

# **“We’re Still Here”: The Persistence and Resistance of the Ramapough Mountain Indians**

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## **Introduction**

The Ramapough (or Ramapo) Mountain Indians are a 3,500-member tribe from the New York-New Jersey Highlands region whose archaeological presence denotes their existence for nearly 10,000 years (Lenik). Despite this history, migratory settlements of other ethnic groups (e.g., Dutch, Hessian, African American) have accounted for a strong racial mixture, primarily evident through Dutch last names (Price 147). This ethnic mixture challenges their right to Native American identity, however, providing the federal government reason to deny this group recognition as an indigenous population. This entitlement would not only grant this group an indisputable identity, but privileges like a reservation, government protection of burial grounds, and healthcare benefits, to name a few (“NJ Committee”). The ramifications of not having this particular identity have created a wide dichotomy between the insider and outsider community, namely the local, state, and federal agencies. Within this discrepancy is a desire for this group to resist hegemony, preserve their culture, and tell their story; which will be explored throughout the remainder of this research.

Indigenous populations have often been subject to discrimination and cast aside as unequals under hegemonic structures. The Ramapough Mountain Indians’ origins and lifestyle into the present are mere reminders of European conquest and their inevitable subjugation. It is important to note that while many of the tribal surnames are Dutch and implicit of European heritage, this in no way provides sufficient grounds to deem them a part of dominant society. Specifically, this ethnoracial mixture also sabotages their entitlement to legal recognition as a Native American population. While they fought for federal tribal status in 1993 and 1996, both times they were rejected on the grounds of their poorly documented written history

(“Reconsidered Final Determination”). Regardless of exclusion, this group maintains a Native American identity, relying heavily on folklore culture, customs, and a strong oral history. Bereft of a reservation, the tribe holds an office in Mahwah, New Jersey. While their customs are integral to in-group survival, the lack of government oversight and protection makes this group susceptible to various societal shortcomings such as poor healthcare, quality of living standards, and environmental protection. Essentially, this research demonstrates the consequences of not having a federally recognized tribal status through: insider and outsider relations; how industrialization and diversification have threatened a community’s lifestyle, and how the community is dealing with its circumstances.

### **Autoethnography**

What’s in a name? Even now, I still remember the day I first heard the term “Jackson White,” uttered by my friend’s mother while driving past the nearby Wal-Mart. At the time, this newly built retail store was juxtaposed against the serene, tall mountains characteristic of northern New Jersey. Like many others in town, my friend’s mother strongly opposed the building of the Wal-Mart because it would arguably bring people of a lower socioeconomic status into the area. Hence, she did not fail to mention her dismay on this behalf, which prompted my friend to immediately ask what could possibly be so bad about the retail store. Her mother, now riled at the thought, replied, “We don’t go there. The place is full of Jackson Whites.” Now intrigued by the foreign moniker, I asked what it meant. My friend’s mother continued to raise my curiosity by claiming that this was a group of reclusive mountain folk, characterizing their otherness.

With the internet to my advantage and a heightened interest, I continued to read about the “Jackson Whites” in a popular local folklore magazine titled *Weird New Jersey*. Rather than provide knowledge, the magazine articles did nothing but disparage this group’s lifestyle, claiming it was common for members to inbreed “to the point of mutation” (Weird NJ). Regardless, not even a picture existed to characterize this group, and no other literature existed which labeled their way of life other than solitary, leaving much to the imagination.

It took a bit of research for me to finally draw the connection between the pejorative outsider label and their proper name, the Ramapough Mountain Indians. With this in mind I immediately rejected the stigmatized moniker, attached to urban myths driven by public fear, increasingly becoming aware of this population’s authenticity as New Jersey’s first people. Though my current perceptions of this tribe have matured beyond the sensational depictions, nonetheless they sparked a curiosity within my fifteen-year-old mind. I had always known that Native Americans once inhabited the land surrounding my home, but like many others I assumed that they were figures that were bound in time with iconic images of teepees and feathers. Learning that there were modern-day Native Americans in the nearby mountains was the match that lit the fuse to demystify the stereotypes.

The more I researched the more I understood how my connection to the Ramapough Indians was much deeper than I had initially presumed. Had it not been that my town, Kinnelon, is nestled in the woods of the Ramapo Mountain chain, there would have been little interest for me to study this tribe intently. It has always intrigued me to know the various identities that have once mapped and inhabited the landscape I have called home for over a decade. Knowing that many archaeological sites can be attributed to their past, makes me aware of their vast

contributions to this area. What irked me, however, was the fact that I throughout my years in public education I had never learned such a tribe existed. The idea that one's history could be muted was one that took me years to finally understand, and is a brutal reality marginalized groups face daily in a struggle for greater visibility.

