In Cahoots with Neo-Indigenism

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Abstract: Academia’s support for neo-indigenes is a significant component of their professional success. I describe how this support operates, drawing a model of cahooting from Edward Dolnick’s analysis of art forgery in *The Forger’s Spell*. Cahooting reflects the importance of social relationships to the construction of perceived truth and virtue. It corrupts academia at multiple levels through these relationships, undermining the pursuit of truth and goals of equity and inclusion.

Keywords: identity; neo-indigenism; ethics in the academy; neo-Chumash; equity and inclusion

1. Introduction

In this article, I revisit the issue that drove me to wade into the murky pool of neo-indigenous identity in the 1990s: the involvement of scholars in the creation and promotion of neo-indigenes. Neo-indigenism is a global social phenomenon that has arisen over the past half-century. It features assertions of indigenous identity by persons lacking indigenous ancestries, histories, or social ties. In the Western hemisphere, it is neo-Indianism, with variants asserting specific identities (see, e.g., Galinier and Molinié 2013; Junka-Aikio 2016; Watt and Kowal 2018). I explore a specific neo-Indian case in this article, but the analysis may apply to neo-indigenism broadly.

My focus here is on the academic allies of people, kindreds, and communities in California’s central coast region, which I have called neo-Chumash (Haley and Wilcoxon 2005). These people began identifying as Chumash in the late 1960s yet lack the Chumash ancestry and affiliation they claim as the basis for this identity, claims that are rejected by actual Chumash communities. By affiliation, I am referring to the suite of social ties, culture, and experience shared within autochthonous communities and kin groups and demanded by their members as the sole basis for public and professional claims of Native American identity (see, e.g., Mihesuah 1998; TallBear 2021; Henry 2022). Scholars supporting neo-Chumash claims argue that colonial period Catholic mission priests must have mis-recorded one or more Chumash ancestors of my neo-Chumash as *gente de razón*, an identity the Spanish-speaking Californio colonists used to unify and distinguish themselves from Natives. However, the ancestry of neo-Chumash is documented in parish, military, and civil sources with multiple records for every person (see, e.g., Haley and Wilcoxon 2005; Haley 2005). For such a rich set of records to all be wrong, as these scholars insist, a far-reaching, inexplicable, and improbable conspiracy would have been necessary. Thus, as I demonstrate below, their argument is pseudoscience and propaganda, not scholarship.

Neo-Chumash identity blossomed in the late 1960s and 1970s among descendants of Spain’s California colonists through a confluence of California Indian land claims resolution, working-class alienation, new religious movements, and the pursuit of relief in identity and tradition (O’Meara 1981; O’Connor 1989; Haley and Wilcoxon 1997, 2005). Processes of globalization and multiculturality lie behind these (Haley 2009, 2024). Early neo-Chumash were drawn to a new “traditionalism” taught by Semu Huaute. They based their new identities on family stories and the belief that the power of their experiences with the new “traditions” proved their claims of Chumash ancestry. Only a few neo-Chumash have Chumash ancestry, which routinely is someone six or more generations in the past.
who assimilated into colonial Californio society, losing ties to their Native community. Significantly, but for a few individuals lured by the new “traditions”, existing Chumash communities at Santa Ynez (federally recognized), Santa Barbara, Ventura, and San Luis Obispo rejected neo-Chumash claims of identity, maintaining a strong social boundary excluding neo-Chumash based on ancestry, family ties, and culture. Neo-Chumash formed, and continue to form, their own organizations, which they now call “tribes”. Early on, neo-Chumash sought opportunities to display their new identity publicly, earning themselves significant outside support from academics, environmental activists, and government officials, and putting actual Chumash at a disadvantage in the public arena. Outside institutional support for neo-Chumash is one of the greatest threats to Chumash autonomy and representation today. One thing neo-Chumash identity is not: it is not the white race shifting that characterizes other cases of neo-Indianism (see, e.g., Sturm 2011; Leroux 2019). Neo-Chumash family histories are characterized by racial ambiguity spanning several centuries (Haley and Wilcoxon 2005; Haley 2005).

2. Cahooting and the Academy

*Cahooting* is a modest neologism for an ingredient neo-indigenism requires if it is to be used successfully for anything more than reconfiguring how one sees oneself. Cahooting comprises the actions or processes associated with conducting a partnership built on a deception. The deception may be intentional or a product of naïveté, thus partners in cahoots may all be deceitful, all naïve, or a mix of the two. I have described elsewhere how North America’s neo-Indians participate in a larger social field whose members have varied identities yet share symbols, roles, goals, and expectations (Haley 2024). A broad set of useful relationships are sought and nurtured by neo-Indians, including scholars and their institutions. Cahooting gives a name to this relationship. It is inspired by Edward Dolnick’s *The Forger’s Spell*, which explores the reasons behind the great success of the Vermeer forger, Henricus Antonius “Han” van Meegeren (1889–1947), who famously duped Hermann Göring into buying a fake Vermeer during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Dolnick characterizes forgers, dealers, and collectors of fine art as being in cahoots because they all need the forgery to be perceived as real, albeit for differing reasons. Van Meegeren’s success depended upon those relationships. As Dolnick notes, “The greatest asset a forgery can have is an authority’s endorsement” (Dolnick 2008, p. 120). Van Meegeren duped influential middlemen who in turn duped buyers. They were in cahoots, with a varied mix of deviousness and naïveté from one middleman to the next. Dolnick’s characterization of the world of art forgery aligns neatly with scholarship on artworlds (Price 2001) and the artistic field (Bourdieu 1993). In short, Dolnick is on firm anthropological and sociological ground.

