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Source: *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Economic and Ecological Processes in Society and Culture (May, 1982), pp. 421-436

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of the [American Anthropological Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/644684>

Accessed: 23/09/2014 10:10

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being-in-the-market versus being-in-the-plaza: material culture and the construction of social reality in Spanish America

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Being human, as every anthropologist surely knows, is to be an extraordinarily complicated, and even contradictory, creature. In one mode of being, we appear to be focused directly on the business at hand and to be unconsciously absorbed in responding to the actions of others; we seem to experience the world around us as a thing given, as a matter of fact. In another mode of being human, we appear to be detached from the tasks at hand and to be self-conscious in our responses to others; we seem to experience the world as a thing fashioned, as a matter of fiction.

This ability to shift modes of being poses critical questions about the relationship between our existence and the world in which we exist. The very fact that we are capable of such dramatic shifts suggests that there is a symbiotic interdependence between the two modes, an interdependence aptly described by Heidegger (1962) as being-in-the-world.

As a single, unitary phenomenon, being-in-the-world means that for us *to be* we must have a *world* to be in. We cannot otherwise exist. Yet "world" is not an external thing, existing apart from our actions and awaiting our entrance; but it is dependent upon our *being in*. Through our actions, our *interactions*, we bring about the world in which we then are; we create so that we may be, in our own creations.

In this article I examine the phenomenon of being-in-the-world in the ethnographic context of Spanish America. Spanish America, however, is far too abstract a thing for a flesh-and-blood human to be in; thus, to examine being-in-the-world of Spanish America we have to look at concrete places where Spanish Americans are in process of being.

Two such places ideally suited for this purpose are the market and the plaza. They are common throughout the region, they lend themselves to ethnographic investigation, and, most importantly, they exhibit the two modes of being-in-the-world alluded to earlier: in the market, a factlike world is constructed; in the plaza, a more aesthetic one emerges. How is

This article describes how the people of Cartago, Costa Rica—compelled, like each of us, to create—incorporate the material culture of their town's market and plaza into social situations. In so doing, they move from the physical reality of simply being there to the distinctive social realities of being-in-the-market and being-in-the-plaza. The juxtaposition of these two complementary realities, the article concludes, constitutes the dialectic through which Spanish American culture becomes. [interpretation, symbolic interactionism, experience, material culture, humanistic anthropology]

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0094-0496/82/020421-16\$2.10/1

this accomplished? How do people transform simply being there physically to being in two distinct worlds? The answers would seem to lie in what differentiates the two places, that is, their material culture. That being the case, we need to consider the nature of material culture and its relationship to the process of world building.¹

We may begin by noting that several social scientists, writing from an interpretive, interactionist perspective, argue that the world-building, or culture-building, process is one of ongoing public discourse. Herbert Blumer (1969), the sociologist who coined the term *symbolic interactionism*, and who draws heavily on George Herbert Mead's social/functional theory of mind (see Troyer 1978; Strauss 1964:66–67), argues that people respond to objects on the basis of what those objects mean and that the meaning of those objects arises out of the negotiated experience of social interaction. Clifford Geertz (1973), the anthropologist known for his interpretive theory of culture and who draws upon Mead and also upon Gilbert Ryle, insists that culture, "this acted document . . . is public" (1973:10), because meaning is—that is, the meaning of a wink, real or burlesqued (to use Geertz's example from Ryle), lies not in knowing the rules governing how to wink, but in the winking; or, perhaps more precisely, in the interpretive response to the winking.

From this view, the human world, because it is brought about by a trafficking in symbols, is not mainly in our individual heads, as a scholar with a strict cognitive view of human affairs might argue; nor is it largely external to our subjectivities, as a dedicated positivist might insist. It is an intersubjective world, lying out there, between the "you-ness" of you and the "me-ness" of me.

Material culture epitomizes this attribute of human life. The material being of house, park, and community lies out there, between us, an intersubjective world fixed for the moment in brick, plants, and street patterns. Viewed thus, material culture becomes, in Mead's phrase, a series of "collapsed acts, the signs of what would happen if the acts were carried to completion" (cited in Troyer 1978:251). The experience of others, as the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1980) notes, is fleeting. A glance, a touch, and then they are gone. But with the ability to make artifacts, we can fix our experience—much in the manner that a text fixes discourse (Ricoeur 1979)—and in so doing employ the material items to recall, reconstitute, and communicate our experience. As the objectification of our subjective experience of social interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1967), material culture, then, is not simply there, like an object of nature, structuring our movements by its mere physicality. Instead, it assumes the dramatic qualities that Kenneth Burke (1962:7–19; 1966:3–57) attributes to words and so becomes a "scene," or better, an opened text, whose narrative we read even as we interact.

If it is granted that material culture is our intersubjective world expressed in physical substance, then how do we respond to material culture in such a way as to move ourselves from simply being there in our own physicality to being-in-the-world? If material culture is like an opened text, how do we bring ourselves and the text together to establish a unity of being-in-the-text? A path to answering that question lies in a familiar, but still incisive, concept in social science: the definition of situation.

Customarily, W. I. Thomas's (Thomas and Thomas 1938:572) famous statement, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences," has meant the portrayal of subjective and often irrational reactions to a given objective situation. Both Ball (1972) and Perinbanayagam (1974) have effectively argued, however, that if the concept is taken seriously, *existentially*, as a description of the human condition, then the so-called objective reality to which people subjectively respond is itself not an external given but the very result of their actions. In this light, defining the situation becomes synonymous with being-in-the-world and shares that concept's investigatory thrust. The matter may be stated thus:

If material culture is the physical expression of the world in which we are, then defining the situation means how people incorporate material culture into the situation they are creating so that they bring about unity between the situation and the material setting. When this is accomplished, one may say that the situation has been placed; it has achieved material existence. People are no longer simply there physically; they are also in-the-world.

