Culture, Gender, Power and Conflict in Melanie Thernstrom's *Halfway Heaven: Diary of a Harvard Murder*

Nancy McCormack

In 1995, a murder/suicide took place at the Dunster House Residence at Harvard University on the last day of Spring exams. Sinedu Tadesse, an Ethiopian student, stabbed her roommate of two years, Vietnamese Trang Phuong Ho, 45 times before hanging herself. What made this event unusual was not just the fact that two Harvard students were involved, or two women, or indeed two very different cultures (three if you include the United States). Rather, what was fascinating about this tragic happening was that the threads of power, culture, and gender were interwoven in it – so much so that Melanie Thernstrom, a Harvard graduate and the reporter who conducted an in depth investigation into the matter, found herself at the end of her investigation wondering, "What is the story? Is the 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?"[1]

Thernstrom's account, entitled *Halfway Heaven: Diary of a Harvard Murder* offers no conclusive answer, but her investigation provides lessons that are humbling to those interested in the intersection of power, gender, and culture in the dispute resolution field. For example, as Thernstrom explores what might have led Sinedu to kill her roommate, she discovers that Sinedu's mother believes envy might have been the cause. This idea, she says, "dates far back in Ethiopian culture, but it was reinforced by a communist regime which levelled everyone to poverty and persecuted and killed those who were better off. Even Ethiopians who do not specifically believe in witchcraft have a general superstitiousness of *kinat*—being too much in people's eyes," which will make bad things happen.[2] Sinedu's mother expresses this sentiment during her interview with Thernstrom and comments that a person who wins a scholarship to Harvard is just the sort of person who is "too much in people's eyes" and could attract a hex – something that might have been responsible for the tragedy.

In contrast to the Ethiopian theories, some of the members at Trang's Buddhist temple believe the tragedy sprang from the fact that Trang and Sinedu must have known each other in a previous life. The story makes no sense otherwise. As one woman explains to Thernstrom,

[1] Melanie Thernstrom, *Halfway Heaven: Diary of a Harvard Murder*, New York: Plume, 1998, 9. [hereinafter Thernstrom].
[2]Ibid, 50.

"Trang must have done something very wrong to Sinedu to have died in such a way." Since the Buddha is always fair, the murder/suicide, she concludes, is clearly a way of "balancing out"[3] the sins of a previous life.

Meanwhile, members of the African Students Association also wonder about the murder, but their concern is about how Sinedu's actions will reflect on other African students. Instructively, they tell Thernstrom they are afraid "the incident will fuel racism and reinforce the stereotype of Asians as the 'good minority' and blacks as the bad, destructive one."[4]

These examples indicate the danger of viewing culture and its intersection with conflict, as theorists have tended to do in the past, as "superficial group differences" that are "evenly distributed across members of the group…as though [culture] were synonymous with 'custom' and 'tradition' and, finally, as if it were impervious to change through time."[5] On the contrary, in "Conflict Resolution in Intercultural Settings,"[6] Kevin Avruch and Peter W. Black assert the role of culture in conflict should, instead, arise "from a conception of social life in which culture is seen to be a fundamental feature of human consciousness, the *sine qua non* of being human." This paper will look at Thernstrom's account of the Harvard murder/suicide in the context of some of the literature in the dispute resolution field, with particular emphasis on Avruch and Black's "Conflict Resolution in Intercultural Settings." It will explore how culture, gender, language, and power can shape conflict in a seemingly endless variety of ways and how it can lead even those most familiar with events to ask, ultimately, "What is the story?"

Culture

In "Conflict Resolution in Intercultural Settings," Avruch and Black explain that "sets of understandings about conflict held by the people involved in a dispute are crucially important."[7] They note that, in the past, theorists and practitioners who have dealt with culture and its relation to conflict resolution have relegated culture to the background, treating it as something that masks a fundamental underlying human nature common to all individuals. Culture for Avruch and Black, however, is not merely a superficial adornment or something that predicts behaviour; instead, it is a "fundamental feature of human consciousness"[8] and acts as a "perception-shaping lens"[9] for all action including conflict.

