

# THEN AND NOW: From Manahatta to Manhattan

BY FRAN ASTORGA, DRAMATURG

In *Manahatta*, Mary Kathryn Nagle masterfully intertwines two distinct timelines, serving as echoing nexus points for the Lenape people. The first timeline unfolds in the early 17th Century, a period marked by the establishment and imposition of the Dutch West India Company's presence on Manahatta. The second timeline, set in 2002, leads up to the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath. Within the framework of these timelines, Nagle adeptly portrays the duality inherent in individuals, interpersonal relationships, generational divides, community dynamics, and national identity.

The characters in *Manahatta* grapple with the challenge of finding solid ground in the tumultuous social and economic landscape shaped by the greed of colonizers. This landscape is marred by corruption, exploitation, and the brutal treatment of indigenous communities and the ecosystems they rely on. The Lenape people are confronted with the daunting task of preserving their way of life amidst external pressures that seek to erode their cultural foundations.

A significant and moving theme emerges through Nagle's exploration of languages and cultural values. In the 17th century, as the Lenape learn to communicate in settler colonial languages and customs, the Dutch show little regard for understanding the ways of the Lenape. Instead, they advocate and enforce assimilation into Dutch customs while trivializing Lenape culture and heritage. This legacy of forced assimilation reverberates through both timelines, leaving a lasting impact on the identity and resilience of the Lenape people.

In the 21st century timeline, the Lenape, having endured generations of displacement, genocide, and forced assimilation, strive to preserve and revitalize their language and customs in Oklahoma. The play poignantly captures the challenges they face as they navigate the complexities of cultural preservation in a rapidly changing world. Across both eras, the Lenape resist the colonizers' culture of entitled superiority, which seeks to undermine their role as the indigenous caretakers of Manahatta.

Nagle's narrative also delves into the concept of an economic bubble, where the intrinsic value of a good is inflated by a trading network frenzied by greed. The intrinsic value of a good is informed by the qualities and utility of the good in its given circumstances. For example, in 1630's Amsterdam, tulips were appreciated for their beauty and the societal status they signified. The tulip prices were driven to unsustainable levels when the contracts for tulip orders were continuously sold and traded. At a certain point, the value of a contract

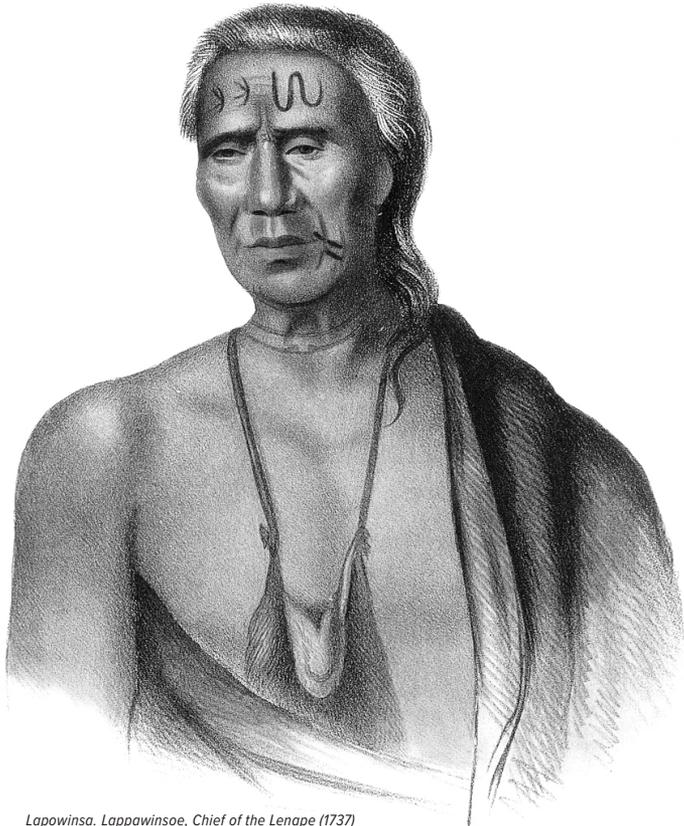


Admiral Verrijck Tulip. Tulip picture from the catalog of P.Cos printed in 1637 in the Netherlands.

became its potential to generate a profit when sold and not in the value or desire for the tulips themselves. When tulip prices dropped, the potential for profit evaporated and resulted in a tremendous loss for anyone who held on to a contract.

The play underscores the universality of this economic concept, emphasizing its potential occurrence at any scale and in any market. The detachment of value from tangible qualities is portrayed vividly through historical examples, ranging from tulips in 17th-century Amsterdam to the housing market in 21st-century America, and is reflected in the commodification of heritage items like wampum and furs and the potential loss of a generational home. The playwright's exploration of economic bubbles serves as a powerful commentary on the inherent risks and consequences of unchecked greed within societies and what we consider worthy of investment.

*Manahatta* invites us to reflect on the cyclical nature of historical patterns, the continued and repetitive harm of settler colonialism, and the importance of cultural preservation. By juxtaposing the 17th-century and 21st-century narratives, Nagle highlights the interconnectedness of past and present and leads us to consider the implications of historical actions on contemporary issues and engage with the broader questions of identity, heritage, and the enduring impact of historical forces on contemporary realities. *Which cyclical legacies do we invest in to perpetuate and which do we divest in to break?*



Lapowinsa. Lappawinsoe, Chief of the Lenape (1737)  
by Gustavus Hesselius