

2006 MAASA Presidential Address

From Columbine to Red Lake: Tragic Provocations for Advocacy

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Serving for the past five years on the MAASA Board has given me an opportunity to develop relationships with colleagues in American studies throughout the Midwest, learn more about the challenges and responsibilities of organizational life, and reflect on the relationship between our organizational practices and material conditions within our region. Like all organizations, MAASA is rooted in particular institutions, structures, and relationships, while its future demands ongoing commitment, revitalization, and revision. If we wish to contribute to the progress of American studies in our region, we must reflect on the same questions that confront the discipline nationally, namely, on the question of what constitutes our field, our goals, our perspectives, and our constituencies. As a field, we are challenging our colonial, nationalist, and imperialist origins by reaching assiduously toward critical, transnational, comparative approaches to American studies and American hegemony.¹ As public servants, we are working at a time when support for public institutions and the services they provide for ordinary people has been shamefully and systematically withdrawn in favor of increasing the profit margins of corporate interests operating on a global scale.

In my remarks today, I want to propose a direction for the future of MAASA, so that we might become better informed about our region and better able to work collectively to formulate and respond to our problems and needs. At a

time when the particularity and scope of regional life is complicated and obscured by the preeminence of corporate institutions and artifacts and by the expansive, quick, and diverse reach of electronic technologies, it remains important to engage with and respond to local circumstances, ongoing and emerging regional struggles, and the histories that inform them. With a broad eleven-state region, MAASA should aim at producing more concrete knowledge of our region and at reflecting on how we as an organization might identify and deploy our resources to improve life in the region. For one thing, we might consider ways to organize our annual conference so that it would address the goal of increasing our knowledge and understanding of our region, its people, and their concerns. For another, we need to develop more avenues for building and maintaining relationships that cross campus and state lines and that can serve to inform us about one another and about our region.

With this goal in mind, I intend to speak today about the recent shootings at Red Lake Indian Reservation, which have provided a tragic provocation for learning and for thinking about social advocacy. Across the world, the 2005 rampage drew attention to Red Lake, Minnesota. The initial frenzy of media coverage on Red Lake focused on poverty, unemployment, crime, and poor housing on the reservation, as well as on Jeff Weise as a pathological teenager whose difficult family background set the stage for his emotional problems. In the context of this frenzy, too little pressure has been placed on the media to offer an educated response to this tragedy, a response that would offer the public a respectful entry into the history and life of the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians. Too few responses were aimed at offering the American public an informed view of the circumstances, challenges, and opportunities, most particularly, that face American Indian youth in Minnesota and across the country today. In my address today, I am asking whether academics in the region with longstanding ties to this community can work collectively with the people to influence the public responses and debates that are framing this tragic event. As the community continues to respond to this tragedy, committed and informed academics might have the resources at this time and in this context to spearhead efforts to articulate pressing community needs and to pursue opportunities that may exist only at this moment for finding resources with which to address them.²

In the aftermath of the shootings at Red Lake, a broad largely uninformed public became interested and curious about Red Lake, its people, and its circumstances. Academics in the region have a particular responsibility for contributing to the process of developing and promoting an informed response to this tragedy by enlarging and/or deploying knowledge, participating in debates, and articulating strategic responses to Red Lake that might best contribute to improving American Indian life. Thoughtfully articulated responses to the shootings at Red Lake might contribute to collective efforts to advocate for local and/or national resources to serve this end. Academics in the region who lack expertise in the field and have little or no previous connection with the

community might take this tragic occasion as a challenge to the prevailing assumptions, foci, and purposes of our areas of expertise, atomized modes of knowledge production, privatized responsibilities at work and at home, and understanding of the region in which we live. Responsiveness to problems that attract public attention in our region can provide academics with a forum in which to challenge our own thinking and from which to serve as participants in the democratic process and to advocate for social reform. Our organization should respond to life within our region by developing avenues for regional discussion and debate; in the case of the Red Lake shootings, for example, our organization might have served as a platform for efforts to redirect public focus from the private suffering and pathology of 16-year-old Jeff Weise to the broader conditions and initiatives that inform the lives of American Indians today.³

As I recapitulate the details of the Red Lake shootings, I wish to convey my sympathies and beg the forbearance of those in this audience who have been personally touched by this tragedy. On March 21st, 2005, toward the end of an ordinary school day, 16-year-old Jeff Weise took his own life, shooting himself in a classroom at Red Lake High School. Earlier in the day, he had already shot and killed his 58-year-old grandfather, longtime tribal police officer Daryl "Dash" Lussier, Sr., and his grandfather's 32-year-old companion Michelle Leigh Sigana. Afterwards, Jeff took his grandfather's guns and bulletproof vest and drove his grandfather's police vehicle to Red Lake High School, from which he had recently been suspended. There, shooting and killing a school security guard, a teacher, and five fellow students, and injuring more than a dozen others before shooting and killing himself, Jeff Weise committed the worst rampage school shooting since the 1999 rampage at Columbine High School near Littleton, Colorado.⁴