---

[3]Ibid, 213.
[4] Ibid, 18.
[5] Ibid, 131-132.
[6] In Dennis J. Sandole and Hugo van der Merwe (eds.) *Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice: Integration and Application*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993. [hereinafter Avruch and Black].
[7]Ibid, 132.
[8]Ibid
[9]Ibid

Certainly, this concept of culture is clear in Thernstrom's account of the Harvard murder/suicide. While Thernstrom does not attempt nor even claim it is possible to completely separate the threads of culture from those of identity and personal history, she does offer information on the girls, gleaned from her interviews with friends, family, and others who knew them, which provides some insight into the "grammar" each girl used to interpret and make sense of the world.

As Thernstrom relates, Sinedu's own understanding of conflict was, in part, the result of having been raised in a tribal society. Ethiopians have a history of trusting and preferring to deal with members of their own tribe as opposed to members of another tribe.[10] Indeed, Ethiopian culture is similar in certain respects to the middle-eastern cultural group discussed by Mohammed Abu-Nimer in "Conflict Resolution Approaches: Western and Middle Eastern Lessons and Possibilities."[11] In Ethiopia, as in Abu-Nimer's middle-eastern community, the intervention of outsiders in local or family matters is usually not sought and not welcome.[12] When members of a particular family require assistance, they generally consult with an elder in their family. Also, the dominant values that are effective and accepted by the parties (honor, shame, dignity, and one's role vis-à-vis one's community and family) are quite different from those typically brought into play in a Western context.[13] Ethiopians have no regard for rugged individualism; instead, individuals define themselves according to family and tribe.[14]

In addition to traditional tribal culture, certain Ethiopian cultural characteristics have developed in response to years of poverty, starvation, and repressive and violent regimes. Sinedu's family were Amharas from Menz – part of the ethnic group that formed the ruling class under the Emperor Haile Selassie. Shortly before Sinedu's birth, however, the Military Council or Derg, made up of about 120 members of the armed forces and police, came to power. By the time Sinedu was two, the "Red Terror" in Ethiopia was underway, which would ultimately result in the deaths of 30,000 people and in the disappearance and torture of massive numbers of Ethiopians with the educated elite as one of the primary targets. Indeed, it was not out of the ordinary for children, during Sinedu's youth, to make their way to school with bodies lying in the streets.

Ethiopia, accordingly, has one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world, and the majority of children do not attend school. Of those who do attend primary school, most sit on dirt floors, 100 to a class, without books or supplies. While Sinedu was a student in Ethiopia,

[10] Thernstrom, supra note 1, 46.
[11] Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 1996, 5(1), 35 [hereinafter Abu-Nimer].
[12] Thernstrom, supra note 1, 191
[13] Abu-Nimer, supra note 11.
[14] Thernstrom, supra note 1, 85.

every male teacher at her school had been jailed during the Derg period[15] and certain children at the school bore permanent injuries as a result of shootings. Sinedu's family also suffered during this time. When Sinedu was seven, her father was imprisoned for two years without trial on suspicion he was a sympathizer with the rebels. The year he was released, half a million Ethiopians died of starvation.[16]

Ethiopians, who had traditionally been paranoid about outsiders, now found that, during the Derg regime, they could no longer trust neighbours, friends, and servants as they betrayed one another to the secret police. Certainly, the Derg rule had much to do with the "shyness [and] secrecy collectively in the culture," [17] as a counsellor at Sinedu's Ethiopian school noted, as well as the national "suppression of personal emotions."[18] Years of starvation, poverty, and terror had placed an emphasis on physical survival that left little room for a "psychological culture." Nor did Ethiopians share their problems with one another. As a classmate of Sinedu's noted, "All Ethiopians have hardship in common…We don't think about it as something to talk about."[19]

In "Conflict and Power: An Interdisciplinary Review and Analysis of the Literature,"[20] Juliana Birkhoff explains that social theorists such as Erik Erikson and George Herbert Mead suggest individuals define or identify themselves in the context of their membership in social groups. Certainly, before coming to America, Sinedu's identity was completely enmeshed with that of her family and her school. An Ethiopian schoolmate of Sinedu's notes that, at home, Sinedu came from a strict family and, as a result, was not encouraged to socialize. Instead, she was a superior student and this became "the basis on which she received admiration. In Ethiopia, family is like a blanket and then you come to the States and you're forced to confront your identity for the first time and you become unsure of yourself."[21]

