INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION AND MULTICULTURALISMS: THE HARVARD FOREIGN STUDENT KILLINGS IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Two kinds of multiculturalism are discussed, in relation to contrasting approaches to international education represented by Harvard University and the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. Key issues are illustrated by a homicide-suicide at Harvard in 1995 that involved students of Third World origin. An American journalist investigated the deaths and attributed psychopathology to political violence in the home country. She indentified, as contributory factors, adjustment problems in the USA and inadequate student support services. This paper argues for a different weighting among these factors, and highlights how structural inequalities between and within societies influence 'multicultural' interaction.

1.   INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION AND MULTICULTURALISMS

> Not only did no one know the real story, no one even had an orientation -- a sense of where to search for answers, which doors to knock upon. (Thernstrom 1998:9)

Foreign students are the 'wandering scholars of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries' (Mohamed 1997:172). In the late modern age, '...globalizing influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely... processes of self-realization influence global strategies' (Giddens 1991:214). Various places of higher education in the First World exert a hold on 'the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe' (Appadurai 1990: 297): for 'many persons on the globe live in... imagined "worlds"' (ibid.) that stretch infinitely beyond the nation-states that Benedict Anderson described as 'imagined communities'.

Global rankings of educational institutions influence the 'imagined worlds' of people all over the planet for whom university education plays a key role in achievement and advancement. Notions of 'excellence' are, however, closely linked to dominance -- which is why the wandering scholars of our time tend to move in certain directions. The pursuit of 'knowledge' is linked to motivations such as improved 'credentials' and increased opportunities for employment and upward mobility.

Travel across the world for an education can also be allied to a desire for exposure to other ways of life, not least those that are strongly projected into the 'imagined worlds' of those elsewhere on the globe. When wandering scholars enter another society, those who associate with them gain opportunities for a reverse exposure, to the lives of faraway societies through particular individuals. But are those in dominant societies and institutions interested in and open to individuals from less powerful and privileged backgrounds? Does the 'cultural packaging' of knowledge -- and the social setting in which knowledge is transmitted -- put those of different social and cultural origin at a disadvantage? Are global centres of higher learning mainly multicultural in form, by including in their ranks people from other societies? Are they also multicultural in substance, with interchange that exemplifies the 'reciprocal illumination of one culture by another' (Todorov 1984:240)?

'International education' at present generally means that institutions of higher learning are open to those from other societies -- international access to the prominent educational institutions of one (usually globally or regionally dominant) country. One analyst defined international education of this sort as 'national education to which for-

eigners are also admitted' (van Nieuwenhuijze 1963:[54]). He contrasted this with 'education adapted to international needs' (<u>op. cit.</u>:44), a contrast illustrated by a network of institutions that provide 'international education' in this second sense, based within his own country, the Netherlands. The two kinds of international education have very different student populations: in the first type local students preponderate, but in the second type (especially as exemplified within the Dutch system) the overwhelming majority of students come from elsewhere. Van Nieuwenhuijze justified this: 'these are projects of international education rather than of Dutch education... these courses are much more useful if a somewhat even distribution of nationalities is achieved so far as participants are concerned' (<u>op. cit.</u>:28).

This paper looks at examples of these two models of international education: the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague which endeavours to provide 'education adapted to international needs', and Harvard University as a case of national education to which foreigners have access. The focus here is on 'multiculturalism'. Is a 'substantive' multiculturalism of reciprocal exchange more likely to take place where 'a somewhat even distribution of nationalities is achieved'? Does a situation where those within classroom and campus are largely from a host country that is globally dominant give rise to what Nandy calls 'a dialogue of unequals' with international students, especially those from structurally disadvantaged parts of the world? To what extent do dominant cultural idioms, or the 'cultural packaging' of knowledge, negatively affect students from elsewhere? And if anomie and social isolation precipitate crises for foreign students, how do the 'authorities' react?

These questions are prompted by the deaths at Harvard in 1995 of two young women wandering scholars (although fuller answers would draw on many other cases as well). A book-length analysis (Thernstrom 1998) now allows those elsewhere some access to the 'facts of the case', as well as an opportunity to examine given interpretations. Unusual and disturbing cases have considerable potential to illuminate (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992) -- in our context, not only the extreme anguish of a wandering scholar, but the host society and culture. 'I found that the best informants were often people who were a little marginal in the group: They were able to make explicit the general rules for inclusion and exclusion, for example, in ways that more centrally located individuals were not... ...cultural values and ideas are best studied at the margins and in interstices between institutions and groups' (Gullestad, quoted in Eakin 1999:41). Thus, after the events, it

was those whose lives were 'lived out on the borderlands' (Steadman 1987, quoted <u>ibid.</u>) of the host institution and culture -- for example, the economically poor and the mentally ill -- who said 'I could see how she felt' and who were given an opportunity to tell 'marginalized stories' that were usually unheard (Abma 1999:172; see 5.2 below).

Section 2 sketches some relevant differences between Harvard and the Institute of Social Studies, and devotes more space to the lesser known institution. Section 3 discusses multiculturalism at the Institute, highlighting both tensions and benefits. Section 4 uses Thernstrom's book to present the Harvard case, in three sub-sections that put forward the main protagonists, the events and the university administration's reactions. Next, the three sub-sections of section 5 use Thernstrom's material to question the relative weight that she assigns to various factors that may have precipitated violent acts, and to demonstrate that additional and alternative interpretations are possible even within the framework that she constructs from the evidence. Section 6 applies Giddens' reflections, on the self in the late modern age, to the woman scholar from the Third World who was at the centre of a double tragedy.

Section 7 touches on the socio-political role of 'stories', to conclude a paper that is a story about stories. Harvard officials resolutely maintained 'There is no story', at the same time that an American journalist based a story on a dead young woman's diaries, a visit to a Third World country, and conversations with (among others) students, administrators and mental health professionals -- a story that is in turn questioned here, using her own material. In parallel I draw on the life stories of former students of the Institute of Social Studies. Much of this paper is therefore presented between quotation marks, including quotes within quotes, stories within stories. Multiculturalism is after all about plural voices.

Section 7 also compares multiculturalism within the two very different institutions examined in this paper. The value of the discussions here lies less in whether my additional explanations hold or not for this single case (something that is in any case difficult to establish), than in the questions raised and the expanded framework of inquiry.

2.   DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS

2.1

In the 'imagined worlds' of many would-be wandering scholars, the spires of Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard soar far above other universities (insofar as these others have spires). Harvard, although much younger than the other two, enjoys an added aura because its 350 year history is linked to a stronger profile of modernity. Harvard is also much richer: Thernstrom reminds us that its 'annual operating costs of $1.4 billion are about the same as the entire budget of the Ethiopian government' (op. cit.:133). A few other American universities share this aura of modernity, excellence and wealth.

Unlike Oxbridge, Harvard straddles what Euro-Americans call the Old World and the New. Located in the USA, Harvard participates in and contributes to that country's political and economic dominance. For many (including academicians all over the world), Harvard exemplifies what is best and most appealing in 'America'.

An Australian woman, engaged in doctoral studies at the Harvard School of Education, says: 'I came to America because I live in times that recognize this nation as among the great. Those of us who inhabit the corners of the Empire once looked to Britain for the imprimateur that Oxford and Cambridge have stamped on generation after generation of colonial hopefuls. I am not of their number..., my quest is otherwise. Gifted with so much boistrous history, America emanates a radiance for those farther from the mainstream; it has produced men and women who have held the world in thrall... Curious, speculative, I came here intending to encounter for myself the national enterprise that is America and the energy that has generated prominence on a scale unexampled in the modern era... Boston has been home to an impressive array of founding persons; one need look no further than Harvard Yard to sense their substance; in creating this, the emblem of their ideals, they built to last' (McRae 1994:196-97).

Harvard's role has expanded from national pride to global icon:

> Historians often describe Harvard's historical preeminence as a function of its twofold appeal of venerability and accessiblity -- its association with both Puritans and [more recently] Jews. On the one hand, the nation's first college continued to appeal to the elite, many of whose families had long relationships with the school. The postwar association with the Kennedys cemented the idea of Harvard as Camelot in the popular imagination. But Harvard also drew talent from minorities who found doors closed to them elsewhere. Harvard abandoned an important symbol of its original Christian identity in 1886 when it abolished compulsory attendance at chapel, three decades before Yale and half a century before Princeton did. Its informal quota on the number of Jewish undergraduates

was much less restrictive than that of other Ivy League colleges. It was able to skim off the cream of the educated Jewish families who fled the Nazis. By the late 1950s Jewish students were as much as forty percent of the student body -- two to three times that of Yale and Princeton. The school's relative liberality was rewarded with generous donations from wealthy Jewish families... Many Jewish graduates of the college went on to prominent careers in Hollywood and the media, and mythologized their school by making it the subject of movies and articles. Harvard has retained a special appeal for minorities and international students. Foreign students make up seven percent of the Harvard student body. Minorities constitute over a third, with Asians representing by far the largest share... nineteen percent of Harvard students, although they constitute only three percent of the population at large (Thernstrom op. cit.:84-5).

Harvard's 'magic of multiculturalism' (op. cit.:85) largely involves assimilation, drawing eager newcomers in under its enchanted mantle -- 'acts of absorption and of incorporation' (Bauman 1990:156). The origins of the term 'assimilation' are biological: 'The imagery that the concept evoked was one of a living, active body, bestowing or impressing its own form and quality upon something different from itself...; of a process, in the course of which the form and quality of the other entity went through a radical change, while the identity of the 'assimilating' body was maintained... It was this imagery that made the biological concept eminently suitable for its new, social, semantic function' (op. cit.:157). Inequality is central to understanding social assimilation: 'Above all, the vision of assimilation was a roundabout confirmation of social hierarchy, of the extant division of power. It assumed the superiority of one form of life...' (op. cit.:158). Such assimilatory processes involve individuals from subordinate collectivities who 'seek to... meet... the conditions set by the gatekeepers of the dominant group' (op. cit.:159). Thernstrom reports from a televised discussion about immigrants that 'the American dream has to be continually imported' (op. cit.:61): similarly, the Harvard legend -- so much a part of that dream -- has to be continually replenished.

With what other form of multiculturalism can we usefully compare multiculturalism-as-assimilation? In the context of foreign students, we hear of 'a relatively recent shift from the idea that the student must assimilate into a pre-existing structure to the idea that the institution must accommodate to the needs of more diverse student cohorts' (Harris 1997:36). There is talk of 'cultural synergy... defined as the mutual effort... to understand each other's... cultures' (Cortazzi and Jin 1997:88), and holding 'the development of cultural sensitivity to be personally rewarding as well as professionally essential' (Wright 1997:101).

The emphasis here seems to be on multiculturalism as two-way or even multidirectional, rather than the largely unidirectional processes of assimilatory multicul-

turalism. Genuine interchange (or 'conversation') between those from diverse unequal cultures, we are told: 'presupposes certain normative rules': '... that we recognize the right to equal participation among conversation participants; the right to suggest topics of conversation, to introduce new points of view, questions and criticism into the conversation; and the right to challenge the rules of the conversation insofar as these seem to exclude the voice of some and privilege the voice of others' (Benhabib 1995:251).

2.2

We move to a smaller and lesser-known country and place of higher education, the Institute of Social Studies in the Netherlands. In the early 1990s, I interviewed 112 men and women from eighteen countries who had graduated from the Institute over a period of forty years, in order to illuminate the relationship between study there and life and work in Third World countries (George 1997a). Later research involved interviews with twelve women and men at two different periods during their studies at the Institute in 1997 (George 1997b and 1998). The number of countries covered then rose to twenty seven -- of the 130 countries from which people have come to study at the Institute over nearly half a century. The quotations that follow are taken from these interviews.

The Institute provides postgraduate education (six month diplomas or fifteen month master's degrees) in English. It has some three hundred students during an academic year, generally people in mid-career involved in Third World development and usually from 'developing' countries -- civil servants, other 'development practitioners', academicians and activists. They are called 'participants', to indicate that they contribute experiences and perceptions. A small number attend short courses of eight weeks or so, or -- at the other end of the spectrum -- are enrolled for a Ph.D.

This is 'education adapted to international needs' as van Nieuwenhuijze described it. In his arguments on the need for such education (as opposed to Dutch education to which foreigners are admitted), he goes so far as to say that the 'location in this country is in a way more or less accidental' (op. cit.:28). This is of course not the case.

The Netherlands, one of the world's smallest countries, operates strategically among its larger partners in the European Union, after earlier centuries of competition with some of them for colonies in what is now the Third World. The Netherlands has a strong economy and welfare system, as well as relatively equitable income distribution. Comparisons are sometimes made with Scandinavian countries, both with reference to

domestic issues and 'development aid' to the Third World -- the Netherlands, like Scandinavia, gives a relatively higher percentage of its national income as 'aid' compared to others within the European Union (who in turn give more than the USA). According to a young Dutch lawyer recruited by his country's Foreign Service, '"I wanted to be part of the Dutch foreign policy making process because I feel it differs qualitatively from the American or the German. Those countries are egocentric, they put their own interests first and then those of others. The Dutch are by no means perfect altruists but they are less self-focussed. They are closer to the Scandinavian countries, and concerned about human rights and social justice. They've evolved a system that guarantees a social minimum to all citizens, and they are keen to propagate this internationally"' (George 1997a:187).

A small rich country that tries to influence world affairs faces contradictions -- for example, that its existence is not very sharply etched on the consciousness of others, whether from rich or poor countries. A young Dutchman said wryly, 'the Americans I meet say "Your capital city is Copenhagen, isn't it?"'(op. cit.:86). Some people from Third World countries said that they had to find the Netherlands on a map when they decided to study at the Institute of Social Studies. A European professor at the Institute commented: 'Dutch development policy is self-consciously more progressive than others, it's better managed than some, it has less overt self-interest than the British and the French, but it's perhaps more hypocritical. And it's too small a country -- the Dutch don't matter, whatever they try to show' (op. cit.:187). A Vietnamese colleague of his provided another perspective: 'I liked the Netherlands' "small nation" role, doggedly putting forward its different world-view -- I thought it could be Vietnam's role in Asia' (ibid.).

The Institute of Social Studies was established in 1952, in the aftermath of the Second World War and decolonization, when the Netherlands had to renegotiate relationships with its former colonies as well as with other parts of the Third World. The Institute's 'mission' engendered two key institutional features. Mid-career training for a relatively short period could not realistically require that foreigners learn Dutch. The consequent use of English as a working language resulted in a 'looseness of fit' between the host culture and the Institute. This looseness is best appreciated if compared with similar institutes in Britain or France or the USA, where knowledge of the host language can be assumed because either ex-colonies or world hegemony provide catchment areas for students. The widespread ability among educated Dutch to work in English proved crucial here (the Dutch have long accepted that people from larger western European countries

are not going to learn Dutch, and many educated Dutch speak English, French and German). The fit with the host society was further loosened because development education at the post-graduate level provided in English for mid-career professionals did not dovetail with the university system in the Netherlands that educates young Dutch (and that does not follow the bachelor's-plus-master's-degree pattern). Consequently, relatively few Dutch study at the Institute.

