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Fuzzy Embeddedness: The Ethnography of Corporate Social Responsibility in the Extractive Industries

Susana Carmona

Abstract

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the extractive industries is a relatively new but growing topic for anthropology. To study CSR, anthropologists often conduct ethnography *in* corporations, which provides a unique perspective to discern the functioning of corporate power, company–community relations, and the mainstream discourses of global governance. However, ethnography in corporations requires further reflexivity about the anthropologist's positionality and what it can tell us about the functioning of CSR. I build on my experience conducting an ethnography of the *Cerrejón mine* in Colombia, one of the biggest in the world, and a dialogue with other anthropologists' methodological and theoretical reflections about CSR. I elaborate on the conceptualization of ethnographers' work in corporations as *fuzzy embeddedness*, to explore the temporary, ambiguous, and often unacknowledged ways in which the ethnographer is immersed in corporate logics, and becomes part of the hierarchies and power relations that corporations enact in the extractive territories. The article develops two main arguments. First, mining corporations see ethnographers as stakeholders in their *performance of transparency*, therefore turning the relation into an enactment of CSR. Second, empathizing with corporate officials is a productive avenue to understand the functioning and reproduction of CSR. Through the text, I present some methodological considerations and hints about the overall functioning of CSR.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), extractive industries, indigenous groups, ethnography of corporations, Cerrejón

Susana Carmona, University College Maastricht, Netherlands

Introduction

During a hot, windy morning in La Guajira desert, located in northern Colombia, I briefly met Misael Juriyú, an indigenous leader looking for the help of a mining corporation. At the time, I was conducting an ethnography of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs of the Cerrejón mine, one of the largest and most controversial open-pit coal mines in the world. The morning I met Misael, I was present at the "Experimental Farm", a small compound in the middle of the indigenous territory from which the mining company manages aid and social projects for some of the more than 300 Wayuu communities in its area of

influence. Misael, who spoke very little Spanish, handed me an envelope containing names and ID numbers of the people in the community he represented. He explained: "food is not arriving in my community."

At first, I did not know what to do, but I quickly realized that for Misael, I represented the company he had come to look for, seeking help. I was, like most corporate employees, an *Alijuna* (or non-indigenous). I also shared other characteristics such as age, language, origin within the country, and ethnicity with corporate employees. I felt awkward. I wanted to correct the mistake, so that neighboring Wayuu communities did not see me as part of the corporation, but that did not make much of a difference for Misael, who patiently waited for my help. This was not the first and not the last time that I was taken for a corporate employee. On this occasion, I went and called the Experimental Farm administrator, who could do no more than take the envelope and send Misael back home with no promises. The administrator later explained to me that communities for the next round of food deliveries had already been selected. He would now perhaps set in motion a bureaucratic procedure with Misael's request. If they were lucky, the community would receive groceries from the following round of nutrition programs, coping at least temporarily with the enduring threat of hunger that most Wayuu families face.

I will not elaborate here on the effects of 40 years of open-pit coal mining in this peripheral Colombian region. Suffice it to say that poverty, anthropogenic environmental change, and the negative impacts of open-pit mining disproportionately affect the Wayuu communities, who find themselves dependent on government programs, international aid, and CSR projects. Despite decades of receiving coal royalties and numerous programs aimed at overcoming poverty, La Guajira is one of the two most impoverished regions in Colombia. The power hierarchies, violence, inequality, and discrimination that the indigenous communities have faced since colonial times are still in place and are often reinforced by the mine's presence.

In this article, I will explore the awkwardness I felt as an ethnographer when being identified as part of the corporation that I had come to observe. This feeling was productive as it led me to reflect on ethnographic work among corporate officials in a region where long-term power structures place them in a position of privilege and paternalism towards local inhabitants. Based on this experience, I conceptualize, theoretically and methodologically, the ethnography of CSR in extractive industries, a topic increasingly encountered by anthropologists interested in contexts of resource extraction (Dolan & Rajak 2016; Jacka 2018). I hope that my experiences might guide other ethnographers who plan to work in similar settings and contribute to this emerging field with new concepts that describe the ethnographic practice.

CSR is a broad field of discourse and practice within contemporary capitalism and sustainable development governance. In the extractive industries, CSR is a powerful discourse that frames and aims to legitimize corporations' relations with local communities in extraction sites. These contexts frequently involve tensions and conflicts that sometimes turn violent, which CSR attempts to manage and prevent (Becerril 2021).

While ethnographies around resource extraction have often focused on the experience of local communities, ethnographic attention to corporations is increasingly popular. Ethnographic research *in* corporations offers unique insights into the strategies, representations, and practices of economic and political elites. Furthermore, it reveals the nuances and limitations of corporate employees' agency and helps to problematize the idea that the corporation is a monolithic structure with no internal contradictions (Welker 2014). However, fur-

ther methodological reflection about the ethnographer's involvement with mining corporations is necessary. In contexts of resource extraction, ethnographers need to question how their work might involve unintended collaborations with the expansion of the extractivist logic of contemporary capitalism, so repeatedly linked with the global ecological crisis and human rights violation.