At Harvard, Sinedu also found herself alone for one of the first times in her life. Another foreign student who knew her remarked that Sinedu

> …seemed starved to talk about Ethiopia. She would talk a lot about Ethiopian customs—how she had been the shining star of her high school and there was a lot of expectation upon her. When you're a foreign student, you come to terms with the fact that people aren't interested in your culture. People think of

[15] Ibid, 40.
[16]Ibid
[17]Ibid
[18] Ibid, 39.
[19] Ibid, 44
[20] George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, 1996. [unpublished] [hereinafter Birkhoff]
[21] Thernstrom, supra note 1, 42.

> 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 tidbits.[22]

Sinedu soon realized that, without the benefit of a wealthy and "exotic" third world background, other students were not interested in hearing about Ethiopia.

Unable to connect with American students, she also had difficulty making friends with other international students. There is no international students' house at Harvard. Indeed, Harvard has discouraged any attempt to create one because students are expected to assimilate.[23] Although there was an African Students Association on campus, this did not help Sinedu. Traditionally, Ethiopians have not identified "with other Africans with whom they don't share a language, common history or culture any more than Americans do with Mexicans." As Thernstrom notes:

> Some Ethiopians actually take offense as being referred to as African, saying, 'Not African, Ethiopian.' They feel pushed toward the larger African-American community, which they feel their culture is radically different from, and there aren't enough Ethiopians at most colleges to form their own community. For the first time in their lives, many Ethiopians find racial identity has been thrust upon them. One Ethiopian-American student tells me how she would never fill out forms inquiring about ethnic origins, until someone in the financial aid office explained to her that her scholarship was dependent on her classification as a minority. Most Ethiopians have never thought of themselves as black: in Ethiopia they are Amharic, Tigrayan, or Oromo. Racism is something Ethiopians experience for the first time in America. Ethiopians take strong national pride in belonging to the only African country never to be colonized by whites.[24]

Although Sinedu was not emotionally close to her first roommate in her freshman year at Harvard, she nonetheless felt an enormous sense of rejection when that roommate told her she had found someone other than Sinedu to room with during second year. At that point, Trang Phuong Ho, a Vietnamese student whom Sinedu had met in a science class, agreed to room with Sinedu for the second year.

Conflict

---

[22] Ibid, 89.
[23] Ibid
[24] Ibid

Trang's story was, in the beginning, not much different on the surface from that of Sinedu's, according the Thernstrom. Trang was born in Vietnam, five months before Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese, and shortly before her parents were placed in re-education camps. After a harrowing childhood in Vietnam, she escaped at the age of 10 with her father and sister, leaving behind her mother and another sister. In the US, the family was impoverished but optimistic – the girls were enrolled in public school and Trang became heavily involved in volunteering and community work. She also excelled academically and was one of the very few students from her school to even get a scholarship to Harvard, "this beautiful place, which was halfway heaven."[25]

At Harvard, however, Sinedu and Trang had adjusted quite differently. Trang did better academically and had an active social life. Unlike the Ethiopian students, the Vietnamese students had a large, thriving association. Trang's mother and little sister, who had also managed to emmigrate from Vietnam, lived nearby. Trang spent a great deal of her time visiting her family and helping them adjust to their new country. The Vietnamese also have a culture of assisting recent immigrants, and Trang had met her best friend, a young woman named Thao, in this way.

Avruch and Black note when conflict is intercultural and the parties to a dispute come from different cultures, "one cannot presume that all crucial understandings are shared among them. Their respective ethnotheories, the notions of the root causes of conflict, and ethnopraxes, the local acceptable techniques for resolving conflicts, may differ one from another in significant ways."[26] Certainly, this was the case with the conflict that arose between Sinedu and Trang. Although the first year they roomed together had been somewhat rocky, Trang reluctantly agreed to room with Sinedu again in the third year. It was during this year their problems began in earnest. Sinedu changed from being an overly tidy and obsessive roommate in second year to an alarmingly messy and dirty one in third year. She complained to Trang that she never spent time with her and became uncooperative, refusing to pass along phone messages or share class notes.

