Organizational ethnography after lockdown: "walking with the trouble"

> Walking is part of my every day routine during this research time and only by walking I could exercise my dwelling with the plants. (Pitrop, 2021, p. 54)

Introduction

Organizational ethnography has not only been confronted with COVID-related restrictions, it is also being challenged by the ecological crisis of which COVID itself is but one expression. The impact of humans on the world climate largely takes place via the very man-made organizations dedicated to exploitation of humans and nature (Latour, 2018, 2021) *in what Haraway calls the Capitalocene* (Haraway, 2016, p. 2). Tracing and tracking (cf. Wels, 2020) this all embracing and uneven multispecies ecological footprint is the shift we seem to witness in the developing craft of organizational ethnography. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's (2015) *The Mushroom at the end of the world* is a prominent example in this shifting paradigm, as is Kirksey's (2015) *Emergent ecologies,* and although she never uses the word "ethnography," so is Challenger's (2021) *How to be animal.* In the context of the South African field, Ellis *et al.* (2021) and we ourselves (Durrani, 2020; Wels and Kamsteeg, forthcoming) have contributed to the issue of how "doing ethnography" (cf. Geertz, 1973; for recent views, see Courpasson, 2020; Gobo and Molle, 2017) can live up to the changing challenge of the climate crisis by "staying with the trouble in real and particular places and time" (Haraway, 2016, p. 3).

During the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, Durrani realized and experienced first-hand that "(t)he plants, who I hoped to study and be with were not my main companions during this pandemic shelter-in-place. Instead my dependence on my phone, computer and software has deepened, fusing me to them, along with the other actors in this assemblage" (Durrani, 2020, pp. 17–18). Following Haraway's (1991) *A cyborg manifesto*, Durrani notes "(t)he cyborg helps me make sense of what I saw during my time in San Francisco, of technology and human mixing, along with the non-human collaboration I sought out to understand between plants and humans" (Durrani, 2020, p. 18). Technology as mediating our relations with non-human animals and plants cannot be ignored, no matter our emphasis on the outdoor fieldwork in the remainder of this article. Online, photo voice and other forms of cyberethnography will definitively be one of the leading routes in future organizational ethnography (Abidin and de Seta, 2020; Geiger and Ribes, 2011; Warren, 2005), next to, we believe, a return to wilder, emergent ethnographies.

In this essay, we want to further explore what an organizational ethnography "on the move" and "into the wild" could look like both in terms of research and teaching. We would hope to do so with the understanding that the boundaries between the latter two are blurred under the conditions of a wild pedagogy (Sitka-Sage *et al.*, 2017; Wels and Kamsteeg, forthcoming) in similar ways that organizational ethnography has challenged the boundaries between academia and the everyday life in organizations (Ybema *et al.*, 2009; Neyland, 2008). We continue this essay by rethinking organizational ethnography in the Anthropocene as a multispecies, multisensory and wild pedagogical endeavour. The type of sources we tap into

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also construct and substantiate our arguments and straddle boundaries of what is considered strictly academic or non-academic work. Especially, the works of Dutch anthropologist Ton Lemaire (1997 2002, 2019) and British language expert and travel writer Robert MacFarlane (2003, 2007, 2012, 2015, 2019) have drawn our attention and inspired us to develop our multisensory and multispecies sensibilities in the context of organizational ethnography. We then explore how such an organizational ethnography would benefit from keeping a walking pace. Before making some final remarks, we describe how we used the present COVID crisis to our advantage by doing and walking organizational ethnography with our students "in the wild" at a local goat farm in the Amsterdam forest.

After lockdown

This Special Issue of the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* (JOE) celebrating its 10-year anniversary comes in a time in 2021 of at least a double global crisis. We are still struggling with the Corona pandemic, and the climate crisis shows its rampant consequences with extreme weather conditions, like the heat wave hitting British Columbia where the town of Lytton recorded temperatures three days in a row in excess of 49 Celsius [1] in June, flooding in New South Wales in Eastern Australia in March of 2021 [2], while southern Africa is experiencing a severe drought for the third consecutive year, causing food crises in Madagascar and elsewhere in the region [3]. Weather conditions and global scenarios that seem akin to the ones described by authors like David Wallace-Wells (2019) and Mark Lynas (2020).