While most ethnographers offer some reflexivity about their work and share ideas about conducting fieldwork among institutional actors, conceptualizations of anthropologists' involvements with corporations are still limited. In fact, the academic/activist community tends to frown upon ethnographers of the corporation, expressing concerns about their cooptation by corporate discourses, the risks of over-empathizing with the research subjects, or not pressing enough for social and environmental justice (Kirsch 2014). The absence of concepts that enable us to discuss the potentialities and problematic aspects of ethnographies *in* and *of* mining corporations adds to the difficulty of discussing these concerns and limits ethnography's potential as a method to study elites and powerful institutions.

I contribute to filling this gap in the literature by elaborating on the ethnographer's relations with corporate subjects in the context of extractive industries. I expand on the idea that ethnographers find themselves in a *fuzzy embeddedness* with the corporation, a term first mentioned by Catherine Coumans (2011) to refer to anthropologists receiving logistical support from corporations. The concept was later discussed by Marina Welker (2014) who argued that not only the ethnographer, but also local communities are embedded with extractive projects in numerous ways. I define this fuzzy embeddedness – evidenced in my own case by my feelings of awkwardness – as the temporary, ambiguous, and often unacknowledged ways in which the ethnographer is immersed in corporate logics and becomes part of the hierarchies and power relations that corporations enact in the extraction territories.

Through an ethnographic description of my own work, I develop two main sub-arguments or dimensions of the anthropologist's fuzzy embeddedness with corporations. First, mining corporations see ethnographers as stakeholders in their *performance of transparency*, therefore turning the relation into an enactment of CSR. Second, empathizing with corporate officials can be a productive avenue to reveal an affective dimension of the working and reproduction of CSR. To present these discussions, I engage in a dialogue with the reflections of other authors in the field; through the text, I put forward some theoretical and methodological considerations, and briefly illustrate the functioning of CSR in La Guajira, Colombia.

In this article, I begin by exploring the ethnographic literature of CSR and anthropologists' engagements with corporations. The section does not attempt to be a thorough literature review of the CSR field but a review of some works and concepts that provide valuable methodological insights concerning the ethnography of CSR. I then introduce the Cerrejón mine, the region of La Guajira, and the functioning and evolution of CSR in the region. In the following sections, I elaborate on the concept of fuzzy embeddedness while I present my ethnographic work in the company and reflect on what I learned about CSR from this experience. I finish with some conclusions.

Methodological Reflections in the CSR Literature

The discourse and practice of CSR is a broad field resulting from liberal democratic concerns about the role of corporations in society. It became well institutionalized in the 1990s after several scandals about corporations violating human rights, and in the context of increasing

global environmental consciousness as well as neoliberal reforms pushing foreign investment in the global south and a retreat of the welfare state (Blowfield & Frynas 2005; Dolan & Rajak 2016).

Dinah Rajak (2011) presents a pioneering ethnography of CSR in the extractive industries, in which she provides some methodological hints on how to approach CSR. She studied the multinational company Anglo American and its operations in the subsidiary Anglo Platinum Ltd in the Platinum Belt in South Africa. She defines CSR as a *movement* ubiquitous and curiously hard to pin down, necessarily involving a multi-sited (Marcus 1995) and multi-scalar ethnography. Rajak (2011) also notes, as I myself experienced as well, that the ethnography of CSR frequently requires relying on the analysis of documents, media articles, and corporate reports. Furthermore, interviews are often time-limited and involving actors in different organizations, for example, senior corporate officers, corporate personnel, consultants, NGO partners, government representatives, and many more CSR insiders. Rajak also conducted participant observations of trans-local events such as CSR conferences and meetings. Unfortunately, she does not elaborate methodological reflections and ethical aspects of her work.

Considering CSR as a multi-scale phenomenon – in the sense of it being enacted and given meaning in interconnected but different geographical scales – enables us to account for the dialectic relation between the global and the local. In other words, CSR configures mining regions and shapes neoliberal subjectivities in the sites of extraction, and these localities at the same time articulate demands and constrain corporations' behavior in ways that co-produce the international standards and corporate codes of conduct. This is in line with the argument of anthropologist Stuart Kirsch (2014), that CSR is the dialectical result of the relationship between corporations and their *critics*, a category that includes actors in all stages of the commodity chain.[1] In this sense, CSR seems to articulate discursively the result of contentious interactions with the potential of providing society with space to discuss corporate responsibilities, and key ethical aspects of the capitalist economic system, and even to prosecute corporations' misbehaviors in international tribunals when these do not comply with their self-imposed standards.

Nevertheless, when placing attention on the interactions between corporations and communities in the mines' areas of influence, anthropologists have shown the manipulative and operational character of practices framed as CSR. In these contexts, CSR has been shown to operate as a government technology (Carmona & Puerta Silva 2020), and has been criticized for greenwashing damaging environmental effects (Conley & Williams 2008), spreading unfulfilled developmental promises (Frynas 2005), contributing to the expansion of corporate power and neoliberal capitalism (Rajak 2010), serving to co-opt critics, and fostering resignation among affected local communities (Benson & Kirsch 2010a, 2010b).