In various ways, my standpoint makes it very simple to relate to the many issues of identity politics the Ramapough Mountain Indians face daily. Standpoint theories generally argue for knowledge as a social construction, noting that one's position in society "informs one's understanding of that society" (Kenney and Kinsella 48). Further, those who experience oppression can better recognize the exploitation of other groups. While this tribe only identifies as Native American, others ascribe other group labels onto them for their mixed lineage, characterizing them as "not Indian enough." These stereotypes further create a discrepancy between insiders and outsiders. What I did not realize until much later, however, is that I too can identify with this labeling of otherness. As a first-generation Ecuadorian- and Egyptian-American, I am biracial and face challenges from descending from multiple racial categories. My difficulty with identifying is exacerbated further when I fill out applications where I am told to choose only one race. Additionally, my physical appearance makes it very puzzling for many to identify me with my heritage. Those who define my background fail to look past my darker complexion and automatically classify me as African American, implying that I maintain solidarity with this racial category. Born in America, I mostly identify with my Americanness, yet my 'in-between' identity separates me from others who are fully Latina/o or fully Middle Eastern; making me feel like I am not enough of either culture.

## Literature Review

Much of the academic research in the twentieth century regarding the Ramapough Mountain Indians surrounds the origins of the cryptic name and its usage among outsiders, brought on by history and folklore. Primarily, the literature detailed the various origins of the stigmatized label “Jackson Whites” ascribed to this group, at a time when this term was not viewed as such. More so, the research describes the term’s ambiguous origins, labeling a group emanating from Dutch settlers, African slaves, and Native Americans. Anthropologist Daniel Collins discusses the origins of this term to mean a “racial anomaly spawned by inbreeding and intermarriage, ignorance and degeneracy, and condemned to poverty, feeble-mindedness, and suspicion” (Collins 1276). Additionally, the local White middle-class population mistook their reclusive nature for “indolence and ineptitude...evidence of racial differences all of which is summed up in the invidious and slanderous name ‘Jackson White’” (1277). While this may be a colloquialism used amongst outsiders for exclusion purposes, those who are referred to as ‘Jackson Whites’ reject this name and its connotations, preferring to be called “mountain people” or “racially mixed” (1277). Evidently, the unclear origins make it harder to distinguish legend and history but demonstrate how much of their past is rooted in the oral, rather than a written tradition.

Perhaps the most controversial research published on this tribe was by David Cohen, a professor at Rutgers University whose genealogical research debunked the Ramapough claim to Indian tribal heritage. This particular source was devoid of archaeological research, yet used by the government as grounds to undermine their qualification for federal recognition. His book, *The Ramapough Mountain People* (1972), studied this group’s origins, racial identification, and lifestyle choices. In his research he claims that the people inhabiting in the Ramapo Mountains of

northern New Jersey and southern New York State constitute a separate group, geographically isolated by the mountains and the rivers since before the Revolutionary War; refuting earlier renowned works. He insists that while many of these people identify with the American Indians, they possess “no authentic Indian cultural traits,” instead labeling themselves as “colored” or “nonwhite” (Cohen 260). The reason they believe they are Indian, he contends, is because of the clash between legend and history. Overall, Cohen’s research, though now outdated, maintains that the oral heritage crucial to this group’s persistence is rooted in myth rather than public documents that would otherwise note their Indian ancestry.

On the other hand, regional archaeologist Edward J. Lenik, historically remapped human occupation in the Ramapo Mountain chain in his book *Indians in the Ramapos: Survival, Persistence, and Presence* (1999). His research is significant in integrating oral traditions and historical data through the noted settlement and subsistence activities characteristic to cultural and identity maintenance (Lenik 2). As an archaeologist, Lenik’s findings in the New York-New Jersey Highland region document the different archaeological periods in which the Ramapo Indians have settled. His literature incorporates charts whose specificities reveal site types (e.g., villages and shelters), locations, and dates. The dates and locations justify this group’s regional presence for thousands of years, well into the eighteenth century. This also asserts that the Ramapo Indians had a much broader community, extending across several areas across as opposed to their confinements in the present-day, inferring that outsider settlement into this region over centuries has significantly narrowed the size of their territory.

