

# A Sociocultural Analysis of a Midwestern American Flea Market

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The ethnographic case study presented in this article illustrates the institutional complexity and sociocultural significance of a midwestern American flea market. A conception of marketplace structure and function that incorporates informal and festive dimensions of consumer behavior is advanced. The article explores the relationship of primary and secondary economic activity. Buyer and seller behavior, marketplace ambience, the social embeddedness of consumption, and experiential aspects of consumption are considered at length.

The flea market is a complex socioeconomic institution to which consumer researchers have directed surprisingly little attention. Although many social scientists have experienced a fascination with such markets through direct participation, few have reflected systematically on either the internal dynamics, the retail ecology, or the cultural significance of the flea market. Yet, observes Campbell (1987, pp. 38–39), modern consumer society is “symbolized at least as much by the mountains of rubbish, the garage and jumble sales, the columns of advertisements of second-hand goods for sale and the second-hand car lots, as it is by the ubiquitous propaganda on behalf of new goods.” The flea market is commonly characterized as a functional anachronism (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988) or a vestigial archaic marketplace (Abrahams 1986). As a superfluous cultural survival or contemporary ancestor of the modern retail environment, the flea market is regarded more as a curiosity or throwback than as an object of serious inquiry. However, the antiquity of the institution should not preclude an assessment of its contemporary manifestations (Davis 1966).

Facile characterizations, themselves a partial function of the relative recency of the inquiry, mask a tempocentric attitude among researchers whose findings are used by practitioners with time horizons already tragically short. These labels also mask, among other

critical features, the ecological propriety of basic market exchange. For example, new generations of consumers are coming of age in a world where the concept of waste is a non sequitur. Public policy makers increasingly are faced with the knowledge that there is no longer an “away” to throw things to. Marketers are being challenged to transform the by-products of industrial production into viable products (Hardin 1985). Consequently, the processes sustaining the lateral cycling of goods that characterizes flea markets (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988) should be the foci of enlightened self-interest.

Lateral cycling is not the only phenomenon that a tempocentric posture obscures. Basic exchange mechanisms, such as barter, countertrade, and debt-equity swapping, are accounting for ever-increasing proportions of business volume domestically as well as internationally. In the natural laboratory of the flea market (or swap meet, as it is often designated), such primary market processes, as well as many of the fundamental functional and structural features to which analysts routinely attend, are easily investigated.

This article seeks to correct the tempocentric perspective by exploring the sociocultural significance of the flea market. Rather than designating the flea market as a second-order marketing system (and thereby implicitly affirming its inferiority), I will describe it as an alternative marketing system that complements and articulates with more commonly understood marketing systems. As an alternative system, the flea market is akin to such venues as the farmers’ market, the garage sale, and other forms of direct marketing, but it also shares many features in common with conventional retail operations. Such alternative markets offer the consumer an additional search option and may provide society with a model for constructing more satisfying and adaptive marketplace relations.

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The flea market is a true periodic market like those of ethnographic record (e.g., Smith 1978), but its designation as alternative sets it in sharp relief to the conventional markets generally studied by North American consumer researchers. These two markets are components of a larger system, and it seems most productive to regard informal and formal sector transactions as part of a unified marketing system (Alexander 1987; De Soto 1989). In constructing viable alternatives to contemporary consumption patterns, exploration is indispensable if we are to tame institutions toward humane ends (Arensberg 1978). Malinowski regarded this action orientation as the lodestar of ethnographic investigations of marketplace behavior (Drucker-Brown 1982).

### FLEA MARKET RESEARCH: AN OVERVIEW

Academic research into flea markets has yielded a rather small and circumscribed literature of discontinuous quality. Trinkaus (1980) suggested that perhaps the most significant finding of his informal study, which merged observational and quasi-experimental approaches to interpret the significance of behaviors of convenience samples of consumers, was that characteristics of the environment influence consumers' processing of price information. The flea market venue (and, consequently, any depth understanding that might account for apparently non-rational exchange at such a venue) was epiphenomenal to his interest in perception. Razzouk and Gourley (1982) used interviews across several southwestern American swap meets to construct a profile of the swap meet shoppers in Phoenix, in terms of their demographics, frequency of attendance, items purchased, motives for shopping, and likes and dislikes about swap meets. The questions asked merely begin to scratch the surface of significant behaviors that occur at swap meets, and the profiles themselves are not effectively sifted for their significance. Such a flat, factual rendition contrasts markedly with the kind of informed speculation that their findings might enfranchise. Their historical overview and observations on regulatory prejudice are also allowed to languish.

Survey research across numerous northeastern American flea markets that has explored purchase patterns and expenditures, shopping behaviors, and attitudes toward flea markets has similar limitations (Sherman, McCrohan, and Smith 1985). Positive perceptions are tied to patronage and possibly to recreational shopping, negative perceptions extend to issues beyond mere pricing, and heavy users are expected to become heavier users. An ironic strength of these studies of such traditional method and overwhelmingly economic orientation is the insightful quality of the issues targeted for future research. So-

cial organization, the formal-informal economy interface, behavioral characteristics of shoppers, comparative analysis of buying decisions of patrons and non-patrons, and flea market image issues are among suggested avenues of investigation (Sherman et al. 1985). Because these studies regard the flea market primarily as a retailing institution, managerial implications for formal sector businesses are often discussed, to the neglect of both consumer and regulatory perspectives. However, just as researchers have induced an information flow that moves from street hawkers upward to policy makers in so-called developing economies (De Soto 1989), so also can flea market research be useful in more fully industrialized economies.

A branch of this research literature clearly indicates that interpretations of the flea market have been prematurely reductionistic and that even the economic foci of interest have been too narrowly construed. Three studies in particular have examined in limited detail the extraeconomic activity at individual flea markets. Maisel (1974) has characterized the flea market as an "action scene" (Goffman 1967) and has used a dramaturgical model to explore some of the experiences of buyers and sellers engendered by "consequential chance." Pricing, vendor and consumer search, bargaining dynamics, and personal experience narratives ("market myths") are among his principal concerns. Despite the summary nature of his overview, Maisel's ethnographic approach reveals something of the playful nature of flea market activity.

A second study by an interdisciplinary team of consumer researchers (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988) also focused on a single venue, but employed a wider set of naturalistic methods in an effort to produce a more holistic account of flea market activity. As in the Trinkhaus study, site selection was epiphenomenal to the investigators' principal agenda, in this case the application of a naturalistic paradigm to consumer research issues. Nonetheless, this study extended Maisel's observations of the extraeconomic, experiential significance of the flea market, while focusing primarily on consumer behavior. The authors present an ethnographic summary of their findings, including emic and etic interpretations of key structural and functional dimensions of the flea market, and offer a set of themes by which an understanding of these dimensions might be constructed. Among the primary themes discussed are freedom versus rules, boundaries versus transitions, and competition versus cooperation; other contrasting dimensions, such as sacred versus profane (see Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989 for elaboration here) and bargaining versus buying, are treated as well. This pilot study was set in the southwestern United States and provides a baseline ethnography and a number of interpretive

propositions that should facilitate thick description in subsequent research into flea markets (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988). (Sherry's 1988 study of market pitching in a West Coast flea market contains ethnographic analysis of more limited scope.)

Although it confounds flea markets with yard sales and focuses almost exclusively on dealers, Miller's (1988) participant observation study suggests something of the ambience of such open air markets and its potential for revitalizing formal sector market processes.

## METHODOLOGY

This study grows out of an interest in the articulation of so-called traditional and modern marketplace behavior that I have observed in regions as far-flung as Mexico, the Caribbean, Polynesia, Europe, and Asia. In such open air markets, consumers can acquire a cornucopian array of goods, from food to munitions (Horwitz and Brooks 1988). My interest is also tempered by observations made in periodic alternative marketplaces throughout the United States. A long-term field investigation of a particular flea market in the midwestern United States is presented here in an extended case study format. The data and interpretations derive primarily from an intensive two-and-one-half-year study of this market, but are integrated by the comparative insights I have developed from the previous investigations. By focusing on a single market over an extended period of time, I sought to capture the richness of context—the thick description espoused by Geertz (1973) and recently advocated by consumer researchers (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Sherry and McGrath 1989)—essential not only to the interpretation of local behavior, but also to the evaluation of existing periodic market studies. The baseline ethnographic data contained in this article are intended to serve as one such touchstone.

