

InVisibilities Project

People of Color in Florence, Italy

Nicolette Alexandra Brito-Cruz

Introduction

ISI Abroad, together with ISI Florence and The Umbra Institute in Perugia, have recently initiated a work-study scholarship for students who wish to study abroad but are not eligible for other funding or wish to integrate this award with other scholarships. The projects range from photography, communications, social media, video-making, journalism, diversity and inclusion, and SEO and web development, or an intersection of any of these.

As one of the work-study advisors, I like to interview the students first in order to create an ad hoc project to fit their interests and skills.

Nicolette Alexandra Brito-Cruz, a student attending ISI Florence from Rutgers University, was a recipient for the Spring 2023 semester. They chose to pursue a project in Photography and Communications. After interviewing them and going over their creative interests and focus, I developed a project that also incorporated aspects of diversity since that seemed to be a recurring theme in their work. The project is called "InVisibilities" and is described below:

Within the study abroad experience, identify the various layers of identities and cultures. We are all study abroad students from American University institutions and most of us are American. Beyond this first and homogeneous cultural bubble, we find a whole intersectionality of identities: POC, first-generation, low-income, LGBTQ+, people with visible and non-visible disabilities, non-American or dual nationality, etc.

Document the various stories with words and images, including eventual struggles or benefits, for one or more of these identities or intersectionality of these identities. How did their identity influence their choice of study abroad? How does their less-visible piece of the puzzle fit the bigger picture? Do these "diversities" actually enhance their study abroad experience?

How do external factors (the surroundings, the country, the access to re-

sources, etc.) affect them as an individual? Is visibility important? Is visibility enhanced in an empowering way or do they feel even more of a stranger? How will their experience abroad shape their identity once back home? How does study abroad benefit their individual struggle?

Give them a voice!

Choose at least 6 people to photograph and document their own personal journey during their time abroad or as an "inVisible". This can be students, staff, professors, or even local residents/people you meet. If you do choose locals, how does their diversity affect their place in society? What can visibility do to better their lives and what can they offer to future generations?

Nicolette chose to concentrate on just people of color for this project. We are pleased to present their project and conclusions in this issue of Beyond. Their project also provided valuable insight to us as a study abroad institute, which helps us improve and grow in our diversity, equity, inclusion and access efforts.

Nina Peci, DEIA officer and work-study advisor, ISI Florence

Growing up, my mother always sited a quote by Spanish-American philosopher Jorge Ruiz de Santayana. "*Los pueblos que olvidan su historia estan condenados a repetirla*". This translates to "The towns that forget their history are condemned to repeat them." Since coming to Florence to study abroad, I have repeated this quote various times to myself, and I feel as though I can now truly say that I understand what de Santayana meant by this. As someone who holds many identities, I've come to realize the importance of staying true to and honoring them, even if I am the only one doing so. This not only ensures that I bring a diverse perspective to every room that I walk into but also that I acknowledge and respect the cultural differences that I notice while stepping into a completely different environment.

I first took on this project to shed light on the struggles of people with mixed identities in a city like Florence. At first, I wanted that to entail

gender, race, sexuality, and religious differences from the “norm” of a small Tuscan city to that of American standards. I quickly came to realize that there is one minority identity that I hold which is nearly completely invisible in this city, and that is my ethnicity. For context, I am an Afro-Caribbean, Dominican-American individual. Since arriving in Florence, I have not met any other Caribbean or Latinx individuals, and it was not until I actively started making an effort to search for Black individuals that I found two of the six people that I interviewed who actively and proudly use the term to label themselves. Of the six that I interviewed, four were of African descent. Going into this, I had a set of expectations for these individuals, but they gave me new perspectives on how the communities that they were raised in shaped their way of seeing Blackness. The same can be said for the two other individuals, who are Latinx and Asian. Five out of the six people were raised in a middle-class and predominantly white town/city. Seeing that I come from the diverse inner-city of Newark, New Jersey, and was raised by a working-class single immigrant mother, it is needless to say that we had completely different experiences growing up. We thus have different views on the world and current events today.

Florence Franks - Student Services Assistant at ISI Florence

Florence Franks, born in Florence to an Italian mother and a Nigerian father, is the Student Services Assistant at ISI Florence. While interviewing her, I got an interesting insight into how being born and raised in Europe as an Italo-Nigerian has affected her perspective of race and ethnicity. She spent ten years living in Paris before returning to Italy about a year ago. During her time abroad, Florence underwent a self-discovery process and learned to unlearn some things about identity and racism. She refuses to use the term “mixed-race” due to the colonial past, where it was used to oppress and divide people. She defines herself as a black woman, a political act since there is no census in Italy that allows people to identify their ethnicity. Instead, Italy uses data from identification cards such as passports and asylum applications to calculate its population.

