

Wennebojo Meets the Mascot

A Trickster's View of the Central Michigan University Mascot/Logo

Richard Clark Eckert

This essay describes an adventure of Wennebojo, the rhetorically explosive and forever elusive trickster of the Anishinaabegs. Tricksters like to play, especially toying with those so serious that they fail to laugh at themselves.

During this adventure Wennebojo travels to Mount Pleasant, Michigan, with the intention of examining the continued use of the "Chippewa" name by Central Michigan University. Wennebojo had heard different things about the Chippewa name still being used at CMU, but he wanted to see for himself.

Wennebojo was curious as to how CMU first used the Chippewa name and how that use and the word's meaning had been transformed and reinvented. Wennebojo was also curious in regard to the continued use of the Chippewa name; he wondered whether CMU had consulted all of the many bands of Chippewa in Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, Wisconsin, and Canada.

On the way to Mount Pleasant Wennebojo stopped and visited his friend Makwa (Bear), who lived on the Isabella Reservation, home of the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe. Makwa came from a traditional family. Some think of him as a clan leader. Makwa stuck his

head out the door. A grin came to his face as he recognized Wennebojo. Everyone grins or chuckles when Wennebojo visits. People laugh when saying his name.

"*Boozhoo* [hello]," said Makwa.

"*Aanniin* [hello]," said Wennebojo.

Makwa invited Wennebojo into his home. He brought Wennebojo a cup of "cowboy coffee."

"*Megwitch* [thank you]," said Wennebojo.

The two of them spent hours catching up on old stories. Makwa gave Wennebojo some "Indian tobacco." "*Megwitch*," Wennebojo said as he shook Makwa's hand. Wennebojo sat down and took out a pipe. It was a beautiful pipe with a bowl made of catlanite, or pipestone, and a pipe stem made from sumac. Wennebojo smoked the pipe.

He pulled out his hand drum, sat on the floor with his legs crossed, and began to sing a song. Wennebojo sang a song about going to the lodge of the big bear.

Makwa sighed and said, "Oh, that was a good song, that was a real old Anishinaabeg song. I hadn't heard that song since I was a little child. I remember Grandfather sitting me by a fire near the lake shore and singing that song to me."

Wennebojo let out an otter-like laugh and said, "Brought out the little boy in you—eh?" He followed with otter-like laughs.

Makwa thought to himself. Why is Wennebojo here? Did he trick me already, and I do not even know it? Maybe Wennebojo put some medicine on me to get me to agree with him. I am happy to see him, but I can't wait until he leaves either. He always gets me thinking about things that I wish he hadn't. I should know better than trying to figure out what Wennebojo is thinking. I will ask him.

"What brought you here?" asked Makwa.

Wennebojo replied, "I'm on a mission. I need to question the mascot at CMU."

"How are you going to question the mascot?" Makwa asked.

"Let's go to the game," Wennebojo replied.

"What game?" asked Makwa.

"The CMU women's volleyball game. You drive," responded Wennebojo.

Upon arriving at Rose Arena, Wennebojo observed an electronic scoreboard flashing the words GO CHIPPEWA, followed by CHIPPEWA PRIDE. Wennebojo looked around. There were no mascots running around making foolish idiots of themselves screaming war whoops. The marching band wasn't using any tom-tom rhythms to incite the crowd. None of the CMU cheerleaders or fans sported face paint. There were no caricatures of scalping. No tomahawk chops could be seen anywhere! There weren't any sweatshirts with an Indian profile or spears and feathers. Nothing on the uniforms of the volleyball players even hinted about a history of CMU using a Chippewa mascot, logo, or name. What happened?

For a moment Makwa thought Wennebojo was talking to a manitou, or spirit. Makwa sighed as he realized that Wennebojo was in dialogue with the electronic scoreboard.

"Could you tell me if the electronic words are symbolic of the Chippewas?" Wennebojo asked.

The scoreboard replied by suggesting that Wennebojo go ask the former mascot.

