SO FAR AND YET SO NEAR
Present-Day Transnational Families

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Through the expansion and development of communication technologies, transnational families are presently experiencing that they are close despite the great geographical distances between them. On the basis of a qualitative study with transnational families, I show that this virtual closeness at a distance brings out new practices of familiarity, on the one hand, but also produces conflicts and dilemmas, on the other. While the new technologies of closeness enable forms of everyday interactions over great distances, the compression of time and space does not take place in a vacuum. Instead, family members are positioned at interfaces of structures of difference and inequality, which decisively influence access to and use of the new technologies and which have far-reaching consequences for the shaping of transnational family configurations.[1]

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In his novel *A Tale of Love and Darkness* ([2002]2004), Israeli author Amos Oz described a recurring scene from his childhood in Jerusalem in the 1940s, vividly bringing back the reality of that time of a seemingly insurmountable distance, one which today seems like a stone's throw – that is, the distance between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. In minute detail he described how his parents prepared for these telephone conversations that took place every few months with relatives in Tel Aviv. The call was first announced by letter, precisely fixing date and time, and then he and his parents would gather at the set time at the nearby pharmacy.

[T]he conversation went something like this: ...
"Yes, Arieh, hallo, it's Tsvi here, how are you?"
"Everything is fine here. We're speaking from the

pharmacy."
"So are we. What's new?"
"Nothing new here. How about at your end, Tsvi? Tell us how it's going."
"Everything is OK. Nothing special to report. We're all well."
"No news is good news. There's no news here either. We're all fine. How about you?"
"We're fine too." ...
And then the same thing all over again. How are you? What's new? ...
And that was the whole conversation.
(Oz [2002]2004: 11)

Descriptions like this, in which the elaborate preparations for the telephone calls assumed the character of a ritual that was at least as significant as the

conversation itself, were also common in interviews of our research project with families that became transnational through the labour migration of part of the family in the 1960s and which report of how arduous and protracted efforts had been in the past to maintain contact over spatial distances.[2] With the mass expansion and rapid development of tele-communication technologies since the 1990s a fundamental shift can be observed, especially with respect to the ways people communicate over a dis-tance. Whereas past generations commonly experi-enced that it could take months for news to reach them from far away, now family networks spread out over great distances can maintain regular and immediate contact with each other with the help of new technologies. Inexpensive telephone charges, mobile telephones, and the Internet have facilitated the rapid transfer of money, goods, and information, giving the impression that spatial barriers are stead-ily disappearing. Arjun Appadurai observed that to-day's world is characterized essentially by "objects in motion … ideas and ideologies, people and goods, images and messages, technologies and techniques" (Appadurai 2001: 5). This seems to apply to the real-ity of transnational families in a special way, includ-ing the everyday experience of "time-space com-pression" (Harvey 1990: 240–242) as a result of the use of new technologies.

In the following I will examine the consequences of this shift and ask how families create familiar-ity across great distances. Within this context it is important to discuss the limits of the concept of family, among the crucial elements of which is the experience of shared time at a common location – in other words, spatial proximity and direct com-munity. My empirical basis is a qualitative study of families whose transnational character developed in the 1950s and 1960s, and after 1990, within the scope of labour migration to Germany and Austria. Using selected cases from this sample I would like to show that the creation of familiarity in the families we studied is characterized by a tension involving a number of overlapping processes. For present-day transnational families the change in time-space or-ganizational patterns is tied to the specific experi-

ence of feeling close also over great distances. This virtual closeness despite physical distance brings forth new practices that allow spatially fragmented families to create forms of everyday togetherness, thereby serving to increase the significance of famil-iarity as a value, longing, and myth, and allowing it in fact to be experienced and lived at times in vari-ous casual structures. Although this development appears at first glance to facilitate the project of liv-ing as a transnational family, upon closer scrutiny it becomes apparent that the compression of space and time can also bring out conflicts and dilem-mas for family members. For one thing, members of transnational families are confronted with various problems deriving from the situation that increased options for accessibility also lead to increased ex-pectations of being accessible. Furthermore, trans-national communication does not take place in a vacuum. Family members are instead positioned at interfaces of structures based on difference and inequality that decisively influence access to and use of the new technologies. These complex, asym-metrical relations with respect to gender, ethnic-ity, nationality, and age develop their own specific influence within the context of migration regimes, whose mechanisms of incorporation and restric-tive policies have consequences for the shaping of transnational family configurations. With respect to the families in our sample, the "mobility order" (Rogers 2004: 174) of the present European migra-tion regime gains special significance in this context. The increasingly restrictive migration policies of the European Union, in particular Germany and Aus-tria, are feminizing migratory movements, which produces a paradoxical experience as it were for fe-male family members: apparently *unlimited* in their geographic mobility, they confront the *limitations* of the national migration regime, which in most cases allow them only unofficial and illegalized paths to the West (see article by Hess).

