

*Confronting learning:  
A reflection on interviewing  
the first NESP (France)  
Candidates*

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EMERGING STUDENTS**

**PROGRAMME 2021**



# MOTLADI MATATIELE

*Master of Science  
Computer Science*

*EPITA School of Engineering and  
Computer Science.  
Nice, France*

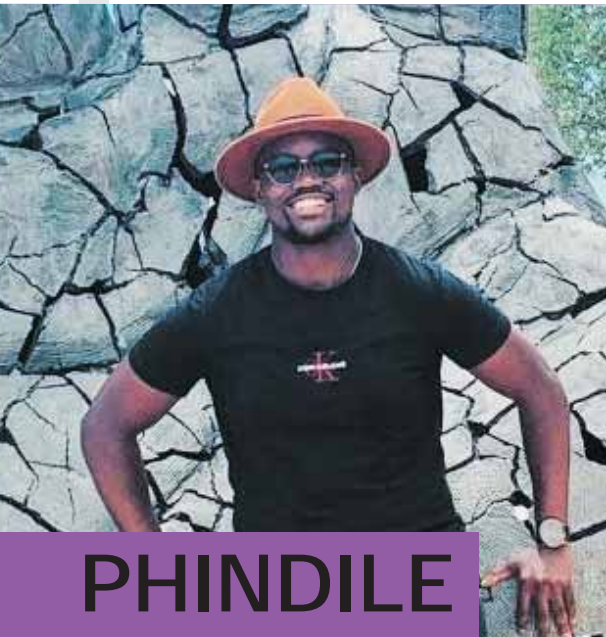
*TRIBE CREATION  
IS AN IMPORTANT  
PART OF  
FOSTERING ANY  
SENSE OF  
BELONGING IN A  
PLACE SO FAR  
FROM HOME*

When caught in the unknowable labyrinth that is academia, the most consistent comfort is often the promise of an end. The end. The resolve. The point. The relief and release after a testing climb. This promise first glimmers before the eyes of a first year student as a faint light at the end of a post matric qualification, and then manages to grow both brighter and more illusory the further one roams into the particulars of their chosen discipline. In August 2021, I met with five young, gifted, and Black scholars who, upon reaching one summit, sojourned only momentarily before heeding the beckoning call of the academy to go further. After all, what is the worst that could happen, right?

“It is by far the most challenging thing I have ever done” remarks Pretoria born and Cape Town based **Motladi Matatiele**. Matatiele, who is enrolled for her Master of Science in Computer Science at the EPITA School of Engineering and Computer Science in Nice, France is succinct in her responses, perhaps a spiriting of her speciality: Data Science and Analytics. In my conversations with Matatiele and her cohort, I am often reminded that I am amidst young thinkers who are mid stride on an arresting and often confronting journey. Matatiele’s sentiment resonates among all five scholars as they reflect on the past year. In the South African spring of 2020, **Motladi Matatiele, Sanele Mhlongo, Vuledzani Badetswana, Phindile Shinga, and Mngqobi Zuma** were presented with a mammoth opportunity entangled in unprecedented obstacles: Candidacy in the National Emerging Scholars Programme (NESP) to read for their Master degree at a French institution of their choosing -- amidst a global pandemic.

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# PHINDILE SHINGA

*Master of Science  
Environmental Hazards and  
Risks Management*

*University of côte d, Azur,  
France*

**WAITING FOR THE  
OTHER SHOE TO  
DROP – BUT IT  
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“The whole process [had given me] kind of mixed emotions,”

**Phindile Shinga** recalls the whirlwind that followed the news of his acceptance to read for his MSc in Environmental Hazards and Risks Management at the University côte d, Azur, “...to the extent that I didn’t tell people until the last day. I remember telling people when I was actually boarding from King Shaka International airport...” Shinga couldn’t help but to recoil at the cascade of sweet news rushing him in the fourth quarter of what had been an otherwise bitter year of unemployment and precarity, and so he kept the news limited to close family members until his last moments in the airport nearest to his hometown of Bizana in the Eastern Cape. That flight from King Shaka International airport would take Shinga to O.R Tambo International airport where he would catch his first ever flight out of the country and wait for the other shoe to drop -- but it never really does. Instead, Shinga and each of his fellow programme candidates describe to me transitional processes that take on the tonalities of a lucid dream, with banal administrative checkboxes related to international travel colliding with surreal dystopian mise-en-scenes related to pandemic protocol all suspended in an almost inappropriate feeling of euphoria.

