Guest editorial

Thrice-born and in-between? Exploring the *Différance* between "At-home" ethnography and ethnography abroad

> Our first birth is our natal origin in our culture. Our second birth is our move from the familiar to do fieldwork in a far place. The third occurs when we have become comfortable within the other culture, and turn our gaze to our native land. We find the familiar to have become exotic, and see it with new eyes [...] Thrice-born anthropologists are perhaps in the best position to become the "reflexivity" of a culture (Turner, 1978a, pp. xiii-xiv).

Drawing on the work of M.N. Srinivas, Turner (1978a) has set a tone—one that still reverberates unconventionally across decades—delineating the complexities of studying one's culture. How can the anthropologist doing research "at home" get out of her culture while her colleagues working in a foreign culture struggle to get in? What does it entail to become "thrice-born" and achieve that type of reflexivity especially in contemporary conditions of "post" or "liquid" modernity (Baumann, 2000)? These questions are far from being settled and the articles comprised in this special issue rely upon, question and problematize "at home" ethnography, which is "a study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a 'natural access' and in which s/he is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants" (Alvesson, 2009, p. 159). The issue assesses also how and if this approach differs from what could be called "ethnography abroad," where the researcher-author must negotiate access and seeks to become a "native" in a "foreign" setting (Alvesson, 2009).

The title of the special issue alludes to our aim of identifying the normative pretensions commonly associated with "at home" vs "abroad" dichotomies, and venture into an analysis of its inherent dynamics and complexities. It seeks to problematize not only notions of "at home" and "abroad," but also the ways in which these are typically equated with familiarity and estrangement. In this respect, this special issue sets to explore the *différance* between "at home" ethnography and ethnography abroad, and thus to question the taken for granted oppositions inherent in this distinction, such as closeness vs distance, insider vs outsider, us vs them, or local vs global. Specifically, *différance* (Derrida, 1976) refers to the ongoing deferral of meaning, or endless interplay between the words "at home" and "abroad." Such interplay becomes increasingly complex in these times of globalization where complex societies are increasingly dispersed and mediated (see Couldry, 2003; see also Hannerz, 1992), and where life-spheres are "indeterminate and ambiguous" (Johnsen and Meier Sørensen, 2015, p. 323). Hence, the collection of articles in this issue reflects on the liminality and in-betweenness of being "at home abroad" as well as being "abroad at home" in organizational ethnography; they address how "insider- outsider/outsider-insider" dialogue can be accomplished in organizational ethnography; and describe the "rites of passage" (Van Gennep, 1909/1960) researchers go through when doing organizational ethnography.

By promoting reflection on the *différance* between "at home" ethnography and ethnography abroad, this special issue provides insights into the challenges of conducting an organizational ethnography in one's "home" organization, community, or country *vis-à-vis* doing so in a "foreign" organization, community, or country, as well as develops useful conceptual and methodological ways for dealing with them. This is important because we still know too little about the obstacles faced when one is a native among natives, so to speak. For instance, in his ethnography of a district level hospital in Bangladesh, Zaman's (2008, p. 135) "nativity" was twofold: as a Bangladeshi doing

fieldwork in the country, and as a medical doctor studying a hospital, the domain of doctors. Despite such familiarity and easy access to the setting, he encountered difficulties due to in-group/out-group identification dynamics. Even though he received information because the doctors considered him to be one of them, that identification with a particular subgroup caused issues when approaching nurses and junior staff (they maintained some distance). Then, because of the very fact that the doctors considered him to be one of them, he could not ask them "innocent questions" (Zaman, 2008, p. 147) about procedures or acts (they thought he knew the answer or that he was joking or trying to be critical). Thus, Zaman's (2008) encounters raise relevant questions concerning familiarity, access, participant observation and observant participation (i.e. moving from front stage to back stage in the study of an organization, and thereby gaining information and knowledge that is otherwise available only to insiders, Moeran, 2009). Since predominant research still takes for granted issues of natural access (see li-Kauhaluoma and Pantzar, 2016; Natifu, 2016; Ybema and Horvers, 2017), the intricacies of operating in a context where one is in close contact with people who are already familiar to the ethnographer are not sufficiently addressed so far. How can proximity and the same cultural background allow reflexivity since neither distance nor familiarity is a guarantee of objectivity? (see Van Dongen and Fainzang, 1998). And, echoing Rabinow's (1977) reflections on familiarity, no matter how far participation and nativity may push the ethnographer in the direction of non-otherness, isn't the context still ultimately dictated by observation and externality? And to what extent shall the ethnographer simultaneously remain a "professional stranger," as Agar (2008) described the ethnographer's role *vis-à-vis* the field?

