

11-1-2021

Seeing the World Through a Different Lens

Camille Lubach
Linfield University

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Recommended Citation

Lubach, Camille, "Seeing the World Through a Different Lens" (2021). *2021-22 Field Notes*. Essay. Submission 9.

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Camille Lubach

2021-22 Academic Year

Alicante, Spain

November 1st, 2021

Seeing the World Through a Different Lens

I found Mari's lifestyle as a retired person mimicked that of many in the US: a calm contrast to a formerly busy daily existence. While she was working for her insurance company, Mutua Levante, she had to be very organized and had little time to go, say, to the farmers market. Instead, she ran to the supermarket straight after work and then made meals for the next day. In contrast, her current lifestyle is family-focused and tranquil. It reminds me much of my mother's lifestyle now that she is not working full-time. Her passion for food, for crafts, and maintaining close friendships are nurtured more now than ever.

The amount of time Mari spends out and about is something that did surprise me initially. In Alicante and now in Sevilla, I have observed that the "vida de la calle" is very much alive and not limited to younger persons. The theaters, cafeterías, cervecerías, and shopping centers are brimming with retired persons and adolescents. I was also surprised by the lack of religious activity that I had originally envisioned as strongly linked with Spanish culture. Mari described the northern Spanish provinces as having a stronger relationship with catholicism; however, the general level of devotion to religious practices in Spain has declined significantly. I gathered this reality from my courses on contemporary Spain and from the high number of non-practicing Catholic Spaniards I came to know.

As for differences and similarities between Mari and I, we focused mainly on food. This was not a surprise, as Spanish life generally revolves around the culinary sphere. When I asked my host mom about what defines our different tastes, she immediately expressed her dislike for eggplant (which I

personally adore). After a good laugh, I turned the conversation to politics, which she quickly responded to as a topic that she and her family don't dispute over. She went on to explain that politics are discussed more among her close friends, but denies ever having tensions arise.

Carefully, I breached the topic of the major influx of immigrants in Alicante. This topic was also scooted around, "No, we are not really affected by that." Mari moved on to say that the people from Africa and South America don't cause any trouble unless they do not pay for housing or do not work. I have heard this argument various times from different members of my host family. There appears to be an assumption that many immigrants, specifically Muslims and South American residents, do not contribute to the economy due to laziness or to their "culture." While I have tried to challenge this perspective on several occasions, they have not budged on their stance. Pepe, my host mom's brother-in-law, goes further to describe Muslims as being historically lazy and useless in the workforce. I cannot get a word in without Pepe giving me a "this is so obviously the truth, why do you even ask?" look. The other members of my host family, when prodded (I lead with "how do you feel about the presences of Arabs in the Valencian community?"), tend to respond curtly with "I don't like them." Or simply, "they are not good people." I plan to explore this deeply ingrained view-point further in my thesis on Muslim-Christian relations.

Overall, I have been enlightened this semester by the way racism and religious/cultural discrimination is perceived (or not) in the Levante region. I now see how liberal my home state California is as I continue to have these dead-end conversations with Spaniards about race and politics. I feel privileged to know the little that I do and am even more determined to expand my understanding now that I can see how oblivious many Spaniards are. On a positive note, I have thoroughly enjoyed and benefited from the Spanish's love of food and focus on family which contrasts with the highly individual, rushed US culture. I look forward to continuing my investigation and reflecting on my personal differences/similarities in Seville where I will spend my spring semester.