‘Love Across a Distance’.
Friendships and Family Relations in Twenty-First Century American Short Stories

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distance:
1. the amount of space between two places or things
2. being far away in space or in time
3. a point that is a particular amount of space away from sth else
4. a situation in which there is a lack of friendly feelings or of a close relationship between two people or groups of people[1]

As the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* tells us, distances come in various forms, ranging from geographic or temporal distances to those of an interpersonal and emotional nature. These distances have to be crossed all the time. As the news illustrates every day, it seems that in the twenty-first century these distances are not only growing but also multiplying, despite the often celebrated ‘space-time compression’, ‘technological advancements’, and social ‘progress.’ This essay looks at a selection of recent American short stories that mirror the diversity of people’s experiences in the twenty-first century and that span vast distances around the globe. The authors selected are quite diverse, in particular with regard to their ethnic backgrounds; nevertheless, it makes sense to look at them as a group since their literary intentions and concerns are quite similar and, I would add, point to a larger trend in American literature.[2] Their stories grant insights into lives as different as that of a family who tries to establish a new life after the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl, the unusual situation of two old women in a picturesque, albeit eccentric Basque community, and the life of a middleclass couple in Seattle. What connects the protagonists in their different locations and situations is that they continuously try to reach across the distances that open up between them and their friends, children, lovers, and neighbors, sometimes unsuccessfully, but nevertheless persistently. The reason these people are so persistent in crossing geographic, temporal, or emotional distances is love, an emotion that also comes in different shapes and guises, ranging from parental love and the platonic love of deep friendship to passionate feelings between lovers. In the following, I analyze and compare the variety of distances and emotions, which both separate and unite the stories’ various protagonists.

I would like to begin this comparison with Sherman Alexie's short story "Assimilation". Here, an interracial (Native American/white) couple has drifted apart not so much because of a lack of love and affection but due to norms and values that society imposes upon them. Specifically notions of race and ethnicity restrict their personalities and thus limit their relationship:

> During the course of their relationship, Mary Lynn and Jeremiah had often discussed race as a concept, as a foreign country they occasionally visited, or as an enemy that existed outside their house, as a destructive force they could fight against as a couple, as a family. But race was also a constant presence, a houseguest and permanent tenant who crept round in all the rooms in their shared lives, opening drawers, stealing utensils and small articles of clothing, changing the temperature. (14)

The story manages to show that race, although an invention or, rather, a construction, still very much plays a decisive role as a visible, even tangible force that the two characters, Mary Lynn and Jeremiah, have to deal with every day: "race, whatever its construction, was real" (*ibid.*).

"Assimilation" evolves around the central event of Mary Lynn's unfaithfulness to her husband caused by her dissatisfaction with their relationship. Mary Lynn concludes that it is the issue of race that has come between them: "Yes, she was a Coeur d'Alene woman, passionately and dispassionately, who wanted to cheat on her white husband because he was white." (3) She herself "only wanted to be understood as eccentric and complicated" rather than being characterized by her ethnicity and cultural background since "that wasn't the only way to define her" (2). Yet she cannot help referring to race and ethnicity as important, almost essential parts of her relationship to Jeremiah. Looking at their family, two boys who resemble herself, dark hair and skin, and two girls who resemble their father, blond hair and light skin, she suggests that they should have another kid, "so we'll know if this is a white family or an Indian family" (13). When Jeremiah answers that "[i]t's a family family" (*ibid.*) they both know from experience that this conceals the problems they have to face as a so-called interracial family. 'Race' is their constant companion, an expression of society's construction of an essentialist difference which can not be grasped and which is always elusive, a difference which is never really there but which can nevertheless be constantly felt.

A seemingly rational and objective concept, race is intertwined with their whole life and comes to dominate their relationship, widening the gap between them and building up an emotional and cultural distance that seems absurd. While Mary Lynn "wanted to go to bed with an In-

dian man only because he was Indian" (1), Jeremiah is "in love with the idea of a white woman from a mythical high school, with a prom queen named *If Only* or a homecoming princess named *My Life Could Have Been Different"* (9, emphasis in the original). Their different cultural backgrounds did not even play a role in their meeting and falling in love, but nevertheless their love has become entangled so much with issues of race and ethnicity that they cannot think about their relation- ship without essentializing themselves. Race, "the Frankenstein monster that has grown beyond our control" (14), comes to play such a decisive role that they become unfaithful to each other and also to themselves.