The articles in this special issue can be said to deepen our understanding of issues such as distance, familiarity and reflexivity, which are particularly challenging when one studies organizations in one's home country in comparison to doing such work abroad. Indeed, when a researcher "works and/or lives in the setting" (Alvesson, 2009, p. 159) she studies, she is considered to have excellent access to the object of study and is therefore able to produce close accounts of what is being studied. However, calls are made for additional efforts to avoid tunnel vision due to the potential difficulties specific to "at home" ethnography (e.g. "making the familiar strange," Van Maanen, 1995, p. 20; Alvesson, 2003). Ybema and Horvers (2017) put forward a repertoire through which a certain amount of "distance" can be created in order to escape such specific traps facing the researcher's insider position. First, the "at home" ethnographer is recommended to address phenomena with which she maybe not deeply involved, allowing her to look at events from a researcher's, rather than a member's, point of view. Second, collaboration between an "insider" and an "outsider" in both fieldwork (conducted with the help of a master's student) and headwork (a joint effort of potential co-authors) is recommended as it may help to avoid one-sidedness (Ybema and Horvers, 2017). The articles in this issue extend our knowledge of the different techniques "at home" ethnographers use to achieve distance in the study of public institutions (universities) and less conventional forms of organizing such as cooperatives, intensive care units, paramedics divisions and artist collectives. But also the special issue's articles provide insight about the challenges specific to the study of global organizations—e.g., multinational pharmaceutical companies—which will rarely become familiar in their entirety given their dispersed nature (Marschan-Piekkari *et al.*, 2004).

Further, the articles in this issue address the complexities specific to negotiating the power asymmetries and possible tensions between the ethnographer's academic home and the needs of the respective research sites. It is widely established that during fieldwork the "researcher's power is negotiated, not given" (Merriam *et al.*, 2001, p. 409). However, the extent to which this negotiation is possible remains relatively not explored in the literature, given unique power scenarios and ethnographer's prior roles and acquaintance with informants. Discussions of reflexivity have typically focused on the social location of the ethnographer and the ways in

which the researcher's emotional responses to participants' power positions may influence the analysis of the former's narratives (Adams, 1999). Certainly situating oneself socially and emotionally in relation to participants is a crucial part of reflexivity (Alvesson, 2003). Establishing and maintaining an appropriate degree of both social and emotional distance requires the ethnographer to determine what is the appropriate level of distancing, which is not an easy task especially when he or she is on familiar terms with informants. Ethnographers aim to foster dialogue, recognize participants' agency and create spaces for multiple voices in published outputs (Simpson and Seibold, 2008). Nonetheless, barriers in the research process such as divergent timeframes and temporalities and conflict over interpretation of the data are widely acknowledged (Barbour *et al.*, 2017). Natifu (2016), for instance, shows how using one's firsthand knowledge of the institutional culture and informants can help identify the nuances of power dynamics such as defining the time and space of field interviews and limiting access to superior informants. The articles in this special issue delve deeper into the difficulties ethnographers experience (e.g. balancing discretion, ethics, power dilemmas and maintaining relational ties) and ways of dealing with such roadblocks when one uses friendships and pre-existing relations as means to access. Such insights are important since it is typically assumed that "[i]nsiderness coupled with intimate knowledge of and an emotional attachment to one's informants makes objectivity incredibly difficult and leaves very little room for analytic distance" (Taylor, 2011, p. 15). Our aspiration with this collection of ethnographic studies and perspectives on the everyday life of organization is to generate more analytical and methodological insights concerning how one can break out of the presupposed familiarity of being "at home." This is especially critical when one studies a wide spectrum of complex organizing forms ranging from public institutions, to multinational organizations to fluid and loose social collectives, in which the ethnographer continuously shifts across different roles and multiple sites, and holds different degrees of in- and outsider-ness, at home-ness, and out-of-placeness (Marcus, 1995; see also Cnossen, this issue).

The first two articles deal with the constantly shifting epistemic status and inclinations of ethnographers situated in familiar environments. Building on data from a recent fieldwork in an Intensive Care Unit, Letizia Caronia proposes to consider "at home ethnography" and "ethnography abroad" not as labels standing for different kinds of fieldwork "out there" but rather as categories identifying the ethnographer's situated, relative and ever changing epistemic status. The article identifies the different epistemic circumstances that originate from the entanglement of the multiple territories of knowledge at stake in any ethnography of complex organizations. Her analysis shows how the participants' relative access to knowledge and rights to claim it vary according to the circumstances and the unfolding of the interaction. The article advances that the ethnographer oscillates between "being abroad" and "being at home" as if she was constantly moving between the two classical positions of ethnographic work: making the familiar strange as it is typical of ethnographies focusing on the "very 'ordinariness' of normality" (Ybema *et al.*, 2009, p. 2), and making the strange familiar as it is typical of anthropologists studying "exotic" communities. The article addresses the limits of the "insider/outsider" doctrines (Bartunek and Louis, 1996) that still pervades contemporary ethnographies, and proposes cognitive bilocation as the unavoidable and challenging mind-set of any ethnographer-in-the-field.