Latour's new book *After lockdown* (2021), which, at the time of writing, we can only access the online description of as the book is expected to be out in September 2021, seems to completely follow his earlier work. Particularly, *Down to Earth* (2018), to which his new book is described as "sequel" [4], marks and links this dual crisis of COVID-19 and the global climate: "*After the harrowing experience of the pandemic and the lockdowns, both states and individuals have been searching for ways to exit the crisis, hoping to return as soon as possible to 'the world as it was before the pandemic'*" [5]. But there is another way to learn the lessons of this ordeal: as inhabitants of the Earth, we may not be able to exit the lockdowns so easily after all, since the global health crisis is embedded in another larger and more serious crisis – the one brought about by the New Climatic Regime. In the hope of learning skills to process and cope with this all inclusive climactic and ecological lockdown, this dress rehearsal for the climate mutation, the challenge to re-understand where we stand as inhabitants of this strange place called Earth, also offers new opportunities to ethnographers.

While the discovery of organizations as "fields" has drawn ethnographers inside the walls of plants and boardrooms, the present ecological drama forces them back into their "natural" habitat to take up what has been their strength from the start, fieldwork, into what Tsing calls "third nature", the possibilities to live life on the planet after capitalist transformation of the environment in "second nature" (Tsing, 2015, p. viii). The new fieldwork based knowledge and understanding may lead to what Latour calls the discovery of a "freedom differently situated and differently understood" [6] aimed at new ways of relating to planet Earth. Kirksey and Helmreich (2010), Kirksey (2015) and others provide glimpses of this reconceptualization of fieldwork into the damage done to the planet.

Perhaps unknowingly preluding this broader call and in the middle of the first Corona lockdown in the Netherlands in 2020, we explored where to go to get inspiration for such new ecological relations. Our reflections finally led us to the San in southern Africa, and how they have lived their lives in southern Africa for something like 35,000 years (please just try to imagine how incredibly long that is!) without leaving a trace in the landscape (Kamsteeg *et al.*, 2020). No cities, no rubbish that was not bio-degradable, no monuments and no nothing. Scham sees the San as "[. . .] exempted from [the] original sin of civilization. Once the archaic

[sic] cosmology in which the whole Earth was held to be sacred, and man but a single link in the long chain of creation, was broken it was all over" (Schama, 1995, p. 13). We are not attempting to directly apply a situated belief system to our own, but we took inspiration from the San's relationship to the landscape. As Haraway (2016) writes, "like all offspring of colonizing and imperial histories, I—we—have to relearn how to conjugate worlds with partial connections and not universals and particulars" (Haraway, 2016, p. 13). Thus, we know the San cosmology cannot be uprooted and incorporated into our ways of living and being. Unrealistic as such an ecological restoration may sound to us in the West, the inspiration we took from it is that in San cosmology, humans do not consider themselves superior to or unique vis-a-vis the rest of the landscape and among other critters, animate or inanimate (cf. Ingold, 2000; Challenger, 2021). Animals, plants, rocks, clouds, life and death, and ancestors are all related in a spirited and some sort of non-hierarchical way. San cosmology decentres the human in relation to the landscapes in which they live their lives and carve their existence (see Guenther, 2020a, b for a more extensive treatment of San cosmologies). Our joint call for a multispecies future for organizational ethnography stems from this inspiration to get rid of our "dream of [human] greatness" (Challenger, 2021, p. 11ff) and to get away from a relating to nature and landscapes that since the Enlightenment only fits "our [human] convenience" (Challenger, 2021, p. 25). What this relating could look like and how it could become a "walking" part of teaching an ethnography-centred university curriculum in organizational studies is what we will explore now.

Walking the talk

Ethnography has many appearances in many fields, but in organization studies, the ethnographic monographic is nearly always built upon fieldwork characterized by lengthy immersion in a particular place/space. This is what handbooks "doing ethnography" typically proscribe (Atkinson, 2014; Gobo and Molle, 2017; Ybema *et al.*, 2009; Kostera and Harding, 2021, which has a chapter on shadowing by Barbara Czarniawska). Getting access to the organizational place/space has always been problematic, as many organizations exhibit a "natural" tendency towards secrecy. COVID-19 only provides a convenient apology to keep out nosy ethnographic eyes (Czarniawska, 2021). "Netnography" (Costello *et al.*, 2017) is an alternative of course, but there are other alternatives.