Right after she has cheated on Jeremiah with an unknown "flabby Lummi Indian" (3), Mary Lynn meets him for dinner. Since they unsuccessfully wait for a table at a restaurant, presumably because the place "discriminates against white people" (11), they decide to drive home. When they get stuck in a traffic jam on a bridge, Jeremiah walks to the other side of the bridge in order to find out the reason for the congestion. The bridge not only represents a real spatial distance between him and his wife but turns into a metaphor for the emotional gap that has opened up between them. While Mary Lynn watches her husband disappear on the other side of the bridge, she is suddenly "slapped by the brief, irrational fear that he would never return" (17). Unable to articulate her thoughts, her fears, and her feelings to Jeremiah, she starts to honk their car's horn, using it as a substitute language and hoping that he will "recognize the specific sound of their horn and return to the car" (*ibid.*). When he does not come back, she starts to weep and realizes "she loved him, sometimes because he was white and often despite his whiteness" (19). Jeremiah, however, continues walking and disappears to the other end of the bridge, where he witnesses a suicide. The jumper, a woman, keeps screaming a name, presumably her lover's, before she jumps from the bridge. And while Mary Lynn becomes "suddenly and impossibly sure that her husband was the reason for the commotion" (*ibid.*), Jeremiah, shaken by the stranger's suicide, realizes all of a sudden how much he loves his wife and confesses abruptly to another onlooker. "'My wife', said Jeremiah, strangely joyous. 'I'm never leaving her'." (*ibid.*) He finally finds his voice and "shouted out his wife's name, shouted it so loud that he could not speak in the morning" (*ibid.*). Although the paramedics arrive too late to rescue the woman, Mary Lynn and Jeremiah find each other just in time to rescue themselves and their love and to articulate their feelings. Finally, they can reach across the gap that has opened up between them: "Jeremiah ran across the bridge until he could see Mary Lynn. She and he loved each other across the distance" (20).

Although the story remains open as to whether the couple will man-

age to overcome their estrangement, it becomes very clear that at least they try to reach across the distances that make their love difficult. It is here that the story's title "Assimilation" attains a deeper meaning, apart from its most common definition "action of making or becoming alike".[4] The word can also designate a "process whereby a person acquires new ideas through comparing experience with the existing content of the mind" and Mary Lynn and Jeremiah have assimilated in this sense.[5] They have discovered that "the Frankenstein monster" (14) might be controlled in spite of everything, in that traditional, essentialist concepts of race and ethnicity can be 'assimilated', changed by new ideas and viewpoints.

Another love relationship affected by distances is explored in Edwidge Danticat's "Seven".[6] The story deals with a couple from Haiti that has been separated since the day after their wedding, when the husband left for the US expecting to be joined by his wife as soon as he would attain his green card. Unfortunately it takes almost seven years until he receives the document and, thus, it is almost "seven years since he'd last seen his wife" (35). The story explores the nature of the unnamed couple's relationship, which has been affected very much by this long geographic and temporal distance. Furthermore, both husband and wife have had extramarital affairs to fill the loneliness that the absence of their spouse has left them with, which adds guilt to the complicated nature of their relation. We witness their reunion, which is almost like a meeting of strangers. Although the husband had hoped that the marriage would hold their relationship together, so that "even if their union had become a victim of distance and time, it could not have been easily dissolved" (41), the formal bond of marriage is not enough to bridge the emotional distance.

Nevertheless, both husband and wife try to reach across the emotional gap, which extends from the beginning of their marriage to its ending: "Someone had said that people lie only at the beginning of relationships. The middle is where the truth resides. But there had been no middle for her husband and herself, just a beginning and many dream-rehearsed endings." (43-44) The actual ending resembles a beginning as it entails a number of radical changes for both of them. Whereas "he wasn't going to tell her about those women who had occasionally come home with him in the early morning-hours" (37), his wife cannot tell him about "that neighbor who had slept next to her for those days after he'd left and in whose bed she had spent many nights after that" (43). Their reunion changes their lives significantly. The husband cannot have "those nights out" with his friends any more - "[g]one were the late-night domino games. Gone was the phone number he'd had for the past five years" (37). The changes she has to undergo seem more

radical, as her new life is made difficult by the racism that she experiences as soon as she arrives at the airport. Her meager belongings are searched and most of her things, harmless gifts of food intended to remind her and her husband of their Haitian home, are thrown away. In contrast to that "a man pushing a cart, which tipped and swerved under the weight of three large boxes" (39) can pass customs unharmed.

It is significant that the spouses long for each other's company despite their estrangement. Whenever his wife leaves their room, he "couldn't stand to watch her turn away and disappear" (40-41). Similarly, "[s]he was happy when the weekend finally came" (44) to explore the city together with her husband. The walk through the foreign city conjures up memories of the Haitian carnival during which they met and during which they performed a traditional wedding ritual. The couple has to walk around in their wedding garments and ask strangers to marry them. The joke of this carnival theater is that the couple usually switches roles, "that the bride was a man and the groom a woman. The couple's makeup was so skillfully applied that only the most observant could detect this" (46). They, however, added their own twist to this ritual as she played the part of the bride and her husband that of the groom, "forgoing the traditional puzzle" (*ibid.*).