The 'loose fit' between the Institute and the society around deliberately <u>discouraged</u> assimiliation into a small and densely populated land and any 'brain drain' from the Third World countries that such international education was supposed to benefit (Kater 1979). The Institute does not function as a mechanism whereby immigrants are assimilated into national culture, because most newcomers to Dutch society who aspire to higher education would look to universities. Neither is the Institute an emblem of national history and pride in the manner that old Dutch universities are.

Thus the Institute is located within the Netherlands, but is considerably insulated from Dutch society -- a matter of some concern and unease for both the 'hosts' and 'guests'. The Institute's formal relationship to the Dutch university system is uncomfortable, not least because the universities are increasingly trying to attract international students. The Institute is therefore trying to develop closer organizational links to Dutch universities, in order to be seen as part of the university network and not competitive with it (Opschoor 1999).

For the 'guests', cross-cultural education at the Institute often diluted the experience of living in another country. Some extent of choice was necessary between intense interaction within the global microcosm that was the Institute and exploring the Dutch society around -- the crammed curriculum of mid-career education did not easily allow both. In the words of some former students: '"The social environment here at the Institute is so nice that you don't have much of an incentive to investigate Dutch society." "I've been so preoccupied with work that I've stopped thinking about connections to the local society here"... "...I've travelled a lot in the Netherlands but have had little contact with people and society -- I've found out about museums and dam projects but not about the people. I have regrets about this, but don't know what to do..."' (George 1998:14).

Such difficulties were attributed not only to the nature of the Institute but to the social distances of life in the 'First World'. Moreover, while the friendliness and efficiency of Dutch society was appreciated, as well as the relative absence of racism, some

former students of the Institute who had tried to 'penetrate' the host culture complained that it was hard to establish relationships of any depth. A few complained of stereotypes, stigmatization and plain old racism.

Some students were able to achieve a balance that they found satisfying between a social life inside the Institute and among the Dutch outside. Many others said that they had established friendships with local people that had sometimes continued at long distance. A majority appreciated the opportunity to take a closer look at everyday life in a 'developed' society whilst engaged in the study of development, and to compare -- however impressionistically -- various kinds of 'developed' societies. There was a widespread feeling among those who had studied elsewhere in the First World that the Netherlands was a more open and cosmopolitan place for foreign students than many other larger and more self-absorbed countries in western Europe and north America.

The small number of Dutch students at the Institute provoked comment. '"More Dutch students would have provided a good link to Dutch society. Without them, an important aspect of cultural exchange was missing." "When I studied at an American university, I had American classmates and friends. At the Institute, there were no Dutch." "Our batch of participants in 1969 was more confrontational than most earlier students had been, especially us West Africans. We asked, "Why are we in Holland to do a course that the Dutch don't do?" Those Dutch who were interviewed commented on the situation from the other side. "I wonder about places like the Institute. I realize that people from abroad can't attend classes given in Dutch, but segregating them in the Institute widens the gap between North and South. Closer contact with participants at the Institute would allow more Dutch to benefit from interaction with foreigners, as I did, and would also expose participants more to western ideas"' (George 1997a:200).

A theme that came across repeatedly and very strongly in nearly all the interviews was the value of the multicultural education at the Institute (discussed below). Theoretical frameworks that fitted these descriptions were 'a conversation of cultures in international society' (Blaney and Inyatullah 1994), 'a polylogue of civilizations' (Kavolis 1991) and 'a global dialogical community' (Benhabib op. cit.; these frameworks are discussed more fully in George 1997a).

Are such multidirectional exchanges linked to the loose embedding of the Institute in local society, and the consequent insulation of education there from dominance by the host culture? Does the rich multiculturalism derive from the loose fit? If so, the chal-

lenge for the Institute is to integrate more closely with the Dutch university system and local society, while at the same time continuing to host a 'conversation of cultures' within a 'global dialogical community' -- where development practitioners, academicians and activists from a world constituency can meet as different but equal.

3.   THE INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES: MULTICULTURALISM

After a brief general discussion of multiculturalism in the Institute, this section considers the reversal of some relationships that characterize the world outside, and the role that multiculturalism can play in exacerbating or ameliorating individual stress. It concludes by noting what former students of the Institute say about multiculturalism and its structural underpinnings, when they discuss global rankings among institutions of higher learning.

3.1

Most participants at the Institute underlined the value of spending time in the close company of peers from all over the world and especially the Third World. '"I had twenty-two classmates with eighteen different nationalities." "As a foreign student else-where, I would have been a stranger among many local students. But at the Institute we were all strangers"' (George op. cit:188). Such a learning situation seemed to contribute significantly to education: '"Here my classmates come from different parts of the world and have different thinking and different cultures. It helps me a lot to understand the world and the diversity that exists within it." "Studying here at the international level, there are ideas and experiences that confirm your own from back home. It orients you, gives you a sense of what people are doing elsewhere in the world -- for me it was a great thing." "...Sometimes I enjoyed the feeling of how different people are"' (George 1998:7).

The multicultural setting enabled acquisition of social and cross-cultural skills. "You can learn theory and gain perspectives elsewhere, but here you learn how to work together with people from other cultures. It's made me feel more comfortable in dealing with other cultures, I have more confidence now"' (ibid.). '"As class representative, I've learned not to take my assumptions for granted any more. I've learned to consult with people from backgrounds I'm not familiar with. I've realized how differently people can think. I proceed very carefully, and I apologize when I make mistakes"' (George 1997b:14).

Effortless rapport and immediate fraternity between those from the many structurally disadvantaged parts of the globe are rare: it was not easy to relate to the strangers with peculiar ways from unfamiliar lands who now shared classrooms and residence kitchens. '"The loneliness was intense. I had difficulty in making contact with people, communicating with others, understanding other cultures, whether it was dealing with unfamiliar food or unfamiliar people... So at first I mixed only with other Latin Americans and even that wasn't easy"' (George 1997a:192). The time together often involved mixed feelings of affinity/repulsion/distance (even towards the same person), in a shifting landscape of cultural and personal variables.

Interaction on a basis of relative similarity was easier, and initial bonding often took place between those from the same part of the world. Most students had been used to dealing mainly with compatriots, and these regional groupings represented substantial interactive leaps beyond national boundaries: the thrill of affinity on a subcontinental or continental basis. Many students, however, felt uneasy about 'narrow regionalism', especially because campaigning along regional lines often characterized the elections to the student union that were held at the beginning of the academic year. '"I came here with the idea that I'd meet progressive Southerners, and that we'd share our Third World perspectives. But there's so much prejudice, people don't talk to each other. The Institute doesn't work against this but sometimes fosters it, by treating diversity as though it was mixing a cocktail"' (George 1998:10). By the end of the academic year, however, many had taken further interactive leaps beyond regional lines: '" About relationships to people from other cultures, as we got to know each other over the course of the year, hostility declined. In the beginning of the year, which region you come from is the key to relationships -- later on, personality is the key. Things get better. I'm still focussed on my own continent, Asia, but I'm more interested in Latin America and Africa. I've been broadened by studying here"' (ibid.).

What were some of the dynamics that weakened regional groupings? 'Individuals today... may belong to several "partcultures" simultaneously' (Eakin ibid., quoting Gullestad 1992). As Benhabib puts it: 'where "we" are today globally is a situation in which every "we" discovers that it is in part a "they"; that the lines between "us" and "them" are continuously redefined through... global realities...' (op. cit.:250). The 'community' of 'we who are studying for a master's degree at the Institute', that came briefly into existence for a period of fifteen months, was a volatile and fluid entity continually

subject to internal fissions and fusions, oppositions and integrations, on shifting lines not only of continental or national origin but of gender, disciplinary affiliation, ideological stance....

'Development' issues provided major topics of discussion both inside and outside the classroom -- and those from 'developing' countries were interested in and qualified to debate these, on the basis of their everyday life in home societies as well as the perspectives on development provided by the Institute's curriculum. What might someone from -- say -- Ethiopia contribute to and benefit from such conversation? '"Here we gain from studying with diverse classmates. The other day in class we were looking at the literature on famines. An Ethiopian classmate was able to speak from first-hand experience and could present empirical evidence that challenged the literature"' (George 1997b:14). '"Here, we can share our problems and explain to others about processes that they have not experienced. For example, I have a friend from Ethiopia, his country is moving more and more to market-oriented development but he wasn't aware of all the implications. I was able to explain some of these implications from Thailand's experience -- that kind of sharing feels good"' (George 1998:8).

3.2

The Institute is atypical of places of higher education in the First World in that its student population consists very largely of men and women from the Third World: prevailing global conventions with regard to race and class were somewhat reversed in this setting. Scholarships to the Institute were earmarked for students from developing countries: what participants there were from the First World could experience financial hardship during the period of study there. A Canadian said, '"I lived on a few hundred guilders a month, I've never been so poor"' (George 1998:2). A Dutchman had worked illegally in the construction industry in the evenings and on weekends to support himself.

'First Worlders' were often at an ideological disadvantage in this setting: an Asian alumnus commented, '"The European and American participants tended to be nice young people, slightly guilty about their backgrounds"' (George 1997a:21). Affiliation to a country that was rich and a 'superpower' could prove embarrassing when classmates questioned the unequal distribution of global resources and power. `White' racial characteristics might lead to discomfort where they characterized a minority: 'When I moved into the student residence, I was very self-conscious, not only because the other partici-

pants were much older than me, but because I was the only white person living in the building. This self-consciousness disappeared as I gradually got to know the others as people rather than as members of categories' (op. cit.:201).

For those Dutch who did attend the Institute of Social Studies, the experience resembled study outside their country: '"Study at the Institute was a way of getting international experience without the hassle of finding admission and scholarships abroad"' (op. cit.:162). They could sometimes feel like foreigners, although still in their own land: '"Every evening, I left the Institute and returned to Dutch society, to my room in Delft"' (op. cit.:200).

Mingling -- on a basis of temporary equality -- of people from the two hemispheres encouraged demystification on both sides. Those from the South were able to see European and American classmates as complex human beings like themselves, and to go beyond demonizing or glorifying citizens of rich countries (op. cit.:292-93). Those from the North gained opportunities to transcend simple stereotypes of people from poor countries as downtrodden victims or heroic activists (op. cit.:295).

3.3

Many former students reported how stressful education at the Institute could be, given the relatively long period of study away from home for those in mid-career with families, the intensive coursework, the complex material studied, the unfamiliar climate and surroundings, and the demanding social setting made up of many different kinds of strangers. This social setting had to become an asset rather than an additional source of strain if those who studied within it were to maintain psychological balance: '"Friends are very important in 'staying afloat' at the Institute. You must have people to spend time with, relax with, eat dinner with. Those who stay alone in their rooms studying are at risk"' (George 1997b:25). I have heard of three presumed student suicides that took place at the Institute, all in the 1990s.

The learning that came from dealing with diversity could be painful: '"I stopped being class representative in April. It was too much for me, I was taking it too personally, seriously. I felt bad about certain things, the arguments and the need for mediation, perhaps I was too sensitive. The person who has taken my place has a different personality, he is less intense than I am, he has what we call 'sweet blood' in Spanish. It's been a learning process -- I thought that I could take leadership positions but I'm not easy-going

enough. It was good for me to learn this in a multicultural environment, where it's diffi-
cult to reach a consensus. You expect to be very good in everything, but you come down
to earth, learn your limitations. Now I'm calm about it, but earlier it was difficult, I was
sad. The Institute can make you feel inadequate sometimes"' (George 1998:8).

Fellow students who had once seemed unfamilar and strange could become major
sources of support, as illlustrated by a Thai woman academician's story: '"English was
such a major problem that I almost felt like giving up. It made the course very difficult, I
had to struggle both with the content and with the language. Halfway through my period
at the Institute, I failed a test. I was so upset -- it was the first time in my life that I'd failed
anything. My self-confidence was eroded, and I felt depressed for weeks afterwards. I
found that I couldn't read, couldn't write, couldn't understand or absorb things, and could-
n't communicate. I was unable to make decisions, not even about what groceries to shop
for. I was completely burnt out. But people helped me -- a lecturer to whom I was close,
the student counsellor, my close friends... Funnily enough, those friends weren't Thai be-
cause I'd tried to make a wide circle of friends. They were women from the Dominican
Republic, South Korea, Myanmar, Ethiopia, and especially one from Surinam who did my
shopping for me... Gradually I got better, but I learned a lot about myself during that state
of burn-out, about my real self as opposed to my self-image. I found out who I was and
what I was able to do and not able to do. I also discovered sisterhood without barriers,
and communication through feelings rather than words"' (George 1997:208).

3.4

A few former students of the Institute were not fully satisfied with a certificate of
development education from the Netherlands, in a world where conventional universities
were ranked above independent schools of development studies and where American and
British institutions enjoyed special prestige. Others, however, had chosen <u>not</u> to study in
the USA or Britain, and had opted for continental Europe in a world of geo-political
powerplay. Those concerned about neo-imperialism, especially Latin Americans, felt
strongly about the USA and the education they associated with it. '"I didn't like the North
American way of life, I didn't want that experience"... "In the US I might have got a good
technical education but not a human education"' (<u>op. cit.</u>:158). Some -- including people
from former British colonies -- said, '"I didn't want to study in Britain. Everybody goes to
Britain"' (<u>ibid.</u>) A few had consciously chosen to study in the Netherlands: '"In the late

1960s, the Netherlands was well known for success in planning with social aspects in view, in comparison with conventional capitalist systems"' (op. cit.: 160).

Some discriminated between education for different purposes, for example an Asian civil servant: '"I've advised my son that if he wants to rise, he should do a post-graduate course abroad... He'll not only get the latest knowledge, but another perspective on things. Where he should go depends on what he wants to do later. He's very interested in finance and works in a commercial bank, so I suppose he should aim for Yale or Harvard. If his orientation were more social, I'd advise him to go to the Institute. I myself never regretted studying there. I always knew what I wanted, and that I wasn't interested in business administration"' (op. cit.:258).

A senior woman Latin American civil servant spoke more generally: '"My brother studied economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and his degree is recognized worldwide. People do rank you according to where you've studied, and such a qualification enhances your career prospects. But I don't think he found that living in the USA was a personally enriching experience. It's a competitive society, in which people are more isolated. You may meet people from other countries but you don't have the right setting for deep friendships..." (op. cit.:259). Learning within multicultural friendships at the Institute provided chances to test the formal curriculum of development studies against the everyday experience of people from a range of backgrounds -- and an unusual opportunity for a 'polylogue' between the self and multiple others.

4. THE HARVARD KILLINGS

Harvard attracts students from the rest of the world by offering the best of American education, deeply embedded in the 'American way of life'. In many success stories Harvard provides a gateway to prosperity and prominence, both within the USA and outside it. But what happens when a foreign student has difficulties with education at Harvard, with American cultural idioms, in the classroom and on campus more generally? Can this contribute to individual crisis and breakdown, and to a smouldering rage that eventually explodes? How does Harvard react to the pathological behaviour of a student who is foreign and 'other' -- especially when one of Harvard's functions is to assimilate foreigners into the dominant culture and it is unused to dealing in other ways with foreignness?