More recently published sources detail the tie of cultural heritage and language. As Stephanie Bird accounts in her book, *Light, Bright, and Damned Near White* (2009), present times reveal that their self-identification includes their Lenape and Munsee heritage with the

“admixture of African, Tuscorora, Dutch and other White ancestry” (38). Other research affirms the Munsee language as a dialect of the Algonquin language (Bischoff and Kahn 17). It is important to understand that while group members acknowledge the presence of other groups in their lineage, they primarily identify as Native American. This research coincides with the tribe’s present efforts to bridge the past with the present, especially as their lifestyle factors become increasingly separated from the world. In the past they spoke both Munsee, an Indian ancestral language, and today the tribal office holds Munsee language classes to establish a cultural solidarity.

Extensive research was done by Mitchell Kahn and Henry Bischoff in *From Pioneer Settlement to Suburb: A History of Mahwah, New Jersey, 1700-1976* (1976), detailing the history of Mahwah, the office site of the Ramapough Indian community, and how the landscape has been reshaped throughout time. The book acknowledges the obscure, early history of the Indians, the first people to come to this setting noted through archaeological traces (Bischoff and Kahn 17). Like most historical documentation, this research also affirms the European settlement in the region as a demise to an existing way of life, for by the year 1600 A.D., fewer than 10,000 Indians remained in New Jersey (17). This European settlement, characterized by agriculture and private ownership of property, was one bridging the past and the present circumstances of the American Indian, who fell victim to land hunger and inevitable losses.

This literature’s credibility was also significant for its prediction of the Ford Motor plant as a turning point to an existing cultural way of life. According to the research, the Mahwah River, “supposed to have been the site of annual powwows and other ceremonies,” was also once the location of the Abex and Ford plants. Origins of the term Mahwah derive from the Munsee



term *mawewi*, meaning an assembly where streams and paths meet, a meeting place at the conjunction of several transportation routes (18). Symbolically, this term also reveals the meeting place where two existing cultures were living side by side, the present slowly taking over the past. Thus, when the Ford Motor plant opened its doors to Mahwah in 1955, it exemplified the “rise of the automobile in American life and the suburban quest” (338). At the time, residents looked upon this acquisition favorably, for this 1,500,000 square-foot assembly plant covering 200-acres would bring in 1,000 new homes to the existing housing boom and an increase in population (340). It became the largest plant in the nation at the time, and its choice to be built here was based on Mahwah’s “low tax structure, the availability of labor, water supply, good transportation facilities, and abundant space” (339). Albeit slow, the shift toward industrialization eventually signaled the downfall of the Ramapough Indian community’s sustenance.

### **Connection to American Studies**

Overall, the research on the Ramapough Mountain Indian tribe is relevant to American Studies for its interdisciplinary roots in history, sociology, ethnography, archaeology, and cultural anthropology. The issues faced by the Ramapough Mountain Indians throughout history and into the present seek to be uncovered by historians and American Studies scholars alike. Much of American Studies dedicates itself to the meaning of the social construction of identity and inclusion into a community. Evidently the government and upper echelons of society still operate by the “one-drop” rule of African (and in this case, also Native American) blood. This not only poses a limit on identification choices but it renders them as “less Indian” than other

tribes (Black Indians: An American Story). This mere ideology establish's the government's power while subjecting others to forces of discrimination.

Many minority cultures in the United States share a common struggle with marginalization and battling with power systems for greater privileges. American Studies' focus on race and ethnicity asserts these keywords as social constructions, rather than essentialist ideas proven by science. On this note it is also important to mention that American Studies takes cultural identification into account rather than biological factors. The Ramapough Mountain Indians are case study of the many cultures in American society susceptible to discriminatory acts and denial of privileges for not having a specified identity. The politics of identity and the criteria for inclusion into a group become focal to the research. What also complicates this group's right to an identity under the government is the imbalance of written and oral history, a pivotal role to their livelihood and persistence. Regardless, this group maintains a Native American identity that is arguably more reinforced than other facets of their lineage, evident with their lifestyle, rituals, and the adamant struggle for recognition. Ultimately, The ramifications of possessing a certain racial identity make them victims of environmental racism, or the environmental policies and industry practices benefitting whites while marginalizing communities of color through zoning laws, building undesirable buildings near a community, and making these groups more susceptible to toxins and degradation (Alston 103). This calls forth issues of environmental justice, another battle for the Ramapough Indian community adjoining their quest for federal recognition.