The Haitian carnival and the wedding game come to symbolize their relationship and its new beginning in New York in a special way. As husband and wife walk through New York as if in search of a new beginning, a new basis for their relationship that takes "the many dream-rehearsed endings" (44) as a starting point, the wife wishes they had not burned their wedding clothes so that they could perform their ritual in this city, "among the stony-faced people around them", and complete "their wedding march in silence, a silence like the one that had come over them now" (46). The carnival, symbol of cheerful exuberance and the possibility of foregoing and challenging traditions, rules, and norms, here turns into an image of the impossibility of change, into a silence in which the nameless wife and husband try to come to terms with their new situation - they cannot but walk around silently in New York. The anonymous city and its inhabitants, whose stony faces resemble carnival masks, therefore turn into a carnivalesque scene, yet one in which traditional structures are not challenged by laughter but reinforced by silence. The story, too, leaves open whether the couple will manage to overcome the distances that have grown between them. Nameless, wife and husband come to signify 'types' - they, too, wear carnival masks to symbolize the fate of numerous immigrants who try to start anew in a strange country, a foreign city, a new culture. The reality of migration and displacement not only creates physical and temporal distances between people. In "Seven" this distance has turned into a solid wall of

silence, a silence not only between husband and wife but also between the couple and the stony-faced inhabitants of the city. Yet the couple is shown walking hand in hand - despite the silence, their physical closeness suggests that there might be a way to overcome the gap. Maybe they will manage to add yet another twist to the Haitian wedding game, with a second beginning after seven years, and turn the streets of this foreign city into their own carnival and their silent walk into a new beginning.

Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's" also deals with the physical separation from home.[7] Here, too, a wife has followed her husband, leaving her beloved India to live in an American university town, where her husband hopes to get tenure. Again economic opportunities are entangled with cultural and emotional issues of finding a new home away from home. The main focus of the story lies on Mrs. Sen, who works as a babysitter in her own home, and Eliot, the boy she looks after while his mother works during the day. Both Mrs. Sen and Eliot are lonely in their own peculiar ways, Eliot since his mother has to work long hours and consequently leaves him to the care of babysitters and Mrs. Sen since her family lives in India. Although she has lived in America for quite some time, she is lonely and homesick, and for her, home is still India, not the new apartment in the US. Isolated as she is, Mrs. Sen's immobility is signified by her inability to drive.[8] She knows how to operate a car - she practices together with her husband - but the pace and rhythm of American traffic confuse her and she does not dare to drive beyond their apartment block, so that she is confined to her apartment.

Her apartment appears to be an ambiguous place, a mixed blessing. On one hand, it is a safe haven, a fortress against the dangers of the American outside world. Here, Eliot's mother, a symbol of independence and mobility, comes to look strangely out of place: "it was his mother, Eliot had thought, in her cuffed, beige shorts and her rope-soled shoes, who looked odd [...] and in that room where all things were so carefully covered, her shaved knees and thighs [were] too exposed" (112-113). Just as Mrs. Sen feels uncomfortable and isolated in her American surroundings, Eliot's mother feels (and looks) uncomfortable and displaced in Mrs. Sen's little world.[9] Moreover, in her apartment, Mrs. Sen can momentarily forget her homesickness and loneliness when she prepares elaborate Indian meals. Eliot looks forward to the daily ritual of food preparation, which is so different from the ordered pizza that he and his mother have every evening:

> He especially enjoyed watching Mrs. Sen as she chopped things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor. Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to bat-

> tie in distant seas. [...] Each afternoon Mrs. Sen lifted the blade and locked it into place, so that it met the base at an angle. Facing the sharp edge without ever touching it, she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices and shreds. (114)

The blade, almost like a weapon, is her defense against loneliness. Its form is compared to a ship's prow and hence it can be read as a symbol of traveling across the ocean, an emotional means to go home for brief periods of time. The food and its elaborate preparation signify the degree of homesickness Mrs. Sen feels. The apartment is temporarily turned into an Indian cooking place, where Mrs. Sen prepares the vegetables, her homemade sauces, broths and pastes. Yet it remains essentially sterile with plastic covers on the sofas, chairs, and lamps. Here Mrs. Sen is alone cutting her food while in India the neighborhood women might come together and "sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night" (115). Although she uses the space of her apartment in her own way to suit her food preparation ritual, she does not really manage to feel at home there. The fact that she asks Eliot whether anyone would come if she screamed - he answers that, if they reacted at all, people would probably complain about the noise - shows how much she misses India, where you "just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements" (116). Moreover, the blade, which is truly Indian in its form and dimensions, comes to signify something forbidden. Although Mrs. Sen takes great care that "[b]y the time Eliot's mother arrived at twenty past six [...] all evidence of her chopping was disposed of" (117), Eliot feels that "he and Mrs. Sen were disobeying some unspoken rule" (118). The blade does not conform to American norms and values (symbolized in that it is used in a completely different way) and its almost archaic form poses a threat to the orderly American apartment world.