Ethnographic approaches of participant observation and both directive and nondirective interviewing were the primary methods used in this study. I shopped with consumers, sold with dealers, and made rounds with managers and regulators. Data were recorded in field notes as well as with audiotapes and photographs. An emergent design was employed to capture at the very least the minimal parameters that constitute the flea market. Interviews were conducted with hundreds of buyers, sellers, and ancillary actors. Data collection occurred both on-site in naturalistic settings and off-site in artificial surroundings (e.g., homes, restaurants, and so on), as well as in front regions and backstage (Goffman 1959). Member checking was employed as a matter of ethnographic course. The long-term nature of the project allowed informants to habituate themselves to the ethnographer's

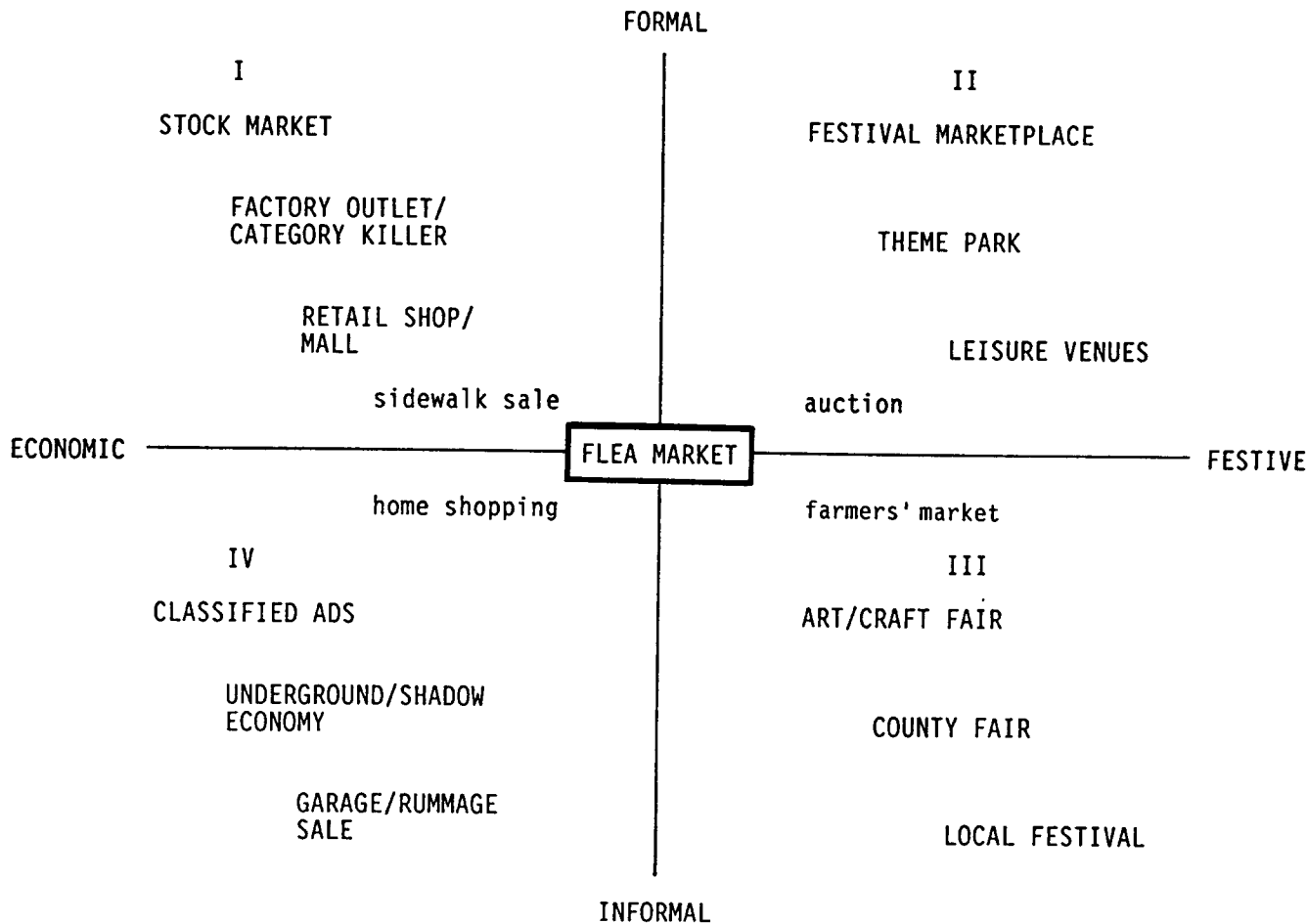
presence and facilitated bonding of key informants to the research program.

The concept of field duration should be clarified here. Anthropologists are still aided or hindered by a conventional notion of an "ethnographic year" that is analogous to the "psychoanalytic hour" in terms of a unit of analysis. I structured my participation to ensure at least monthly attendance at the market for a calendar year distributed over the course of the study. To better gauge seasonal variability and achieve redundancy in both observation and interview, I clustered additional attendance across four calendar seasons during the fieldwork. I then balanced additional visits against the opportunity to study the same buyers and sellers in other settings (e.g., at other periodic markets or other infrastructural settings such as outlying flea markets and garage sales) or in interview sessions in public and private centers. I also conducted "off market" research on weekdays with local retailers, regulators, and consumers. Actual fieldwork duration was closer to three and a half years. Passive investigation began in 1984 and active investigation continued through 1987. Clean-up and depth collection on other topics resulting from the use of the field site as a contextual beachhead has continued through 1989.

The use of ethnography in consumer research is enjoying something of a renaissance. Such behaviors and events as garage sales (Abrahams, n.d.; Herrmann and Soiffer 1984), yard sales (Landman 1987), swap meets (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988), auctions (Smith 1986), price setting (Prus 1985), sales (Prus 1986a), purchasing for resale (Prus 1984), the construction of trust between buyers and sellers (Prus 1986b), market pitching (Pinch and Clark 1986; Sherry 1988), and compliance techniques (Cialdini 1984; Clark and Pinch 1988) have been studied ethnographically. Because treatments of ethnographic method in consumer research are available in many of these cited studies and elsewhere (e.g., Sherry 1987), no further explication is developed in this article.

A framework is provided in Figure 1 to alert the reader to a fundamental bias that pervades this study. As Campbell (1987, p. 201) notes, a philosophy of recreation is essential for a dynamic consumerism; consumerism becomes pathological when void of playfulness (Lasch 1984). Lucentio's observation (*The Taming of the Shrew* I, i, 39) is echoed by many of my informants: "No profit grows where is no pleasure ta'en." I envision much marketplace structure and function as experienced by consumers to unfold along the dimensions of two dialectics, which for the sake of expedient display I have reduced to continua. The structural dimension is represented by the formal-informal dialectic; the functional dimension is represented by the economic-festive dimension. In

FIGURE 1  
MARKETPLACE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION



conventional sociological and anthropological perspective, formal structure is characterized as official, controlled, highly rationalized, proactive, and institutional, and informal structure is viewed as less official (often clandestine), less controlled, less rationalized, reactive, and transient in nature. Informal patterns are thought to arise in response to or in spite of their formal counterparts. Functions may be similarly contrasted; an economic function is characterized by notions of rationality and utility, and a festive function is hedonic and experiential in nature. The contrast between these functions is captured by Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1986, p. 255):

Consumers in a developed market society are not left to wander alone and unaided amidst heaps of goods, computing and recomputing to some decimal place the most advantageous fit between their yearnings and their places. They do not—nor do they wish to—form their tastes and preferences in the private bliss of ratiocination and then descend upon innocent merchants to

scrutinize their shelves with cold and wary eyes. Except when (as is too often the case even today) groups are pressed hard against the limit of deprivation by exploitation or an inhospitable environment, consuming is an elaborate social game, as it has always been in human cultures.

Although these dialectics (as well as others I have not considered here) are inherent in all marketplace behavior, it is possible to characterize marketplaces by their dominant dialectical dimensions, as I have done in Figure 1. This concept of dialectical simultaneity captures the complexity of marketplace behavior more effectively than Couch's (1986) flat, neo-Simmelian separation of social forms into market-, palace-, and temple-centered relations. It also allows me to allude to a more comprehensive axiology of marketplace behavior within which my specific concerns are embedded than if I were to apply a framework such as the semiotic square as Floch (1988) did in his

discourse-focused study of hypermarket characteristics. In particular, it removes marketplace behavior from the unproductive either/or conceptualizations characteristic of much current paradigmatic dispute, and places it directly into the kind of both/and framework demanded by postmodern inquiry.

