

“DO YOU REALLY LIVE HERE?” THOUGHTS ON INSIDER RESEARCH*

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One summer Saturday I was sitting at the living-room table in a run-down old house in the gold-mining ghost town of Bodie, a California State Historic Park located in the high-altitude desert east of the Sierra Nevada. Signs on the outside walls of the house identified it as an “Employees’ residence.” A nearby number post linked the building to the park’s self-guided-tour brochure, which described it as “the Gregory House” and detailed the lives of the home’s historic inhabitants. I was busy writing when small running footsteps approached: children, some of the 200,000 or so annual visitors to Bodie. A brown-haired girl of about eight and her towheaded kid brother strained to pierce the relative darkness inside the house. What they saw was me. Turning away from the window, the girl hollered to her parents, “There’s a guy in there! And he’s dead! He died writing!”

Being taken for dead—and for a man—may seem shocking to some, but this was not the only time that I was seen as a ghost—or as a man—during the fourteen summers that I worked and did fieldwork in Bodie.¹ But experiences like this one led me to contemplate the interactions between my physical presence and my role as insider in the public place that I was trying to study.

As a researcher I was interested in how visitors and staff understood Bodie’s past and made room for it in their present, in how they made meaning in and from the landscape. But as a staff member and part of the Bodie community, I myself was part of that process. An important aspect of my work became understanding how I was a part of my own research and negotiating the challenges that being an “insider” presented.

STUDYING YOUR OWN COMMUNITY

Because gaining perspective on something you’re in the middle of poses distinct challenges, texts on qualitative research methods often advise students not to study communities or situations of which they are already part. Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklen warn that since qualitative researchers regularly focus on the taken for granted, starting with an insider’s perspective can make research harder rather than easier (1998, 52). “You may fail to notice pertinent questions or issues because of the in-

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