In his ethnography of the campaign against the Ok Tedi mine in Indonesia, Kirsch (2014) elaborated on these criticisms of CSR showing how corporations manipulate science amid

[1] To give an example, I once met a citizens' group in Germany living in a city whose main coal provider was the Cerrejón mine. They invited me to present my PhD research. I learned that they had long been in contact with Colombian activists and were well informed of the social and environmental issues concerning the Cerrejón mine. They lobbied enough to make the municipality switch coal providers. These activists' networks play a crucial role in monitoring corporation–society interactions and the shaping of the CSR field. Corporations increasingly face the need to extend their public relations to groups previously unacknowledged or non-existent. These activists' networks are a promising avenue for ethnographic work inquiring into corporation–society relations more broadly.

environmental controversies. This leads him to reject ethnographers' involvement with corporations and call on the discipline to take a clear political stance on the side of local communities, social and environmental justice. For Kirsch, conducting ethnography in the corporation entails the risk of co-optation "because the tendency of ethnographers to empathize with the subjects of their research may influence their findings or temper their critical perspectives" (Kirsch 2014: 12). Although Kirsch recognizes that refusal to conduct ethnographic research inside the corporation leads to potential blind spots, his position exemplifies a widespread distrust among academics and activists. I experienced this stereotype and often had to explain that my interest in CSR was not a result of me being directly involved with the industry, nor was I claiming the corporation was 'responsible', but rather that I was analyzing how the corporation builds and presents itself according to an idea of responsibility.

This widespread depiction of ethnographers of corporations is based on unfortunate assumptions. First, it assumes that anthropologists are incapable of looking critically at the subject of their research. Second, it rejects empathizing with corporate employees as if they are passive and uncritical subjects whose feelings and ideologies are somehow contaminating. Third, it seems to imply that the CSR apparatus only transforms local communities, overlooking changes in the organizations themselves: how CSR is embedded in corporate cultures, how corporation-community relations become increasingly standardized, and how CSR principles constrain the daily work of employees and the mining operation.

In effect, conducting ethnographic research of CSR has led anthropologists (including me) to reflect on incorrect assumptions about corporate employees, communities, and the nature of the encounters between them. Ethnographies of CSR evidence that corporation-community relations should not be look at exclusively in terms of communities' oppression, co-optation, or dependence. Sally Babidge's (2013) studied a partnership between an indigenous community in the Atacama Desert and a BHP mining company, showing that by engaging with CSR, communities actively negotiate public services and infrastructure the state does not provide. She demonstrates that tensions between the community and the corporation emerged from the different understandings and expectations of what being *socios* [partners] meant, rather than because of the actual presence of the extractive industries. This image challenges stereotypes of indigenous communities as opposed to mining and recognizes the agency of local communities. Fabiana Li (2015) makes a similar point when showing how actors are trying to reach agreements for the compensation of water loss in irrigation canals affected by the Yanacocha mine in Peru. Both examples demonstrate that CSR ethnography is a productive avenue to understand the complexities of extractive contexts.

However, the question concerning anthropologists' engagements with actors in the controversial encounters of CSR remains open. As I have already suggested, the notion of anthropologists' fuzzy embeddedness with corporations offers the theoretical potential to highlight ethnographic work in corporations in the context of CSR, perhaps shedding light on the ways in which CSR legitimizes extractivism and conceals forms of violence. Catherine Coumans (2011) first mentioned this notion briefly to describe academically engaged anthropologists who have "independent funding for their mining-related research but accept logistical support in the form of housing or transport from the mine" (Coumans 2011: 33). For Coumans, such fuzzy embeddedness might give "unique insider perspectives and information",

in the same way that

> "journalists embedded with troops gain access to experiences and information that would be difficult to obtain as independent journalists […] However, like embedded journalists, their ability to publicize those insights or perspectives may be restricted, and their reporting may be biased by their operating environment" (Coumans 2011: 33).

Marina Welker (2014) elaborates on Coumans' argument in her ethnography of Newmont Mining Corporation and the Batu Hijau Copper and Gold Mine in Indonesia.[2] Welker's work, another key reference for the anthropology of CSR, consisted of spending a summer in Newmont corporate headquarters in Denver and several months on the Indonesian island of Sumbawa, living in villages near Newmont's Batu Hijau mine. Welker narrates that during her time in Indonesia, she often received logistical support from the corporation, shared meals and recreation with company officials, participated in meetings or conversations deemed confidential, had a badge to enter the mining complex at will, and received health care when needed. She says that she often felt puzzled – what reminds me of my feeling of awkwardness – as she was well aware of the negative images of anthropologists working with corporations. However, she notes that mining is omnipresent in the region, already deeply embedded, for example, through the polluted air and water, the communications networks, and the paved roads built by the company.

