The Places,

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Sustainable

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Weaving a Tapestry of Resistance

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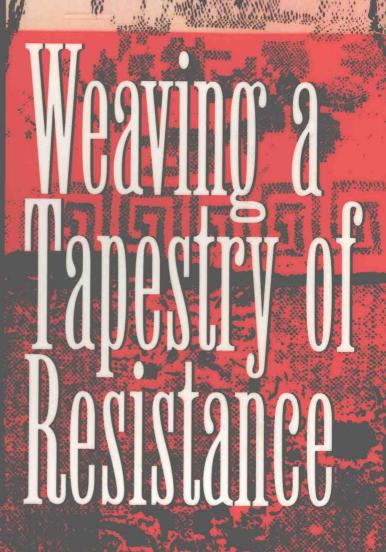
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Series Foreword

Sharon E. Sutton's addition to the *Critical Studies in Education and Culture* makes a novel contribution to the debate over the meaning and purpose of education that has occupied the center of political and social life in the United States over the last decade. Dominated largely by an aggressive and ongoing attempt by various sectors of the Right, including "fundamentalists," nationalists, and political conservatives, the debate over educational policy has been organized around a set of values and practices that take as their paradigmatic model the laws and ideology of the marketplace and the imperatives of a newly emerging cultural traditionalism. In the first instance, schooling is being redefined through a corporate ideology that stressed the primacy of choice over community, competition over cooperation, and excellence over equity. At stake here is the imperative to organize public schooling around the related practices of competition, reprivatization, standardization, and individualism.

In the second instance, the New Right has waged a cultural war against schools as part of a wider attempt to contest the emergence of new public cultures and social movements that have begun to demand that schools take seriously the imperatives of living in a multiracial and multicultural democracy. The contours of this cultural offensive are evident in the call by the Right for standardized testing, the rejection of multiculturalism, and the development of curricula around what is euphemistically called a "common culture." In this perspective, the notion of a common culture serves as a referent to denounce any attempt by subordinate groups to challenge the narrow ideological and political parameters by which such a culture both defines and expresses

itself. It is not too surprising that the theoretical and political distance between defining schools around a common culture and denouncing cultural difference as the enemy of democratic life is reactively short indeed.

This debate is important not simply because it makes visible the role that schools play as sites of political and cultural contestation, but because it is within this debate that the notion of the United States as an open and democratic society is being questioned and redefined. Moreover, this debate provides a challenge to progressive educators both in and outside of the United States to address a number of conditions central to a postmodern world. First, public schools cannot be seen as either objective or neutral. As institutions actively involved in constructing political subjects and presupposing a vision of the future, they must be dealt with in terms that are simultaneously historical, critical, and transformative. Second, the relationship between knowledge and power in schools places undue emphasis on disciplinary structures and on individual achievement as the primary unit of value. Critical educators need a language that emphasizes how social identities are constructed within unequal relations of power in the schools and how schooling can be organized through interdisciplinary approaches to learning and cultural differences that address the dialectical and multifaceted experiences of everyday life. Third, the existing cultural transformation of American society into a multiracial and multicultural society structured in multiple relations of domination demands that we address how schooling can become sites for cultural democracy rather than channeling colonies producing new forms of nativism and racism. Finally, critical educators need a new language that takes seriously the relationship between democracy and the establishment of those teaching and learning conditions that enable forms of self- and social determination in students and teachers. This suggests not only new forms of self-definition for human agency, it also points to redistributing power within the school and between the school and the larger society.

Weaving a Tapestry of Resistance is both a critique and a positive response to these concerns and the debates from which they emerge. Through the language of interdisciplinary critique, social analysis, and self-reflection, Sutton seeks to deconstruct the physical environment as a visual text, which makes all too evident the unequal power relations in schools and in the larger society. By focusing on the palpable differences in resources that inevitably parallel race and class differences, she challenges the view of schools as objective, neutral institutions engaged in the transmission of an unproblematic cultural heritage. This volume, which is part of a new discourse that challenges narrow disciplinary boundaries and theoretical paradigms, illuminates how schools func-

tion as cultural sites actively engaged in the production not only of knowledge but of social identities. Central to Sutton's vision is an educational process that actively produces, negotiates, and rewrites culture by being centered in democratic governance and the tangible, esthetic energy of a particular locality.

