

Between September 23 and October 7 2011, the University of Humanistic Studies and its Kosmopolis Institute, hosted a group of South African exchange students. They are of diverse social backgrounds and study in different Faculties at the University of the Free State (UFS) (located in Bloemfontein, South Africa) and all participate in the *Formula I Initiative* of the UFS. This program offers talented first year students at UFS an opportunity to expand their horizons and experience two weeks at a foreign university. By participating in the Formula I initiative, the UvH connects to a large international academic network in the United States (including NYU, Stanford, Cornell), Europe (Free University Amsterdam, Ghent University, American University in Paris) and Japan (Tokyo University). All these universities received a group of South African UFS students. In the two weeks that they were our guests, they attended lectures, participated in tutorials, explored Utrecht, Amsterdam, The Hague and Wijk bij Duurstede and met many UvH students. They stayed with UvH student hosts and at Strowis Hostel in Utrecht. Together with the UvH Student Organization OpDrift, Kosmopolis organized a well-attended film – and dialogue evening around the South African movie "Skin". Before they returned to South Africa, Kosmopolis Graduate Assistants Frank Nieuwenhuizen and Kevin Pijpers, together with their South African mentor (JC Van der Merwe, staff member of the International Institute for Studies in Race, Reconciliation and Social Justice at UFS) interviewed them. For privacy reasons, their answers are anonymous and mixed. Because of this, diverse replies may appear in the interview.

The students



Thelma Thobeka Ngoma, 19 years old



Ancois de Villiers, 19 years old



Thato Mohlakoana, 18 years old



Petri Claassen, 20 years old



Sinebhongo Matshaya, 18 years old

I: Your generation is sometimes referred to as Mandela's Children. What does this mean to you?

The period in which Mandela was freed was the period where we were born. That is why he is referred to as our father, as the man who made it happen for us. He made it possible for us to be born in a time where things became different. When he was released, the era of post-apartheid started. So, yes I do feel like one of Mandela's Children.

I: Is it something you feel proud of?

Yes, I do. We *are* his children. We are born in a time in which we don't have to experience the things our parents had to experience. For me, as a black woman, it has become easier. If you have a good example of a father, you want to follow in his footsteps. That is what Mandela means for me. I want to grow up to be like him.

As a white person, I can also be proud of him. He had a vision for the whole country, not only for black people.

I: Don't you think that being labeled "Mandela's children" is unnecessary pressure on you?

No, it is pressure, but very necessary pressure. There has to be a specific drive or focus for us to follow. So the pressure is very good, because now we know that the way South Africans did things in the past is not the way to go. It refers to a time where we don't want to go again.

I: What will happen when Mandela dies?

That is a difficult question. It would be a global outrage, beyond South Africa. Of course, the world is not going to stand still, but people will feel a great loss all over the world. I don't think his death will have a huge negative impact on the South African economy or on other fields. Certainly, there will be a huge funeral... But he is not really active anymore in decision making politics, so unlike it would have been in a previous time, the impact of this death would not be very big in this field. But *symbolically* Mandela's legacy will definitely live on. People will hold on to that. Surely it will be an emotional thing when he dies.

I: For the Kosmopolis Summer School Alumni, a famous question which we dealt with in class is: If you could be born again, with any characteristic, for instance different gender, skin color, religion, nationality, birth year and so on, then what would you be?

I wouldn't change my race, I wouldn't change my gender, nor my sexuality. I would probably add a few more qualities, like a bit of humility here and there. I would like to have more positive qualities that could outdo the negative. Like honesty or qualities that would help others.

It is hard to imagine being different because of who you are now and all the things that give meaning to your life. If I could start over again, I would start earlier in realizing that I could make a difference, that we should make a difference. That it is not up to other people to do something but you can start something yourself. But I wouldn't want to be born in another body or with a different gender, I think that being a boy would be really hard!

I: Would you like to be born in this time or in the past?

I would like to be born in this time, I like creating history and that is where I'm going: creating history. Honestly, the only thing I would change in my life is where I come from. Not my family or the people I grew up with, but I would like the area where I come from to be a bit more posh. A place outside of the rural area, where people would be closer to good schools and such. That is the only thing I would like to change. Being black and South African.... aaaah I like it!!

I: When you entered the building of the University of Humanistic Studies, what did you notice? What is remarkable to you, in a positive or negative way?

It looks as if everyone here gets along with each other. Everyone knows each other. In the cantina, you find one person sitting alone and then the next person just joins him. They get along and move together as a group. I like that. And the building is colorful. With the hands on the walls and the yellow paint on the doors, it's a place to feel happy when studying.

There is a more informal attitude here at the university. No one is very stiff. People just move around their chairs if they want to and form a circle. This is very different in South Africa.

In South Africa, if there is a strange or a new person in the room, at first they just leave him alone. But here, people want to know what you are thinking and where you are from. People here want us to be here, it seems like they enjoy us to be here.

I: One of the classes you attended was by Laurens ten Kate about Humanism and Christianity. Now, you are all Christian. What do you think about these two world views? What do you think about humanists?

There are a lot of similar ideas in Christianity and Humanism. But of course, the atheist perspective of Humanism differs from the Christian one. But besides that, there is a lot in common, such as similar values, like the way you treat other people. Humanism does not necessarily equal atheism of course. We also learned these past two weeks that Humanistic Studies does not the same as the worldview of humanism. It seems possible for a Christian to do Humanistic Studies.

