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# INDIAN

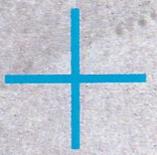
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## HORACE POOLAW'S WAR STORIES



**SAND CREEK**  
HEALING AND ART

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CASINOS AND  
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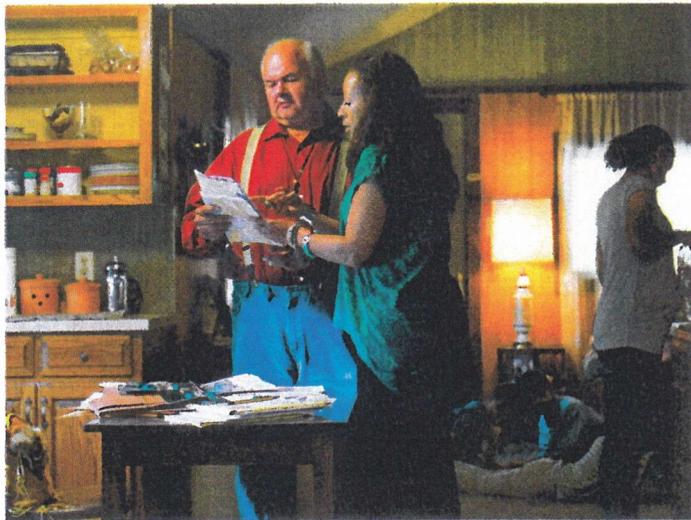
**THE RED ROAD  
ANTIDOTE**  
JASON MOMOA FIGHTS  
VIOLENCE

**WINTER ART  
MARKET**

**...AND MORE!**

# THE RED ROAD: FACT AND FICTION

BY PHOEBE MILLS FARRIS



Mac (Gary Farmer) and Marie Van Der Veen (Tamara Tunie) in *The Red Road* episode 4, "The Bad Weapons."



Sky Van Der Veen (Lisa Bonet) leads protest of Ramapo tribe in *The Red Road*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SUNDANCE

## "THE RED ROAD"

to indigenous people means a good path of life, a spiritual path, the right road or positive direction to walk. Most non-Indian Americans might not have heard the term, but since February 2014 the concept is now familiar to a wider audience thanks to the Sundance TV dramatic series *The Red Road*.

The series also introduces the broader public to a Native population located just 30 miles from Manhattan, the Ramapough Lenape. In the series the tribe is identified as the Lenape Mountain Indians, but it is based on "real" people, a tribe recognized by both New Jersey and New York State whose members mainly live in the Ramapo Mountains, across the Hudson River from New York City. The tribes of New Jersey, and the Northeast, have long been victims of stereotypes and misperceptions, and there has been concern whether the TV drama would further the problem or help alleviate it. Although many tribal members are still withholding judgment, others are applauding the first season.

In the words of Xwat Anushiik (Autumn Wind Scott), chair of the New Jersey American Indian Affairs Commission and a Ramapough Lenape (or Lunaape) tribal member, "When a people have been marginalized and continue to suffer indignities without a voice, the opportunity to effect perceptions is one which cannot be overlooked. Even within the context of fiction, there can be that opportunity."

The characters live in the fictitious town of Walpole, N.J., and the Lenape are often harassed or neglected by the Bergen County Police. In real life, Bergen County and its police do exist. The main plot deals with a white police officer, Harold Jensen, and his participation in the cover-up of a hit-and-run accident involving his recovering alcoholic wife, the contentious partnership between the policeman and the Lenape Mountain Indian Phillip Kopus, a recently released ex-con drug dealer, and the generational/historical/contemporary ties between the white officers' family and the Native Van Der Veen family members.

Kopus, played by indigenous Hawaiian Jason Momoa, and Jensen, the white police officer played by Martin Henderson, defy racial stereotypes. As the series of six one-hour episodes unravels, the so-called good guy versus bad guy roles become complex and constantly evolve.

In addition to the personal stories, the series makes a serious attempt to present the rich complexity of life in a contemporary Northeastern Indian tribe. For this reviewer and many indigenous people that I talked to informally, what is engaging and empowering about the series is the authentic portrayal of contemporary American Indians in all our diversity of appearances, diversity of professions or lack of jobs, spirituality, friendships and romances with non-Natives and the resulting offspring who want to identify as Native. It shows our love for the land, in this case

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Ramapo Lake from Castle Point.

PHOTO BY PAUL J. NEARY

a mountain and woods, but also acknowledges the need sometimes to live an urban lifestyle to survive financially, in this case in New York City.