Malm Tobias in his ethnographic study as a rock musician investigated the organizationality of rock bands, that is how these fluid social collectives achieve organizational identity and actorhood (Wilhoit and Kisselburgh, 2017). Drawing on his first hand experiences and reflections, he illustrates how close familiarity, at first, made the researcher look for shared practices on a collective level, which gradually revealed an inability to see anything interesting at all. Eventually, distancing encouraged articulation of suppressed questions.

This article conceptualizes and builds further upon previous discussions on "at home" ethnography, adding insights into the "breaking out" process and the curious paradox of the proposed necessity for the researcher to both leave and utilize his/her "at home" experience and familiarity. The article illustrates two central aspects that may characterize the "breaking out" process, namely its passive and active sides. The findings also indicate that too much active breaking out also may pose a major risk in "at home" ethnography. If the researcher's breaking out means leaving the practitioner self and developing of a one-sided outsider identity, there may be a risk of getting lost in myopia and "abstractions in which specific processes, acts and events are turned into unrecognizability" (Alvesson, 2009, p. 165). While other related discussions mainly seem to deal with how "at home' researchers" experience and familiarity affects the research process, this article casts a new light on how these aspects may also have an impact on what kind of knowledge production is possible.

The next article seeks similarly to probe the limits of the "at home/abroad" dichotomy here with particular attention to how ethnographers negotiate ideals such as "a moderate degree of involvement" and "right moments" (Alvesson, 2009, p. 160) when doing fieldwork. Kirstie McCallum focuses on how her status as an international academic wanting to maintain "local" research relationships in her country of origin both improved and derailed the process of conducting an organizational ethnography. Theoretically, the article shows how a glocal engaged scholarship project problematized the meanings of being "at home" and "away" in terms of negotiating the organizational and occupational commitments that pulled her as a researcher and the research project in competing directions. In this case, her academic "home" influenced her preferred projects and methodologies, while organizational needs and desires sometimes pulled her "away." As McCallum points out, managing these multiple commitments requires constant reflection on two key questions: "To whom and to what was I committed?" Theoretically, the article shows how contemporary processes of globally mobile academic labor and local sites of research become entangled, undermining a dichotomous view of being "local-at home" and "global-away." By documenting the multiple ways of being "home" and "away," this article makes several contributions. First, it nuances how engaged scholars manage "insider/outsider" research (Bartunek and Louis, 1996), since their status as an organizational insider and outsider is dynamic and emergent, as their commitments evolve. Second, since the study is situated in a context of unprecedented academic mobility and the promotion of boundaryless careers (Kim, 2009), the findings provide an empirical account in the form of a confessional tale (Van Maanen, 2011) of the challenges involved in crossing the geographic, organizational, and professional boundaries that accompany any glocal engaged scholarship project.

Raising further questions about how the notion of "being at home" deconstructs itself in the actual practice of fieldwork, Boris Brummans and Jennie Hwang provide a more nuanced picture of the challenges of being a "foreigner" in one's own organization, community, or country. The article questions and reflects on the spatial metaphors that inform Alvesson's (2009) conception of an organizational home in his description of "at home" ethnography. (Cultural) hybridity is proposed as an alternative metaphor because the concept of hybridity can be used to highlight the complex nature of the relationships between an "at home" ethnographer and the people she or he studies as they are produced during ethnographic work in an era where multiple (organizational) cultural sites are increasingly connected; where (organizational) cultural boundaries are uncertain; and where the notion of (organizational) culture itself is opaque, rather than transparent. Brummans and Hwang suggest that it may be more appropriate to speak of hybrid home ethnography, rather than "at home" ethnography. The article puts forward the concept of (cultural) hybridity and shows that this concept provides a useful metaphor for understanding and studying one's own organizational home in these times of globalization where complex societies and the social collectivities of which they are composed are increasingly dispersed and mediated. The value of Brummans

and Hwang's metaphor is briefly illustrated through a hypothetical study of an academic department. The metaphor of (cultural) hybridity reveals how studying one's own organizational home (or homes) entails investigating a web of relationships between other organizational members, nonmembers, and oneself (the ethnographer) that are blends of diverse cultures and traditions constituted in the course of everyday communication. In addition, this metaphor shows that liminality (Turner, 1978b) is a key feature of this web and invites "at home" ethnographers to combine first-, second-, and third-person perspectives in their fieldwork, deskwork, and textwork. Moreover, this metaphor highlights the importance of practicing "radical-reflexivity" in this kind of ethnography.