As I have already mentioned, in the days and weeks after the shooting, Red Lake Indian Reservation became a focal point of attention across the world. As a recent and sudden focal point of outside attention in the midst of a tragedy within, Red Lake's shock and sorrow were compounded by acute discomfort.⁵ To control the public exposure, Red Lake exercised its sovereign right to keep journalists off the reservation and away from the high school and to exclude them from the funerals, healing ceremonies, and other community gatherings that took place in the aftermath of the tragedy.⁶ Located in the northern reaches of Minnesota, in Beltrami and Clearwater counties, adjacent to the Canadian border, Red Lake Reservation certainly represents what this conference called "a world within a world," that is, a place where diverse world views and practices co-exist, not always easily. Almost 250 miles north of the Twin Cities, 30 miles north of Bemidji, and 120 miles south of Canada, this remote reservation, which includes seven clans and four villages (Little Rock, Red Lake, Redby, and Ponemah), has retained an unusually high degree of sovereignty and vital traditions, including Ojibwe language, song, religion, and drums. One of only two tribes in the country that successfully resisted the Dawes General Allotment

Act of 1887, the Red Lake Band retains an unusually high degree of sovereignty over its land, which it holds in common. Ninety-eight percent of its more than 5,000 residents are tribal members, but another 5,000 tribal members live off the reservation. As a result, the life experience, daily concerns, and immediate needs of the members of the Red Lake Band are far from homogeneous. Although the lives of tribal members exceed the boundaries of the reservation, the the Red Lake Indian Reservation remains wary of outsiders.

Red Lake Indian Reservation is geographically remote and Ojibwe language and traditional culture are poorly represented in dominant American cultural forms, but the Red Lake Nation asserts and represents itself on the *Red Lake Net News*, a well-developed and -maintained website that was established in 2003 and that provides historical, political, cultural, civic, and commercial information, including tribal council business and contacts, a phone directory; and information about Red Lake businesses and institutions. Providing a contrast to the emphasis in the recent national media accounts on community deficits, the *Red Lake Net News* represents community strengths and achievements, such as an extended care facility that builds on a comprehensive tribal health care system, a construction and contracting business, a specialty food company, and most significantly from the standpoint of revenue, the Seven Clans Casinos.⁷ Because of the casinos, the Red Lake Band of Chippewa, which comprise nearly 12 percent of the American Indian population of Minnesota, has a growing measure of economic power, access to and representation within electronic communication networks, and commercial and cultural interaction beyond the borders of the reservation.⁸

Among the complexities facing the young people of Red Lake are the challenges of negotiating the vital yet confusing co-existence of traditional and non-traditional ways of life, learning, construing and remembering the past, relating to others and to the environment, and valuing life. However much non-traditional ways have penetrated life on the Red Lake Reservation, no one would have anticipated that Red Lake High School might fall prey to a rampage school shooting, a crime that research links almost exclusively to white male teenagers living in predominantly white communities.

Much of the mainstream coverage of the shootings at Red Lake has focused on the tragic family life of Jeff Weise. Scant as the details about Jeff and his family may be, they offer a view of family trauma.⁹ Born just a year after the passage of the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act to parents whose lives had been shaped by the passage of the 1968 Indian Civil Rights Act and the founding of AIM here in Minneapolis, Jeff Weise lived his short life during a time of American Indian empowerment. During this period, the population of American Indians was growing, partly, as Joane Nagel has argued, because a renewal of Red Power encouraged more pride, self-identification, and American Indian affiliation. Jeff lived on the Red Lake Reservation for the past five or six years, but he spent the earlier years of his short life in Minneapolis, where American

Indians make up only a little more than 2 percent of the population. As recent news stories have noted, Jeff was struck by personal tragedy at the age of eight when, in July 1997, his father Daryl Lussier, Jr., took his own life in a standoff with tribal police at Red Lake. Less than two years later, in March 1999, Jeff's mother Joanne Weise was in an auto accident that killed her cousin the driver, who had been driving under the influence of alcohol, and that left her with a debilitating brain injury. Unable to function independently, Jeff's mother was placed in a nursing home, leaving without maternal care Jeff and his two half siblings, 8-year-old Daphne and 7-year-old Sebastian Weise, who were apparently born around the time of his father's death. Although some say that he "did not want to go" and was "out of place" there, Jeff was sent to the Red Lake Reservation and placed in the care of his paternal grandparents. At the time of the rampage shootings, Jeff no longer lived with his grandfather, who had moved to another residence to live with a female companion.

From these sketchy details, it is not possible to reach many conclusions, except to observe that Jeff's immediate circle of relationships was volatile and marked by violence and tragic loss and hence that he was a teenager in need of social support. Media accounts drew public attention to this traumatic family history, including suicide, violence, alcoholism, and foster-care without discussing such trauma in terms of the legacy to American Indians of colonization, genocide, dispossession, relocation, prejudice, and discrimination. Furthermore, media attention to the negative effects of this collective cross-generational trauma has not been balanced with enough representation of the powerful legacy of tribal strengths and resources.