With neo-indigenism, cahooting becomes necessary when the neo-indigenous self-identity is deployed to pursue a goal that can only be achieved by persuading others that the identity accurately reflects ancestry and affiliation. The strategy demands that persons of influence consecrate (to use Bourdieu’s term) claims of indigeneity as authentic (Bourdieu 1993). This authority must not be too aware of the dangers of accepting identity claims at face value, although this does not matter if they are willing to fabricate or falsify evidence. After consecrating the neo-indigene’s identity claims, one of the authority’s roles is to beat back damaging revelations that crop up. This requires verbal performances that rely on misdirection, appeals to personal prestige, and peer-pressure to compensate for a lack of evidence. In most cases, the ideal authority is an anthropologist or someone else engaged in indigenous studies.

The art forgery model of cahooting applies with disturbing precision to academia’s relationship with neo-indigenism. We can see this most clearly in the neo-Indian problem in North American academia, where there has been a growing number of exposés, including Ward Churchill (Flynn 2005), Susan Taffe Reed (Keeler 2015), Elizabeth Warren (Astor 2018), Andrea Smith (Viren 2021), Carrie Bourassa (Vescera 2021), and Elizabeth Hoover (Vives 2023). Academics and their institutions have emerged as key allies of neo-Indians. In 1998,
Larry Wilcoxon and I observed that “scholars rarely concern themselves with how their own practices construct a modern slot for colonialism’s historical victims or how this slot may be co-opted” by neo-Indians (Erlandson et al. 1998, p. 502). Mvskoke tribal cultural preservation specialist, Larry D. Haikey calls scholars who consecrate self-identified Indians “hired hands”, who have forged symbiotic relationships with neo-Indians that strip them of professional objectivity: “The groups need anthropologists to legitimize their claim to ‘Indian’ status since anthropologists study Indian cultures (i.e., ‘We have an anthropologist studying us, therefore we are Indian’). At the same time, the anthropologists need the groups in order to practice their craft” (Haikey 2001, p. 230). Though Haikey singles out anthropology, his critique applies to other fields and the institutions that house them. The “craft” that brings scholars, institutions, and neo-Indians together includes research, teaching, service, collaboration, diversity programs, financial support, recruitment, and more. The academic institution allows “the charade to continue, because often it has much invested in the fraud and exposure would put the institution in jeopardy” (Pewewardy 2004, p. 202).

The academy inadvertently plays an outsized role in the consecration of neo-indigenous identity. Its institutions produce and disseminate new knowledge, including identifying and helping to correct prejudice and discrimination that has harmed segments of society. None of us in the academy will apologize for these goals—they are exactly what we ought to be pursuing. Yet, the rise of neo-indigenism reveals that reliance on racial or ethnic self-identification as (1) a proxy for life experience and community of origin and affiliation, and (2) a measure of institutional progress toward goals of equity and inclusion poses a grave threat to their achievement (Pewewardy 2004; Haley and Wilcoxon 2005, p. 434).

North American scholars and institutions who consecrate neo-Indians as authentic indigenes, whether naïvely or duplicitously, reap professional rewards (Haley and Wilcoxon 1997; Pewewardy 2004). Publicly visible Natives—whether as students, hires, or collaborators—are valued as symbols of individual, disciplinary, and institutional virtue. Indeed, a college diversity officer told me that the gold standard of diversity hiring is a Native American faculty member or administrator. Abandoning support for already consecrated neo-Indians is difficult because it risks potentially severe professional embarrassment plus the fracturing of significant relationships (Viren 2021). Compounding the difficulty, those professional social relationships can influence scholars’ notions of truth (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Barnes 1985, pp. 49–58, 82–83). In many disciplines, relationships that shape truth and virtue include collaborators outside the academy with whom a politics of obligation and shared understandings of truth and virtue often develop. When those truths and virtues rest on nothing but the relationship, they can only be defended with counterfactual rhetoric, evasion, claims of unique expertise, or ad hominem attacks.

3. The Forger’s Dupes

As Dolnick (2008, p. 286) observes, “The forger’s dupes immediately become his greatest allies”. Duplicated scholars began naïvely consecrating neo-Chumash in the late 1960s. Historians at the University of California, Santa Barbara sparked the creation of the Quabajai Chumash Indian Association, which devolved into an organization neo-Chumash used to dominate the emerging cultural resource management sector beginning at Hammond’s Meadow in the early 1970s (O’Connor 1989; Haley and Wilcoxon 1997; Ranch 2012). In 1976 Travis Hudson of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History recruited ten young men from Quabajai who he assumed were “of Chumash descent” to recreate a Chumash tomol plank canoe (Hudson 1977, p. 60). Neo-Chumash gained national attention in 1977–1978 for protesting against a proposed liquified natural gas (LNG) terminal near Point Conception (O’Connor 1989; Haley and Wilcoxon 1997), supported by archaeologists who produced a report falsely asserting that Chumash had conducted traditional rituals at the Point in the early 20th century. The report helped solidify the public’s perception of neo-Chumash as “traditional” Chumash (Haley and Wilcoxon 1997). Peter Nabokov (1980) and Gregory Schaaf (1981) naïvely supported neo-Chumash origin claims, with Schaaf writing that neo-
Chumash had “suppressed their Chumash identity publicly, taking the more acceptable role of a person of Mexican descent, while their cultural traditions were preserved within a close circle of related people” (Schaaf 1981, p. 63). In short order, members of the Franco, Hames, Guevara, Gutierrez, Romero, and Lopez families and the Quabajai Chumash Association, Brotherhood of the Tomol, Coastal Band of the Chumash Nation, and others were falsely promoted by scholars as Chumash. They have since recruited others into today’s larger neo-Chumash community.