In a recent article, William Ellis *et al.* (2021) describe their experiences with a "walking ethnography" among herders in the Northern Cape, South Africa, which they describe as "a multispecies and multisensory world that is a sympoietically intertwined cosmos. What emerges is a world that is neither science nor indigenous knowledge but rather an endogenous system that syncretically draws on science, herder knowledge and novel information" (Ellis *et al.*, 2021, p. 1). In the process, they get to know the land.

This resonates strongly with the work of Ingold and Vergunst (2008) who describe various herders in their introduction to the edited volume and how the animals they herd "bond" themselves to the land because of their treading it, and also how they as human herders, in the tracks and traces of the animals, "bond with the land" (Ingold and Vergunst, 2008, p. 11). Walking in a multispecies and multisensory approach to landscapes – urban, rural or organizational – leads to an endogenous system of knowing and bonding.

Reading both Lemaire's and MacFarlane's extensive and more literary oeuvre on exploring landscapes, wilderness and the non-human, being it animals or plants, one comes across very similar stories, arguments and conclusions on how they arrive at their writings, which is through walking. According to Joseph Amato, as quoted in Lemaire (2019, p. 227): "[. . .] Walking allows the feet to lead the mind and heart; it gives us back our body and senses" and lets the wanderer "communiceren met een bezielde ruimte" [7] (Lemaire, 2019, p. 102).

Schama remembers a teacher insisting on "using 'the archive of the feet' for "directly experiencing 'a sense of place'" (Schama, 1995, p. 24). Macfarlane (2019, p. 380) writes about a "deep level acknowledgement of a sentient environment which both listens and speaks" and "(t)rees making meaning and oxygen" during his extensive walks (Macfarlane, 2019, p. 110). Concepts such as "nature" and "landscape" are strongly entwined with cultural ideas around what nature is. It is easy to conflate the two concepts, but they cannot be reduced to each other as Lemaire (2002) makes clear: "[Natuur] bewijst (. . .) onmiskenbaar haar zelfstandigheid zowel door weerstand die ze aan ons handelen en dus aan onze wil biedt, alsook door de soms overweldigende indruk die ze op ons gemoed maakt" [8] (Lemaire, 2002, p. 78). In his chapter on the art of walking (2019, p. 219ff), Lemaire argues that the pace of walking strongly contrast with the fast rhythm of consumer capitalism and its ecological consequences (see also Lemaire, 1997). Walking can be seen as an act of rebellion that following a different, slower and more attentive logic is surprisingly similar to the basics of ethnography and therefore ideally suited to detailing its devastating effects.

Taking all this work to the heart and mind makes it only a small step to go along with the planetary hypothesis, originally developed by Lovelock (1979) in cooperation with Lynn Margulis in the 1960s, in which the Earth, named Gaia after the Greek primordial Goddess of nature, is conceptualized as an integrated animated source of knowledge, meaning making and agency in its own right. Latour (2017) elaborates on the concept of Gaia in the context of his earlier work on actor network theory (Latour, 1996) with which he brings Gaia from chemistry in the realm of the social sciences. Ellis *et al.* (2021, p. 2) do not write explicitly about Gaia, but do speak about sensemaking landscapes as "multispecies classrooms" and walking ethnographies as "mobile methods", with which one can begin to understand "the language of landscape[s]" (Spirn, 1998). In the process, Ellis *et al.* (2021) link Latour's theoretical abstractions with the "deeply required[d] local knowledge" to read "foreign ground" (Spirn, 1998, p. 4) and get a feeling for "the landscape's sentience" (Macfarlane, 2019, p. 362) and give space to "the power of the wild to act [. . .] upon the mind" (Macfarlane, 2007, p. 71). Teaching this research approach cannot be done in a sedentary and indoor environment.

In the lecture, neither hall students nor teachers can walk the talk. We follow Tsing (2015) in her plea for an alliance "based on commitments to observation and fieldwork" in order to train the art of "noticing" (159–160). For that to happen, students and staff have to go outside and get mobile and walk in order to sensitize themselves to the "pleasure of noticing" (Tsing, 2015, p. 279), taught in a context that is labelled as "wild pedagogies", in which thinking and doing come together (Jickling *et al.* 2018a, b). Using a wild pedagogical approach inevitably comes with what Lemaire (2002, p. 37) labels as "het regiem van de traagheid" [9], needed to fully immerse oneself in sensory ways in a landscape or any other organizational environment for that matter.