While the previous articles show that observation and participation across multiple familiar sites cross-cuts dichotomies, such as "at home" and "abroad," the next three articles address in more depth how ethnographers perform multiple identities and still pursue the Sisyphean task of becoming a "native" in a global and fluid organizational context. Boukje Cnossen, in her study of a community of artists based in Amsterdam, confronts the duality between "at-home" ethnography, and ethnography in an unfamiliar environment, and problematizes the idea of "natural access." In her article, she reflects on her experiences with what she calls "us-vs-them" situations as a starting point to explore how organizational ethnographers may work productively with these roles. She finds that the strong familiarity with the research context makes it difficult for "at home" ethnographers to have "break downs" (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). Cnossen works explicitly with "the processual nature of the researcher's self" (Alvesson, 2009, p. 169) and finds that in fragile organizational structures, the organizational ethnographer is one of very few who has a long-term exposure and stable position in the organizational setting. The article shows that in conditions of fragmentation of organizations in multiple industries as an effect of job hopping, remote working, and increased global mobility (Costas, 2013), "at home" ethnographers are in the unique position to experience the organization from within without the constant possibility of being elsewhere.

Drawing on fieldwork within a multinational pharmaceutical company, which is part of a research project jointly financed by a private company and a Danish government fund, Anna Gosovic reflects on the ways in which ethnographers' conflicting identities shape data generation and interpretation processes. Within organizational ethnography, only limited attention has been paid to the simultaneous processes of both "insider" and "outsider" identity creation that take place during fieldwork and the opportunities and limits these identities set for the ethnographic accounts one generates (Alvesson, 2003). Studies have indeed demonstrated the fluid nature of fieldworker identities (Järventie-Thesleff *et al.*, 2016). However, research tends to focus primarily on the identity shifts experienced by researchers when having one foot in academia and another in the context under study, and less on the identities ethnographers acquire within the field and the impact of such identities on knowledge production (for an exception, see e.g. Casey, 1995). Gosovik's article provides a fresh look on our understanding and practice of fieldwork in familiar settings by expanding the literature on fieldworker identities. The article introduces a reflexive framework for understanding the multiple and fluid identities that ethnographers purposefully take on, accidentally acquire, unintentionally are ascribed with and experience during ethnographic fieldwork in familiar settings.

Lastly, based on a study of cooperative organizations that complement the sanitary systems infrastructure in rural areas in Chile, Suarez Delucchi Adriana shows how the assumption of "natural access" oversimplifies the power relationship between the ethnographer and the informants, and overlooks the multi-dimensional nature of this rapport shaped by prevailing cultural values, gender and educational background. The article shows that performing multiple identities can create bewilderment, as it became impossible to distance herself from the different selves ("immigrant in the UK" vs

"academic") in interactions and create "break downs" as traditional research principles would advise. Any attempt to completely subordinate one's own code of ethics, conduct, and world view, and "suspend belief" (Rabinow, 1977, p. 46) turned out to be futile. Even if Suarez Delucchi is a native Chilean, her constant self-reflection in an environment where everything is familiar turned out to be an exhausting experience, underlining the disturbing sentiment that unless someone lives in the respective village or town, "one is somewhat of an outsider to the community" (Merriam *et al.*, 2001, p. 410). The article reveals the multiple positionalities and complex power dynamics, which impact knowledge construction and representation in the research process. Suarez Delucchi shows that the dialectic between poles of observation and participation are far more complicated than what "at home/away" dichotomies can express. Artificial boundaries are not only fragile but they are also blind to the fact that people's positionalities constantly change in time and in relation to where we are and who we are talking to.

In summary, our endeavor shows the vast conceptual diversity and inherent lack of precision in ethnography "at home" and ethnography "abroad," which may be discomforting to some readers, especially because it makes the quest toward an overarching theory of organizational anthropology difficult to achieve (see Albu *et al.*, 2013). The anxieties to which this methodological shift gives rise are considered in terms of testing the limits of ethnography, attenuating the power of fieldwork, and building the reflexive persona of the ethnographer as "circumstantial activist" (Marcus, 1995, p. 95). Yet, our intention in the special issue is not to promulgate terminology or define what "at home/abroad" ethnography is or should encompass, but to theorize, illustrate and critique the implications of these dichotomies. The pursuits of contemporary ethnographers to differentiate between "inside/outside" and "at home/abroad" spaces hold so many wide-ranging promises despite the circularity of organizational dynamics. The informants who have an element of "otherness" (Rabinow, 1977), in their self-reflection and objectification, also spend time in the liminal, self-conscious world between (organizational) cultures. The entire experience of the "at home"/"abroad" categories is fluid—both the ethnographer and the informants constantly revise their interpretations. The memory of what happened before is modified by the knowledge that comes after, constituting a whole of information that is ever changing. Thus, through the ethnographer and informant interaction an infinite cycle of phenomenological interpretation is sustained: "Think you're escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way home" (Joyce, 1922/2002, p. 360).

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