More accurate scholarship revealed that older members of these families had no prior knowledge of their alleged Chumash ancestry before the Indian land claims process began (O’Meara 1981, pp. 7, 25) and that the name Quabajai had been applied to the Chumash in an error the new organization was perpetuating (Hudson 1982). While working with records in the Santa Barbara Mission Archives, John Johnson began discovering neo-Chumash families’ lack of Chumash ancestry and affiliation (O’Connor 1989; Haley and Wilcoxon 1997, 2005; Ranch 2012). Nothing changed for several years because knowledge of the finding was privileged. But in 1987, Native American scholar Johnny Flynn leaked Johnson’s findings to the press, threatening the livelihood of families active in cultural resource management. Santa Barbara, Santa Ynez, and Ventura Chumash groups began asserting themselves more forcefully, though neo-Chumash were seldom sidelined, and still received repatriated Chumash remains for reburial (O’Connor 1989, pp. 14, 16; Ranch 2012, pp. 139–49). Santa Barbara’s neo-Chumash subjected Johnson to endless ad hominem attacks. Suggesting a conspiracy to conceal their ancestry, one told me, “Someone got to him [Johnson]”. The professional community split over support of the neo-Chumash, but none bothered to examine the evidence until Larry Wilcoxon confirmed Johnson’s findings. Project managers buried the evidence behind the fiction of an underground Traditionalism, allowing neo-Chumash to carry on as before and even recruit new members (Haley and Wilcoxon 1997). Mary O’Connor (1989) published the first academic article stating explicitly that neo-Chumash families lacked Chumash ancestry and affiliation. But she published where locals would not find it, thereby depriving Chumash communities of a tool they might have used to challenge the appropriation of their identity.

In 1997, Larry Wilcoxon and I examined the roles of scholars in the creation and consecration of neo-Chumash identity in “Anthropology and the Making of Chumash Tradition” (Haley and Wilcoxon 1997). The article explored how the mutability of identity and tradition collides with popular and legalistic expectations that they rigidly mirror ancestry. We reported that Point Conception was not a part of neo-Chumash ancestral history, yet it held cultural importance for them because anthropological and media reporting of their 1978–1979 LNG resistance consecrated their identity claims.

4. Cahooting in Eugene

Less than a year after “Anthropology and the Making of Chumash Tradition”, a set of commentaries on it was published. One commentary was favorable, but the rest were not. Several of the latter were by scholars who had consecrated neo-Chumash identity (Erlandson et al. 1998). The critics’ commentaries were plagued by mis-readings, false assumptions, and myopic posturing as enlightened defenders of (to them) indigenous persistence. Though they claimed we were wrong, they provided no evidence to support this. The lead response by archaeologist Jon Erlandson of the University of Oregon in Eugene has given neo-Chumash and those in cahoots with them a false sense that an authority has disproven our arguments. It is worth re-examining to illustrate how cahooting with neo-indigenes operates. As Dolnick (2008) demonstrates, the forger Van Meegeren showed that duping a single well-placed art connoisseur into consecrating a forgery could have far-reaching effects, making new forgeries easier to sell. Erlandson is that naïvely cahooting scholar whose perceived expertise is a crucial asset. He is an important authority on the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the Pacific Coast of North America, having garnered well-earned respect and accolades over the course of a stellar career. His effectiveness as a cahooter rests on this respect, not on any expertise.
Neveling and Klein (2010, p. 17) characterize Erlandson’s essay as “abound[ing] in clichés of a kind that one would rather expect from the post-Hippie faction among the [neo-]Chumash than from academics living on state salaries”. It reads as neo-Chumash because Erlandson has had a close relationship with them since 1977 when we were both undergraduates at the University of California, Santa Barbara. All of us there at the time were seeking greater Native collaboration. None of us realized initially that our intentions were being undercut by neo-indigenism. Some of us figured this out by the early 1980s, but not Erlandson. He became quick to assert his professional status on their behalf. For over forty years, Erlandson never familiarized himself with the evidence of the actual family histories of his neo-Chumash friends. Doing so would have put those friendships at risk or made him conscious of his cahooting.

Erlandson’s response to our article is certainly confused. Since he specializes in pre-Columbian ecological adaptations, our topics of identity and tradition were well outside his wheelhouse. The distinction specialists commonly draw between identity, ancestry, affiliation, and culture causes him to howl in anger when we apply it to neo-Chumash. Equally unaware that people’s sense of the authenticity of a tradition reflects present circumstances and not just historical persistence, he mistakes our description of how neo-Chumash traditions came about to be a demand that we alone ought to determine authenticity. These gaps in his expertise combine in an accusation that we had created a false dichotomy between traditional and non-traditional Chumash. Not so: the contrast originated among neo-Chumash Traditionalists themselves.

Erlandson’s main objection concerns our statements on neo-Chumash origins since that reflects poorly on his career-spanning collaboration with them. He complains that their documented history implies his friends are “ethnic chameleons” (Erlandson et al. 1998, p. 483). Then, he turns around and endorses an equally chameleonic origin myth in which unknown Chumash ancestors of neo-Chumash families escaped missionization by passing as gente de razón, preserving their identities and traditions for generations while masquerading as Californios (Erlandson et al. 1998, p. 478). He offers no evidence to support this scenario.