Each of them seems to vividly remember the moment when reality hit, for some it was with South African soil safely beneath their feet as they awaited their Visas and read infographics hung on the walls of the French Consulate, for **Mnqobi Zuma** who had been accepted to read for his MSc in Biocontrol Solutions for Plant Health at the University Côte d’Azur, reality hit in candid conversations with his wife about how to prepare for the longest time they would have ever spent apart. But for **Vuledzani Badetswana** it was not until she stood before administrators at her residence in Paris after the longest flight she had ever been on that she came to understand that she was not in South Africa anymore:



# VULEDZANI BADETSWANA

*Master of Science  
Computer Science*

*EPITA School of Engineering and  
Computer Science.  
Paris campus, France*

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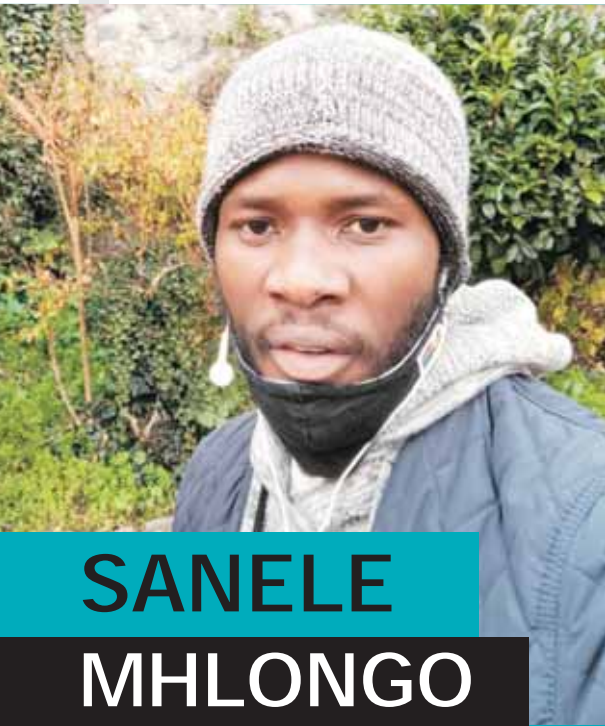
"I can say that for my first day, I cried the whole day." Badetswana admits shyly at first, and then she clears her throat "I cried literally the whole day." She surrenders this truth with more pride this time. Badetswana describes the state that she was in on her first day in Paris with a compassion for herself that is perhaps a testimony to becoming what we later coin to be a *global adult* -- it is a loose terminology, a kind of catch-all phrase to describe the rogue energy of being the first of our families to venture so far into the world unaccompanied and on our own business. For Badetswana, it seems that a part of being a *global adult* means defending the delicate version of herself who, on the morning of her arrival, was without a room and without the cultural and linguistic eloquence to navigate a comfortable understanding of how her first days in Paris would unfold. She deserves to cry. Badetswana, who is reading for her Master of Science in Computer Science - Computer Security at EPITA's Parisian campus, is the only candidate in Paris, a challenge in itself. But bank accounts must be opened and sim cards registered and there is no time to waste -- the *global adult* takes over.

Between their arrival and the commencement of their first classes some of the candidates have as little as a few hours to prepare as they function at the mercy of COVID-19 adjusted schedules.

stamina is Gold!" Matatiele laughs. "We've come to consider ourselves wounded idealists - we push through each moment with the belief that it will get easier" but the wounded idealist is seldom afforded the opportunity to process and heal. Matiele's meta-reference is not lost on me. *Hurt now, heal later*. She at once points to her experience and the experiences of her peers in the context of this formidable two year opportunity whilst gesturing to a common conundrum within academia: That of being a young, Black, and African scholar of a fast evolving field in an infrastructurally European institution.