The etic model described in Figure 1 captures something of the variability of marketplaces within quadrants as well as between them. Thus, the New York Stock Exchange (QI) differs not only from the Arcola Broom Festival (QIII), but also from Toys 'R' Us (QI). Still, financial markets have important informal and festive dimensions (Adler and Adler 1984; Baker 1984; Odean 1988; Wolfe 1987), which may in part account for the success of such films as *Wall Street*. Similarly, the West Edmonton Mall (QII) differs not only from Joe Smith's periodic garage sale (QIV), but also from Great America (QII). Marketplaces approaching the intersection of the axes—sidewalk sales, auctions, farmers' markets, and home shopping venues (such as cable television shopping networks or videotex)—exhibit greater dialectical intensity than the others. That is, the counterpoised dimensions of the model are brought into such intimate association and are condensed so tightly that the resulting tension is palpable to participants and seems to energize them as well. I have placed the flea market at the center of the model to emphasize just such intensity. As an institution, the flea market embodies the tension inherent in formal-informal and economic-festive dialectics to a greater degree than those marketplaces traditionally investigated by consumer researchers. The intensity of this embodiment, so largely responsible for the venue's neglect by our discipline, is explored in the following ethnography.

As a kind of good faith example offered to the reader in anticipation of fuller ethnographic particulars, I have selected some field note excerpts to suggest the ways informants articulate the dimensions of this model spontaneously and via interview. That I have merely formalized the terms of the model and described their relationship should become apparent as the text unfolds. One female informant characterizes her experience of marketplaces quite effectively:

The flea market is not as *sterile* as a mall. You don't get the same franchises over and over again. There's lots of different people around the flea market—it's more of a *social* atmosphere. The talk is more personal and personable. The talk with salespeople is less restricted. I collect salt and pepper shakers, so the discussion is more personal and turned toward an interest of mine. In malls, the clerks follow you around and bug you more. At the flea market, dealers aren't so aggressive. They'll tell you about a specific piece if you ask. There's low pressure from dealers, but more pressure from other customers. You have to be ready for the flea market. The people are different than the ones I usually hang around with. It's an *event* to go to the flea market.

I make a big production of it. I get friends together and spend an entire day. I can go to the mall anytime I want. It's repetitive, always there. It's no big deal, I can go there anytime. Going to the mall is a chore. It's more like a job than anything fun, and I'm a shopper! I wait for something to trigger a purchase at a mall: a job interview, a party, something. But not with a flea market—I do this for fun. The flea market is an event. The flea market taps my adventurous streak. It is not as structured (as a mall). It's got a sleazy element—people with tatoos, people on the shady side, you know—that adds to the allure. Like it's a little dangerous for a white, upper-class, suburban female. That's why it's no fun to go with people who don't like flea markets. The open air and outdoors setting appeal to me. The long drive through the country to get there also really appeals to me. You have to roll up your sleeves and get into it. You have to go *through* the stuff and ask yourself, "Am I going to find it today?" You have to look at something and see its potential. The whole process is enjoyable. Some people get *dazed* by the whole thing. At the mall, things are lined up neatly on racks, and put on coordinated window displays, whether it's clothes or housewares, and you walk in and say, "I want one just like this." Everything is prepackaged. The flea market is imperfection. It's jumbled, dirty and unorganized. It takes more creativity.

An adolescent male informant offers contrasting views of marketplaces:

At a mall, things are brand new and expensive, and you can go there any time you want. There's a bigger variety and lower prices at a flea market. The stuff is mostly second-hand. The flea market is only open a couple hours a month. I like the atmosphere at the flea market—the feeling you get there. You have all this stuff around you, but you don't even need to *buy* anything. Or you *could* feel like you *have* to buy *everything*. It's a place you can go to after you've looked everywhere else. In a mall, you're looking for a specific thing, and you know exactly where to find it. But at a flea market, you may be looking for a certain thing, but find other stuff and buy it before you find what you're looking for. That would only happen at a mall if you went *into* some stores along the way. And the people are nicer at the flea market. At a mall, they (other consumers) can bump into you and not say they're sorry, or just give you a look.

Finally, even the insights of consumers who hold negative opinions of the flea market are instructive in a number of regards, as the following field note excerpt of an interview with a female informant illustrates:

The flea market has junk. The mall has good stuff. I don't like buying things used. I worry about who owned it, and what they used it for. Lots of unsavory and unkempt people shop at the flea market. Also, I hate shopping in the heat. In the mall, you're on your own. It's a solitary kind of thing. But at a flea market, you've got a dozen people looking at the same stuff. You're sacrificing your privacy for the sake of a buck. The dealers

look at you with pleading eyes, like it's their stuff. I don't want to become personally involved with their stuff. At the mall, you've just got teenage girls (clerks) that don't care—just don't shoplift! I don't like crowds, I don't want to be closed in. I don't like to bump up against sweaty bodies. I don't like prices that change that quickly; it makes me uncomfortable. I feel like I'm *losing*. Someone else might have gotten something cheaper an hour after or before. At least in stores, unless there's a sale, they're not going to mark it down any more. There's just not the same tension and worry about "Should I ask him for a dollar less?" at the mall.

Each of these excerpts suggests something of the richness of experience I have attempted to capture in this article.

### DALTON VALLEY FLEA MARKET: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

Pseudonyms are used throughout this account to preserve the anonymity of informants. The account begins with a description of the rural setting and retail ecology of the field site and a brief history of the local marketplace. After a discussion of the social organization of the market, I examine in some detail the various loci of market activity. Finally, the range of marketplace behaviors that came to light during the investigation is considered. The ethnographic present tense is employed merely for stylistic convenience, not to connote a static market environment.

#### Local Setting and Retail Ecology

On the far outskirts of rural Mt. Arden are the grounds on which the Dalton Valley Flea Market is held each month. Mt. Arden has a population of about 20,000 in just over 7,000 households, and its median household income approaches \$35,000. Once a mill town, it is now characterized by light industry and specialty shops. Townspeople have evolved a mission of historic preservation that merchants have helped fuel and from which they have profited. Much synergy has obtained between the flea market and this civic mission. Antiques are among the principal attractions at the market, and numerous antique shops dot the downtown map. Renovated and refurbished buildings house a variety of specialty shops and restaurants. A recently installed and rapidly growing factory outlet complex is located in a restored factory building, the concept and the setting a product of the synergy just cited. The commerciality of this historical self-consciousness is further reflected in such details as the prevalence of antique typeface on the signboards of all manner of stores, regardless of merchandise.

Mt. Arden has successfully preserved a traditional downtown business district unimpeded by pedestrian

malls. The main thoroughfare is lined with real estate and insurance offices, hardware stores and movie theaters, restaurants and bars, drugstores and banks, law offices and scattered residences, and numerous specialty stores. The central business district merges with a predominantly residential area, which in turn gives way to a classic retail strip of fast food outlets flanking a mid-sized shopping center. Motels, lumberyards, service stations, and grain elevators abut the grounds on which the flea market unfolds. Adjacent to the market grounds is a converted warehouse, recently outfitted as an antique store, which benefits tremendously from its proximity to the flea market. Hundreds of acres of farmland lie beyond the market grounds.

#### A Brief Market History

The Dalton Valley Flea Market has been in continuous operation for more than 20 years under the direct guidance of Mrs. Ruth Warren. It was founded and has flourished as a family business. Having informally gained a good deal of managerial experience through lifelong participation in church bazaars, Mrs. Warren opted in her late 50s to start a business, with the following rationale: "I've worked for charity all my life—now I'm going to work for myself." Emulating other markets she had visited, Mrs. Warren launched her first market from a local Legion Hall. Her first profits were earmarked to buy books about antiques, so she could research the field. To dispel any notions of fixed price consumers might harbor and to ensure room for the bargaining she feels essential to success, Mrs. Warren elected to label her business a "flea market" rather than a "show" (despite the high quality of the goods she was able to attract) and took her market from a hall to a fairgrounds almost immediately. Her flea market grew from a base of 35 dealers and fewer than 1,000 customers to its current size of more than 1,000 dealers and tens of thousands of customers. Something of the nature of this growth as well as the seasonality of the market itself during a portion of my field tenure are conveyed in Table 1.

The Dalton Valley Flea Market is now a local institution, with third-generation management, dealers, and consumers. The dealers on its waiting list could fill another market. It is a state tourist attraction where the governor has been an occasional vendor and where other politicians routinely campaign. The market has grown enormously in terms of its demographics and its variety and range of quality of merchandise. A satellite market is in the offing, which may place the management in an even more heterogeneous urban setting.