Erlandson faced a predicament in writing his response: how to counter a well-supported reconstruction of history when he does not know the evidence or have data of his own. His approach is scattershot. First, he claims that proofs of neo-Chumash origins rest on a flawed source. Then he simply decrees people to be Chumash. Lastly, he resorts to rhetoric by posing as a champion of decolonization. To bolster his arguments, Erlandson cites his expertise as a Chumash scholar, a sleight of hand to misdirect away from what is actually needed: expertise in Californio history. This lack of relevant expertise causes him to bungle his argument so badly that he exposes the lack of Chumash ancestry in one neo-Chumash family and several neo-Chumash organizations.

Erlandson begins by falsely asserting that the reconstruction of neo-Chumash origins rests on only one source. Genealogists helping to compile the California Judgment Roll, created to resolve California Indian land claims, had raised hopes that California’s Catholic mission baptismal, confirmation, marriage, and death records would identify Chumash ancestry among Californios. When neo-Chumash did not get that result, their frustration was directed at the records and researchers who use them, such as Johnson. However, records in the mission archives were never the sole source of neo-Chumash history. Blind to this, Erlandson argues that the records contain “only what Chumash people told the Franciscan fathers, what the fathers thought they said in the translation from Chumash to Spanish, or what the Franciscan fathers wrote down. In fact, the biological heritage of virtually any individual descended from those who lived and died at the California missions 150 to 200 years ago cannot be verified or authenticated with certainty” (Erlandson et al. 1998, p. 482). Lacking experience with these records himself, Erlandson relies upon Johnson’s description of neophyte records as proof of their limitations, even though Johnson has repeatedly done exactly what Erlandson claims is impossible (see, e.g., McLendon and Johnson 1999; Johnson 2020). This hardly matters, however, because Erlandson has laid
a false trail. The neophyte records are irrelevant to neo-Chumash history. Their family histories appear instead in the *gente de razón* records of Mexican sending communities, colonial expeditions, presidios, pueblos, and churches, which share none of the limitations Erlandson raises. His unfamiliarity with the sources has led to this grave error.

Next, Erlandson decrees who is Chumash based on his “personal knowledge or experience”. He simply declares it false that “Family A and many Traditionalists are unrelated to the indigenous people of the area” (Erlandson et al. 1998, p. 480). Family A was Mary O’Connor’s (1989) designation for a prominent, neo-Chumash kindred that abandoned Spanish, white, Mexican, and Chicano identities in the late 1960s. Erlandson equates the late Madeline Guevara Hall’s family with Family A, then declares it has documented Chumash ancestry, only to acknowledge that he was mistaken about that in a footnote added shortly before publication (Erlandson et al. 1998, p. 482n3). He stumbles on, associating three organizations with Family A: the Brotherhood of the Tomol, United Chumash Council, and Coastal Band of the Chumash Nation. He avoids their history before the 1970s because he does not know it, but makes it clear that he has had a close relationship with them since 1977 (Erlandson et al. 1998, pp. 480–81, 504).

Erlandson then unwittingly exposes Family A’s lack of Chumash ancestry by recounting the one time he saw genealogical evidence compiled by Johnson on the sole ancestor who had not previously been identified as a colonist. The ancestor was from Baja California and was not Chumash. After presenting this, Erlandson almost seems to grasp that he has left Madeline Hall’s family without Chumash ancestry. He suggests that one or two other ancestors six generations ago *could* be Chumash since their birthplaces were not stated in a genealogy Wilcoxon had shared. These, however, were documented colonists with published histories (Bancroft 1964; Northrop 1984, 1986). Likely grasping that “could be” was not adequate, Erlandson decrees yet another ancestor to be Chumash, a fabrication all his own which was contradicted by Wilcoxon’s genealogy (Erlandson et al. 1998, p. 482).

Erlandson’s attempt to rebut proofs of Family A’s colonial origins and affiliation thus amounts to a lesson in logical inconsistency. First, he claims that records cannot prove Chumash ancestry for anyone, then claims they did prove it for Family A before conceding they did not, and, finally, he resorts to inventing *possible* Chumash ancestors whose colonial ancestry and affiliation are already documented and published. Throughout this embarrassing display, Erlandson concedes no limits to his own expertise, though he briefly comes close. “I did not choose an anthropological career to become a judge of the cultural or biological authenticity of indigenous peoples”, he writes (Erlandson et al. 1998, p. 484). If only he had weighed this more carefully! Besides his ignorance of colonial records, the limits of his expertise are evident when he equates identity with biology, an untenable notion long abandoned by anthropologists (Erlandson et al. 1998, pp. 480, 482; cf. Barth 1969; Jenkins 2008; Eriksen 2010).

As a final step, Erlandson admonishes that “anthropologists should not act as the sole arbiters of truth and justice, the diviners of who is or is not Indian, or the creators of simplistic stereotypes that exacerbate factionalism within Indian tribes or interfere in tribal self-determination” (Erlandson et al. 1998, p. 484). This sounds good, but it is purely rhetorical. Erlandson has just spent the previous pages arbitrating truth and justice, divining who is Indian, and exacerbating factionalism by ignoring decades-old complaints from Chumash communities about neo-Chumash “wannabes”. This is precisely the sort of “hired gun” performance that Haikey described. Erlandson’s symbiotic relationship with neo-Chumash enabling them both to “cash in” on archaeology is plainly revealed (Neveling and Klein 2010, p. 20).