The process of incorporating material culture into the definition of situation, although probably not a strictly linear progression, can best be presented as three analytically distinct steps or components: the preliminary definition supplied by the material culture of a setting; the interaction occurring within that setting; and the image emerging out of the interaction and completing the definition by restating that situation's sense of place. The ethnographic data will be organized accordingly, but first it is necessary to report how those ethnographic data were collected.

the ethnographic experience

In the summer of 1975, I took up residence in a corner of the market and on a bench in the plaza of Cartago, Costa Rica. In Cartago, the plaza—as it does in every Spanish American community founded as part of Spain's policy to conquer, civilize, and Christianize the New World (Foster 1960; Stanislawski 1947)—forms the aesthetic focal point of a grid of streets stamped in perfect rectangularity upon curvilinear nature. A block north of the plaza and occupying one of the rectangles is the market. It fronts the main thoroughfare that links Cartago to the Atlantic port of Limón to the east and to the nation's capital, San José, some 25 km to the west. Behind the market, railroad tracks parallel the highway's route from the coast to the capital, and a local complex of roads ties Cartago and its hinterland of farms and small communities to these national links. The transportation network and the historical status of Cartago as the colonial capital of Costa Rica ensure that it, a pleasant community of 35,000 in a friendly country of 1,871,000, occupies a significant niche in the national hierarchy of urban places (Dirección General 1974).

During two previous summers, 1972 and 1973, I had made several efforts to relate place to behavior and behavior to place. Although I had accumulated considerable data, I was dissatisfied with what I was doing and even wondered why I was there. During that summer of 1975, however, for reasons that I still do not understand, things came together.

It began when, listening to the market's harsh noises or admiring the plaza's gentle order, I became fascinated with the act of watching. Of course, I did more than watch. Through the medium of colonial documents, travelers' accounts, local histories, and old photographs, I followed the evolution of the plaza from being a colonial parade ground to being, in the 19th century, an open-air market, and to being converted, in the early 20th century, to a garden park with the market moved to its present location (Richardson 1978). Back in the present, I interviewed various city officials and the administrator of the market. For the most part, however, I listened to people who wanted to talk to me—men, women, and children whom I had met the two previous summers and new acquaintances, some with a rounded view of Cartago and others with a knowledge limited to specifics. There was one individual whose words still stir within me: "Man possesses memory, intelligence, and particularly, imagination. Of all the animals only man can imagine, and with imagination man can know God." Of all the animals only man can fictionalize, and through fiction man can know reality.

The conviction came to me that if I watched the people around me with sufficient skill and passionate concern, the simple acts of buying lettuce and of gentle strolling might ex-

pand and transform to reveal a glimpse of the peculiar reality in which we humans operate. But what to watch? What to note down? What to ignore? Recording the material manifestation of the market and plaza was easy enough. I took photographs, paced distances for maps, and wrote descriptions to myself. Recording interaction was much more difficult. I visited both places at different times during the day and on various days during the week. In the plaza I tried to make maps of people's actions and scribbled rapidly as they leisurely moved from bench to bench. The swirl of people around the market made even this modest effort impossible. The familiar works of Edward Hall and Ray Birdwhistell came frequently to mind, but I found their notational systems too finely grained for a single observer equipped with a pencil, paper, and a still camera. Nonetheless, I kept reminding myself to be sensitive to the proxemic distance between individuals and between clusters of people and to note occasions of territoriality.

Although I tried to keep count of categories, such as age, sex, and wealth, more and more I caught myself watching particular individuals, those whom the scene revealed as heroic—the old, the poor, and the very young—and with a jerk, I had to remind myself to watch the man in the suit and the woman with carefully coiffured hair. As I watched, I began to notice exchanges among these individuals and compiled incidents that seemed “situational” (Goffman 1963:22): micro-dramas that were not merely *in* the market or the plaza but were *of* each place, interactions that either incorporated or challenged the definition of the situation being proposed. Thus, from my reading, from my listening, but again mostly from my watching, I tried to comprehend the process of being-in-the-world of the Spanish American market and plaza.

The brief report of the ethnographic experience now finished, the data collected are presented in the three components mentioned earlier: the preliminary definition of the material setting, the interaction taking place in the setting, and the image that completes the definition. In the presentation of the data, the last thing I want to do is to draw an overly sharp division between market and plaza; at the same time, I do not want to retreat into phrases that purport to describe the market's or plaza's ideal patterns—either cognitive or behavioral. To do one or the other would seem to obscure the realities of the two places and do violence to the interpretive, interactionist emphasis on the public, ongoing manner in which we construct social reality. The stylistic aim, then, is to convey something of the immediacy of being there and something of the understanding that being there calls forth.²

being-in-the-market and being-in-the-plaza

the material component To use the material culture of a setting as a preliminary definition of the situation means that people respond to the setting in part through “reading” its textlike characters (Richardson 1980b), but perhaps primarily through experiencing its phenomenological presence. What people respond to in a setting are the overt messages that objects present through their appearance and arrangement and the more implicit theme that the setting in its totality conveys. In all probability, what constitutes a setting and defines its limits lies not so much in the isolated setting but in the manner in which the physical and thematic features distinguish, in a quasi-phonemic fashion, that setting from others in the community. In this, material settings resemble a series of semantic domains, domains which, as people literally enter them, provide a preliminary understanding of the interaction going on around them and, consequently, of the situation developing before them. Thus, the preliminary definitions of the settings of the market and of the plaza are revealed through contrasting the context, the arrangement, and the theme of each.

