you agree with the author that the cook depicted in Figure 5, though resembling a minstrel caricature, might express a degree of agency? Does knowing the source of the cook's image (see Figure 6) affirm your view, or challenge it?
- How defensible is the claim that the built environment is always shaped in some way by race?

## Chapter One

### Cottage Desire

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#### SUMMARY

This chapter investigates the sustained engagement of escaped slave Hannah Crafts's 1850s novel *The Bondwoman's Narrative* with the socio-architectural philosophy of the dean of the midcentury pattern book genre, Andrew Jackson Downing. At once claiming and revising Downing's conception of the ideal cottage as her own desired domestic space, Crafts narrates—through an ingenious literary repurposing of the pattern book's model of architectural construction—a search for black homeownership that is inextricably linked to self-ownership. This chapter attends not just to Downing, whose evasiveness about slavery in a text like *The Architecture of Country Houses* betrays itself in often surprising ways, but also to Charles Dickens, whose depiction of Esther Summerson's housekeeper-to-homeowner happiness in *Bleak House* provides an alternative model for Crafts's narrator's personal and spatial self-reclamation.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What does it mean for a novel to have an “architectural consciousness”?
- Why were cottages so popular in mid-nineteenth century America? Why does the narrator of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* long to live in one?
- 3. Why is Downing so obsessed with the detached kitchen in the engraving and floor plan for the “Small Southern Country House” depicted in Figures 7 and 8?
- In what specific ways does the frontispiece in Figure 11 draw on the visual idiom of the pattern books? What kind of social relations does the image depict, or conceal?
- Why is Dickens's *Bleak House* so important to *The Bondwoman's Narrative*?
- How are the intersections of race and architecture described in this chapter also crossed (and perhaps complicated) by questions of gender?

*Chapter Two**Piazza Tales*

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## SUMMARY

This chapter considers the obsessive return by late-nineteenth-century African American writer Charles Chesnutt to the plantation porch as a meditation on the failed racial and spatial politics of the post-Reconstruction South. Attending in particular to the largely ignored middle phase of Chesnutt’s conjure tale production, it argues that Chesnutt’s carefully framed stories index an acute understanding of the ways social relations are shaped by (and leave their impress on) the built environment. The chapter uncovers a revisionist historicism in which Chesnutt appears to dare readers to discover that the plantation piazza—perhaps the chief architectural marker of southern white racial superiority—is actually a creolized form whose polycultural origins owe as much to West African and Caribbean vernacular traditions as they do to the white colonnades of classical antiquity. If African Americans were often excluded from public spaces and “white” buildings at the turn of the century, Chesnutt shows powerfully how those same Americans have been claiming ground, in their own ways, since the days of slavery.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why are the 1890s a particularly risky decade for Chesnutt to inquire into the ways that social relations are inscribed upon the American spatial landscape?
- What does it mean for architecture to be “legible”? Can you read a building as you would a book?
- Why did Chesnutt return to the conjure tale genre after initially setting it aside? In what sense might Chesnutt be said to have given the conjure tales their own “architecture”?
- How would you convince an antebellum slaveowner that his or her colonnaded plantation mansion (like the one depicted in Figure 17) evolved from West African vernacular forms?
- How does “The Tree of Architecture” (Figure 18) depict the relationship between race and the built environment?
- This chapter argues for Chesnutt as an aggressive revisionist; do you agree with that assessment of his conjure stories? Why or why not?

## Chapter Three

### Imperial Bungalow

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#### SUMMARY

This chapter examines three texts that together interrogate the buildingscape of empire: Richard Harding Davis's travelogue *Three Gringos in Venezuela and Central America* (1896), his popular romance *Soldiers of Fortune* (1897), and *Memorias de mi viaje (Recollections of My Trip)*, the little-known 1918 epistolary memoir of Olga Beatriz Torres, who emigrated to the U.S. in 1914 during the upheaval of the Mexican Revolution. All three books share a specific interest in the bungalow form, which though typically celebrated, particularly in the U.S., as the material incarnation of democratic ideals, actually emerges from within a far more complex narrative of global invention and appropriation, which these works help lay bare. Proposing a new reading of these texts as “Gulf” narratives—as concerned less with specific national demarcations than with the more fluid political and cultural geography of the hemispheric Gulf region—this chapter highlights not only the points of contrast between Davis and Torres but also the unexpected moments in which they find common ground.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is a “Gulf narrative”?
- In what sense might the bungalow—arguably one of the more democratic of house styles—be called “imperial”?
- How do the transnational travels of Davis and Torres influence their respective understandings and depictions of domestic space?
- Why do you think mail-order house plans were so popular in the early twentieth century? For whom would they have been most popular? Least popular?
- What does a “hemispheric” approach to American literary studies make possible that more traditional, nation-based approaches cannot? What are the challenges of conducting a hemispheric literary analysis?
- Do you see Torres as Davis's antagonist, or as his uncanny double? Why?