After a brief survey of the present state of research on transnational families, two cases from the sam-ple shall serve to illustrate some of the problems and structural dilemmas that are connected to the experience of virtual proximity at a distance. Both

of these examples are from a corpus of twenty-five families, with whose members – that is, parents and their (usually) grown children – biographical narrative interviews (Apitzsch 2003; Schütze 1983) were conducted. Corresponding to the labour recruitment agreements of the 1960s, families from Italy, Greece, Turkey, and the former Yugoslavia were selected. Also, families largely from Eastern Europe were interviewed, whose transnational life circumstances did not begin until the Iron Curtain fell after 1990. This included families from Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Lithuania, and Slovenia. In addition we selected a small number of families that immigrated within the scope of labour migration and in doing so had to overcome incomparably great spatial distances. This group includes migrants from South Korea who were recruited in the 1960s as nurses, and women from Peru and Colombia, who have been working for a number of years in Germany and Austria as domestic workers. There are thus two groups of transnational families in the sample, which differ with respect to the duration of the migration process and the respective legal conditions for migration, as well as regarding the means of communication and transportation available for their endeavour to establish their family beyond national borders.[3]

Transnational Families: State of Research

Since the 1990s authors have observed that in the course of advancing globalization, more and more family forms are developing whose members spend their everyday lives separated from one another by great distances and national borders, but they nevertheless remain cohesive due to viable emotional and financial ties. Transnational families are by no means a new phenomenon, as historical studies show. Also in the past, immigrants from the Old World wrote letters to relatives reporting about their new home and sent money to cover the ocean passage (see also Thomas and Znaniecki [1918]1984; Yans-McLaughlin 1990). Studies in the countries of the Caribbean and Central and Latin America have for quite a while been drawing attention to a development in which migration becomes a central pattern for how families lead their lives, assuming

the status of a social norm (Nyberg Sørensen & Fog Olwig 2002; Fog Olwig 2003).

At the same time expressions such as "transnational parenting" (Parrenas 2001: 62) and "long-distance mothering" (Gamburd 2000) provide evidence of current migration processes being characterized by qualitative and structural changes that become visible also (and precisely) in transnational families. This includes, for one thing, the feminization of migration since the 1980s, which challenges the symbolic family order and poses the question as to images and expectations of motherhood anew. While studies on migratory movements of women in the late nineteenth century already referred to gender-specific migration practices, the sphere of globalized domestic employment is today the most important labour market for women worldwide and with respect to hiring and recruitment practices it is considered to be better organized than ever before (Momsen 1999: 5; Lutz 2011). Furthermore, the new technologies allow members of transnational families "to be actively involved in everyday life there in fundamentally different ways than in the past" (Levitt 2001: 22). These developments have become the subject of studies that direct the attention to "distanced" models of familiarity, taking the changed time-space relationship into account.

In one of the first studies on transnational motherhood, Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila used the example of Latin American migrants in the United States to express – in their aptly titled essay "I'm here, but I'm there" – not only the longing of mothers for direct community but also the specific experience of creating new forms of closeness and intimacy as conveyed through regular telephone calls (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila 1997). American sociologist Rhacel Parrenas (2005), in her study of transnational families from the Philippines, treats the perspective of the children left behind. She analysed the constitution of gender in such transnational interactions, showing that the absent mothers not only assume the role of the male breadwinner in order to secure the livelihood of their families, but through emails and telephone calls they attempt to compensate for the gender-specific expectations on

them for care. Parrenas observed that the practices of the women have served to redefine a concept of motherhood such that forms of material support are understood as expressions of maternal caregiving. Under the heading of transnational care, Loretta Baldassar et al. pursue the question of how the relationship between aging parents and their grown children is shaped against the background of great spatial distances (Baldassar, Baldock & Wilding 2007). In their study, the authors not only worked out "distant" practices of transnational care in family life, but also referred to a family network structure that is based on the principle of a "specific reciprocity" (Faist 2000: 106ff.).

In the present article I refer to these studies, therefore rejecting an understanding of transnationality that concentrates primarily on the mobile actors. I aim instead to show how in the course of exchange processes within the family both mobile and immobile family members actively participate in maintaining transnational social and symbolic ties (Brah 1996; Brennan 2004; Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). I employ those approaches which do not view families as homogeneous units and instead look at how family relations are characterized by structural inequalities (Dreby 2006; Schmalzbauer 2004). Such a perspective views the family as a community of individuals, each with his or her own interests and experience. This also means that members select when, with whom, and in what way they maintain family ties. Attention is thus directed at those practices, strategies and negotiation processes through which family members "create familial space and network ties in terrain where affinal connections are relatively sparse" (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002: 11).