According to Florence, her childhood was privileged, and she nev-



Florence Franks

er discussed the different heritages within her family. She lived life as a typical European for 25 years, and most of her friends were white. It was not until she moved to France that she realized her blackness. In France, she heard stories of other black women who experienced racism, and she started to acknowledge that her story had a small piece of the black experience. Her father worked in national education, so he was well-integrated into Italian society, which gave Florence a privileged status. She acknowledges that many black women do not have this privilege and often experience not only racism but also colorism within the community. Race is not spoken about in Italy and is part of the culture. In her opinion, this is a legacy of colonization, and through language, we have the opportunity to change society.

Florence has experienced racism, but it was only after she stepped out and learned about others' experiences that she could recognize it. She has experienced microaggressions, which are subtle and often go unnoticed by those who do not experience them. Anti-blackness is high in Paris and other parts of France, and people would often ask her where she was "really from." However, she was never denied any basic rights, so she never thought about it deeply. When I asked if she had a support system with whom to discuss these topics, she stated that since her family did not speak about race or ethnicity growing up – they still don't – she keeps most of her experiences to herself. She also stated that there are no spaces for people of color to gather and celebrate each other in Florence, and if there are any, they are not mainstream.

Florence recommends that students of color study abroad in Italy, but they need to be active and create their own paths; it won't fall into their laps. When students study abroad, it is so easy to use the city as a base to travel to other countries on the weekends. While these experiences are obviously fulfilling, it is also important to take the time to immerse oneself in the culture of where they are studying.

She believes that institutions can do better to accommodate students of color, but they need to let the staff know how they can help them, whether this be through clubs, events, scholarships, etc.

April Parrish - Penn State

April Parrish, a Penn State sophomore with a double major in Science and Italian, has been dreaming of coming to Italy since seventh grade. She intends to live here someday and be a doctor. She chose Florence because of the courses offered by ISI. Although she has not experienced direct racism in Florence, she has encountered discrimination based on her nationality, with people assuming that she is American.

April rarely deals with microaggressions and usually brushes them off since she cannot change the people who make those comments. She does not want to give them the satisfaction of getting a reaction from her, so she acts oblivious. Although she has not found spaces for people of color to gather and celebrate with each other in Florence, April believes that studying abroad in Florence is an excellent opportunity for students of color. It exposes them to a different culture while also being in a touristy area where many people speak English. To keep in touch with her culture while studying abroad, April recommends that students not compromise their social norms if they make them uncomfortable, such as wearing certain clothes or relaxing their curly hair. April, for example, can always be seen walking the halls of ISI Florence wearing bright red clothing (and it suits her very well)!

April believes that institutions in Florence can help accommodate students of color by providing clubs and activities to help them meet locals who share their ethnicity and by hiring more racially diverse staff members. Although April does not think there are any advantages to being a person of color in a city like Florence, she advises students to be prepared to be stared at frequently since it happens to her every day, but to acknowledge that there is power in standing out from a crowd. Overall, April's experience as a student of color in Florence has been positive, and she recommends that other students take advantage of the opportunity to spend a semester in this beautiful city.

Nicolas Joaquin Gomez - University of Maryland

Nicolas Joaquin Gomez is a Colombian-American student at the University of Maryland majoring in Biology with an Italian minor. He



April Parrish



Nicolas Joaquin Gomez

chose to study in Italy due to his mother's experience living in Milan for many years and his interest in learning Italian. He found the study abroad programs in Maryland to be diverse and preferred Florence over other major cities because it is smaller, and he would be able to truly immerse himself in the culture. Although Nicolas has not experienced any racism himself in Florence, but he said that his roommate was attacked after wearing a Star of David necklace in a nightclub. Another incident he spoke about took place in Madrid, where Nicolas got into an unprovoked verbal altercation with someone on public transportation, and afterward, his necklace was yanked off.

There are no specific spaces for people of color to gather and celebrate their culture in Florence, but Nicolas recommends embracing Italian culture to have a better experience abroad. He suggests that institutions can help students of color study abroad by offering more scholarships, as it is a privilege that not everyone can afford.

He believes that visibility can help others by providing a different perspective on life, and although there may not be advantages to being a person of color in Florence, having a diverse background and knowing another language can be beneficial in Europe. His advice to students of color is not to be afraid of being the only one and to embrace the opportunity to learn outside of their identity.

Haylee Gaines - Marywood University

Haylee Gaines, an interior architecture student from Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania, found herself in Italy through her school's architecture program with ISI Florence. While in Italy, she has faced instances of racism, such as witnessing a person (who seemed to be American as well) yelling at a security guard for being Black. Additionally, she has experienced microaggressions, such as a professor playing with her hair after she removed her braids.

