Muhheakantuck—Everything Has a Name*

MATTHEW BUCKINGHAM

The dream of vertical ascent and hovering flight seems to have first appeared in China in the form of a toy—a bamboo dragonfly that lifted straight up through the air when spun quickly.

The dream of vertical ascent and hovering flight is a dream of suspending time through distance—of cutting oneself off from ordinary measures of time—“surface time.”

The numbers we use to count the years are like the codes we use when we send a letter or make a telephone call—arbitrary and systematic—invented and determined by those who lived in the past—maintained by authority—and only made meaningful because most of us agree to use them.

On September 11, 1609, Henry Hudson and his crew sailed into the mouth of the river that would later bear his name. He was not flying the flag of Holland on his ship but rather the corporate flag of the Dutch East India Company.

Far from being the first, Hudson was one of the last Europeans to arrive before European colonization. Indeed, there seems to have been little surprise when one of the first indigenous people he met on his voyage spoke to him in French.

If I draw a line on a sheet of paper in order to think of it as a street or a river, I have made a place, a place where you can imagine another place. But the line also limits our imagination, keeping this place in one spot and not in another.

When European mapmakers began to draw the image of the world as a globe, they found many solutions to the problem of placing a spherical form on a flat sheet of paper. At least one cartographer mapped the world metaphorically in the image of a male human head. Europe occupied the position of the “face.” The

* Text of the voice-over from Matthew Buckingham, Muhheakantuck—Everything Has a Name (2004), continuous color 16 mm film projection with sound, 38 minutes. The film was first exhibited in Watershed: The Hudson Valley Art Project, Beacon, New York, curated and organized by Diane Shamash.
Atlantic Ocean lay behind the head’s right ear, Asia at the left. The so-called New World lay on the back of the head, directly in Europe’s “blind spot.”

Less anthropomorphized world maps also attempted to describe “what Europe couldn’t see.” Many were inscribed with a curious waterway. Although it appeared in various forms, it invariably connected the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, providing an easier way to sail from Europe to Asia. This waterway was called the Northwest Passage. No one knew whether or not it existed. Courts and monarchs in Europe wished for it to exist, so they commissioned maps that depicted it, so that more navigators would look for it.

Under the rule of the Habsburgs, Spain used the Netherlands as a warehouse and distribution center for northern Europe. Amsterdam became an economic and cultural delta. When the Dutch merchant class became wealthy, they rebelled against Spain, initiating years of war.

When they took over the Spanish trade infrastructure, Dutch investors saw four hundred percent profits. Business was so good Dutch traders agreed not to compete against each other and created a trade monopoly, the Dutch East India Company. Anyone in Holland could buy shares in the company on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange.

But out on the sea Spain still threatened Holland’s fleet. Insurance costs were high, and arming the boats limited cargo space.

In 1609, after forty years of war, Holland and Spain agreed to a twelve-year truce. At the same time, the Bank of Amsterdam was founded, and loan and credit systems were expanded. Taking advantage of peace and financing, the Dutch East India Company hired Henry Hudson to look for a new passage to Asia.

Hudson wrote in detail about his voyage in his captain’s log. When he returned to Amsterdam, the log became the property of the company. Two hundred years later it was sold, along with eighty thousand pounds of company records, as scrap paper and destroyed.

One of Hudson’s crew members, Robert Juet, wrote down the depths of the waters they sailed through. After dutifully listing his findings each day, Juet occasionally also narrated his own experience on Hudson’s ship.

Robert Juet didn’t know the names of the landmarks he and Hudson passed by. He did not know what name the people in this part of the world called themselves. Juet referred to them as “the people of the country.” In his journal he didn’t write down any of the words that were exchanged during the twenty-one encounters he and Hudson had with them. He did say that Hudson kidnapped three “people of the country” near the point now called Sandy Hook, New Jersey. One immediately escaped—the others a few days later—as the ship sailed past the mountains that would be renamed the Catskills.

Everything has a name, or the potential to be named, but who does the naming when the unknown is falsely assumed not to exist?

Tasting salt in the river one hundred fifty miles upstream, Hudson cautiously hoped he might have found the Northwest Passage.
When they were near what is now called the City of Albany, New York, Hudson invited several “people of the country” to board his ship. He gave them alcohol to drink. Robert Juet wrote that he thought the one woman in the group behaved the way he would expect a Dutch or English woman to behave in a place that was as strange to her. The alcohol made one of the people drunk, and the others felt uncertain and were concerned for him. They left and came back with numerous strands of beads, which they gave to him. The next day they came again, bringing more beads, and were relieved to find the man well again. That afternoon they gave Hudson a tour of their homes and their land.

Meanwhile, a few men from Hudson’s ship were charting the waters farther upriver. They returned that night with the news that Hudson’s journey was at an end. The river was too shallow for the big ship to navigate. They had not found the Northwest Passage.

