

RETHINKING ACCESS

Key Methodological Challenges in Studying Energy Companies

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Introduction

Energy is deeply embedded in society, and the way it is produced, distributed, and consumed has consequences for the way we live our lives. Yet, the multifaceted social and material relations that this involves tend to elude scientific description and analysis. Among the primary reasons for this elusiveness are the barriers we encounter when studying energy companies. Firstly, energy companies are considered close to the cogwheels and power of society, and more so than corporations in other fields they confront demands from both political spheres and civil society to attain sustainability and to take responsibility for bringing society through the “green transition.” Debates regarding the need for more energy, financial profit, and increasing rates of unemployment add to the complexity of these goals. Another important factor that might entrench corporate barriers is the constant development of energy technology, which can change the operations and structure of the energy industry within a short timeframe. Lastly, national and international policies, agreements, and guidelines are under constant negotiation. Increasing visibility has pushed energy companies to develop sophisticated communication strategies, which enable flexible positioning in the face of criticism. These are among the dimensions that must be accounted for when researching energy companies today. The sum of these societal

and environmental dimensions can indeed create challenges for social scientists who choose to study energy companies.

So, which methodological measures can make us better equipped to understand the role of energy companies? Participant observation and ethnographic methods hold potential for prying open corporate self-representation in an exploration of the relations of power and politics that determine flows of energy and extractive capital at the global and local levels. Ethnographic methods help us move past structural analyses to locate the agents and processes at work within economies of energy production and to identify tensions and dynamics both within the corporation and at the interface with society. Enabling us to look beyond the virtual, and actual, walls of energy companies, such methods help us understand how energy corporations work and how decisions are made and justified. Further, these methods illuminate the interaction of personal values and institutional norms, individual agency, and structural constraints that shape the development and management of energy supply chains.

Ethnographic methods require reflexivity, pushing the researcher to question methodological prerequisites, which, in the case of ethnography on energy companies, may be to ask what it *means* to look beyond the walls of energy companies, and how social scientists should study cultural, structural, ethical, and social aspects of energy when the corporate walls are high and usually well guarded. When we enter the field of energy companies, the researchers' initial expectations to access, reflections on positionality, and power relations between academia and business are challenged, thus arguably necessitating a reconsideration of key anthropological methodological insights for further exploration: What can be considered "good" access for a social scientist in this research field? What are the power relations between academia and business at present? Is reflexivity an essential tool in studying a field that, to a large extent, exercises power and affects all aspects of society and people's lives?

We will reflect on these enquiries by demonstrating how we came to question dominant assumptions within anthropology of what constitutes "access" in ethnographic work that focuses on energy companies. To do so, we will first present the research project *Energethics*, on which our methodological reflections are built and our take on multisited ethnography is based. Then we will critically discuss how to understand "access" when studying energy companies. We suggest that the term should be de-anchored from conventional understandings of access to allow us as researchers to reflect and adapt to the flux we must negotiate in the field. We show how multiple

approaches to “access”—which takes into account the positionality of the researcher, fluidity of research fields along with attention to power dynamics, and “strategic intimacy” with energy company employees—can shape the sort of knowledge that is produced when studying energy companies. The overall objective of the article is to show how a creative and active ethnographic approach produces new knowledge about energy corporations while simultaneously creating new challenges in relation to how to approach this particular field of study. In doing so, we also argue that anthropological ethnographic research, in its particularity and attention to the complexity of contexts, has the potential to strengthen the literature on energy companies and extractive industries.

Energy Companies and the “Social Life” of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

The methodological discussions in this chapter draw on the anthropological project *Energethics*,¹ which ran from 2015 to 2019, and the experiences from the fieldwork of research team members with reference to Norwegian energy industry presence in Turkey, London, Oslo, Tanzania, and Northern Norway. In *Energethics*, we studied energy companies by investigating corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies and practices of energy companies based in Norway, representing varying degrees of state ownership: Statkraft (100 percent state owned, hydropower), Statoil, now Equinor (67 percent state owned, hydrocarbons), and DNO (“The Norwegian Oil Company,” 100 percent private, hydrocarbons). An important aspect of *Energethics* was that it sought to explore the field where the companies operate and not just the companies in and of themselves. Multisited ethnography enabled us to empirically track the production, circulation, reformulation, and outcomes of CSR policy and practice in Norwegian energy companies abroad, from boardrooms to operations, from the sites of formal policymaking to the sites of implementation in different locations around the world. This multisited approach to the “flow,” negotiation, and localization of CSR can arguably provide insight into how energy corporations work, and the CSR “take” on studying energy companies is certainly not unusual among social anthropologists (Barry 2013; Benson and Kirsch 2010; Cross 2011; Frynas 2009; Rajak 2011a; Welker 2009; Welker 2014).