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# SANELE MHLONGO

*Electrical Engineering for  
Smart Grids and Buildings  
Master Programme*

*Institut Polytechnique de Grenoble  
(Grenoble INP)  
Grenoble, France*

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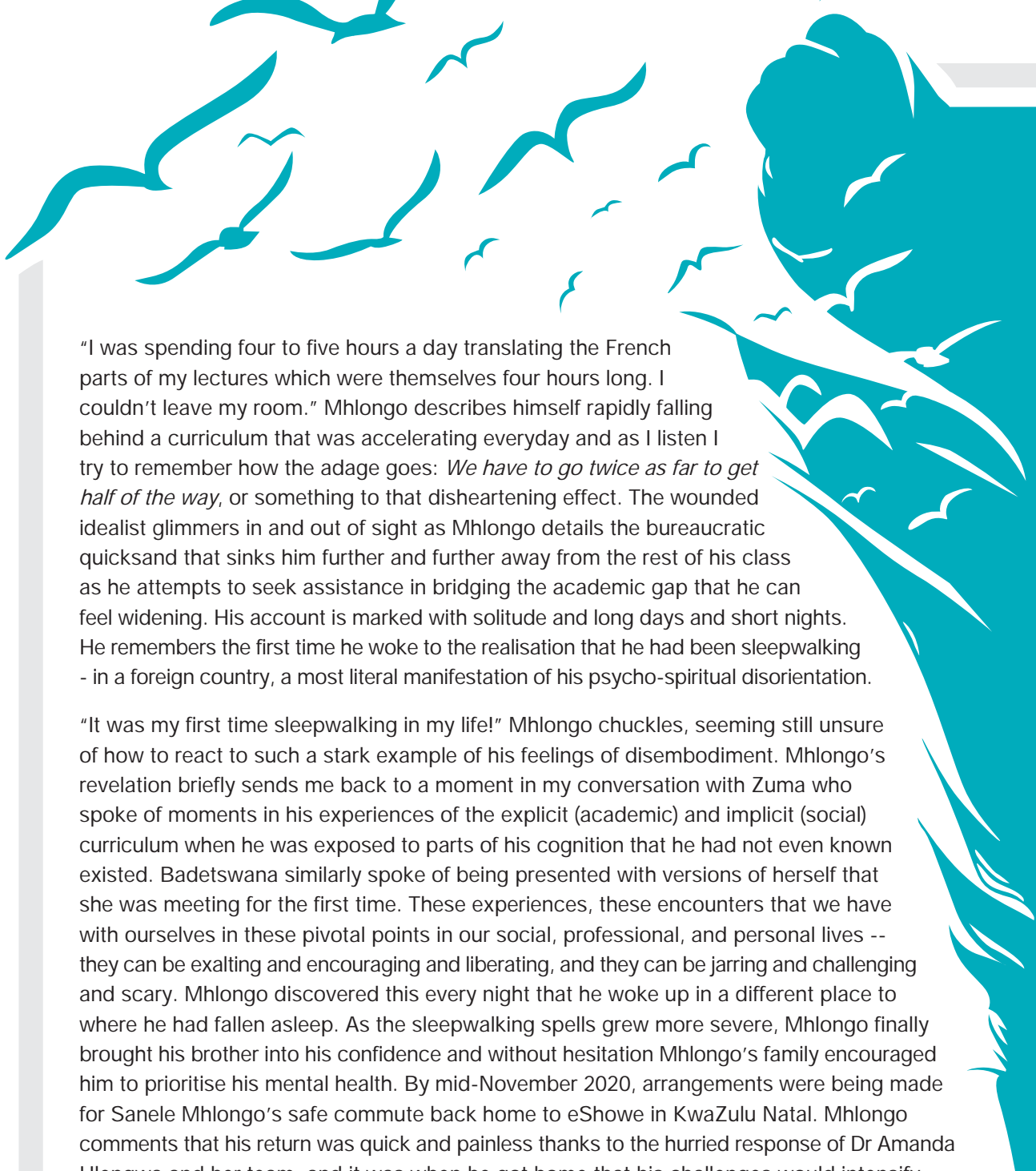
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The conundrum of knowing all of the historical nuances that have contributed to your being there but needing to focus on the moment in front of you as though no history precedes it and nothing will follow it. In other words, there is more data than there is time to process it and the space to run pre-emptive diagnostics and predict what may come is incredibly limited.