### **Methodology and Research Questions**

It is significant to note that new sources have been acquired from the start of the proposal to the research finding stage, revealing the dynamic present circumstances of this tribe. Overall,

the research findings entail a wide range of interdisciplinary primary and secondary sources, of which I have divided into three specific categories. Unlike the proposal, which was based on mostly secondary sources like government documents and literature, primary research entailed interviews with key figures, including Chief Vincent Mann, Autumn Wind Scott, and authors assessed in the literature review like Mitchell Kahn and Edward Lenik. Having the opportunity to interview key figures, especially authors, was a method of reinforcing what was already in writing, and was a way for in-group members to provide alternate perspectives to what was published. For the in-group members my research questions inquired the main issues affecting the tribe today, what it was like to grow up in the community, why they chose to become community activists and how they address both outsider allies and foes. Interviewing the community outsiders, both authors whose writings use different methodologies to uncover the region's history, required different research questions. Primarily, I was interested in finding on how they address this community in their research, what advocated them to empathize with this group, and what steps they think should be taken for this tribe to gain federal recognition.

Secondary resources, like documentaries, government records, newspaper articles, and books, complemented the primary research. A secondary source emerging after my proposal phase was a broadcasted seminar provided by the National Museum of the American Indian titled "*Does Indian Blood Still Matter?*" dealing with the ways in which the government exercises control over Native American populations through quantifying the amount of blood per tribe. As mentioned previously, new sources relevant to this tribe emerged after the proposal stage addressing environmental racism, both of which include HBO's *Mann v. Ford* (2011) documentary, and *The Record's* "Toxic Legacy."

1. *What are the differences between the in-group versus outsider perceptions of the Ramapough Mountain Indians?*

Much of which is a product of choice, the Ramapough Mountain Indians remain a reclusive community to this day. A big reason for this is due to the harsh discrimination bestowed upon this group by outsiders, who, according to the New Jersey Committee on Native American Indian Affairs reports, impose institutional discrimination and racial profiling, to say the least (“NJ Committee”). While this will be explained in further detail in the findings, it cannot be argued that the outside community plays an integral role in what happens to the Ramapough Mountain Indians, reiterating the notion of hegemony.

2. *How have diversification and industrialization influenced the Ramapough Indians’ way of life?*

The beautiful mountainous landscape that was once all home to the Ramapough Mountain Indians is no longer shared with African American slaves and Dutch settlers. Rather, decades of suburban sprawl from New York City has reshaped this land into an area inhabited by families of wealth and prosperity. The abundance of land has also led many people to build large properties, drastically minimizing the land in which this group roamed freely. As this region has become a more attractive place to live for nonnative residents, issues such as tribal land, burial sites, and housing affordability have become more complicated for the Natives (“NJ Committee”). Essentially, the outside community’s industrial shift has diminished this tribe’s means of living, in terms of population count, land size, and overall agency.

3. *Furthermore, how are the Ramapough Indians coping with present-day shortcomings?*

This group still remains persistent in obtaining federal recognition from the government, particularly in the state of New Jersey. The community still remains relatively isolated from the outside, but recent publications and documentaries keep outsiders aware of their persistent efforts. With a dose of realism in understanding that their wishes may never be entirely fulfilled, this group remains powerful in its willpower to expose the truth to the world and continuously resistant to oppressive forces.

## **Research Findings**

### *Insider versus Outsider Perceptions*

On a local level, the outside community still plays on fabled anecdotes to exclude the Ramapough Indians from the rest of society. Still referring to them by the term “Jackson Whites” has damaged this community’s reputation and connotes ideas like indolent and incapable, things that which having a conversation with any tribal member would immediately falsify. This poses a problem for the younger generation, who when at school essentially have to shield their identity to avoid disparaging remarks. As tribal member Fayelynn Van Dunk notes, her heritage is hard to embrace for having a certain name makes “jobs hard to come by, even in the local fast food restaurants and hotels” (“Toxic Legacy”). Popular stereotypes have led to their tribal surnames (i.e., Van Dunk, DeGroat, Mann) being equated with inhumanity, quite ironic for the ways in which others have imposed barbarism onto them.

One of the most fundamental issues affecting the Ramapough Mountain Indians is the stark difference in establishing an identity in opposition to what the government believes. Recently, the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian held a seminar titled “*Does Indian Blood Still Matter?*” which revealed how the government’s establishment of an identity in

providing tribes with federal recognition is a threat to the Native American way of life. In doing so, the Bureau of Indian Affairs issues a Certificate Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) to tribes throughout America, equating how authentically Indian a tribe is through blood quantum. Blood quantum, a measurable way to describe innate characteristics, is calculated through biological ancestry and genealogical distance, factors that can be determined through scientific advancements. Having a CDIB is a key to federal recognition, which entails access to social service and monetary awards, Treaty rights, exemption from state taxes, “Indian preference” in federal employment, family rights under Indian Child Welfare Act, and economic rights under Indian Arts and Crafts Act (“Does Indian Blood Still Matter?”). While a CDIB provides certain benefits for Native Americans, it politicizes the notion of blood and identity and fails to ignore Indian cultural heritage. In addition, the diversification of populations is another caveat under this certificate, for it accounts for less blood quantum over time, and ultimately less Indians. For federally recognized tribes, this categorization is a loophole to get rid of Indians as generations pass, and for the Ramapough, a label of “not Indian enough.”