After losing his father and, effectively, his mother, Jeff found a new home with his paternal grandparents in Red Lake. Yet apparently he was unable to draw on the social support that he needed to recover from a life and a historical legacy of trauma. He is portrayed as a troubled youth with ongoing difficulties at school, who had threatened suicide, reported abuse at home before his mother's accident, was desperate and uncertain about his future, and recorded on the internet violent fantasies of murder and suicide, including identifications with Hitler and Nazism. Larger than many of his peers at six-feet tall and 250 pounds, Jeff had recently been suspended from school, which only exacerbated his isolation.

As the communities affected by the shootings grappled with the shock and worried over their wounded children, preparations for the ten funerals began. In the midst of these rituals of mourning, the FBI began working with the BIA and the Red Lake Tribal Police to investigate. Within a week, having reached the conclusion that Jeff Weise was not the only teenager in Red Lake responsible for the rampage shooting, the FBI arrested 15-year-old Louis Jourdain, son of the Red Lake Band's tribal chairman, introducing further confusion and grief to the community. Subsequently, investigators suggested that as many as twenty other Red Lake students may have been involved or known about the planned

shooting.¹⁰ Perhaps details unavailable to the public might justify this course of action, but the decision to arrest Louis Jourdain and to cast suspicion on as many as twenty other students brings further pain to and creates a climate of suspicion and recrimination within the community. Teenage boys who become rampage school shooters typically inform their peers, often many of them, about their plans, and these peers typically fail to tell adults what they have heard. The recent study *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* offers several complex reasons to explain why teenagers do not report such threats to adults. First, this study argues, teenagers obey a socially-constructed code of silence and non-compliance vis-à-vis adults; second, they have difficulty assessing the risk that someone threatening such violence may actually take violent action; and third, they expect adults to discount their reports or to fail to act on them.¹¹

These findings suggest that investigators should act with caution and with as much transparency as possible when considering whether and to what extent other teenagers were involved. Based on evidence retrieved from computers at Red Lake, which revealed that students exchanged messages about a violent shooting, has the FBI investigation drawn reasonable and appropriate conclusions about the possible involvement of other students? Is the FBI's involvement and management of this case consistent with how such cases have been treated elsewhere? Is it typical to treat other students in such cases as co-conspirators and to take them into custody? As of today, Jourdain has been in custody for nearly three weeks.¹² Was the evidence sufficient to conclude that arrest was the appropriate treatment for this young boy? Without sufficient information about Jourdain's alleged involvement and in the context of a climate of shock, fear, and suspicion, the community is uncertain about the merit and justice of this decision.

In any event, the conduct of this federal investigation exerts immediate, multiple effects on a community already suffering from shock and grief, and its allegations regarding the possible complicity of other students in the shootings pits individuals and families against one another. The arrest of Louis Jourdain, for example, provoked immediate debate about whether his father Floyd Jourdain, Jr., should continue to serve as tribal chairman and whether he can provide effective leadership when his son is suspected of bearing some responsibility for the shootings.¹³

Our organization should develop ways to lend support to those tribal leaders and academic allies who, even in the midst of shock and grief, are capable of surrounding the findings that emerge from these legal investigations, whose protocols for determining guilt in this case devolve from a narrow view and a blind eye to the context in which these violent shootings occurred, with critical commentary. Otherwise, the partial viewpoints of such legal authorities will exert undue authority in the process of determining the causes, meanings, effects of, and solutions to the Red Lake shootings. Both within the community, especially in dialogue with the youth, and across the world, a struggle over the meaning of the Red Lake shootings has commenced, and educators with roots

and stakes in this region, can engage actively in discussion and debate over the terms of this struggle over representation and self-determination.

In interviews immediately after the shootings, American Indian leaders on and off the reservation have expressed surprise that a type of violence usually associated with white teenagers and communities could have happened at Red Lake. At the same time, they acknowledge that American Indian youth face many of the same problems and are shaped by many of the same influences as other youth, including gangs, drugs, alcohol, sexual abuse, and poverty, on the one hand, and mass culture, including electronic information technologies, on the other.¹⁴ Despite the shock, they realize that American cultural forces permeate American Indian identity and culture and inhabit Red Lake Reservation itself. That said, it remains complex to consider the potential significance to the case of Jeff Weise recent analyses of the causes of rampage school shootings, which include “media violence, bullying, gun culture, family problems, mental illness, peer relations, demographic change, a culture of violence, and copycatting.”¹⁵ Beyond the question of fit, it is important to consider that the explanation of this rampage will have strategic meaning and potential to the Red Lake Band and that some explanations will better serve the needs and interests of the Nation than others. Of all the problems that may be deployed to explain why Jeff Weise resorted to such drastic and violent action, which problems have most bearing on and would contribute the most to improving the lives of teenagers at Red Lake? Framing a strategic response to the Red Lake shootings recognizes that any inquiry should be rooted in the needs of the community and should articulate arguments for the dedication of resources to address them.