Whoever Emigrated "Was Simply Gone"

Back then there was one shared telephone for the whole town and that's where my mother would call. My mother always collected 5-mark coins. When she called us she always went to a coin machine [i.e., a telephone booth], put in the 5-mark coins, and then called so someone would tell us. Then we'd come and she would call again. Mostly we talked about what was absolutely necessary.[4]

Such reports were common among our interviews with members of transnational families that were involved in labour migration in the 1960s. All conversation partners reported that private households in the respective countries of origin did not have telephone connections in the 1980s and that also those family members who had emigrated only rarely had their own telephones. Long distance calls were an expensive, public act. The main medium for communication was the letter, or a package with cassettes. This in turn was connected with waiting periods, which underscored the great geographical distance between members of the families. "That always took a long time, yes. It could take three to four weeks before you got an answer." Whoever emigrated "was simply gone, far away", as one of our interview partners summarized the family experience of these years. This also involved the gradual acknowledgement that what had begun as an exceptional, short-term situation, in many families changed to something "temporary that lasts" (Sayad 2004: 74), which stabilized, demanding new plans for organizing family life over great distances.

The family of Sophia Wassiliou, in her mid-forties and proprietor of a hairdressing salon in Frankfurt am Main, is such a case. Sophia's family came from a village near Thessaloniki, Greece. Her mother described life as characterized by the harsh conditions of agrarian life, of hardship and small yields, too little to feed a family. The labour migration seemed to be the final recourse, an act of necessity. The elder brothers of Sophia's father were the first to leave for Germany, then a brother of her mother. Recommended by his brother-in-law, Sophia's father was offered a job in a Volkswagen plant in northern Hesse as an unskilled labourer. He emigrated before the birth of his daughter, and his wife followed three years later, also to work in Germany. The three children remained in the village with their grandmother. When the parents realized that their economically successful return would take longer than they had expected, they brought their children to Germany as well. Because their workdays were long and hard, the children were often left to their own resources. Soon the two older brothers were sent back to relatives in

Greece so they could attend secondary school there. The family only got together during summer holidays in the village where they came from, in order to work on the project of building their own house.

> So there were certain years and then there was always a separation again. Good, so that's how things went all those years. And there were always tears, yes, always farewells and tears and farewells and tears.[5]

Similar to how Ayse Caglar (1997) analysed the situation of Turkish labour migrants, the myth of returning determined the everyday activities and family decisions in the life of the Wassiliou family. In social practice, the mentioning of the return took on the force of a key symbol: "It was always clear that somehow, sometime we would go to Greece. That was our family story."

Nevertheless, all three children started settling in as young adults in Germany. When family life seemed finally to shift to Germany for good after the sudden death of the father, the mother decided to return to the village she came from. This decision raised the painful question once again as to where and how they could set up a life they shared, a process which revealed the myth of return to be an illusion. In the interview, the daughter Sophia described her decision not to return, in which she referred to how different the circumstances of her life were from those of her parents:

> But it has become totally different for us. As soon as I realized that, I said: "OK, I can't leave here [Frankfurt] totally; I don't want to; what options do I have? Fly there often." And then I told my mother, "You will have to understand that somehow, that your children will come and go…" Yes, and now it has worked out so that basically we try to see each other as frequently as possible and, of course, through all these options – telephone, Internet – everything has become much easier.[6]

Sophia Wassiliou was referring here to a difference in the experience between the generations, which comes out especially in the different narratives that introduce the respective migration stories. Whereas the story of her mother carries qualities of an inevitable "either-or", the daughter experiences her family life at a distance more as a "both-and" (Kearney 1995: 558), in which everyday practice – virtual, communicative, and practical – makes it possible to overcome the distance and limitations without any effort. This description not only gives the impression that Sophia, in contrast to her mother, has a sense of belonging to more than one place, it also describes the conditions under which she decided to stay in Germany. Fate gives way to an active choice.