As the findings demonstrate, efforts on the state and local levels do not appear to be as promising for this tribe. Undoubtedly, the lack of federal tribal enrollment accounts for so much more than treaty rights and tax exemption. After much lobbying with little success, in 2006 then Governor Jon S. Corzine established a New Jersey Committee of Native American Community Affairs to conduct research and report back to the federal government. In turn, they were to evaluate the social and economic conditions of the Native American communities, focusing on civil rights, environmental protection, and healthcare issues. Given a year to report, they found that the greatest problems plaguing Native American tribes in New Jersey were federal

recognition, discrimination, environmental justice, intergovernmental issues, educational problems, lack of employment, healthcare, and housing (“NJ Committee”). This was yet another pitfall for the tribe, for even after extensive documentation the government continued to turn a blind eye to this community’s plight.

Arguably, the lack of motivation for state agencies to assist this tribe have become an issue of money, especially on the issue of Indian gaming rights. The state of New Jersey, which boasts its very own casino center in Atlantic City as well as a proximity to New York City, saw granting this tribe federal recognition as a threat. According to Chief Mann, former New Jersey Senator Bob Toricelli, now known for his alleged Mafia ties, believed that endowing the tribe with rights to a reservation would be a straight shot to a competitive casino industry. These stereotypes still perpetuate amongst state and federal levels, a disconcerting point for the tribal community simply seeking to feel protected under the law. Very recently, the tribe, along with the Powhatan Renape Nation and the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Nation signed a resolution that established their opposition in developing any kind of casino gaming into their territory (“Resolution of Agreement”). Regardless of their objections the government seems to fear the thought of tribes generating revenue for their own communities. Going this far to establish this, especially after nearly three decades of state recognition reveals how systems of power equate groups with capital, rather than individuals.

Local historians, however, have been allies advocating the Ramapough Mountain Indians’ presence throughout time. Archeological evidence, as referenced in Edward J. Lenik’s *Indians in the Ramapos: Survival, Persistence and Presence* (1999), provides raw material evidence, photographs and statistics to strengthen this group’s existence in the Ramapo Mountain

region. The Ramapough name has been bestowed upon the bodies of water, towns, and institutions attribute to the rich history this group has given to this region. This information not only reveals Native American presence in the Ramapo Mountains from 10,500 B.C. but provides information such as the major contact periods with Europeans dating all the way back from their settlement to this region in 1600 C.E. (Lenik 15). Upon interviewing Lenik himself, he admitted that his desire to do his research was driven by the outward discrimination faced by this tribe and hidden past. “To dismiss their long history is beyond my understanding,” he alleges, but he aims to paint a “more positive picture by [documenting] all the data that has been recorded.” As an ally Lenik also aims to use this archaeological research to find artifacts that may stop a potential pipeline from being built in the community. Always hopeful that they will gain federal recognition, his documented research is a way to challenge the government’s existing presumptions of this tribe.

Mitchell Kahn, another ally whose documentation was clarified in the literature review, uses a historical approach in everything he teaches. Upon interviewing him, I learned that he was commissioned by the Mahwah Historical Society to write the history of the area in the 1970s, and that he has always lived in this region. With this in mind I aimed to ask him how people in the neighborhood view this tribe, to which he remarked that stereotypes and old myths about the Ramapough still persist. Particularly among people further away from the area, they are referred to still as the “Jackson Whites,” revealing the enduring racial tensions. Having his perspective as a local was a way to understand the Othering of this group by outsiders, which may be an indirect factor of the little motivation for local, state and federal agencies to assist them.



Strong In-group perceptions have been an essential defense mechanism to maintain the culture. Currently, the tribe consists of 3,500 people in the immediate area, but according to an interview with Chief Vincent Mann tribal roll surnames indicate possibly up to 10,000 members nationwide. Additionally, there are community outreach efforts to bring more followers into the tribe, especially with Munsee language classes to bridge the past and the present. The tribe consists of a council, which includes a Wolf Clan, Deer Clan, and a Turtle Clan, all led by chiefs of the Perry, Van Dunk, and Mann families, respectively. Additionally, there are chiefs in surrounding regions, like Paterson, Staten Island, and Waywayanda (Ramapough Lenape Indian Nation). Essentially, the initiatives of the tribal council maintain governance over its citizens to uphold respective traditions and preserve the culture.