Sutton's work links emergent educational discourses on gender, race, class, and ethnicity with concerns for ecology and conservation. She attempts to rethink the relationship between language and the experience of one's physical surroundings and between pedagogy and the capacity to be socially responsible agents within those surroundings. By emphasizing the centrality of place, power, and culture, Sutton contributes to our understanding of how socially critical knowledge, democratic values, and interpersonal practices can provide a basis for teachers, students, and other cultural workers to redefine their roles as engaged public intellectuals. In this respect, it is part of a larger project for deepening the prospects of democratic schooling in a multiracial and multicultural society and opens up new discursive and public spaces for critical interventions into schools and other pedagogical sites.

The *Critical Studies in Education and Culture* series is concerned with making public schooling a central expression of democratic culture by challenging and transforming those configurations of power that characterize the existing system of education and other public cultures. *Weaving a Tapestry of Resistance* has been included in the series because it moves beyond the boundaries of traditional and existing critical discourses to broaden understanding of how not only schools but also the physical surroundings in which they exist can be sites of either containment or possibility.

Henry A. Giroux

Preface

The physical environment can be understood as a system of three-dimensional, hieroglyphic symbols—a text that conveys information about the social, political, economic, and cultural relations of a society. Places not only sustain individuals in a tangible way by providing shelter for varied private and public activities, they tacitly communicate a way of life. Large gabled homes set back on lushly landscaped lawns symbolically encode an existence quite unlike that presumed to occur in the sleek apartments of New York City's Trump Tower, a rural farmhouse surrounded by fields of wheat, or an inner-city neighborhood with its check-cashing outlets, burned-out buildings, and broken-down cars. Since children are keenly observant of spatial details, what do such disparate places tell them about themselves and their place in society? In what way do the material conditions of poverty or wealth shape children's worldviews, values, and ways of being? Do poor and affluent children's observations of place encourage social roles that exaggerate the differences in their life chances? Is it possible that young people's transactions with their surroundings help to perpetuate environmentally destructive behaviors?

For most children the home, school building, and neighborhood constitute the primary backdrop for their universe of experiences and, as such, constitute widely varying texts that reflect their socioeconomic status. The pages of a text of poverty are ominous and deteriorating, mostly devoted to violence, drugs, and despair; they lack beauty, personal control, or any sense of protectedness—sacredness. Is it possible that the stories of such a text may be teaching poor youth that they are of no value and deserve their lot? Is it feasible that the place-related nar-

ratives of impoverishment deter some children's ability to conceive themselves as successful or in charge of their futures? In contrast the pages of a text of wealth are spacious, pristine, and inviolate; they are full of well-tended homes and neighborhoods, distinctively set apart from ordinary life. Is it possible that the stories of this text are instructing well-to-do youth that they are superior and entitled to all they have—to more than others? Is it feasible that the place-related narratives of affluence obstruct other children's capacity to be empathic or altruistic?

Since the hieroglyphic symbols of the physical environment so plainly symbolize socioeconomic status, will young people be less impacted by the extremes of poverty and wealth if they are engaged in learning about those symbols? Can youth reframe the lessons of hopelessness or entitlement contained in their surroundings by being active participants in reshaping those surroundings? The ecological balance of all the Earth's systems—natural, social, political, economic, cultural—are changing so rapidly that familiar patterns of behavior are becoming increasingly inadequate. Can children learn new ways of being by learning to care for the physical environment? Can they begin to conceive a more just, harmonious Earth by collaborating with others to make improvements in their local communities? These are some of the questions that motivated me to write this book.