The narratives of the Wassiliou family reveal not only a change in perspective away from the shared notion of a remigration and towards awareness that the family already has numerous transnational references at its disposal. Their statements also reflect a specific experience of labour migrants of the 1960s who had come to West Germany as EU employees in the course of bilateral recruitment treaties. Sophia's parents were awarded legally regulated residential status, the right to choose their place of residence (right of mobility) and thus legally privileged status as compared with migrants from non-European Union countries. Since the German economy had an interest in trained workers, the planned rotation was suspended and family reunions in Germany were permitted. At the same time, Sophia's parents came from an economically depressed region in Greece and had had limited schooling – a fate they share with many labour migrants from EU countries in south-eastern Europe. Their economic status thus corresponded to that of the classical reserve army of labour in the country of origin. Although their income was much higher than what they would earn in Greece, it required that they accepted as a matter of course hard workdays with great sacrifice. This situation – similar to other families in the sample – led to children going back and forth between country of origin and country of destination. At first they remained in the country of origin with the grandmother; later the two sons were sent to Greek relatives so they could attend secondary school there. The parents' decision to put the children under the

care of a network of relatives in the area of origin was not unusual at the time. Instead, it fits into an understanding of family that is based less on the nuclear family and much more on the extended family, in which care for the children is transferred also to other (mostly female) relatives (see Erel 2002). In the course of familiar chain migration, as in the case of the Wassiliou family, these care arrangements take on additional significance, since the great spatial and temporal distance requires a reliably functioning transnational family network. With this step Sophia's parents emphasized their intention to return, on the one hand, and they reacted to the social restrictions and discrimination they were confronted with in Germany, on the other. This included the experience that their adolescent children faced difficulties or were even denied higher schooling, which was why the parents decided that they should acquire this qualification in their country of origin (see Apitzsch & Siouti 2008: 98f.). The transnational living space that was established could, in its beginnings, also be seen as a reaction of the labour migrants to the exclusionary tendencies of the host society.

Compression of Time and Space

The changes that Sophia's family went through indicate, first of all, how the first generation's initial perspective on migration as one-time, temporary, and return-oriented often became a long-term, flexible, and intergenerational way of life for the family, located in various places both socially and culturally. In addition, Sophia's experiences also reflect the dynamic development of communications media and means of transportation, the "material infrastructure" of transnationalization, which according to Ludger Pries is what enables "the migrants to remain mentally present in their families and places of origin" in the first place (Pries 1998: 77).

Without exception, everyone interviewed in fact described that these developments greatly facilitated their family life at a distance, although there were differences among the interviewees in terms of both their respective options for access and the ensuing costs. In particular "cheap calls" (Vertovec 2004:

219), that is, the possibility to make inexpensive telephone calls worldwide, has changed the families' perception and underscored the impression of what Frances Cairncross characterized as the "death of distance" (1997: 27). Reports on the daily call "just because", in which someone could sometimes even learn of something "before everyone there heard about it", underlines the feeling that "I know everything that goes on there even though I am here". The progressing pregnancy of a daughter can be observed via webcam, and cousins can "chat" between Sydney, Frankfurt and Chicago on the Internet. But not only the ways and means of communication have changed. The possibility to exchange information frequently, spontaneously and informally generates a "virtual intimacy" (Wilding 2006) among the participants, which helps to make the physical absence lose significance, at least for the time being. Communication technologies researcher Christian Licoppe came to similar conclusions in his studies, in which he described: "Communication technologies, instead of being used (however unsuccessfully) to compensate for the absence of our close ones, are exploited to provide a continuous pattern of mediated interactions that combine into 'connected relationships' in which the boundaries between absence and presence eventually get blurred" (Licoppe 2004: 136). Most of the mediated interactions thus lead not only to a compression of time and space, but give the impression of shared time and space despite the physical distance. This experience of simultaneity over great geographical distances is an essential factor, enabling transnational families, as "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983; Vuorela 2002: 63), to create and maintain shared notions and narratives of cohesion and belonging.

Taking a closer look at how the increase in mediated interactions developed within the families we studied, it is apparent that the communication technologies available were not used by all participants to the same extent. While contact to the older generation is generally maintained by telephone, the middle and younger generations use especially the Internet – that is, email – in addition to telephone and mobile phone, in their communications.

We hear from each other regularly, also the cousins, etc. … So now I actually have much more contact with them than my parents. And through Facebook I have … the contact is maintained, like, I don't know, by exchanging pictures or whatever, and talking a little and sending messages; that usually is kept up through Facebook.[7]

What at first glance signals only a change in medium, turns out when looking closer to be a change that also has consequences for the ways family members refer to one another. First, the increased use of the Internet means that information can be passed on within the shortest possible time to a large number of people. Thus the circle of people who can potentially be informed of "family matters" and who feel connected is expanded. In particular among members of the younger generation the Internet has created new forms and forums for coming together through the various social networks such as Facebook. Here, independent communication between peers is possible over great geographic distances, which is significant in order to maintain a sense of familiarity. Also, the medium of Internet has increased the number of male participants in family communication, since they are generally more willing to send an email than to pick up the telephone. Both developments contribute to the fact that two different patterns can increasingly be observed within families. Both for letters that had been written in the past and for the telephone, which increasingly replaced letter-writing, it was and is primarily women who maintain this communication:

The women talk to each other on the phone much more often and that is really like: My mama picks up the phone and then her sister will be called, and then the other sister, and the aunt, and everything is discussed with one another.[8]

Such descriptions, which give female relatives a key function in terms of gathering and passing on information, refer to a network with one person at the centre who is responsible for exchanging and directing transnational communication. Through media such as the Internet and email, parallel networks are emerging, "in which communications proceed simultaneously in more or less all directions" (Urry 2003: 160). The structures of these media appear to be looser and less binding, but at the same time they involve a larger circle of participants who in different ways can participate in or help shape family events.