Arguments regarding the causes of rampage school shootings in general may be equally illuminating but not equally strategic when it comes to framing arguments for resources and reforms aimed at improving the lives of American Indian youth at Red Lake and perhaps beyond. According to the American Indian Community Profile drafted by the American Indian Policy Center at the University of Minnesota and based on the census reports from the year 2000, the American Indian communities in which Jeff lived, both at Red Lake and in Minneapolis, face high rates of general and child poverty, that is, upwards of 40 percent. Infant mortality rates among American Indians in Minnesota are two to three times the rate for whites, according to studies conducted over a nearly 15-year period. In one four-year period, only three of every four infants born in Minneapolis survived; during the four-year period in which Jeff was born, the chances for surviving infancy were not much better than one in five. Unemployment on the Red Lake Reservation is at least at 40 percent. From 1997-2000, the rate of American Indian high school drop-outs in the state of Minnesota ranged from 62-74 percent, which is equivalent to the percentage of white students in Minnesota who *graduate* from high school.¹⁶ Strategic responses to the Red Lake shootings should keep these specific challenges in view as they articulate needs and requests for strategic resources, initiatives, and programs.

Advocacy from within our association should offer support to the people of Red Lake in seeking funding for long-term research efforts aimed at developing policy recommendations to ameliorate life for children and teenagers at Red Lake. As Katherine Newman's study and the research on which it is based illustrate, such funding did emerge to support an academic investigation of the shootings at Columbine. What impact might such investigations have on the amelioration of the challenging life circumstances facing American Indian children and youth? What support could MAASA provide to such initiatives and how might we organize ourselves so that we can make a contribution? We should help academics learn how to respond to the needs of their communities and to report these needs and their efforts to this organization. Such efforts would educate us as an organization and might enable us to serve as advocates for policies and resources that address longstanding underlying problems within our region, particularly but not only when they surface as tragedies that capture public attention.

An example of funding secured to support long-term research is offered in the preface to *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* by Katherine Newman et al. Newman, a professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and Dean of Social Science at the Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study, undertook this study, with a team of graduate students who are also credited as authors, in response to a call from the National Academy of Sciences. The Academy was commissioned by the Department of Education, which was charged with investigating rampage school shootings by a post-Columbine provision added in 1999 by the House of Representatives to the "Missing, Runaway, and Exploited Children's Act." With federal funding, Newman was able to design and undertake a long-term collaborative research project focused on two communities—Heath, Kentucky, and Westside, Arkansas—that had suffered a rampage shooting three years earlier. Newman and her graduate students conducted on-site studies of the communities, which included 163 interviews, and they reviewed national and local media coverage. These two case studies, along with case studies of four other communities, produced under the direction of academics at other institutions, were published by the National Research Council in a 2001 collection entitled, *Deadly Lessons: Understanding Lethal School Violence: Case Studies of School Violence Committee*.¹⁷ Newman and her collaborators decided to extend their inquiry and, drawing on the additional four case studies from *Deadly Lessons*, published *Rampage* a year later. Soliciting the concern of local and national congressional delegates could encourage funding for a long-term research effort to support the work of tribal leaders and their academic allies to initiate, maintain, or enhance policies and programs to benefit Red Lake.

Apart from suggesting that a tragic occasion can serve to bring awareness and additional resources to bear on pressing social needs, Newman's research offers general findings that may also be of some use in an effort to understand

the processes that have been set in motion with the shootings at Red Lake. Newman's research demonstrates, as I already mentioned, that it is typical for many students to have heard threats or plans of a proposed rampage shooting and that it is equally typical for such students to remain silent about these threats. More broadly speaking, Newman and her collaborators found, working with case studies from 1974-2002, that rampage school shooters have been invariably adolescent males, predominantly but not exclusively white. They found that 60 percent of the shootings occurred in tight-knit, rural communities where, the authors argue, because "ties are multiplex, anonymity scarce, and homogeneity the rule,"¹⁸ male adolescents have difficulty escaping regulatory norms of masculine identity and pay the high price of social ostracism when they are unable or unwilling to fit these norms. In urban areas, they hypothesize, where social ties are more limited in scope, individuals have greater anonymity, and social groups are more heterogeneous, teenage boys can find alternative social niches and more readily evade the enforcement of norms of aggressive, violent masculinity. Where such alternatives are unavailable, adolescent males are more vulnerable to fantasies of aggression or acts of violence that occasionally reach the tragic proportion of a rampage.

Reviewing the list of hypotheses that are most often advanced to explain rampage school shootings, namely, "media violence, bullying, gun culture, family problems, mental illness, peer relations, demographic change, a culture of violence, and copycatting,"¹⁹ Newman et al. maintain that shootings are never the result of a single cause but are rather the outcome of a combination of factors. They offer five factors as "necessary but not sufficient conditions" for rampage school shootings, that is, as preconditions for the possibility but not the inevitability of a rampage. The selected factors combine phenomena that occur at different levels—namely, at the level of the individual, the community, and the nation. First, an adolescent male who becomes a shooter perceives himself as marginal to the social worlds that matter to him and lacks strategies of action that will enable him to move away from the margins. Second, he has psychosocial problems that magnify the impact of his perceived marginality. Third, he believes, on the basis of what Newman et al. call "cultural scripts," "strategies of action," or "blueprints," that an armed attack on teachers and classmates will move him from the margins and win him the prominence, status, and social power he lacks. Fourth, he eludes local surveillance, that is, local authorities are unaware that he poses a lethal threat. Fifth, he has access to a gun.²⁰