The market structure in Cartago is physically situated in a context of business concerns. Lining the main street that fronts the market are small stores owned by local enterprises and larger ones headquartered in San José. Lining the railroad tracks in back of the market are numerous cantinas and a "hotel" or two where a peasant, celebrating a moment's release from weekly toil, can wake up with a heavy head and an empty pocket.

Bracketed by the square block in which it sits, the market building itself is a large, square, metal "box" made of corrugated tin welded to a steel frame. No curlicues or bric-a-brac adorn the walls, and only a coat of blue-green paint relieves their metallic monotony. Inside the structure, a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus provides the only relief from utilitarian starkness. The barnlike interior space is checkerboarded with wooden compartments called *tramos* (literally, contiguous pieces of terrain separated from each other by whatever means at hand). Individual *tramos* may vary from a tiny cubicle, barely large enough for the vendor to sit behind a display of lurid paintings of the saints, to ones over thirty feet long. Each has an open space extending from waist to head level, through which the vendor and the customer exchange brief words about the customer's needs and the vendor's price. The top of the *tramo* is only a foot or so from the vendor's head and from it hangs objects he is selling: sausage, if he is a sausage, cheese, and egg man; boots if he is selling footwear; and harnesses, belts, and rope if he sells leather goods. Smaller merchants who do not have the wherewithall to gain access to a *tramo* ring the outside of the building with makeshift benches rented from the market administration. On Saturday, the principal market day, every inch of this space is occupied by the vendors and their products: coarse sacks bulging with brown potatoes; twisted strings of white onions; red tomatoes arranged in perfect pyramids; or topical fruits piled in brilliant, multicolored clusters.

Thematically, the market is a place where nature is present as a precipitate of human action. With the exception of fish caught wild in the ocean, nature here is in the form of domesticates (potatoes, onions, or fruit) or as fabricated items (clothes, shoes, or pictures of the Virgin). Managed by man, bagged, strung, and stacked, nature is now an object for purchase; it has been converted into a commodity.

The surroundings of the plaza are considerably more sedate than those of the market. One side is entirely occupied by the *palacio municipal*, which houses both local and provincial offices within modernistic concrete-and-glass confines. On the adjacent side are the remains of a church, unfinished and abandoned since the devastating earthquake of 1910. The parish church had been located here since the founding of Cartago in the 1560s, but after the earthquake another church nearby became the parish church, and the remains, known locally as the "ruins," have become a kind of picturesque park. On the other two sides of the plaza are small businesses, homes, and a movie theater.

In 1890, after the market was moved to its present location, the plaza was made into a garden-park (in Costa Rican Spanish, it changed from a *plaza* to a *parque*). A fence of iron, given to the city by the country's president in appreciation for political support, bounded the plaza, and a large bandstand formed the center. Later, the fence was removed, the bandstand was reduced to a small shelter in a corner, and a large fountain became the centerpiece. Today, the plaza is a series of rough circles enclosed within a square border and dotted with commemorative objects. The center circle is the fountain, rarely flowing, the base of which is sunk slightly below street level. At the base is another circle of water cluttered with candy wrappers and cigarette butts. These mix with aquatic plants to form a scum through which, miraculously, tiny fish swim. Circling the fountain is a paved walkway, then a strip of grass and bushes, another curved walkway, a larger area of shrubs and trees, the square border, and, finally, the street. A series of cast concrete benches spaced at regular intervals circle the fountain. Other benches spaced with equal precision

line the three entranceways that lead from the street to the fountain; still other benches line the square border and face the streets. On the side that borders the *palacio municipal*, a triangular arrangement of flagpoles enclose a triangular-shaped pillar commemorating Costa Rican independence. Nearby is a large bust of the founder of the Red Cross. On the far side are small busts of a local clergyman and a physician. Along the side that faces the "ruins," embedded in the grass, is the wheel of the International Rotarian movement. Opposite this side and squeezed between an entranceway and a street is the small bandstand.

As with the case of the market, the theme of the plaza is the management of nature: tall, needle-leaved trees tower above shorter, broad-leaved trunks; smaller bushes and pink flowering shrubs form alternate assemblages on green lawns; and lush water herbs around the fountain contrast with a cluster of spinous shrubs and palms planted near a walkway. Even dirt, the primeval pollutant, is discretely covered with grass. Although managed, nature in the plaza is not meant to be exchanged as a commodity; rather, it is intended to be an ornament, a substance that lends grace, a quality that adorns.