"Where can I find the former mascot?" asked Wennebojo.

"Clarke Historical Library," responded the scoreboard.

So Wennebojo and Makwa left the volleyball game at Rose Arena and walked over to Clarke Historical Library. At the library the receptionist greeted Wennebojo and Makwa by giving them forms to fill out about their research. After completing the paperwork, the two of them waited for the files to arrive. Makwa was told to get rid of his pen. Use pencils only! No request was made of Wenne-

bojo concerning his royal blue "presidential" fountain pen. Looking through the file, Wennebojo located the former mascot.

"Are you the former mascot?" asked Wennebojo.

"I am," said the mascot.

"What happened? Why are you a former mascot and not the current mascot?" asked Wennebojo.

"There is no mascot at CMU anymore," the former mascot replied.

Wennebojo looked puzzled. "Tell me, how come the scoreboard flashed GO CHIPPEWA at the volleyball game?" inquired Wennebojo.

"Well," said the former mascot, "the scoreboard is an electronic image, a virtual reality, so to speak. It is a logo. Actually, it isn't even a logo in the dictionary sense. 'Chippewa' is a nickname."

Shaking his head in disbelief, Wennebojo wondered what mental gymnastics had occurred at CMU. There was no Chippewa mascot, perhaps not even a logo. What remained was a nickname whose meaning was understood by few people; even fewer understood how the use of the nickname by CMU was offensive.

Wennebojo thought out loud, "How can I explain to people that 'the meaning of a word is the action it produces'?" (Montagu 1969).

The former mascot began, "I was first introduced to CMU back in 1942 by a member of the coaching staff. I replaced a Bearcat mascot who had replaced a Dragon mascot. I was used for pageantry, but that changed, too. I became a symbol of ferocity, a warlike spirit. I was the CMU Chippewa mascot until 1972. At that point I was transformed into a logo—actually two logos. One logo was a Native American Indian profile. I'm not sure if the profile was from one tribe or a mixture of many tribes. Nor do I have any idea of how authentic I was, but I presume my profile was not of a "real" Indian. The other logo was a combination of a block C with spear points and feathers" (Newsletter CMU 1989; Plachta 1992).

"I didn't notice logos like that today. What happened?" asked Wennebojo.

The former mascot continued, "The two logos were discontinued in March 1989. This resulted from an October 1988 Michigan Civil Rights Commission report that said the use of nicknames, logos, and mascots depicting Native American Indians by Michigan educational institutions was racist. The report cited an article in *Central Michigan Life* entitled 'Torturer.' The article described a CMU wrestler who claimed that if he were an Indian he would take 'great pleasure in collecting enemy scalps and then drinking the blood'" (Newsletter CMU 1989; (MCRC 1988).

Wennebojo gasped as the Mascot said those words. He looked completely disgusted. "Stop! I don't want to hear anymore of that," Wennebojo exclaimed. "You mean to tell me that educated people wrote and read that without objection?" asked Wennebojo.

"Well," replied the former mascot, "the Native students didn't appreciate it much."

"Now wait a second," demanded Wennebojo. "You mean to tell me that the president and the Board of Trustees of CMU supported the Chippewa logo after reading the findings of the MCRC?"

"Yes, the president was aware of the MCRC findings," said the mascot.

"Well, what about the wrestler? You mean to tell me that CMU, an educational institution, didn't have a problem with the 'Torturer'?" asked Wennebojo.

"No problem at all. They encouraged that sort of thing," said the mascot.

"What about non-Native students? Didn't they see a problem with the 'Torturer'?" asked the trickster.

"Not really. Students thought that racism against Native Americans was something of the past. They thought racism had to be like Jim Crow," answered the former mascot (Bobo et al. 1997).

"What else did the commission say?" asked Wennebojo in a very irritated tone.

"The commission concluded that the 'use of Indian images is stereotypic, racist, and discriminatory.' The MCRC recommended that 'any use of Indian names, logos and mascots should be discontinued because racial stereotyping of Native Americans is prevalent and destructive'" (MCRC 1900).