According to Welker (2014), villagers were more concerned with the distribution of corporate resources, like royalties and employment, than with their origin's morality. Therefore – in contrast to academics and activists – the villagers did not question her close involvement with the company. Welker explains that in the web of relations around Newmont's Batu Hijau mine, people already enact ideas that represent the company as a subject of responsibility for alleviating the inequalities it has created. Newmont officials' efforts to implement the insights of the CSR movement interacted and conflicted with these local ideas and practices for moralizing the company (Welker 2014: 12).

Welker's depiction is insightful and points to the interdependences, collaborations, and omnipresence of mining corporations in their areas of influence. However, she does not elaborate on how – aside from the logistical support received – the anthropologist becomes 'embedded' with the corporation. She also does not elaborate on her positionality derived from her close relationship with corporate subjects. I discuss how addressing these issues through the idea of fuzzy embeddedness has further conceptual potential. I understand fuzzy embeddedness as unintended, temporary, ambiguous, and often unacknowledged. It produces a sense of awkwardness as the ethnographer does not (necessarily) share the aims and ideology of mining corporations and tries to remain distant and independent while becoming entangled in corporate logics in subtle ways. This ambiguous relationship involves ethical and intellectual challenges for the ethnographer. In what follows, I present reflections of my ethnographic work in La Guajira to reflect on the fuzzy ways in which I became entangled with the corporation.

[2] Welker (2014) explores what she calls the different enactments of the corporation. Inspired by Science and Technology Studies literature, and specifically by Annemarie Mol's (2002) idea of multiple objects, Welker discusses how a corporation can appear so differently to different groups of people, yet at the same time remain a coherent unity.

Cerrejón in La Guajira, from Paternalism to Non-Voluntary CSR

The mining operation in La Guajira began in the early 1980s when it was established as a joint venture between the Colombian state and ExxonMobil with the promise to be the anchor of regional development. From the beginning of the operation, the mining company – through its social management division or corporate foundations – offered agriculture and handicraft projects for the Wayuu communities, introduced microcredit to promote entrepreneurship in local towns, and donated money for health, education and small infrastructure projects. With a few transformations over the decades, there has always been some version of what we today call CSR, a concept that started to appear in corporate reports and magazines in the late 1990s.

In the early 2000s, in line with neoliberal reforms, the Colombian state and ExxonMobil sold their shares to three multinational mining giants: Anglo American, BHP, and Glencore, who established a separate company called Cerrejón to run the mine. Around the same time, the state extended the concession to exploit the Cerrejón deposit for another 20 years, up to 2034. The 'new owners' [*los nuevos dueños o accionistas*] – as they were called in interviews – attempted to distance themselves from the social conflicts initiated by their predecessors. They initiated a 'third party review' of their social relations that resulted in the change of the company's brand, and the deployment of what they called the *Strategy of Responsible Mining*. As part of this strategy, the company enlarged the CSR division, announced the adoption of international social and environmental standards, and publicized their 'transformation' in the media and with local communities. Soon after, the company launched ambitious and controversial expansion plans involving the diversion of rivers. These projects have galvanized a strong opposition to the extractive industry that challenges the 'responsible mining' discourse, calls for a transition to a post-extractivist economy, and denounces the negative social and environmental impacts of the mine (Carmona & Jaramillo 2020).

However, conflicts between the mine and local communities are not at all new. The corporation's failure to respond to societal expectations about development and poverty reduction and its direct and subtle forms of repression and violence – evidenced in decades of slow dispossession, deterioration of local ecosystems, pollution, and marginalization of Black and indigenous communities – have fueled tensions, conflict, and sometimes violent confrontations.

This last aspect presents us with an important issue concerning CSR functioning in La Guajira. Although the global discourse of CSR rests on self-regulation and voluntarism as a core idea of the concept (Shamir 2010), corporate social management is hardly voluntary. On the contrary, CSR in the sites of extraction is seen as a necessity for the smooth functioning of the mining operation. This was explained to me by a high-level executive while discussing the transformation of the idea of CSR within the company:

> "Now the idea that social responsibility is voluntary is over. They [communities] already demand it as if it were part of the law. It becomes mandatory. It is a day-to-day issue; it is what ensures you operate. If it [CSR] was not implemented, blockages would make it impossible to operate the mine […] I would not see it possible to function" (Interview 29.07.2016).

Without a doubt, disruptions to the operation of the train – a 150 km open railroad that passes through Wayuu territory – are a real threat for the business, and are therefore perceived as a

menace by employees. During 2016, the year I visited the mine, there were at least 70 blockages of the train line and double that number of attempts. Lawsuits are another ubiquitous threat that the corporation faces and tries to prevent through negotiated agreements and maintaining an amicable climate with communities in the areas of influence. These extreme examples illustrate how CSR for this company is not an underfunded marginal subdivision but a necessity; it has become increasingly sophisticated through the years and largely effective in dealing with upset communities. In this sense, CSR functions as a strategy for the pacification and disciplining of protesters that has the effect of protecting the company's reputation and perceptions of its legitimacy by different stakeholders. CSR is successful to the degree that it guarantees that responsibilities over negative environmental and social impacts are discussed and problems are resolved on terms and through procedures that are acceptable for the company.