It is aimed primarily at practitioners and scholars whose work deals with youth including educators, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, and policymakers as well as physical planners, designers, and environmentalists. However, since the book is written in a nontechnical style, it should also appeal to a much wider audience of parents, community activists, and other concerned citizens. I hope to depict the tacit learning that occurs in relation to the school and neighborhood environment, and to probe how that learning might be directed toward social and environmental activism. I begin with the assumption that the development of poor and well-to-do children alike can be compromised or enhanced by the quality of their physical environment. I use an anecdotal approach to illustrate how two groups of children are exposed to differing sets of values through their experiences in socioeconomically dissimilar schools and neighborhoods. Based on these anecdotes, I lay out the parameters for an approach to helping children realize their power to responsibly influence their social universe through activities that are focused on the physical environment.

WHERE THIS STORY BEGINS

Social exchanges among family members, friends, and neighbors; experiences of events during a school day; exploration of the unknown;

sensory engagement with the landscape—all are affected by the characteristics of a particular place and, in turn, impact the social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development of children. The Urban Network, a national outreach program that enables youth to learn about and positively influence the physical environment of their school and neighborhood,[1] is an attempt to enhance children's development through place-related activities. This program is the outcome of a thirteen-year period of experimentation in the classroom with children and teachers, its guiding principles seeded in 1975 when this author worked on construction projects in several elementary schools and community arts organizations. The most long-term of these involvements was an architect-in-residence program at an elementary school in New York City that primarily served low-income minority children. Over a four-year period, fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students were engaged in building large three-dimensional structures in their schoolyard. Children who participated in an empirical study during the third year of the program demonstrated improved social skills as a consequence of their involvement with the design and construction process, and their efforts won the enthusiastic support of local residents.[2] In 1987, these hands-on efforts with children were expanded as I began elaborating instructional materials that could offer teachers the know-how to implement their own architectural projects. In a curriculum piloted internationally at several schools in Mexico and the United States, I broadened my beginning efforts by using videotapes to form an exchange, or a network, among participants. This network was formalized in 1988 and has since directly accommodated almost 200 schools and community organizations around the country. In addition to these discreet implementations, the program reaches thousands of K-12 educators through various professional meetings, workshops, focus groups, and a biannual journal.

Based at the University of Michigan's College of Architecture and Urban Planning, the Urban Network is one of many design education initiatives that encourage culturally based experiential learning. Some of these programs were created by design professionals or by professional organizations, and encompass a career-option focus. Others grew out of classroom teachers' realization that their school building or neighborhood contained a wealth of instructional opportunities and could be used as a fascinating point of departure for interdisciplinary teaching. One teacher's manual explained the versatility of using built space as a backdrop for learning in the following manner:

> Architecture has the beauty of many things. It is an art form, a science, a
> form of self-expression that can be political, cultural, historical, or envi-

ronmental. Indeed it is so multi-faceted that most imaginative teachers can find within architecture a suitable place in which to pursue their particular spheres of interest. The cultural anthropologist, for example, can discuss and compare types of shelters; the engineer can focus on bridges and tunnels; the historian can investigate patterns of local community development; the artist can design architectural embellishments; the mathematician can investigate structural parameters; the language arts teacher can explore a sea of urban literature. In fact if a flow chart were designed with architecture at its center, there would be infinite paths to explore through a variety of disciplines [Board of Education of the City of New York, 1979, p. iv].

In addition to its roots in design education, the Urban Network is akin in its methodology to science-based programs focusing on the natural environment. These curricula are more widely implemented than the arts-based ones and often are buttressed by state-mandated requirements for the subject matter. Whereas design educators typically focus on creativity and the appreciation of esthetics and culture, many environmental educators—those dealing with nature—emphasize citizenship and the capacity for advocacy. Proponents of the latter approach hope to "increase pupils' awareness of the moral and political decisions shaping their environment and give them the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that will help them to form their own judgments and to participate in environmental politics" (Huckle, 1983, p. 105).