The literature on walking has more or less exploded over the last ten years, and the anthropologist Lemaire and geohumanist MacFarlane are only two vocal exponents of how the literature can be linked to (social) science. From a totally different discipline, neuroscientists, like O'Mara (2019), for example, provide ample proof of the health benefits of walking as it reminds us of the crucial human characteristic of man as a bipedal signifier. But also in our own organization studies, walking has always had a place, though not always explicitly and predominantly among its ethnography inspired representatives.

Although organizational ethnographers have traditionally tended to bury themselves in organizational bastions, losing themselves in microscopic analyses that lack context and more recently even moved to online ethnography as a result of the limitations set by the present pandemic (De Seta, 2020), there are more examples of mobile ethnography. Geiger's *trace ethnography: Following coordination through documentary practices* (2011) builds upon Harper's strategy of following the object developed in his *Inside the IMF. An ethnography of*

documents, technology and organizational action (1998), which was in its turn inspired by Julian Orr's seminal *Talking about machines* (1996), based on him following photocopier maintenance technicians on their daily routes and routines. On a more methodological note Czarniawska's *Shadowing and other techniques for doing fieldwork in modern societies* (2007) can be taken as yet another plea for the slow pace of walking in organizational ethnography. These ethnographers moving around in their fields in search of relevant objects and subjects literally opened old new paths (MacFarlane, 2012) to be explored. The most recent and explicit suggestion for doing organizational ethnography by walking came from Courpasson (2020) for whom walking is "to spend the necessary time [. . .] to let things happen" (100). We are happy to take up the gauntlet dropped by these forerunners.

Making sense in organizational ethnography

In the opening issue of the JOE in 2011, Hamilton and Taylor (2012) published their article *Ethnography in evolution,* asking attention and arguing for the acknowledgement of the "animal other" in organizations. Evolution can go very fast because now, only ten years later, basing ourselves on ongoing scientific evidence and debates ranging from Lovelock (1979) to Latour (2018) on the Anthropocene, from Lemaire (2002) to MacFarlane (2007) on "wildness" and the senses, from to Haraway (2016) to Jickling *et al.* (2018a) on responsible teaching and from Ellis (2021) to Kamsteeg, Wels and Durrani on (teaching) multispecies ethnography, we argue for extending organizational ethnography to include both the animate and inanimate world in our analyses. This inclusivity challenges and straddles all sorts of binaries and boundaries, amongst which those between species, genres, types of data, disciplines and scientific conventions. Hence, it also requires a true intellectual flexibility from us scholars and teachers, and also from the students we tutor.

At the Department of Organization Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, we have been teaching a master's programme on culture, organization and management for more than 30 years now. Our mission is to teach students about the importance of everyday life in and around organizations, the cornerstone of ethnography and show them that organizations are littered with discrepancies between outward appearances and backstage realities, between formal procedures and informal practices, and between people's sayings and doings. We urge our students to use their ethnographic sensibilities to study the complex and ambiguous world of organizing, but hardly teach them how. No wonder that many in the end chose to set less ambitious goals in their research projects.

But then COVID invaded our lives and universities. We (the authors) started to practice walking the talk we learned from MacFarlane, Lemaire and our organizational ethnographic forebears. In the summer of 2020, we decided to evade the complete staff and student immobility the universities had ordered because of the Corona crisis. We designed an experiment modelled on the old Greek lyceum best known because of its

Figure 1.
Walking the talk in early Greek times

peripatetic school where Aristotle and Plato lectured their students while walking. Reframing our university teaching as a "wild pedagogy of ethnography" meant a radical breach with the universities' overall policy to halt all "live" classes and replace them by online teaching with ZOOM lectures and virtual break-out rooms. Instead, we radically turned around our "Sense making in Organisations" Master's course and took our 90 students out of the classroom into the nearest-by forest and its goat farm [10]. In a sense, Corona proved to be a "blessing in disguise" because our classes, conversations and assignments all of sudden took place outdoors, in the field – the key concept of ethnography. Whereas the very idea of fieldwork had in other years remained an abstract concept we endlessly discussed and explained in preparation the students' own fieldwork phase in organizations, all of a sudden the field was simply and tangibly a fact, as the chairs stood in the grass, the stable served as canteen and the woods as our own "peripateia". Apparently, we owe to Aristotle and his walking friends the axiom that "nothing reaches the mind until it is first picked up by the senses" [11]. Be it legend or history, in the forest our students not only immediately got the idea of fieldwork, but puzzling concepts, like sensemaking (teaching among goats in the early chilly morning sparks all senses instead of the usual hearing and seeing), and even interspecies entanglements and emergent ecologies started to make concrete sense. Our master's programme Culture, Organization and Management had been reborn [12].