In this way, we can observe how the mine has sustained itself partly thanks to the CSR discourse, something that not only demonstrates that there is a *business case* for CSR, but also that the social projects run by the company have turn out to be one of the channels through which the mine has become economically, materially, and culturally entangled in La Guajira (Carmona 2019). In what follows, I elaborate on my work in the corporation to review how these entanglements take place and how the ethnographer is caught in its functioning.

Approaching the Field

The first time I saw the Cerrejón mine was during my first visit to La Guajira as a master's student researching a dam project in 2012. I observed for the first time how the mine was present in the communities' daily life not only through the acute transformation of the landscape, the mine dumping sites, the daily explosions, the railroad, and the passing train visible on the horizon but also through some version of CSR social programs. Even brief visits to the Wayuu communities in the mine's area of influence were sufficient to see the corporate slogan *Minería responsible* [Responsible Mining] on buildings, windmills, and water tanks.

About two years later, I participated in another research project concerning the controversies surrounding the mine's expansion.[3] We observed how, during these controversies, the mining company used CSR and the *responsible mining* rhetoric to secure its expansion projects, for example, to obtain the consent of indigenous or Black groups during prior consultation procedures.[4] At the same time, the company released statements openly warning [the social movement called it blackmail] that if the expansion projects did not go through, there would be fewer taxes, royalties, social investment, and no new employment. As part of this research project, I visited the region on several occasions, working closely with activist organizations, attending forums and other events against mining, and interviewing affected communities. At the time, I tried to approach the company for interviews and received no

[3] This project was called Regímenes de Intervención económica y conocimientos expertos en Colombia, and was financed by the Universidad de Los Andes and Universidad de Antioquia, 2015. I conducted fieldwork with two other colleagues from the Universidad de Los Andes. The mine expansion project that was being discussed at the time implied the diversion of a stream, adding one more to the several water sources that had already been interfered with and sometimes destroyed to make room for the mining pits. Several sectors of society have opposed the project expressing concern about water.

[4] Colombia is signatory to ILO (International Labour Organization) convention 169, which stablishes the right to prior consultation for ethnic minorities.

response; the mine appeared to me like an impenetrable place for anthropologists, at least for those asking about controversies and conflict.

For my doctoral research, I decided to study CSR practices. Following my advisor's suggestion, I accepted a two-month consultancy with the engineering faculty of my university to evaluate the extent to which explosives in the mining operation affected houses in the vicinities of the Cerrejón mine. The study was carried out as an agreement between affected communities and the company's CSR department – but financed by the latter – in an attempt to resolve a long-standing dispute. I took the role of a 'social expert' to work by the side of seismic engineers. This was not a *fuzzy*, but a *direct* engagement with the corporation that I anticipated would be an opportunity to contact the company and later come back as an ethnographer. Still, even though I mentioned my aims, no one seemed willing to help me get access.

Assuming that the company would remain inaccessible, I planned my project as an ethnography of Wayuu communities' experiences with CSR projects. However, in a last attempt not to set aside the company's perspective, I wrote to the CSR manager introducing my project and asking for an interview, attaching letters from the university and my funding institution (the Colombian Institute for Anthropology and History, ICANH), and assuring him that my research was purely academically motivated. To my surprise and against all my predictions, he answered positively. Soon afterwards, I received a call from an executive from the CSR department who, from then on, helped me plan interviews with CSR officers in Bogota – the country's capital – and in La Guajira. She further suggested that I spend a month living in the mine's residential facilities – a well-equipped enclave reserved for top employees and their families, most of them foreign to the region – so that I could have first-hand access to their work. In less than two weeks, I found myself at the heart of the Cerrejón mine, and my fuzzy embeddedness began.[5]

Ethnography During a Performance of 'Transparency'

During my first weeks at the company, the CSR executive arranged my scheduled, and I was happy to let her do so. She also requested me to send a weekly report so the company could keep track of my activities. I agreed to the company rules, which I did not interpret as an intrusion into my work, but as part of the corporate practices which I needed to experience and record myself. CSR employees, after all, are requested by their managers to provide regular reports of their activities and expenses so this environment of highly controlled and disciplined work applied to us all. Later, I got more freedom to move around on my own; I made acquaintances, and shared the social life of the compound.