During the last twenty-five to thirty-five years, Norwegian energy companies have increasingly “gone global,” and many of the

projects in which these companies invest have involved significant, and sometimes contested, environmental and social issues in energy frontiers. Investment strategies have raised a number of ethical, social, environmental, and political concerns that have been high on the public and political agenda. Energy transnational corporations (TNCs) as well as Norwegian firms relate to these societal, cultural, political, and economic challenges of energy investments, productions, and infrastructures by developing policies for corporate ethics, often conceptualized as CSR. In Norway, the energy sector, in cooperation with the state, has been at the forefront in adapting to global standards for CSR. Anthropological studies have argued that CSR should be seen as a broad, evolving, and flexible set of practices and languages through which businesses variously attempt to position themselves as ethical actors. As such, we may consider CSR as a particularly adaptable discourse, which, over the past two decades, has evolved to respond to and incorporate new ideas and challenges, encompassing movements that often start out as alternative or even oppositional to the corporate world. The language and practice of CSR has thus increasingly become embedded in international conventions and institutions, such as the UN Global Compact, OECD Corporate Responsibility Guidelines, and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI).

What we see from emergent ethnographic work in this field are the various ways in which corporations use the language and practice of ethics to contain and respond to the different kinds of challenges generated by their activities. Examples include the ecological crisis, conflicts concerning labor rights and local expectations of jobs, the problem of dependency and Dutch disease, and increasing corruption and conflict over resources. CSR policies largely evolved out of corporate accommodation to critiques of the environmental and social impacts of neoliberal economic reforms of the 1980s (Rajak 2011a). In the later years, CSR strategies have increasingly involved governance techniques whereby the companies claim to foster local sustainable development in direct interaction with relevant local communities. Thus, claims Noel Castree (2008: 147), CSR is often “actualized in tandem with” free market environmentalism. CSR, as practiced by most TNCs, may therefore be considered neoliberal governmentality.

In the Energethics project, we critically explored this position, asking whether and to what extent CSR can be claimed “from below” or by governmental entities, and whether state-owned energy companies can pursue and implement corporate ethics by governance techniques that do not rely on market rule and privatization (see

the introduction for a more elaborate discussion). Thus, our starting point has been that the role of the state is central to understanding CSR dynamics, whether defined by its presence or, at times, its absence from the debate. As we elaborated in the introduction, national oil companies control roughly two-thirds of global oil and gas, and Equinor is considered one of the more successful among these national oil corporations. Statkraft, however, is more of an anomaly since it remains 100 percent state owned in a sector—electricity production and distribution—that has to a much larger extent been privatized. Both Equinor and Statkraft argue that working with and supporting the state in Norway is in their very DNA and that, therefore, they find it natural to pursue the same strategy abroad. Fieldwork on these companies was thus conducted not only on the impact of the corporations' projects in Turkey, Tanzania, and Northern Norway but also on the way in which CSR was handled at various levels of the corporations and in the relevant contexts in which they operate. The project took us to places such as Oslo, Bergen, Stavanger, Ankara, and London and methodologically involved a variety of approaches, including analyzing reports, white papers, and guidelines and tracking the performance of CSR through the circuit of conventions, policy forums, and award ceremonies, which constitute the elite "global" arena of corporate citizenship.

This flexible approach strays from central aspects in conventional anthropological ethnography where thorough and long-term participant observation is the preferable method. The discipline's historical intensity of "studying down" has shaped the methodological framework, while studying corporations demands a reinventing of anthropology, something Laura Nader anticipated decades ago. In "Up the Anthropologist" she writes: "What if, in reinventing anthropology, anthropologists were to study the colonizers, rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty?" (Nader 1972 [1969]: 289). Also in later years, anthropologists have experienced how the solid tradition on "studying down" has set its marks on the ethnographic know-how. Karen Ho (2016: 29) considers that "studying up fostered for me a critical re-framing of anthropology's fundamental assumptions, challenges, and possibilities because it necessitated pulling apart methodological and theoretical tools that were forged through the process and contexts of studying the marginalized, and recalibrating their directionality and use."

Compared to traditional anthropological ethnography, multisited ethnography might come through as an opportunistic approach to

the field where energy companies operate, but at the same time it is necessary to grasp the “social life” of CSR. There are, interestingly, parallels between the anthropological multisited way of approaching the field and the way in which multinational energy companies themselves operate in a field that encompasses national laws/policies and international nonjuridical guidelines on “soft” risk assessment and performance. Both Equinor and Statkraft perform and report CSR across sites bound together by new energy investments and infrastructures. Energy projects are dependent on a “smooth” flow across sites and beyond borders, especially because legitimation of projects depends so much on stakeholder involvement, meaning that the CSR department’s key activity is to create and implement strategies for ethical business conduct across different sites, including main offices, country offices, and local communities, in relation to governments, NGOs, and civil society (for an elaboration of this, see especially chapter 10). The fields across which corporations must produce smoothness are nearly always uneven, and ethnographic methods are, we argue, especially suited to explore how they perform this work.