And since the main white character is a police officer, the series depicts the continuing mistreatment of Indians by law enforcement if the victim is white and neglect by law enforcement if the victim is Native. However, events and characters in *The Red Road* are nuanced and complex, not strictly black and white, or should I say red and white?

The series is a welcome contrast to the stereotyping evident in a recent film, *Out of the Furnace*, that is partly based on the Ramapough tribe and depicts them in an unfavorable light. The filmmakers were sued for \$50 million by 17 members of the Ramapough Lenape Nation, whose family names were used in the movie.

The movie starred Christian Bale, Casey Affleck and Woody Harrelson and was produced by Leonardo DiCaprio. Harrelson's character, the turquoise-jewelry-wearing criminal leader Harlan De Groat, belongs to an ethnic group identified in the movie as the Jackson Whites and labeled inbreds.

Although the production company, Relativity Media, claimed the film was entirely fictional, eight of the plaintiffs in the suit have the last name De Groat and two have the last name, Van Dunk, that are used for gang members in the movie. Plaintiffs charged that both last names are common in their tribe and that the name Jackson Whites has historically been used in a negative way to refer to the Ramapough Lenape as Dutch and Indian inbreds. In May 2014, a federal judge dismissed the suit on the grounds that the plaintiffs could not show that they had been specifically referenced by the movie.

In contrast with the DiCaprio movie, executives associated with the production of *The Red Road* met with Ramapough Lenape Chief

Dwaine Perry and tribal member Scott prior to filming. Scott was hired to serve as a Native consultant for the series. Screenwriter and executive producer Aaron Guzikowski felt that even though the series is fictional it was important to have tribal input because of elements in the series that were inspired by real events related to the tribe. Scott read the scripts and offered suggestions regarding possibly offensive language and accurate portrayals of native life on Ramapo Mountain.

She told *American Indian* magazine, “The Native characters who are represented as members of the Tribe are those whom I need to ensure are culturally accurate. Even within fiction there are those things we simply would not say or do, and in as much as early publicity connected us to this film, we needed to assure it would not add to the heartache of a people.”

The main character Kopus, she said, was an exception. “He is certainly a lost soul, but in no regard is he representational of our Ramapough men!” (In preparing to portray the violent but tormented ex-con, actor Momoa met with Ramapough Lenape tribal members. In an interview with *American Indian* magazine writer Anya Montiel, he recounted that he told them, “you are not going to like my character. However, he is a complex person, a lone wolf, whose past explains his behavior.” (Montiel's article, “Jason Momoa's Road to Paloma,” starts on page 40.)

At the insistence of tribal advisers, the series also touches on two major issues facing the New Jersey tribes; recognition and pollution. During the first term of New Jersey Republican Governor Chris Christie, he considered revoking state recognition for the Powhatan-Renape Nation in Mt. Holly, N.J., and the Lenni-Lenape Nation in Bridgeton, N.J., both located in southern New Jersey, as well as the Ramapough-



## THE VIEW FROM RAMAPO

**Xwat Anushiik (Autumn Wind Scott), a member of the Ramapough Lunaape tribe and chair of the New Jersey American Indian Affairs Commission, consulted on the Sundance production *The Red Road*. She answers questions about the significance of the project.**

You ask how our people came to live in the Ramapo Mountains that border New Jersey and New York. More accurately, they demographically divided our people by running the states' border through our mountain, leaving our citizens on both sides. The boundary surveyors "happened upon" Indians living in wigwams in the frontier wilderness of the Hudson Highland region of the Ramapo Mountains. We were once known by our band names: Tappan, Hackensack, Nyack, Haverstroo, Esopus, Waping/Pompton, Raritan and Ramapoo.

Our land base once consisted of northern New Jersey, southeastern New York, southwestern Connecticut, Staten Island and western Manhattan. Over time, with much diminished numbers, those who would not relocate west or north (nor accept Christianity and move to the country's first reservation, the Brotherton Reservation in southern New Jersey), would gradually come together under one Chieftancy and become "Ramapough" or "people of the Slanting Rock." (However we did have a few Christian ancestors who were among the Brothertons). We are grateful that the majority of our ancestors refused to believe the broken promises and leave their aboriginal homelands. Our lands are our book of memories.

We are formally recognized by both New Jersey, and New York states. Both states have very different relationships with their aboriginal tribes, and in New Jersey in particular, acknowledgement is shrouded in ambiguity and sadly changes with each administration.