As the company was to a large extent managing my access to CSR practices, I came to understand my presence there as part of the performance of 'transparency' that characterizes the enactment of CSR. As pointed out by geographer Andrew Barry (2013) in his work about the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline, transparency is a key concept in the extractive industries. Its practice involves making available large amounts of information about extractive

[5] I lived in the mine's residential compound for a month. My ethnography of CSR also included observations in communities near the railroad and the port, the "experimental farm", events related to the mine expansion plan, and a two-day CSR congress in Bogota. I conducted interviews with government officials in the cities of Riohacha—capital of La Guajira—and Bogota. I also collected and analyzed documents reporting CSR practices, such as sustainability reports, corporate magazines and social media posts.

projects, emphasizing that this might help counter the effects of the 'resource curse' and encourage civil society participation. Mechanisms of the performance of transparency in the Cerrejón mine included the publication of sustainability reports, signing voluntary standards and agreements, opening the compound for touristic and educational visits, and – why not? – allowing researchers to conduct ethnographic research of CSR practices.

In line with the idea of transparency, I was never asked to sign confidentiality agreements, nor was I asked to keep any information to myself or to speak in favor of the mine. Therefore, I concluded that everything that they showed me was public and that they expected me, even wanted me, to see it. Therefore, as an ethnographer, I had to pay attention to the *regime of visibility* that was presented to me. In other words, in the ethnography of CSR, the analysis has to focus not only on what is observed but also on the suppositions, absences, and silences that are also 'present'. As Barry (2013) suggests, the performance of transparency in the extractive industries aims at containing the shape and the development of public debates by rendering the discussion as informed and rational. By defining the means and the indicators through which the company is to be evaluated, corporations define a specific regime of visibility. Then, transparency and openness are as much about what is not shown as what is (Garsten & de Montoya 2008).

I often had more direct hints of the framing of my presence as part of CSR. After an interview with two corporate managers in late 2016, during which we shared dinner, one of them half-joked, half-asked his colleague about getting the cost of dinner reimbursed in the name of "meeting with stakeholder." During another interview, a manager made it more explicit, saying: "since the 2000s, our shareholders have a policy of open doors. That is why we accept students like you. We accept students all the time, but sometimes we just can't cope with so many." This way, I realized that as an ethnographer, I was not only describing CSR but also, and more importantly, participating in its *making*. This is the core implication of the anthropologist's fuzzy embeddedness with the corporation. My relationship with the company turned out to be an enactment of CSR, often without me noticing the ways in which this happened.

Doing Ethnography from a Privileged Space

A second implication of the fuzzy embeddedness with corporations is that the ethnographer's positionality is necessarily entangled with that of the CSR staff while visiting local communities. In my experience, these power dynamics revealed the languages and imaginaries with which corporate employees represent the local communities and exposed an 'affective' dimension elicited by a context of outrageous inequality that motivates employees' engagement with the CSR discourse and practice.

During my stay at the residential compound, I rented a room in the family house of an engineer who had worked for the company for more than 30 years. The compound had all the facilities a family might need: a constant supply of water and electricity, private security, a bilingual school, recreational and sports facilities including a football pitch and a semi-Olympic pool, restaurants, a bar, a supermarket, a health center with access to medical specialists and more. These might all sound like standard infrastructure. However, no town in La Guajira enjoys such facilities.

Living in the compound, I had first-hand experience not only of the contrasts between the inside and the outside of the compound, but I also understood how employees experienced it. My perspective contrasts with Kirsch's (2014) idea that over-empathizing with employees

is a risk for the quality of the ethnography. On the contrary, I believe that ethnographers can critically analyze their own feelings of empathy and apathy, comfort and discomfort, and write stories that reflect the contrasts and paradoxes of these encounters.

These feelings are a manifestation of what anthropologist Gisa Weszkalnys (2016) calls *resource affects*, or the emotional responses related to natural resources prospecting and extraction. *Resource affects* are not seen as "an anti-economic response but as one force among many that give economies their specific shape, while also being shaped by them" (ibid.: 128). Although resource affects are more commonly observable in the local communities' feelings of hope, fear, frustration, or disillusionment, there is no reason to think that corporate employees' affects are not key in shaping corporation–society relations. Empathizing with corporate employees, another form of fuzzy embeddedness, is then an advantaged way to understand the affective dimensions that keep CSR running.

People living within the compound – like my host family – thought of the *outside*, specifically the Wayuu territories, as dangerous, 'undeveloped', full of conflictive backward people in need of education and aid. The urban areas were often described as having been captured by corrupt local elites who did not invest well the money that the mine paid in taxes and royalties and who were primarily responsible for the failure of the coal industry to fulfill its developmental promise. Representation of the outside fluctuated between feelings of fear and pity, often referring to the Colombian state as absent and justifying the presence of the mining company as the only actor that was doing something to overcome the problems. In this way, I learned that through CSR, the company can represent itself as the entity that brings solutions to problems such as water scarcity, hunger, corruption, patronage, dependence on the extractive industry, and others – many of which the presence of the extractive industry has contributed to creating or aggravating.

Anthropologist Hanna Appel (2012) refers to a comparable situation in the case of oil enclaves in Africa. She conceptualizes the enclave as a form of infrastructural violence where CSR functions to disentangle the people living *inside* the privileged walls from the reality *outside*. Appel argues that by focusing on bringing solutions instead of analyzing causes, CSR helps the corporation and its employees to abdicate responsibility for the social problems of host regions. CSR then is the mechanism that connects the enclave economy and the region, the corporation and the distant – yet so close – 'others'.