As necessary preconditions, this element of the analysis suggests that a rampage school shooting must be explained by a combination of factors rather than by a single cause. Another way of analyzing how American society is failing our youth is to connect the marginalization, isolation, disempowerment, and absence of "local surveillance" with moral failure. In *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*, Vine Deloria, Jr. and Dan Wildcat suggest that the problem of education for American Indians and indeed for Americans stems from

the sterility, fragmentation, and pretensions of Western metaphysics. From the perspective of Indian metaphysics, Deloria writes, “the world, and all its possible experiences, constituted a social reality, a fabric of life in which everything had the possibility of intimate knowing relationships because, ultimately, everything was related.”²¹ As Wildcat explains, the authors propose to indigenize education for American Indians, in order to reclaim “an inheritance too many generations of American Indians were outright denied or have struggled mightily to maintain: identity within tribal cultures we were actively engaged in, as opposed to existence within a culture of indoctrination facilitated most effectively through U.S. government education programs.”²² At the basis of this reformist agenda is a metaphysics that assumes that self and world exist in relationship to one another, not apart from one another. An education based on Deloria’s notion of how people and things acquire power or force in specific places would restore dignity, purpose, and hope to American youth and would offer them a ground from which to resist dehumanization and disempowerment at school and in the environment of mass culture.

Henry Giroux, whose work for nearly two decades has articulated the nexus of education for critical consciousness, democracy, youth culture, and mass media, characterizes the effects on teenagers of “corporate culture” as so negative as to amount to an “assault on youth,” more brutal yet for young Americans placed on the margins by race or ethnicity.²³ Like Deloria and Wildcat, Giroux places a high premium on a social setting that provides youth with a context of egalitarian social relationships, relationships in which they learn to exert agency and to develop personal integrity, accountability, respect, and empathy. To develop the capacity to exert agency and power in social systems, youth need not only a broad repertoire of models, blueprints, and scripts for solving problems through social action but also public arenas that provide them with opportunities to develop, nourish, and maintain social relationships. Such relationships provide a critical context in which to measure and adjudicate different strategies and scripts for social action. Obviously, when effective strategies for moving from the margins to a more secure position in a social hierarchy are narrow, access to arenas for effective action and for the development of strategies to promote social change and to sustain hope and dignity become even more crucial.²⁴

The withdrawal of government funding from non-commodified arenas of life, i.e., from public arenas that respond to social needs and promote the exercise of effective action and the development of social agency, is an abdication of the fundamental ideals of democracy and of our responsibility to human welfare, especially to youth. In the context of corporate culture’s “assault on youth,” rampage shootings take on the character not simply of young boys who will not or cannot conform but also of brute resistance to the systematic evacuation of resources from the very public spaces, services, relationships, and values that offer meaningful alternatives to oppressive regulatory norms and provide op-

portunities for growth, development, reflection, expression, and the exercise of agency. Public school, which has become an increasingly militarized social space, enforces regulatory norms rather than providing alternatives to them. Consigned for much of their daily life to such militarized conditions, young people have decreasing access to public arenas and social practices in which they can cultivate ongoing relationships with adults and peers and, in the context of such relationships, gain a measure of agency over their lives. By withdrawing from youth opportunities for democratic action and the development of non-market values, we relinquish them to the dictates and values of corporate culture, which commodifies them, sexualizes them, and represents them as a threat to society, the more easily to profit from and exploit them and to renounce responsibility for their social welfare.

The cultural abandonment of American youth to a culture that refuses to invest in public institutions and spaces that promote and educate our youth to develop agency in social relationships is eerily reflected in Gus Van Sant's post-Columbine film *Elephant*. Media accounts reported that Jeff listed this film on a website profile as one of his favorites and watched the video a couple of weeks before the shootings, skipping to the end, according to a friend, to focus on the rampage. The film offers an eerie view of high school as an environment that habitually produces and reproduces four of the five preconditions that Newman, et al. believe necessary to rampage school shootings, namely, marginalization, isolation, disempowerment, and a failure of local surveillance (which I would attribute more broadly to the diminished and underfunded opportunities for meaningful relationships between adults and youth).

Highly aestheticized, the film *Elephant* uses long-tracking shots, low lighting, non-linear narrative structure, and multiple perspectives to create a pseudo-documentary or *cinema verite* presentation of what appears to be an ordinary day in the life of an ordinary middle-class high school. The camera uses tracking shots to follow 8-10 different adolescents, frequently from behind, as they make their way in, out, and about school, with little or no social interaction. They travel through long, narrow, dimly-lit corridors to reach prescribed areas, such as the library, the cafeteria, the field, the locker room, the bathroom, the photography workshop or darkroom, etc., where they engage in prescribed activities.²⁵

Few adults appear in the film, and when they do, they seem for the most part to blunder or abdicate their role as elders whose responsibility is to convey meaning and purpose to the next generation. The first adult who appears in the film slowly crashes the car while driving his son to school. His son, the blond teenager whose perspective and actions seem to cast him as the film's moral compass, drives the car to school and seizes the car keys from his irresponsible father. Emphasizing the reversal of roles, the son has to arrange for someone to look after his father before he can turn to his own responsibilities at school. As he deposits the keys at the school office and uses the school phone to arrange for his brother to pick up his father and the car, he is admonished and detained

by the school principal, who passes judgment on this student's aberrant behavior without inquiring into its reasons or offering any assistance.