**What changes were made due to your role as a consultant?**

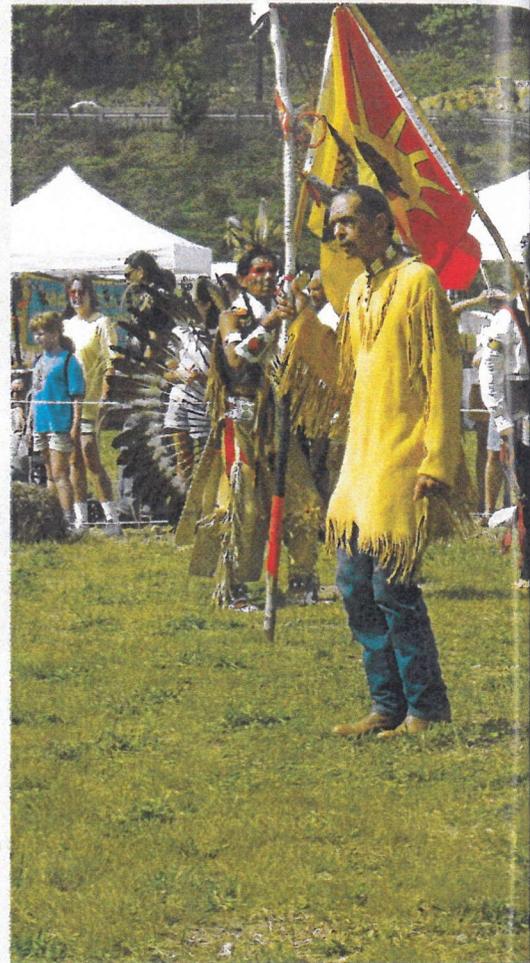
The opportunity to add two of our main issues to the script was very important to me. If we have any chance to effect public perception, then our issues need be highlighted. The long-term corporate dumping of toxins on our clan communities has resulted in far too many deaths. Those presently suffering from the effects were left without healthcare provisions. The financial inability to fight against political opposition to gain Federal status has also been an ongoing challenge. Those Federal benefits would be a solution to the suffering that has existed for decades, yet even unimaginable suffering in a "civilized" society has fallen on deaf ears. My hope is that having a national audience of discerning viewers may open a few eyes, or hearts, at the very least.

**What is the overall impression of fellow Ramapoughs regarding *The Red Road*?**

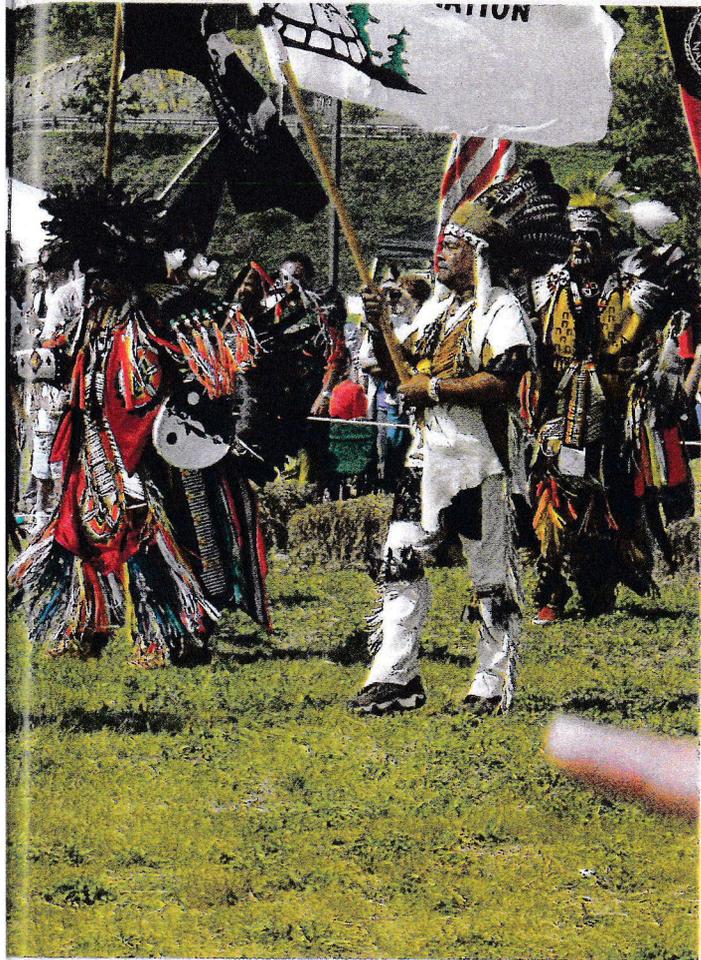
Ramapough feedback regarding Season One [of the series] has been mixed from the few who have expressed their opinions directly to me. Overall comments were positive. However there were a few who remained skeptical, reserving opinion until the conclusion of the series.

