

CET Florence, Spring 2025 | Kylan Thompson

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Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece? "Black students abroad"

Abroad while Black: A Reflection on Identity

When I arrived to study in Florence, Italy, I wasn't expecting to see many people who looked like me. While this turned out to be true, it doesn't tell the whole story of my experience.

Despite encountering some prejudice and occasional stares, I found Florence to be one of the kindest and most hospitable cities I've ever visited. CET did an excellent job preparing students for the cultural differences between the United States and Italy, both before arrival and during orientation. However, what they failed to mention was how your own identity may be different.

As a Black man from the South who had moved to the melting pot of New York City to attend a predominantly white institution, I was no stranger to the camaraderie that comes with being Black. What surprised me was discovering that what I believed to be a universal experience doesn't extend beyond the United States. The passing nod or smile of recognition at a bar was virtually nonexistent, and so too was that feeling of comfort that comes from being around someone who looks like you in a space dominated by those who don't.

I had expected my countless other adjustments—like navigating a language I could barely speak—to be much more difficult. Instead, I found this lack of shared racial identity to be the most challenging aspect of my transition. It made me feel more isolated than I already did as a newcomer, as I was now without the community that had been part of my entire life.

However, this experience allowed me to focus on the many other facets of my identity that I had previously engaged with much less. Rather than simply gravitating toward other Black students, I was driven to find community among all students and young people. I was able to forge friendships and make connections that I never would have pursued back in the States.

Though I looked forward to returning to the South, where far more people look like me, I did so with a transformed perspective on my identity. While I will certainly continue writing for the Black magazine on campus and attending events hosted by Black student organizations, I will also be sure to branch out. My experience in Florence taught me that my identity extends everywhere—even beyond the boundaries I had previously imagined.