When the shooters arrive shortly before lunchtime, the boy is leaving the school building to check on his father and, in an often-cited line from the film, is warned by one of the shooters, if I remember correctly, to "stay the fuck out." As he searches for his irresponsible father, he warns everyone in sight to remain outside. The absence and powerlessness of his father and the schoolteachers and administrators underscores the suggestion that these youths have been abandoned to the sterility, banality, and alienation of a militarized daily regimen. As the increasingly ominous tracking shots suggest, the lives of these teenagers is meant to contain them and the threat of disorder rather than to provide them with spaces for developing agency by interacting with others or with the environment.

Viewers of this film, which became so interesting to Jeff Weise, are perplexed by the film's eerie focus on an African-American teenage boy who is killed in the rampage. While everyone else is fleeing the building and running from the sound of shooting, this character walks steadily toward the shooting, stopping once to help another student escape the building by climbing through a broken window. As if he might be able to overpower the shooter and save the cowering principal from death, he comes closer and closer until the shooter whirls around and shoots him swiftly. Neither killer nor hero, this teenager of color is conspicuous as a bystander and victim. Jeff Weise's attraction was to a scenario or script that suggested a way to overcome his marginality, isolation, and lack of power.

To weather the difficult weeks, months, and years to come, the members of Red Lake must anticipate the difficulties they are liable to face. After an initial period of togetherness, Newman's study suggests, the community is likely to be divided by resentment and suspicion, sometimes arising in connection with the distribution of resources that might come through charitable donations or government support and sometimes in connection with efforts to determine fault and seek restitution.²⁶ Longstanding leadership in the development and provision of comprehensive health services that are tribally owned and managed and that are sensitive to the cultural and spiritual needs of the community offers evidence of a local infrastructure that might serve as a resource to the Red Lake Nation in the troubled times ahead. Academic allies with ties to the community might act as leaders in the effort to deploy this tragic occasion as an opportunity for securing resources to improve the health, welfare, and education of youth. A collaborate research and policy initiative could provide leadership to the nation for advocacy, recovery, reform, and action aimed at improving and empowering the education and lives of American Indian youth.

Watching *Elephant*, Jeff found a model of violent action through which to connect to a world from which he felt abysmally separate. According to Deloria and Wildcat, American Indian people and their youth have been most particularly damaged by an epistemology and a metaphysics that separates the self

from the world. To educate youth in effective agency through their connection with one another and with their environment, Red Lake High School might solicit resources to indigenize their faculty and curriculum; nourish tribal traditions and values; foster relationships; traverse connections across generations and species, and provide youth with abundant opportunities for developing power, dignity, and hope in specific places.

As members of an association defined in relation to a specific region, we have an obligation and an opportunity to act as spiritual forces in specific places by contributing resources and institutional power. By learning to do so, our organization might learn to represent and serve the profoundly divided constituents that bring to life and inhabit the region we call our own.

Notes

1. I thank the American Studies Program, the English Department, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the University of Kansas, for supporting my research with a sabbatical leave in 2005 and research support and assistance in 2006. I extend a special note of thanks to my friends and colleagues on the MAASA Board, who offered and guided me through many opportunities to serve, and to my colleagues Tony Clark and Carol Miller, for engaging with me and with the sensitive material included in this address. I am grateful to Aaron Gilbreath, without whose timely, energetic, and astute research assistance, I could not have compiled notes to document the voluminous media research on which my remarks on the Red Lake shooting were based. Regarding the call for transnational approaches to American studies, see Shelley Fisher Fishkin's "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004." *American Quarterly* 57.1 (2005). For a bibliography about broadening the nationalist framework of American studies, see Michael Frisch, "Prismatics, Multivalence, and Other Riffs on the Millennial Moment: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 13 October 2000." *American Quarterly* 53.2 (2001): 225note18. See also the *American Studies* special issue on Globalization, Transnationalism, and the End of the American Century 41.2-3 (2000).

2. My address met with criticism from people who were painfully close to this tragedy and who generous enough to express their concerns directly to me. Thanks to their criticism, I have more appreciation for, as a good colleague expressed it, "how genuinely difficult it is to put into practice the respectful and supportive interconnections your address called for between and among academic and cultural communities."