Using multisitedness to approach energy companies’ multinational operations initially opens up for a common understanding between researchers and corporations, creating meeting points where ethnography can be conducted. As such, similarities in approaches gives access to arenas for communication, cooperation, and even knowledge production between academia and energy corporations regarding international energy development, responsibility, and ethics. Still, at a certain point during fieldwork, after the initial conversations and meetings, both the researcher and the representative for the corporation somehow realize that the meaning of “site” is fundamentally different for each. While corporations treat multiple sites in their production chain according to a strict hierarchical structure with headquarters at the top, researchers treat all sites as equal. Talking insightfully about “sites” and “globalization” with corporate representatives might initially be interpreted by the researcher as an opening to a corporation’s inner life, only to realize that common language opens nothing beyond an instrumental entry to the field of study, pushing the ethnographic scope to the periphery of the corporate practice. Research language that initially speaks to and then gradually adapts to the corporation may contribute toward legitimizing the corporations’ position and reputation in society while having a negative effect on the need to develop a relevant critical language, which could facilitate an evidence-based dialogue about and with energy companies. To maintain a reflexive position toward the

similarities between this project's multisited academic approach and the corporate approach to the multinational energy field has been a central methodological challenge, especially because the unpredictable movement between getting close to and feeling distanced from the corporate body made us question the meaning of "access" in this particular field of study.

Access and Flexibility

Trying to gain access to the energy companies, the Energetics research team found that our expectations of what "access" meant and required in return was a methodological challenge in itself. After establishing communication with the Norwegian energy companies, our main contact persons in Equinor and Statkraft made it clear that cooperation would have to be reciprocal and that the company would need to benefit in some way. Often, leveraging or demonstrating our knowledge or previous experience was needed to secure access. Samuel Coleman (1996) addresses "why they let me in," suggesting that if a corporation sees the ethnographer as a possible asset to the business, they will be more likely to grant access. Without explicitly framing it as a methodological challenge, Greg Urban and Kyung-Nan Koh (2013: 140) emphasize that "contemporary anthropological research necessitates 'giving back' [to the corporation, because] few corporations are eager to allow access to those whose research does not contribute to the corporation's goals." The importance of giving the corporations an opportunity to "check facts" before we published articles was often brought up in conversation with both Equinor and Statkraft employees. During interviews, the interviewer sometimes experienced being tested by corporate interviewees, who made statements concerning certain pivotal events in ways that demanded that the anthropologist choose a side in their response (Choy 2011: 1–4). For example, we were expected to say what *we* think of a specific initiative to ensure local content in a project—such as a sponsored event or the number of locally employed youth—or give our opinion of the new roads or buildings that were built in conjunction with the company's regional activity. In such situations, where our informants clearly expect us to agree with certain points of view, our responses shape their perceptions of our motives, and with that determine how and what information is shared.

After several experiences similar to those described above, we soon realized that our main contacts in Equinor and Statkraft, who

were very professional, friendly, and helpful, were not so much at our disposal to help us gain access to relevant processes and arenas in the corporation; rather, they kindly guided us toward what they considered to be “CSR in a nutshell” in the company. They directed us toward “key informants” who were managers in the CSR departments or key CSR employees in the field. From their perspective, all relevant information about CSR could be untangled by interviewing a few employees. If we talked to employees without approval from our appointed contact person, we received mostly gentle but sometimes stern reminders to limit our conversations to the approved contacts. Our main contacts were gatekeepers as well as our closest dialogue partners in the company.

When we had an impression that we had gained “good access,” being let into a project and able to observe CSR in practice in the local communities where the companies had invested, it was orchestrated by the gatekeepers with a rationale that “this particular project” gave an impression of how CSR was “done” at its best within the company. In a certain sense, they treated us as a combination of consultants and auditors. After this discovery—that good access mostly meant access carefully orchestrated by the companies—we had to reconsider the meaning of access. It became clear to us that our expectations of “good access” as opposed to “poor access” were affected by a notion of peeking behind the curtains, gaining close insights into the everyday work life of employees through participant observation in meetings, lunches, and seminars and by “hanging out” during or after work appointments.

When we first started the project, “access” was one of the main themes discussed within the research team, and we may have had a rather superficial understanding of what access implied. It is fair to say that we evaded an explicit move toward conducting the necessary concept clarifications; rather, we spoke of access as if we all had the same expectations of eventually cracking the business code, of being “let in.” Although we did not envision total immersion in the daily activities of the corporations, we did imagine that the development of the project depended on “gaining access,” and we emphasized the practical problems concerning gaining access rather than asking the obvious: “What does access mean?” Although it now seems naïve, we did—to varying degrees—aim for and hope to somehow gather crucial, behind-the-scenes information revealing new knowledge about business and CSR. Our ideas about access were obviously informed by classical anthropological ideals about “becoming one of them,” “hanging out with the informants,” and the like. At one of the

first meetings with our contact person in Statkraft, for instance, we asked him how we could go about being among the office staff at the headquarters in Oslo and at the country office in Istanbul. We also asked him if we could join some of the CSR staff on their journeys to Turkey and other relevant places. We tried to convey our flexibility. He did not quite turn us down but postponed answering, and after a year of maneuvering our inquiries in other directions, the dialogue about “insider” access gradually ceased.