In response, Trang avoided hanging around the dorm room even more. She never dreamt of confronting Sinedu with the problems in their relationship. As a Vietnamese friend explained, "she kept it all to herself. That's the Vietnamese way."[27] Toward the end of the year, Trang told Sinedu that in her fourth year she had decided to live with some other people. This meant Sinedu would have to "float" – a status which, at Harvard, was associated with a sense of failure and carried the stigma that no one wanted to live with you.

---

[25] Ibid, 206.
[26] Avruch and Black, supra note 6, 133.
[27] Thernstrom, supra note 1, 110.

Trang had attempted to break the news as gently as possible. When Sinedu wrote her a letter pleading with her to reconsider, Trang wrote back "using words like 'respect,' which she knew would make sense to Sinedu."[28] It was of no use; after the letter Sinedu stopped speaking to Trang. As Thernstrom explains:

> The slight is an important concept in Ethiopian culture. Ethiopians say they are often struck by how Americans are always tossing off the words 'Oh, I'm sorry.' In Ethiopia slights are grave offenses, difficult to set right. People rarely attempt to apologize directly to each other, but instead negotiate through a third person—often an elder. The ancient tradition of revenge—*tickat*, or bloodletting—still exists in the countryside: a Capulet and Montague tradition which can be responsible for the annihilation of entire families.[29]

In "The Relevance of Culture for the Study of Political Psychology and Ethnic Conflict,"[30] Marc Howard Ross notes that:

> Culture orders political priorities…meaning it defines the symbolic and material objects people consider valuable and worth fighting over, the contexts in which such disputes occur, and the rules (both formal and informal) by which politics takes place and who participates in it.[31]

Ross' statement also has relevance for disputes among individuals. For instance, in this case, Trang had written the letter to mollify Sinedu. "Our living habits are different," Trang wrote, "I don't want to belabor this point."[32] For Sinedu, however, Trang's rejection was so great, a written response to it was totally inadequate. As she wrote in her diary, "The bad way out I see is suicide & the good way out killing, savoring their fear & then suicide."[33] For Sinedu, the proper response involved revenge.

Language

[28]Ibid, 112.
[29]Ibid, 114
[30] Marc Howard Ross, *Political Psychology* 299, 1992, 18(2). [hereinafter Ross]
[31]Ibid, 302.
[32] Thernstrom, supra note 1, 112.
[33] Ibid, 114.

Avruch and Black note that "intercultural encounters take place in shared linguistic settings" and "shared language can fool the parties into thinking much else, or all else, is shared as well."[34] Certainly, Ethiopia provides a good example of this. As Thernstrom explains"

> [A] central metaphor of Amharic culture is a type of ancient poetry, often taught in monasteries, called *sem imma wok* (wax and gold). The image is taken from the technique used to fashion gold figures, in which a wax model is made and then covered in wet clay. When the clay is fired, the wax runs out in a small hole. Molten gold is then poured through the hole into the cast, and when it sets, the mold is broken to reveal the figure. In the poetry, *sem imma wok*, the outer meaning of the words conceals an inner true and often opposite meaning. Ethiopians are said to use the technique in their daily speech, as well. For example, when Ethiopians want to insult one another, they sometimes conceal their meaning in the form of an overt compliment.[35]

This particular use of language and its ideology of secrecy were reinforced in Ethiopia by the terror of the Derg regime.

Shortly before the murder/suicide, Sinedu sent a picture of herself to *The Harvard Crimson* along with a note that read, "KEEP this picture. There will soon be a very juicy story involving the person in this picture." On the outside of the envelope, she typed 'IMPORTANT.'" Newspaper staff who received the note believed it to be a prank, but after the murder, some interpreted it as "a cry for help." Ethiopians, on the other hand, who heard about the note were suspicious as the message itself was completely un-Ethiopian and could only be interpreted, they felt, as a kind of *sem imma wok* with a much different undertone.

Avruch and Black explain "our own culture seems to us transparent and the world seen through it seems to us veridical, simply the way things are. A glimpse of the world through another culture (one possible result of an intercultural encounter) presents us with areas of opacity, things we cannot see through clearly."[36] Sinedu's diaries, written almost entirely in English, provide a good example of this type of opacity.