Mrs. Sen rarely leaves the security and isolation of the apartment. One errand that requires her to go out is the buying of fresh fish. Since the fish shop is quite far away, she has to depend on Mr. Sen to drive her there. These trips seem almost like holidays, especially since they sometimes include short walks at the seaside. One day, however, when the shop calls to offer her the last fresh fish of the season and her husband is not able to drive her, she decides to drive on her own. Although she has practiced a lot, Mrs. Sen really hates driving - her fast and skilled handling of the cutting blade contrasts sharply with her fearful

and insecure driving.[10] Her anxiety and lack of self-confidence that becomes obvious in the car mirrors her situation in America, and it is not surprising that the "accident occurred quickly" (134) after she and Eliot had left the apartment. Nobody gets seriously hurt but nevertheless, the accident is the end of Mrs. Sen's driving as well as Eliot's visits. In the face of this accident, his mother decides that he is a "big boy now" (135) and that he can stay home alone. Mrs. Sen's prediction with regard to Eliot's situation finally comes true: "When I think of you, only a boy, separated from your mother for so much of the day, I am ashamed. [...] When I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far. You are wiser than that, Eliot. You already taste the way things must be." (123)

"Mrs. Sen's" explores relationships between people with different ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds and the situations they find themselves in. Mrs. Sen cannot break through her own isolation as she has no possibility of finding a replacement for the extended family that she is used to in India. Her only friend is Eliot, who is also isolated and lonely. The elaborate food preparations and the fresh fish are only poor substitutes for a home. Moreover, her specific situation in America, which is epitomized in her inability to drive, isolates her not only from her Indian home but also prevents her from establishing any contacts or friendships in America. Since Mr. Sen is not yet tenured, the couple lives in a kind of in-between state, a never-ending transition between 'here' and 'there'. While family and friends in India think that Mrs. Sen lives like a princess, she herself feels trapped since she lacks something that the American Dream does not provide: friends and family. Eliot is the only one who understands her. Moreover, he mirrors Mrs. Sen's isolation and loneliness, and in the story's last scene, we see him waiting for his mother in their tiny beach house, looking at the ocean. Although the thought of missing his mother "had never occurred to him" earlier (122), his visits to Mrs. Sen have changed him. He has been confronted with alternative ideas of home and family and now he seems to be as trapped in the isolated beach house as Mrs. Sen is in her apartment, and suddenly the world of a little American boy at home is not so different from that of a married Indian woman in a foreign country.

In Katherine Shonk's "My Mother's Garden" we encounter yet another kind of distance.[11] Here, too, family members are separated from each other, and although the spatial distance is not as big as the one that separates Mrs. Sen from India, notions of home and mobility play a quite important role. The story is set in the Ukraine twelve years after a meltdown in the local nuclear power-station and its characters have to deal with their loss of home, the subsequent resettlement, and the omnipresent threat of death and disease.[12] "My Mother's Garden" opens

with the narrator's visit to the contamination zone, where she is going to see her mother, who has left the "new home" (275) in order to spend the rest of her life together with her friend in her old one. The relationship between Yulia and her mother is tense, due to their disagreement concerning the danger of living in the contaminated old place. When Yulia meets the two old women, she knows that "[t]hey were waiting for me to touch them, a kiss or a pat, but I hesitated, and the moment passed" (276). The fear of contamination and the resulting danger are closely connected to the longing and refusal to touch each other, and a gap opens up between mother and daughter emotionally and physically, a gap that cannot easily be crossed. It seems that Yulia, who is torn between the desire to visit her mother and her concern for her family's health, cannot reach across this distance to her mother, who denies and ignores the danger of living in her old beloved homeplace. Thus, while the narrator tries to convince her mother that their old home is contaminated by radiation, her mother insists that everything is normal, even healthy, since the produce of her garden grows more abundantly and bigger than ever before. For Yulia's mother the garden signifies home, a paradise where she lives peacefully, growing vegetables that taste better than ever. For Yulia herself, the garden symbolizes not only the exact opposite, the loss of paradise and home, it furthermore stands for the insidious, invisible, and inexorable death the atomic monster of progress has brought to its inhabitants. Whereas for the older generation the garden is a symbol of paradise, for the younger generation it acts as a constant reminder of the accident, a fall from grace, which has banished them from the Garden Eden. The dispute over the contaminated vegetables signifies helplessness vis-à-vis a generation of parents who cannot be convinced of the dangers they live in: "Mama showed me a bucketful of green onions she'd grown in her garden. 'Delicious,' she said, chomping on one. 'Here, you try.' 'Mama, you know I won't eat that,' I said." (276) Yulia keeps refusing these gifts, just as her mother keeps giving them, and both are convinced that they are doing the right thing. Just as Yulia cannot understand the importance the home has for her mother, the mother cannot grasp the deadly threat of the invisible contamination. In their attempts to reach out to each other - the mother's gifts, the daughter's well-meant provisions of uncontaminated food and her insistent pleas to leave that place - they actually seem to widen the distance that separates them.

A physical and emotional distance has developed - not only between Yulia and her mother. Yulia's daughter, Halynka, who has been raised by her grandmother, feels betrayed by both her mother, who forbids her to visit her, and the grandmother herself, who has simply left the family to live in the old place. Moreover, Halynka has lost her best friend, who

died of cancer, and in a more indirect way her father, who tends to live in his own world due to his extended exposure to radiation right after the accident. Halynka is worried about herself as much as about her father, mother, and grandmother, and feels alone. Her life revolves around the central event of the accident, which she experienced as a baby, but whose significance she does not really understand. The whole family has been affected by the accident, which they nevertheless cannot fully comprehend - almost all of them live in a state of denial, dazed by this nightmare that looms above their heads as an ever-present threat and a traumatic memory. Yulia, for instance, is not able to talk to her daughter about her own fears of losing her and her husband to the radiation. Similarly, she cannot convey these sorrows to her mother, who not only refuses to leave the place but consistently invites her grand-daughter to visit her. Therefore, Yulia emerges for her daughter as well as her mother as an insurmountable wall that stands between them as she refuses to let Halynka visit her grandmother.