So, when access to corporate offices is at best precarious, expanding ethnographic research to the wider field to which corporate employees relate has proven to open new vistas. Arenas, such as conventions, policy forums, and award ceremonies, offer a critical sphere where energy executives reach out beyond the walls of the company, albeit in ways that are often highly ritualized and orchestrated. Nevertheless, such sites have an important ethnographic value in their own right, giving us access to flows and negotiation of concepts, knowledge, and models, as well as articulation of power relations—broadening our understanding of who is relevant in the field. The venues at which we meet are important not only as places to observe others but also as places to be seen. Though these conference rituals are not equal to observing the inner workings of company dynamics, conference participation shapes our access to company employees and representatives as arenas that are also meeting places at the intersection of business, academia, and policy. By registering and paying the conference fee (often a barrier in itself, due to the high fees levied),² dressing and acting like the rest of the delegates, we gain access both to the “onstage” conference presentations and the “offstage” conversations and informal business encounters that take place around it. Naturally, these informal encounters are not offstage even if they give the appearance of being so but are arenas where the researcher can engage in networking and observations.

Further, fieldwork at such sites can reveal the ritualized and performative dynamics of CSR, which are, we suggest, crucial to establishing it as development orthodoxy.³ It is here that we begin to disentangle the agency of various actors—from captains of industry to representatives of the “grassroots,” from business schools to UN agencies—involved in the production of this powerful discourse; we begin to see how the shift from agonistic to collaborative, from conflictual to consensual, is achieved. Within these arenas, corporate executives come together with representatives of global NGOs, the growing army of CSR consultants, and dozens of small firms or non-profits (the boundary between which is often blurred). Participants

extol the virtues of bi-, tri-, or multisector partnerships, develop standards, and present case studies recounting their engagement with the local communities who represent the targets of their ethical behavior. Such gatherings unfold as highly ritualistic theaters of virtue (Rajak 2011b) in which awards for the best corporate citizen are presented and inspiring stories of social responsibility are told. These rituals are elements in the construction of narratives that structure the processes of the CSR world. As Maurice Bloch (1992) argues, ritual can serve to constrain contestation while inviting participants to share in and thus validate a particular worldview. Put another way, they compel consensus while mystifying the dynamics of power at work. Rituals of corporate morality thus play an important role in generating particular ways of seeing and understanding on the part of people involved in the CSR industry and should be seen as a new and significant dimension of corporate power.

Official conventions rarely pass under the radar of civil society, which sometimes engages in its own counterperformances. Participants at Ethical Corporation's 2016 convention in London were greeted with a banner, courtesy of the London Mining Network, that said "The Oxymoron Appreciation Society proudly presents 'The Responsible Extractives Summit 2016.'" Perhaps they had been reading Benson and Kirsch's article on "Corporate Oxymorons" (2009). It took some time for the hotel to borrow some ladders and construction workers from a building site opposite to take it down. During the panel on "Stranded Assets," questions flashed up on the big screen polling the audience with, "Is climate change good or bad for the extractive industries?" An awkward pause followed. After some time, the facilitator glanced over his shoulder and exclaimed: "Oh, sorry! That should have read 'Is the climate change convention good or bad for the extractive industries?'" "In our company, we have a very good story to tell" was a frequent refrain among oil executives at events, such as Responsible Extractives 2016, both in their public performance and in individual conversations over coffee or outside of the conference circuit. Of course, the line between public performance and individual narrative is in no way clear, and if "inside ethnography" relies on waiting for a key informant to "break ranks" from, for instance, the dominant discourse of sustainability in big oil, then we will certainly hit a wall. The smooth surface of energy companies belies these subsurface fissures but has proved far more impenetrable in recent years. For researchers trying to find a way to get beyond these surfaces, there is an implicit way of discussing access where the goal is to gain access.

It was the comparative dimension of the Energethics project that eventually made us realize that practical access to the field of study and access to relevant knowledge about energy companies were different things, which we had conflated. Discussing within the group variations in “degree of access” and strategies for addressing access challenges in case studies that were to some extent interlinked through our main contacts in the companies, we realized that the access issue actually taught us something about the way in which the companies work. Knowledge about business and CSR does not necessarily depend on practical access to the inner workings of the corporation, or what several scholars coin as methodological challenges: busy corporate work schedules, sensitivity to publicity, the distracting presence of an ethnographer, and restrictions to entry and on participant observation (Rohlen 1974; Nader 1972 [1969]; Gusterson 1995; Ho 2016). Rather than taking for granted that these are obstacles for the researcher to develop knowledge about energy companies, the methodological challenges experienced and discussed by anthropologists since the 1960s can be viewed as basic knowledge about the field that one tries to understand. The busy corporate work schedules, for instance, might tell us something important about how corporate time is organized compared to, for example, academic time, which can be regarded as access to interesting aspects of the field we study rather than a challenge to gain access. One of the most obvious examples of “failure to access” in the project was the impossibility for us to visit Statkraft’s largest hydropower project outside of Norway, located in southeastern Turkey. While the reluctance to facilitate our visit to the project site may relate to concerns about reputation and perhaps mounting challenges for their CSR work, we came to realize that one of the major reasons was concern for (our) security. This, in turn, sensitized us to the importance of security and safety and, together with other observations, stimulated us to explore the companies’ concerns and narratives about safety, ultimately leading us to analyze risk management—which has emerged as one of the major topics in the project and which we have explored further by other means in other contexts. Thus, what we initially thought of as lack of access actually provided us with basic information about the corporations’ varied surfaces, flows, and concerns. We found that the key methodological challenge across all cases in the research project was that we had not fully reflected on the meaning of access in this particular field. The methodological challenge was in fact a theoretical one.