In sum, the material features of the market and plaza contrast in context, arrangement, and theme. A busy street, stores, and railroad tracks surround the market; quieter streets, government buildings, and the church "ruins" circle the plaza. The market, like most places in this highly carpentered environment, is principally indoors and square, while the plaza is uniquely outdoors and circular. The market concentrates individuals into narrow streams flowing past stationary vendors, and the plaza distributes people into clusters focused primarily on the fountain. Only the enigmatic Sacred Heart of Jesus is on display in the market, while the plaza displays busts, flagpoles, an independence marker, and the Rotarian's wheel. Finally, the thematic feature that distinguishes the material environment of the two places is that nature in the market is a commodity and in the plaza it is an ornament.

the interaction component As people approach the market and the plaza, they begin constructing situations preliminarily defined by their interpretive responses to the semantic contrasts in the material culture of the two places. During the course of their interaction with the material settings and with each other, their behavior becomes meaningful, one might suggest, to the extent that it incorporates or challenges their initial understanding of what is happening around them. In actuality, from a purely ethological, neutral-observer point of view, the behavior occurring in the settings varies over a wide range and the recording of that variation, as mentioned, is extremely difficult. A portion of what people do and say may not be critical to either incorporating or challenging the emerging definition. The behavior is *in*, but not *of*, the setting. The matter is further complicated not only by having to decide what behavior is merely *in* and what behavior is critically *of* but also by the fact that the apparently incidental "in" behavior may form the context for interpreting the "of" behavior.

To set aside the "in" and "of" problem for the moment, interaction that people interpret as incorporating the preliminary definition transforms a purely "crude," ethological "conversation of gestures" (Strauss 1964:154-162) to meaningful, symbolic interaction. The movement is from simply being there to being-in-the-world. Conversely, interaction that people interpret as challenging the preliminary definition also achieves meaning, but the meaning it achieves is that of being out of place, of being-out-of-the-world now taking shape. Out-of-place and in-place behaviors exist in a sort of dialectic, reinforcing one another in their very antagonism. Yet, at the same time, what is in-place and what is out-of-place is situational, and what is situational depends, preliminarily at least, on people's interpretive responses to the material setting.

Since the ethnographer obviously wants to avoid the imposition of categories that do violence to the process he is trying to understand, the best way to handle both the “in” and “of” problem and the in-place and out-of-place distinctions is to contrast a broad sample of market behavior with that of the plaza and extract from that contrast critical interactions that illustrate the incorporation of the material settings into the emerging situations. This is attempted by first giving a running account of representative activity in the two places and then by making a more systematic comparison to underscore the contrast between market and plaza behavior.

In a slow, subdued manner, the market is open all week; but the tempo quickens as the weekend nears, and on Saturday it peaks. In the fresh light of early morning, heavily loaded trucks, battered old American Chevrolets, and bright new Japanese Datsuns maneuver through the small space and finally stop. Pulling and pushing carts of all sizes, workers quickly move the produce from truck to stall. By 7:00 the now-empty trucks pull away, and as if he were the official starter of the day’s activities, the man selling tickets for the weekly lottery first calls to the crowd, “Tomorrow it plays. What is your number? Your number? Your number?”

Within the market building and in his *tramo* the vendor moves about his domain, his head automatically ducking under straw bags hanging from the roof, his hand reaching above the rice bin for a can of peaches. Before he has finished with one customer, he is calling out, “Señor, what pleases you? Señora, what offers itself to you?” Arrogantly, his voice implies why should the customer be so stupid as to buy from anyone other than him.

At an entrance, a boy stands with a box full of wet lettuce. He calls out, “Lettuce! Lettuce! Two for a peso.” He makes a quick sale, but before he can make another, one of the market officials hurries up and tells him he is blocking the passage. The boy moves away, and a pale, thin man with a small box of white thread takes his place. With his mind in strange and distant places, he gently offers the box to the people pouring through the entrance. He does not make a single sale and quietly drifts off. The lettuce boy reappears with his partner, a man in his twenties. “Sell them three for one,” he advises. The boy makes several sales, but again the official comes and drives him away.

At a *tramo* selling staples, a young mother is buying her weekly supply. The vendor is attentive and courteous. Little of the vigorous bargaining supposedly characteristic of Latin American markets marks their exchange. As the lady makes a purchase, the vendor wraps each item in newspaper and places it carefully in a bag made of shiny *cabuya*, a fiber spun from a local plant. She finishes her purchases and buys one cigarette. After lighting the cigarette she motions to her son, who, without a word, backs up to the counter. The vendor lowers the sack on the boy’s back and carefully adjusts it as the boy, still without expression, staggers under the weight. Bent nearly double by the load, the boy turns to follow his mother as she and an even younger child pass into the crowd, the smoke of her cigarette lingering delicately in the air.

At noontime, at one of the market’s small restaurants—which is only a counter, five stools, and a name, “The Gardenia”—a comfortable-looking man is eating a dish of rice and beans topped with a fried egg. He rises halfway from his stool and says something to the waitress. She laughs and tosses her head. Nearby, another man, drawn out and crumpled, peeks out of a face that barely emerges from a tattered, brown sweater. He spots the customer, blinks, and touches him on the arm. The customer, fresh from his exchange with the young waitress, scrapes a portion of his dish onto his bread plate. Immediately the small man grabs a dirty spoon and starts eating. A dog hurries by but pauses to piss on a crate of tomatoes.

Outside, one of the two regular shoeshine boys works on the ethnographer’s boots. A few

spaces down, a boy is perched on the edge of a crate selling fruits—guavas, mangoes, and oranges. A larger boy, horsing around, gives him a shove. The boy falls backward and hits the ground hard. Hurt and full of anger, he jumps up swinging. Instantly, a circle of eager men forms. They prod the two boys on with shouts and gestures. Someone bombards them with hard palm fruit. The shoeshiner, winking at the ethnographer with a knowing thrust of his head, joins in the shouting but continues slapping on polish. From the circle come more eager shouts and prodding gestures. Finally, the two are separated, and the circle disappears as quickly as it formed.