4.1 Three triumphs

Of the protagonists described in this section, we begin with Harvard University -- for the other two used Harvard as the measuring stick of their own achievement.

The words of Harvard's president in 1869 still encapsulate the institution's public image: 'There is an aristocracy to which the sons of Harvard have belonged... the aristocracy which excels..., carries off the honours and prizes of the learned professions, and bears itself with distinction in all fields of intellectual labour and combat' (p. 1).[1] Or as Thernstrom puts it, a century and a quarter later: '...students understand that to attend Harvard is to have the opportunity to graduate from Harvard, and all that that bestows upon one. On one's resume, at work, on a blind date, it is a fact that connotes not so much intelligence as chosenness -- a destiny to do significant, lucrative work' (p. 3). Thernstrom builds on this image throughout her book:

> The endowing of specialness -- the sense of Harvard admission as an important and irrevocable stamp of approval -- is impressed upon students at every turn. `John F. Kennedy Slept Here. So Did Ralph Waldo Emerson and FDR. And Very Soon You,' read the headline in The Crimson [the Harvard university newspaper]... in 1992... It was the fifth year in a row that Harvard had been named... the nation's number one school and the fifth consecutive year it had a record number of applicants' (p. 83). Reputation and money form a kind of dialectic: the richer Harvard gets, the more it has the resources to attract top faculty and students who enhance its reputation; the higher its reputation, the easier it is to fund-raise... ...its endowment of nearly 9 billion is the largest of any university in the country... ... some of the university's graduate schools, such the business and law schools, produce alumni who often become wealthy and make large contributions... (p.133).

Harvard's magnetism is strongly felt abroad as well as among families newly arrived in the USA. 'As the Vietnamese owner of a drycleaning establishment explained his disappointment at his son's acceptance to Yale: "Relatives in Vietnam not heard of Yale"' (p. 85). At Harvard, '[at] the moment of graduation... [a]s the seniors are welcomed to the company of educated men and women, their parents clap and cry... Among the most touching sights are the immigrant parents: gathered around their sons and daughters, the American Dream seems alight in their faces -- everything they journeyed to this country for accomplished in a moment' (p. 3).

Thernstrom's book, and this paper, focusses on two women students: Sinedu Tadesse from Ethiopia, and Trang Ho, who arrived in the USA from Vietnam at the age of eleven.

4.1.1

Trang's father was fighting in the South Vietnamese army when she was born in 1974. Her birth was followed by the fall of the South Vietnamese government, after which both parents were sent to 'reeducation' camps. After their release, the three children continued to be tended by grandparents, because the mother (a schoolteacher) was posted elsewhere and the father was a struggling businessman; in any case, the conventional father and the more independent mother often disagreed.

From early on in Trang's life, her family made unsuccessful attempts to flee Vietnam by boat. When she was ten, her father managed a successful escape with Trang and another daughter who were disguised as boys to avoid rape. After a week's journey, during which the two girls and their father stood the entire time in a crowded boat dogged by government patrols and rocked by storms, they reached an insalubrious refugee camp in Indonesia. Almost a year later, visas to the USA came through, and father and daughters flew across the Pacific.

Trang's father soon moved with his daughters to the Boston area: 'He had... heard of all the famous universities in Boston he dreamed his daughters might one day attend' (p. 66). He retrained on public assistance, and encouraged his daughters to do as well as possible at their studies. Trang's mother and remaining sister later managed to get from Vietnam to a refugee camp in Malaysia, but spent more than three years there. When they finally reached Boston, the family reunion was brief -- acrimony and violence between the parents led to a divorce, and the father was legally restrained from approaching the small apartment where his children and their mother lived.

Despite this turbulence, Trang was a favourite at school: '"I've never seen an individual so cherished by her teachers... There have been other students who excelled academically, but they didn't have that total package. Her determination to succeed, her friendliness..."' (p. 68). Eight months after her mother arrived in the USA, Trang graduated as best student from a minority-dominated school in a poor area. Her sister recalled, '"Breaking up and not being a family really bothers Trang... Trang get really sick the first few months. She would break down, and on top of that she was applying to colleges. I

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[1] In sections 3, 4 and 5 of this paper, where a page number in given in parentheses without author's name or date of publication, the reference is to Thernstrom 1998, the main source of information

was amazed at the end of the year how she pulled it all off and went to Harvard'"(p. 73). Trang received a special recruiting phone call from Harvard, with the offer of a full scholarship. 'The admissions office at Harvard (whose stated goal is to "identify world leaders") immediately recognized the qualities they were looking for in Trang. "We thought here is this person with all this potential to do a lot for herself and for others"' (p. 71).

4.1.2

Sinedu Tadesse was also born in 1974, into the Amhara ruling elite, within the feudal system perpetuated under Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie. Her father had been educated at the American University in Beirut and was appointed headmaster of various government schools. Just before Sinedu's birth, the Emperor was overthrown by the Dergue, a military council. When Sinedu was two years old, Ethiopia experienced what was known as the Red Terror, in which thirty thousand people were killed and many others underwent torture and imprisonment. The educated elite was a special target, and when Sinedu was seven her father was jailed without trial for two years. Her mother worked as a nurse to support the five children and only returned from hospital at 8 p.m., until which time the children remained at school. The mother also broke off relations with her husband's family whom she accused of having betrayed him. This was a period when Ethiopia was ravaged by famines, conflict with neighbouring Somalia, and internal struggles that kept the country in a state of civil war.

Sinedu attended a Roman Catholic girls' school in Addis Ababa where her family lived. She competed with the best students from sixty schools, through an exam written in English, for a few scholarships that enabled Ethiopians to study at the International Community School (where the children of western expatriates were educated and the tuition fees were beyond the means of even well-to-do Ethiopians). She scored the second highest marks and did well in the interview: '"They... had to be fit to enter into an international situation. The interview was about their character, as well as academic capabilities. Sinedu was admitted by unanimous decision. She was a model in character and she did very neat work"' (p. 14.).

> Sinedu distinguished herself academically throughout high school, becoming one of only two students in her class of thirty-two to achieve the prestigious international baccalaureate diploma... She applied and was accepted to twenty-four American colleges, including a full scholarship to the world's richest, most famous university. She would return home a doctor in a country which currently has one doctor for every thirty-five thousand people. The day she got into

Harvard, she told people, was the happiest day of her life. She was seventeen years old... (p. 34).

4.2   And a tragedy

The trouble with success is that it is not enough to arrive -- an advantageous position on a steep upward path has to be vigilantly maintained, as all three of our protagonists learned.

'There is no other school in the country whose reputation is greater -- and more carefully cultivated -- than Harvard's' (p. 133). In the early 1990s, Harvard had to deal with several cases of negative publicity: for example in 1995, the co-chair of a University charity was sentenced to imprisonment for stealing from the charity (p. 131). Also in the first half of 1995, there were student suicides and an uproar over the admission of a convicted murderer (the admission was later cancelled). But the unwanted media attention that followed the events of 28 May 1995 dwarfed these earlier scandals.

4.2.1

Trang brought commitments with her to Harvard that ate into her time for study. 'She returned home every weekend to the neighbouring suburb of Medford to help her younger sister with homework, translate English documents for her mother and do household chores. She worked eighteen hours a week at two jobs to support them financially' (p. 10). She also made long bus journeys twice a week to tutor refugees. Her academic advisor told her in her second year that her grades would not qualify her for Harvard Medical School. Trang responded that she was happy enough to have her present learning opportunities.

On weekdays too Trang would sometimes rush home after a tearful phone call from one of her sisters. 'Trang's friend Huong Mai remembers... "... She seemed happy, but she wasn't happy. She have many burdens, she care about her family all the time"' (p. 77). 'Trang's friend Khoi Luu says that he particularly admired the way "Trang didn't share her pain with anyone. She was able to laugh a lot"' (ibid.). Khoi was one of the new friends that Trang made on campus, first as a member and then as the vice president of the university's Vietnamese students' association.

In Trang's first year, her roommate's boyfriend sometimes stayed the night and Trang disapproved. She and Sinedu Tadesse met in a science class and agreed to share rooms in the following year. 'Trang's life initially dovetailed with her new roommate's in

many ways. They took the same premed classes and were often seen in the... dining hall eating together. Trang took Sinedu as her guest to her lab's Christmas party. Trang's sister, who recalls Sinedu as "very quiet", says that "for a while Sinedu and Trang were doing a lot of things together... But as time went on Trang had obligation to own self and not have that much time'" (p. 107).

The relationship cooled, and the next year (their third year on campus) Trang agreed to continue to live with Sinedu 'for convenience more than affection' (p. 17). Trang soon regretted this, because Sinedu who had been compulsively tidy swung to the other extreme and began to leave soiled clothing and fly-ridden fruit around. Their relationship deteriorated in other ways too. Halfway through the year Trang asked the administration for a change of room, but was turned down. In April she made arrangements to live with two other women in the coming year. Sinedu, upset, asked Trang's roommates-to-be if she could join the new arrangement. They agreed, but retracted when Trang told them that she was trying to move away from Sinedu. After that, the final weeks of the academic year in the shared rooms were extremely uncomfortable.

In the stressful final week of the semester, Trang phoned a friend, a father figure: 'She told him she had taken one exam and was worried about the others -- that she wouldn't perform her best. He told her to relax and go for the B's instead of the A's, but she felt an obligation to live up to her scholarship... Her sisters were fighting at home, she told him, and she was worried about the troubles there. As she talked she began to cry' (p. 80).

After her last exam on 27 May, however, Trang was smiling again. A good friend, Thao Nguyen, another woman refugee from Vietnam, visited her on campus that final weekend of term. They packed Trang's things for the summer, went out to dinner with one of Trang's future roommates, watched a video film with a friend, and then chatted in Trang's room until they fell asleep at around 4 a.m., after a very long day.

4.2.2

Sinedu, like Trang, was told by a student advisor that her grades would not take her to Harvard Medical School. Sinedu, however, was apparently more preoccupied with her social life (or lack thereof) at Harvard. In her first year there, Sinedu tried unsuccessfully to get a high school friend to transfer from the University of California to Harvard, and she attended workshops on relating to strangers. Towards the end of that year she

discovered that her roommate Anna was to room with someone else the next year. Sinedu was not close to Anna but was discomfitted. She wrote angrily about Anna in her diary, but was then elated when Trang agreed to be her new roommate.

Sinedu appears to have been too proud to let others at university see how lonely she was. Some acquaintances later said: '"She might have seemed a little lonely, but not in a way that was reaching out to people"' (p. 19). In the summer after her first year, however, she did reach out -- to strangers. She was spending the vacation with a cousin and his family who lived in the area, and had taken on a summer job. She did not confide in her relatives, but wrote a long letter about her desperate loneliness and mailed it to strangers whose names she picked out of the telephone directory.

One recipient of the letter thought that the writer needed help and sent the letter to someone she knew in the Harvard administration. The letter ultimately came to rest in a file on Sinedu kept in the office of her university residence. Sinedu, however, had already sought help for herself and from her first year had received counselling from University Health Services -- although in her letter to strangers she complained that her meetings with her counsellor were infrequent and brief. Thernstrom comments that Sinedu's diaries (written mainly in English) 'display uncanny capacities for self-expression and self-analysis... an extraordinary record... of an intelligent, insightful, strong-willed person using all those capacities to fight as hard as she could for mental health -- and losing, day by day, hour by hour' (p. 91).

'"The one help I believe and have always believed would be crucial for my success is someone who will constantly check in on me and share both the good and bad part of my life with me... one ordinary person who will invite me for jogging or taking a walk, for shopping, for watching TV together, for having dinner together a few times..."' Sinedu wrote in her letter to strangers (p. 103). For a while she found such a companion in Trang, but Trang had other demands on her time. Sinedu's diaries describe her resentment when friends visited Trang to chat and laugh, whilst Sinedu sat alone next door pretending to study but feeling excluded and unhappy.

That Sinedu was losing the battle for mental stability became apparent in her third year at Harvard. Her swing from being compulsively neat to 'aggressively messy' is described by Thernstrom as a classic symptom of mental illness and especially of clinical depression (p. 110). Trang began to spend less time in their shared suite. When in April

1995 Sinedu heard that Trang was to room with others in the coming year (their final year at Harvard), she followed Trang onto the subway, pleading with her to reconsider.

In the final week of that semester, Sinedu's behaviour swung mercurially. Neb Tilahun (a former classmate from Ethiopia who was also a student at Harvard) was struck by her elation and by radical changes in her demeanour. Later in the week, though, some students noted that Sinedu appeared 'distracted, with a glazed look' (p. 118), and she was often seen crying. She wrote to one of Trang's prospective roommates and asked if they could talk, but did not post the letter. She sent a photo of herself to the student newspaper with an anonymous promise of a 'juicy' story.

She wrote one final exam (for which she received an A), missed others and obtained medical permission to do so, but -- on 27 May -- did not write the last exam and did not obtain medical clearance. The friend who stayed over with Trang in the shared rooms that weekend described Sinedu as spending much of 27 May sitting on her bed in a fetal position and crying.

On Sunday, 28 May, Sinedu got up while Trang and her friend were asleep, and prepared a noose in the bathroom. She then went to Trang's bed and stabbed her forty-five times with a hunting knife that she had bought earlier. Trang's friend awoke, tried to wrest the knife away, was injured and ran for help. When the police arrived, Trang was dead and Sinedu had hanged herself in the bathroom.

4.3   "Looking for a villain"

'Everyone's looking for a villain... and we don't want to be it'
(a senior Harvard administrator, p. 129).

After the deaths, Sinedu was not perceived as a villain by her peers. Two mini-buses carried students from Harvard Yard to Sinedu's wake, conducted by priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in a funeral parlour. A few days after the deaths, at an informational meeting organized by the university administration at the request of the Harvard Vietnamese Association, the president of the Association said that '"the tragedy is as great for those who know Sinedu as for Trang's friends"' (p. 9). Members of the African Students' Association, invited to speak, described Sinedu as '"nice"', '"very responsible"', and '"very quiet"' (pp. 10-11). The questions that students asked university officials at the meeting highlighted the student advisory system and the arrangements whereby roommates were paired -- not 'How did we come to have this psychopath in our midst?'

> Sinedu... was rarely spoken of as a murderer. A peculiar discourse developed on campus in which, rather than being viewed distinctly, as murderer and victim, the girls were recalled in one breath, as if their deaths were the result of some unfathomable blood rite, like a suicide pact, about which no one could say who was to blame... There was a good deal of discussion on campus about whether there should be a joint scholarship in the names of both girls -- a macabre kind of Political Correctness. There was a confused sense that there were two victims; as... the co-president of the Vietnamese Students Association and a friend of Trang's, explained, `In some way we don't understand we feel Sinedu is a victim as well -- we're not blaming anyone' (pp. 6-7).