While Peter Benson and Stuart Kirsch (2010: 464) claim that ethnographers risk co-optation when doing fieldwork in corporate of-

fices because they have a tendency “to emphasize and identify with their subjects,” our exploration of alternative models and methodologies for studying the field in which these energy companies engage provides means to negotiate this risk. This includes bringing our critical sensibilities to the methodological tools anthropologists use, such as “gaining access” and “maintaining a reflexive stand.” However, the meaning of “good access” obviously depends on one’s research agenda and research questions. If the aim is to understand the motivations, experiences, and meaning of life within a corporation—including, for example, corporate employee perspective on energy and sustainability—then a “deeper” kind of access is required to gather relevant data. If instead the aim is to explore the way in which the corporation engages the wider fields of energy policy, CSR discourses, reporting regimes, and the like—in short, the role of corporations in society—other methods that come with other criteria for access are called for. In our experience, not gaining the expected access might instead be considered a door opener into important knowledge about what the companies did not want us to know. If we reconsider the meaning of “good access” and focus more on what the corporations endeavor to avoid telling and showing, we get insight into the implicit “flow” of CSR (Barry 2013). What is made visible and readable and how access is navigated both from our side and from a company’s and its employees’ side are relevant methodological considerations. “Access” can be given and withdrawn, therefore the company’s ability to control the information and the different ways in which they make information accessible to us are observations that are appropriate to coin as “good access” in this particular field of study.

Control of information and the way in which access is navigated are not necessarily guided by purely instrumental considerations only. A thorough methodological reappraisal should critically assess our own positionality, including how we may be embedded in and—willingly or not—be “intimate with” representatives from the energy corporations. Below, we discuss this with reference to what it implies to be Norwegian researchers studying Norwegian energy.

Searching for Access through Multiple Positioning

When following energy companies’ CSR work across sites, the researcher’s search for relevant positions in order to gain access are ever changing. Sometimes seen as a potential asset or a stakeholder by the companies we study, the researcher’s positioning is constantly

negotiated and challenged. However, with anthropology's historical intensity of "studying down," for example looking into local communities and grassroots initiatives in the face of energy infrastructure and climate change (see, for example, Sawyer 2004; Gardner 2012; Kirsch 2014; De Neve 2009; Dolan and Scott 2009; Li 2010; Gilberthorpe 2013), the methodological framework has also been shaped by this particular focus (Ho 2016: 30). Hugh Gusterson argues that "participant observation is a research technique that does not travel well up the social structure" (1995: 115). While corporations shift between "reaching out" and raising their defenses, we are compelled to find new creative methodological strategies for research, sometimes mobilizing our identities as researchers creatively to establish alternative arenas for fieldwork. We arranged several dialogue workshops, to which we invited representatives of the companies as well as other relevant "stakeholders." These workshops—lasting a day or two—gave us the opportunity to interact on a different basis with representatives of energy companies and to observe interaction between them and other actors (state, NGOs, academia).

Thus, to understand how energy corporations work from the inside, we shifted our methods beyond conventional participant observation to constantly negotiate the barriers we encounter in the field. Doing fieldwork at Equinor's investment area in Tanzania, for instance, Norwegian researchers were initially considered "foreigners" by local employees (see chapters 7 and 8). Switching from Tanzania to Equinor sites in Norway put us in a completely different position, and our research might even be considered self-ethnography of sorts. Norwegians have grown up with the idea that the oil that this company extracts secures our economic future through the Government Pension Fund Global (the so-called "Oil Fund"). To demonstrate the enormous size of the fund, journalists at times spell out the fund's worth per capita, making us all petro-millionaires. For those of us living in western Norway, we encounter Equinor in our daily lives, where we have learned the offshore work schedules of the parents of our children's best friends. A man in his early sixties, a friend of a friend, has been offered a compensation package with a monthly salary higher than a full professor's wage for the rest of his life in addition to his state pension if he is willing to voluntarily quit his position. We learn such news with a mix of moral indignation and envy. Equinor and the rest of the industry has, particularly during boom times, operated outside of the economic realities that the rest of us relate to. The company sponsors cultural events, science competitions for children, and student festivals where we might get an

Equinor stamp on our wrist—a physical mark (albeit temporary) of this company’s “omnipresence” in our country.