Haylee has a support system of roommates, but they do not always understand her experiences. However, her Asian roommate provides a space for understanding and support. Despite the challenges she has



Haylee Gaines

faced, Haylee recommends that students of color study abroad in Italy, as it provides a unique opportunity to encounter different lifestyles and learn how to balance everything from school to traveling and meeting new people.

To stay connected with their culture while studying abroad in Italy, Haylee suggests that students call home. She also believes that institutions can accommodate students of color by offering support systems. For example, the ISI app has a feature for LGBTQ+ people to find community in Florence; they could do the same for Black people. Haylee's experience abroad has helped her become more in tune with who she is, understand her boundaries, and become self-sufficient. She has learned how to balance relationships between home and Italy, and though it takes time to warm up to people, she is learning to manage everything and appreciate small moments.

Zachery Peronilla - Rutgers University

Zachery Peronilla is a junior at Rutgers with a double major in Psychology and Communications and a minor in creative writing. He chose to study in Italy because it was a bucket list destination, and his cousin studied at ISI and loved it. Zachery has not experienced any explicit racism, but he has received many stares, especially during the beginning of the program (in January), because it's mostly locals in the area. He faces microaggressions regarding his sexuality, which he believes is a universal issue, so he isn't particularly disturbed by it in Florence. He does not have a strong support system in Italy but stays in touch with people back home who can relate to his experiences. He recommends students of color study abroad in Italy and explore different areas, not just Florence. He uses the website Meetup.com to connect with different communities and speak with people regarding current events and his personal experiences.

He thinks institutions can help accommodate students of color by recognizing their presence and promoting inclusivity. He believes visibility is essential to bettering others' lives and offering opportunities to



Zachery Peronilla

future generations. Being a person of color in Florence gives him a sense of uniqueness, which he appreciates. Zachery's experience abroad has made him appreciate his home country and realize that there is beauty everywhere.

Devon Lawson - Penn State

Devon Lawson, a junior at Penn State majoring in Psychology, decided to study at ISI Florence after visiting Italy over the summer and falling in love with the food and culture. She hasn't experienced explicit racism but has dealt with microaggressions, such as being ignored by classmates and receiving a lot of stares. She relies on her roommate for support, as she can connect with her on a certain level. Despite this, she recommends students of color study abroad with friends that they are comfortable with because being in all-white spaces can be difficult.

Devon believes that institutions can help accommodate students of color by bringing them together and making it known that they are there. She also recommends keeping in touch with one's culture by calling home and meeting up with people who look like them. Being a person of color in Florence has advantages, as it offers a unique perspective and prepares one to handle adversity better. Devon's experience abroad has given her cultural awareness and the ability to be around different types of people, even if they have different opinions.

Conclusion:

Some of the main pieces of information that I hope you, as a reader, take away from these profiles are:

- Be sure to keep connections with people at home, especially if you have a difficult time assimilating into the culture/a new environment.
- Explore! Take advantage of being in Europe and visit different cities and countries on the weekend.
- Use every moment as a learning opportunity. By the end of your study abroad journey, you'll realize how much you've changed as an individual and can then apply the lessons you've learned here to your life back home.
- Being a person of color in a predominately white space will make you stand out; use this as an advantage by learn-



Devon Lawson

ing about a different culture and teaching others about the uniqueness of yours.

- Search for your community!

Biography

My name is Nicolette Alexandra Brito-Cruz. I am a first-generation, third-year undergraduate student at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism & Media, specializing in Global Media and Italian Studies with a minor in Women and Gender Studies.

During my three years at Rutgers, I have maintained a 3.8 GPA and excelled in all my courses. This has opened doors for me and allowed me to become a Benjamin A. Gilman, Fund for Education Abroad, and Hispanic Scholarship Fund Scholar. I am also the President of the Women's Center Coalition, Artist Manager for Celebrating Latinx Arts & Works, and Diversity Inclusion Chair/Historical Liaison for the Rainbow Pines on my University's campus.

During this past summer, I was able to study abroad at John Cabot University in Rome, Italy, and I was inspired to create the Juliet Rose Review. In this literary and art review, I feature the art of people of color and other marginalized groups. Seeing that I was one of the only POC in my classes in Rome, I felt as though it is important to give individuals these spaces to express themselves. I have received and published submissions from the following countries: Italy, Egypt, France, and the United States. In this outlet, I also feature my photography.

In January 2023, I went to Kuwait for two weeks to do observational research on the effects of colonization on Kuwaiti society with Dr. Mokhtar through the Global Leaders program, my living-learning community on the Douglass campus at Rutgers. I am currently studying abroad in Florence, Italy, until May. During this time, I hope to gain insights into both cultures and understand how their laws and media function. I will surely use the skills I learn during these experiences to excel in my career as a foreign correspondent.



Nicolette Alexandra Brito-Cruz