Sinedu did not become a hate-figure, but not because any coherent analysis was put forward as to why she had acted as she did. Thernstrom quotes questions from one of the many media commentators: 'Is it a story about a lonely student at a negligent institution? Or is it a story about an Ethiopian and her personal or cultural or national history? A story of female friendship and a relationship between two women -- a story of rejection, envy, or love? Or a story of psychopathology and mental illness?' (p. 9). Thernstrom answers all four questions in the affirmative. Here we shall summarize her discussion of the first and last questions -- that of an institution's responsibility for a mentally ill student. In section 5, we examine her responses to the other two questions.

Thernstrom herself can be described as another protagonist in the story, but (as she points out) in a very different relationship to Harvard from that of Sinedu, and even from the relatively successful 'hyphenated American', Trang. Thernstrom, a Harvard graduate, was very much an insider:

> ...My last position, as a tutor [at Harvard], had ended only the previous semester [before the deaths]. And I had lived around Harvard all my life; both my parents and brother were educated at Harvard, my father is the Winthrop Professor of History and my mother has taught at Harvard as well (p. 11). It had been strange for me, working on this story, to realize that I was writing about a girl whose experience at Harvard had not been analogous to my own. I loved Harvard and felt cosseted and nurtured by it. I loved doing my homework in the stacks of Widener Library... I loved having lunch with my father at the Faculty Club at the start of each term... (p. 141).

That relationship was to change when Thernstrom investigated Trang's and Sinedu's deaths. She was called in by Harvard's vice-president for government, community and public affairs who was uneasy about her inquiries (p. 141). His fears were justified: Thernstrom describes remorselessly how Harvard failed Sinedu, both through its advisory system and its mental health support services.

4.3.1

'A few months after the murder a letter to all Harvard parents from [the]... dean of Harvard College, assured parents that both girls had been integrated into Harvard's "carefully woven advising system"' (p. 6). Thernstrom points to large holes within this system. Sinedu and Trang had the same academic advisor, a 'Professor of Ichtyology and curator of the 1.2 million specimens of fish at the Museum of Comparative Zoology... a man much more adept at classifying dead sea-life than dealing with human problems' (p. 143). 'He said that he knew of no special problems Sinedu had been having and, in fact, had met with Sinedu three days before her death' (p. 145). He later lied about his knowledge of the letter that Sinedu had written to strangers.

Student residences had live-in tutors, 'primarily graduate students who, in exchange for free room and board, were supposed to provide the personal contact and academic advice a student may miss in a big school... ' (p. 150). However -- perhaps typically of institutions that define themselves through intellectual achievement -- 'tutors are not chosen because they're interested in counselling: they are chosen on the basis of their academic qualifications' (p. 152). Thernstrom describes mistrust and political intrigue among tutors in the student residence where Sinedu lived: 'the murder happened in the most troubled of Harvard houses' (p. 155). A month before Sinedu and Trang died, there had been two suicides by students connected to the house (in addition to other suicide attempts).

'In the wake of the deaths many students expressed anger that... the tutor system let Sinedu slip through the cracks"' (p.150), especially foreign students aware of their vulnerability. From some viewpoints, however, it was Sinedu who had failed, and who had not proved capable of upholding the standards of the institution that had drawn her from across the world. '"Harvard is what it is," a tutor told me. "Students should know what they are choosing when they come here"... "Students who want a lot of hand-holding should have gone somewhere else..."'(p. 151). Sinedu's advisor said in a press interview after her death that he 'planned to make no administrative changes... because the tutorial staff was "excellent". He described the deaths as "a real tragedy and a real mystery," and concluded, "We will probably never know what the underlying factor is"' (pp. 145-46). Other official pronouncements (see below) also depicted Sinedu's and Trang's deaths as a baffling mystery -- depictions that allowed Harvard to close the books on these deaths and on the uncomfortable questions that they raised.

Sinedu's academic advisor denied to the press that Sinedu had been to the Mental Health Services at the university. In fact Sinedu had sought counselling from early on in her time at Harvard. Students who had committed suicide earlier in 1995 were also being treated for mental problems.

Thernstrom quotes university health personnel on 'the increasing financial pressure that psychological services at UHS [University Health Services] have been under because mental health services "are very expensive and results are hard to quantify." ... the caseload has increased and the staff decreased. On the advice of business school efficiency experts, students are now ordinarily seen for half an hour rather than an hour' (p. 156). The cuts included programmes intended to sensitize people like tutors to signs of distress among students. At the same time Thernstrom quotes experts who think that 'mental illness is an enduring reality on campus: "There's no way an admissions committee can screen out mentally ill students -- they are going to be part of the population and they have to be treated. The late teens and early twenties is the time of onset of the major mental illnesses"' (176).

On other US campuses too mental health services had been cut back because of competition for funds. But why was 'the world's richest university' under financial pressure? Sinedu's and Trang's deaths 'occurred in the midst of a five-year $2.1 billion fundraising drive -- with a stated goal of a million dollars a day -- a sum unprecedented in academia, but perhaps possible for Harvard... [But:] As an administrator explains, "There are a lot more claims on Harvard's money than on any other college. Teaching undergraduates is a very small part of what Harvard does..."' (p. 133).

> ...For example, Harvard has a three-thousand piece collection of glass flowers -- the only [one] of its kind in the world; it was a donation, of course, but one that requires a great deal of museum space and also dusting. Harvard also has `over three thousand course offerings' and `endowed chairs in obscure subjects where the chair didn't begin to cover the cost of the subject'... The library's twelve million volumes -- including rare books... -- require `an incredible amount of upkeep...' (p. 134). More recent expenses at Harvard... [are] tied to `the managerial revolution -- the huge number of new managers they've brought in. It's an iron law of bureaucracy that it grows...' ...`The administrators have taken over Harvard. Everything is calculated to minimize negative publicity and is managed by lawyers...' Harvard has eleven full time house lawyers (p. 135-36).

Sinedu was counselled by a Dr Powell, author of a guidebook for parents on danger signals in adolescents, who had apparently noticed no such signals in Sinedu's case: 'he had seen Sinedu shortly before she died, and had been trying to reach her on Saturday

[the day before she died] to cancel an appointment for Monday. He knew she had been having roommate problems, he said, but he had had no idea this would happen, and her problems hadn't seemed like anything out of the ordinary' (p. 179). He told Thernstrom that he was 'under a "gag order" by the university' (p. 116) -- a muzzle that seemed to protect the institution rather than the individual who had undergone treatment.

Thernstrom quotes: 'Sinedu writes to Dr Powell that if he is to remain her doctor she really needs to meet with him more frequently. She begins by telling him that it has been a "very very long time since I last saw you. To you, I am only one of your subjects, but to me, you are my last hope and my last chance." She tries to hold on between appointments, she writes, but she can't' (p. 181). 'In a list of things "to talk to Dr Powell" about which was found among her papers, Sinedu writes that she is concerned that she is incapable of forgiveness. If people do anything that hurts her, she writes, forever afterwards when she thinks about them her heart "will go cold." How does forgiveness work? Is it that others express anger at the time, while she keeps it all inside her?' (p. 116).

Thernstrom showed Sinedu's letter and diaries to mental health professionals experienced in adolescent care. 'Susan Besharov, a Washington, D.C., based clinical social worker who reviewed Sinedu's diaries, says that

> `what makes Sinedu seem so ripe for treatment is that she does have a good deal of insight. She is able to make connections to her early childhood experience. She also takes impressive responsibility for her problems, rather than just externalizing or blaming the world. What is so poignant for me as a therapist about Sinedu's diaries is that she is both so acutely aware of her depression and is working terribly hard to compensate for her emotional deficits. This is what makes her therapy -- with its infrequency and lack of medication -- seem like such a missed opportunity' (p. 182).

Here too, opinions differed as to whether Harvard had failed students with mental problems or whether these students had failed the institution. Thernstrom interviewed other Harvard students with experience of inadequate mental health services. 'What seems most damaging about the attitude Harvard adopted is that... depression, with its suicidal manifestation, was treated not as an illness but as an infraction -- one subject to disciplinary action' (p. 171, emphasis given). According to one such student: '"the underlying reality is that Harvard expects its students to be the best and the brightest and the most well-adjusted... the rule can more or less be summed up as sink or swim"' (p. 173).

Or as a senior advisor wrote to a student who had complained about the university's mental health services: '"If you don't like it here, go away"' (p. 166)[2].

4.3.3

For the university, Sinedu's and Trang's deaths did not seem to be a human tragedy, the background to which needed to be probed and understood -- the deaths were instead seen as a public relations disaster: 'the news office could have adopted the line that every institution has troubled students and Harvard is, alas, no exception. Instead it chose to propagate the idea that the student didn't appear to have any troubles and the tragedy had, therefore, no explanation' (p. 136). A dean's letter to parents concluded: 'Although several news articles have speculated on what might have caused Ms. Tadesse to act as she did, it seems unlikely that we will ever have an adequate understanding of the event' (p. 6). A newspaper 'quoted a Harvard official: "There is no conventional motive. It is not about sex or revenge. There is no apparent reason"' (p. 5).

Processes of mystification are greatly aided when there is A Great Tradition to draw on. At the informational meeting after the deaths, Harvard's dean of students did not say anything as mundane as 'We have to think more about the needs of various kinds of students here.' Instead he read 'a quotation from a speech President Franklin Roosevelt gave on the Tercentenary celebration of the founding of Harvard, in which he quoted Euripides: "There are many shapes of things, mystery, past hope and fear, a path where no man sought, so hath it fallen here"' (p. 9).

4.3.4

The limitations of Harvard's advisory system and mental health services applied to all students (although less to those who could afford private therapy and psychiatric care). One reviewer of Thernstrom's book, however, underlines that Sinedu -- and in a sense Trang -- were foreign students:

> ... the increasingly obvious question [is]: why didn't anyone at Harvard notice that Sinedu was mentally ill and do something to help her? The simple answer seems to be that no one took enough interest in Sinedu to distinguish between behaviour that was psychotic and behaviour that was presumed to be Ethiopian. It's true that Sinedu's foreignness masked her craziness. But it's also true that no

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[2]According to a recent newsreport: 'Harvard students..., frustrated with managerial foot-dragging, [have now] set up a website and support groups, and badgered the authorities to improve counselling facilities' (Wojtas 2000:21).

one looked past one set of alien characteristics to see that it was accompanied by another set. ... The university records show that Trang, in a mild-mannered way, seems to have sought repeatedly to escape Sinedu's attentions... Trang, too, was doomed by her foreignness. She didn't express herself in ways that Harvard administrators understood. She was conciliatory and agreeable and nobody bothered to understand her situation (Weber 1999: 11).

Sinedu's counsellor 'didn't know Sinedu well because he only saw her on a limited basis' (p. 159). He had assumed -- because she was a foreign student -- that she needed treatment for adjustment problems, and in his meetings with her he apparently did not perceive anything deeper and more serious. Thernstrom consulted an expert on mental health in multicultural situations: he 'stresses that, in a time in which schools have increasingly large foreign student populations, their mental health services need to have counsellors who are "not just cross-culturally sensitive, but cross-culturally competent"' (p. 160).

Sinedu's foreignness proved useful in Harvard's presentation of hers and Trang's deaths as a unsolvable riddle, rather than as worrying events from which the institution should try to learn. Had an American student been the murderer or victim, such evasion would have been more difficult, especially if litigation-minded American parents had been involved. Sinedu had sought help but had not been taken seriously. Trang had requested a change of room (and roommate) at a time when events were building up to a crisis: had the administration responded, she may well have remained alive:

People tell them [Trang's family] Harvard should give them some sort of settlement, but... `we can't expect them to do something they don't want to.' Harvard never told the Ho family that the school did an internal investigation after the death, or what the results of that investigation were... Suzi Naiburg, the... senior tutor, was given the role of being the liaison for the family. She would call them up occasionally and ask how they were doing, but `What are we supposed to say?... We're not fine?' ...They don't recall Naiburg mentioning that she knew Trang, or that -- as Naiburg told the police -- Trang had been to see her to talk about her rooming problems at the end of her life... Harvard is very aggressive when it comes to the threat of publicity: when NBC approached the Ho family about doing a program on Trang, Suzi Naiburg promptly called the family and Trang's friend Jim Igoe, warning them against cooperation. `We just don't want to see the family manipulated,' she told Jim Igoe. `Does she think we're stupid?' Jim Igoe said. `Who is manipulating who? They just want Trang to be forgotten' (pp. 211-12).

An American family may well have resisted the erasure of their daughter from the institutional memory. 'Naiburg invited the family to attend commencement the following year, but she told them that Trang would not be mentioned during the ceremony. They declined, so she sent them a tape of commencement instead, which they could never bring themselves to watch. "Usually at graduation they mention the members of the class who

have died, don't they?"' (p. 212), Trang's sister asked Thernstrom. The 'otherness' of Trang and Sinedu made it easier for their inconvenient memories to be shed: 'There is no reference... throughout the long commencement day, to two girls who are not there to graduate with their class' (p.2). 'In a small campus service of "Prayers and Remembrances" [in connection with the deaths and organized soon after]... neither girl was referred to by name' (p. 7).

5.   QUESTIONING INTERPRETATIONS

When investigating the case, Thernstrom successfully transcended her position as an Harvard 'insider'. However, she was less conscious of her identity as an insider in American society, and less effective in going beyond American perceptions in order to understand relationships between countries and cultures. On a plane to Ethiopia, Thernstrom 'skim[s] through a pile of books about the country' and is surprised to hear from aid workers on the plane that the USA is the least generous international donor among the rich industrialized nations: 'I puzzle about this...' (p. 28). She generally writes about the 'third world' and not the more usual 'Third World'. She finds somewhat strange Sinedu's concerns and embarassments with American table manners (p. 96): those from societies where fingers are used to eat with are more likely to understand and to have shared Sinedu's self-consciousness on this score.

Thernstrom drew attention to Harvard's silences, evasions and 'closure' on the subject of Trang's and Sinedu's deaths. She put forward theories as to why these deaths had taken place, theories that emphasized political violence in Sinedu's native country (5.1)[3] and Sinedu's emotional problems (5.2). I argue that these are perceptions from within the USA, and that greater weight should be placed than Thernstrom does on cultural features that characterize American society (5.2). I attribute a major role in the tragedy to a protagonist very close to Thernstrom -- a protagonist she criticized sharply, yet with a role that she could not perceive fully because of the closeness (5.3).

By assigning primary importance to Sinedu's Ethiopian origins, Thernstrom relates psychopathology to difference. In her reading, the problems that precipitated the Harvard killings were largely imported from the Third World. Did Harvard administrators share Thernstrom's theories but find it impolitic to voice them? Rogers et al. describe

the 'unsayable' as that which is difficult to say in a particular context, and contrast the 'unsayable' with the 'unspeakable', viz. that which is 'too dangerous to speak or even to know' (1999:80) -- for example, fundamental issues about difference that Harvard administrators (and others) were not prepared to confront, let alone discuss.