The Urban Network, which has been utilized primarily by social studies and language arts teachers as well as by youth service workers in low-income communities, joins both these streams of thinking. A year-long series of hands-on activities enables children to learn design concepts, use those concepts in exploring other disciplines, and increase their capacity as activists in their local communities. Incorporating input from a national team of consultants, "the Urban Network is a flexible curriculum designed to teach the concepts of architecture, planning, and design to schoolchildren nationwide by involving parents, neighborhood residents, and volunteer professionals" (Thomas, 1991, p. 13). A primary goal is to "enable children to elaborate on their intuitive understanding of the physical environment as a map of society—one that reflects its beauty as well as its injustices—and to understand their own power to participate in its re-creation" (Sutton, 1992, p. 37). Youth might go out into the community, redesigning schoolyards, landscaping vacant lots, proposing legislation at City Hall, or picketing to save a historic structure. In other cases their activities might occur within the classroom, debating community development plans or mounting a letter-writing campaign to call attention to some environmental issue. In still other instances, participants might operate within

the realm of the imagination, writing poetry or making drawings of places as they would like them to be.

A formative evaluation of the Urban Network yielded the data for this book. Although its purpose was to improve the program, the evaluation led to broader insights about the participants' environmental lives because it took me and my graduate research assistants into a mixture of private, religious, and enriched public schools as well as many inner-city ones in varying states of dilapidation. We visited schools on delightfully busy city streets; in quiet, parklike suburbs; in small, migrant farm communities; amid the vacant lots of urban ghettos; one even occupied the windowless basement of a synagogue. Some buildings were quite large but so underutilized as to appear deserted; others were so overcrowded that the first lunch shift began at 9:30 A.M. Some had exit doors chained closed to protect their charges from malicious intruders; others were wide open to the outside. We observed classrooms with a handful of children spread out at newly lacquered tables, experimenting with an array of colorful supplies and electronic equipment. We visited others with a constantly shifting enrollment of thirty-five to forty children crowded into mismatched furnishings, squinting at ancient books in the harsh rays of sunlight that streamed through unshaded, unwashed windows.

While this evaluation was in progress, problems related to environmental degradation began to attract increasing public interest, especially around the time of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Environmental conservation, which had been included in a minor way in the Urban Network curriculum, became the major focus of activities at a number of schools. As I mulled over the site observations and recalled children's passionate discussions of how they wanted to "save the planet," the reality of their starkly contrasting lives of poverty and wealth began to hit home. Certainly these diverse groups each had a unique relationship to the environmental crisis and each would have to make very different sacrifices to address it. They all were affected by the materialism that was driving excessive consumption, but they were in varying relationships to the mania for growth—some benefiting from their superior ranking on the economic ladder, others marginalized by not being able to access the goods and services that are associated with a proper middle-class life. How would they be able to arrive at a singular solution? How would they be able to sort out their varied perspectives and derive a common understanding of such conflicts as jobs versus deforestation, people versus nature, material wealth versus social justice?

I began to wonder how a multiracial, multicultural democracy could function when its members were growing up with such diverging

worldviews. Since poor and affluent children seem to have only a media impression of one another's reality, I began to conceive the difficulty of articulating a truly inclusive common good. Was it possible that design and environmental education programs such as the Urban Network could help? Could children learn to ameliorate the negative aspects of their surroundings by becoming active managers of their immediate community?

In 1963 when Robert Coles (1977) was interviewing children who pioneered desegregation in New Orleans, a young black girl pointed out to him the effect rich persons have on the poor. Her insights and those of other lower-income persons led him to realize that a study of impoverished children should also encompass those "others" who affect that group by virtue of their superior socioeconomic status (pp. x–xiv). Reading this account, I began to think about poverty and privilege as interlocking issues. I became especially concerned about how the extremes of poverty and wealth will play out in the environmental drama that is unfolding. Through a rigorous reflection on my Urban Network experiences, which included structured dialogue with other activist scholars and practitioners, I attempted to investigate children's class-based conceptions of themselves and explore how they might realize a more egalitarian relationship with one another through a shared concern for the physical environment.