CSR executives fulfill the crucial role of brokering between the inside and the outside. The CSR executives are the human face of the 'corporate personhood'[6] that interacts and often conflicts with communities and local authorities in the company's name, a task that they consider exhausting and sometimes frustrating. However, conflict is only part of the picture. CSR executives also get to feel good about bringing projects and resources to 'poor' families. A widespread comment was that the beneficiaries of CSR programs would have probably never got an education, infrastructure, and employment if it were not for the company. Even though the origins and hierarchies involved in this salvation rhetoric need to be problematized, it is true that for many households, CSR does bring concrete opportunities

[6] When speaking of corporate personhood or of the corporate person, I refer to the legal notion that companies have legal rights and responsibilities, independently of the individual human beings that are part of it. This gives corporations the right to sign contracts, to sue or be sued, and have legal continuity over time. As suggested by Robert Foster (2014), within CSR, the 'corporate personhood' obtains a more prominent role and visibility. Foster points out that CSR makes it easier to think of corporations as human partners, "to animate them with the moral virtues of people committed to others" (ebd.: 248).

and solutions to everyday problems. This translated into a pragmatic acceptance/legitimacy (Suchman 1995) of the company's presence as embodied by CSR executives.

It is true that, parallel to personal motivations, CSR executives are aligned with corporate objectives through diverse means, such as a contract, performance indicators, an annual bonus and other economic incentives. In my experience, they were also conscious that CSR and community management generally aim to facilitate and support the extraction, transportation, loading of ships, and export of coal. However, it would be misleading to claim that economic incentives alone account for employees' engagement with the corporation and the extractive industries more generally. In my experience, for employees, the feelings associated with contributing to communities, and the power and prestige that it imbued them with, were important motivations for their jobs and consequently an essential fuel for CSR functioning. While accompanying CSR officials in their daily work, I saw them distribute food, sign up people for food deliveries, install solar panels, repair community infrastructure, and many other things. I saw local people hug and thank them, and enthusiastically participate in corporate programs. It was easy to feel good about bringing some, albeit minor, positive change to communities. However, the CSR employees' 'best intentions' need to be analyzed as they are also inextricably embedded within the enactment of the corporation and the extractive industry. I will elaborate on this point in the next section.

CSR Employers and the Human Face of the Company

CSR executives' daily work consists of coming and going between their houses in the comfortable residential enclave and fieldwork in the communities. As my own fieldwork consisted of being by their side, I also transited this border between the idealized bubble of the mining compound and the communities (a very literal one, fenced with wired cable and surveilled with security cameras). I shared with them the same codes, the same language, and a similar look, so when I was taken for one of them, I understood that being non-indigenous, upper-middle-class, highly educated from the center of the country already distanced me from the Wayuu. Besides that, I was going around side by side with people who have the power to give or withhold corporate gifts or access to social programs. For communities, I was not just a curious outsider who came to visit the region, but one that came with the mine and all the power that it implied. Therefore, I was entangled in the power relations that the CSR builds in the region every day, and that the CSR executives represent.

That my fieldwork involved collaborations with the corporation was only to be expected. I reciprocated employees' willingness to have me observing their work by helping during community meetings, distributing snacks and lunch, taking notes, participating in workshops, and taking pictures. However, I had to remind myself that my fuzzy embeddedness was not only with well-intentioned employees but also with the functioning of corporate power. This was salient when interviewees asked for my opinion and recommendations on improving community relations or conducting more efficient programs or projects. While for me it felt like talking to people like myself, concerned with doing their job the best they could, these requests faced me with the dilemma of how, through these 'innocent' interactions, I might be helping the corporation. I also faced these ethical dilemmas during conversations about the opposition movement that I knew in depth from previous research projects, and I refrained from interviewing local leaders and activists while I was working directly with the CSR employees. I negotiated these dimensions of my fuzzy embeddedness on the

spot, sometimes maintaining more extended conversations, giving some opinions, and sharing my impressions, and sometimes sidestepping the issue, avoiding getting too involved in discussions by saying that I was still getting to know the context and I had more to learn from my interviewees than the other way around, which was how I actually felt. I was frequently asked about my opinion on the mine, and I always openly said that I thought coal mining needs to be downscaled, sooner rather than later, and that La Guajira needs to start enacting a post-extractive future.

For CSR officers, dealing with conflict and criticism was an inherent part of working in the extractive industries. Even though I was not being given any sensitive information, there seemed to be an implicit presumption that I was going to criticize the company. Sometimes, my closest group of acquaintances joked about seeing me years later speaking against the company as the head of an environmentalist NGO. They told me stories of disappointment about researchers or journalists whom they had welcomed and who ended up writing negative depictions of the company. They also discussed and lamented the negative depiction of coal mining in the media. Confronting the corporation was, in many ways, confronting them. They assumed their roles as representatives of the corporation and self-identified with it: 'the Cerrejón family' was an idea commonly invoked, although not uncritically.