I: But are they separate world views?

For instance, some things Christians and Jews have in common. This is also true for Humanism and Christianity. But there will always be ways in which they will not be the same. Some things just don't mix. Some people seem very hard-core Humanist. They think there is no other worldview which is more valuable. I think those people may like to clash with religions since that is all they are, that is all they believe.

I think that in Christianity it is more important *why* you do things as opposed to *what* you do, which seems more important in Humanism. Christianity is more about *why* you do things, because we believe in an afterlife.

At the UvH, we talked a lot about connectedness. In Humanism the connectedness is between people and animals and the earth. In Christianity the most important thing is your relationship with

God. That is the essential part of being a Christian. Humanism is so focused on the meaning of life. I think all people focus on that, but in Christianity, you find your purpose in your connection to God.

I: Is it a personal God then? Or a God of an entire people? How do you see that?

I think it works both ways. It is about you seeing him as your Father and you are his daughter.

For me personally I find my purpose in my religion. When I search for meaning, I find it in my religion. I don't understand how people find the meaning of their life without any religion. Because it is something so much bigger than you. I don't understand how people cannot believe in anything.

I: So when you see a humanist who claims to do just that, how do you make sense of that, when he or she tells you he or she finds meaning only in this life?

That is good for him, but I would not be able to find the purpose of my life, just in me myself, I don't! But someone else might find that it works like that and I do not judge him. But, personally everything I decide, everything I process, I relate back to my religion.

What I noticed is, that in most religions, there are parallels. Most of what people believe, they share. The difference is in small things. So for me, it is just a matter of choice to be comfortable in what you are doing. It would not make sense for me to be an atheist, I have been a Christian all my life, I would not like being anything else. It is just how you do it that differs.

I: Have you discovered that there are personal limits to your views on pluralism? Have you perhaps noticed things in the Netherlands which you definitely would not tolerate?

I would absolutely get angry if you were to blaspheme or swear when using the name of someone I believe in. In that case, I do not care if you think that I am judging you. It would be unacceptable to me and I would either walk away or say something about it.

I: In terms of diversity, or pluralism, do you find issues in the Netherlands that are different? Or, are these issues more or less the same as in South Africa? For instance, do you feel more black here than in South Africa?

No, I do not feel more black here. Because no one refers to me as black and no one treats me differently. Yesterday in my group in class I was the only black person. I only noticed that when the class ended. While in South Africa, I would be noticed immediately and referred to as black. So no, I do not feel more black here, at all. Instead, I just felt like anyone else.

I: But do you remember when we went to a certain restaurant, and there was a specific woman who was not welcoming to you?

I did not think of that as racist behavior. She was just being rude, very rude.

For me: I *do* feel more black here in Holland and at the UvH.... because... there is white everywhere! Here, when we walk in the street, and see a black person, I would look up <gawk>, even as a black person myself! Everywhere I go in the Netherlands, I see white people. But not in the sense that anything is done to me, because I am black.

I: In terms of language? Did you have trouble?

I think it is very easy in terms of language: the Dutch community is very open in terms of speaking English. Even if I can't speak Dutch, people are very helpful and nice. They make a real effort to understand each other and are delighted and surprised when I, as an Afrikaner, can understand a lot of Dutch.

However, what surprised me was the idea of many people that our language is "South African", while that language does not exist. Afrikaans is just one of the many languages in South Africa. We have 11 official languages. I did not know that people were not aware of that.

I: What did you learn about yourself on this trip?

I realized during the dialogue about the movie Skin, that I can, without bragging, use my mouth: I can talk! I learned that I can change things by talking. After this experience in the Netherlands, I am much more confident using my mouth. I might not be the smartest person alive, but if I can help people to change things, I might as well use my talent to speak. So I am going back to South Africa with more confidence.

For me, I learned that I am very frank, but sometimes in a negative way. Sometimes I just say things because I can. And, because I was here, it pushed me to be even more frank. Because the Dutch are very frank too, they just say things directly. Compared to them, I am not on that level. Sometimes I tend to just say things, even when I'm not supposed to.

I: You mean you are too honest?

No, I just say things, sometimes I am just rude. I do not try to make things sound nicer than they are. But for some people that becomes quite hurtful.

For me, I realized during these two weeks that before, I was occupied with insignificant things that I thought might be important. For instance, when you talk to people who are very driven, it makes you wonder about yourself. My mother used to say that if you hang on to people who are negative, you end up being negative yourself. So, if you hang on to people who are very goal-oriented, who have a mission, maybe one starts looking at things in a different way.

Normally, I tend to close myself off from people I do not know and only spend time with people I really know. On social occasions, for instance. But here at the UvH, I interacted with different people, with new people. Maybe I planned this experience a little bit, I wanted to change in that regard.

I: Do you think that you are going to take these changes back home? Because, obviously, you are going back to your old lives and the people you already knew.

I think if you make it a priority, and for instance set yourself only 3 goals, then it will become part of your life. I think that is possible. So in a way, it is about turning bad habits into good habits and make a shift in the way you do things. Somehow you will find your way. Some things might be difficult to change, but with the right mindset and the right habits, it will be possible. Definitely if you stick with people who are inspiring and who push you. Then, you won't feel like you are doing it all alone.