The market day grinds on through the afternoon, the morning freshness lost, forever, it seems, in the mounting piles of garbage. Over the roar of the street noise the bored calls of the vendors punctuate the shouts of the lottery man, who continues to call with an almost frenzied optimism, “Tomorrow it plays! (Potato, potato, potato.) What is your number, your number, your number? (Banana, banana, banana.) Your number, your number, your number? (Potato, potato; banana, banana.)”

On weekdays, Cartago stirs early, and by 6:30 A.M., as the bells of the church chime their first call, people are cutting through the plaza on their way to work. Some are taking their places at the retail stores along the city’s main street, but many are traveling to San José, where perhaps more than a third of Cartago’s work force is employed. While these people are leaving Cartago, others from the smaller neighboring communities are arriving at the city and are trying to squeeze out of packed buses stopping at the plaza. The man in charge of keeping the plaza clean gets his broom out from a storage area underneath the fountain and starts sweeping. The plaza guard, in freshly pressed khakis, arrives, and the sweeper stops to talk to him.

An old man, barefooted and gray, with a sack over his shoulders, slowly picks his path through a swarm of schoolchildren, on his way to gather in the last days of living. The children, their white and blue uniforms flashing against the plaza’s green, shout and call to each other. One tiny girl, barely larger than her book satchel, pulls an even tinier brother by the hand, the two rushing to learn what the old man never knew.

The morning moves on, and women on their way to the retail stores or to the market cut through the plaza. Young mothers, having finished their housework or having left it to the maid, push their strollers around walkways, stopping to sit and admire each other’s babies. As the noon hour approaches, the shoppers return carrying straw bags filled with purchases. They lean the bags against the benches and sit: a woman with two children talking to an older woman, two women together, or occasionally an older man by himself.

At noon the church bells chime the hour and the plaza fills with kids, running in packs, whirling about, pausing, and then taking off again. One older boy jumps about Kung Fu style, making the appropriate noises and impressing his younger playmate. The guard orders them off the grass. A nattily dressed man in suit and tie sits down on a bench not far from the ethnographer. He takes typewritten pages out of his attache case and looks at them with a serious expression on his face. Other men, singly and in small groups, are scattered about the plaza. An older man, driven by the heat of the sun, sits down on the edge of a shady bench occupied by two teenage boys. He crosses his legs and orients his body away from them. They leave, and he recrosses his legs and orients his body toward the middle of the bench, unconsciously establishing a territorial claim to his domain. A man, about the same age as the ethnographer, walks slowly and carefully by. The thick soles of his bare feet are dark with mud. His ragged pants are too big for him, and he holds them to his waist with an unsteady hand. His eyes, innocent and childlike, peer out of a face black with sun, dirt, and hair. He lies down on a bench, but immediately the guard comes over and nudges him. Without protest the man gets up, smiles weakly at the guard, and walks away, tugging at his sagging pants.

In the empty plaza in the slow afternoon the ethnographer sits reading Goffman's (1963) *Behavior in Public Places*. The day's movement begins to reverse itself, but without the energy of the morning's expectations. Even the children, tired from numbers, history, and verbs, are subdued as they cross the plaza. The guard has little trouble keeping them off the grass and out of the fountain. The return flow from San José starts and goes on until after supper. The guard leaves and the church bells chime for the last time. At 7:30 P.M. a small crowd of young men gather in front of the Teatro Apolo, located on the corner across from the *palacio municipal*. The feature is *La Ultima Pelicula*. It is here for only one night, and no Cartagoan is attracted to a movie about the last picture show in a small Texas town. The show is preceded by slides advertising local merchants, and then the movie begins. The audience soon gets restless; to them the images on the screen are too culturally specific, the fiction is too factual. But the ethnographer sits in a trance as the seamed character of Ben Johnson and the voice of Hank Williams, heartsick and lonely, take him back to the 1950s and home.

On Sundays or on holidays, such as the one on July 25 commemorating the annexation of Guanacaste (a Pacific province formerly part of Nicaragua), people fill the plaza. After mass or after the soccer game, families stroll about in their best casual dress. One father picks up his small daughter and places her on the edge of the fountain. He carefully holds her hand as she solemnly walks around the edge: she, the little princess in starched dress and laced pants; he, the proud father, enchanted with the magic of his daughter's being. Wandering through the plaza are occasional clusters of adolescent girls, at times attached to someone's older brother. This is all that remains of the *paseo*, the formal promenade of separate circles of unmarried girls and young men, and even now the girls leave the plaza for a nearby ice cream counter.

A raucous roar of motorcycles rips the peace of the plaza. Three young men charge their machines across one edge of the park. The guard blows his whistle at them again and again. The trio glance at him and without even a shrug they drive away. A tourist bus from San José arrives at the "ruins," and as the North American passengers get out, the fountain bursts forth. Its spray describes the human trajectory: defying nature the individual drops go up toward the sky to catch the sunlight briefly and then, inevitably, fall back, their momentary individuality disappearing into the pool below.

The afternoon grows cool as coastal clouds ascend the mountains to hide the sun. The rain splatters down and drives people from the plaza. Evening comes and the rain turns to mist. The crowds gather at the movie to watch Charlton Heston save the passengers in *Airport 1975*. The 747, which few have seen, becomes more real to them than the Texas town depicted so realistically the other night. Scattered about the plaza, one pair to a bench, couples in tight embrace warm themselves against the growing chill of the darkening night.

A more systematic contrast between market and plaza behavior is now ventured. Of necessity, the contrast will be between large, generalized categories, several steps removed from the actual behavior. The first distinction is between engaged participation and disengaged observation.