"CMU President Jakubauskas responded to the MCRC report by creating a committee to study the issue."

"Wait a second," interrupted Wennebojo, "if they understood the MCRC report, why did CMU think a committee to study the issue was appropriate at all? Why didn't they comply with the recommendations of the commission?"

The former mascot continued, "The nineteen-member committee was composed of students, faculty, alumni, and members of the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe of Michigan," the former mascot responded. "The committee provided the president with recommendations, including retaining the Chippewa nickname. The Native voice on the committee was outvoted" (Newsletter CMU 1989).

The mascot continued, "President Jakubauskas decided upon a three-year trial period. To oversee implementation of the committee's recommendations and the use of the Chippewa name during the trial period, the president set up yet another committee, a Symbol Advisory Committee. At the same time, CMU was negotiating a CMU trademark protection deal with Carnegie Mellon University (which also uses the abbreviation CMU) that included copyrights on the Chippewa name" (Jakubauskas 1989; CMU 1990; Dysinger 1989).

"What did the Symbol Advisory Committee do? Did they do anything?" asked Wennebojo.

The former mascot replied, "The Symbol Advisory Committee met eleven times between June 2, 1989, and May 9, 1990. The committee was formed in the summer of 1989. The defined purpose of the committee was to 'assist in carrying out the recommenda-

tions of the Advisory Committee, to eliminate stereotypic images of American Indians associated with the University's Chippewa symbol" (CMU 1990).

The mascot went on. "The committee focused on removing pictorial representations, changing the name of a dining hall room called Reservation, eliminating tom-tom beats from marching band music, removing a Miami Redskin banner from Finch Fieldhouse, removing the Indian-head profile from ROTC signs on campus, removing a spear displayed on the studio set of the head football coach's television program, discontinuing the use of Chippewa Indian-head logo in the yearbook, educating cheerleaders not to lead "chop" cheers, educating students not to use war whoops and not to wear war paint to athletic events. Local merchants were urged by CMU to discontinue using Native American symbols on products associated with CMU. CMU reminded ABC and ESPN to stop using the old logos as racialized stories were aired by sportscast announcers when CMU beat Michigan State in football" (Goldsmith 1989).

"As another example," the mascot said, "one professor wrote to Vice President James Hill, chair of the Symbol Advisory Committee, and reported seven areas of problems related to the use of the former logos on campus and inappropriate use by local merchants. Some areas on campus, such as the Wellness Resource Center, were cooperative. Others, such as the bookstore, resisted the changes" (Hatch 1989; Rabineau 1989).

"In March 1990," stated the mascot, "CMU intensified efforts to seek the input of local merchants. The problem was they wanted a 'mascot' to sell to the public. One real estate company suggested changing the name from Chippewa to 'Chips' in reference to gambling chips" (Sherwood 1990).

"Did any of those efforts really help anything?" asked Wennebojo.

"Well," continued the former mascot, "by May of 1991 the Affir-

mative Action Council openly opposed the Chippewa logo. They presented to Jakubauskas eight reasons to drop the logo:

1. It presents a stereotypical image of savage, warlike people.
2. Use of the name of an existing Native American people as the 'mascot' is inherently demeaning to that group.
3. Use of the name of an existing Native American people as the 'mascot' is an affront to the self-esteem of Native American people.
4. Cost should not be a factor in eliminating/changing the name.
5. According to the current plan for Affirmative Action at Central Michigan University discriminatory harassment is unlawful. Racial and ethnic harassment constitutes any intentional, unintentional, physical, verbal, or non-verbal behavior that subjects an individual to an intimidating, hostile, or offensive educational, employment or living environment by a variety of actions.
6. The change in the name was made in 1942 from 'Bearcats' to 'Chippewa.' It was made for pageantry.
7. The Chippewa Tribe did not have input into the name change. The Chippewa Tribe was not consulted. We do not believe the Tribe should be imperiled by being placed in the situation where they bear the burden to change the name.
8. As long as Central keeps the name we have no control of the usage by local merchants.