From a historical perspective we are thus dealing with a unique extent of closeness created through communication, which results in a new problem for the members of transnational families in our sample. The virtual closeness over a distance corresponds to the insight that one's own actions remain indirect, conveyed via media, and – for example in the case of a family crisis – are no substitute for co-presence. This experience produces new dilemmas for members of transnational families, which go hand in hand with the availability of new technologies. When in many cases distance no longer represents an insurmountable barrier, then one's own absence no longer assumes the character of fate, but instead increasingly becomes an act of decision-making. If, when and under what conditions family members get together is thus the subject of negotiations of what comprises family obligations and responsibilities (Urry 2003: 169). In other words, the increased opportunities to be accessible also lead to increased expectations of accessibility.

Sophia Wassiliou also shared this experience. Similar to other people we interviewed, she stressed the close contact with her birth family. Through inexpensive telephone tariffs and the Internet she can communicate daily with her mother and relatives. The expansion of means of transportation – in particular inexpensive air travel – has multiplied the options for travelling very quickly to her hometown in Greece. At the same time her descriptions also present an unspoken problem: Sophia knows that she will not be there if something happens to her mother. The daily calls and the detailed knowledge of the various flight connections stand for her promise to be there as fast as possible in case of a crisis. When she was told that her grandmother in Greece lay on her deathbed, she had to admit that in reality such a promise could always fail.

And I tried to still get a ticket and it was just not possible. And I had already prepared myself for it … to say goodbye to her and it was just impossible, no matter what ticket I had taken, even though we are in Frankfurt and I would've had to fly via Athens and then, well, I never would have made it. … And that made me totally crazy, because I thought, I just can't believe it![9]

Although Sophia Wassiliou looked into various travel routes, she did not make it there in time. Her frustration and anger is an expression of a series of dilemmas that emerge through access to "time- and space-compressing technologies". One of them is that the technological changes and facilitated access have served to increase mutual expectations and commitments within transnational families. Furthermore, this change can also lead to a reassessment of the migration process itself. If long-term processes of immigration and emigration give way to virtual and spatial interrelations that can be set up individually and flexibly, then the standards for assessing life at a distance also gradually change. The guilty conscience that one senses from Sophia's account traces back to a self-attribution in which she assessed her own absence as the consequence of an individual decision that she could have also made differently. But whereas Sophia and her relatives enjoy freedom of movement within the legal space of Europe, flexible and mobile interrelations in many cases are also an expression of restrictive European immigration policies, whose border regimes separate the demand for immigrant labour from the workers' social reproduction, thereby largely contributing to the transnationalization of families.

Virtual Closeness at a Distance

One example of this is the story of Ingrida Einars. Ingrida, 38 years old, is from Kaunas, Lithuania. She has been living and working in Frankfurt am Main since 1998, although her eighteen-year-old daughter Danuta stayed in Kaunas with her grandparents. Like the Wassiliou family, Ingrida had planned to spend one or at most two years in Germany. However, the legal conditions of her migration are fundamentally different from the basic conditions of the recruitment measures of the 1960s. Whereas the Wassiliou parents received legally regulated residential status in the course of so-called guest worker migration, which provided for their children to later join them, Ingrida is subject to the restrictive requirements that the countries of the European Union, and especially Germany and Austria, implemented in the 1990s through the Schengen agreement. Not only does this treaty provide for a stepwise system of selective immigration controls both internally and externally, it limits in principle the right of people from Eastern Europe to move and reside freely and abolished the right to settle – with few exceptions – almost entirely (Bade 2003: 288–290). British sociologists Eleonore Kofman and Rosemarie Sales have determined that the few remaining legal forms of labour migration address primarily the migration of men, whereas migrating women are increasingly forced to resort to unofficial means (Kofman & Sales 1998). The disproportionate illegalization of the migration of women has led to specifically female migration patterns and job opportunities developing especially within the so-called low-skilled and informalized service sector. Aside from the sex industry, it is predominately work in private households – that is, the unregulated and informalized area of domestic help – that is available to most female migrants as a chance for employment (see Anthias & Lazaridis 2000). This was also the case for Ingrida Einars. Until Lithuania joined the EU in 2004 she was eligible for a three-month tourist visa, and after 2004 a bilateral treaty between Germany and Lithuania abolished the visa requirement for tourists. Ingrida Einars was able to enter Germany but she had no work permit. She worked illegally and unregistered as a seamstress in a sweatshop together with other Eastern European women. Later she took on various cleaning jobs, and not until 2009 did she register her own cleaning services as a business. Her irregular status has led to her not being able to have her daughter join her, especially since the restrictive German legislation provides for neither the right for her child to attend school nor sufficient rights to adequate healthcare. Similar to the account of Mirjana