Mrs. Warren has tempered her corporate mission with an intriguing blend of religious and social consciousness. The energetic matriarch sums up her chief

**TABLE 1**  
1985-1986 MARKET CENSUS

Month/year	Dealers			Consumers (gate count)
	Inside	Outside	Total	
January 1985	227	35	272	4,215
February	198	10	208	3,887
March	270	96	366	6,321
April	240	465	705	5,827
May	385	670	1,055	10,860
June	384	682	1,066	12,034
July	389	724	1,113	12,384
August	387	648	1,035	11,213
September	361	597	958	12,422
October	384	580	964	13,084
November	376	443	819	10,833
December	232	65	297	4,833
January 1986	236	25	261	3,014
February	241	50	291	5,066
March	356	150	506	6,620
April	341	607	948	14,018
May	494	725	1,219	15,004
June	499	780	1,279	14,986
July	501	669	1,170	15,611
August	501	716	1,217	18,085
September	501	528	1,029	19,610
October	502	367	869	13,114
November	400	125	525	14,428
December	359	183	542	5,102

operating principle succinctly: "If I make good, you make good." This promise is made to all stakeholders recruited to her enterprise. She views her flea market as a vehicle for providing work to those who truly wish to work. Principal among these are her own family members, many of whom have followed her into "the business" and prospered. Moving beyond her own family, she prefers to hire husband and wife "teams," believing their reliability and commitment as employees to be a function primarily of this family tie. Friends, and friends of friends, form another labor pool. She also prefers to hire workers who are retired or laid off from other jobs, and those she views as "hard luck cases" beset with problems that regular employment might help resolve. A local butcher thrown out of work with the folding of his firm is one such beneficiary. "Too old to rehire, too young to retire," he has found steady work at the flea market. She acts on occasion as a venture capitalist, staking needy novices and charitable groups to booth space and staging an occasional market for charity.

Even though she operates in the red in winter months, Mrs. Warren always holds her market on the first Sunday of every month, barring only "divine intervention" in the form of that rare coincidence of Easter with flea market day. Such constancy is prized by Mrs. Warren and her clients as a business asset and a character trait. While recognizing the contributions

of initiative, effort, and advertising to the growth of the flea market, Mrs. Warren attributes her success primarily to the cultivation of good working relationships with her stakeholders. Good management is the added value she brings to what she perceives would otherwise be an ineffective confederacy of informal retailers.

### Marketplace Grounds and Physical Plant

The Dalton Valley Flea Market sprawls over 25 acres of county fairgrounds. Vendors operate from three distinct but interspersed venues within the marketplace. The size and importance of these venues varies by season. Some dealers elect to work in the open air, displaying their wares under awnings and tarp flaps, from the backs or sides of vehicles, on tables, or on the ground. Outdoor booth space is the least expensive rental option, and due to overall dealer demand for stalls, often the only option available to newcomers. Open air dealers decline in number in winter months when temperatures can reach far below 0°F, but the hardiest congregate around oil-drum fires and portable heaters when the mercury drops. Their numbers soar in the summer months, when sweltering temperatures make access to a breeze a comparative advantage.

Some vendors work under the open-sided sheds that serve on off-market occasions as livestock pavilions. Here the rent is steeper, but a roof and electricity are valued by many dealers. During the winter months, a plastic windbreak adds a measure of comfort for dealers and consumers.

Completely enclosed buildings constitute the third and most costly venue. Five such buildings are used in the winter, and eight in the summer. The Fair Board is trying to make more buildings available (the equivalent of several hundred more dealers). Temperature extremes in the buildings during the year range from almost comfortable in the winter to almost unbearable in the summer. Rental rates did not rise appreciably above the \$40-\$60 range during my field stay, although rumors of imminent increases were frequently circulated. Booth space in the buildings and sheds is always reserved in advance (which has, on occasion, led to unsanctioned subletting and scalping of space among dealers), while open-air sites are filled on a first-come-first-served basis. On market weekends, many of the vendors camp at the grounds in their vehicles, either directly onsite at their stalls or in the field adjacent to the enclosed buildings.

Two interesting structural features characterize the marketplace itself, from both emic and etic perspectives. The first is the opposition of "inside" space versus "outside" space. Inside space is comparable to conventional retail settings in terms of leasing arrangements, patron loyalty, merchandise display

(and often inventory itself), pricing structure and vendors' willingness to dicker, and size of stall. Many inside vendors are also employed full time in a conventional retail trade, and they supplement or diversify their business at the flea market. Many use business cards or stenciled shopping bags as promotional tools. Whether it is actively adopted by them or attributed to them by "outsiders," something of a status differential attaches to inside vendors. Many insiders hold outsiders in relatively low esteem. In the words of one informant:

Lots of them (outsiders) don't know how to count. They can't figure overhead. They may break even, or maybe even lose money, but they figure they're ahead. They come out here, enjoy the people, camp out, sleep in freezing trailers, eat some dusty "brats" and have a hell of a good time. Others only take cash and don't pay tax.

It is apparent that dealers as well as consumers experience the tensions depicted in Figure 1. Vendors who work in the covered sheds are held in slightly higher esteem than the outsiders. Many insiders work "shows" in addition to the flea market. Outsiders, by contrast, frequently cite their low entry and exit barriers and high pass-by traffic as evidence of the soundness of their business strategy. Many of the outsiders are career flea marketers who work a number of circuits in adjoining states, while some are newcomers with no current expectation of long-term participation. Outsiders are often quick to cite the individualism, autonomy, gregariousness, and adventure of their lifestyle as perquisites to their job, in contrast to the perceived regimentation of the "inside." Something of this regimentation is occasionally apparent in the consumers' experience of the inside, as customers march soldierly through the crowded indoor aisles. For many, "doing" the market implies that consumers have examined all the indoor booths at the very least. Outsiders may derogate insiders by calling them "retailers." Consumers regard the outsider atmosphere as more "freewheeling," and expect to find more "bargains" there.

The second structural contrast is the distinction between outside space in the midway and the adjacent meadow. The midway occupies a small crest of land above the meadow. Reflecting more the distance than the elevation between these sites, dealers and consumers refer to the midway as "up at the top" or "up here/there," and to the meadow as "down here/there," "out here/there," "down the hill," "at the bottom," or "the south forty." The midway is a more desirable location because it is closer to the entrance of the fairgrounds, the sheds, and the buildings, and is more ordered. The expanded area of the meadow is farther away from the fixed-site stalls, the quality and type of merchandise are more varied and less predictable, and the layout of vendor stalls is erratic.

The principal anchor points in what otherwise is described by consumers as a "confusing," "chaotic," "unorganized," "random," and "sprawling" agglomeration of stalls and walkways are the "main building" and the "food shed." The former houses the main kitchen, dining room, information booth, and rental office; the latter, a satellite kitchen and open-sided eating area. These anchor points serve as a rendezvous for shopping teams on precise schedules and for stragglers or wanderers inadvertently separated from their partners.

Although a photocopied "Directory of Buildings" is posted in the main building, it functions more as a projective treasure map than an accurate guide. Its information is dated and highly selective, and provides newcomers able to locate the sheet a semblance of control and an impetus to search, but rarely more than that. Veteran dealers and consumers often joke about the profit to be made in the publishing of a definitive, accurate guide, on the one hand, and of the irrelevance of such a guide on the other. It is inimical to the passion of the quest and the wisdom of the random walk. Such formality would detract from the festive pursuit.

Patron-client relationships are facilitated by long-term leases and by outdoor dealers' ability to relocate in their preferred areas. These relationships are cemented by consumers' perceptions that some dealers carry goods of consistent quality, type, or variety. Some consumers place orders with particular dealers, and some dealers will hold pieces for clients' inspection prior to selling on the open market. Thus, consumers are able to return, or to direct others, to dealers who are known to them by name (e.g., "Jay Banks," whose business card they may have secured) or by location (e.g., "third barn down, on the right hand side, near the end"). The thrill of search (or "challenge of the hunt," as informants describe it) is enhanced by the apparently random distribution of goods and services. One informant remarked,

I usually go with nothing in mind (i.e., no fixed purchase intent). You just browse until something grabs you. I want to hit every lane there—I don't want to miss anything.

In his eloquent appeal for a recovery of haptic consciousness, Walter (1988) describes "the place" as having a life of its own, insofar as its form of experience occupies persons and locates experience in people. Place is a "matrix of energies" that generates representations and changes awareness in people. Each place has its own characteristic rules of action, form of making itself felt, and way of being in the world. The flea market is a place that actively engages the consumer's imagination and fosters holistic perception, a feat that many formal sector retailers have been unable to accomplish. The activities that ani-



mate the market grounds are considered in the following section.

