Prologue

Our lives shape the research that we do, whether we make those connections clear or leave only traces of them in our writing.[1] The practice of ethnography brings these interconnections into sharp relief. Through interviews, conversations, and the everyday sharing of life we gloss as "participant observation," our lives become entangled with those we seek to understand. As anthropologists Janet Carsten, Sophie Day, and Charles Stafford write, biography is a "part of the process of ethnography rather than separate from or prior to it."[2] It is not just that our life experiences lead us to particular research projects, to asking some questions instead of others. Our interactions with the people we study affect our own lives, and the connections we create "inform the moral judgements and ethical practices that pervade the experience of fieldwork."[3] This intermingling of lives and the emotional resonances it sets in motion are often viewed with suspicion, evident in accusations that anthropologists have become "too" close with their subjects. Closeness, this line of reasoning goes, sullies our ability to take a normative stance in relation to the lives we observe and participate in.

The kind of research I do requires a balancing act between "ethnography as an exercise in human empathy and anthropology as an exercise in cultural critique."[4] Ethnography usually hinges on intimacy and trust that cultural critique potentially damages. This is especially fraught space for those of us who recognize that our writing will likely end up being read by those who we write about. Diana Forsythe insightfully reflected upon her ethnographic research with technoscientists, writing, "Those of us who

write about well-educated people in the United States can be sure that our informants will be able to read everything we publish. We can also be sure that they will not agree with everything we write."[5] Nancy Scheper-Hughes's raw account of being expelled from the Irish village where she and her family once lived, after residents took offense to her anthropological portrayal of them, has stayed in the back of my mind since the first time I read it.[6] The stakes of damaging relationships in one's field site are particularly high for those of us who do anthropology "at home" in some way. As Forsythe wrote, "Where home and field are contiguous or even identical, there is no 'elsewhere' for the fieldworker to return to."[7]

This book represents the second major research project in which I found myself confronting these dilemmas. My puzzlement at the internal and sometimes contradictory workings of corporations stretches back to my intertwined personal and professional trajectories. I grew up in a Wyoming town and family that revolved around mining. My father spent his career as a diesel mechanic for one of the world's largest coal companies, and both my sister and I worked as temporary laborers in that company's mines during summer breaks from college. I still remember the ironic ways that my coworkers commented on and managed their relationship with the company and its subsidiaries. They made fun of corporate discourses that bade them to practice "good teamwork," underlining the power differentials that distinguished some members of the team (technicians) from others (their supervisors). But they also proudly wore coats, hats, and belt buckles emblazoned with the company logo. A good portion of their retirement savings was invested in company stock. And they defended their companies and industry against criticism from others, both real and imagined. I later returned to that mining town as an anthropologist to conduct fieldwork, which provided the platform for writing an ethnography that examined how gender, kinship, and labor dynamics of the region had led to an unusually successful integration of women into the mining workforce there.[8] Engineers were present in that research project, but they were not the focus of it.

When I joined the faculty of the Colorado School of Mines in 2012, I found myself immersed in an academic institution whose faculty and

students were almost exclusively dedicated to engineering and applied science, with a long-standing focus on the mining and petroleum industries. I felt bewildered by my new surroundings, from the students' lock-step progression through their major's course flowchart—I had gone to a liberal arts college, after all!—to the curious ways they vehemently distinguished engineering from "emotions."

In a very real sense, the past eight years of learning to work at Mines has felt like fieldwork. Through interactions with students and faculty, I began realizing that how our students are taught to conceptualize and solve problems had a lot to do with the challenges and frustrations I observed firsthand between engineers and technicians back home in the mines, which piqued my curiosity in engineering education. That interest grew as I soon found myself collaborating with faculty across campus to make visible the inherent social and political dimensions of engineering, as my arrival coincided with the fracking boom and the rising concerns of faculty and students to understand and address the growing firestorm it had ignited.

As I started getting to know Mines students and alumni, I realized that for them to think about their accountabilities to the public, they had to first make sense of the corporate context of their work. The miners I had come to know in Wyoming identified as part of the companies employing them, but they also had clear institutional space to separate their sense of self from the companies employing them—they weren't paid to care about the company on their days off, they frequently joked. Engineers, in contrast, occupied management and executive roles that seemed to demand such care. I quickly became captivated by scholarly debates about how and why the engineering profession in the United States had become entangled with managerial pathways inside of corporations.

