



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Great VCU Bike Race Book Faculty Reflections

Great VCU Bike Race Book

2016

Red, White and Bicycle: RVA, France and the Bike Race

Margaret Ozierski

Virginia Commonwealth University, maozierski@vcu.edu



Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/bike_faculty

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

© The Author

Downloaded from

http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/bike_faculty/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great VCU Bike Race Book at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great VCU Bike Race Book Faculty Reflections by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Red, White and Bicycle: RVA, France, Bike Race

REFLECTION ON RED, WHITE AND BICYCLE

The *Red, White and Bicycle* class was intended to nudge students toward an encounter with French culture under a somewhat-hazy pretext of the bicycle race, which of course recalls the *Tour de France*, and to get them thinking critically about their own cultural space through the lens of French culture.

I say hazy pretext, because the last thing I wanted was a simplistic rehashing of the history of the French race, applied to the ICU coursing through Richmond. In fact, the “Tour” that we ended up discussing the most was not the famous bicycle tour, but rather a blockbuster schoolbook from the nineteenth century. Yes, a million-seller hit, a bible of the French school child well into the twentieth century, a primer on republican virtues known as “the little red book.” Kind of like Mao’s famous book, just not quite so “red.”

In fact, the entire class took the form of a winding *tour* through moments of French history and thought, pursuing ideas into unlikely nooks and crannies, getting a little lost on tangents at times, and issuing into the home stretch of the present moment of.... home, seen with fresh eyes.

The discussion began with *The Tour of France by Two Children*, via La Rochefoucauld – another bastion of French culture – linked to theories of the....baroque, whose latest, decontextualized iteration by Gilles Deleuze placed us squarely in a space where questions of national identity, nationalism and patriotism could be raised.

To my great delight, the discussion manifested a high level of thoughtful reflection on the part of students and a willingness to depart into unforeseen territories on a tour of critical thought. (The professor, too, found herself consumed by all this.) Fifty percent of the student body being advanced in French, there was also solid engagement with the primary text in its original French version.

For example, Ayana tackles the difficult question of race that comes up in *The Tour of France by Two Children*, providing necessary translations of the part of the text she comments on:

<http://rampages.us/butlerar2/>

Ayana writes about the races as they are rather naively featured in the book, a handling of the issue that reflects the time the book was written, so that the book essentially “parrots” the current ideology. What

is remarkable (and refreshing) is the fact that it doesn't go into inferiority of the "other" races, as Ayana astutely notes.

In his blogs, Kendall engages the Deleuzian idea of folding, which is a useful trope for understanding how difference in France is programmatically absorbed by the republican "mechanism" that erases difference, which belongs in the private, not public, properly republican sphere.

<http://rampages.us/bazemorekl/>

Kendall also critically addresses the idea of instilling nationalist feeling in children, finding a version of this process in the US, where children are routinely taught that they are part of a great nation, whose history in the process is obfuscated or even obliterated outright.

Jamie in her blogs also raises the issue of "nationalist agendas," bringing her idea squarely into present day France:

<http://rampages.us/rougeblancbleubicyclette/2015/10/20/nationalist-agendas-the-tour-of-france-by-two-children-part-2/>

Jamie links such education of children to other educative endeavors, such as the one that French citizens, living in a capitalist, increasingly globalized world, are subjected to in the very structure of work. Jamie develops this idea by connecting it to her own, local space.

To sum up, the students were willing to take this tour of thought to impressive results, visible in their comments and in the blogs they wrote.

I am grateful to you for being my *compagnons de voyage*!