One CSR executive illustrated this identification with an anecdote. She had become friends with a well-known Wayuu leader from one of the communities in the area of influence. The leader often told the employee that she hated Cerrejón, and she refused to talk to anyone in the company – except for this CSR executive! During one crucial meeting with a manager, the Wayuu leader demanded her presence – a low-rank executive who was not initially invited. The executive knew this was a contradiction and later that day told the leader, "You say you don't want to speak to Cerrejón, but I am Cerrejón." The leader answered saying: "no, you are not the same. You are different."

To sum up, the stated objectives of CSR which include that the company contributes to sustainable development, cannot be disentangled from the aim to profit from coal extraction, because they are both inherently linked. The broad pragmatic idea that the corporation can be 'beneficial' for the region because it is deeply committed with CSR practices and standards implies the acceptance of a trade-off with the long-term consequences of extractivism. But this pragmatic acceptance goes beyond survival and necessity; it is also fueled by feelings of identification, affects, assigned meanings and experiences of CSR for specific people at different moments during the constant interaction between local communities and corporate employees. CSR has become a successful discourse to justify the extractive industries, as it manages to fuse itself with local identities and everyday life.

Conclusions

CSR has become an anthropological problem requiring novel ways of ethnographic experimentation and concept making. In this article, I have elaborated on how ethnographers studying CSR and the extractive industries engage with mining corporations. I have elaborated on the concept of fuzzy embeddedness to refer to the ambiguous and temporary ways in which ethnographers become part of the practices, logics, and power relations they are researching.

My approach is traditional in the sense that I conducted localized fieldwork during which I shared with a group or community – the corporate employees – daily life and conversations.

I participated in and observed their practices, and sought to understand their inner categories, ways of thinking, and the underlying logics of their social life. However, I have argued that the ethnography of CSR needs to account for how ethnographers may become entangled in the logics and functioning of the phenomenon they observe, considering that CSR success relies on embedding the company in the daily life of local communities. I have widened the idea of anthropologists' fuzzy embeddedness with corporations to reflect on such aspects.

I have pointed to how ethnography in the corporation involves a constant negotiation over how much to collaborate with employees and a constant transitioning between the inside and the outside of the corporation, carrying the symbolic charges associated with having access to corporate offices and fancy residential compounds. As CSR is deployed from a space of privilege, the shared fieldwork with corporate executives calls for a reflection on the ethnographer's positionality. This experience can translate into an ethnography of privilege itself that accounts for the representations and emotions that bridge the inside and the outside of the corporation, and morally disentangles elites from the problematic consequences of inequality.

I have also pointed out that fuzzy embeddedness with the corporation implies empathizing with CSR corporate employees and understanding the affective dimension that sustains CSR. Furthermore, I have shown how the opening of corporate gates to ethnographers is part of the corporate performance of transparency entangling the ethnography with the enactment of the CSR. In other words, in the ethnography of CSR from the corporate perspective, the ethnographer is not only there to document a cultural practice; the fact that she is there at all is possible because of the principles of the practice itself.

Paying attention to my fuzzy embeddedness with the corporation allowed me to maintain critical reflexivity about my own work. I was able to conceptualize contradictory feelings and doubts I had during my fieldwork and to understand crucial aspects of the daily functioning, the routinized conflicts and paradoxes that surround CSR. I offer reflexivity as an antidote to anthropologists becoming imperceptibly complicit in phenomena that interest them academically but for which they do not share an ideological base. I hope that my methodological reflections will contribute to the consolidation of a critical thinking around CSR and its role in the reproduction of power relations and environmental crises associated with the seemingly unstoppable demand for natural resources

To look at situations of fuzzy embeddedness provides a point of entry to interrogate how organizational actors represent ethnographers and even use their presence in their favor, or to discuss ethical dilemmas during fieldwork. Beyond the extractive industries, my reflections aim to inspire ethnographers who increasingly find themselves fuzzily embedded in powerful institutions as we explore new ethnographic fields in modern societies.

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Author Information

Susana Carmona is a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow at University College Maastricht in the Netherlands. Her research stands at the interface of the anthropology of development and mining, political ecology, and Science and Technology Studies. Carmona completed her doctorate in anthropology in 2020 at Universidad de Los Andes in Bogota, Colombia, where she focused on the case study of the Cerrejón mine. She observed the relations between corporations, state actors, and local communities around the extractive industry, the enactments of expert knowledge and the government technologies deployed around environmental controversies. Susana Carmona has lectured at Goethe University Frankfurt and Ruhr University Bochum (RUB) in Germany, and Universidad del Rosario in Colombia. From 2019 to 2020, she was a member of the RUSTLAB at RUB, where they worked on coding practices for collective work in academia and discussed experimental methods for ethnographic research. She currently works on a research project about food insecurity and coping strategies among Wayuu indigenous people in Colombia.