In Tanzania and Brazil, it is easier to create distance to everyday life under Equinor’s influence. As anthropologists, we are in a position to gain access to lower-level employees—and to the Tanzanian and Brazilian national discourses in general—that many of the company’s Norwegian staff and managers do not have. Although our ease of local access may in some cases seem threatening, it also makes us more attractive partners, since we may share information and an understanding of local perceptions that they would otherwise not have access to. This again requires a level of care with regards to the information we disclose to the higher-ranking employees. Equinor specifically stated that they were interested in learning more about the public’s opinion of their company and that our research project could be helpful in this regard. Our dual capacity thus meant that our access to knowledge about local contexts put us in a position wherein access might be given to other parts of the company’s workings.

Balancing multiple positions resulted in Equinor offering us access to their training sessions in Dar es Salaam, which gave us an opportunity to observe communication between company staff and Tanzanian civil servants, academics, and representatives for the corporation, as well as how the Tanzanian participants engaged in a counterhegemonic discourse during lunch breaks. The majority of the seminar participants were Tanzanian, and during the lunch breaks, the discussions quickly switched to Swahili. Being perceived as a Tanzanian and able to engage in the discussions in Swahili, the researcher quickly became part of the “us” in the “us” versus “them” discussions that dominated lunch conversations. There was a heated discussion of how the Equinor seminars were a calculated way for international oil companies to spread information about their agenda in the country. There was mistrust among participants of the company’s intentions in the country, criticisms of their lack of skill transfer and poor CSR initiatives, and skepticism around the expenses they had incurred in the country so far.⁴ This openness and discussion of the participants’ blatant mistrust of Equinor depends on the researcher’s flexible positionality, being able to blend in with both locals and corporate staff. However, applying multiple positions, changing direction whenever needed in search for access to a field difficult to grasp, makes the researcher accountable for how changing positionality affects access and, even more important, the knowledge that is produced when access is pursued through multiple positionalities.

As one of the researchers in the Energethics project has a background as a campaigner and frequently appears in public debates about the climate crisis, financial and environmental risks of new petroleum fields, and oil sponsorship in the arts and academia in Norway, the methodological positioning becomes even more ambivalent. The “researcher” position is mostly expected to be neutral in Norway, where embedded research on the energy sector from an “activist” position is not a well-known methodology. Though critical perspectives on the industry from the social sciences are not uncommon (see, for example, Dale and Andersen 2018; Ryggvik and Kristoffersen 2015), there is a tacit expectation of “role separation.” Working in the north of Norway, where the environmental groups are smaller and less organized than in the south (Jentoft 2013: 440)—and where Oslo-based NGOs are viewed with a certain suspicion—our researcher did *not* solely align herself within the “environmental movement” but sought an equivocation where she engaged both with the industry and environmental groups. Still, the moniker “activist” is not always one you choose—it is also one that is ascribed based on associations with such groups and that might shut down discussion because you are assumed to be committed to a preconceived idea. This was particularly true for our researcher as texts with her signature are easily found by doing a Google search. While this “bias” might restrict access in some domains, association with activism and advocacy allows for a wider engagement with how company employees engage with our questions and respond to critical engagement within academic research.

Moving between different contexts and events makes it possible to trace how people in the industry and environmental groups relate to each other on as well as off the record. During the Barents Sea Conference of 2016, where there was no visible on-the-ground protest taking place, national NGOs kept an eye on what was going on from afar. When Equinor and other companies presented a new report on weather conditions in the Barents Sea, Greenpeace was quick to challenge them in the media, accusing them of undercommunicating the risks in the area. The disagreement turned into a radio debate on the state channel, NRK, where Equinor insisted it had a “responsible approach”—one of its core values—based on fifty years of experience as a company. At the conference, we discussed this with some employees. They were confident that they had “won” the radio debate and told us how Greenpeace had *not* presented well. The Twitter feeds of Greenpeace and other environmentalists told a different story: Equi-

nor had made outrageous and irresponsible statements. They had each performed before and convinced different audiences—and now Equinor’s representatives were working on convincing us. They kept referring to CEO Eldar Sætre by his first name, insisting that “Eldar is really concerned about the climate” and a very different leader from Helge Lund. Lund was Equinor’s CEO from 2004 to 2014 and took the company into foreign investments that have proven both controversial and expensive, allegedly losing 20 billion USD in the United States before pulling out (see conclusion). “Eldar,” from what they told us, was different, someone who was serious about Equinor being a sustainable company, with the offshore windmills in Scotland as a prime example.

As Kim Fortun (2001: 6) found in her work as ethnographer and advocate after the Bhopal disaster, a methodology of working within advocacy can trace transnational connections and how corporate events move across countries, where “oscillation between different sources of data became an important research strategy.” Different materials become traces of longer-term engagements: public discussions, op-eds, interviews, conferences, demonstrations, actions, newspapers, and everyday lives in the proximity of the energy operations. The activist status also gives different entry to how the companies are seen by other groups concerned with energy projects (such as environmental NGOs), and people in the local contexts where they operate, who might seek to share their disagreements with someone they feel understands their conflicted relationship to the industry. Such encounters were frequent during our fieldwork, where different people would confide in us their frustration, skepticism, or outright rage toward the company, which they would not voice in town for fear of falling out with neighbors, while others would display an ambivalence and others again outright praise of company activities.