*The wounded idealist.* It is a fitting talisman: a diabolical technology for survival in the lexicon of Black excellence that I, myself, am all too familiar with. Perhaps it is this familiarity that sent a shudder of resonance through my body as I spoke to **Sanele Mhlongo** who was accepted for the Electrical Engineering for Smart Grids and Buildings Master programme at Institut Polytechnique de Grenoble (Grenoble INP) in the city of Grenoble.

would say unluckily enough, we don't really know how to heal ourselves. We know how to survive, but the healing part..." Mhlongo trails off gently as he remembers his experience in Grenoble. There is a softness to his voice that cautions of a healing in progress. Mhlongo, like his colleagues, received the news of his acceptance to Grenoble INP and his successful candidacy in the NESP mere weeks before departing for France. Although anxious at the prospect of being in a foreign land, he was reassured by the explicit expression that all classes would be conducted in English and excited at how this experience could contribute to his road into higher education as a lecturer in his field. However things would quickly start to go awry, and Mhlongo would find himself flailing from one translation app to the other trying by all means to comprehend what his lecturers were saying when they defaulted to French in lectures (which they did often and for long periods).



"I was spending four to five hours a day translating the French parts of my lectures which were themselves four hours long. I couldn't leave my room." Mhlongo describes himself rapidly falling behind a curriculum that was accelerating everyday and as I listen I try to remember how the adage goes: *We have to go twice as far to get half of the way*, or something to that disheartening effect. The wounded idealist glimmers in and out of sight as Mhlongo details the bureaucratic quicksand that sinks him further and further away from the rest of his class as he attempts to seek assistance in bridging the academic gap that he can feel widening. His account is marked with solitude and long days and short nights. He remembers the first time he woke to the realisation that he had been sleepwalking - in a foreign country, a most literal manifestation of his psycho-spiritual disorientation.

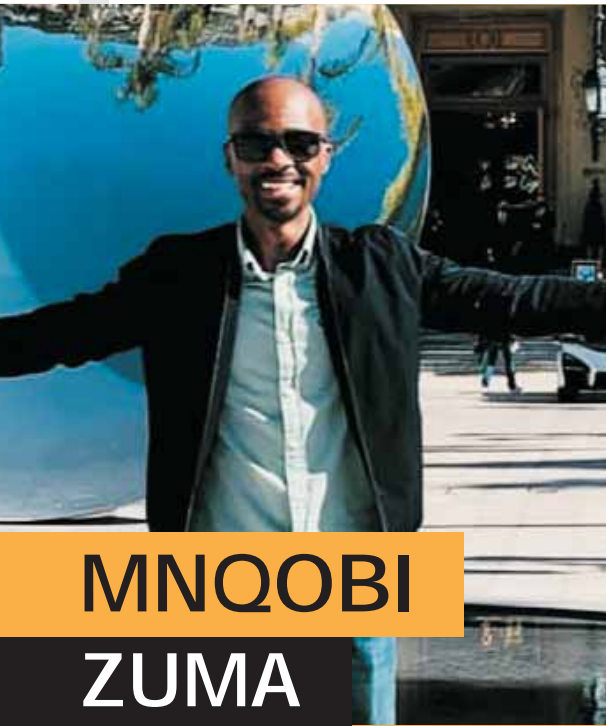
"It was my first time sleepwalking in my life!" Mhlongo chuckles, seeming still unsure of how to react to such a stark example of his feelings of disembodiment. Mhlongo's revelation briefly sends me back to a moment in my conversation with Zuma who spoke of moments in his experiences of the explicit (academic) and implicit (social) curriculum when he was exposed to parts of his cognition that he had not even known existed. Badetswana similarly spoke of being presented with versions of herself that she was meeting for the first time. These experiences, these encounters that we have with ourselves in these pivotal points in our social, professional, and personal lives -- they can be exalting and encouraging and liberating, and they can be jarring and challenging and scary. Mhlongo discovered this every night that he woke up in a different place to where he had fallen asleep. As the sleepwalking spells grew more severe, Mhlongo finally brought his brother into his confidence and without hesitation Mhlongo's family encouraged him to prioritise his mental health. By mid-November 2020, arrangements were being made for Sanele Mhlongo's safe commute back home to eShowe in KwaZulu Natal. Mhlongo comments that his return was quick and painless thanks to the hurried response of Dr Amanda Hlengwa and her team, and it was when he got home that his challenges would intensify.

When I spoke to the NESP candidates, each was approaching the 1 year anniversary of first having received the news of their entry into the program. Much has happened since then and a second leg to this journey still awaits them. Our conversations seem to be useful in presenting an opportunity to deliberately reflect on the past year and perhaps even dare to imagine the year to come as counter intuitive as it may seem for some.