5.1   National character?

> ...is it a story about an Ethiopian and her personal or cultural or national history?
> (p. 9).

Attempts to understand Trang's personality after her death were facilitated by conversations with her friends and close family. This was not so in Sinedu's case -- she had made no friends at Harvard. Thernstrom then felt: 'I would have to go to Ethiopia... There was no one in America who knew her' (p. 23). The <u>New Yorker</u> paid for Thernstrom to visit Addis Ababa briefly. There, the response that Thernstrom most often encountered among those who knew Sinedu well was: '"It is impossible... I did not believe it when I heard it..."' (p. 35). The International Community School treated its file on Sinedu as confidential: 'But the teachers... are sufficiently eager to prove that there was nothing wrong with Sinedu that they thrust the file into my hands' (p. 35). The file was full of laudations.

Ultimately, then, Thernstrom has to search among generalizations and statistics for an explanation of Sinedu's behaviour that draws on 'Ethiopian' national or political or cultural characteristics. This is not always convincing. For example, Sinedu alludes in her diaries to 'shame and guilt' about sexuality, and Thernstrom comments: 'perhaps she is referring to feelings of shame often described by Ethiopian women, ninety percent of whom have undergone ritual female genital mutilation' (p. 197). This is a possible connection -- but what if Sinedu was one of the ten per cent who had <u>not</u> undergone clitoridectomy/ excision/ infibulation? 'Shame and guilt' about sexuality are common among young people (and others) across a range of cultures.

> Interpreting the characters of individuals based on the historical events that surrounded them is always tricky; certainly not everyone growing up during the Red Terror turned out to have similar psychological profiles. But many of Sinedu's perceptions do seem to reflect coming of age in a society in which murderers have the power (p. 191). `Violence wasn't foreign to her... Sinedu was born into the bloodiest time in Ethiopian history -- a time when there were bodies on the street...' (p. 40).

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[3] References to other sections of the paper will be made in this manner, with the section or subsection number given in parentheses.

Statements such as these can be unfair to those who grow up in violently unstable polities through no choice of their own: if they survive the bloodshed, they are stigmatized as having grown up among murderers -- guilt by association, however unwilling the association. No direct correlation is established between Sinedu's actions and the killings that took place around her as she grew up: '"Her family suffered under the Dergue," Negash Kebede said, "but every family suffered. There was no unusual suffering"' (p. 40). No evidence is presented that anyone close to Sinedu was a perpetrator of the violence that has sometimes characterized Ethiopian history: Sinedu's family, like Trang's, seems to have been at the receiving end and her reaction could equally (like others) have been revulsion from bloodshed. The limits to such arguments are clear in the case of Trang, also the product of a wartorn society: 'Trang's childhood... seems to have strengthened rather than damaged her' (p. 188). Thernstrom can quote very little from Sinedu's diaries that is violently aggressive (see 5.2.1).

Attributions of violence by individual Ethiopians to their national history have proved legally untenable: 'Students mention a 1991 murder at Dartmouth College in which an Ethiopian national... had hacked two Ethiopian physics graduate student roommates to death because one of them had rejected his marriage proposal. He pleaded insanity -- his attorney arguing that his instabiity came out of the turmoil of his childhood homeland -- but he was convicted of first-degree murder' (p. 18). The assistant district attorney told Thernstrom that if Sinedu had lived she would have been charged with first-degree premeditated murder (p. 201) and the onus would have been on the defence to prove mental instability.

Perceptions that Sinedu's crimes were crucially influenced by her Ethiopian origins have to be balanced by other perceptions that some of her final actions were '"totally un-Ethiopian"' (p. 119). Scepticism -- extending to disbelief and incredulity -- was apparent among Ethiopians: many from the Ethiopian community in Boston were not convinced that Sinedu had murdered Trang (p. 119). 'Suicides are supposed to be buried forty metres from a churchyard, but Sinedu was allowed a Christian burial [in Addis Ababa] because the family persuaded the priest that no one really knew what had happened to her' (p. 202). Sinedu's cousin in the Massachusetts area refused to talk to Thernstrom but later agreed, because he hoped that Thernstrom would cast light on an act by Sinedu that he found difficult to believe (pp.19-20). Neb Tilahun, Sinedu's former schoolfellow, met Thernstrom for similar reasons. Sinedu's actions are best understood in

terms of her personality and circumstances, of which being 'Ethiopian' was a part but not the determining part.

The argument can in fact be turned around. Sinedu appeared able to function adequately in the face of bloodshed, civil war and famine. In her school file, her (Western) maths teacher reports:

> 'Sinedu possesses a type of inner peace that shows itself in all her dealings with others. She appears to have glided through the turbulent teenage years and emerged as a confident mature young woman. At ICS [the International Community School] she has inadvertently been a pillar of support for many fellow students through the years. During the final weeks of the revolution in Ethiopia last spring when tensions were mounting and many expatriates were evacuating, Sinedu's calm and rational attitude towards the situation helped maintain some semblance of order and peace at ICS' (p. 36).

Why -- having withstood all this -- did she crack up when resident on a tranquil campus alongside the gentle Charles river? Thernstrom's answers are: Sinedu killed because she grew up during a bloody period in Ethiopian history; her unhappy family life exacerbated the impact of the violent polity around; Sinedu was biophysically vulnerable to mental illness; her experiences at Harvard put her under stress; and Harvard's student advisory and mental health systems proved inadequate.

To what extent would this explanation satisfy Ethiopian readers? For a former teacher of Sinedu's, her national and family background was relevant but she had managed to survive and even to do well within it, with no manifestations of mental illness (p. 37). What drove her to murder and suicide when she was far away from both country and family?

I argue below that Sinedu's behaviour should be viewed not in terms of 'an Ethiopian at Harvard' but as 'a foreign student at Harvard', and as a particular kind of foreign student (female, not affluent, from a Third World country and so on). Emphasis should then be placed on what she was foreign to -- namely, American society. Thernstrom's discussion is of limited use here, precisely because of her immersion in American society: her material should be reinterpreted to highlight the cultural content of American life as well as that of Ethiopian life -- and to consider the structural relations within and between societies as experienced by individuals.

5.2   Harvard: race, gender, class and identity

> 'The only way I could conceive of Sinedu having done this is if she had some problem in her brain like a brain tumour... Here was a person who had a vision of the future and it was very bright and very promising, and she was motivated to

work hard and earn that vision. Why would that person want to die? People who commit suicide don't have a vision. I do get awake at nights, thinking about that. How did she lose her vision?' (Negash Kebede, Sinedu's physics teacher in school -- ibid.).

By attributing a causal role in the tragedy to Ethiopian culture and politics, Thernstrom absolves the USA of responsibility; similarly when she portrays the deaths as stemming from Sinedu's longstanding psychological deficits -- Sinedu had 'brought her problems with her' (p. 85) to Harvard and the USA. I suggest below that Thernstrom:

- overstates the continuity in Sinedu's psychological experience before and at Harvard (5.2.1);

- uses Sinedu's diaries and letter to strangers ill-advisedly, as evidence of 'objective facts' rather than 'subjective states';

- overlooks similarities between Sinedu's troubled emotions and those of adolescents more generally (especially female adolescents in the USA);

- confuses 'foreignness' and 'craziness' (Weber ibid.) in her depiction of Sinedu as quasi-autistic;

- does not adequately relate Sinedu's problems at the end of her life to the social environment of her final years: the environment in which Sinedu 'lost her vision' and her will to live (5.2.2 through 5.2.7).

5.2.1

Thernstrom claims a continuity in experience when Sinedu moved from Addis to Harvard, notably a pervasive loneliness related to an incapacity to make friends or relate to people. The evidence presented, however, suggests discontinuity in Sinedu's social experience after relocation to Harvard.

In the file on Sinedu that was kept in her school in Addis, teachers' reports sketch a different picture from Thernstrom's. The headmistress of Sinedu's elementary school wrote: '"Her participation is remarkable in the sense that she has the ability to organize, encourage and draw out the best from her companions (p. 37)"'. A recommendation from a (Western) teacher emphasizes both Sinedu's academic and social qualities, counter to Thernstrom's presentation of Sinedu as socially underdeveloped and focussed only on her studies: '"Sinedu Tadesse is a conscientious and caring student. Sinedu is a dedicated student with enormous potential for academic and intellectual and social growth. She is mature and wise beyond her years and widely respected for her sensitivity, initiative and

insight' (pp. 35-6, emphases added). Another Western teacher wrote: '"She is well established within the social life of ICS. The other students value her responsible nature and level-headedness and have elected her as their student council secretary and newspaper co-editor. Her leadership abilities have been put to good use in a founding of the French club and in work on the yearbook and carnival committee' (p. 36).

There thus appears to be a difference of kind and not just of degree between Sinedu's social situation in Addis and Harvard. Although strongly oriented towards study, she did have a few friends when in school (a diplomat's daughter, Lillian, is mentioned), in addition to her family and other connections. At Harvard, she appeared to have been singularly friendless, apart from her continuing association with Neb Tilahun, the schoolfellow who had also won a scholarship there. He said: '"She was the person I felt most comfortable with at Harvard, a very sincere and cordial person"' (p. 42). It was only in her final semester at Harvard, when her depression became severe, that she withdrew from Neb (p. 117).

In presenting Sinedu as always having been friendless, Thernstrom partly bases her assertions on Sinedu's diaries and her letter to strangers (pp. 101-104)[4], but people in depression are likely to look back on their lives very negatively. At one point Thernstrom acknowledges this: 'During a depressive illness (which is twice as likely to affect women as men) sufferers are overcome by a radical, unshakeable negative view of themselves and the world -- a fog so thick they are unable to see the world as they had previously experienced it... The defining quality of clinical depression, however, is not its negativity but its unrealistic negativity. A depressed person's self-description is usually at odds with the external evidence...' (p. 182). To use a depressed person's diaries as the main source of information about her past then appears unwise.

Crowther argues that diaries in general should not be treated as 'bearers of the truth', given their 'potential for performance, fantasy, and inaccuracy' (1999:214-215). The same applies to such confessional documents as Sinedu's letter to strangers. What Sinedu wrote about her period at Harvard is supported by others' consensus that she was friendless there; but we find no similar unequivocal corroboration of what she wrote about her earlier life in Ethiopia.

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[4] Sinedu wrote in her letter to strangers: 'As far as I can remember my life has been hellish... Year after year, I became lonelier and lonelier. I see friends deserting me.. Home was not a comforting place. I swallowed my pain and anguish just as my siblings did to theirs. I was so lonely' (p. 102).

Sinedu's feelings of loneliness, of being a perpetual outsider, her attempts to perform better socially and so on, coincide to some extent with many people's memories of adolescence and young adulthood. 'At the transitional stage of adolescence... both one's subjectivity and style are unsettled... The claim that no one cares or there's no one to talk to is common in adolescence. Phrases such as "My mother didn't understand me, I felt a misfit, misunderstood, an outsider, and lonely" occur frequently in the questionnaire replies' (Crowther: op. cit.:214-217, referring to a study set in Britain). In this difficult time of life, the 'delicate' bridge to full adulthood has to be negotiated (Hatcher: 1994:172): 'early adulthood is a crisis phrase in identity formation' (Giddens: op. cit.:106).

The literature suggests special difficulties for females, not least in the American society where Sinedu went to study (Rogers et al 1994). Higher education can exacerbate this: '...when Loevinger and her colleagues (1985) observed a significant loss in ego development among young women attending a private, academically competitive university..., she remarked, "A disturbing possiblity is that for some significant fraction of students, particularly women, college is a regressive experience... ...moving into institutions of higher learning may affect dramatically and negatively young women's experiences of themselves"' (op.cit.:6).

Thernstrom, as a relatively privileged insider in the USA and at Harvard, who went to university in the same environment in which she grew up, possibly did not share these problems in any acute way. For other Americans, leaving home for college can be a very difficult step to negotiate and a time of life when neurotic and psychopathological behaviour can erupt (Hatcher: op. cit.:177). 'Suicide... is the second biggest killer of students in the United States, after accidents/injuries. Most suicides stem from psychiatric illness...[which] disproportionately affects young people. The average age of the onset of manic depression is 17, and 19 for schizophrenia. Students are therefore in the highest risk group for both mental illness and suicide' (Wojtas 2000:20-21).

Such 'psychological risk and vulnerability' (op. cit.:3) is likely to increase for some individuals from minority groups in situations of multi-ethnic and international diversity -- and again, more so for women: a study of Malaysian students in the USA 'found life-change stress to be higher among female than male students' (Othman 1986, quoted in Mohamed 1997:160).

Thernstrom argues that Sinedu was quasi-autistic (pp. 95-100) and supports this with Sinedu's anguished discussions in her diaries of her difficulties in relating to people

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at Harvard. When Thernstrom draws parallels between autistic behaviour <u>among Americans</u> and Sinedu's experiences, she does not allow for cross-cultural differences and the very real social predicaments of adult newcomers to a country with an extremely different way of life.

Thernstrom suggests a link between a 'personality disorder' and Sinedu's killing of Trang. While it seems very clear that Sinedu suffered from extreme depression at the end of her life, and that she committed suicide as a result, depression does not appear a sufficient condition for murdering Trang. Thernstrom quotes at most three aggressive and/or violent threats from Sinedu's 'voluminous' diaries: two are not about Trang and one, written almost two years before the murder, was followed by a statement that she cannot carry out the threat. Many 'normal' people write angrily in their diaries: one function of a diary is precisely to ventilate and disperse aggressive feelings. 'Her diaries reflect a deep, perhaps even a psychotic depression, but psychotic depressions are usually sufficiently incapacitating that the person is not capable of violence' (p. 198). Sinedu wrote in her letter to strangers, to reassure possible contacts:'"I would have been aggressive rather than shy if I was to hurt others"' (p. 103).

According to a psychiatrist, '"Sinedu's diaries are clearly very disturbed, but they are less disturbed than other patients who don't commit murder and suicide"' (p. 200). The assistant district attorney remarked; '"What makes this case seem so mysterious is that the thing which pushed her over the edge -- the slight [Trang moving out of shared rooms] -- was so slight"' (p. 201).

In the alternative interpretation of events below, I focus more than Thernstrom does on the environment in which Sinedu spent her final years. I argue that Sinedu's social isolation at Harvard did not exacerbate an existing problem but created new ones. Thernstrom describes Sinedu's difficulties with racial, class and gender identity at Harvard as additional pressures on an insecure sense of self that derived from fragile connections to others. I shall present these difficulties as major sources of the stress that contributed to Sinedu's breakdown.

5.2.2

To begin with 'racial' identity: African students in the USA -- a country with a long history of racial uneasiness -- are aware as never in their home societies of distinctive physical characteristics, yet have little in common socially or culturally with African-

Americans (pp. 85-6). Students from Africa may have more prejudice to contend with than other foreign students: 'members of the African Students Association... are worried about how Sinedu reflects on African students -- that the incident will fuel racism and reinforce the stereotype of Asians as the "good minority" and blacks as the bad, destructive one' (p. 18; also see Furnham 1997).