Not until the end can the three women literally cross the geographic distance and approach each other. The scientist George Hayes, who researches the effects of the nuclear disaster on the environment, can provide adequate information for Halynka to understand the scale of the disaster and its aftereffects. Furthermore, he can visualize the radiation with the help of a special camera as tiny but all-pervasive snowflakes, so that the grandmother sees the contamination of her home with her own eyes. Suddenly the grandmother understands Yulia's precautions, she even asks her to stop coming. In this moment, when the distance between them becomes almost graspable due to its necessity and its urgency in terms of health, Yulia and her mother can reach out to each other. This understanding becomes visible in physical closeness: "I held her tight, wanting to both shake her and kiss her. After twelve long years, she finally understood. She had only needed to see it with her own eyes." (289)

Hayes can provide yet another bridge with which to cross the distance between the contaminated zone and the new home, a distance that is so much larger than the 50 kilometers that separate the two places. He gives Yulia his tape recorder so that Halynka and her grandmother can actually talk to each other, with Yulia functioning as a messenger between them. Hence, the grandmother can explain to her granddaughter why her longing for home is stronger than her fear of radiation and why she does not want Halynka to visit any more. Even more importantly, the tape recorder can also function as a communication channel between Halynka and Yulia, who has not been able to verbalize her fears. Now Yulia can walk through the old hometown on her own and face her past and her lost home while talking to Halynka

about what she feels and remembers about the catastrophe. Going back to her own "old home" for the first time in twelve years, Yulia is finally able to describe her memories of this place and what it looks like now. Furthermore, she understands her own silence with which she has surrounded this event: "I was afraid to come here, to see our old home looking so empty and desolate." (292)

Whereas the accident symbolizes the dangers of progress and the careless use of science, the tape recorder plays a more positive role. The women use it to communicate across the distance that separates them, upholding a certain distance between speaker and listener; the device enables communication without direct confrontation. Yulia uses the tape recorder to relive her memory and tell her own story: "And, I confess, I was eager for my daughter to hear my own story for the first time." (296) For her, this is a relief, and afterwards she can run back to the bus that will take her home feeling "as if in my rush to leave the town I had forgotten myself, just for a moment, and thought that I was still a young girl" (*ibid.*). It seems that Yulia has not only crossed the distance to her mother and her daughter but also the one to herself, dealing with the traumatic experience of losing her home and living with the threat of radiation.

Family relations are also central to Louise Erdrich's short story "The Butcher's Wife".[13] The story's main character is Delphine Watzka, daughter of the town's drunkard, who becomes friends with Eva Waldvogel, wife of the town butcher, shortly before Eva is diagnosed with cancer. It is this fatal illness that affects not only the friendship between the two characters but also their relation to their families. The characters cope in very different ways with Eva's illness and her rapidly declining health. In an attempt to ease her friend's pain, Delphine takes care of her and her family, "just as Eva had done" (51). Eva, who has been hiding her pain for months, faces her diagnosis with black humor and tries not to give in to a feeling of hopelessness. To Delphine, "who cleaned up shameful things in her father's house" (43), Eva is a perfect being - "Eva appeared so fantastically skilled a being, so assured" (*ibid.*) - and the friendship with Eva instills new self-confidence in her. Eva regards her as a friend, not as the pitiable but nevertheless shunned daughter of an alcoholic as other villagers do. Therefore, although Delphine also suffers during Eva's treatments - "shooting pains stabbed her own stomach when the needles went in; she even had a sympathetic morphine sweat" (50) - she does not leave her friend and continues to nurse her. She administers the pain-reducing morphine although "she secretly hated needles, abhorred them, grew sickly hollow when she filled the syringe, and felt the prick in her own flesh when she gave the dose to Eva" (55); she tries to "divert her friend by massaging her sore

hands" (*ibid.*) and she cleans away the signs of Eva's illness, "the sheets, the sweat, the shit, and the blood, always blood" (51). Delphine turns her traumatic experiences with her father, the burden of taking care of him, into a positive skill, a gift that she can give to her friend, who can accept it due to Delphine's own history.

