Acknowledgments

I see this thesis as a bouquet. Each of the steps in its making – the flowers being picked, pruned, trimmed and tied together with a ribbon of common theme – was a small adventure within the larger quest. A few were involved in the entire process, some added a precious item here and there, suggestions of many were of great value, and watching the rest provided much inspiration. The contribution of each is significant in this valuable unlearning and learning experience and what follows is only a humble attempt at expressing my gratitude for the same.

It is impossible to ignore Raffaella’s indomitable energy and the almost-infectious optimism. Even when she had five students to supervise, three of them very close to finishing, the amount of attention she devoted to our work made each of us feel we were the only ones she was responsible for. I can only see all the projects presented in this thesis as ‘our’ projects. She has just always been there, guiding the work at the same time giving enough space for independent thought, taking every idea with the same seriousness and interest, helping create collaborations, recognising the impact of our results, reading through the drafts at lightning speed, and being understanding whenever the situation demanded.

It is a privilege to have someone with as critical an eye as Tom on our side. I highly admire his capability to pick up small nuances that, in fact, have large implications and introduce an entirely new point of view. Also, special thanks to him for giving the finishing touches to my Dutch summary. I fear that I may not be able to sufficiently express my gratitude for all that I have received from my supervisors and hope it suffices to say that this thesis is not because of me but in spite of me.

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Huug too, by his mere presence, inspired us. That he was in the office next to mine perhaps added a special touch to it. Right from my initial weeks until the last days before the institute became temporarily inaccessible due to the pandemic, I have had the good fortune to interact with him personally on numerous occasions. He was always interested in our work, the general well being, and always had a kind word for each of us. The memory of Huug passing through my field of view and smilingly pausing for just a moment to raise his mug in a very sweet greeting warms my heart even today.

Christa, Lucia, Martine, Maria and Ramona made life extremely smooth and added an entirely different flavour to the times at Kapteyn. I am especially grateful for their very warm consideration since the onset of the pandemic without which completing this thesis would have been infinitely harder. I warmly cherish all our sweet little chats at the almost-empty institute about everything from snow to environment to politics to holidaying to defending the thesis. Without them, Kapteyn would not have felt like home.

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Acknowledgments

I was very lucky for getting the warmest office at Kapteyn, both literally and figuratively. Being in an office into which the sun shines (clouds permitting) the whole day was most convenient. The figurative warmth is due to the wonderful people the office currently has and has had in the past. Initially, I found Jack’s VLBI wisdom, Alessandro’s logical tautologies, Zheng’s quiet interest in gaming, art and culture, and the icy presence of Alberta (the eternal inhabitant of Office 153) very welcoming. I cannot forget the times with Yanan, our pseudo officemate, working late nights at the institute. Then there was Shuaibo a fleeting visitor we happened to have for a couple of months just before the onset of the pandemic. The following summer saw Mark being around in the office for a short while.

The best time in the office was with Anqi and Ruslan with whom I shared the space the longest. While it was already wonderful to have another girl in the office, having Anqi was like icing on the cake. She always made herself available for numerous discussions about work which has been of great help all through. Our chats on culture, life and the world, in general, were also thoroughly enjoyable. Ruslan, with his simplicity, added colour to our times in Office 153. His knowledge of Indian songs had already baffled me when I had first met him during his interview. Later on, as officemates, all three of us have had various memorable moments sharing experiences, supporting each other, and playing Ruslan’s strange games such as Bean Bamboozled. I am extremely grateful to both of them for coming in at the right moment and being there each time there was a need.

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Punya keeps disappearing ever so often, being driven uncontrollably by wanderlust, and lives for the rest of the time in a parallel universe. But her knack of appearing to give a push, a pat, a goad, a slap, or whatever is needed at the moment has been a true lifesaver over the last four years. The times we spent together singing, discussing, arguing and getting goosebumps over so many varied topics form some of my best, best moments in Groningen.

Cosmos had to work hard to get the absolutely unwilling Apu and me to talk. Despite taking the same flight from India, the same train to Groningen, starting at the university on the same (non-standard) day and belonging to institutes just a few steps apart, we spoke only at the strong urging of the IWCN receptionist in the first of the many appointments with the Dutch bureaucracy. Fortuitously, we were always one behind the other in the queue for all these appointments and enduring this ordeal together helped us transition quickly from being acquaintances to close friends. Avanti helped me with moving here, took care of my needs when I just landed and was my go-to person for everything in the initial days. How these individual friendships changed to us becoming a trio is vague. The late-night musings about the cobweb of complexes in the brain, the badminton weekends, the lunches, the wanderings around the campus and sometimes the city, the Dhanashree thillana, the heated arguments, the irritating improvisations of Avanti’s favourite songs, optimising our late-night instant Rava-idli snacks, Apu’s never-ending power naps at the institute, being there in weal and woe ... before I knew, friends had become family.

I perhaps should, but do not know how to acknowledge my family whom I cannot see as an entity separate from myself.

In most of my encounters with people of some greatness, I have keenly felt that they are great and I am small. Only a few rare personalities exude a sense of equality while being truly great. It is my greatest good fortune to have come in contact with many of this class without whose mention this piece would be incomplete. However, a mere word picture stands the risk of becoming gooey. An expression of gratitude to them is thus best left to stay beyond words.

It is hard to resist acknowledging the silent influence of the Netherlands, though. Here I saw the most beautiful night skies, heard the meteors whiz past, came across spectacular murmurations of starlings, witnessed the ocean eat up the land and give it back in a matter of several hours, and was mesmerised by the numerous different rainbows. The ever-changing day-length and the never-stable weather brought back to recollection more often than ever that I am riding on a planet going around a star, so are you, and so is everybody else...