### Loci of Market Activity

The Dalton Valley Flea Market is less a discrete entity or event than it is a focal point of interdependent marketplace behaviors. Both Malinowski's notion of market spillover (Drucker-Brown 1982, p. 66) and Moulin's (1987) notion of parallel markets characterize the flea market. Significant activity predates the market day proper and is not confined to the enclosed grounds of the marketplace. Price flexibility is maintained in part by the role fluidity of buyers and sellers and by the premarket availability of goods.

Although the market is open officially to consumers on Sunday only, buyer-seller interaction begins at midweek, as early-bird dealers take their places on the "lineup" (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988) outside the market grounds in the hope of securing preferred booth space when admitted on Saturday. Although some consumers take advantage of relatively captive retailers before the Sunday market, the principal purchasing occurs among dealers themselves, who buy for resale later in the week. Initial market surveillance is conducted as well. The intensity of market activity is relatively low during this period.

From the time that the market gates are opened to the dealers on Saturday morning until the gates are locked for the final time late Saturday night, the market arguably achieves its hottest semiotic, if not economic, intensity. As the emic adage claims, dealers are their own best customers. On Saturday, individuals continually shift from buyer to seller as goods begin circulating through the marketplace. A particular item may change hands more than a dozen times before it winds up for sale to naive consumers on Sunday morning. Dealers casually survey each others' merchandise during setup and more systematically once their booths are prepared. Market intelligence is collected and recorded in notepads by individuals on random walks, by teams in constant contact by walkie-talkie as they scour the grounds, and by others still who rely on word of mouth from passersby. What dickering does occur ensues either between novices or between traders of distinctly different competence, for seasoned dealers are shrewd appraisers and realize that the discount they receive from each other is a professional courtesy and is as much of a discount as they are likely to receive. Although the practice is forbidden as anticompetitive by flea market management, dealers occasionally "sell out" on Saturday and leave when the gates open early Sunday morning, effectively avoiding end-users altogether. A field note excerpt illustrates something of these activities among dealers:

Sam Lane, a 30-year veteran of the local public school system, sells periodically at the Dalton Valley Flea Market to supplement his income, and as a hedge against the day he'll feel compelled to "bail" from his stressful position as a high school teacher. He has parlayed his expertise as a collector of Native American artifacts into something of a small business. He is working on a deal with a vendor from several aisles down the midway, who is trying to relieve him of a Cherokee shield that is especially "cherry." This vendor specializes in African artifacts, but is apparently aware of the value of this particular "Indian" piece, and is trying to acquire it cheaply. This vendor interrupts the dealing several times to travel over to a public phone to conduct yet another deal, this time with a consumer unable to make today's market. The vendor has acquired an Etowah celt here for \$1,500, and is certain he can sell it in turn for \$2,500. He is engaging a prospect by phone, and dealing with Sam between calls. As the vendors converse, they remark upon the number of artifacts they have watched circulate through the market, moving from one booth to another. As collectors and dealers, the men compare notes on the speed with which artifacts they have graded as "A stuff," "B stuff," and "shit" (or "C stuff") have shifted tables, before the goods are either sold to naive consumers or retired for sale at more lucrative markets. The deal gradually resolves to mere conversation, with each vendor shifting his attention to newcomers to the stalls. Each has enjoyed the encounter, yet each is also thankful to have enough "regular buyers" and pass-by customers to absorb the cost of idle chatter. Sam usually makes \$5,000 each weekend he sells at the flea market.

Role fluidity and exchange variety achieve peak intensity when the market gates open to consumers on Sunday morning. All published and broadcast announcements proclaim a 7 a.m. opening, but consumers are permitted on the grounds several hours earlier. Thus, in winter months it is not unusual to see customers searching with flashlights, in hopes of securing an "early deal." The principal Sunday market interactions occur between dealers and naive consumers. However, dealers continue to trade among themselves, with some of them engaging in "lot buying" at the end of the day, when some dealers seek to divest themselves of unwanted goods and others seek to build inventory or acquire a particular item unobtrusively. Some interactions flow in another direction entirely. That is, consumers smuggle goods into the market with the intention of selling or trading them to dealers, or obtaining covert appraisals. Consumers also try to resell items they have purchased on-site to dealers displaying analogous merchandise. Finally, a significant amount of exchange activity occurs between consumers. Such interactions may begin as a simple exchange of information (e.g., "Where did you find that piece?"; "Are there others like that left?"), but culminate in a cash or barter transaction. Some consumers comb the parking lots in search of items

they may have missed in the marketplace, hoping to buy goods from other consumers who have already done the legwork.

### Marketplace Behaviors: Selected Processes

As a compromise between comprehensiveness and concision, a cursory summary of the range of marketplace behaviors at the Dalton Valley Flea Market is presented in the following paragraphs. I will comment briefly on some stakeholder activity and elaborate upon consumer behavior in a subsequent section.

*Managers.* The Warren family's premarket preparations consist chiefly of infrastructural servicing. Relationships with Fair Board landlords are continuously managed to balance the perceptions of appropriate overhead costs and acceptable profit levels. Subcontracting for such services as satellite food vending and security police must be arranged. Advertising and promotion, including answering the hundreds of information calls, are pressing concerns. Tables, portable outhouses, and trash barrels must be distributed, and thoroughfares plowed or watered. The market day itself brings a host of additional duties. The managers allocate booth space and dispense information to market patrons. Concession stands are tightly regulated for insurance purposes, so the Warren family members spend a good deal of time cooking and overseeing food preparation. Managers are also responsible on an ad hoc basis for troubleshooting, which may range from spot electrical repairs to dispute adjudication. Many of the managers also have stalls and spend a portion of their time selling and buying on market day. Postmarket activity consists chiefly of dismantling and storing movable properties, evaluating overall market performance, discussing difficulties with particular dealers, and planning improvements for subsequent markets.

*Regulators.* State and federal tax authorities, county law enforcement offices, and Fair Board personnel are the principal bodies assuming oversight responsibilities. Premarket activity consists almost solely of "auditing" flea market management: checking for accurate accounting procedures, urging a periodic distribution of tax information and plea for compliance to market vendors, and assessing security needs. On market day, regulators may count dealers, check for proper licensing and accounting procedures among dealers, and occasionally collect taxes. However, the high volume of cash transactions coupled with low entry and exit barriers and dealer mobility are incentives for sellers' falsifying earnings records and evading proper licensing procedures. In fact, a number of informants report that they maintain a large cash "kitty" against the day they are "visited" by the "tax man." County police stroll the market

grounds to preserve order, a task once performed by Warren family males when the market was not as large. A small amount of covert checking for illicit activity is undertaken by police, who are principally concerned with stolen merchandise and pickpocketing offenses. Less blatant offenses, such as fraud in the form of counterfeit antiques and collectibles, are rarely investigated, despite the large body of lore surrounding the creation and detection of counterfeits. Compared to outlying and urban flea markets, Dalton Valley has a reputation as a lawful enterprise. Postmarket activities undertaken by regulators involve evaluating the success of social control measures and planning for the subsequent market.

*Dealers.* Principal among dealers' premarket activities is amassing inventory. For dealers who are also formal sector retailers, this poses no logistical problems. Such dealers include representatives from department stores, such as Sears or JC Penney, real estate and mortgage finance companies, insurance agencies, and health service providers. For those who are independent entrepreneurs—many vendors are women managing family businesses—preparations may begin with the cultivation of loan officers. Another preparation is "picking," an ongoing activity that involves the frequenting of garage sales, auctions, and estate sales, contracting with jobbers, and other forms of "sourcing." Dealers are often craftspeople, who must produce their own inventory and source their own materials. Much time is spent researching lines of merchandise and gaining expertise as a sourcer, appraiser, and connoisseur of particular objects. Many vendors build picking networks and socialize family members or friends into the business.

On the day before the market, dealers are occupied with the logistics of lineup and setup. Market day is taken up with the business of selling, which may involve pitching and dickering. Dealers engage in rumor mongering as well as mere information exchange. Some do a good bit of teaching while selling, and many consumers come away from a sales encounter with at least a better knowledge of objects or object categories than they initially possessed. Dealers impart meaning to their goods, providing cultural biographies for objects, which many consumers believe enhance their value. In fact, these "stories" or "histories" are sought by some consumers as avidly as the objects themselves. One informant noted,

The story gives me more of a personal relationship with the thing (i.e., consumer object). A regular store doesn't have a story.

Many dealers use the market as an opportunity to teach family members, particularly children, the skills of the trade. Children are often actively involved in sales interactions.

Much socializing goes on among dealers, either informally on the level of casual conversation or shop talk or more formally through such events as Christmas and birthday parties, the selection of adjoining booth space, and occasionally through road partnerships formed as a consequence of traveling similar market circuits. "Pack-up" generally concludes a dealer's participation in the market. Postmarket activities include circuit travelling to other marketplaces, or simple business evaluation as a step toward preparing for the following month's market.