There is, indeed, no tradition of diary keeping in Ethiopia and, perhaps more importantly, no equivalent for certain English words. For example, one can say "sad" in Amharic, but there is no equivalent of the word "depressed." An Ethiopian interviewed by Thernstrom tells her that he had never heard of depression before he came to America and never thought much about self-fulfillment. "Happiness is not an Ethiopian value," he explains, "The essence of happiness has to do with freedom of choice and pursuing your own desires.

[34] Avruch and Black, supra note 6, 132.
[35] Thernstrom, supra note 1, 45.
[36] Avruch and Black, supra note 6, 133.

Ethiopians are supposed to be responsible; that is the highest value. Sinedu took this sense of responsibility to a higher degree."[37]

Certainly, part of this sense of responsibility manifested itself in Sinedu's diary keeping – an attempt to deal with the opacity of American life. Her diaries take the form of spiral notebooks with varying titles including: "My Small Book of Social Rules," "The Social Problems I Faced," "Wisdom," "Amazing Events and How I Could Have Solved Them," "Set Your Priorities," "2d Quarter," "There Are Some Strict," "Depression," and "Stress."[38] As Thernstrom explains, "These notebooks consist primarily of hundreds of meticulous numbered instructions—sometimes in Q and A format—in which she tries to set down the rules of American social life." On the first page of her notebook "Wisdom," Sinedu writes "there are some strict rules" that govern social life and it is necessary to figure these out "as tools to manipulate your social life." The language she uses is "odd, obsessive, and at moments imaginative, the deviations from standard English"[39] numerous.

As if reaching back to cultural roots, Sinedu addresses herself in the second or third person, often using two voices – the first of a child or pupil whom she calls "Baby" and the second of an elder or teacher who is both babying and berating. Much of the berating has to do with North American rules of etiquette. For example, she chides herself for forgetting to put a napkin in her lap at a dinner party (Ethiopians eat with their hands) and writes that she must have seemed a "barbarian"[40] to her dinner companions. She develops a rule for herself that involves focusing on conversation rather than eating when she is out with people, but then revises this rule later on, afraid she will make others feel "greedy and jungle-like."[41] She reminds herself to look others in the eye when having a conversation and to be "a fresh pink rose in a sunny garden."[42] Her goal, she writes is to be more like a "lollipop" and less like a "cooked asparagus."[43]

Although Sinedu is technically proficient at English, Thernstrom indicates "in her diaries the prose seems adapted to her internal world. Her language is both overly concrete and overly abstract, in a way that seems not to reflect so much a poverty of language as one of mind – as if, while she is trying desperately to interpret her world, she is looking through the wrong end of the telescope and the picture that emerges is distant and distorted – a distance she is aware of but unable to readjust."[44]

---

[37] Thernstrom, supra note 1, 43.
[38]Ibid, 95
[39]Ibid
[40] Ibid, 96.
[41]Ibid
[42]Ibid
[43]Ibid
[44] Ibid, 186.

In John Paul Lederach's *Preparing for Peace*,[45] he notes "many words or phrases can be identified that capture metaphoric images and insights directly related to the experience of conflict. Language is…a window into how people organize both their understanding and expression of conflict, often in keeping with cultural patterns and ways of operating."[46] For example, the devil plays a central role in Ethiopian popular culture, so much so that a popular Amharic saying for a quarrel is, "The devil came between us."[47] This is reflected in the language Sinedu uses in a letter she writes to a friend of Trang's shortly before the murder – a letter she never sends. In the letter, Sinedu discusses the "evil" that has come between herself and Trang and explains that living with Trang is like "burning in hell."[48]

Gender

Both Sinedu and Trang's cultural backgrounds involve patriarchal societies. Trang's father believed "girls should be studious and obedient and not go out and have a social life"[49] and Trang obeyed this as she was growing up. Even at university, Trang continued to believe she needed to focus on her school work rather than dating and that sex outside of marriage was wrong.