## Chapter 4

### *Keyless Rooms*

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#### SUMMARY

This chapter explores two strikingly different uses of “Oriental” space (and Asian decorative otherness) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the mid-1890s, still fascinated by the Ho-o-den, the half-scale replica of an Asian temple he had seen mounted on the Chicago World’s Fair’s Wooded Isle, Frank Lloyd Wright began designing homes with the horizontal lines and open floor plans characteristic of Japanese architecture. By 1905 Wright himself would travel to Japan, whose twinned aesthetic of openness and simplicity he continued to incorporate into his own work. In stark contrast to Wright’s aesthetic, however, lay popular representations of “Oriental” space; one thinks, for example, of Sax Rohmer’s Fu-Manchu stories or the “Oriental” tales of pulp fiction magazines. In these depictions, “Oriental” spaces are confining rather than open, “inscrutable” rather than simple. Possible exceptions to this general rule, however, are Earl Derr Biggers’s Hawaii tales of Charlie Chan. In the very first Chan novel, *The House without a Key* (1925), Biggers tries to imagine “Oriental” settings that reveal secrets rather than conceal them. Enlisting metaphors of crumbling walls and expansive gardens, Biggers counters stereotypes of Asian space and décor (even as he creates others of Asian character) in stories that owe more to Wright’s blueprints—and less to Rohmer’s—than one might expect.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why was American culture so powerfully drawn to Asian architecture and decorative arts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? To what extent, and in what specific ways, did Frank Lloyd Wright share this attraction?
- What role does architecture typically play in the settings and/or plots of popular tales of Chinatown in turn-of-the-century U.S.?
- Charlie Chan is considered by many to be an offensive racial stereotype that should be consigned to the past; one popular multi-volume anthology of contemporary writings by Asian Americans even calls itself *Charlie Chan is Dead*. In light of this, how problematic is the author’s claim that Biggers’s Chan novels counter rather than confirm certain “Oriental” stereotypes?
- How is the design of a Frank Lloyd Wright interior reminiscent of a mystery novel?

## SUMMARY

The brief coda closes the book with a compact history of our nation's whitest house, currently home to the first African American president and his family. An apt site with which to close this study, the story of the White House overlaps provocatively with nearly all the salient histories in this book, from its mode of construction, to the implicit (and sometimes explicit) racialization of its social spaces, to the stories that have used it as a potent site for their own imaginings. Taking us back in time to the early 1800s, and then ahead to the present moment, this concluding discussion thus also helps point ahead to new terrain while offering new ideas for producing future sociocultural analyses of the built environment informed by questions of race and writing.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The epigraph for the Coda states, "Architecture is politics by other means." How do you understand this statement? Do you agree with it? Why or why not?
- Is there such a thing as "black" architecture and "white" architecture? Is architecture necessarily raced?
- Why did the idea of an African American president become a staple of American fiction, television, and film well before an actual African American president? The epigraph for the Coda states, "Architecture is politics by other means." How do you understand this statement? Do you agree with it? Why or why not?

*Additional Resources*

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GENERAL REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does it mean for a site to be “unseen”? Why make such sites visible?
- Look at the two images on the cover of the book. How does their juxtaposition convey the central argument of *Sites Unseen*?
- Think about a physical environment in which you spend a good deal of time. How does race shape the meanings that environment conveys? To whom—and how—are those meanings conveyed?
- Can architecture and the built environment play a role in social justice? If so, how? If not, why not?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES OR ASSIGNMENTS

- Draw a floor plan of your house or apartment (or if not your own, then of someone you know). How does the arrangement of rooms affect the kinds of interactions that might take place in that space? Can you identify a racial dimension to the spatial arrangement? What about a gendered dimension? Now draw a plan for a more public site or structure—a school, a bank, a hotel, a restaurant, a neighborhood—and perform the same analysis.
- Choose one of the images in the book and perform your own “close reading” of it. What does your close reading make visible that the author has not already highlighted?
- Find an image from a magazine or book that was published during the same time period as one of the main chapters in *Sites Unseen*, and make a case for why that image should have been included in the book—either in addition to the images that are already there, or in place of one of the images chosen by the author.