3. Matt Pueschel's report on the process of coordinating local medical providers, law enforcement staff, and federal agencies to assess and provide immediate and long-term behavioral health care at Red Lake offers a view of advocacy efforts to which academics in the region might contribute. See "IHS, Federal Agencies Respond To Red Lake School Shooting," 18 May 2005, <http://www.usemedicine.com/dailyNews.cfm?dailyID=230>. See also the Social Science Research Council's productive academic response to Katrina, namely, an essay forum entitled "Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences," aimed "at opposing analyses and 'spin' of the Katrina crisis. . . . [in order to] directly examine the underlying issues—political, social and economic—laid bare by the events surrounding Katrina." see *Understanding Katrina*, 13 Mar. 2006, <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/>.

4. For a sampling of media accounts of the events of March 21st see Jodi Wilgoren, "Shooting Rampage by Student Leaves 10 Dead on Reservation." *New York Times*, 22 Mar. 2005. *Nytimes.com*, 23 Mar 2005, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=health&res=9C0CE4DA1F3CF931A15750C0A9639C8B63>; David Melmer, "Ten dead in Red Lake shootings." *Indian Country Today*, 22 Mar. 2005. *Indiandcountry.com*, 6 Mar. 2006, <http://www.indiandcountry.com/content.cfm?id=1096410609>, and Dennis Doeden, "School Shooting at the Red Lake Chippewa Reservation," *NPR.ORG*. 22 Mar. 2005. *National Public Radio*, 12 Apr. 2005, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4555580>.

5. From the outset, concern was expressed about the media's coverage of events. For a sampling see: Dan Knutson, "'Outsider' Commentators Need Attitude Adjustments FAST re: Red Lake." *Red Lake Net News*, Mar. 2005, [rlnn.com](http://www.rlnn.com), 13 Mar. 2006, <http://www.rlnn.com/ArtApril05/KnutsonOutsiderComments.html>; Eric Black, "Measuring the media coverage against Columbine," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Mar. 2006, [rlnn.com](http://www.rlnn.com/ArtMar05/MeasureMediaCoverage.html), 14 Mar. 2006, <http://www.rlnn.com/ArtMar05/MeasureMediaCoverage.html>; Kent Nerburn, "Amid Red Lake's media circus, look

for the truth,” *Red Lake Net News*, Mar. 2005, rlnn.com, 14 Mar. 2006, <http://www.rlnn.com/ArtMar05/NerburnLookForTruth.html>; and Kevin Schofield, “An interesting Observation,” *Red Lake Net News*, Mar. 2005, rlnn.com, 14 Mar. 2006, <http://www.rlnn.com/ArtApril05/ObservationByKevin.html>.

6. See: Monica Davey, “Bewildered Tribe Looks Warily Inward,” *New York Times*, 31 Mar. 2005, *Nytimes.com*, 31 Mar. 2005, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30912FE355B0C708CDDAD0894DD404482>; Kirk Johnson, “Days After Killings, a Tribe Seeks a Cloak of Privacy for Its Grief,” *New York Times*, 24 Mar. 2005, *Nytimes.com*, 26 Mar. 2005, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F50B14F63D5B0C778EDDA0894DD404482>; Sylvia Moreno and Evelyn Nieves, “A Very Quiet Sense of Shock: Small Community Struggles to Cope,” *Washington Post*, 23 Mar. 2005, *Washingtonpost.com*, 23 Mar. 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A58413-2005Mar22.html?>; David Melmer, “Grief and Shock After Red Lake School Shootings,” *Indian Country Today*, Mar. 2005, *Indiancountry.com*, 12 Apr. 2005, <http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1096410616>.

7. *Red Lake Net News*, 3 Mar. 2006, <http://www.rlnn.com/>.

8. “American Indian Community Data Profile, 2002,” 3 Mar. 2006, <http://www.airpi.org/projects/american-indian-community-profile.pdf>.

9. See: Monica Davey, “Behind the Why of a Rampage, Loner With a Taste for Nazism,” *New York Times*, 23 Mar. 2005, *Nytimes.com*, 24 Mar. 2005, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F40F13FC3D5B0C708EDDA0894DD404482>; Monica Davey, and Jodi Wilgoren, “Signs of Danger Were Missed in a Troubled Teenager’s Life,” *New York Times*, 24 Mar. 2005, *Nytimes.com*, 24 Mar. 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/24/national/24shoot.html?ex=1141707600&en=31f80bf4138e655d&ei=5070>; David Melmer, “Child, Community Fell Through the Cracks,” *Indian Country Today*, 4 April 2005, *Indiancountry.com*, 4 Apr. 2005, <http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1096410693>; and Chris Maag, “The Devil in Red Lake,” *Time*, 4 Apr 2005, *Time.com*, 12 Apr. 2005, <http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1042470,00.html>.

10. See: Dana Hedgpeth and Dan Eggen, “As Many as 20 Teens Knew Plot of Red Lake Shooting,” *The Washington Post*, 1 April, 2005, *Seattletimes.com*, 2 April 2005, http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2002228230_webredlake01.html; Dana Hedgpeth and Dan Eggen, “Others Aware of Red Lake Plans, Officials Say As Many as Four Believed to Have Helped Plot Attack,” *Washington Post*, 2 April, 2005, A03; Monica Davey, “Inquiry on School Attack May Include 20 Students,” *New York Times*, 3 Apr. 2005, *Nytimes.com*, 4 Apr. 2005, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30912FE355B0C708CDDAD0894DD404482>.