Basic market activity requires that people engage each other's presence. Because their livelihood depends on it, the vendors *must* intrude themselves into the customer's sphere and disrupt the customer's reflection. They must engage the customer in a rapid, sequential fashion, for the greater the number of different individuals they intrude themselves upon, the greater the chance of a sale. At the same time, a merchant must keep the attention of the customer before him, lest he seek another vendor. Those who cannot manage the balance between many, ephemeral customers and fewer, loyal ones may find themselves on the economic and physical peripheries, like the pale, thin man and his box of thread. The physical organization of the market—the *tramos* lined up one after another and the

checkerboard arrangement of the aisles—facilitates the close, two-party, face-to-face exchanges between vendor and customer. Similarly, the austere setting and the near absence of monumental displays means that the market setting remains inconspicuous and does not detract from the important business of doing business.

Contrary to the focused participation of the market, plaza interaction necessitates that people self-consciously become observers even as they respond to the actions of others. The organization of plaza space distributes clusters of men, women, and children so that as they sit or stroll together, they become the audience for other small groups. Likewise, the very uniqueness of the plaza, its circularity in a squared world, its outdoor setting, its cultivated greenness, and its monumental displays, means that it conspicuously intrudes itself into people's awareness and encourages them to distance themselves from their absorption into the actions of others.

Another contrast, closely related to the first, is between intense and serene action. In the market, space is a scarce commodity and competition for it is high—the vendors, in fact, must pay a fee for it. Proxemically, then, the space between individuals is small and engagement in the market world demands that a person navigate the physical body and the social self past constant aggressive intrusions into personal space. The sudden explosion of behavior that the fight between the two boys triggered may well be a product of the tension generated by the crush of too many bodies, too many hands, and too many eyes. In the plaza, competition for space—with the exception of a shady bench on a hot day—is low, and therefore the zone of personal space is relatively large. Intrusion into that space—hand-holding and embracing—is by mutual invitation. Thus, in the plaza world, where boys only pretend to fight, disengagement means to be “away,” to stroll in solitude, even as others walk alongside, and to disappear into the interior of the body, thereby releasing the self from its task of “face work” and allowing it to flitter across the dream sky (Goffman 1963:69–75).

Yet, “being away” may be more characteristic of Anglo American park behavior than Spanish American plaza performance. In the plaza, people are quite conscious of being in the presence of others, and they act accordingly. In other words, they present themselves as “being onstage” (Goffman 1959:108–140). Earlier in Cartago's history, the stone pillar and iron railing that surrounded the plaza strengthened the impression of it being a stage; an older informant remarked that in those days the plaza was an enchantment. Coincidentally, those were also the days of the formal *paseo* when people were even more conspicuous about their onstage performance. Today, the plaza, as a decorative ornament, continues “to enchant” behavior and bestow upon it a theatrical quality. Those whose presence spoils the effect, such as the man with innocent eyes and filthy dress, are out of place and are not permitted to be.

If people are onstage in the plaza, they are offstage in the market. Here in the back region of the urban center, away from the front regions, people can appear to be more natural and show themselves as having less concern with the demonstration that they are maintaining certain standards. As they switch into a less careful mode of behavior, they become more tolerant of those who are down-and-out and no longer consider them out-of-place and defiling. They may even, as did the man in “The Gardenia,” share their table scraps with the more lucky of the unfortunate ones.

In sum, the contrast between market and plaza behavior reveals that the critical interactions—those that are *of* the two places, that are characteristically *in place* and thus interactions preliminarily defined and then facilitated by the material setting—are, for the market, engaged participation, intense action, and offstage performance; and for the plaza, disengaged observation, serene action, and onstage performance.

the image component During the course of their interaction with the material setting and with each other, people respond to the material setting by incorporating its preliminary definition into their behavior. In so doing, they transform their ethological "conversation of gestures" into symbolic interaction. Behavioral challenges to the definition are responded to as being out-of-place, and their out-of-placeness heightens the definition of the situation being proposed. Thus, out of the ongoing process of interaction emerges a sense of the situation that is being defined. The final step in the process of incorporating the setting into the ongoing situation is the objectification of the sense of the situation upon the setting so that the setting becomes a material image of emerging situation.

The objectification of the emerging sense upon the material setting is essentially the transfer of the *what* of the ongoing social experience onto the *where* of the material setting. The "what" is the sense, or the understanding, of the situation that is emerging out of people's interpretive responses to one another's actions. The objectification of that sense onto the "where" of the setting means that the social situation becomes physically *placed*. This, in turn, means that the setting, which earlier (prior to the situation being formed) was a preliminary definition, now becomes a full exposition of what is occurring. The material image, in brief, is the implicit, preliminary definition made explicit and complete; with its formation the participants have moved from simply being there to being-in-the-world.³

From the ethnographer's view, the material image is what he sees upon the completion of his analysis. Having considered the setting and the interaction separately, he now brings them together for a statement on the overall meaning of the two places. For the market, the commercial context and the arrangement of largely indoor, squared space into rows of adjacent booths with the near absence of monumental displays combine to define in a preliminary way interaction that is engaged, intense, and offstage. Out of that interaction, the implicit theme of nature as a commodity is restated, the ethnographer suggests, in the image of the market as a place for being *listo*. In the case of the plaza, the governmental context and the arrangement of outdoor space in circles around a fountain, dotted at measured intervals with benches and monumental displays, preliminarily defines interaction that is disengaged, serene, and onstage. From this interaction the implicit theme of nature as an ornament is restated, in the ethnographer's view, in the image of the plaza as a place for having *cultura*. Being *listo* and having *cultura* are now contrasted.