As a methodological tool, the activist-researcher position requires a constant negotiation. It is in no way an escape from the risk of co-optation (cf. Benson and Kirsch 2010) but rather highlights how we as researchers may find ourselves becoming part of the company’s strategy or “risk management” whether or not we signal an explicit position of advocacy. Moving between spheres with a willingness to engage with agendas without necessarily signing on to them, *not* being “neutral,” produces knowledge of how energy companies treat different stakeholders and how they engage in public debates in Norway as part of their operations.

Strategic Intimacy

Reflexivity concerning our own shifting position in the search for access gave us particular insight into how the corporate staff we encountered positioned themselves toward us. We were often met by employees who managed to balance a strategic and professional appearance with an intimate twist. This particular position blurred our view over the corporate landscape and made access a shifting asset rather than something we gained over time.

Opinions are divided about the internationalization of fully or partly state-owned companies in Norway. Equinor has been heavily criticized for their investments abroad, which have been controversial for a number of reasons in addition to contributing relatively little to the company's overall income. Statkraft has lost enormous sums on failed projects, a fact negatively commented upon in the media. Cost cutting and downsizing of the staff in Norway is sometimes held up against the "waste of money" that is taking place when these companies invest abroad. While both companies have internationalized in recent years, the great majority of company staff is still Norwegian. Norway is a society characterized by a high degree of interpersonal trust. Equinor employees who have been interviewed in Norwegian have to a very large degree come across as frank and open about various challenges, and they seem to take for granted that we as researchers know where to draw the line as to what can be publicized and what can't. This is in marked contrast to the international staff posted in Norway. Such staff have a more corporate air and prefer to refer to official documents and policies rather than to real life events. These observations highlight a methodological problem encountered when examining the elite agencies of actors within institutions that are enabled or constrained by managerial systems. While intimacy may be articulated also in internationalized "high-circle" corporate spheres, such as at international conferences and fairs, this intimacy should be interpreted in the context of how corporate representatives are situated in the field. Corporate representatives obviously must maneuver tensions or ambivalence between corporate and personal identity and agenda, but methodologically it is important not to disentangle the person from the corporation.

During the previous super-cycle when oil prices and earnings were high, we experienced how researchers benefit from the sense of corporate infallibility and complacency. It produced a strangely unguarded openness at a point when, as one of Equinor's media and

PR executives told us, “It was like selling water in the desert—you don’t have to bother with the customer—the stuff just disappears and money appears in your bank account ... and so we let ourselves eat too many cakes when times were good.”

Boom times yielded to downturn, with oil prices plummeting from 120 USD a barrel to below 30 USD at the lowest. According to insiders, corporate arrogance and profligacy gave way to corporate austerity and job losses, especially within the “expendable” functions such as sustainability, and a time of much greater circumspection. This is a sign of the times but also indicative of a new sophistication in the practice and discourse of CSR, now dubbed *sustainability*, in which engagement with researchers is welcomed yet tightly controlled, “dialogue” is open, yet company personnel are careful to stay on message. While the question of where the individual ends and the corporation begins, ethically, socially, and politically, is an interesting one, it can also be a diversion. Even those moments of apparent spontaneous confessional—the breaking of ranks from the corporate line to admit failures of responsibility, impotence, and frustration at the impending existential crisis of climate change, for example—have become part of the ritual of public performance on the CSR/sustainability circuit. “We really dropped the ball on that one, it wasn’t good for us, but also on a personal level it felt immensely frustrating to have to let people down because the company had made a decision that was effectively beyond my control,” an executive with one of the top ten global oil companies said in a moment of apparently painful candor. Catharsis comes quickly, however, through the quasi-public ritual of corporate confessional: “But it’s at these times that I think we really learn from our mistakes, we paid the price heavily in reputational capital and, next time, those of us on the ‘soft’ (i.e., CSR, external relations) side will have a bit more influence with the ‘hard side.’”

Thus, it may be difficult to trace the connection between individual agency and corporate agency and agendas. While the former might at times appear at odds with the latter, it can serve to sustain it in unexpected ways. Internal conflicts and differences can be productive rather than disruptive in the company’s power to achieve its aims. Yet it relies, as Jessica Smith (2021) has elaborated in her study of engineers’ CSR work, on the embodied work of individuals who play between the scales of the personal responsibility and institutional responsibility. Thus, they embody the ethical agency of the corporation as well as the supposed systemic limits or impediments to realizing its self-proclaimed vision of a sustainable future. Time and again