Despite the ease with which the flaws in Erlandson’s arguments can be identified, the lesson of van Meegeren is that none of this matters if the consecrating authority’s status as a connoisseur is widely accepted. Erlandson’s status within North American archaeology is secure, so blindness to his failings on neo-Indianism can be expected. For example, a reviewer of a major study by Erlandson and others gave the project’s archaeology well-deserved praise, but naïvely extended praise to the project’s collaboration with local
Chumash, unaware that they were neo-Chumash (Lightfoot 2009). The project’s Native collaboration was a chimera.

5. A Fantasy Heritage Charter

There is a more serious example of blind trust in a cahooting scholar’s claims of expertise. In November 2009, I stumbled across the doctoral dissertation of Deana Dartt on the University of Oregon’s website. As I skimmed its contents, my curiosity turned to concern. Dartt had used the dissertation to promote her assertion of Chumash identity she claims through a maternal great-grandmother, Felipa Maria Romero (1862–1949) of Santa Barbara (Dartt-Newton 2009, p. 235). Romero had no Chumash ancestry or affiliation and publicly identified as Spanish (Haley 2010). Dartt also extended the baseless, malicious attacks on the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History made for decades by neo-Chumash of Quabaja and the Coastal Band. I notified Johnson at the museum and resolved that I had to share my concerns with Dartt’s dissertation committee. Johnson and others at the museum reached a similar conclusion. The University of Oregon’s response to the complaints reveals how a single committed cahooter in one’s institution corrupts at multiple levels.

Our experience contrasted with a similar incident reported by Patrick Lewis (2017), who lodged a complaint with a university where a graduate student asserted an indigenous identity but lacked the corresponding ancestry and affiliation. Lewis worried that the student was using resources intended for indigenous students, including teaching positions, supervision, funding, human resources support, and external funding. He cited the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) Council which has declared that “Falsifying one’s identity or relationship to particular Indigenous peoples is an act of appropriation continuous with other forms of colonial violence” (NAISA Council 2015). Lewis learned that the institution created a new policy requiring any university scholar whose indigenous self-identity lacks documentation or indigenous community support to acknowledge those gaps when stating an ethnic identity. Lewis was less than satisfied, noting that the response had more to do with protecting the institution than with addressing the root problem. Nevertheless, it was far better than the response from the University of Oregon.

Ordinarily, one does not publish a critique of a doctoral dissertation. Before universities began publishing them online, dissertations were expected to contain errors that would be fixed prior to publication. Occasionally, significant errors slip past a committee. Chances for that increase if there is a mismatch between the dissertation topic and the committee’s expertise, and Dartt’s committee had this flaw. Since the dissertation helped earn Dartt prestigious positions intended for Native Americans and dragged others at Eugene into cahoots with neo-Indianism, we must do the unusual and examine it.

Dartt was not unknown to me. Her mother’s sister began claiming Chumash ancestry and identity in the 1970s, so Dartt’s uncle paid for a professional genealogy which proved there was no Chumash ancestry. Undeterred, Dartt’s mother raised Dartt to identify as Chumash. They joined the Coastal Band, founded and run by neo-Chumash. Dartt was recruited by Erlandson to Eugene’s anthropology graduate program where her self-identity bolstered the program’s claims of service to indigenous communities. Dartt and Erlandson collaborated in taking swipes at “Anthropology and the Making of Chumash Tradition”, signaling a continuing urgency to counteract it (Erlandson and Dartt-Newton 2002, p. 30; Dartt-Newton and Erlandson 2006, p. 417).

For her dissertation, Dartt ostensibly investigated how museums represent and interact with Native peoples in California’s Chumash region. In fact, Dartt used the dissertation to create a charter for her own identity claims, thus opening her fabricated ancestry and social history to scholarly review. Dartt begins by using her fabricated ancestry to claim a privileged point of view. She writes, “I am a descendant of the people historically identified as coastal mainland Chumash and Californio and an active member (albeit currently in absentia) of this community in Santa Barbara. This connection allows me an intimate familiarity with, and knowledge of, how Indian views of life relate to the portrayal of
their lives” (Dartt-Newton 2009, pp. 16–17). This is brazen. Dartt’s own genealogical investigation, publicly posted for a time on Ancestry.com, turned up no Native California ancestry, confirming the genealogy done for the family decades earlier. The centerpiece of her charter is the theme that Californios and Chumash comprise a unified “Native community” that historians, museums, and “white” scholars have artificially separated in a “fantasy heritage” (Dartt-Newton 2009, pp. 17–18). Her mission is to recast her own Californio descendant community as being just as indigenous as the Chumash (Dartt-Newton 2009, pp. 76, 97, 143, 205, 225, 226, 248).

What Dartt proposes is truly a fantasy heritage that she can only support by falsifying data. To circumvent the evidence, Dartt searches for any sign of potential Native American ancestry among the colonists or their descendants, ignoring how social boundaries and identities were drawn by the people themselves. By repositioning neo-Chumash colonial ancestry as Native Californian she can then accuse museums of colonialism if they refuse to promote her fantasy history.

How did Dartt trick a committee of experienced scholars into believing that she had made a fabulous discovery overlooked by generations of historians? However intentional her method may or may not have been, Dartt replicates van Meegeren’s methods. Once the great forger had duped connoisseurs into confusing his own painting style with Vermeer’s, van Meegeren took shortcuts knowing that the tests which could reveal forgery were unlikely to be conducted. Indeed, no one tested Van Meegeren’s paints, so his substitution of the more modern cobalt blue for Vermeer’s favored ultramarine went unnoticed until Van Meegeren revealed the fraud (Dolnick 2008, p. 318). Dartt follows a similar strategy. To support her theme that Californios are indigenous, Dartt cites sources for her boldest inventions to give the illusion of evidence. But these sources do not support her statements, and just as in van Meegeren’s forgeries, no one bothered to check.