11. Katherine S. Newman, et al., *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* (New York: Basic Books, 2004.)

12. For stories of Jourdain’s arrest and public reaction see: Monica Davey and Kirk Johnson, “Tribe Is Shaken by Arrest of Leader’s Son in Shootings,” *New York Times*, 30 Mar. 2005, *Nytimes.com*, 31 Mar. 2005, <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F20611F7395B0C738FDDAA0894DD404482>; David Chanen, et al., “Computer clues linked Jourdain, Weise,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 30 Mar. 2005, *Startribune.com*, 31 Mar. 2005, <http://www.startribune.com/stories/362/5318401.html>; Dan Gunderson, “Chippewa Leader Says Son Is Innocent in School Shooting,” *NPR.ORG*, 29 Mar. 2005, *National Public Radio*, 12 Apr. 2005, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4566442>; Floyd Jourdain, “Jourdain Claims Son’s Innocence,” *Indian Country Today*, 29 Mar. 2005, *Indiancountry.com*, 12 Apr. 2005, <http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1096410653>; David Melmer, “Tribal Chairman’s Son Charged with Conspiracy,” *Indian Country Today*, 30 Mar. 2005, *Indiancountry.com*, 12 Apr. 2005, <http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1096410651>. For the recent conclusion to the Jourdain story see: Amy Forliti, “Jourdain Sentenced in Red Lake Shooting,” *Indian Country Today*, 24 Jan. 2006, *Indiancountry.com*, 3 Mar. 2006, <http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1096412297>.

13. Associated Press, “Tribe’s Leader Says He’ll Stay on the Job,” *New York Times*, 2 Apr. 2005, *Nytimes.com*, 2 Apr. 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/02/national/02shoot.html?ex=1141707600&en=1935018ea71bbca0&ei=5070>; and “Tribal Leader Says He’ll Stay at School,” *The New York Times*, 4 Apr. 2005, *Nytimes.com*, 4 Apr. 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/national/AP-School-Shootings-Tribal-Politics.html?ex=1113278400&en=4bb9278ace142775&ei=5070>; Floyd Jourdain, “Buck.” “Statement to the Red Lake Band,” *Red Lake Net News*, 29 Mar. 2005, rlnn.com, 14, Mar. 2006, <http://www.rlnn.com/ArtMar05/JourdainState032905.html>.

14. Andrew Catt-Iron Shell, “We must examine our own lives,” *Indian Country Today*, 25 Mar. 2005, *Indiancountry.com*, 12 Apr. 2005, <http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1096410612>.

15. Newman, et al., *Rampage*, 229.

16. “American Indian Community Data Profile, 2002,” 3 Mar. 2006 <http://www.airpi.org/projects/american-indian-community-profile.pdf>.

17. Newman, et al., *Rampage*, 388.

18. *Ibid.*, 229

19. *Ibid.*, 229

20. *Ibid.*, 229-231

21. Vine Deloria, Jr. and Dan Wildcat, *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* (Golden, CO: American Indian Graduate Center: Fulcrum Resources, 2001), 2. For other writings treating education and American Indians, see the reading list offered in Troy Johnson, et al., *Red Power: The American Indian's Fight for Freedom* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 205, and Joane Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

22. *Ibid.*, 9.

23. As stated above, Giroux has been working on this subject for two decades. Quotes for this article are from: Henry A. Giroux, *Stealing Innocence: Youth, Corporate Power, and the Politics of Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). Other important works in this area by Giroux include: *Public Spaces Private Lives: Beyond the Culture of Cynicism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); *Impure Acts: The Practical Politics of Cultural Studies*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), *Theory and Resistance in Education* (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 2001); *The Abandoned Generation* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux, *Education Still under Siege* (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1993); and Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux, *Post Modern Education: Politics, Culture and Social Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); and as editor in: Henry A Giroux and Peter McLaren, eds. *Critical Pedagogy, the State, and Cultural Struggle* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

24. In *Stealing Innocence: Youth, Corporate Power, and the Politics of Culture* (2000), Giroux argues that three conservative myths are deployed to justify the withdrawal of resources from the public sphere and the corporatization of the media, public schools, and universities. These myths hold that 1) neo-liberalism and its market values are the final destination and triumph of history, 2) childhood is a natural state, and 3) knowledge and scholarship are disinterested. These myths, Giroux argues, are deployed in order to "(1) excuse the adult world from any responsibility toward youth by appealing to a thriving economy and the natural order and by denying the political and cultural roles that educators and education play in children's lives; (2) reproduce race, class, and cultural hierarchies; and (3) limit citizenship to a narrowly privatized undertaking. What all three myths ignore is the increasingly impoverished conditions that future generations of youth will have to negotiate. Childhood is not a natural state of innocence; it is a historical construction. It is also a cultural and political category that has very practical consequences for how children view themselves" (5).

25. *Elephant*. Dir. Gus Van Sant. DVD. HBO Home Video, 2003.

26. Newman, et al., *Rampage*, Chapters 8 and 9.

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