If such traditional gender roles were harmful, however, it was Sinedu who was most affected at Harvard. In Ethiopia, female scholarship students are not encouraged to use the first person or to express themselves in class. Girls may not wear shorts in gym for fear of immodesty. Indeed, one teacher noted that 95% of parents wanted their daughters to be "not verbally opinionated, modest in clothing, gestures, behaviors and tone of voice, courteous, demure, doesn't stand out in the crowd, follows rules, asks no questions."[50] Sinedu did well in a system that relied on memorization and rote learning[51] and did not have the experience of competing against students with a range of academic abilities. At Harvard, where class participation is mandatory and graded,[52] Sinedu found herself struggling.

In the matter of gender roles, however, it was the variety of responses to the murder/suicide that were most instructive. Several theories regarding the event circulated on campus. The first was that the girls had been lesbians. This was primarily based on the news that Trang and her best friend, Thao, were sharing a bed (they were actually sleeping head to

[45] John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995.
[46] Ibid, 75-76.
[47] Thernstrom, supra note 1, 49.
[48] Ibid, 118.
[49] Ibid, 67.
[50] Ibid, 38.
[51] Ibid, 91
[52] Ibid, 93.

toe – a traditional Southeast Asian way for women to sleep together) at the time of the murder. Thao had awoken to find Sinedu bending over Trang, stabbing her. Thao herself had been cut badly in an attempt to stop the murder – she had then fled the room in order to find help. Sinedu bolted the door behind her. Later, in addition to grieving for her friend and agonizing over her decision to leave the room and run for help, Thao was dismayed to learn their sleeping arrangement had been misinterpreted. As Thernstrom relates, "all over Southeast Asia women share beds and are physically affectionate. Trang used to tell Thao, 'We can't hold hands when we're walking down the street—we're in America now.'"[53]

But the lesbian theory had its proponents in Ethiopia, too. Thernstrom's interviews conducted among people who lived in Sinedu's region revealed it was one of two main theories about the murder – either Sinedu was a lesbian or/and she was possessed by spirits. "If she was a lesbian," people told Thernstrom in hushed tones, "then she did the right thing to kill herself and the object of her shame. Ethiopian women stress that there are no lesbians in Ethiopia: it is a perversity of Western culture which, if Sinedu had fallen into, would have shattered her native self beyond repair."[54] Thernstrom notes female sexuality is so feared in Ethiopia that most women have their genitals ritually mutilated so they never experience orgasm. Lesbianism, accordingly, is seen as a form of spirit possession and is dealt with by stoning.

Another reason why the Ethiopians interviewed by Thernstrom believed the girls might have been lesbians is that although tribal hatred and revenge killings in Ethiopia are traditional, they are done by men rather than women – particularly stabbings. "Stabbing is a male-identified method of killing in Ethiopia," Thernstrom notes, "the kind a man might enact on a woman he has caught *in flagrante delicto.* Female identified methods of murder are witchcraft or poison."[55]

Curiously enough, Thernstrom discovers Americans had, possibly, even more difficulty in coming to terms with the murder/suicide. As a result, Sinedu was rarely referred to 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 or where the evil lay. In a small campus service of "Prayers and Remembrances" in which neither girl was referred to by name, the Reverend Peter Gomes, the university minister, said only, "For all that was good in these girls, Lord bless them, for the forces of evil

[53] Ibid, 123.
[54] Ibid, 48.
[55] Ibid, 196.

> beyond their control, Lord forgive them. Lord, heal, as well, the rupture the evil has made in our hearts.[56]

The fact that the occurrence was not according to an acceptable Western stereotype – that two young women, rather than men, were involved in this type of brutality is most mystifying. As the Reverend Peter Gomes concludes his prayer: "words fail us, analysis runs cold."[57]

Power

In "Conflict and Power: An Interdisciplinary Review and Analysis of the Literature," Juliana Birkhoff comments "Power is one of the most understudied and least understood conflict phenomena, yet it relates significantly to how we comprehend and handle conflicts."[58] Certainly power figured prominently in the Harvard suicide/murder. As Thernstrom discovered during her interviews, students from overpopulated third world countries are used to having plenty of people around them. When these students come to the United States, the loneliness can be terrible, and in Sinedu's diaries, the image of an empty room is a leitmotif to which she returns again and again.[59]

Early on in Sinedu's relationship with Trang, Trang's connection with others – her friends, her family, and the Vietnamese students' association – meant Sinedu found herself much more desperate for Trang's companionship than Trang for hers. Indeed, Sinedu's diaries acknowledge a growing power imbalance, particularly as Trang spends more time away from her.