Thernstrom reports that Ethiopian students do not easily cohere with other Africans, because of differences in language and history; thus Sinedu's limited involvement with the African Students' Association. If there were enough people from a similar background -- as with Trang and the Vietnamese Students Association -- a minor discourse could be maintained, parallel to the dominant stream of cultural discourse that was American. Sinedu seems to have had only Neb Tilahun to carry on a minor discourse with and was handicapped in the main discourse. Shugu Imam, a socially successful woman foreign student, said of Sinedu: '"She seemed starved to talk about Ethiopia. She would talk a lot about Ethiopian customs... When you are a foreign student, you have to come to terms with the fact that people aren't interested in your culture. People think of Ethiopia as a place people starve to death -- that's it. You have to package it in an interesting way for them -- to tell them little tidbits. You have to learn American politics -- to read Vanity Fair"' (ibid.).

5.2.3

Neb Tilahun shared Sinedu's racial and national affiliations but not her sense of isolation at Harvard. Gender is a major variable that separated Neb and Sinedu: 'Terefe Kerse, who had been Sinedu's gym teacher, describes her as having been "a typical Ethiopian female, what ninety-five per cent of Ethiopian parents want their daughters to be: not verbally opinionated, modest in clothing, gestures, behaviours and tone of voice, courteous, demure, doesn't stand out in a crowd, follows rules, asks no questions." She would never wear gym shorts..., he says, for fear of immodesty' (p. 38).

But how did such demeanour translate into campus perceptions at Harvard? Shugu Imam said: '"I'm not surprised she [Sinedu] didn't have any friends. She was not a compelling personality. She was completely ordinary looking. She didn't dress well. She kept her hair tied in a bun, she wore brown -- she was small, of average weight, everything about her looked average. I had no sense of her as an attractive woman -- I couldn't

imagine men being in love with her. I never bumped into her at parties, only at the library"' (p. 88).

What should Sinedu have done to attract friends, to become a 'compelling personality'?

> Bethlehem Gelaw, a high school classmate of Sinedu's and a medical student at the University of Pennsylvania, describes the metamorphosis she underwent to fit into American collegiate social life. Like Sinedu, she had been quiet and studious in high school, but at college she discovered that this style didn't work. The social breakthrough for her came when she was in a fashion show; after that people began to pay attention to her. `In Ethiopia girls are not supposed to be sexy; they are supposed to be modest,' she said. `In American colleges there is so much emphasis on physical appearance.' Bethlehem explained how, when she walked through campus, her companions would be impressed as acquaintances greeted her, remarking, `Oh, you know a lot of people.' She figured out that in America it was important to have numbers of friends, whereas in Ethiopia one is supposed to have a few well-chosen friends. After the murder-suicide, newspaper accounts reported students recalling Sinedu as looking downwards and not making `eye contact', as evidence of her emotional instability. But, Bethlehem explains, that's the way Ethiopian girls are supposed to be. Yilugnita -- the Amharic word for the polite reserve inbred into Ethiopians, especially females -- is a quality which proves singularly maladaptive in America. `In Ethiopia you are not supposed to draw attention to yourself,' Bethlehem says. `In this country you really have to sell yourself -- you have to stand out -- to try and attract people in the way you wouldn't in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia it's very rare for people to talk about themselves. In this country unless you talk about yourself who is going to?' (p. 90).

Sinedu did not attempt the 'metamorphosis' that her former classmate underwent, in order to win friends and influence people: this highlights personality variables as well as gender and 'nationality'. Those who had made successful assimilatory efforts could respect her for resisting, as did her friend Neb: 'He had admired the way in which "Sinedu maintained her autonomy and didn't become overly friendly to make other friends. I always felt she made her own decisions and, when you make American friends, you cannot stay wholly Ethiopian. You compromise your identity." But, in retrospect, he believes that Sinedu "went to great lengths to conceal her loneliness"' (p. 43). Sinedu's diaries reveal the pain of her 'assimilatory struggles' (p. 117) and her envy of Neb's cosmopolitanism. When the metamorphosis did come, it was at the end of Sinedu's short life:

> When Sinedu arrived that day [a week before she died], Neb was struck by the transformation in her appearance. She was wearing makeup, high patent leather heels, and shorts... Surprised, he told Sinedu she looked `spectacular'... He felt `there was a profound change in the way she looked and moved and carried herself. There was an air of happiness about her. She seemed lighter.' It was the happiest he had ever seen her. He is certain now that she was saying good-bye. After her death he found himself particularly disturbed by the memory (p. 117).

5.2.4

      Thernstrom underlines the importance of socio-economic class at Harvard: '... Sinedu was further isolated being a poor student in a very rich school -- a complaint frequently voiced by the few poor students who find themselves at Harvard. The Harvard student body is diverse is many respects, but social class is not one of them... Sergio Camache, a Mexican American student -- the son of a single uneducated mother who supported him on welfare and odd jobs throughout his childhood -- says he "never remembers feeling badly about being poor until he went to Harvard. Where I was growing up everyone was poor and the ones who aren't were just a little bit better -- like they were on food stamps instead of welfare. But most of the other minorities at Harvard came from fancy prep schools and knew how to blend in." During his first year at Harvard, Sergio says, he felt "physically sick at the ostentation of the wealth. The guys that lived next door would joke about how much they were getting from their parents -- their expectations for Christmas presents. One was going to get a Land Rover if he had a B average. They would plan ski trips over winter break and go away for spring break. The guys were astonished that I didn't know how to tie a tie. I had never had one. One time our dorm was supposed to go see the dean of students to make a presentation and our proctor wanted us all to put on jackets and ties to look especially good. I told him I didn't have one, and he wouldn't let me go. I could see how Sinedu felt very lost"'(p. 87-8).

      What counted was the 'total package', of race, gender and class: 'The foreign students -- particularly those from third-world countries -- are ordinarily culled from the ruling classes in their countries and are thus often the very richest of Harvard students' (p. 88). According to Shugu Imam (the daughter of one of Pakistan's former ambassadors to the US): '"The African friends I had who were socially successful were well travelled, from fabulously wealthy or glamorous backgrounds, and the women were pretty and knew how to exoticize themselves"' (p. 89).

5.2.5

      But would all this be so new to Sinedu, whose high school years were spent in a tiny enclave for the children of affluent westerners in Addis? A former (Western) teacher of hers summed up the attitude to local students who came in with scholarships after a rigorous entrance exam and interview: '"There is this sense of 'Oh, you native Ethiopians,

you've made it now -- you've come up to our level. Congratulations'"(p. 34). In Addis, however, she had had her family and home to return to every evening.

Thernstrom quotes Sinedu's diaries (and her letter to strangers) on stresses and un-happiness within her family. Candid diaries, especially those kept during adolescence, often report anger and resentment against parents -- the majority of families have their 'particular pathologies' (p. 191). 'Most people have come to accept the mixture of good and bad, love and hate, envy and gratitude, that constitutes family dynamics' (Hollway and Jefferson 1999:130). Families in unstable and violent polities are generally subject to ad-ditional stresses (as for example with Trang's family). Thernstrom cannot use Sinedu's diaries as an 'objective' picture of her family life -- they provide the subjective view of someone in depression (5.2). In-depth interviews with other family members would have yielded a fuller view of life in the Tadesse household, but Thernstrom did not conduct such interviews. (She visited Addis in the month after Sinedu's funeral, when the family was in severe shock and the father was home from hospital after a heart attack.)

Arguments that Sinedu had a basic problem in making connections to other people -- as opposed to a more specific problem in connecting to people at Harvard -- do not take account of relationships with kin: 'When Sinedu decided to die, she set about planning it in the same methodical fashion in which she had always conducted her life. She wrote to a relative that she had always promised them a <u>gabe</u> blanket... and that she wanted to give it now. She sent her sisters in Ethiopia a present. Two weeks before the end of the se-mester she packed up her computer, meticulously... and sent it to one of her cousins' (p. 117).

Thernstrom reports from Sinedu's diaries that she was especially jealous of Trang's proximity to her family (p. 108). 'Sinedu particularly suffered during school breaks, when she would often stay alone in the dorm. The heat was turned down, the dining hall closed, and all the other students were gone. The leitmotief of an empty room is one Sinedu re-turns to again and again in her writings. Even Shugu Imam recalls the shock she had felt freshman year at finding herself alone for the first time. "Before I came to Harvard," she says, 'I had never slept alone in a place before. In Pakistan, there are always people around..."' (pp. 108-9).

Unlike some other universities, Harvard does not have a special residence for in-ternational students (more of whom would be likely to stay on during school breaks). One foreign student said, '"Harvard discourages it because the idea is that we are meant to as-

similate"; '"we don't want to segregate them," an administrator explains. "They are supposed to fit in with other students. They were examined and admitted by the same criteria"' (p. 89). '"Students arrive at this legendary place and they are all thrown together under the bland assumption that the magic of multiculturalism will work... And sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. Students who don't fit in can feel very isolated and lost"' (an administrator, p. 85). '"Harvard is very complacent, very arrogant -- there is this attitude: we're the best university on earth and you should be happy here"' (a foreign student, p. 89).

When Sinedu was most under strain, she must have sharply felt her family's absence. Thernstrom talked to a Harvard student who had undergone a mental health crisis: 'Damien feels he would not have survived his illness had he not had a local family to support him and intervene on his behalf. "At Harvard, they're always telling you how many resources there are," he says, "and that all you have to do is seek them out. But when you're ill, you can't always fight for what you need." He feels "sympathy for Sinedu -- with her parents in Ethiopia and no one to help"' (p. 167).

5.2.6

> The detail Mr Dyer [a former schoolteacher of Sinedu's] found most striking about Sinedu's death is that the day before the murder/suicide she had skipped her final exam. It was the detail that made him know she had undergone a profound change: 'The Sinedu I knew <u>never</u> would have missed an exam -- she'd be the first at an exam. She was just a quiet young lady with a monumental task in front of her. You couldn't tell her that academics weren't everything because they were' (p. 39).

A crucial difference between Sinedu's position at the International Community School in Addis and at Harvard -- although at both places her peers were mainly white and/or affluent -- was that at school Sinedu was known for academic achievement whereas at Harvard she did not excel as a student. Thernstrom attributes Sinedu's mediocre performance at Harvard to the changed learning environment: 'Although in [Sinedu's] high school teachers ... understood that they could not expect Ethiopian students to talk in class the way the Americans did, in Harvard classes participation is frequently mandatory and graded. In one of a series of diaries that Sinedu kept at Harvard, she describes the agonies of being forced to give a presentation in biology class' (p. 93).

Thernstrom points out that this is 'one of the few entries in the whole of her voluminous diaries to mention academics. The preoccupation of Sinedu's writings is her

loneliness and the question of how to solve her "social problems"' (p. 94). And even in this relatively rare reference to study, the emphasis is on the social rather than the academic:

> As she muddled her way through her material, groping for English words, she became paralyzed by the fear that she could not hold the attention of the class: they were bored, perhaps even laughing at her. When the next student make his presentation she saw the terrible contrast between them: suddenly the `shrivelled figures' of her classmates woke up and began to smile. He had `charm', and she didn't. He made up games with which to engage the class -- games she felt she could not have thought of and which, even if she had been able to -- she wrote with great self-reproach -- she felt she would not have had the confidence to enact (p. 93).

Thernstrom attributes Sinedu's dramatically lowered performance at Harvard to her earlier education through 'memorization and rote learning' (p. 91), although it seems unlikely that an international school would rely on such methods when it catered to expatriates who would have to return to more challenging educational systems. Even if valid, her statements need to be re-examined in the light of recent and less Euro-American centred research: 'Chan and Drover offer an invigorating defence of the learning styles and strategies of ...cultures which are so misunderstood by westerners, who confuse repetitive learning (which facilitates accurate recall) with rote learning (which entails learning mechanically and unthinkingly). Repetitive learning, for all its unpopularity in the West, works rather well as a deep learning strategy...' (McNamara and Harris 1997:5). Similarly with 'classroom participation': 'While Hong Kong and other Asian [and in this context some African] students may be perceived in western educational institutions as passive and reluctant to participate in critical commentary, there is little in the research to suggest that they would be wise to set aside their learning skills and substitute those of the West. While their traditional learning skills may inhibit them from speaking out in class or challenging their professors, they may have helped them compete internationally and score well on standard academic tests' (Chan and Drover 1997:60). The classroom performance described by Sinedu tested ability to combine knowledge with social skills valued in American culture, not comprehension of the subject.

Those schooled within one educational system can adapt to another, as did Neb Tilahun: 'he recalls the shock when he first came to Harvard and had to start writing papers that required an original point of view -- but he discovered it was something he actually enjoyed' (p. 91-2). Why did Sinedu not adapt to new academic requirements, like Neb with whom she had much in common?

Did Sinedu's acute anomie at Harvard undermine her academic focus? Study is '99 per cent perspiration', and earlier Sinedu had exemplified this: 'She had worked terribly hard in high school in order to be second in her class of thirty-two' (p. 92). The evidence presented in Thernstrom's book suggests that at Harvard Sinedu no longer gave priority to studies. Her grades may well have been higher had she devoted more time to assignments and less to her extensive diaries on paper and on cassette, and the notebooks 'entitled: "My Small Book of Social Rules," "The Social Problems I Faced," ... "Depression," and "Stress"' (p. 95). In the final semesters of her life she suffered from 'the loss of concentration characteristic of clinical depression' (p. 181), and her grades dipped further.

Sinedu's quietly studious style when at school in Addis was socially accepted and even admired, and there peer pressure had been mitigated by family pride in her scholastic achievements. At Harvard, without these bulwarks, she found herself in an environment where -- at the same time that academic achievement was prized -- being studious in a '"dull"' way was seen among some peers as a social liability: '"I felt for her [Sinedu] in the way that you feel for lonely studious students, but I didn't want to befriend her. She was a geek"' (Shugu Imam, p. 89). 'When I [Thernstrom] inquire why Sinedu couldn't have made friends with other studious students, Shugu says, "Because of her Africanness, I suppose..."'(ibid.).

Once again, it was the '"total package"' that did not appeal to peers on campus: being African, female but not '"attractive"', non-affluent and a '"geek"'... The other qualities were difficult to manipulate but Sinedu may well have tried to be less studious and more sociable. Working hard had taken her very far with studies, but 'working' on her social life -- with detailed analyses in her diaries and social exercises to carry out -- did not lead to success in the same way.

5.2.7

Social esteem among students on campus was based on popularity, 'attractiveness', glamour, wealth, achievement, intellectual brilliance, 'belonging'... and Sinedu had none of these -- '"she wasn't very interesting"', Shugu Imam said (p. 88). Thernstrom quotes the same adjective repeatedly to describe Sinedu, one that is possibly the most damning social indictment in American usage: 'People found Sinedu boring...' (p. 98); '"Trang told me I'm boring. I felt like I'm boring her"' (p. 114). Thernstrom did not admit Sinedu to her class on autobiographical writing because 'the writing she had submitted

was boring' (p. 95). The Collins English Dictionary defines 'geek' as 'a boring and unattractive social misfit' (1999:636). For those who were socially successful at Harvard, the '"angst"' of others could be very '"dull"' (p. 88).