HOW THE STORY IS TOLD

This book offers the reader an artist's rendering of the experience of visiting schools in dissimilar socioeconomic settings along with children's own reactions to those settings. Although the incidents described are based on systematic observations of Urban Network participants, the main body of the text is written as a narrative—as fiction—to give the reader a firsthand, tactile experience of the physical environment. By composing portraits, I am able to describe these settings in detail while still protecting the identity of the real schools that participated in the evaluation. Thus, the reader can construct a clear mental image of the neighborhoods, imagine being a child attending the schools, and feel what it is like to learn in the classrooms that are depicted. Such an immediate experience of the material world seems vital to conveying the importance of place in shaping children's lives. The narrative format also enables me to bring the voices of the children onto the pages of this book so they can tell some of their own story. To provide an interpretive framework for the events that occur, I intermingle theoretical commentary with the storyline and, on occasion, use an event as a launching pad for discussing broader issues of social and

environmental justice. By combining narrative descriptions of particular settings with children's commentaries on these places and with my reflections on the structural inequities that shape such situations, I hope to engage you in formulating your own interpretive framework and debating the positions I take. Trying to understand a complex phenomenon through multiple perspectives—provided by the observation data, the literature, and my own rigorous self-reflection—is important to the inclusive, wholistic ways of thinking and being that underpin this publication.

Using observations of thirteen poorer schools and four more affluent ones, I constructed two schools, one in an inner city and another in a well-to-do suburb, both schools depicting moderate rather than extreme examples of elementary education. Although I observed unequal numbers of poor and affluent schools, I have been careful to encompass the same features in both portraits, including leadership styles, interpersonal relationships, pedagogy, and the physical context of the school and neighborhood. I do *not* intend to suggest that either of these portraits is representative of a subset of poor or affluent schools. Rather, I have constructed two case studies to illuminate the disassociation of poverty and privilege that characterizes our culture while, at the same time, calling attention to deficits in the education of both groups.

The first five chapters contain quotations by children, usually in parenthesis, provided to support my analysis. Sometimes these are verbatim statements by children that were taken from a variety of written materials collected during the Urban Network site visits including pre- and post-tests, essays written during classroom activities, and letters. Others were made orally and recorded by me or my research assistants as accurately as possible after class. The children's essays, drawings, and conversations that constitute Chapter Six were not collected during the site visits, but in a separate study of young people's perceptions of their neighborhoods conducted to provide data for this specific chapter. Some of these children are introduced earlier in the book as characters in the storyline so that there is a fit between the children whose work is presented and the settings themselves. Their essays and conversations are quoted verbatim except that the content was altered in minor ways to correspond with the situation presented in the composite schools, for instance, names of places and friends were changed to fit the storyline. The events and characters in the narrative have been devised to prevent recognition of the real circumstances, and any identifying words and images were removed from the children's work.

Taking these liberties with the data—especially as an outsider to the field of education—resulted in no small amount of struggle and self-

doubt on my part, and extended the writing of the book by nearly three years. Despite my unorthodox methodology, I hope I have been able to call attention to how, through the educational process and its physical setting, children can learn to either reproduce or resist the status quo.

HOW WE COLLECTED AND ANALYZED THE DATA

Except for Chapter Six, the events in the book are based on site observations conducted over a three-year period at sixteen elementary schools in nine states and one school in Mexico City. School visits varied in length from a two-day stay to repeated visits taking place over a year; year-long involvements ranged from four to seven all-day visits with telephone conversations occurring between visits. School visits encompassed meetings with administrators, workshops and planning sessions with teachers, class and community projects with children, as well as countless informal exchanges. The visits were made by myself or a graduate research assistant, and the majority took the form of a consultation. As our introductory letter to host schools explained: "The purpose of our visit is to help you implement the Urban Network curriculum and to collect the observational data that can help to improve the success of this program in your school and nationwide."

Although the number of site visits varied as did the amount of time that various schools spent on Urban Network activities, my research assistants and I used a standard log format for recording observations after each visit, filling in as much information as was available. Other data were obtained from open-ended interviews, questionnaires, pre- and post-tests, completed projects, photographs, and archival materials. Areas of documentation included the following:

- *Social milieu of the school and neighborhood.* We documented the number and demographic makeup of teachers, staff, and students; class size and teacher-to-student ratio; availability of teaching or community resources; mission statement or school plan; school organization and rules; management styles and interpersonal relationships; and demographics for the surrounding area as reported in the 1990 U.S. Census.
- *Physical milieu of the school and neighborhood.* This comprised building size, structure, and condition; occupancy rate; layout and visual appearance of classrooms, communal spaces, and playground; utilization of corridors; photographs of the school and neighborhood; and housing data for the surrounding area as reported in the 1990 U.S. Census.
- *Parameters of the Urban Network implementation.* We recorded the number of classes and grade levels participating; types of classes

and subject areas used; time devoted to the program; schedule of activities; availability of financial or teaching-release support; improvement in the social and technical skills covered in the program; and the types of activities and projects completed.