Morokvasic (1999), Ingrida left her home in order to be able to maintain it. Migration made possible for her what she could not accomplish at home: to earn a livelihood for herself and her daughter and to renovate the house in Kaunas where Danuta and her grandparents live. In the interview Ingrida described her own lifestyle as torn: "I have one foot here and one foot there." This statement expresses not only her longing for a life together with her daughter, but also the fact that she has been living with a man for several years in Frankfurt – a situation that her birth family does not approve of and which continues to stabilize the circumstance of separation.

At the same time, Ingrida's statement is evidence – similar to those in the studies on transnational motherhood (Parrenas 2005) – also of her attempt to be there for her daughter even over a distance and to provide both emotional and material care. Unlike the families involved in labour migration in the 1960s, Ingrida Einars can compensate for the geographical separation from her family through daily use of new communications media. Over the years she has built up a complex network of conversation partners who help her participate from a distance in the family life "at home". Via telephone, Internet and Skype she communicates regularly with her daughter, her parents and her sister, whose family lives next door. If acute financial problems arise, she can transfer money almost immediately. If her parents complain about their granddaughter, she tries to assuage the situation from a distance, occasionally asking her sister to help out. Ingrida keeps abreast of Danuta's school achievements, not only through her daughter directly, but also through the school's Internet portal, where absent parents like Ingrida can see their children's grades from a distance. In addition, she and Danuta's teacher communicate by email about Danuta's progress in school. What at first sounds like a success story of modern communication technologies must be qualified when looking closer at how this communication is organized in practice. Ingrida's parents have both been suffering for years from a hearing disability that makes talking on the phone very difficult. Both parents can write but have had very little practice so that written con-

tact is in fact not really possible. In the initial period of back-and-forth migration, Ingrida was therefore only able to have contact with her young daughter and her sister, who occasionally served as mediators between her and her parents. Not until the family in Kaunas gained access to a computer, webcam, and an Internet connection was it possible for Ingrida to communicate with her parents via Skype from a "call shop" in Frankfurt. Now she is able to use her partner's computer. Since Ingrida's parents are not very proficient at using the computer, they need to rely on their granddaughter to prepare the necessary computer set-up for them to be able to communicate with Ingrida using the keyboard, individual words, and sign language. This laboured communication is even more difficult due to interruptions in the connection and deficient picture quality. Despite these problems, Skype and webcams have in fact made it possible for Ingrida and her parents to have direct contact with each other.

Whereas in this case the technological innovations are a necessary prerequisite for the communication, they have also given rise to an opposite effect when Ingrida Einars tries to contact her daughter. When Danuta entered puberty Ingrida was confronted via Skype and webcam with the (not unusual) changes her daughter was going through: nail polish, dyed hair, and a lip piercing made Ingrida fear that her daughter might go astray, causing her to seriously consider returning to Kaunas, a thought she later abandoned. Mother and daughter decided instead to change the medium of their communication. Their daily exchange now takes place via email, since both of them discovered that the webcam and computer telephone conversations created a closeness that they had difficulty dealing with emotionally from a distance.

> We write. Whenever we talk we end up arguing. Always, almost every time we talk, I give some kind of sermon and she raises her voice a bit when she responds and that's it. Then it just takes off from there. But when we write I don't hear her tone, since it doesn't come through the writing. And that's better.[10]

Conflict-laden conversations between parents and their pubescent children are an everyday part of family life, whether they are interacting under the same roof or over a great distance. While the conflict in a face-to-face situation can be carried out by, for example, slamming doors and avoiding each other's glance at meals until the waves of escalation begin to ebb, in this case mother and daughter have taken a course that is much more rational. Since the goal of communication from a distance is to maintain communication per se, it requires controlling anger and curbing emotions in order to avoid potential conflict; otherwise the escalation can lead only to ending the conversation and, with that, all contact.