These traditions are another way of unifying the already close-knit community in the face of change. The tribe holds powwows annually, and has recently erected a longhouse on the ceremonial grounds in Mahwah, a place of worship that will unite the voice of the Ramapough Lenape Nation (Mann). Like many Native American religious traditions, the Ramapoughs believe in the interconnectedness between humans, nature, and the past. As Autumn Wind Scott recalls, “Everything is connected...we’re all dependent on one another. It’s that way through creation as well.” Group members, thus, hunt for protein, primarily eating the animals off the land. While some of these animals that were hunted a few generations ago no longer exist, hunting is still a way for the community to maintain close traditions and ties to the past, especially as the outside community rapidly develops.

The in-group members’ perceptions of the outside community are mostly wary, for they have constantly been at the losing end of broken promises. As both Chief Mann and Autumn

Wind Scott have mentioned in their interviews, Native Americans essentially have no say when it comes to having to testify in the Supreme Court, whose judges have not a drop of accountability when listening to their requests. As Scott asserts, the government has been “consistent in the way they have treated [the community].” According to Chief Mann, The BIA and the federal government wanted this group to be something that nobody could prove. When the Ramapough Indians sued the BIA for lack of federal recognition, the BIA responded by saying how “there’s never been a question of whether [they] were Native American or not,” but rather their own stipulations of what exact historical tribe they belonged to. This reveals the losing battle between the Native Americans and the flawed government oversight.

Fundamentally, what holds this group together is their determination for people to understand their past and contributions to history. As Chief Vincent Mann asserted in the interview, history doesn’t lie, but “what’s written is what people want you to know or remember.” Growing up, he witnessed how the tribe faced harsh discrimination, much of which came from the negative outside community perceptions. Thus, a survival tactic for the community has always been to stay silent. “It’s been almost bred into us to shut up and keep your head down while you walk,” Mann recalls. Both interviewees were adamant in discussing this group’s place in history and recognition, particularly during the Revolutionary War when George Washington’s troops were aided by the Ramapough and essentially helped them survive the winter in this region. In this regard, reconciling with the past has been the supreme defense mechanism in maintaining their pride despite the denigrating efforts of the outside.

*Diversification and Industrialization Threatening an Existing Way of Life*

It is universally understood that European expansion and settlement has been the biggest threat to the American Indian way of life. As has been reiterated throughout the literature review, the outside community expansion has diminished the Ramapough community in size and population. Much of this is a product of the corporate expansion of Ford Motors, whose repercussions have essentially attributed to what many can consider a modern-day genocide. Additionally, the growth of the outside community has done best to mute the Ramapough Indians' collective voice.

The current events surrounding this tribe have not failed to include the inherent environmental racism it has faced over time, particularly with the Ford Motor plant lawsuit; and more recently, the proposed building of a natural gas pipeline in its backyard (Lenik). Once a mining community, the land was bought by realty companies and eventually Ford Motors, who subsidized much of the land taxes. Thus, community members always rented, but never owned their own land. Because they lack federal recognition, they pay nearly \$3,000 dollars annually to the city of Mahwah for land that has been in their lineage for thousands of years (Mann). For a community not generating much revenue, this money is difficult to pay, posing yet another ramification for not having the desired federal status.

The rise of institutions in this region over time have further marginalized this impoverished community, evident in its overall low educational background and occupations as miners and other sources of low-income labor. Much of this is attributed to the destitute circumstances this group deals with on a daily basis, and more recently, the rare diseases brought on by toxins in the ground and air. Arguably though, the primary reason for their shortcomings in society result from the failure of the government to assist the community through programs. This

poses a severe limit on their scholarship opportunities, for they have no CDIB to be determined as a federally recognized tribe.

Perhaps the greatest threat to industrialization was the building of the Ford Motor Plant, presenting a clash between a traditional community and the rise of big industry. When the Ford Motor Company plant opened in 1955, nobody was aware of the imminent threat it would have on the community's livelihood and physical landscape. Between 1967 and 1971, the plant dumped industrial waste and paint sludge into the Ramapough Indians' backyard, deteriorating the groundwater and the soil. The air quality was also significantly damaged as a product of the highly combustible chemicals igniting and burning. At the time, the children would play with the paint sludge on the ground, covering themselves with the "colorful paint, forming and eating sweet-tasting rainbow-colored sludge 'pies'" (Chermayeff). As a pastime, the children would often refer to this wooded area where the toxins would appear as "sludge hill," entirely unaware of any conceivable damage to their health within the following years ("Toxic Legacy"). Allegedly, these immediate effects included rashes, severe headaches, and bleeding from the throat, eyes, and nose. Once the children attended public school with community outsiders it was apparent that these health problems were atypical. As the children grew into adults, the health problems seemed to permeate through generations, exposing one of the harshest environmental disasters in recent history.

