

Shaina Lamchick
George Washington University

Tunnel Vision

Although the tunnel is not very long, my first descent into it made me feel like Alice trapped in her Wonderland maze. A few feet ahead, my thirteen-year-old host brother dodged White Rabbit-like between bicycle riders in suits and stilettos, forcing my roommate and me to move faster to keep up with him. Though thankful that our host parents had sent him to walk us to school, we wondered if we would ever be able to remember the route the following day as he bounced through the small crowd of commuters clogging our path. The tunnel was a blur of graffiti color as we passed through. Fly-like aliens overlapped with silver polar bears. A menacing fox hovered near a youthful Virgin Mary. The walls were entirely covered in a strange variety of symbols, murals, and quasi-philosophical phrases in English, Italian, and other unidentifiable languages. Music echoed throughout the tunnel, drifting from a band in its center led by a withered raisin of a man. I marveled at a warm, spicy smell until I noticed burning incense balancing on a garbage can. When we emerged back into the sunlight a minute later, I shook my head, disoriented and amused by my first brief encounter with a place that would become part of my daily routine.

As days and weeks and finally months passed, I found myself looking forward to my frequent trips through the tunnel. I was no longer intimidated by the wrinkly bandleader who never seemed to leave his perch, nor was I bothered by the occasionally offensive—and sometimes plainly ridiculous—graffiti on the walls. I instinctively moved out of cyclists' paths, no longer fearful of being hit, and I welcomed both the smell of incense and the freshly-spray painted walls. Yet despite my fondness for the tunnel and those who frequent it, I cannot say that I have ever felt a part of its world—for it does possess a distinct culture. Though I always smile

as I walk past the bandleader, I have never spoken to him. While a part of me would love to contribute to the colorful walls, I never have the courage to write anything. In short, even as I pass through it twice a day, I do not belong in the tunnel; I am merely an observer.

To be an observer in an unfamiliar setting is simple. It is easy to muse at the customs of others and note how different—or how similar—they are to your own culture. Indeed, there have been several times since I arrived in Italy when I have felt more like an anthropologist than a member of the Italian society. I have become so accustomed to discussing human behavior and trends in the classroom that it is often difficult to step out of that mentality after each lesson. Yet a clear understanding of a nation's culture cannot be built exclusively in an academic setting. Furthermore, it can never be achieved merely by observing. Rather, one must become a participant.

When I leave Florence, I will certainly remember the tunnel. Yet even more, I will remember countless small moments with my host family and the other Italians that I have met. Recounting jokes at dinner, laughing at my own mispronunciations in Italian, attending my host brother's confirmation, and successfully communicating with my 93-year-old nearly deaf host *nonno* have been among my most meaningful experiences. Undeniably, you can learn by observing. You can produce an in-depth study of a culture by watching from afar. Yet you cannot truly become a part of said culture unless you interact with others and truly engage yourself into daily life. You must move beyond the tunnel, into the home, church, and marketplace. Learn the names of your neighbors. Help your host mother prepare a meal. After all, a tunnel is merely a passageway. Without exiting, you can never reach your destination.