I had never thought about how tough, in reality, it would be to do a PhD in a country of which I knew nothing except for its reputation for tulips and painters. Obviously (and fortunately!) I did this with the support and help of many people and organisations.

Amina, you have helped me and always been willing to do so in many different occasions, not only related to my work but also to my well-being. Thanks for all the belief and encouragement, especially in those days when things weren’t going well.

My thanks also go to Simon, who has always astonished me with how much one can know about Science with such great details. Your kind words and encouragement always eased a student’s nervous mind.

Gabriella, I really owe you on the semi-analytic business and more! Thank you for always being so open and critical to my ideas, sharing your invaluable experiences with me and always willing to help me out.

Felix, without your simulations, 3/4 of my thesis would not have been there. Volker Springel made available the codes and the post-processes for the simulations.

Scott, thanks for having such confidence in me and being understanding. Eline, I appreciate your words as an experienced observer. The comments from both of you contributed greatly to my last piece of work, making it more down to the earth.

Wing-Huen Ip, Wen-Ping Chen and Diana Ip at the Institute of Astronomy, National Central University who gave me the final push to go abroad.

The following organisations and funds are cordially acknowledged for the financial support for conferences, schools and visits to MPA and other institutes: Kapteyn, MPA, LKBF, NWO, IAU, MPIA and AIP.

To the management team and secretaries at Kapteyn: Thijs, Piet, Hennie, Lucia, Greta, Jackie and Geneke (Hennie and Jackie especially, thank you for always being very patient with me); the Kapteyn computer team, Wim, Eite and Martin.

During my PhD, I’ve spent a substantial time at the MPA in Garching. I’d like to thank Maria, Corniela and the computing group there for making my stays go smoothly. Also to my friends there: Wang Jie, Wang Jin and Gao Liang for keeping healthy my limited social life and for the discussions about the cross-straight issues.

Ching-Lan Huang is warmly thanked for making the thesis cover. Else Starkenburg for translating the summary into Dutch, and Mark den Brok for the proof-reading.

My academic siblings: Martin, Giusy, Álvaro, Facundo, Else and Laura, thanks for enduring my seemingly-never-ending-and-drifting words with great patience and for teaching me many things during our Friday meetings, which occasionally took place at the sunny balcony.

Hsiao-Wen, thank you for the constant support and honest comments, especially in the difficult moments. Chin-Lan, I’m very happy that you are still employed after spending so much of your office hours listening to my ‘daily soap opera’ in 2005... Yann-Shan, thank you for being so different from my usual crowd and so understanding.

Jan and Hana, thank you for fulfilling my curiosity about your homeland in your cozy flat at Groningen and Olomouc.

I would not have been able to come to this far without the company of all my friends who I met in Groningen. Álvaro, Giusy, Jelte and Bruno, thank you for integrating me into your colourful social group, which has eventually evolved but still survives... My friends who made my days colourful and kept me fed and entertained in the last year: Peter, Antonela, Mirjam, Paolo, Ayşin, Boris, JP, Matias and Facundo. Thank you all taking me as who I am.

Antonela (:D), in the last months you managed to survive my constant bombardments about my very ‘interesting’ daily life as a finishing PhD student. Thanks for your wit and for
being such a comforting personality.

Facundo, I sometimes wonder whether you are a fair representative of Argentineans due to your European origin... Anyway, thanks for not twisting my arm to join those “Facundo’s choice” movie nights.

Peter, I’m so honoured to have witnessed your evolution, which Facundo described in his speech. I’m always impressed by how well you can take other people’s ideas, which might be very different from yours, and yet you are still able to have a fair discussion. And I agree with Paolo that your music is terrible and more terrible than that is your heartfelt invitations of your concerts...

Álvaro, thank you for being so very kind to me when I first appeared in our office and for providing me with numerous tips for survival. Btw, the bike we picked up on my second day has finally stopped working after 4 years...

Giusy, thank you for initiating so many relaxing aperitifs and social events. Such as those good old days when we were all shaking outside on the Poelestraat because the weather was nice (by Dutch standards). Also for showing me the great advantage of having a friend in town while I was in Munich.

Paolo, I can’t remember how many times I’ve bored you with my miserable(?) life and lingered in your office and at your place. For that I might consider teaching Sofie some of my ninjia skills. Thanks for the intellectual(?) discussions and all the comfort.

Mirjam, I think that you are probably the one who knows most of my s_____. Thanks for sharing my happiness and my worries and, most importantly, for being a normal happy non-astronomer!

Uncle Bruno, I think after all these years I can name you as my greatest challenger without any doubt. Through those constant challenges (including watching two of the worst movies ever produced by your English-speaking country fellow), I’ve grown stronger. And you need to know that it doesn’t make DTF chicken dumplings good just because the vegetarian ones are not!

Dr. Martin Smith, here I quote what you asked for to keep my words: “Without the help of Martin C. Smith this thesis wouldn’t have been possible. He truly is the greatest living scientist I have ever met (sorry Simon)”. I hope this is enough to pay back the time you had spent tweaking the introduction and the summary, etc... Thanks for being the ‘seal’ and teaching me the usage of ‘proper’ and ‘naff’ though sometimes I know that you really “can’t be bothered” but still saved me at many critical moments.

To the current inhabitants of the old house at Oude Kijk in’t Jartstraat: Matias and JP I have great memories of the most enjoyable parties (usually related to heavy drinking), which happened in the house before your time. Thanks for continuing this nice tradition and added to these memories with your ‘wild’ South-American ambience.

Ayçin and Elif, thank you both for caring about how I was doing and for stopping by to talk to me, especially in the last months when I was even less sociable than I usually am...

Else, I felt ashamed of putting such responsibility on you because of my insufficient Dutch. Thanks for taking this task and for all the nice discussions we had, especially in Tenerife!

Teffie, Alicia, Esra and Gert, thanks for the good times and talks we’ve shared, and Jelte for your kindness anywhere and at any time as always.

Bjorn, Álvaro, Christian, Boris, André and Attila, thanks for being so easy-going in our offices. Boris, thanks for bringing the dynamic elements into the office.

Finally, I’d like to thank the anonymous referee of my group infall paper. I forgot to do so in the final version of the paper and I hope you will see this. The organising committee of
the XX Canary Islands Winter School and the people who have contributed to this school are kindly acknowledged. I’m glad that I could conclude my thesis during such a nice event.

acknowledgements

Yang-Shyang Li
Puerto de la Cruz, Tenerife
November, 2008

p.s. To Paolo, Martin and Facundo, I support Czech Republic football!