Ingrida Einars's story is exemplary for a series of experiences shared also by other interviewees, including the knowledge that family interactions can indeed be carried out via the Internet and telephone, but the indirectness and mediatization of the contact also changes the quality of the relationship. The virtual closeness can generate emotions that as perceived by family members cannot be adequately dealt with through the new communication technologies. The dilemma of the illusion of closeness produces not only disappointed expectations among the conversation partners, but can also lead to reflections on how to deal with the corresponding media. This can involve weighing considerations of the possible emotional repercussions of a short-term "virtual intimacy" against the long-term goal of successfully maintaining contact. The decision of family members as to which of the available media might seem best suited for communicating with each other can also be understood as an attempt to appropriately fathom the relationship between closeness and spatial distance.

This leads to another experience shared by members of transnational families. Using media such as mobile telephones and the Internet they continually become involved in difficult family situations that nevertheless take place *elsewhere*. As Ingrida Einars's example shows, she is directly available but can only indirectly take action, a situation that she experiences with emotional ambivalence. The new technologies make it possible for her to do whatever she – in agreement with her family – decides is necessary. Almost immediately she can put through a bank transfer or share ideas and information, but she is not there in person. This leads to a feeling of tension that also comes from a sense of asynchrony, namely, of being close to the absent person virtually, whereas one's actions are bound together, as Norbert Elias described it, in extended "chains of action", which have been "lengthened" in the course of interdependent transnational contexts (Elias 2000: 370). As Ingrida's example shows, her scope of action had been considerably expanded, yet at the same time she cannot anticipate the outcome of her actions. This awareness increasingly pressures individuals to "take account of the effects of his or her own or other people's actions on a whole series of links in the social chain" (ibid.: 370), but without losing the insight that in the end they do not regain control of their intended actions.

The dilemma that has emerged for migrant women in our sample is especially apparent regarding matters of distributing money in transnational families. Similar to Ingrida Einars's case, also in other families a large share of the earnings of the migrant women is used to support their family network in their region of origin. An attempt is made to control the distribution of the funds from a distance by transferring money to one particular person in the place of origin who then makes decisions regarding the further distribution there. As a rule this contact is a female relative, such as their own daughter or a sister in the family (see Gamburd 2000; Parrenas 2005). The migrants can, however, never really check whether or not their money transfers are used as they intended. Also, the chain of family obligations and problems does not end, as can also be seen in the example of Ingrida Einars. From the costs to renovate and maintain the house to financing the daughter's education and the parents' visits to the doctor, new demands and emergencies continue to arise, which prolong the migrant's stay in Germany in order to earn the necessary money. Conversely, Ingrida Einars is dependant on the support of the family network, especially with respect to caring for her daughter. This "moral economy of family loyal-

ties" (Lutz 2008: 161) leads to close, often also burdensome, emotional and mental ties with the region of origin, which at the same time makes it all the more difficult to take advantage of opportunities to establish one's own life in the place of destination.

These accounts clearly show that the use of new communication technologies does not take place in a vacuum, but that the compression of space and time is embedded in a "power geometry" (Massey 1993) characterized by structures of social inequality that exert a determining influence on the positioning of the individual family members. Access to these technologies presupposes that the parties involved are either financially in a position to acquire the necessary equipment or that a local infrastructure exists, such as "call shops", which offer inexpensive opportunities to have contact. Family members are thus confronted both with economic constraints that can limit transnational contact (Mahler 1998) and with the unequal distribution of resources worldwide or the existence or lack of varying technological infrastructures in urban areas such as Frankfurt am Main and Kaunas.

In addition to the fact that the respective economic and technological accessibility of transnational communications media has far-reaching consequences for the success of this communication, the example of the Einars family indicates additional factors of social inequality that greatly determine the actual options and abilities of the individual participants in the communications. The new technologies thus enable contact between Ingrida and her family in principle, but this communication also displays an asymmetry that determines its form. Whereas Ingrida's daughter was too young during the first few years of Ingrida's migration to independently engage in contact with her absent mother, the grandparents had to painfully admit that, due to their physical disabilities and insufficient technological savvy, they did not always have the necessary means or unobstructed access at their disposal to be able to enjoy unrestricted use of these new technologies (see also Baldassar 2007).

Conclusions

The two cases of Sophia Wassiliou and Ingrida Einars do not only reflect a short narrative on the compression of time and space, they also illustrate the different realities of labour migration in the 1960s and 1990s. Both families have developed forms of familiarity at a distance which, for one thing, make the great technological leaps apparent and, for another, show how the different legal conditions for migration offer the families a framework to refer to in shaping their own transnational experiment. The case of the Wassiliou family is exemplary for how the specific positioning of the EU labour migrants in the 1960s influenced the family structure. Unlike the case of Ingrida Einers, the parents of Sophia Wassiliou were recruited and then given permanent residential status that provided for the right to move and reside freely and the right to reunite the family by allowing other family members to join them. This legally privileged position was combined with an economic status in which the migrants were better off than in their country of origin, yet they were confronted with tendencies in the host country to close itself off to immigrants, which caused the family to take advantage of transnational family networks to arrange for the extended family to participate in caregiving in the country of origin.