Cartago merchants often describe their peasant customers as being *listo*, and similar depictions are found in the stories of the Costa Rican *costumbrista* writer Manuel González Zeledón (1968). In these cases *listo* is frequently coupled with the verb *ser* and means "to be smart or clever." If this meaning is tied to the meaning of *listo* when it is coupled with the verb *estar* (to be ready or predisposed to act), then being *listo* conveys, in an especially vivid manner, the image of the market: a place where one is ready to act and to act opportunistically.

In the market, where nature is a commodity, everything from tomatoes to love has a price. Participating in the market means negotiating that price to one's advantage, to act smart. To act smart also means to act quickly, as did the boy selling his lettuce by the entrance, as well as the down-and-out seeking his daily bread. If one does not act, then he risks failure, for as the lottery vendor cries out prophetically, "Tomorrow, it plays," and by then the opportunity will be lost. The market is a tough place where a person can succeed and be a winner or fail and be a loser; and in the market, the two sit at the same table.

Although being *listo* is a quality that most people exhibit in varying degree, having *cultura* in Spanish America is limited to certain humans. These people live within the rectangular confines of the urban grid and traditionally near the plaza. They possess, and exhibit in their manner of life, a rationality that separates them from those, such as outlaws

and Indians, who live out of the city and away from its *cultura* and next to nature and its rudeness. In literature, the genre *la novela de la selva* (the novel of the wilderness; the bush; the jungle) portrays the conflict between the rational, urban life and the barbaric way of nature. Frequently, the conflict ends, as in the case of the classic example *La Vorágine*, by José Eustasio Rivera, with nature devouring humanity (León Hazera 1971; Franco 1970:140–141).

The plaza is a near-perfect construction of the reverse image, of rationality subduing nature. Located in the central nexus of urbanity and surrounded by institutions that represent order and authority, the plaza describes a nature that has been tamed and arranged according to a reasoned plan; as such, it depicts the triumph of rationality over barbarism. Within the plaza's greenery, no boas loop down from an overhead limb and no piranhas rip apart an unwary prey in the fountain. For here, surrounded by ornamental nature, people are in the plaza to applaud each other's performances. Kids, notorious for their uncouth attacks on decorum, are watched carefully; and couples, who warm themselves in modern embrace, do so only in the darkness of the fallen night. Finally, those who would tarnish the play with raucous machines earn the guard's shrill whistle, and those who would defile the image with the animalistic filth of the down-and-out are told to move on, for the plaza is not a place for failures to be.⁴

being-in-the-world of being human

With the incorporation of the material setting into the situation, and with the movement from simply being there to being-in-the-world, the people of Cartago have created two distinct realities in which to be: that of the market, with its image of being *listo*, and that of the plaza, with its image of having *cultura*. These two social realities, in turn, constitute segments of the larger universe of Spanish America. Indeed, I want to suggest that through the dialectical interplay of these two complementary but antagonistic realities, Spanish American culture takes shape. First, however, I need to review a particular point to make certain it is clear.

As anyone who has been in Spanish America knows, there are exceptions to the contrasts that I have drawn between the market and the plaza. In smaller communities, the market may still compete with the plaza for central space. Even in Cartago, a vendor wheels his ice cart into the plaza to catch the noonday school trade. So the question will surely arise: Are the contrasts mine or are they those of the participants?

This perennial problem ultimately concerns the locus of culture and the role of the ethnographer in the ethnographic process. If it is not solvable here, it is at least discussable. According to the interpretive, interactionist view, the human world or culture is not secluded in inaccessible areas of our individual subjectivities, but is "out there," located in public discourse, and thus available for study and comment.

Part of that public discourse is the ethnographic experience that parallels, I believe, the incorporation of the material setting into the definition of "situation." Just as it does for the participants, so the material setting provides the ethnographer with his first clues to what is happening around him. This preliminary insight is either substantiated or challenged by subsequent observational responses to people's behavior—including the ethnographer's own action. Out of the ethnographic experiencing of both setting and interaction, then, comes the ethnographic text, which, rather than the material image, is the objectified result of the ethnographic experience. "What does an ethnographer do?" Geertz (1973:19) asks; and the answer is, here as elsewhere, "He writes."

Should you ask in reply, and no doubt you should, "How do we, the readers, know if what

is written in the text corresponds to what is inscribed in the material culture of the market and plaza?" the truthful response has to be that you do not know. I hasten to add, however, that I am not claiming that what I have written and what you see here correspond in a one-to-one fashion with what is in Cartago. "A Skeleton Key to *Finnegan's Wake* is not *Finnegan's Wake*," Geertz (1973:15) reminds us. I am claiming that what I have written here explicates what has happened in the market and plaza in Cartago and in Spanish America, by which I mean that I have sought to bring out the social significance of the material setting of the two places. To do this, I have tried to convey the experiential sense of the market and plaza and to extract from that experiential sense what, in the context of public action, the two places mean. My explication is, I argue, insightful, but its validity does not lie in any claim to be a faithful reproduction of what is in Spanish America, and certainly not what is in Spanish American heads.