In 1980s, the Ford Motor plant shut down in Mahwah, but its reverberations continued mercilessly at the expense of the Ramapough Indian community. The mines, which have been characteristic to this area and which were once a source of labor for much of the community for centuries, were now contaminated and buried. By 1983, the EPA declared this area a Superfund

site, a government program intended to fund the cleanup toxic wastes. In 2006, it became the first Superfund site to ever be re-listed, revealing just how deep the toxins had gone into the soil (“Toxic Legacy”). Testimony from Ramapough tribe members and surveys reveal birth defects, learning disabilities, asthmas, rare cancers, female reproductive disorders, and skin diseases. It has even affected the youngest of the population, as community resident Kelly DeGroat still mourns the loss of her ten-year-old son Colin who died of a rare bone cancer (“Toxic Legacy”). The losses experienced by this community reveal the extent of environmental racism. While it is a product of discrimination, it certainly is unbiased in what members of the population it targets.

The same year the site was re-listed as a Superfund, the Ramapough Indians sued the Ford motor plant for decades of environmental hazards imposed on their land. In a lawsuit titled *Wayne Mann et al. v. Ford Motor Company*, the Ramapough Mountain Indians accused the company of negligence, fraud, conspiracy, trespass, and battery because they did not tell residents how dangerous the waste was (Martin). Finally, a decision was made for Ford to compensate the victims \$12.5 million dollars, whereby some families received more than others. As the Upper Ringwood community leader and lead plaintiff Wayne Mann testified, “The amount given [to victims] was a pittance.”

Undoubtedly, the lawsuit brought outside community members to assist the Ramapough Indians, specifically members of the Environmental Protection Agency and environmental attorney Vicky Gilliam. Members of the EPA created the Ringwood Community Advisory Board to monitor progress of the cleanup. The toxins, which now have far surpassed the confines of the Ramapough community, now affect many members of the local communities who share the water from the nearby Wanaque reservoir. To the frustration of many, the slow cleanup reveals

that there is still paint in the site, which is quite embarrassing for the EPA (“Toxic Legacy”). According to environmentalist Bob Spiegel, “Ford has done their best to stall” what could have been initially avoided, indicating that even the strongest of external forces could not clean up what had been done onto nature. With the Ford Motor lawsuit already settled, the community experienced somewhat of a rest to the existing environmental problems. Even with the Ringwood Community Advisory Board providing agency to the cause, the toxins have become so entrenched in the soil, creating a situation whereby no true cleanup really exists. The animals, who have always been a source of nutrition for this community, are more threatened than ever. “The ground is so polluted and dying and the animals that eat all of the vegetation...are going to die as well. They are not safe to eat, but our people are eating them. They’re gathering herbs and vegetation growing out of that land and ingesting...and these people are now dying,” laments Autumn Wind Scott. This ultimately presents the biggest clash of cultures, whereby the community is nearly forced to abandon their customs as a survival method.

Perhaps no one could attest to the diversification and industrialization clashing with Native American culture better than Chief Mann, who premised his desire to become a representative of his own tribe with the outright hatred he saw others do onto his people. Growing up, he witnessed having community outsiders call them things they were not, which created deep-rooted anger for intolerance. However, it made him develop into someone who sought to stand up and fight for human rights. While the Ramapough Mountain Indian community has always been close-knit, the Ford Motor Superfund site created rifts throughout the tribe. Once a community with large families with existing multiple generations, the current population contains a tiny population with members over the age of 65. In an interview for the

“Toxic Legacy” series, lead plaintiff Wayne Mann remarked on the lack of elders in the community, noting that the “fifties and the sixties are becoming what used to be the nineties and the hundreds.” The losses have been devastating, only exacerbated by the fact that these atrocities remain largely unknown. Regardless, their cultural perseverance has been, and will seem to always be, the bind holding the group together.

#### *Community Response to Present-day Circumstances*

One thing never to be overlooked is the sheer resilience of this community, despite the efforts of many to essentially despoil this population of its history. If there is anything tribal members can say in the face of oppression, they can proudly say: “We’re still here.” For one of the only people in the world who can attest to living in their homeland for 10,000 years, this bears testament.