### Consumer Behavior and the Flea Market Experience

Traffic backs up for miles on the major arteries of Mt. Arden on flea market Sunday. The open fields around the marketplace that serve as parking space fill quickly and systematically under the guidance of flea market attendants. License plates from as many as 15 states and Canadian provinces are discernible on a given Sunday, and indicate the drawing power of the market. Rental vehicles abound, as some consumers fly in from cities on the distant coasts, some even prepared to haul their purchases home by rental truck. The atmosphere in the parking lot is festive, with consumers energized by their sheer numbers and their proximity to untold treasures. In the words of one informant,

There's a sense of excitement with lots of people being there. The open-air environment is really nice. The whole thing is just exhilarating. Other peoples' excitement is contagious, and the stuff is exciting too. You just know you're going to get a real bargain—something unique, not mass produced, but it's going to be cheap. Not something Thomasville is going to produce 7,000 of.

Here economic and festive impulses resonate and are clearly amplified by the informal market setting. Some consumers come with specific purchase intentions, others chiefly to enjoy the atmosphere. Many vehicles bear vanity plates attesting to their owners' passions: ANTEEKS, ARTFACTS, I REHAB, TINKER, MR SIGN. Bumper stickers and window hangings warn: Flea Market Maniac, Born to Shop, Caution: This Car Stops at All Garage Sales, Shopper on Board, Licensed Junk Collector. Some consumers themselves become walking advertisements, sporting printed T-shirts, jackets, aprons, and even baseball caps proclaiming their desire to buy all manner of goods, from "old fishing gear" to "Prohibition gangster items." People file between the vehicles and down the aisles that funnel toward the main gate, their pace accelerating as they near the entrance. By 6 a.m. as many as 300 vehicles are parked. The "early birds" seek to "beat the heat" (or rain, or cold), "avoid the

crowds," and get "the best stuff" before it is "picked over."

Most consumers begin their trek through the marketplace in a roughly counterclockwise direction, moving to their right once through the gate. Most meander at a moderate pace, browsing as they wander. Others assume a more purposive gait, moving down a central aisle toward specific destinations. At the entrance, some nominal leader will often urge his or her fellow travelers to organize their foray: "Let's get a system here." Quite often the "system" is an agreement to meet at the food shed at a particular time should parties become separated. Newcomers to the market are frequently guided by friends who have "done" the market on other occasions; unescorted first-timers generally gawk and stroll as they are moved along with the flow of traffic.

Some consumers have budgeted carefully for this monthly outing, others have researched particular categories thoroughly, and still others have arrived with the sole expectation of window shopping. As a state-designated tourist attraction, the Dalton Valley Flea Market draws a good many visitors seeking primarily the spectacle that the press of crowds and exotic goods conspire to produce. The anticipation of first timers and regulars is almost palpable, their expectations of engagement with the market building with the crowd.

Whether they arrive intending to locate specific items for personal use or investment purposes, or principally to enjoy a day of sightseeing, or even solely to take advantage of bad weather or closing time in the stubborn (and variably accurate) belief that they will obtain enormous discounts from dealers willing to sacrifice items rather than reload, consumers engage in a few highly patterned behaviors once inside the market gates. The most important of these include searching, dickering, and socializing. These behaviors occur independently and in combinations, and can be illustrated by a few vignettes:

Marin, Renee, Elaine, and Pam, young mothers in their early 30s, meet once each month as a group at the flea market. The four set off together to explore, entrusting their children to their husbands, who are expected to "cruise" the market until the parties reunite at lunch time. Significantly, spouses and children express a preference for the flea market as opposed to mall shopping. The women enjoy searching for bargains and rummaging through the various wares on display. They use their shopping time to "catch up on gossip," and to savor "the feel" of the market. They describe the crowds at Dalton Valley as a "community" and claim to enjoy the press and pace of activity. They are mainly interested in antiques. Elaine actually sells oak furniture at the market once each year. The women "love" to "bargain" and to "find things," and often function as a team in their interactions with dealers. Each acts as a "spotter" for the other, so that everyone's personal

preference in items is incorporated into each shopper's search. When an item is "discovered," one partner will express some initial interest in the piece. Taking this interest as her cue, another partner will step in and attempt to dissuade the prospect by disparaging the object, by denying the other's need for the object, by suggesting additional search, and so forth. Frequently a dealer will discount merchandise in the face of such feigned resistance.

Bill Jones, a collector of black amethyst glassware and musical instruments, also shops Dalton Valley with three friends. In this case, however, the friends separate at the entrance and conduct three independent but redundant searches, each keeping an eye open for the others' interests. Bill is a methodical and calculating searcher. He always begins his search at the far end of the meadow, since the true "finds" are always "outside." He then works the "inside" and "middle" of the main midway and finishes with the outside booths at the "top." He begins early as well, before the "old ladies" can "steal" the "treasure." He searches for signed pieces among the wares of older dealers whose poor eyesight may have allowed such goods to go undetected. He looks for dealers who have come directly from estate sales and who might not have had time to assess and properly price their goods. He routinely derogates instruments, frequently lamenting the impossibility of their ever being tuned properly. He espouses a philosophy of "let the seller beware" and feels no compunction about "beating dealers" at what he believes to be "their own game." He revels in discovering a dealer less knowledgeable about wares than himself, even if he must buy an entire table of merchandise to get the one piece he truly wants. He rationalizes this lot buying as a favor he does for dealers, by letting them sell out and go home early. Like many consumers, he is not above posing as a dealer and offering a fictitious dealer number to get a trade discount, which he feels is often as great as 40 percent. Bill buys some glassware for which he has no personal preference, but which he can in turn sell for a profit and thus help finance the purchase of favored pieces. He becomes incensed when dealers try to levy a state tax on him.

*Searching.* Heterogeneity characterizes the Dalton Valley consumer base, even though much of the merchandise is priced upscale compared to many of the other local flea markets. In fact, informants have complained of a gradual "yuppification" of the market, caused by an influx of affluent urban consumers who have "discovered" the market, but whose inability or unwillingness to dicker has encouraged dealers to inflate prices artificially and resist bargaining with regulars. Other consumers note a countervailing trend. As the flea market has increased in size, more so-called "junk" has entered the market, producing a Gresham's Law effect of sorts: higher quality material has moved elsewhere. However, a wide range of regional, cultural, occupational, social class, educational, lifestyle, and age segments is present at the market.

Heterogeneity also characterizes the market's goods. Only balloons and rummage clothing, which management has deemed a threat to the well-being of expensive antiques, are banned. The Warrens exercise a monopoly over food sales, which they perceive on the one hand as a commercial loss but on the other as a domestic success, insofar as meals contribute to the creation of a family atmosphere and provide an incentive for consumers to remain at the market. "Rummage" is a highly discretionary adjective that overlaps with the category of "junque," itself an emic descriptor connoting a distinction achieved through disrepair or neglect. Although the bulk of the merchandise is categorized as "antiques" or "collectibles," the kinds of goods assigned to these categories are legion. Furniture, linens, glassware, crafts, plates, stamps, baseball cards, tools, signs, books and magazines, clothing, archaeological artifacts, music cassettes, antique weaponry, jewelry, statuary, tramp art, war memorabilia, military patches, beer cans, toys, knock-off perfumes, engraving service, rust-proofing chemicals, hardware, and appliances are just a few of the categories of items available. Many consumers and dealers liken the market to a museum because of the sheer variety of items available and the sense of history experienced.

The observation that anything may become a collectible (Belk et al. 1988) is readily verified at Dalton Valley. A field note excerpt illustrates how collectibles can be dispersed and how both the process and objects of collecting can be sacralized by consumers:

Hank Richards and his wife Nancy slosh across a muddy midway, trampling beneath them the straw that only hours before had kept the feet of thousands of consumers relatively dry and warm against the November chill. They haul their purchases past booths of basketry and straw brooms, past tables full of dated magazines and broken neon signs, past barkers hawking chiropractic cures and woodworking chemicals, past factory outlet stalls advertising discounts on already discounted merchandise. Although their bags are heavy, the Richards must step nimbly to avoid the strollers, the wheel chairs and the golf carts winding through the walkways already overcrowded with pedestrians. The smell of mud and sodden straw commingles with the aroma of popcorn, and the din of the open air market—strains of 60s music blaring from vendors' stereo speakers, voices raised to pitch, haggle and politic, truck engines idling and misfiring—recedes as they pick their way across the field to their own parked car. They are laden with the purchases of a day's long exploration of the flea market. Each of them is a collector of antiques, and they use their collectibles to decorate their home in a style they describe as "early barn." They have come to the market today in search of Christmas presents for relatives, who are also collectors. The Richards have purchased a variety of old tools, with which they intend to furnish antique tool boxes that

they will construct and give away as gifts. Nancy favors flea markets for such shopping, although she “dearly loves” auctions, because she likens her behavior at auctions to a “disease.” She gets caught up in the bidding, and finds herself overpaying for items she doesn’t really need.