Dartt begins by manipulating sources on the early colonizing expeditions. She claims “180 Cochimí Indians from Baja California were part of the 1769 Portolá expedition, but the source states that 42 or 44 Cochimí departed but only 20 or 30 reached Alta California, and most of those returned to Baja (Dartt-Newton 2009, pp. 76–77; cf. Street 2004, pp. xv, 9, 12). Next, she claims that enlistment records show that “The majority of the people who arrived in these first expeditions, were Indians from northern Mexico”, though her source provides no such evidence and time-tested sources with actual evidence tell a different story (Dartt-Newton 2009, p. 78; cf. Gonzales 1999, pp. 53–54; Crosby 2003). Then Dartt states that one of her colonial ancestors, Luis Manuel Quintero, had a Mayo Indian mother, but her source does not say this. In fact, Quintero was born in Guanajuato, Jalisco, far from Mayo territory, was considered a mulato for most of his lifetime, and historians have not identified his parents (Dartt-Newton 2009, pp. 94, 99; cf. Ríos-Bustamante 1992, p. 44; Mason 1998). Later, she audaciously claims that a 1790 census of California proves that most of its colonists “were primarily Cochimi and Mayo Indians and mixed heritage people of Indian and African parentage” (Dartt-Newton 2009, p. 143). Her source says something quite different (Mason 1998, pp. 47, 50, 61–62). With these four falsifications of data—and, literally, no other evidence—Dartt concludes Spain’s colonists were “primarily” Cochimi, Mayo, and Yaqui (Dartt-Newton 2009, pp. 13, 70, 76–77, 78, 80, 82, 94, 96, 99, 143, 248).

Dartt’s next task is to prove these allegedly Indian colonists were converted to gente de razón once they were in Alta California. Once again, her evidence collapses under scrutiny. Dartt presents a list of Catholic confirmations of twelve colonists at San Gabriel mission, claiming it records their transformation from sin razón to de razón status (Dartt-Newton 2009, pp. 78–79). As any Catholic can attest, confirmation is a standard ritual of incorporation into the Catholic church. It did not confer de razón status. Dartt neglects to report that eleven were considered razón before the ritual, and the twelfth, an india child from Baja California, retained her sin razón status afterwards (Hackel 2022). Dartt also alleges that California’s colonists and natives were more intermarried and integrated than anyone has realized. Not only do her sources not support this, but several do not even address

One after another, every line of Dartt’s evidence in support of her thesis melts away upon inspection. In the end, nothing supports her fantasy thesis that Californios are indigenous Native Americans undifferentiated from the Chumash. Did some Chumash marry Californios? Certainly, though none of these couples appear in Dartt’s dissertation, an oversight that raises more doubt about Dartt’s research skills. In reputable primary sources, their numbers are few, and they were assimilated into Californio society without weakening the social boundary between Californios and indios (see, e.g., Mason 1998; Hackel 2005, pp. 61–62). Had a historian of colonial California been on her dissertation committee, these errors likely would have been challenged.

6. How Cahooting Entraps

On August 30, 2010, I wrote to members of her committee: “It is my feeling that Dartt-Newton needs to be made aware of the vulnerability of her claims and urged to bring her behavior into line with the standards of her profession. But I think you are better positioned to do so than I” (Haley 2010). I enclosed a genealogy that the committee members could easily verify and listed problems in the dissertation based on my familiarity with the sources, which exceeded that of any member of her committee. I held off from concluding Dartt had been intentionally deceptive. By late September, I had heard nothing from Eugene, so it appeared that the committee might be content to bury my concerns. But I had also sent copies to curator Johnson, director Karl Hutterer, and the California Indian Advisory Committee at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. Dartt’s unfair treatment of the museum and its people raised concern she had crossed a line into unethical conduct. In November, members of the museum’s California Indian Advisory Committee began sending their own letters, and on December 10, Johnson sent his letter to the dissertation committee, their dean, and the University’s human subjects research review committee (Johnson 2010). He requested a review of the procedures that allowed Dartt to engage in misconduct and asked for apologies to the museum and himself. He enumerated 23 more flaws with Dartt’s dissertation, including misrepresentations of her interactions with museum staff and Advisory Committee, misrepresentations of Johnson’s scholarship, and misrepresentations of her ancestry. He reported that Dartt had admitted knowing she was not of Chumash descent. He pointed out that Dartt and her committee had ignored Dr. Hutterer’s request to correct her false ancestry statement on her survey form. As Hutterer had predicted, the statement caused Chumash not to participate, while encouraging neo-Chumash to do so.

These letters sparked action in Eugene. The Anthropology Department, ethical conduct, and human subjects research committees undertook reviews of the complaints. When these were completed, the Dean of Arts and Letters wrote to Johnson declining to force changes to a dissertation that had been approved by a faculty committee following standard procedures (Coltrane 2011). The human subjects committee declared that the complaints were solely disagreements between scholars and minor errors of citation, before concluding tellingly that Dartt had not “purposefully or knowingly” violated rules of research conduct (Schenkel and Booth 2011), phrasing that creates legal and ethical cover for all but the most egregious misconduct. The human subjects reviewers did not acknowledge that the “minor” citation errors collectively nullified Dartt’s central argument. The University of Oregon defines falsification as “manipulating research materials, equipment, or processes, or changing or omitting data or results such that the research is not accurately represented in the research record” (Schenkel and Booth 2011). As I have documented above, elements in Dartt’s dissertation fit this definition. The only unanswered question is did she falsify intentionally or as a result of confirmation bias?