Bernard Mayer, in "The Dynamics of Power in Mediation and Negotiation,"[60] notes theorists who study power in this context have debated whether power should be equated with the "ability of one side to inflict more damage to the other than it receives in return"[61] or whether it has more to do with the "ability to influence others."[62] That Sinedu clearly swings between these two extremes can be seen in her books of rules. According to Thernstrom, Sinedu "decides she can at least try to recoup her 'power' in relation to Trang. In one rule, she declares that if Trang borrows her science textbooks, then in return she, Sinedu, has a right to use anything Trang owns freely and that, if Trang 'grunts' about it, Sinedu should remind her

---

[56]Ibid, 6-7.
[57]Ibid
[58] Birkhoff, supra note 20, 1.
[59] Thernstrom, supra note 1 at 108.
[60] In C.W. Moore (ed.) *Practical Strategies for Phases of Mediation.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987. [hereinafter Mayer]
[61]Ibid, 77.
[62]Ibid

that whatever she is using is equal to the cost of Sinedu's books. In another rule, she decides perhaps she shouldn't lend her any textbooks at all."[63] She also becomes increasingly hostile to Trang's friends and invents another rule in which Trang's friends must ask for her permission as well as Trang's to enter their room. As Sinedu writes in her diary, "Maybe you want people to know you're there, even in hatred."[64]

Sinedu's diaries also reveal she feels herself powerless to make friends of her own. On a visit to her brother at Dartmouth, she breaks down, uncharacteristically, and cries when he appears anxious for her to return to Harvard. She confesses to her brother she has no friends on campus. She then writes in her diary that she didn't want to reveal "the image of a lonely girl, but I know that is the truth…There is no power that lies in me that I could use however I want to. I am unable to make friends. There is no magic I control."[65]

Thernstrom's research indicates that, from a Western perspective,

> Homicide/suicide occupies a so-called epidemiological domain, different from either homicide or suicide. Careful planning and a very short time span between the killing of the other and self reveals that homicide/suicide is conceived of as a unified plan, in which neither act is incidental to the other. Homicide/suicide differs sociologically from simple homicide in that it is primarily "about" a powerful relationship—ordinarily a romantic or parenting relationship.[66]

Clearly, power was a key factor in the girls' relationship, as Thernstrom observes, and Sinedu decided to seize the one absolute power a human ever has over another – the power to kill.[67] Indeed, Thao, Trang's best friend, tells Thernstrom, when she awoke to find Sinedu standing over Trang, she remembered seeing her "stabbing [Trang] silently with a huge knife and a fixed, glazed expression—'intent, like she really knew what she was doing.'"[68]

This whole matter of power was also seen very clearly in Harvard's response to the murder/suicide. There are many sources of power, according to Mayer, one of the first of which is formal authority or "the power that derives from a formal position within a structure that confers certain decision-making prerogatives."[69] Thernstrom points out, ironically, that

---

[63] Thernstrom, supra note 1, 109
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid, 100.
[66] Ibid, 195.
[67] Ibid, 187.
[68] Ibid, 123.
[69] Mayer, supra note 60, 78.

Harvard's operating budget is $1.4 billion a year – the same as the entire budget of the Ethiopian government.[70] Its endowments are the largest in the country, yet its need for money is enormous.

During the course of her investigation, Harvard, according to Thernstrom, was much more interested in the "spin" given to the tragedy than in determining the truth underlying the event. The university, Thernstrom comments, chose to propagate the idea that the students did not appear to have any problems and so the murder/suicide is an inexplicable mystery.[71] Not surprisingly, Harvard has 11 full-time lawyers.