The affecting presence and power of sheer numbers of goods, of people, of smells and sounds, of big ticket cash transactions, of temperature extremes, and so on, are undeniable to observer and participant alike. Braudel (1979) has commented on the “unbeatable” nature of the “robust simplicity” that characterizes such markets; the immediacy of exchange conducted “hand to hand” and “eyeball to eyeball” he finds remarkable. Abrahams (1987, p. 10) characterizes the “archaic” market and its contemporary analogs quite accurately:

Exchanges take place at a high intensity and under a different system of exchange than in the home or the village. The archaic marketplace establishes its difference from all other value spaces by establishing a field of energy that is charged not only by the high-pitched bargaining, but also by the abundance, even the overabundance, of significant mobilized objects and mobilizing actions. This type of market exists as a semiotically-charged field of action.

This energy and mobilization are captured by one informant:

I really appreciate the aesthetics of the flea market—I fall in love with stuff I can’t afford or wouldn’t even buy, like going to an art gallery. It’s (the shopping experience) like going back to the old days, to the bartering system, where you talk to the person that has the goods. It’s more personal, more direct.

The “immediacy” of the traditional market (Agnew 1986, p. 98) also characterizes the contemporary flea market. The flea market is more than an action scene, as termed by Maisel (1974). It is rather a co-occurrence of action scenes that encapsulates the tensions of Figure 1. Abrahams (1986) has described the centers of significant activity and enactment that operate simultaneously in crowds.

*Dickering.* It is useful to distinguish, again by way of ethnographic vignettes, between the mechanics of dickering and what consumers regard as the essence of dickering. Two field note excerpts capture the flavor of the give and take that characterizes bargaining between buyers and sellers:

Peg, a woman in her late 50s, dickers with a vendor over a ceramic bowl.

P: Will you take \$10 for it?  
 V: I’d feel like I was giving it away. I’d hate myself.  
 P: I wouldn’t hate you.  
 V: I’d hate myself.  
 P: I’ll split the difference with you—\$12.50  
 V: What’s it marked?  
 P: \$18  
 V: Can’t do it. I’ll go (\$14).  
 P: Sorry, thanks.  
 V: No, thank you.

Such dispirited dickering shows the obligatory nature, if not the efficacy, of the ritual. Deals are routinely aborted by incompetent hagglers, as in the following exchange:

Consumer: I know where I can get it (duct tape) cheaper.  
 V: Go buy it then—don’t tell me about it.  
 Consumer: I will.

Chuck, a man in his early 30s, inspects an antique coat rack under the expectant gaze of his wife and the indifferent attention of a vendor.

C: You want \$30 for this, eh?  
 V: Yep.

As Chuck looks for imperfections in the hooks and flaws in the wood, the vendor grows more attentive.

V: You can fix that (loose and missing hooks) up pretty easy.  
 C: I’ll never get around to it.

Chuck continues to detect chips in the post and flaws in the grain. He expresses concern as he wiggles the hooks.

C: Not real solid here. They’re (hooks) going to come off easily.

Chuck continues to disparage the piece, as his wife becomes increasingly interested. She senses Chuck is alienating the vendor. As Chuck tests the stability of the piece on unlevel ground, he asks one more question.

C: Can you solder a hook to make it tighter?

In response to her imploring look, Chuck addresses his wife, before the vendor can respond.

C: You want to go for it?  
 W: Maybe, if he comes down to \$25 . . .

Unhappy that this figure has been announced within earshot of the dealer, Chuck draws his wife closer to confer. She interrupts the conference to address the vendor.

W: I think we’ll take it. Will you take \$25?  
 V: Okay.  
 C: Will you take a check?  
 V: Sure, as long as you’ve got ID.

The atmosphere grows more relaxed. Chuck munches some popcorn while his wife writes a check. She is clearly elated with the purchase. Chuck disparages the

rack one last time, and asks her if she wouldn't really like to look around some more. She declines, hands the vendor the check and some identification, and visually encourages her husband to complete the interaction. The three exchange some small talk, then the couple departs with the coat rack.

The essence of bargaining is somewhat more elusive, but surely transcends both the satisfaction of mere economic gain and the indulgence of playful impulse. The following field note excerpts suggest that dickering is linked to peak or intrinsically enjoyable experience and to feelings of competence and mastery:

Jack Arem, a plate collector in his early 60s, describes the essence of his particular passion: "There's no Alcoholics Anonymous for collectors. You just get bit by the bug and that's it. The beauty and craftsmanship of some of these things is amazing. They were made by people who cared. There's nothing like getting a hold of them for yourself. Especially if you get it for a song and you sing it yourself. It's not just *getting* a great deal, it's *knowing* that you've got a great deal that makes for the thrill. It's even better if you had to bid against someone for it."

A father in his mid 40s encourages his 12-year-old daughter to haggle for a stuffed animal. The toy is marked \$2.50. She very tentatively offers the dealer 50 cents, and to her amazement, he accepts the offer. Upon her return, the father inquires, "What'd he charge you?" "Fifty cents," replies the daughter. The father rewards her with a knowing smile and a look of approval.

Here and elsewhere (Sherry and McGrath 1989) I have described the experience-rich characteristics and projectable nature of marketplace ambience that motivate much consumer behavior. The seeking of such experience is often far more significant than the mere acquisition of products. Modern autonomous, imaginative hedonism drives much contemporary consumer behavior (Campbell 1987, p. 89). That is, consumers seek pleasure from the self-illusory experiences constructed from meanings associated with products: this imaginative pleasure-seeking is the essential activity of consumption. Rationality and passion—the tension between calculation and longing—is the dialectic upon which our Western market culture ultimately turns (Campbell 1987, p. 227). As Figure 1 suggests, the flea market could have evolved specifically to allow consumers to savor this tension. The objects on display serve as vehicles for a variety of experiences. Consumers may see objects that prompt them to recall and discuss either possessions of their own or possessions they know others have. Frequently they marvel at the potential value of objects they own, lament the unwitting jettisoning of objects that could have commanded "fortunes," scoff at the ludicrously high price being asked for an item of

which they have a duplicate in their own home, and denigrate the vendor's occupation (e.g., "Do you believe you can sell this shit for a living?"). A consumer may pontificate to a partner, or anyone in earshot, about product provenance, quality, or availability. For example, a commonly voiced suspicion is that the "good stuff" is no longer available at Dalton Valley because it has been largely recollected and retired from circulation, and a generation will pass before it is re-released through estate sales. One can accumulate a wealth of knowledge by eavesdropping on the informal lectures some consumers deliver in the course of their search. The sheer joy of evaluation—of intellectual showing off with no adverse consequences—seems to be a powerful mechanism of engagement with the market. Further, particular objects stimulate consumers to reminisce about their past; parents and grandparents see objects, such as antique printers' blocks or electric trains or clothing, that inspire them to teach their children about "the old days." Nostalgia alone often prompts them to buy such items.

*Socializing.* Finally, a note on the nature of socializing in the marketplace is warranted. Many consumers inhabit the Dalton Valley Flea Market, both literally and figuratively. They come for a day to live the market experience, even if their principal aim is to purchase. The *communitas* of the market, the notion that buying and selling is just one aspect of a larger experience to be sampled, is notable enough that informants commonly acknowledged it. In describing consumers' (and ethnographers') phenomenological experience of material culture, Richardson (1982) coined the phrase "being-in-the-market," a mode of existence distinct from other domains. Being-in-the-flea-market is an experience that contrasts vividly with that of conventional or institutional marketplaces. The fact that the market is held on a holy day is not lost on consumers, who may choose to substitute a secular ritual for a sacred one, or who bracket their church attendance as a pre- or post-market activity. In more senses than one, the market is a movable feast; it is both a place and a spirit (Hodges 1988, p. 8), and it serves as a secular vehicle for the achievement of transcendent experience. This larger experience represents a return to the fundamental functions of the marketplace forum.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have explored the sociocultural significance of the flea market. The baseline ethnographic data I have recorded should facilitate comparisons with other alternative and conventional marketplaces and the consumer behaviors that such marketplaces stimulate. The extraeconomic dimen-

sions of consumer behavior are all too often ignored or slighted in our conventional research. Challenges to the dominant ideology of market capitalism as expressed through the American belief system—celebrated in such venues as periodic markets (Soiffer and Herrmann 1987)—are also too infrequently examined. This embeddedness is a crucial issue for consumer researchers to disentangle. Not only do periodicity and itineracy persist within a context of market permanence, but informality works as well to humanize institutional relationships. Even within the flea market itself, the relative permanence of the inside stalls contrasted with the relative transience of the outside stalls provides a microcosm of the larger commercial dialectic.