However, President Jakubauskas decided the three-year trial period would continue" (Gonzales and Newby 1991; Jakubauskas, 1991).

"Shortly thereafter," the former mascot continued, "the Committee to Examine the Use of 'Chippewa' as the university symbol issued a report in which it noted that 'constructive efforts during the trial period had "at best—only limited success." ' The report also indicated that systematic monitoring of abuses had been discontinued for the previous one and one-half years and that cooperation

with the Saginaw Chippewa Tribal Council was minimal" (CMU 1992a, 1992b).

Wennebojo asked, "Well, if the Symbol Advisory Committee and the Affirmative Action Council wanted the use of the Chippewa name discontinued, then how did it survive?"

The mascot replied, "Before the three-year trial period was over, the president at CMU resigned. The acting and later official president, Leonard Plachta, supported by the vice president of university relations, sought to retain the logo. There was concern for alumni contributions diminishing if the logo was changed."

"In September 1992, Plachta ignored the recommendations of the Academic Senate and decided to retain the Chippewa name," said the mascot. "Contrary to the findings of the MCRC, the rationale was that 'there is nothing inherently racist or demeaning in using the name of an ethnic group as the nickname for a university—or for a river or city.' Plachta never provided scientific research to support his differences with the MCRC. His decision was immediately voted upon and approved by the Board of Trustees. Some faculty presumed the board made the decision for Plachta" (Plachta 1992).

Puzzled, Wennebojo again interrupted at this point. "Let me see if I understand this right," he said to the former mascot. "The MCRC, the Affirmative Action Council, and the Academic Senate were all recommending that the Chippewa logo be discontinued. Native American students objected to the use of the mascot. Plachta and the Board of Trustees were aware that the MCRC noted that logos using Native American symbols and imagery damages the self-esteem of Indian children."

The former mascot, bowing his head with shame, replied, "That is correct."

"Why in the heck would the president of CMU appeal to igno-

rance in his decision in favor of the continued use of the Chippewa name?" asked Wennebojo.

"You are expecting the president to be intelligent and act rationally," said the mascot.

"Well, yes," said Wennebojo. "Otherwise we have a president who is locking reason out of a university. I've never known a president of a university to encourage students to be ignorant, except maybe in Alabama or Georgia before the time of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. A president of a university perpetuating ignorance should be a basis from which to force them and trustees supporting them to resign."

"Whoa!" said Makwa. "Don't you think that is a bit strong?"

"No!" said Wennebojo. "Plachta's decision rubs ignorance in the face of all who embrace the motto of enlightenment and have the courage to know," he added emphatically. "Let me ask a few more questions to be certain I understand this correctly. CMU originally had a mascot that was a Dragon. The Dragon became a Bearcat. In 1942 the Bearcat became you, the former Chippewa mascot. You were first used for pageantry and only later for sporting events. After thirty years you became a victim of the 1970s and the civil rights movement and were transformed into a logo."

The former mascot interrupted, "Actually, two logos."

"Okay, two logos," Wennebojo continued. "Sixteen years after you were dropped, the MCRC issued a report that said no to Native nicknames, logos, and mascots. CMU responded by removing spears, chicken feathers, and tom-tom beats, changed the name of a dining room called Reservation, and created a three-year trial period of purging CMU of racial stereotypes. In other words, CMU dropped the mascot, then the logos, yet kept the nickname and called it a logo," said Wennebojo.

"They sure did," said the former mascot.

"CMU decided to retain the logo even though the MCRC identified nicknames, logos, and mascots as perpetuating racial stereo-

types. CMU openly uses the word 'Chippewa.' Is that correct?" asked Wennebojo.

"That is true," said the former mascot.

"Didn't the Civil Rights Commission say that continued use would lead to acts of racism against Native American Indians?" asked Wennebojo.

"They certainly did," replied the mascot.