Finally Sinedu wrote in her diary: '"I am tired of being boring"... The... things she writes that she most wants to convey about herself are: "1. You're somebody. 2. You're interesting..."' (p. 96) -- the message that she had tried to get across to Harvard, but with increasing hopelessness. '"There is no power that lies in me that I could use however I want to. I am unable to make friends..."' (p. 187).

Thernstrom describes her own encounter with Sinedu:

> 'In Ethiopia where I come from I have seen terrible violence and poverty and things no one would understand,' she told me, leaning forward slightly, her voice low and self-dramatizing. Another rich Harvard student from the third world, I decided impatiently: they speak of the suffering of their countrymen and turn out to be royalty... I was one of a long line of people -- as it turned out -- whom Sinedu had reached out to and who did not respond to her (pp. 22-3).

'In speaking, a person's aim is to be recognized, not simply to communicate"' (Freeman: 1996:749). Had a 'global dialogical community' that transcended culture and race existed among Harvard undergraduates in the 1990s, Sinedu might not have been '"starved to talk about Ethiopia"' and when she did talk about it would not have had to make her voice 'low and self-dramatizing' in (unsuccessful) attempts to gain an audience. If Sinedu could have participated in a 'conversation of cultures' at Harvard, she may have known the 'socialization and support' that leads to '"a continuity of self"..., a stable, core aspect of... identity as an individual' that runs 'like a thread' through people's lives and gives those lives 'consistency and direction' (Mizrachi 1999:164, quoting Fiske 1980:259). Instead, she experienced 'alienation and anomie..., self and social estrangement, and social isolation' (Furnham op. cit.:16).

A mental health specialist at Harvard told Thernstrom: "If your self-esteem is shaky and very narrowly based..., and you are really unsure of your value as a human being... You may take a rejection as clear evidence that you as a person are not valuable, and that might make you enormously angry -- so angry you can't deal with it. A primitive response is to destroy..." (p. 116).

5.3   A crime of passion

Sinedu stabbed Trang forty-five times. Thernstrom comments: 'one does not ordinarily associate friendship with the degree of passion necessary to create forty-five stab

wounds' (p. 17). A campus rumour after the deaths suggested that Sinedu and Trang had been lovers, noting that Trang's friend Thao had on the night before the murder slept not just in Trang's room but in her bed. But non-sexual intimacy between women is common in Vietnam, explains Thernstrom (and in many other cultures). Those who knew Trang and Sinedu well found the 'lovers' theory untenable. Thernstrom hypothesizes that while the two women were not lovers, Sinedu had an 'intense crushlike attachment' to Trang and killed her 'when she was in bed with another woman' (p. 195-96), smarting with envy and rejection. But if Sinedu was driven by these feelings, why did she not also use the knife on Thao, as she so easily could have? Sinedu's preparations to kill Trang could well have been made before she had any idea that Thao was to stay over with Trang that week-end.

My hypothesis is that Sinedu acted in great passion, and that she and Trang were part of a triangle, but that Thao was not the third party. Sinedu killed Trang because she felt slighted and rejected by Harvard whereas Trang was accepted and belonged. It was indeed 'a story of rejection, envy...' (p. 9), but Harvard -- the term connotes an audience whose attention Sinedu was struggling to engage -- was not just the setting for the story but a major protagonist within it and the third side of the triangle.

How could Sinedu get Harvard's attention? She was '"mousy"' and '"not a compelling personality"', quite simply '"boring"' -- from Ethiopia, a place that her peers on campus did not (want to) know about, a boring place where '"people starve to death"'. Suicide may have been suggested by depression, but it could also have appeared a means to gain the attention she did not otherwise seem able to attract.

Yet if she sank alone, would those who swam on even be aware of what had happened? 'Perhaps she had... noticed that the three previous suicides that spring had not been given much play in the [student news]paper' (p. 119). Sinedu once wrote in her diary: '"the bad way out I see is suicide & the good way out killing, savouring their fear & then suicide"' (p. 114).

About a year and a half before the deaths, such ideas had already appeared in Sinedu's notebooks: '"on the way to depression and battered w/ pessimistic thoughts, I am saying there is no use to my life. I am unlovable and a cuckoo... I hate Adey. If I ever grow desperate enough to seek power and fearful respect through killing, she will be the 1st one I would blow off... she acts as if I am no more important than a crawling insect"' (p. 114). Adey Fisseha was 'a popular Ethiopian-American classmate': 'She told me

[Thernstrom] she considered Sinedu a friend she didn't know well but with whom she was always on cordial terms. She had no idea that in Sinedu's mind she was part of the conspiracy of all those who had rejected her, against whom she was planning revenge -- revenge which in the spring of her junior year came to be directed... at Trang' (p. 115). The two people on whom Sinedu focussed her rage -- for perceived slights to herself as well as a means to command '"fearful respect"' from the audience that had long ignored her -- were women immigrants who (unlike Sinedu) had managed to succeed socially at Harvard, with the advantage of longer exposure and socialization to American life.

Sinedu ended the diary entry about Adey Fisseha by writing that she did not have it in her to carry out these threats. By May 1995, though, she had grown 'desperate enough'. For all her erratic behaviour in the final week of her life, Sinedu appears to have planned her last actions in a manner that ensured maximum attention from Harvard -- as if for her, killing Trang was not only an end in itself but a means to an end: '"Maybe you want people to know you're there, even in hatred"' (Sinedu's diaries, p. 109).

Presumably Sinedu was angry enough to kill Trang in April when she heard that the period as roommates was over, but she did so only at the end of May, just before 'commencement': 'Harvard's commencement is among the most festive in the land. By the first week of June ... [a] large pastel tent has been erected, as if in preparation for an enormous wedding, and red silk flags are strung all around on trees... World eminences give historic speeches -- Mother Teresa, Colin Powell, Vaclav Havel. The Marshall Plan was announced at the commencement of 1947' (p. 3). '"Senior week", the week before commencement, is supposed to be devoted to partying -- the "Booze Cruise", senior barbeque, graduation ball: a time of giddy anticipation...' (p. 15). The commencement of 1995 was 'terribly transformed' (ibid.) by the murder and suicide that took place on its eve: Sinedu could not have chosen a better time in the academic year to exit with a bang and not just a boring whimper.

'The ability to imagine and manipulate the publicity attendant on her own death is one of the most striking aspects of the murder' (p. 119). Thernstrom refers here to the photo of herself that Sinedu sent to the student newspaper with an unsigned typed note: 'KEEP this picture. There will soon be a very juicy story involving the person in this picture'. Thernstrom notes that the photo 'didn't look much like her' and that it had 'a glamour and a slightly sinister air which she never had' -- presumably the way Sinedu wanted to be remembered ('many more people now know Sinedu from that photo than

from life', ibid.). Thernstrom suggests that sending the photo could have been a cry for help, but her other comment seems more plausible: Sinedu 'wanted to ensure what she got: three [student newspaper]... issues devoted to the unfolding drama of her death' (ibid.). 'The letter is a detail Ethiopians find particularly repulsive and bewildering... "The letter is totally un-Ethiopian"' one informant comments (ibid.). But Sinedu was not communicating with an Ethiopian audience.

'... Sinedu's story seems to have been one she wanted to tell. She planned her death carefully and she left her diaries in a place where they might easily be found' (op. cit.:95). Did Sinedu anticipate the wider media attention that murder and suicide would ignite? 'Reporters from news organizations from CNN to Hard Copy had descended upon campus after the murder. No one could recall such a frenzy of media interest before' (p. 8). Sinedu had finally become '"somebody"' and '"interesting"'. Even Thernstrom, who had found Sinedu's work too dull to admit her to a writing class, ended up publishing a book about Sinedu based on her diaries.

'Sinedu would certainly have been pleased...' (p. 7). Thernstrom writes that taking Trang along with her in death was a triumph for Sinedu: 'in memory they are bonded in a way in which Trang has no choice, and which in life never existed' (ibid.). But Sinedu's manner of departure -- no quiet suicide during the vacation, but a murder-plus-suicide in a student residence during the week before commencement -- also meant that she is 'bonded' in public memory with Harvard, although in a manner that Harvard certainly did not want.

6.   GIDDENS ON GLOBALIZATION: 'THE TRIBULATIONS OF THE SELF'

> Personal problems, personal trials and crises, personal relationships: what can these tell us, and what do they express, about the social landscape of modernity? (Giddens:1991:12).

Sinedu's life -- and death -- can be illuminated by Anthony Giddens' (1991) discussion of 'self and society in the late modern age': 'Modernity must be understood on an institutional level; yet the transmutations introduced by modern institutions interlace in a direct way with individual life and therefore with the self' (op. cit.:1).

Giddens sees his work as applicable mainly to the 'industrialized world' and those who inhabit it, and less so to 'people living... outside the most strongly "developed" por-

tions of the world' (op. cit.:22). He tends to treat Third World societies as an analytically convenient contrast to his descriptions of the 'modern', without distinguishing between these societies, and generally conflates them with earlier historical stages in the development of 'modern industrialized' societies. Without pursuing the issue here, I will try to demonstrate that what he says about 'modernity and self-identity' holds true for Sinedu who spent most of her short life in Addis Ababa.

Sinedu's story, as narrated by Thernstrom, is of a seventeen year old who relocated from the 'traditional' and 'provincial' setting of Addis to the modern academic metropolis of Harvard and simply could not cope. But Thernstrom does not quote any excerpts from Sinedu's diaries that suggest nostalgia or homesickness: no 'strong preoccupation with thoughts of home', no 'perceived need to go home', no 'sense of grief for the home (people, place and things)...' (Furnham 1997:17). Sinedu experienced 'unhappiness, dis-ease and disorientation in the new place which is conspicuously not home' (ibid.), but that was because in the 'new place' her efforts to integrate were unsuccessful.

Sinedu exemplified in many ways Giddens' description of the 'modern', as we shall see, and not some 'survival' of the pre-modern or some product of the insufficiently modern. When we apply Giddens' arguments to Sinedu, it becomes clear that she was not atypical, not a freak case, but well within the range of modernity. Quite a few people who have read Sinedu's story in drafts of this paper, especially women, react with 'That might have been my story if...' Some of them have also experienced being foreign students in the USA, others were from low-income American homes and attended elite universities, some were students from poor countries at First World institutions, and others had moved from provinces to metropolitan universities in Third World countries. Sinedu crossed a line that nearly all of us stop short of, but her experiences are familiar to many. She represents a recognisably modern self rather than -- as Thernstrom has it -- a peculiarly 'Ethiopian self' (op. cit.:96).

The 'backdrop' to Sinedu's story is 'the existential terrain of late modern life... in which the reordering of time and space realigns the local with the global' and where 'the self undergoes massive change' (op. cit.:80). Giddens describes this change: 'In the settings of modernity... the... self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change' (op. cit.:33). In other words, 'the self becomes a reflexive project' (p. 32): 'A person's identity is... to be found in... the capacity to keep a particular narrative going... continually [to] integrate events which occur in the

external world, and sort them into the ongoing "story" about the self' (op. cit.:54, emphases given).

Sinedu at Harvard wrote away in her numerous notebooks and (instead of working on assignments) devoted herself to the 'reflexive project' of her self. She was engaged in what Giddens refers to as 'self-therapy' (op. cit.:70) -- trying to generate 'the self-understanding necessary to plan ahead and to construct a life trajectory which accords with the individual's inner wishes' (op. cit.:71) -- and she may well have read books similar to the self-help manual that he discusses. Sinedu's 'inner wishes' were for social success in her new setting: her 'notebooks consist primarily of hundreds of meticulously numbered instructions -- sometimes in a Q and A format -- in which she tries to set down the rules of American social life' (Thernstrom op.cit: 95). Her style is sometimes reminiscent of social science: one part of her diaries is titled 'Case History' (op. cit.:194). 'On the first page of her notebook, "Wisdom", Sinedu explains that "there are some strict rules" that govern social life and it is necessary to figure these out "as tools to manipulate your social life"' (op. cit.:95).

Thernstrom and a reviewer of her book (Weber) quote some of Sinedu's 'odd' musings: 'She urges herself: "Do not show off what you really think. Put on a mask. If you are talking about something serious, make your face serious..." She begs herself to learn the art of false merriment, instructing herself to laugh "falsely" regardless of her feelings, and smile at appropriate moments' (Thernstrom: op. cit.:97). For Giddens, Sinedu's perceptions are typical of the late modern age, where the body is 'less and less an extrinsic "given"' (op. cit.:7) and more and more the 'embodiment' of the self, and therefore to be worked on intensively as part of the reflexive project of the self: 'The body is thus not simply an "entity" but is experienced as a practical mode of coping with external situations and events... Facial expressions and other gestures provide the fundamental content... of everyday communication. To learn to become a competent agent -- able to join with others on an equal basis in the production and reproduction of social relations -- is to be able to exert a continuous, and successful monitoring of face and body. ...Regularized control of the body is a fundamental means whereby a biography of self-identity is maintained' (Giddens: op. cit.:56-7). One reason for Sinedu's lack of social success may have been her laboured and obvious efforts: 'she... writes that she often finds she has difficulty listening because she is so consumed by the anxiety of formulating an appropriate response' (Thernstrom: op. cit.:99).

Giddens writes: '...class divisions and other fundamental lines of inequality, such as those connected with gender or ethnicity, can be partly <u>defined</u> in terms of differential access to forms of self-actualization and empowerment... Modernity, one should not forget, produces <u>difference, exclusion </u>and<u> marginalization</u> (<u>op. cit.</u>:6). Giddens elaborates a little on gender: 'Nothing is clearer than that gender is a matter of learning and continuous "work", rather than a simple extension of biologically given sexual differences' (<u>op. cit.</u>:63).

Sinedu's social struggles at Harvard can in part be summarized as a search for intimacy, for an intimate, '"someone who will constantly check in on me and share both the good and bad part of my life with me"' (Thernstrom <u>op. cit.</u>:103). Giddens describes the 'pure relationships' of intimacy: 'In contrast to close personal ties in traditional contexts, the pure relationship is not anchored in external conditions of social or economic life -- it is, as it were, free-floating... Modern friendship exposes this characteristic... clearly. A friend is defined specifically as someone with whom one has a relationship unprompted by anything other than the rewards that that relationship provides' (pp. 89-90).

Sinedu found one such relationship at Harvard, but it was shortlived: 'After Trang agreed to live with her, Sinedu writes in her diary, she enjoyed four days that were the "highlight" of her life at Harvard. She says she felt for the first time what it is like to be happy: she could feel her face brightening, her skin healing, her energy surging all because "...my rooming problem was solved in the best possible way saving my face and also with a girl I thought I would really enjoy to be with..."' (Thernstrom <u>op. cit.</u>:106).