Teaching in the forest and at the goat farm provided a multisensory, multispecies experience that allowed students to grasp and digest the meaning of sensemaking in organizations in a more natural and direct way than would have been possible in the classroom. The symbolism of the conceptual mole framework on culture, identity, power and emotions also became a more powerful teaching instrument in the context of an idyllic, man-made forest farm surrounded by the sound and smell of animals, humans, motorways and aircraft. This was all there for the taking at a stone's throw away from Amsterdam's major commercial and transportation hubs and home to the organizations many of our students may dream to work in. Walking and talking organization and ecology could not wish for a better context. The mixed scent of kerosene, dung and pine had a strong impact and immensely helped our students in digesting Latourean dystopic text and other disturbing literature.

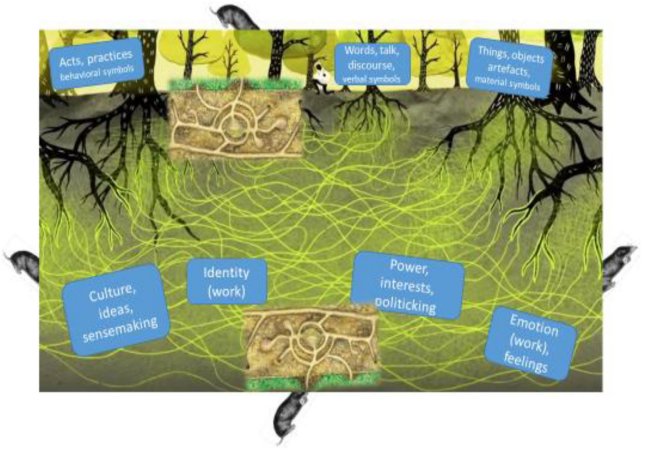

Figure 2.
Moles digging for symbolic meaning below the surface of the prima facie world we live in

By turning away from the university precincts and teaching a multisensory and multispecies ethnography in the field, we could finally practice what we had been preaching for years. This wild pedagogy not only brought us and our students (a "community of the curious") outside of the traditional classroom, it also enhanced the chances to better understand and question concepts and theories, in sum to practice academic reflexivity, because we had all moved outside of our comfort zones, beyond our human–animal centeredness and its related pomposity.

Our sensemaking course, built around the interplay of mind and body in the five senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching and tasting) through which we interpret our (organizational) environment, literally made sense. Our talk about key organizational concepts, like culture, power, identity and emotions and their symbolic reflection in and through "objects", "acts", and "talk", proved far more understandable in this multisensory and multispecies environment in which students could abundantly train their multisensory skills. Here is a brief impression of the sense-scape they encountered:

(1) *Smell*: Any goat farm has a particular smell that reminded some students and staff of pleasant childhood experiences, but many considered the smell of animal urine and faeces as overwhelming, if not offensive;

(2) *Taste*: Strongly related to smell and many related to goat products, if only for the goat milk in your coffee or tea and the goat cheese during lunch [13];

(3) *Hearing*: As the goat farm is close to the Dutch national airport Schiphol and in between highways, there is a lot of fuel-driven noise. Regularly, we had to stop our conversations when planes came over either to land or to take off. But also the non-human residents on the farm – the cows, pigs and chickens were the loudest – could be heard all the time. Finally, the many parents with their usually small children visiting the goat farm did not keep silent because of our university course. Everyday organizational life is noisy.

(4) *Seeing*: The goat farm does not look like a stereotypical organization, if only for the many non-human animal employees who are the main attraction for the many human visitors but also in terms of dress and absence of the all-pervasive computers (students did bring their laptops of course).