As the women spend more and more time together, they grow closer, although it is not necessarily through words that their thoughts and feelings merge: "Delphine's sense of time passing had to do only with the duration of a dose of opium wine [...] or of the morphine that Dr. Heech had taught her to administer." (55) It is almost as if Eva's pain had become part of Delphine's own body as much as it has become a part of her daily routine. Nevertheless, the women cannot talk about Eva's death in a straightforward and unveiled manner. If they talk about it, it is in an attempt to submerge Eva's imminent death and their subsequent separation in a bout of morbid laughter. When Eva wonders what will happen to her mind after death, Delphine tries to reassure her:

> "Your mind stays itself," Delphine said, as lightly as she could.
> "There you'll be, strumming on your harp, looking down on all the foolish crap people do."
> "I could never play the harp," Eva said. "I think they'll give me a kazoo."
> "Save me a cloud and I'll play a tune with you," Delphine said.
> It wasn't very funny, so they laughed all the harder, louder until tears started in their eyes, then they gasped and fell utterly silent. (53-54)

Similarly, other people are helpless vis-à-vis the illness, notably Eva's husband Fidelis, a man who "shed power, as though there were a bigger man crammed into him" (44). He cannot find words to express his feelings either but finds other ways to do so. A public display of his physical strength is not only an attempt to distract Eva and show her his love (cf. 54-56). It also signifies his utter helplessness, "[s]howing clearly that all his strength was nothing. Against her sickness, he was weak as a child" (56). Delphine's father Roy is similarly helpless in the face of Eva's illness. Due to the sudden and early loss of his wife, Delphine's mother, Roy has become an alcoholic. For Delphine, Roy has become a synonym for shame and a burden, a helpless person whom she has to take care of, clean up after, and keep out of trouble. Yet now Roy comes to Eva's house every day to repay her friendliness towards him, "some- times stinking of schnapps. But, once there, he'd do anything. He'd move the outhouse, shovel guts" (51). He, too, tries to distract Eva from her pain by telling her stories about his life, something he has never done for his own daughter.

The story's crucial event happens one day when Delphine discovers that the last vial has disappeared shortly before Eva's next dose of morphine is due. She assumes correctly that Fidelis's sister Tante Marie-Christine has taken it in her hypocritical religious fervor, damning her sister-in-law's 'addiction' to the medicine. With no chance of getting a new prescription on a holiday, Delphine drives straight to Tante's house and confronts her. Since Tante Marie-Christine has thrown away the morphine, Delphine has to try to find someone who can give her a new prescription. When she has to return empty-handed after hours of searching, she sees her father staggering along the road. Delphine, who has had to deal with her father's drunkenness and his unreliability all her life, is suddenly seized by "an all-seeing rage", and "she suddenly wanted to run him over" (59). Seeing her own helplessness vis-à-vis her friend's illness mirrored in her father, she ponders killing him with the car and imagines that it would mean a new beginning and erase the memories of her chaotic life. Yet when she "drew alongside him, she was surprised to meet his eyes and see that they were clear" (*ibid.*). Even then she thinks the bottle in his hand is booze, but this one time, Roy is more reliable than anyone would have thought possible. He hands her "a brown square-shouldered medicine bottle labelled 'Sulphate of Morphia'" (*ibid.*) that he has stolen from the drugstore. Despite his own need to drown his pain, Roy has surmounted his self-denial and pain-relieving stupor to help Eva.

When Delphine returns, Tante Marie-Christine is "slumped useless in the corner of the kitchen" and Eva's sons are "weeping and holding on to their mother" (60), who is about to kill herself, crazy with pain. Delphine manages to remain calm and administer the painkilling morphine: "She'd come upon so many scenes of mayhem in her own house that now a cold flood of competence descended on her." (*ibid.*) Finally Delphine can take confidence from her own life experience; she turns her shame, her traumatic memories, and her helplessness into strength and competence to help her friend and in a way also herself. Taking the knife away from Eva, she can promise her "not now. Soon enough" (*ibid.*), ambiguously referring to both the medical relief and Eva's coming death. In her friendship to Eva, Delphine has managed to grow beyond herself and see a future for herself, not just a shameful past. Although the two women have not known each other for a long time, their relationship proves to be very deep. While Delphine is given self- confidence and the feeling of being part of a family for the first time, Eva can accept her friend's care and nurturing without embarrassment and the feeling of being a burden. Eva's illness, her growing dependency, and her imminent death complicate their friendship, but both women do not perceive this as a gap or a distance between them. They

substitute the words they lack to talk about this with a feeling of care that brings them closer together and that helps even Delphine and Roy to reach momentarily, silently, across the void that the loss of Delphine's mother has created between them. Emotional communication, acts of caring and nurturing prove to be just as important as words to bridge the distances between them.

This friendship can be contrasted with another quite unusual relation described in Trevanian's "The Apple Tree".[14] This story explores a love-hate relationship between two old women who live in a small community in a Basque village, a community which follows their rivalry in an attentive and yet bemused manner. Both women continually insist on being different from each other, but their lives are nevertheless astonishingly similar, a fact on which the narrator comments indirectly and ironically. The story's opening line introduces the object around which their rivalry culminates and which at the same time comes to signify the futility of their competition:

> The Widow Etcheverrigaray took great pride in the splendid apple tree that grew on the boundary of her property, just beyond the plot of leeks that every year were the best in all the village; and her neighbor and lifelong rival, Madame Utuburu, drew no less gratification from the magnificent apple tree near the patch of *piments* that made her the envy of all growers of that sharp little pepper. (311)

Although they would never admit this, both women take pride in the same things, symbolized in the apple tree, which they in fact share. As we follow the "bitter rivalry the two women cultivated and nourished for most of their lives" (*ibid.*), more and more correspondences and parallels between their characters and their lives emerge. The more any one of them points to their differences, the more alike they become, and in the end it is clear that they indeed need each other for luck and happiness.