With that point at least clarified if not solved, I conclude with an observation on the composition of culture and its real realness. The basic thrust of this article is that in the process of incorporating the material setting into the situation and thereby moving from simply being there to being-in-the-market or plaza, people in Cartago are constructing a Spanish American world so that they may *be*. Further, it is through their actions that Spanish American culture forms, or better, *becomes*. This "becoming" takes place, literally and socially, in the construction of the two realities, but it is especially realized through the dialectical tension between the two. On the one hand, being *listo* is Spanish American culture in an engaged, opportunistic, factual mode; on the other hand, having *cultura* is Spanish America in a disengaged, proper, aesthetic mode. The two modes appear to be mutually exclusive and antagonistic: people cannot be-in-the-market and be-in-the-plaza at the same time, physically or socially. The incorporating of the material setting into the modes anchors this division in physical space, and by this further separation enhances their distinctiveness and counterposes them more clearly, one against the other.

The dialectical interplay between these two modes does not, of course, exhaust the ways in which Spanish American culture becomes. Being-in-the-church and in the world of the sacred, for example, has an intriguing relationship with being-in-the-market and in the world of commerce. Markets in small communities may front a church; and even in larger towns and cities, religious statuary, as in the case of Cartago's Sacred Heart of Jesus, occupy a visible position in the market place (see Buechler 1978; Swetnam 1978). By contrast, the plaza, while organized around the disengaged and aesthetic, rarely has, to my knowledge, religious objects in its greenery. It is the organization of secular *cultura*, not religious faith; yet *cultura* and *fe* are linked in Spanish America, and the common location of the plaza in front of the parish church may express a dialectic between the sunlight life of the plaza and the dark suffering and death inside the church.

This line of thought suggests that cultures are composed of multiple realities, counterposed against one another like semantic domains and, through this juxtaposition, defining each other. The pattern that results from these juxtapositions, the culture, would appear to be in no sense a fixed entity—certainly not something you could capture in a butterfly net—but a pattern whose very existence shifts with each new arrangement among the social realities that compose it. Only when we, as participants or as ethnographers, counterpose it against some other tenuous pattern, such as Anglo American culture, does it achieve an existence that resembles a fixed thing. In that instance, as in the case of its component realities, we bring it about through our public discourse and endow it with a worldliness so that we may be.

Creating specific cultures so that we may be particular persons is a distinctly peculiar human trait, a point that, although not always taken seriously, is not new. My contribution here lies in the attention given to the ongoing creative effort that the human condition

necessitates. The struggle to construct a world so that we may be is a continual one, and one from which, for the human creature, there is no escape. To paraphrase Sartre, we are condemned to create. Thus, we are constantly at the job of building cultures; shaping, molding, fitting together materials produced not only by the experience of social interaction but also from materials produced by nature. Transformed by the magic of symbols, these objects shape our lives even as we shape them; and in this manner, caged but free, driven but heroic, we are.

notes

Acknowledgments. I gratefully appreciate the kind assistance of Don Javier Montoya and Señor Francisco Rodríguez, citizens of Cartago, and Dra. María Bozzoli de Wille and Lic. Marta Eugenia Pardo de Jarquín, anthropologists at the University of Costa Rica. I am also grateful to Drs. Arden King, Fred Kniffen, and Forrest LaViolette, three distinct spokesmen from three different fields, for their continual encouragement. I thank Dr. Norman Whitten, editor of this journal, for his patient counsel. The Graduate School of Louisiana State University provided partial support for fieldwork carried out during the summers of 1972, 1973, and 1975. The ideas expressed here represent a continuing effort to relate place to behavior and behavior to place in the context of symbolic communication (Richardson 1974a, 1974b, 1978, 1980a, 1980b). Other versions of the article were read at the 1979 meeting of the American Anthropological Association and at the 1980 meeting of the Association of American Geographers.

¹ Other than Edward Hall, the individual most familiar to anthropologists for his work on behavior and objects is probably Amos Rapoport. His *Human Aspects of Urban Forms* (1977) provides a comprehensive survey of the various approaches to the subject. Mention also must be made of the exciting efforts of some archaeologists to break free of the constraints of prehistory and to redefine their discipline as the study of material culture, ancient, historic, and contemporary (Rathje 1979; Gould and Schiffer 1981). In addition, anthropologists can greatly benefit from the rich literature in geography on place (e.g., Meinig 1979; Buttner and Seamon 1980; Gade 1976; Robertson 1978; and especially Tuan 1976, 1977).

² The overall process of incorporating material culture into the definition of situation includes the longer-term cycle of constructing, modifying, and replacing the material expression of a community and the shorter cycle of responding to the existing material landscape. The two cycles are closely linked. The physical creation of a setting impinges directly upon the social responses to that setting. Likewise, the day-to-day social use of a setting may lead to physical modification, either on a small scale (a new arrangement of goods in a vendor's booth) or on a large one (the construction of a new market building). The analysis here focuses on the shorter cycle of responses to the existing setting.

³ It is important to note that the implicit thematic message is not so much a fixed cognitive map with instructions on how to behave as it is a series of collapsed acts to which people experientially respond. Out of that response meaning arises, and that meaning is objectified upon the setting so that the setting becomes a full statement, a *read* text, and therefore the material image of the situation. With allowance for the fact that Moore (1981) is dealing with changes from one architectural form to another, his explication of the "sign-image" of Cuna architecture seems similar to my attempts to decipher how established settings achieve meaning.

⁴ Although mine differs from his, I am indebted to Morris Freilich's (1972, 1980) provocative formulation of being smart and being proper.

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Submitted 20 June 1980

Revised version received 6 November 1981

Accepted 6 November 1981