Wennebojo paused for a moment. He asked the mascot, "Which tribes did CMU consult on this issue?"

"What do you mean?" replied the mascot.

Wennebojo, getting a bit impatient, rephrased his question just slightly: "Which tribes did the university ask about the use of the logo?"

"The Saginaw Chippewa Tribe," replied the mascot.

"What other tribes?" asked Wennebojo.

"None that I know of," said the mascot.

"What did the Saginaw Chippewas say?" asked Wennebojo.

"At one point they passed a tribal resolution supporting the use of the nickname" replied the former mascot. "At the same time the MCRC report was coming out, CMU was entertaining the idea of naming the Student Activities Center after the Tribal Council Chief. They were also looking at the idea of giving the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe royalties from the sale of CMU items that had the Chippewa logo on them" (Saginaw 1988; Hill 1992).

Wennebojo looked all the more puzzled. "Weren't there Native American students attending CMU who were from other tribes, such as Sault Sainte Marie, Bay Mills, Lac Vieux Desert, and Keweenaw Bay?"

"Sure," said the mascot, "and a few from Lake Superior bands of Chippewas in Wisconsin and even some from Minnesota, too."

Wennebojo frowned and then asked, "What gave the Saginaw Chippewas the right to speak on behalf of all other Chippewas?"

"What do you mean?" asked the mascot.

"I mean", said Wennebojo, "what gave the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe the right to speak for other Chippewa tribes in Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, and Canada? What gave them the right to tell CMU anything on behalf of all Chippewas?"

"Nothing gave them that right, but I am not so sure they spoke on behalf of any other tribes," said the former mascot.

"What do you mean?" asked Wennebojo.

"Well, I think CMU presumed that to be true, but the Tribal Council Resolution spoke only for the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe members," said the former mascot.

"There is a sovereignty issue," said Wennebojo.

"Well, not exactly," replied the mascot. "Although the courts have dismissed tribe-against-tribe claims of treaty rights being limited to friendly waters or territories, there simply was no legal obligation for CMU to seek out the opinions of other tribes. In fact, CMU retains the license for the use of the term 'Chippewa.' CMU owns the right to use it and doesn't need permission from any band of Chippewas, let alone all of them—not legally anyway."

Makwa, who was listening attentively to the conversation, interrupted and said, "Hey, not everyone on the reservation agreed with that resolution."

Wennebojo responded by suggesting he and Makwa leave.

"What do you make of all that, Wennebojo?" Makwa asked.

"Let's go back to your place," said Wennebojo.

Makwa put some coffee on the burner and sat quietly. Wennebojo took out his pipe again and smoked it. He spoke. "I was reading a paper called the *University Record* in Ann Arbor. It is a University of Michigan publication for faculty and staff. There was an editorial criticizing Charlene Teters for speaking at the University of Michi-

gan. The editorial asserted, 'some tribes were asking to be remembered in association with universities'" (Simmons 1999).

"Which tribes?" asked Makwa.

"None that I know of," answered Wennebojo. "The author of that editorial also asserted that 'the Chippewas want to be partners with CMU'" (Simmons 1999).

"Where did they get that idea?" asked Makwa. Apparently the Saginaw Public Relations office was claiming that the continued use of the Chippewa symbol by CMU somehow honored Native Americans (Sowmick 1998).

Wennebojo responded, "I also remembered a sporting event contract between CMU and the University of Wisconsin being canceled because of UW policies prohibiting the contracting of sporting events with universities that use Native symbols and imagery. Apparently, CMU entered into a contract with the University of Wisconsin, but the UW had to cancel because the event violated a 1993 Athletic Board policy. The policy explicitly states, 'During the regular season the UW Athletic Department will not schedule any team with a Native American mascot or nickname unless the team is a traditional rival or a conference member'" (Wishaw 1998; University of Wisconsin 1998).

He continued, "I heard that students at CMU now believe that they are no longer allowed to use 'Chippewas,' so they use only 'Chips.' I was told the 'Indian related symbolism' had been dropped. So I grew curious" (Littlefield 1999).