While the narrator illuminates this need for the other, the need for competition and the feeling of difference, he also makes clear how constructed this rivalry is. In a delightfully naive and comic way he explains that "[w]hen young, one of them had been accounted the most beautiful girl in our village, while the other was considered the most graceful and charming - although in later years no one could remember which had been which, and, sadly, no evidence of these qualities remained to prompt the memory" (*ibid.*). The narrator undermines the women's efforts to be different by showing instead how similar they are. Thus, the reader gets to know that both Widow Etcheverrigaray and Madame Utuburu were in love with "the cheeky rascal" Zabala, but that the two women married two "simple shepherds far beneath their expectations"

instead (312). Again we learn a lot about village life as well as about human nature in general as the narrator points out that

> both women had given birth to babies after only seven months of gestation. Short first pregnancies do not occasion criticism in our valley, for it is widely known that the good Lord often makes first pregnancies mercifully brief as His reward to the girl for having preserved her chastity until marriage. [...] Is it not marvelous how one finds justice and balance in everything? (*ibid.*).

The human search for other people's faults, the urge to judge shortcomings as well as the attempt find excuses for them is beautifully exposed; even more importantly, the arbitrariness of certain human norms and values is uncovered.

Even after their marriage, both women's lives are parallel. Their husbands die quite soon and both have sons who leave the village as soon as possible to become famous and successful elsewhere. Widow Etcheverrigaray's son is a "clever and hardworking scholar" (313) and Madame Utuburu's son is in contrast "the most powerful and crafty player of jai alai our village ever produced" (314). Both sons send their mothers tokens of their achievements, Etcheverrigaray receives a boring and complicated book written by her son, whereas Utuburu gets a silk cushion with "a beautiful (if rather immodest) woman painted on it" (315). As a sign of their pride and, more importantly, as a sign of their superiority vis-à-vis the other, Etcheverrigaray and Utuburu miss no opportunity to show off these tokens of "prodigal generosity" (*ibid.*) and brilliance. Of course, both women criticize the other's behavior: while Utuburu cannot understand why someone would show off "a stupid old book" *(ibid.),* Etcheverrigaray is annoyed by "the way some people forever lugged about a dusty old cushion" (316).

This rivalry belies a dependency on each other, which culminates when the women end up as next-door neighbors. While the garden produce, which is "the finest (or second-finest) [...] in our village" (316), is a sign of their competition, the apple tree, which grows exactly on the border between their gardens, signifies their similarities and the fact that their lives are closely intertwined. It is around this tree that their rivalry reaches its peak. When they pick apples on the same day, they get into a dispute that quickly turns physical before the neighbors can intervene. This direct and physical confrontation has disrupted an invisible rule - had the two rivals until then only referred indirectly to each other, complaining about nameless people whose description and behavior innocently and quite accidentally matched the other, Utuburu and Etcheverrigaray now openly disparage each other. This open rivalry adds a lot to the village's amusement, but it takes a tragic turn when

Zabala suddenly dies. Their competition takes on an absurd quality when both women remain standing at the grave in full rain after the funeral to "win" the honor of being the "chief mourner" (351). They remain there until the priest leads them away to put an end to this game. When the Widow Etcheverrigaray does not go to mass the next morning, the reader already suspects that there is something wrong with her. Madame Utuburu, however, reads this behavior as yet another trick to win the honor of being the chief mourner and is quite shocked when the Widow is found dead in her kitchen, due to a fever she caught at the funeral.

As a result, it is after her rival's death that Madame Utuburu "sat in her neighbor's kitchen for the first time in her life" (323), observing the traditional mourning ceremony. She is urged by the other mourners to "follow the ancient tradition and take some little trifle from the house as a memento of the Departed One" (*ibid.*). After some hesitation, Madame Utuburu indeed takes a memento that gives the whole village much food for thought - her rival's beloved book. However, not until after the funeral does Utuburu realize the extent of her own loneliness. Suddenly, even "the task of planting a garden at all seemed terribly heavy and unrewarding" (324) without a neighbor to show it off to.