I have elected to use several metaphors to depict my understanding of the flea market. Such tropistic thinking (Fernandez 1986) and its rhetorical analysis (McCloskey 1985) has much to offer consumer research, if the metaphors and their criticism are well turned. Levy (1978) has long advocated understanding buyer-seller interactions as a dialogue. Such a discourse-based metaphor is accurate, but might be refined in accordance with the cacophony that characterizes the flea market. The flea market is essentially a multilogue, as Emerson construes such discourse (Fernandez 1986, p. 239), with many voices communicating. Or, rather, in keeping with the alternative status of the periodic market, Peacock's (1986) term "polylogue," which mixes etymological roots, is perhaps the fittest metaphor to adopt. The selective and insulated aspect of communication is thus emphasized. As a polylogue, the flea market is a blooming, buzzing confusion negotiated at the emic level by transactors and at the etic levels by the analyst. Its features are mobile and polymorphous (Agnew 1986, p. 11). Again, Abraham's (1987) work with open air markets is instructive. The flea market is a polylogue in which semiotic intensity is apparent to all participants, even though multiple meanings may be apparent to only a few. The subject of this polylogue (and ultimately its object) is the nature or essence of the marketplace in contemporary U.S. society.

The flea market poses a direct challenge to the problem of misplaced emphasis and perspective diminution. It is at once part of the formal and informal economies. It is a rational market on the order of a shopping mall, where consumers can purchase utilitarian goods at fixed prices. It is also a "fantastic" economy (Stewart 1982, pp. 158–159) with its own "principles of exchange, substitution and replicability, despite its dependence upon the larger economic system." In this regard, purchase is subordinated to search, exchange value is constantly renegotiated, and use value is often aestheticized (if not eroticized). Here the expressive tempers the instrumental; commodities are sacralized. The flea market's kinship

with the fair, carnival, and theatre of preceding centuries (Agnew 1986; Bakhtin 1984; Davis 1966) is unmistakable. Exhibitions of "commercial libido" (Drucker-Brown 1982, p. 62)—Malinowski's term for the confluence of commercial talent, economic avarice, and passionate interest that produces market transactions even on ostensibly noneconomic occasions—are flea market staples. The "commercial athleticism" that infused marketplace festival of the Middle Ages, and that put "wit, honor and manliness to the test" (Agnew 1986, p. 37) in an atmosphere of ambivalence and opportunism, is transmuted in the contemporary flea market. Each of these commercial impulses, tempered as they are by concerns of playfulness, competence, and mastery, is restrained in more conventional retail settings, making formal sector consumer behavior more predictable and passive ("safe" and "sterile" in informants' words) and informal sector consumer behavior less routinized and more engaging ("dangerous" or "exciting"). The opportunity to experience "being-in-the-market," where the market is not merely a mechanism, or where such mechanism is not so much self-regulating as it is subject to tinkering by the self, is liberating for some consumers, threatening to others.

Demographers (Gonzales 1988) have demonstrated the enormous popularity of recreational shopping in consumer culture, and researchers (Sherry and McGrath 1989) have explored the impact of sense of place on consumer behavior. A recent theoretically informed interpretation of the shopping mall as ceremonial center (Zepp 1986, p. 51) maintains that

Out of the disorder of the city and the disease of the suburbs arises the shopping mall and its perceived symmetry and tranquility. People come to this center feeling isolated, lonely and anonymous. They need to be at ease, to belong, to center themselves again. Chaos will be cosmicized. Disorder will be ordered.

Although such interpretation pushes commodity fetishism to its furthest limits, it is a useful foil against which to gauge the significance of the flea market. Zepp produces an unintentional irony in his mall-as-order motif in the last sentence of the citation. To prevent "consumerism" (brute materialism or sheer acquisition) from becoming a pathology, many of us will literally place an order for disorder. When priorities are skewed, disorder can be corrective. The flea market produces a decentering and recontextualizing experience for consumers, permitting the re-embedding of market relations in social relations. It permits a species of disorder to thrive. As a liminal place, it rebels against the keepers of the "obvious world," and challenges consumers, marketers, and regulators alike to reinstate the "expressive legibility" of marketplaces that has been so diluted by contemporary



"systems of design and management" that separate logic and symbolism (Walter 1988, pp. 2-3).

Whether or not his aesthetic canon is sound, Peckham's observation on the individual's "rage for chaos" is compelling. Peckham (1965, p. 313) maintains that people will explore the disparity between their interests and subjective reality only in "protected situations characterized by high walls of psychic insulation." The endurance of chaos in protected settings serves as a rehearsal for adaptive behavior in times of true disorientation. Similarly, Turner (1974) has stressed the dialectic between structure and anti-structure that permits culture to persist. Here again, disorder is ultimately an order-affirming condition. The flea market is such a protected venue where anti-structure can be recognized and embraced, perhaps against the day when the social relations characteristic of advanced capitalism are judged by consumers to be wanting and in need of adjustment.

The antistructural characteristic is the key both to the flea market's popular appeal and its sociocultural significance. As an institution or genre of activity, the flea market cathects two of our principal cultural foci—buying and selling—from the perspective of subsistence and recreation. These foci are enacted by consumers and dealers in work and play. Antistructure is the "subjunctive mood" of culture that enfranchises speculation (Turner 1985, p. 295). Antistructure "generates and stores alternative models for living" (Turner 1974, pp. 65 and 75) that liberate our capacities from normative constraints and can influence behavior in the direction of radical change. Because it is explicitly contrasted with formal sector markets, because it has explicitly incorporated elements of these same markets into itself, and because it explicitly subverts many of the canons of these markets, the flea market virtually demands that its participants question the nature of marketing and consumption in contemporary life. For some, the exploitation of a parallel "guerrilla" economy that merely mirrors the formal sector is a satisfactory result of this questioning. For others, immersion in an alternative, complementary, and more holistic economy is the preferred resolution. The flea market accommodates each of these options. For many participants, the authenticity of this experience, which ultimately encourages embrace or disdain of the flea market, lies in their ability to fuse economic and festive impulses. Search is effortful and involves physical discomfort; prices fluctuate and money is not the sole legal tender; age and disrepair are emblems of quality; objects are invested with biographies in which the past is present; workaday proletarians become weekend entrepreneurial capitalists; obsolescence is subordinated to recycling. The immediacy of the encounter between buyer and seller, consumer and object, person and environment prompts a rethinking of marketplace dy-

namics. Although the flea market remains on the margins of the city, the calendar, and the economy, it stands as an implicit challenge to the consumer's conventional experience and carries within it the potential for reconstructing that experience in more satisfying ways. It provides a template for the transcending of commodity fetishism and an antidote for the numbing predictability of the formal sector marketing mix.

In Floch's (1988, pp. 242-243) estimation, the flea market is "the place, *par excellence*, where people 'browse' and where it is impossible to plan one's itinerary 'in reverse,' i.e., with one's arrival at a specific objective in mind when one starts out." It is here that consumers are seduced "in the literal sense of being led astray" (1988, p. 243). Just as garage sales have been interpreted as "suburban subversiveness" (Abrahams, n.d.), so also does the flea market provide a ritual or ceremonial venue for the experience of disorder. It is chaotic within cultural limits. Its fusion of festivity with rationality both subverts and reaffirms the assumptions upon which our marketing system ultimately rests. "Just looking" (an admittedly impoverished metaphor) is thus neither a defensive posture nor an exercise in self-denial, but rather an authentic experience with potential to reinvigorate the marketing system. Formal sector marketers have been quick to commodify the categories of objects that circulate at flea markets (such as "collectibles"); they have moved with less alacrity to incorporate the ethos of the market, but such movement is perceptible. More ambitious still will be the efforts of transitional society regulators to formalize what are in essence national informal economies in the service of development and global market linkage (DeSoto 1989). We need to recognize and celebrate more of the kinds of dialectical tensions I have sketched in Figure 1 if we are to approach the goals of understanding and taming marketplace behavior with which I began this article.

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