we were told by executives, from sustainability managers to vice presidents: “We are all allies, we are on the same side of the table”; “We want a future for our grandchildren too”; “We’re all members of WWF”; or, “Like our CEO always says, we have children too, I am worried too, I care about this too.” The apparent intimacy of such statements belies their strategic value to the company. They seem to speak of internal tensions and ethical contestations rather than structural coordination. Yet, this seemingly casual intimacy is rehearsed and effective. It can be, we suggest, highly strategic, a reaffirmation of the political role of CSR work rather than evidence of the failure of the company to fully socialize managers of outlying units. As such, defenses rise, leaving the researcher skating (or sliding) over the top if relying only on corporate statements and reports. How companies relate to the world beyond their walls, be it the “impacted communities,” national states, or civil society, and the techniques they deploy in handling critics differ from company to company. This has posed particular obstacles to analyzing responsibility as a terrain of agency in which we can locate nodes of power and decision-making and trace routes of causality.

Conclusion

Doing ethnographic research on energy corporations is not impossible, but it is challenging. Their role in society can be fruitfully explored ethnographically if certain methodological challenges are comprehensively and reflexively addressed. While we hold that a multisited approach is required to explore the way in which energy corporations interact with society, we have also come to realize that this comes with particular challenges and possibilities. The main methodological challenge we initially experienced was “gaining access.” We have argued that the combination of a comparative method within the project and critical reflexivity about what access means stimulated us to rethink methodology and access and ultimately gave new directions to our analytic work. The heightened sensibility concerning methodology has implied scrutinizing our positionality as researchers; being flexible, sometimes taking the role of advocacy, and being drawn into strategic intimacy. Handling this obviously requires certain cultural and linguistic skills. For instance, the characters of most case studies require the researchers to handle three languages fluently. But this reflexive multisited approach also means working against strongly held ideas about ethnographic fieldwork,

such as long time stays in one place, and “hanging out” with locals. Thus, our research has involved a high degree of personal flexibility, more semi-structured interviews than participation, noncontinuous involvement with our interlocutors, mapping infrastructures of extensive geographical extent or opaque character, being present at or attending activities that involve alternative forms of socialites (social media, websites, documents, video meetings, etc.), and even creatively designing situations where we can interact with and observe company representatives.

We have had to reconsider access to the field in the conventional anthropological meaning of “peeking behind the curtain,” seeking different kinds of data collection: the reporting regime of corporations, the importance of creating evidence for CSR activities, and the importance of branding. However, the methodological challenge was not so much to break loose of our initial expectation to access but to realize that what we had taken for granted as methodological obstacles was, in fact, important knowledge about corporations, such as concerns about security and safety. Reflexivity was a key methodological tool throughout that allowed us to maintain awareness of our own expectations and implicit insights about energy companies and to apply these experiences to examine the boundaries between society and corporations. And if we don’t reflect critically on the “sameness” when we argue that multisited methodology is a pre-requisite for access since corporate operations are multisited, we may be seduced into thinking that researchers and corporate representatives look similarly on the world, whereas the latter may tend to think within a more hierarchal or core/periphery framework.

Rather than the day-to-day workings in company offices, we explore the narratives they produce when facing external criticism and dialogue, striving to detail, unpack, and situate the patterns that emerge when tracing companies from corporate offices to local sites and back. As researchers in one way or the other are regarded as externals and sometimes as stakeholders, sometimes as risks, we are indeed embedded in the narratives produced and performed by energy companies. By giving “attention to complexity, contradiction and the contexts that enable and limit even the most powerful among us” (Ho 2016: 45), whether company employee or researcher, these interactions have become integral to our understandings of how CSR is handled by energy companies. While we consider that the approach we have sketched here should contribute toward improving our knowledge of the way in which energy corporations

interact with society, we also realize that the ideal of gaining “full knowledge” of this interaction is as problematic as “good access.” Nobody, not even those centrally positioned in the company, has “full knowledge” of the corporation and its immediate environment, and corporations are likely much more complex, chaotic, and unstable entities than their self-presentations often convey. Energy corporations interact in a society that rapidly changes policies, attitudes, and practices concerning energy, and we therefore suggest that further reflexive thinking about methodological challenges concerning the study of the interaction of energy corporations with society should focus more closely on how we can address the temporal dimension, keeping in mind that “corporate time” may be quite different from “academic time.”

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Notes

1. Full title: “Norwegian Energy Companies Abroad: Expanding the Anthropological Understanding of Corporate Social Anthropology.” Energethics website: <https://www.uib.no/en/project/energethics>.
2. Costs for energy conferences may often be upward of eight hundred USD for a few days, including a conference dinner and other informal events. Researchers are sometimes able to negotiate or request a reduction in price, as the companies are aware that the income difference and spending allowance between academia and the corporate world is enormous, and they do want to include academicians in these events to preserve the democratic flow between different sectors in Norwegian society.
3. “Development orthodoxy” refers to the position of CSR now being firmly established as a central component of the development policy mainstream, which to a large extent goes unquestioned these days, when only a decade ago many development insiders were still rather ambivalent about such a key role for big business in development.
4. Data in this paragraph provided by research assistant Maria Njau.

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