Shinga, Zuma, Badetswana, and Matatiele all nervously approaching a year of practice by way of internships which will have them interfacing more immediately with interpersonal elements of French culture which they have each already noted to be a lot more direct and uncompromising than they are used to.

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# MNQOBI ZUMA

## *Electrical Engineering for Smart Grids and Buildings Master Programme*

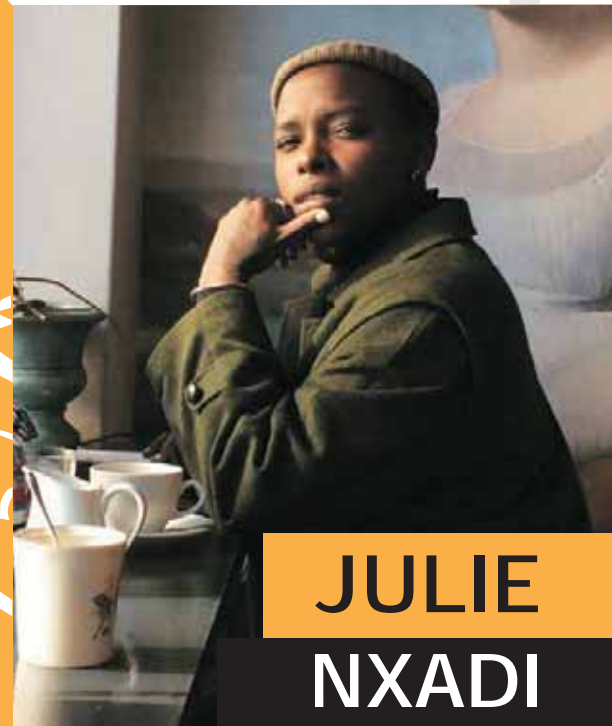
*Institut Polytechnique de Grenoble  
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Zuma, Badetswana, and Matatiele welcome the paradigm shift, and seem as excited as they are nervous, Shinga seems more cautious. Matatiele is quick to note that although it is challenging in many ways, the shift in pedagogy in her chosen institution is critical and appreciated by data scientists such as herself who are adamant to keep up "...in a field that is constantly redefining itself..." an important and deeply rewarding detail to this experience.

I decided to end off my conversations with the five candidates with questions about any grounding practices they may have developed to keep themselves sound and stable as they continue in this process. It would be the question that triggers Mhlongo's call for more deliberate transmission of healing practice in academia. Indeed, how do we become better global adults? Matatiele insists that tribe creation is an important part of fostering any sense of belonging in a place so far away from home and credits the programme for its support in manufacturing that. "I was lucky though" she admits "I wasn't the only one from the programme in Nice." Shinga shares in this fortune, "at King Shaka I recognized uMngqobi from the French classes we had to take in preparation for the programme [...] I met his family and he met mine and I was like, "at least there is someone I feel like I know" and indeed these friendships would serve to calm the anxiety of feeling unknown in a place so unknown to them. And perhaps a sense of community is the difference between surviving and healing: an encouraging space to process, and reflect, and plan. Badetswana recognised this as a matter of urgency when she discovered that she was the only one from the programme registered at her institution, so she made a tribe the old fashioned way which proved challenging in light of COVID restrictions and a rigorous curriculum. "My social life has improved in the last eight months though [...] now I meet people and I have friends and I have been travelling around," it is all but impossible for her to mask her excitement as she speaks about future plans to travel, a sentiment which piqued my curiosity about whether she imagines she will be sad to leave France, I am quick to realise that leaving France in the rearview is not the natural next step for all of my new friends. Indeed, Matatiele, Zuma, and



# JULIE NXADI

Badetswana are all sure that they will return to France and likely beyond! I ask Sanele Mhlongo where France lives in his imagination following such a jolting first experience. Mhlongo is candid in his reflection on what the past year has been: Much like his colleagues, Mhlongo has undergone a paradigm shift and a confronting learning process. An abrupt return from an unprecedented elation followed by a profound sense of grief and disappointment that trailed into a life threatening depression has proven to be a curriculum that he will need time to digest. He is mending and learning that France can wait, and that the tenderness he is extending to himself will make him a better teacher in the future.

I am in awe of these five young scholars who have, despite everything, ventured inward and found in themselves the audacity to be without apology. I am honoured to have met every one of them and think I speak for many when I say Ntinga ntaka ndini!



From left to right: Mngqobi, Tinashe, Camille, Motladi and Phindile.

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