Unfortunately, the worsening conditions in the community have created situations whereby certain members are forced to leave their homeland. Though members have an exceptional love for the area which has been home to their ancestors for thousands of years, current conditions simply deem it too hazardous for their continuance. “Who wants to call a Superfund site home?” is a question they ask themselves. The answer is ambivalent, for on the one hand they feel a deep connection to the past living there, and leaving would simply be sacrilege. On the other hand is the idea that their population is being killed off slowly, with the older members dying knowing that the land once rife with natural resources is now ruthlessly torn apart.

Education has been a driving force to change the minds of the outside communal population who are either unaware of or indifferent to this tribe’s existence. When former

Governor Jon Corzine helped establish the New Jersey Committee of Native American Community Affairs, it established a small step to this tribe's agency in the public sphere. Committee chairwoman Autumn Wind Scott describes her job as "a vehicle, developing relations to create programs and to educate between the Native community here and to educate the greater public." As one who has spent 27 years educating the public, she speaks to an audience who is primarily oblivious to Native Americans in New Jersey. According to Scott, "Ninety-percent of New Jerseyans not aware that there are Native Americans in New Jersey...that certain people are indigenous to New Jersey...unaware of tribes, and indigenous people that live there." While the histories of other ethnic groups have been largely exposed, the Native American story is one remaining largely hidden and lost in the past. "We have always been devalued," Scott remarks on the treatment her people have received, reminiscent of blacks in the 1950s. Additionally, she acknowledges that the unsympathetic way her people have been treated at the expense of other groups is the mere reason why their account is concealed.

"How much longer can it possibly be, before the truth is told and people listen?" Chief Mann asks rhetorically. While their voices may have been ignored for many years, their story captured the minds of HBO filmmakers who released the documentary *Mann v. Ford* (2011). When this news came out, it was a boon for the Ramapough Mountain Indian community, who had never thought their story would be exposed. This left Chief Mann with the idea that people are waiting for Ramapoughs to step out of the box. "Those days are coming, they really are," he asserts. More so, has noted the encouragement from outsiders, who have been overwhelmed with their willingness to finally speak up. More so, he even indicated that there were people who grew up in New Jersey who sought to create documentary on BIA to reveal how flawed it was, but



decided to make the documentary more about the Ramapough Indians when he told the directors their history. The power of media in documenting their story has been a window for the outside world to peer in, shaping public opinion and changing discourse.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

Centuries of harsh treatment imposed by outside communities have given the Ramapough Indians much reason to be distrustful of others. They nevertheless remain extremely passionate regarding their Native American heritage, and have an unrelenting desire for their story to be unveiled. What makes this so significant is their will to tell all, and not sugarcoat a single detail. They are extremely knowledgeable regarding their own history and racial lineage, and in turn are self-aware of the educational, health, and wealth disparities compared to the outside community. The government, which has ultimately failed to succeed as a sustainable source of help to this community, has caused them to be distrustful of most of the outside community.

Furthermore, they are quick to debunk research outsiders have written about them and the way they have been “othered,” predominantly by David Cohen’s work and others who have referred to them as “Jackson Whites.” Autumn Wind Scott and Chief Mann both expressed their irritation on having people write publications providing false information regarding their culture, especially those wrongfully referring to them using a pseudo-racial classification “Black Dutch.” Similarly, other obscure research written about them maintained that their main language was Jersey Dutch, a fiction considering their language is Munsee. Despite English being the primary language of communication, Native language classes have been a way of fostering their cultural makeup.

For the Ramapough Mountain Indian community, perceptions of the future remain ambiguous. Determining whether they will someday get federal recognition is also a mystery, but empathetic outsiders believe they will eventually. The Ramapough are not quick to be optimistic, considering their centuries of mistreatment. Arguably, the proliferation of media and the accessibility they play in relaying messages to large audiences may ignite others to lobby for them. If their history is no longer shrouded to the rest of society, more empathetic outsiders may be able to assist them, especially federally recognized Amerindian populations. Chief Mann maintains that certain Navajo tribal members have been outsider allies, coming across the country to visit the tribal office in Mahwah and reconnect. Having supporters has been effective for this group's mobility, and hopefully will entail a promising future.

### **Conclusion**

As New Jersey's first people, the contributions of the Ramapough Mountain Indians in history is nothing short of authentic. Most groups are unable to trace their lineage back to 10,000 years the way this group can, and articulate knowledge of the past is how members come to terms with the present. Knowing their account has also been the best defense to the oppression they continuously receive while sustaining their pride. They may remain reclusive by choice, but the perceptions of the outside community accounting for exclusionary acts have galvanized them into resisting adversity. While their future is quite ambiguous it is without a doubt that this group deserves federal recognition for perseverance and to endure the clash with external forces.