- *Description of the site visits.* We kept track of the utilization of preplanning and follow-up activities; description of class activities; teacher's role versus evaluator's role; children's participation; reactions from teachers and children; and actual work or photographic documentation of projects and work process.

Each evaluator prepared a final report on a particular school. At the end of the three-year period, another research assistant (who was not involved in any of the site visits) helped to put the reports into a consistent format even though some were much more detailed than others due to the varying lengths of site visits and program implementations. This person and I then focused on the last item—description of the site visits—to identify particular events that seemed to inform our primary concern of what children learn through their observations of the physical environment. We noted events that offered evidence of children's and teachers' attitudes about their surroundings, classroom management techniques that encouraged or prevented children's control of space, teaching styles that supported or blocked children's environmental activism, and administrative policies that nurtured or inhibited teachers' leadership in carrying out the program.

These site visit descriptions were written up as factually as possible without editorial comment; then we reviewed them for common themes and conducted literature reviews to elaborate a socially critical perspective on each theme. Subsequently, aspects of the social and physical milieus of the thirteen poorer schools were woven together to create a single composite, and the same was done with the four more affluent ones. The most substantive site descriptions were selected as scenarios through which these composite schools would be portrayed.

As the book concept began to evolve, I felt the need to learn more about how children view their neighborhoods, both as a tangible reality and as a stage for imaginative play. Another one-week study was designed to engage children in communicating ideas about their neighborhoods through drawings, essays, and videotaped conversations. This study began with a two-hour session in which four different groups of ten to twelve children were interviewed. The children, who lived in inner-city urban and affluent suburban neighborhoods, were shown photographs of neighborhoods in diverse socioeconomic and geographic locations and asked what they thought it might be like to live in these neighborhoods. Following this group interview, the chil-

dren were introduced to the concept of an architect's journal, which typically contains both writing and drawing, and were given specially designed 11" x 17" artist's drawing pads, which contained an assignment for each of seven days. The first assignment was carried out as a group activity in school with the rest of the journal being completed at home. Journals contained a note suggesting that, since there were no right or wrong answers, children might discuss the assignments with family members or friends. The following week, the groups reconvened for a second two-hour session. This time they worked in teams of three or four children to determine how to present their completed journals on videotape. Some teams read their entries and displayed their drawings on camera, others chose to interview each other, still others developed skits or talk shows.

To analyze the written material, two research assistants, neither of whom had worked on the site evaluations, each reviewed half of the journals, making individual cards for the key ideas appearing in each story. They traded journals and repeated the process, then all three of us negotiated agreement on the key ideas expressed in the writings. Neither the group interviews nor the videotapes were analyzed systematically; however, excerpts from the videotapes were shown to a class of fourteen graduate students attending an education seminar at the University of Michigan. The discussion that ensued, which provoked some fairly intense disagreements, was instrumental in helping me and my research assistants to combine the key ideas from our preliminary analysis of the writings into the larger concepts that appear in Chapter Six.

WHAT WERE MY BIASES

Throughout the writing of this book, I have struggled to avoid distorting the data to serve my own agenda as a lifelong advocate for the rights of disadvantaged children, especially given the flexibility of the narrative format. My principal means of assuring a credible interpretation of the data included finding similar conclusions in other studies, discussing my interpretations with other colleagues and with my research assistants, and having drafts of the manuscript reviewed by persons who represented different intellectual areas and held different political views. Nevertheless, it is important for me to also reveal my biases, which unquestionably affected the very framing of the book and the insights put forth, so that readers can use this information to assess the "goodness" of my work.

I am an African American woman who grew up in Cincinnati, the "gateway" to the South, during the era of Jim Crow. Even though I have