I certainly understand their skepticism, as we have a long history of having been characterized in a negative light. What we don't need is a perpetuation of the stereotype that our men are drug dealers, addicts, etc., nor do we need to feed the manufactured myths of murder and mayhem in the mysterious Mountain woodlands. These fabrications may sell newspapers and make for good movies; however there have always been those few incapable of distinguishing fact from fancy, and the long-term result has been devastating to a people.

— Compiled by Phoebe M. Farris



Dwaine Perry, current Chief of the Ramapough Lunaape, foreground, with honor guard, carrying flags at the opening of a recent Ramapough Powwow.



LEFT: The late Walter "Silent Wolf" Van Dunk, formerly Chief of the Ramapough Lunaape tribe, leading male dancers into the arena during Grand Entry at the Ramapough Pow-wow, circa 2002.

Lenape Nation in northern New Jersey. Initially Gov. Christie questioned the American Indian authenticity of tribal members and wanted tribal councils to "prove" their members' Native heritage. Fortunately, through united efforts by the three New Jersey state-recognized tribes the governor gave up those termination efforts. Unfortunately he was successful in taking back the Powhatan-Renape's Rankokus Reservation land base in Mt. Holly under eminent domain. Preserved woodlands, wetlands and protected deer are now vulnerable. Water pollution is imminent as wetlands are now open for private development

The series also features a sub-plot about toxic pollution from an industrial plant's contamination of land and water. The Ramapough Lenape Tribe has been fighting the Ford Motor Company for years over the dumping of toxic paint sludge and other wastes from Ford's massive automobile plant in Mahwah, N.J. (The legal battle is also the subject of the 2010 HBO documentary, *Mann v. Ford*.)

A welcome feature of the show is the number of American Indian characters who are played by American Indian actors. The cast of major actors, recurring supporting actors, and those in background scenes run the gamut in age, generations and phenotype thanks in part to casting by Junie Lowry-Johnson (Lumbee). Says Scott, "With limited roles offered to Native actors, I am thrilled that the majority of the lead actors are tribal enrolled citizens." Zahn McClarnon (Standing Rock Sioux and Irish), born in 1966 as Zahn Tokiya-ku McClarnon, plays Phillip Kopus' criminal partner. (He also appeared in the A&E series, *Longmire*, as a tribal policeman.) Kiowa Jordan, raised on the Hualapai reservation in Peach Springs, Ariz., is Kopus' adopted half-brother. Tribal Council Chief Mack Van Der Veen is played by veteran American Indian actor Gary Farmer.

Marie, his sister in the series and biological mother of Kopus, is portrayed by Tamara Tunie, the well-known television actress who is part Native. Lisa Bonet, a veteran of *The Cosby Show*, takes the role of Sky Van Der Veen, the tribal lawyer/activist who lives in Brooklyn, N.Y., but maintains ties with family mountain relatives. (Although she is non-Native, she is married to Jason Momoa.)

Viewers unfamiliar with contemporary Native culture might be surprised that these African-American actresses have prominent parts, but there are tribally enrolled Indians who resemble them, particularly on the East Coast. Their appearance in *The Red Road* is an authentic look at the diversity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's Indian country.

I do have one criticism – the sparse amount of joy in the lives of the Lenape characters. Indigenous people are still capable of laughing, rejoicing and embracing their culture despite racial prejudice, poverty, genocide and other types of social injustice. Their spirit still prevails, and they are successful in some of their endeavors for state and federal recognition, land claims, environmental issues and the like. Natives throughout the Americas are still here – our biggest accomplishment. I hope Season Two, airing in 2015, will show more balanced, multi-faceted coping strategies for the Lenape characters. Although I am not interested in a Hollywood happy ending, I do want to see some laughter, some winning lawsuits and some loving marriages. ❁

For further information: [sundancechannel.com/series/the-red-road](http://sundancechannel.com/series/the-red-road)

Dr. Phoebe Mills Farris (Powhatan-Renape/Pamunkey) is professor emerita at Perdue University.



PHOTOS COURTESY AUTUMN WIND SCOTT

Joe Mathis Jr., Ramapough youth dancer, at a recent Ramapough Powwow.