(5) *Touch*: As the teaching was outdoors, our largest sense of touch, our skin, was constantly at work checking weather conditions. Some days were very warm, others were cold, or windy, or rainy or all at once (we had to seek shelter sometimes). While walking around the farm, really the opposite of a sterile and sanitized environment, students have touched objects and set foot on soils [14] totally unfamiliar to them.

But the comfort zones of both students and staff were also challenged in other ways, adding to the flavour, how appropriate, of our sensorial experiences at the goat farm and that are the uncontrolled contexts compared to a lecture hall on a university campus in Amsterdam. First of all reaching the goat farm, if you do not have or wish to use a car, takes you on a route that may feel like "the middle of nowhere" compared to the hustle and bustle of Amsterdam city life. You have to cycle for something like 20 min through sometimes dense woods to reach the goat farm. The woods can be very dark and dripping on rainy days and comforting and fairy-tale-like on bright sunny days. Not one of the six field days was the same, not even during one day. Weather and light changes all the time during the day because of the sun taking its course. A comparison to a lecture hall where light and temperature are controlled puts things into perspective. Another uncontrollable context is the multispecies environment in which the wild pedagogy takes place. Chicken, pigs and cows almost moved in between us all the time.

Not to say anything on the wasps that started to take an interest in this busy group of humans and towards the end of the day the mosquitos came for their share in the fun. All of us, students and staff had to deal with these aspects of everydayness at the goat farm. Finally, the six assignments students must complete relate to the senses. The students are not required to turn in text based assignments each time, with drawings and soundscapes included in the assignment repertoire. The assignments culminate in an exam that combines their writing and non-text based explorations into a multispecies and multisensory organizational ethnography of the goat farm.

By way of conclusion

Organizational ethnography is standing at a crossroads. Do we keep striving for an ethnographic practice that prioritizes immersion within the boundaries of the businesses we study, studying them from either a "fly on the wall" and distanced position or in more collaborative forms, engaged in bottom-up or top-down relations with the organizational (hu) man? Or do we move to a more multisite and mobile ethnography, critically contextualizing organizations and their role in the present anthropogenic ecological crisis? Clearly, we believe the latter is not only more rewarding, but also our responsibility towards society and the planet. To be able to play this role, we must further develop and explore the possibilities of the multisensory, multispecies ethnography that we are only just starting to "smell". Of course, we can use the full human sensorium from a relative stable ("sessile") position within the organization, yet we think that moving, walking, positions us better to see/hear/smell/taste and touch the organizational and other trouble – and produce sense-scapes that make sense – we should stay with if we want to not only study the consequences of the Anthropocene but also do something about them. Here looms a tough challenge for organizational ethnographers for times to come.

Frans Kamsteeg, Layla Durrani and Harry Wels
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Notes

1. https://globalnews.ca/news/7991383/lytton-bc-new-all-time-canadian-heat-record-third-day/, accessed 6 July 2021.
2. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-20/nsw-floods-break-120-year-old-rain-records/100079400, accessed 6 July 2021.
3. https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/146015/drought-threatens-millions-in-southern-africa and https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/may/10/at-least-1m-people-facing-starvation-madagascar-drought-worsens, accessed 6 July 2021.
4. http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/907.html, accessed 6 July 2021.
5. http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/907.html, accessed 6 July 2021.
6. http://www.bruno-latour.fr/node/907.html, accessed 6 July 2021.
7. English translation: "communicate with an animated space".
8. English translation: "[Nature] proves [. . .] unmistakably its independence both by the resistance it offers to our actions, and therefore to our will, and by the sometimes overwhelming impression it makes on our minds".
9. English translation: "regime of slowness".
10. The goat farm is an organization like any other with a registration number at the Chamber of Commerce in Amsterdam. Only its appearance may be a bit out of the ordinary if your image of an organization is built on an entity in an office, with an entrance and reception, like our universities.

11. Oxford University Press. (n.d.). *Nihil in intellectu nisi prius in sensu*. Oxford Reference, retrieved on July 15, 2021 from https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100234623.
12. The opening quote of this article is from the thesis of one of the students who in September 2020 participated in our first experiment with outdoor education in the Amsterdam forest – an organization like any other more but less easily recognized than those that are usually housed in office park buildings.
13. And of course goat meat, which we leave out of the main text as it opens up other debates that we keep for another day.
14. Could it be that as "children of compost" (Haraway, 2016), they were unconsciously reminded of their roots in the Earth, the humus origin of their humanity?

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