Sinedu's search for friends would be described by Giddens as essential to modernity: '...the capacity to achieve intimacy with others is a prominent part of the reflexive project of the self...' (p. 96). '...self-identity is negotiated through linked processes of self-exploration and the development of intimacy with the other. Such processes help create "shared histories"...' (<u>op. cit.</u>:97). Not only did Sinedu lack enough common background with her peers at Harvard to provide a basis for 'shared histories', she was unable to engage sufficiently with them in the collective present to create such histories. Without connections, she became increasingly self-absorbed and thus of even less interest to others (see Giddens <u>op. cit.</u>:170 on narcissism). Sinedu had to confront 'the looming threat of <u>personal meaninglessness</u>' (<u>op. cit.</u>:201) -- 'the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer', 'a fundamental psychic problem in circumstances of late modernity' (<u>op. cit.</u>:9).

Giddens' discussion of 'subjective death' (op. cit.:49) is illustrated in Sinedu's diaries and letters: 'She describes the terrible feelings of dissociation: what she calls "this heart-failer thing" -- how at some point in a conversation the thread gets lost and she "stops caring". She feels "dead and it is hard to warm myself up"' (Thernstrom op. cit.:99). 'She writes that she "can't stand the bright light outside my shell"; but she also realizes that she is "debilitated and made lifeless by the comfortable darkness of my shell." Yet, she says, she only feels "secure" when she is back in her "dear bed, back to my loneliness, away from the eyes of others" (op. cit.:180-81).

Sinedu increasingly lost 'pride, or self-esteem: confidence in the integrity and value of the narrative of self-identity... because of the intrinsic relations between the coherence of the self... [and] its relations to others' (op. cit.:66). What she terms 'that shitty cringing feeling' (Thernstrom op. cit.:106) is described by Giddens as 'the other side' of pride, namely shame: 'shame directly corrodes a sense of security in both self and surrounding social milieux' (Giddens op. cit.:153). After Trang found new roommates, 'Sinedu was left "to float" -- to be randomly paired with a roommate by the Dunster House office. In a school where most people choose their roommates, especially by their senior year, there is a sense of failure associated with floating: the stigma that no one wants to live with you. An editorial written by a Harvard student stated that he understood how Sinedu felt, for floating was worse than death' (Thernstrom op. cit.:112). Such remorseless public exposure as friendless and unwanted was what Giddens calls a 'fateful moment' for Sinedu: 'Fateful moments are times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroads in his existence; or when a person learns of information with fateful consequences' (op. cit.:113).

Giddens extends the notion of 'fateful moments' to institutions: 'There are, of course, fateful moments in the history of collectivities as well as in the lives of individuals. They are phases at which things are wrenched out of joint, where a given state of affairs is suddenly altered by a few key events' (ibid.). The homicide-suicide may have well constituted a fateful moment in the history of the collectivity that is Harvard -- not merely the negative publicity that vexed the administration but the wider impact of the deaths on students and others. '"There is still orderly action... the day-to-day routine goes on. But the complex structure of actions is partly unshielded and unjustified in an ideological and emotional sense"' (Rein 1983:152).

Giddens describes late modernity as characterized by the 'sequestration of experience': '...the separation of day-to-day life from contact with experiences which raise potentially disturbing existential questions -- particularly experiences to do with sickness, madness, criminality, sexuality and death' (op. cit.:244). During 'fateful moments', however, these existential questions that have been carefully excluded force themselves back on the consciousness ('the return of the repressed' -- op. cit:167). The celebrations of Harvard's commencement week in June 1995 were riven by shocked discussion of 'madness', 'criminality', 'death' -- and 'difference'. Public debate in the university newspaper and at the informational meeting ran parallell to private exchanges and individual reactions. Given Sinedu's friendlessness, who were the students (however limited in number) who rode in two mini-buses to her funeral wake and why did they go along? 'Students are sitting, looking down at their feet, sober and uncomfortable; no one talks or cries. They are awkwardly dressed, the guys in jeans and ties, the young women in skirts with backpacks... [After the wake] The bus ride back to campus is silent' (Thernstrom op. cit.:14).

'The frontiers of sequestered experience' Giddens writes, 'are faultlines, full of tensions and poorly mastered forces; or, to shift the metaphor, they are battle grounds...' (op. cit.:168). Sinedu's violent actions created a fateful moment for Harvard, rippling through the fabric of academic excellence, individual and institutional success, national and international prestige. But the issues that had led to Trang's and Sinedu's deaths were not confronted: the administration instead expended its energies on patching up riven fabrics or -- to use Giddens' metaphor -- trying to paint out the faultlines.

Giddens ends his book with a discussion of 'life politics', quoting Theodore Roszak: 'we live in a time when the very private experience of having a personal identity to discover, a personal destiny to fulfil, has become a subversive political force of major proportions' (op. cit.:209). Sinedu's short life appears to have been conformist rather than subversive. Her period at Harvard especially (if we are to judge by quotes from her diaries) embodied a struggle to fit in despite the barriers of 'race' and 'culture' and 'class' and despite gender stereotypes -- not any active attempt to oppose and confront these barriers and stereotypes. Yet insofar as 'life politics... concerns debates and contestations deriving from the reflexive project of the self', her diaries illustrate such politics. And while Sinedu's life may have been conformist, her death was not.

7.   CONCLUSION

> Telling a tragic story can raise pity and concern, serve as an excuse for failure,
> lead to sanctions, or stimulate the search for improvements (Abma: op.cit.:177,
> citing Gergen: 1994:206-207).

News of Sinedu's death reached her old school in Addis courtesy of the CNN television channel: 'A student had heard of the crime on CNN at the health club in the Hilton Hotel -- the only health club in the country -- to which the rich locals belong' (Thernstom op. cit.:32). In the global order represented by such communication networks, societies as distant as Ethiopia and the USA sometimes seem to mirror each other. Sinedu's former counsellor at school, 'a Massachusetts native', says of Ethiopia: '"There's... a secrecy collectively in the culture"' (op. cit.:39). And when Thernstrom visits Sinedu's family: '"There has been a cover-up," Sinedu's father says in a heavy final voice and instructs me to search out the truth... "I know the States," he says. "Things are very closed there. Things cannot be found out"' (op. cit.:57-8).

In both Ethiopia and the USA, two common theories about Sinedu's motives were lesbianism and possession by spirits -- the latter represented in the USA not only in the sense that ideas about mental illness parallel and sometimes shade into older ideas about 'possession', but literally: at the informational meeting held at Harvard soon after the deaths, a 'woman asks whether the administration would permit a spiritual cleansing in the dorm room where the murder took place. "What tradition are you representing?" Dean Epps asks. "Just a general spiritual tradition," she says. He shakes his head no, but everyone in the room seems struck by the question' (op. cit:12). During the campus service of 'Prayers and Remembrances' held after the deaths, reference is made to '"forces of evil beyond... control"' (op. cit.:7).

Thernstrom ends by citing explanations of Sinedu's behaviour in terms of 'evil' (op. cit.:200-201). Such a link between 'evil' and 'difference' is even more questionable -- and dangerous -- than the connection between 'psychopathology' and 'difference' that she makes earlier in her book (section 5.1 above). When Thernstrom describes Sinedu's story as 'dark and cryptic' (op. cit.:23), what resonates -- the Dark Continent, forces of darkness and evil, the dark workings of disturbed minds...?

7.1

Thernstrom's portrayal of the Harvard killings as an Ethiopian tragedy should not be countered by arguments that they were an American tragedy -- instead, the killings are best viewed as a tragedy in international or global society, expressing relationships between cultures and nations. This paper therefore juxtaposed the deaths at Harvard with the global microcosm represented by the Institute of Social Studies, a microcosm that is free of some of the hierarchies that characterize global society and that global icon, Harvard University (3.2).

American culture dominates life at Harvard in a manner that Dutch ways do not at the Institute of Social Studies. Participants at the Institute, for example, do not need to know how to wear a tie nor do they have to conform to Dutch notions of (female) attractiveness; and any Dutch equivalent of the word 'geek' is not in use there. While it is likely that participants at the Institute find some of the others boring, there is no dominant cultural notion of what comprises 'boring'.

International students at Harvard have to become 'americanized', to varying extents: there, international students are foreign students -- 'foreign' as in 'foreign bodies', that which is 'other' and has to be assimilated in some way or rejected. In contrast, any Dutch students who attend the Institute are forced to become international students in their own country: as a conspicuous minority, they can indeed feel like 'foreign bodies' until they adapt to their new environment (3.2).

The dominance of American culture at Harvard affects not only the relationship of foreign students to peers from the USA, but foreign students' relations with each other. Shugu Imam, for example, judged Sinedu not by 'Ethiopian' or 'Pakistani' standards but by those of the host society (5.2.2, 5.2.5): she used the term 'geek' as easily and as pejoratively as any American classmate might. Was Trang using the same standards when 'Trang told me [Sinedu] I'm boring' (5.2.6)? Foreign and immigrant students would not want to associate with counterparts who were social failures lest this jeopardize their own marginal positions.

Some foreign students articulated the 'rules of the game', for example Shugu Imam who said '"I thought I understood her [Sinedu's] problems more clearly than she did"' (Thernstrom op. cit.:88):'"you have to come to terms with the fact that (American) people aren't interested in your culture... You have to package it in an interesting way for them -- to tell them little tidbits. You have to learn American politics -- to read Vanity

Fair'" (5.2.1). As international students in a global setting that does not fully reflect global hierarchies, participants at the Institute of Social Studies interact within networks of global culture but are not overwhelmed by any one dominant culture. They generally communicate with each other in English, a third person's language, but not within any tight framework of a third person's culture. They do not have to '"exoticize themselves"' (5.2.3) to entertain peers from the host culture, or to interest each other -- the term 'exotic' becomes irrelevant in a situation where everyone is exotic, including the Dutch and the Americans.

Class issues are important here as well as culture. Shugu Imam, from a background that was not only Third World elite but global elite, belonged to a transnational class that is both educated and socialized at Harvard. She was probably in a better position to articulate dominant ideologies than Harvard students who were American but from marginal and disadvantaged groups -- Sergio Camache from an underprivileged Mexican American background (5.2.3) or Damien who had experienced a mental breakdown (5.2.4), both of whom expressed more empathy with Sinedu than Shugu did.

Those who attend the Institute can also be seen as members of local or global elites, if not the transnational super-elite that goes to Harvard, but interaction between peers in this setting is much more open culturally.

7.2

Giddens' arguments about the self in the late modern age have been applied in this paper to Sinedu (6). His arguments are put forward generally and not especially for those in early adulthood, and can also be applied to the individuals I interviewed during research on the Institute of Social Studies. These individuals, at a later stage of life, had -- unlike Sinedu -- survived the 'tribulations of the self'.

Sinedu went to Harvard aged seventeen, unlike students at the Institute who tend to be graduates and usually in mid-career. Are the foreign students who attend the Institute less likely to go through crises as intense as the one that Sinedu underwent, because of their greater maturity and experience?

Adolescence and early adulthood are vulnerable junctures in the development of the self (5.2.1), but not the only such junctures. Study at the Institute is certainly stressful (3.3). In some ways it may parallel the experiences of adolescence as an exposing and reshaping of the self, here undergone by people in midlife who are detached from familiar

settings in order to go through intensive formal and informal education (George op. cit.:283). Study in mid-career at the Institute is also accompanied by stresses that are not present in the late teens, for example separation from spouse and children, and anxiety about office politics in one's absence. Three suicides have taken place at the Institute in the 1990s. The breakdown described in this paper (3.3) involved acute burn-out, depression and loss of self-esteem. Healing came about partly because of formal student support services but mainly through substantial peer support that transcended cultural differences. This cross-cultural peer group support provides the most striking contrast with Sinedu's story, not the different stage of life.

It is worth investigating how strong a role dominant cultural idioms play in the 'international' education of graduate students in the US: Thernstrom mentions disturbed Third World graduate students involved in murders (op. cit.:18 and 179), and I have been told of other such cases.

7.3

This paper has suggested additional explanations for a homicide-suicide committed by a Third World student at Harvard. Both Thernstrom's 'interpretation from an American perspective' and Harvard's official stance of 'no interpretation at all is possible' have been contested.

Alternative versions of a story generate different political questions: 'Storytelling has a socio-political character, because of the diversity of interests and values of the actors... Power inevitably plays a role in the struggle around stories... stories are open to multiple interpretation... and this creates an opportunity for social negotiation' (Abma op. cit.:170, 176). Alternative versions also -- explicitly or implicitly -- suggest different lines of reflection and action.

What recommendations for action can we draw from Thernstrom's analysis? Her sharp criticism of Harvard's student advisory services and mental care clearly indicate scope for improvement. This paper concurs with Thernstrom on the need to strengthen the formal provision of support services, but places primary emphasis on the far wider, more amorphous and informal network of relations between peers. Such networks contributed to healing in the case I cited from the Institute of Social Studies (3.3, 7.2), but to crisis and death for Sinedu. These different outcomes, I argue, derive from the forms of multiculturalism that typify the two institutions and the structural factors that underpin

these -- with the Institute offering 'education adapted to international needs', and Harvard providing 'national education to which foreigners have access' within a globally dominant nation.

The alternative reading of events presented here tries to persuade Harvard and American society to reflect on their attitudes to 'difference'. Stories can 'stimulate... self-reflection and imagination' and 'are powerful tools in change' (op. cit.:193, 191). Harvard's 'silences... may indicate topics that are taboo or unspeakable' (Rogers et al op. cit.:91), but 'what might be unsaid, unsayable, and even unspeakable at one point... may become sayable at a later point' (ibid:104).

This paper treats 'Harvard University' as a protagonist, not an antagonist. Harvard is a complex institution. Would Sinedu have fared better as a student there had she been enrolled in a subject that is less ruthlessly competitive than pre-medical biology (Thernstrom op. cit.:92-3) -- in the social sciences, for example, or the humanities? Blaney and Inayatullah discourage presentations of global actors as 'homogenous' and 'fixed,' and use Nandy's work to advocate viewing such actors as 'layered..., comprising "different levels or parts" or, perhaps, dominant and recessive moments' (op. cit.:38). Sinedu's story should be balanced with detailed portraits of Third World students who survive or thrive on the same campus where Sinedu struggled and sank. We similarly need to know more about the suicides that took place at the Institute of Social Studies.

The case of the Institute was therefore not put forward to suggest that Third World students should study abroad only in hothouses that are relatively insulated from host societies in the First World. The Institute increasingly seeks further links to the society around, notably with the Dutch universities, but can lessons be learned on the other side as well? How are 'conversations of cultures in international society' to be encouraged within conventional institutions of higher learning in the First World? How can 'national education to which foreigners have access' be combined with 'education to meet international needs'? How can First World students develop cultural sensitivity and become international students in their own countries, through contact with peers from abroad? How can wandering scholars from the Third World attain self-esteem and personhood in their own right?

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