Dartt’s dissertation committee began their response by arguing that they have neither the obligation nor legal right to check the accuracy of Dartt’s ancestry (Stephen et al. 2011). This common response to neo-Indianism confuses and conflates two different issues. The
issue is not identity per se, but rather intellectual integrity and academic honesty while making scholarly empirical claims. If Dartt received resources or opportunities based on false assertions, there is added ethical and legal justification for raising questions. In any event, it is the empirical accuracy of claims of ancestry and affiliation—not self-identity—on which the charges against Dartt rest. Dartt opened these claims to legitimate scrutiny by using them (1) to represent herself and her research to human subjects, (2) as factual claims to support her thesis, and (3) to claim a privileged point of view. By making her ancestry and affiliation claims in the context of scholarship, Dartt made them as much a part of the dissertation committee’s oversight responsibility as any other issue of scholarly conduct. The committee’s response reveals inexperience with these nuances of neo-indigenous identity in the academy and an unwillingness to reflect critically on their support of Dartt.

Rather than review the evidence, the committee rested its case on Erlandson’s claims of expertise in Chumash history and identity politics. This was a classic category error. Neo-Chumash history lies in the colonial population of California and not among Chumash, so expertise in Chumash history is barely relevant. As it is, Erlandson’s expertise is with pre-colonial ecological adaptations, not the colonial era or colonial documents. As for Erlandson’s alleged expertise with Chumash identity politics, this consists of four decades of vilifying the use of evidence, hardly a sign of expertise. Indeed, given how unknowledgeable Erlandson is about neo-Chumash history and identity, his claim of expertise is as ethically troubling as Dartt’s behavior. Nevertheless, it is easy to appreciate that committee members would trust a close colleague of Erlandson’s stature. Unfortunately, this trust pre-determined the result of their review. Had that not been enough, the presence of Roberta Reyes Cordero on the committee likely solidified their review’s outcome. Cordero is a neo-Chumash attorney who falsely claims Chumash ancestry through her late father, Santa Barbaran Robert Cordero (1919–1964), and paternal cousins with a distant Chumash ancestor whom she does not share. Cordero’s involvement likely reflects common membership with Dartt in the Coastal Band, a non-profit that mimics a tribe.

The committee dismissed the family history evidence by declaring that descriptions of race, origin, and family relationships in historical documents are not completely reliable, are subject to interpretation, and are fallible due to potential translation errors and false paternity. These vague and unsubstantiated assertions are the committee’s only response to the evidence of Dartt’s ancestry. They even ignored Dartt’s cousin, who had written to tell them that the family knew for decades that they lacked Chumash ancestry. Although they wrote that Chumash identity claims needed to be resolved by Chumash people rather than museums or universities, by ignoring Dartt’s Salinan cousin and complaints submitted by Chumash, the committee cast their lot with Erlandson, Dartt, and the neo-Chumash. They chose to remain in cahoots. The committee members’ social relationships with Dartt and one another determined their sense of the truth. They set aside their responsibilities as scholars to maintain those relationships.

Defending the indefensible forces one into strange positions. By stating that historical descriptions of race may not be “reliable”, the committee implies that reliable descriptions of race are possible. This conflicts with anthropology’s position that race is a social construct in which any racial description is an act of racialization and boundary drawing shaped by the social circumstances in which it occurs. Changing circumstances can yield differing racializations. When changes stick, ethnic change is afoot (see, e.g., Haley and Wilcoxon 2005; Voss 2008; French 2009). This is basic stuff that professors of anthropology and ethnic studies should know, so their assertion is bizarre and a possible sign of desperation.

Equally awkward is their appeal to undiscovered false paternity. In effect, the committee holds that one’s ethnicity can be set in stone by a single biological ancestor no one can identify. They would have us believe that the potential for such unknown ancestors renders it impossible to trace identity through time. This is vulgar biological determinism. As they would have it, Dartt must be considered just as Chumash as someone whose family has been affiliated with a Chumash community throughout recorded history. Why? Just because somewhere—anywhere!—in her family tree there might have been an unidentified
and unidentifiable Indian who waited for the man of the house to depart. With this argument, the committee consecrates Dartt’s chosen identity. Thus, the committee’s response to Dartt’s documented family history is not merely poorly reasoned, it is offensively neo-colonial. Nevertheless, there is a bright side. By resorting to undiscovered false paternity for their proof, the committee tacitly reveals that they have no evidence to counter the documentation I and the others provided. So much for Erlandson’s alleged expertise.

Having gone this far to defend Dartt’s identity, the committee had little choice but to endorse her findings. They laud Dartt’s treatment of identity politics and “discovery” of her mixed heritage (How, if there is false paternity?). The committee praises Dartt for discovering a “fantasy heritage” artificially separating Chumash from Californios, ignoring the work of California historians, among whom there is firm agreement of a social boundary between gente de razón and gente sin razón (see, e.g., Miranda 1988; Sánchez 1995; Haas 1995; Hackel 2005; Voss 2008; Pubols 2009). Since all of Dartt’s proofs were falsified, the committee implicitly endorses falsification by confirming its support. The committee’s defense of Dartt’s findings reveals how ill prepared they were to supervise this particular dissertation and how ill-advised a topic it was for Dartt to pursue in the first place. Ironically, by rejecting historical records of race and insisting that potential false paternity makes it impossible to trace identity, the committee has nullified all of the ethnic identifications in Dartt’s dissertation, undermining it entirely.