Sophia Wassiliou's family has a citizenship that allows family members to develop multi-local reference points within the European sphere. Ingrida Einars's situation, however, illustrates the development of European migration policies that reflect a dependence on migrant labour, on the one hand, but which are increasingly restrictive towards them, on the other. This development goes hand in hand with a political and legal practice leading to a feminization and illegalization of migratory movements, as also experienced by Ingrida Einars. Her irregular employment as a domestic worker long denied her the opportunity to bring her daughter to join her in Germany. In contrast to the Wassiliou family, however, she had greater spatial mobility from the very beginning of her migration and was able to maintain contact to her family in Lithuania by virtual means. Present-day communication technologies allowed

her to develop everyday practices and routines of transnational motherhood while assuring her financial support of the family. At the same time, however, she has been denied the opportunity to develop any lasting prospects for a future in Germany, since both the legal regulations for migration in the country of destination and the continuing financial demands of her family in the country of origin hamper such a project.

These two examples show how a concept of familiarity that remains tied to face-to-face relationships at close proximity ignores the ways in which new technologies create closeness and how the related practices make it possible to create and maintain a family lifestyle spanning great geographical distances. At the same time this clearly shows that participation in this process is essentially characterized by the individuals' (unequal) social positioning, which largely determines the respective opportunities to use these technologies. This applies not only to family members who physically engage in the cross-border mobility, but also to those who remain at the places of origin, because they too actively help shape the transnational relations. Against this background, members of transnational families experience the new technologies as a relief, on the one hand, since they enable everyday interactions in which familiarity can be experienced. On the other hand, along with the increased options for crossing virtual and spatial boundaries quickly and flexibly, the evaluating standards with respect to the decision for a life-at-a-distance have changed. While migration used to be connected with the burden of necessity, today's mobile lifestyles seem more and more to be an act of choice, taking wishes to shape one's own life into account. What is subjectively perceived as a process of individualization, however, is the outcome of a European immigration regime that produces flexible and mobile labour, but which places the responsibility for the consequences of these constraints on the migrants themselves.

Notes

1 The article was translated by Allison Brown.
2 The Transnational Familiarity research project (Prof. Ina Merkel, Dr. Karen Körber, Mag. Polina Kirjanenko) was conducted from 2008 to 2011 at the Institute for European Ethnology/Cultural Studies at the Philipps University, Marburg. It received funding from the German Research Foundation (DFG).
3 The interviews were conducted in Frankfurt am Main and in the Rhine-Main region, as well as in Vienna. These cities and regions have been affected by processes of migration and mobility for decades: The share of the population with a migration background in Vienna is roughly 32 percent of the overall population; the figure is 39.5 percent for Frankfurt am Main, and 38 percent in the Rhine-Main region. Through contacts to immigrant organizations, cultural and religious associations, and schools, which served as networks and hubs, we were able to gain access to the field, finding the families for our sample through the snowball effect. The interviews were conducted in either German or Russian and in isolated cases interpreters were used. Because limited research funding was available, we first interviewed members of the families living in the greater Frankfurt area or in Vienna and then those family members who shuttled regularly between Germany or Austria and their respective country of origin, or those who were visiting in Frankfurt or Vienna. Finally, a group interview with the family was carried out. We also gathered data using the methodology of participant observation to determine how family members organized their transnational communication. In addition, we participated in both private family celebrations and religious services and festivals as well as activities organized by immigrant organizations, in which the families were present in various different configurations. The interviews were transcribed and then evaluated on the basis of hermeneutic processes (Fischer-Rosenthal & Rosenthal 1997). Thus patterns of action and interpretation were reconstructed in order to reveal those – often invisible – "structures of intricately networked state, legal, and cultural transitions, which provided a biographical orientation for the individuals and represented a shared experience for them" (Apitzsch 2003: 69).
4 Interview with Wassilis K. on 11 May 2009 in Frankfurt am Main, transcript, p. 5.
5 Interview with Sophia Wassiliou on 10 February 2010 in Frankfurt am Main, transcript, p. 3.
6 Ibid., transcript, p. 5.
7 Interview with Raina S. on 12 October 2010 in Wiesbaden, transcript, p. 9.
8 Ibid., transcript, p. 8.
9 Interview with Sophia Wassiliou on 10 February 2010 in Frankfurt am Main, transcript, p. 17.
10 Interview with Ingrida Einars on 16 December 2010 in Frankfurt am Main, transcript, p. 15.

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