"What have you concluded?" asked Makwa.

"Well," said Wennebojo, "as long as CMU earns revenue from the licensing fees for the use of the Chippewa name and the use of the name damages the self-esteem of Native American Indian children, then it is reasonable to identify such use as exploitative. CMU profits. Native children lose."

He went on, "Although CMU has gone to great lengths to rid itself

of a racially stereotypic mascot and logos, ceased to endorse practices of tom-tom beats, got rid of the face paint on cheerleaders, and exposed the chicken feather outfits, the fact remains that MCRC identified the continued use of Indian names by educational institutions to be detrimental to the self-esteem of Native American Indian children. I am not aware of CMU ever citing a study that contradicts the MCRC findings.

"CMU does acknowledge that Indian mascots are inappropriate, but then school officials claim they no longer have a mascot. They argue that CMU is honoring the Chippewa Tribe by using the Chippewa name. One might erroneously presume that the positive changes were somehow initiated by CMU. However, the historical record indicates that CMU habitually resisted changes regarding the mascot and later the logos and now resists efforts to have the use of the Chippewa name discontinued by CMU.

"The president and the Board of Trustees of CMU have blatantly ignored the recommendations of the Affirmative Action Council, the Academic Senate, two different directors of Native American Studies, and Native American students attending CMU. According to one former director of Native American Programs, during the course of his job interview both the provost and the president asked him, if he were to be selected for the job, could he keep his personal opinions to himself, unlike the former director" (Reinhardt 1998).

Wennebojo continued to speak, "While the more overt forms of racism surrounding the mascot and logos have diminished, the covert forms persist with the continued use of the Chippewa name by CMU. Still, the transformations from covert to overt are informative. Recall that the mascot was first adopted for the purpose of pageantry and only later acquired ferocity. Recall that the mascot was dropped in 1972. Yet, in 1988 the 'Torturer' was talking about scalp-ing wrestling opponents.

"As recently as March 1998, alumni were arguing that their

contesting of mascots and logos was 'playing the "race card" in reverse.' Recall the elimination of the logos in favor of using the name only and the resistance to that on campus. The transformations were not smooth. Now they claim to be honoring Chippewa people, though Ojibwes seldom call themselves Chippewas" (van Benschoten 1998).

"Is the tribe really honored? While it is difficult to see how that could be so, there does appear to be a relationship between the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe and CMU. Certainly there is advertising for the Soaring Eagle Casino for fans to notice at sporting events. The problem is that although the earlier tribal council resolution lends support without any pretension of speaking on behalf of other bands of Chippewas, the university and the general public have since interpreted the Saginaw Chippewa voice to speak for all Chippewas."

Wennebojo went on, "Two former directors of Native American Programs at CMU made it clear that the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe does not speak for all Chippewas and certainly not for all Native American Indians. When he was director of the Native American Programs, Martin Reinhardt suggested that the name used by CMU should be 'Saginaw Chippewa' instead of the Chippewa name in general. A member of the Sault Sainte Marie Chippewas, he was highly offended by the continued use of the Chippewa name by CMU" (Reinhardt 1998).

"Where does that leave things?" asked Makwa.

Wennebojo responded, "It is going to be a difficult task to end what the general public sees as a softer and gentler form of racism. Every time we expose racism, the university does not just rewrite the rules—they reinvent what an Indian is and claim they are honoring us. We are not supposed to feel offended. We should be proud.

"The Saginaw Chippewas have apparently decided to support the continued use of the Chippewa name. It is unlikely that other tribal councils are going to openly speak out against that action. The

silence of other tribal councils should not be interpreted to mean concurrence or agreement with the resolution passed by the Saginaw Chippewa Tribal Council," Wennebojo cautioned. "Perhaps if we got a grant and started up a wood products company we could have an impact."

Makwa was all confused. "A wood products company, what does that have to do with mascots and logos?" he asked.