Finally, the committee asserts that intermarriages blur the boundaries between Chumash and neo-Chumash. The neo-Chumash community of Santa Barbara uses its few intermarriages with Chumash to create a misleading gloss. Are a handful of marriages determinative of identity in a neo-Chumash community estimated to number a thousand? A cautionary example lies in front of everyone’s nose. The federally recognized Santa Ynez Band does not turn non-Chumash spouses of its members into tribal citizens or empower them to speak on the tribe’s behalf. Intermarriage does not negate that boundary for the tribe, nor does it consistently demolish ethnic boundaries in other societies, as anthropologists have long known (Barth 1969). We can end this review by noting a glaring mistake by Dartt’s committee. Where there is identity politics, there most certainly is a social boundary. Dismissing one while acknowledging the other is an absurd contradiction.

7. Conclusions: Consequences Too Grim to Contemplate

In characterizing the trap that cahooting creates for the duped art expert, Dolnick writes, “The experts have to believe because, if they dared admit the possibility of fraud, the consequences would be too grim to contemplate” (Dolnick 2008, p. 288). So, it goes for academics naïvely in cahoots with neo-indigenes. In this essay, I have described the roles played by scholars and academic institutions in the neo-indigenous field in North America. Often, those who deny it, as they do loudly and often, they are crucial to neo-Indians achieving a level of external approval that gives them access to resources and opportunities set aside for indigenous peoples. Indeed, North American academic institutions themselves provide many of those rewards. Because neo-Indians have non-indigenous origins, scholars, and institutions must base their support on claims to authority outside normal academic standards. Their investment in neo-Indian claims and the prestige it conveys within a multicultural framework makes it very difficult to abandon support. So, it becomes inevitable that those in cahoots fall back on a self-serving, cynical posturing as experts and successful decolonizers. Their neo-Indians repeat the mantra, and it becomes another fictitious layer of the neo-indigenous self-narrative.

After a few prominent exposés of false claims to Native American ancestry and affiliation in American academia, Sarah Viren of Arizona State University wrote, “Academia is an industry, like journalism, that defines itself in large part by its ethical standards; we’re supposed to educate people and produce knowledge. So, what does it mean that we’re also a haven for fakes?” (Viren 2021). Viren quotes one estimate that only about one-third of the roughly 1500 Native American professors in the United States have the ancestry and affiliations they claim they have. Add to this the presence of scholars who
are in cahoots with neo-Indians and whose teaching, scholarship, service, and letters of recommendation distort the facts accordingly, and the problem quickly becomes enormous. Academia is not just a haven for fakes, as Viren warns. It is also far down a path towards being an institution of deception about Native Americans, aiding in depriving them of the opportunities, services, and resources set aside for them. As crucial gateways for social mobility, colleges and universities must take a leading role in promoting greater equality. North American academia’s reliance on self-identification opens the door to naïve neo-Indians and deceitful pretendians, and just as certainly rewards naïve or dishonest cahooters who are just as essential to neo-indigenism’s success. Neo-indigenism taints or corrupts all who it touches, especially the people and institutions responsible for pursuing truth.

8. Coda: Finding a De Groot

At one point in The Forger’s Spell, Edward Dolnick tells the story of Dutch art historian, Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, who had celebrated two paintings as authentic seventeenth-century Frans Hals in 1924 (Dolnick 2008, pp. 113–21). Both later proved to be forgeries. De Groot was taken to court for fraud after an array of conclusive scientific tests proved the Merry Cavalier was a modern forgery. De Groot insisted it was not and voiced outrage that anyone would question his expertise. Nevertheless, he settled out of court. Then he wrote a booklet in which he rejected the science of testing for forgery, insisting that the eye of the connoisseur was the only valid test of art. De Groot’s booklet, Dolnick observes, was fabulous news for forgers and their collaborating dealers, because it signaled that all they needed for success was to groom and dupe a single authority who commanded a following among art collectors and who could be expected to ignore or dismiss firm evidence. De Groot’s conceit in the infallibility of his eye was hardly unique in the art world, so the field was ripe for the taking.

North America’s neo-Indians succeed by finding and nurturing their own De Groots. They are abundant in academia, due to their leading role in promoting equity and inclusion. Finding a De Groot requires face-to-face mentoring, sharing secrets, nurturing trust and obligation, and setting mutual goals. The De Groots of the neo-Indian field are scholars who are willing to believe they can know history without troubling themselves to study it. Prone to confirmation bias, they trust the stories they are given and construct moralistic arguments that it is improper to doubt them. Some may even have begun as forgers themselves, in which case misrepresenting the identity and history of other neo-indigenes is partly a self-serving act. Those De Groots frame their support as coming from a privileged indigenous status. But De Groot arguments are always tautological: they assume a priori that neo-Indians are who they claim to be, then base their verdict on that assumption.

In the end, the De Groots of the neo-Indian field have done exactly what they tell others not to do: they decide who is Indian. Like the original, the modern De Groot’s response to challenge is outrage: a posture that questioning their authority is tantamount to challenging indigenous people themselves. It works because, as in the world of art forgery, there are enough collectors who are so in awe of the connoisseur’s reputation that they will accept the connoisseur’s eye as sufficient evidence. Sadly, academia has a surplus of overconfident De Groots and unsuspecting collectors.

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