"The Apple Tree" makes quite clear that Widow Etcheverrigaray and Madame Utuburu cannot live without each other. Like close friends, even a loving couple, they depend upon each other; literally, they are each other's death, but in a sense, they have also provided for themselves "not something to live for, but maybe something to live *against*" (*ibid.*, emphasis in the original). Their relationship is of a peculiar sort - in their lifelong attempt to create a distinguishing gap between them, they have really become more similar. Only in the end does Madame Utuburu realize that she needs her 'other,' Widow Etcheverrigaray, to define herself, as a 'vexing incentive' to push herself to greater achievements than otherwise possible. Therefore, the next time Madame Utuburu visits the village, she carries not only her be- loved cushion but also, to the astonishment of the whole village, "The Book" (325), her memento of the Widow. As always, she talks about her own son's achievement, only this time she adds to it by praising Etcheverrigaray's son and his success as well. As a result, "Madame Utuburu kept the Widow Etcheverrigaray alive for several years longer. And herself too" (*ibid.*). The story is a clever and charming comment on the human character and its insistence on essentialist differences, on a strict opposition between self and other. At the same time, it is a portrait of an unusual friendship, which is all the more touching and true as it points out the inconsistencies and illogical behavior that are so often a part of human relationships. The women's relationship is characterized

by closeness as well as by a well-kept distance that 'hides' this closeness only to a certain extent. Only when Etcheverrigaray's death enlarges the gap between them infinitely can Utuburu reach across the distance, admit their similarity, and weave a connective thread out of an emotion that lies somewhere between love and hate.

These stories concentrate on human relationships and processes of (mis)communication. Their focus lies in the private realm of home and family; nevertheless this allows the authors to comment on larger issues of society. The stories' characters struggle with their everyday lives as well as with their more or less successful attempts to relate to and communicate with other people. Distances, voids, and estrangements of all kinds figure prominently. They can be of a geographic or temporal sort (e.g. in "Seven") or an emotional one (as in "The Apple Tree"). They can be constructed culturally or socially ("Assimilation") or caused by concrete forces like migration and displacement ("Mrs. Sen's"). Moreover, quite often the distances these characters attempt to bridge are intricately intertwined with their search for a place, geographic, emotional or otherwise, where they feel at home ("My Mother's Garden"). It seems that in our age of globalization and technological progress, when geographic distances decrease with the possibility of instant (virtual) travel, when capitalism, war, and economic need increase migrations around the globe, distances more than ever play a vital role in human relationships. As has been frequently observed, globalization not only leads to extended possibilities of cultural exchange, hybridization, and border transgressions; it also kindles opposing phenomena like nationalism, (cultural) conservatism or the (re-)drawing and enforcing of rigid borders. As the world moves closer together, the safe distance and clear separations between 'here' and 'there' and between what is perceived as self and as other decrease, something which requires new, additional skills of communication and of living together. The authors analyzed here turn to the private realm to discuss these issues and use the private realm to exemplify the problems of larger society.[15] It is 'at home' that we learn how to communicate, how to bridge distances to others, and how to negotiate boundaries and differences between our- selves and others. Society, networks of human relations are made not in the abstract realm of the 'out there,' but more immediately at home. Vis-à-vis growing conflicts on a global, international level, a great number of short stories seem to turn to a more 'local' level to scrutinize human relationships. In the stories, the protagonists attempt to bridge the gaps that open up between them and others, their spouses, lovers, friends, children, parents and neighbors. Although they are not always successful, "their need [...] to form meaningful connections with others" is stronger than their fear of failing.[16] What these disparate stories can

teach us is that there is always the possibility and the necessity to reach out, to love "each other across the distance" (Alexie, 20) even though this might involve leaving behind the safe position of what we consider 'our self, or a stable sense of identity.

Notes

1 *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English.* 6th Edition. Oxford: OUP, 2000.I would like to thank Stefanie Eversberg for her critical comments on this essay.
2 Cf. e.g. recent novels like Jonathan Franzen's much celebrated *The Corrections* (2001), which is also deeply concerned with family relationships. See also Astrid Böger's essay in this issue, in which she observes that a lot of recent American short stories are concerned with the relationships between family members.
3 Alexie (2001: 1-20). Further references to this edition will be included in the text.
4 *The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (1997).
5 *Ibid*.
6 Danticat (2002: 35-46). Further references to this edition included in the text.
7 Lahiri (2000:111-135). Further references to this edition included in the text.
8 It is quite ironic that a woman who has traveled thousands of miles is immobilized in the very country that symbolizes freedom and unlimited space.
9 Another decisive difference between the two women is their mobility: "It seemed so simple when he sat beside his mother [...]. Then the road was just a road, the other cars merely a part of the scenery. But when he sat with Mrs. Sen [...] he saw how that same stream of cars made her knuckles pale, her wrists tremble, and her English falter" (120-121).
10 Being able to drive does not really solve her problem. Eliot suggests that she "could go places" but to her question "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta?" (119) he knows no answer. Her network of friends and family cannot be replaced by a car.
11 Shonk (2001: 275-295). Further references to this edition included in the text.
12 The story refers, of course, to the nuclear catastrophe that happened in Chernobyl.
13 Erdrich (2002: 41-60). Further references to this edition included in the text. This story, which won third place in the O. Henry Awards, is part of Erdrich's most recent novel *Master Butcher's Singing Choir*.
14 Trevanian (2001: 311-325). Further references to this edition included in the text. Trevanian also writes under the pen names Rodney Whitaker and Nicholas Seare.
15 Cf. David Morley, who points out the various links between "micro structures of the home, the family and the domestic realm" and the "macro debates about the nation, community and cultural identities" (1999: 271).
16 Shonk (n.d.).

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