Writing about engineers in the mining and oil and gas industries presented different sorts of challenges than did my first research project, which directly involved family and close friends. Studying these industries via engineers implicated my institutional home: the place where I showed up to work; the place where I taught students who held a variety of hopes, fears, and desires for corporate careers; the place where I socialized with engineering and applied science professors; and the place where I was seeking

tenure and promotion, from an academic administration and university committee composed almost exclusively of engineers.[9] Mines was a very different institutional context than the anthropology departments where others in my field wrote treatises about technical professionals while remaining at arm's length from them. Echoing one of my interlocutors who struggled more with the internal than the external mining company politics, I had to *work with* the people I was supposed to be critiquing. I decided to make my intellectual project one of what Gary Downey—engineer, anthropologist, and science and technology studies (STS) and engineering studies scholar—calls critical participation. I planned and conducted my research already with an eye to it circulating at Mines and other engineering schools. I envisioned different strategies for my research and teaching to open up the questions Downey poses for engineering studies in general: what are engineers and engineering for?[10]

My own imbrication in the fields of practice I was studying has raised eyebrows among scholars who look suspiciously on those of us who get "too close" to our research. There is no question that my institutional location and biography shaped my research. In turn, the research shaped my institutional location and biography, prompting me to embrace engineering studies and engage in collaborative projects of curricular transformation. I conceptualized a successful National Science Foundation grant proposal for a research and teaching project that would (1) ethnographically develop a critical analysis of the intersection of engineering and corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the mining and oil and gas industries and (2) integrate more critical social scientific take on CSR inside the engineering curriculum at Mines and other schools with large mining and petroleum programs.

My attempts to cultivate more robust approaches to thinking about the accountabilities of corporations inside engineering education could be critiqued for potentially shoring up the moral authority of corporations. The kinds of questions we asked of and with our students exceeded the ethical possibilities of dominant CSR discourses, but it is also true that the kinds of critical self-reflection on industry practice we nurtured are foundational to the moral register of CSR in general. Although I wish to highlight and problematize my own positionality in relation to the research, I also caution

against "purity politics" that presume that it would be possible for other academics to fully stand apart from the industries they critique.[11] As Alexis Shotwell writes in *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, "Personal purity is simultaneously inadequate, impossible, and politically dangerous for shared projects of living on earth."[12] We are all complicit in corporate forms and in the mining and oil and gas industries in particular, though we occupy different positions in these networks and have different opportunities to shape them. We owe it to ourselves and to our others to do more than dutifully acknowledge the high carbon footprint of academic life and then launch into calls to simply do away with mining or fossil fuels or capitalism. The epilogue chronicles my own experiments in critical participation, so readers who are the most curious about the interweaving of my biography and the ethnography and engineering education efforts may wish to start reading there.

This book focuses on engineers who view social responsibility as central to their profession and their everyday work. This means that I have not presented an in-depth analysis of those who vociferously marginalized concerns about social responsibility—and they do exist. While I do not claim that the engineers profiled here represent their profession as a whole, there is much to learn from engineers who take public accountability seriously. We learn not by painting overly flattering portrayals of them to challenge dominant stereotypes of the profession but by giving them a good argument that is attentive to the complexity of their lives as they attempt to inhabit and detach from the corporate world. The ethnography proposes that the primary dilemma facing engineers is not a dearth of ethics that opens them up to becoming corporate automatons, as many would suspect. Rather, the primary dilemma is how to manage competing personal, professional, corporate, and public accountabilities as they attempt to craft themselves as ethical actors, to orchestrate a dense network of distributed agencies, and to enact corporate forms that are responsive to different judgments of what the world is and what it could become.

Extracting Accountability

Engineers and Corporate Social Responsibility

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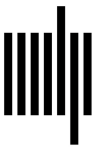
Citation:

Extracting Accountability: Engineers and Corporate Social Responsibility
By: Jessica M. Smith
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/12677.001.0001
ISBN (electronic): 9780262366151
Publisher: The MIT Press
Published: 2021

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from The National Science Foundation



The MIT Press

The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Adobe Garamond Pro and Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

Names: Smith, Jessica M., author.
Title: Extracting accountability : engineers and corporate social responsibility / Jessica M. Smith.
Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2021] | Series: Engineering studies | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020052840 | ISBN 9780262542166 (paperback)
Subjects: LCSH: Engineering ethics. | Social responsibility of business.
Classification: LCC TA157 .S588 2021 | DDC 174/.962--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020052840