Harvard also made its power felt in terms of those reporters covering the story. In the early days after the murder, the university held a press conference where it gave very little information. Harvard officials then asked the press to leave, but invited Harvard students and faculty to stay. As a recent alumnae, Thernstrom decided to stay and described it as "a uniquely Harvard moment—the ousting of outsiders…a sense of excited secrecy tightens the audience, as if officials will reveal the mystery to us, the ones who deserve to know."[72]

No further information was revealed, however. Indeed, Thernstrom realized the university had sent word to its students and faculty that it did not want anyone from Harvard talking about the murder. Thernstrom describes the ensuing power struggle as the university drew a line between "insiders" and "outsiders" and accused her of misusing her insider status to find out information.[73] Harvard threatened to take "action" against her, and tutors were told not to talk to reporters or face being fired.[74] The Cambridge police were given so little cooperation they finally decided to leave the matter to the Harvard police. One Dean explained to Thernstrom Harvard does not want outsiders involved while it is conducting its own internal investigation. Thernstrom asked who the recipients of that information will ultimately be: "The press? Of course not. The students? That would be inappropriate. The families? That might cause them pain."[75] In the end, she got no cooperation from the institution. The university went so far as to advise Trang's family and friends not to speak to the media lest they be manipulated. As a friend of Trang's observes, "Who is manipulating who[m]? They just want Trang to be forgotten."[76]

---

[70]Thernstrom, supra note 1 at 133.
[71]Ibid, 136.
[72]Ibid, 11.
[73]Ibid, 140.
[74]Ibid, 142.
[75]Ibid, 130.
[76]Ibid, 212.

ISSN: 1522-211X | www.trinstitute.org/ojpcr/5_1mccormack.htm

Conclusion

In "The Relevance of Culture for the Study of Political Psychology and Ethnic Conflict," Marc Howard Ross notes "In cross-cultural encounters people most often make sense of another group's behaviour—attribute motives to them—by drawing on their own cultural worldview."[77] Thernstrom struggled with this throughout her investigation. In 1992, Thernstrom herself was studying at Harvard and was also selecting students to take part in a seminar on autobiographical writing. One of the students who applied and who was not selected to take part was Sinedu. She came to Thernstrom and asked Thernstrom to change her mind. Sinedu explained "In Ethiopia where I come from I have seen terrible violence and poverty and things no one would understand."[78] Thernstrom decided impatiently that Sinedu is another rich Harvard student from the third world who "speak[s] of the suffering of their countrymen and turn[s] out to be royalty."[79] This was Thernstrom's only encounter with Sinedu, but one which she remembered vividly while investigating the Harvard murder. Her own sense of guilt is palpable.

Thernstrom's investigation ultimately leaves as many questions unanswered as answered. "What is the story?" she asks. Is it about culture and identity? Is it about a powerful and uncaring institution? Is it about the personal relationship between two women? Or is it a "story of psychopathology and mental illness?"[80] Concerning the latter, Thernstrom discovered that if Sinedu's problems were the result of depression, culture also might have played a key role in a misdiagnosis. She explains "Foreign students are often at risk for undertreatment because mental disorders may be misinterpreted as assimilation problems, clinical depression or loneliness and character pathology as traits of a foreign culture…in a time in which schools have increasingly large foreign student populations, their mental health services need to have counselors who are 'not just cross-culturally sensitive, but cross-culturally competent.'"[81] During the course of her investigation, Thernstrom discovered that Sinedu did actually visit one of the clinics on campus, but there is no evidence that any of her needs were met.

Thernstrom's *Halfway Heaven* is a reminder the threads of power, culture, language, and gender can all find themselves interwoven in conflict's tapestry, and exploring and making sense of these can be a monumental task. It also reminds us we each have a cultural grammar with which we make sense of the world and a cultural "lens" through which we perceive the world. As Avruch and Black remind us, in the area of conflict, not only is meticulous analysis

[77] Ross, supra note 30, 302.
[78] Thernstrom, supra note 1, 22.
[79] Ibid
[80] Ibid, 9.
[81] Ibid, 160.

necessary, but "due caution and hesitancy and are called for, precisely because in the real world the stakes are so high."[82]

***Nancy McCormack** is a graduate of the University of Toronto law school and holds an LL.M from Osgoode Hall law school, York University.*

[82] Avruch and Black, supra note 6, 141.