Wennebojo responded, "They don't understand how they invent us. We can teach them by reinventing them." Makwa was still confused, but Wennebojo continued, "We can manufacture crucifixes."

"What!" exclaimed Makwa.

"We can make wooden crucifixes that slide open when pulled on both ends, and popcorn springs out sort of like a jack-in-the-box," said Wennebojo.

"You're kidding," insisted Makwa.

"No. I am serious," snapped Wennebojo. "When John Bailey debated the vice president of university of relations over the mascot logo issue, he brought up that same example. Many non-Indian students were offended. When asked how he could be so insulting, John responded that he was 'honoring' their savior. Some of the students actually understood for the first time. It took others longer to comprehend his point. Some never did get it. I suspect that the use of the Chippewa name by CMU will continue at least until the current president resigns. He has locked reason out of the university," concluded Wennebojo.

"So where are you headed now, Wennebojo?" asked Makwa.

"Oh, I'm going go find some grant applications for you to fill out," he said with a grin as he got into his "rez-rod" and drove away.

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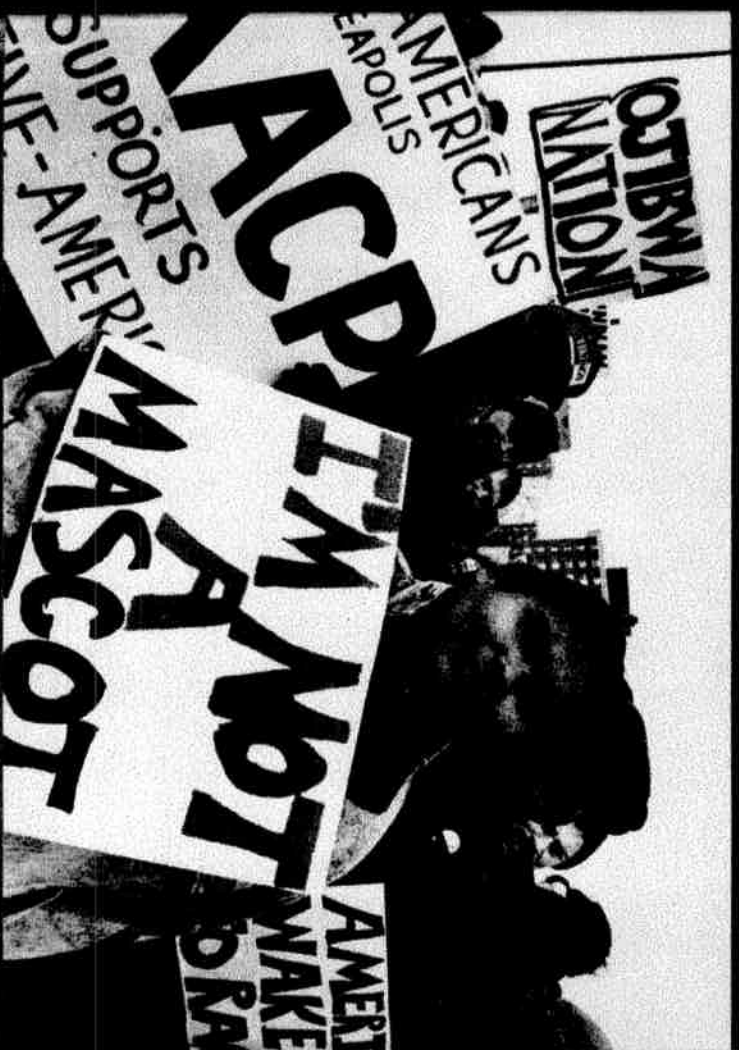
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The Anishinabe came fo
for the Warrior Ceremony
In old cars and pick-ups, f
Throughout the night,
there was dancing, songs,
They painted their white
They wore feathers in the
They bought little drums
They carried toy tomahav
The Keeper of the Sacred Pip
starts the ceremony.
Tobacco, fur, feathers, wood,
Facing the four directions, pr
smoke will guide us to the tru