Robert Juet wrote that on the way back, downriver, one of the “people of the country” followed Hudson’s ship in a canoe, climbed aboard, and took Juet’s pillow and two of his shirts from his cabin. The ship’s first mate shot and killed this man. Hudson sent out the small boat to collect the pillow and shirts. When another person of the country attempted to tip this boat over, the ship’s cook cut off one of his hands and he drowned.

The following day, before reaching the mouth of the river, one of the three people Hudson had earlier kidnapped reappeared, leading an attack on the ship. Juet and the ship’s crew killed eight of these men.

The following year Robert Juet joined Henry Hudson on another voyage in search of the Northwest Passage but appears to have mutinied against him. Hudson, his young son, and loyal crew members were left to die in a rowboat in the icy waters called Winipekw, later renamed “Hudson’s Bay.”

The river that became known as the Hudson was not discovered—it was invented and reinvented.

The point where the river joins the sea is both its end and a beginning. As fresh water empties out into the ocean, seawater surges more than one hundred fifty miles up the middle of the river.

“Muhheakantuck”: the river that flows in two directions. The people who named it this call themselves the Lenape, or Leni-Lenape, meaning people, or common people, or real people. Europeans translated this name as “we the people.”

We understand the world through our experience—and our experience of other people’s experience.

Writing substitutes the eye for the ear. Writing substitutes the hand for the mouth. Colonizing language also colonizes memory and imagination.

Most of the Lenape who encountered Henry Hudson expected to exchange furs with him for European goods and knew exactly which furs were in greatest demand in Holland.

As he searched for the Northwest Passage, Hudson drew a map of the coastline he saw in the distance from on board his ship. The detailed lines on his map
describe the way the water meets the land and almost nothing else. Behind these lines Hudson’s map is empty.

Hudson did not know it, but there is a waterway connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans—it flows deep under the ice cap that stretches across the earth’s North Pole. The first ship to navigate these waters was the Nautilus, a nuclear-powered U.S. Navy submarine.

Even though Hudson did not find a Northwest Passage, the Dutch East India Company was interested in the furs he purchased on his trip. Holland immediately claimed exclusive trading rights to the region behind the lines on Hudson’s map, renaming the land of the Lenape “New Netherland.”

Everything has a name, or the potential to be named.

When the Dutch floated into their world, the Lenape called them “Swannekins,” or salt beings, or bitter beings, or “the salty people.” Some Lenape say this refers to the Dutch arriving over the sea, or to the bitter nature of interactions with the Dutch, or to an origin story for European people: that they were created from the foam of the saltwater lapping against the shores of Europe and later floated west to the land of the Lenape.

The Dutch occasionally referred to the Lenape in writing as “Americans.”

In 1613 the Dutch East India Company built a small storehouse on the southern tip of what they called Manhattan Island. The next year they established a twelve-person military garrison near the place on the river where Hudson turned around when he discovered he had not discovered the Northwest Passage. The company purchased furs at the garrison upriver, then shipped them down river and on to Holland. The Lenape’s northern neighbors, the Mahicans, may have allowed the Dutch to establish the garrison on their lands because it gave them a trading advantage over their rivals, the Mohawks.

The beads that Robert Juet and Henry Hudson saw on their trip are called wampum—small tubular beads of white and purple shell strung together and sewn into belts. The patterns on the belts are memory aids, recording events and stories. Initially, the Dutch did not understand the importance of wampum. Attempting to demonstrate Dutch power to the neighboring Pequot, the Dutch captured a Pequot leader and threatened to decapitate him unless a large ransom was paid. The Pequot gave the Dutch more than eight hundred feet of wampum. But expecting payment in beaver skins, the Dutch killed their hostage and returned his body to the Pequot.

After the Dutch realized the value attached to wampum, the Pequot, Lenape, and others counteracted the fluctuating value of European trade goods by reconfiguring wampum as a monetary currency with a set value. In exchange for their beaver skins, the Lenape asked for exact payment in wampum. In order to pay, the Dutch first had to buy wampum from Lenape or Pequot manufacturers. Wampum production became a major industry for groups living along coastal waters, and some Dutch attempted to counterfeit wampum.
Toy helicopters had become popular across Europe by the fifteenth century. Leonardo da Vinci designed a helicopter that would never fly. The dream of vertical ascent and hovering flight creates imaginary views of real places. The world is a place, but the globe is a reality that most of us will only experience as an image.

By capturing land on paper, maps always construct their worlds in the image of a society, placing the unobtainable within reach—drawing places in order to possess them.

Land, light, water, air.

In agreeing to share their land, the Lenape were asking the Dutch to join an alliance to protect the land together from common enemies. Being similar to light, water, and air, land was not considered a possession.

Despite opposing ideas of communal land vs. private property, both Europeans and Lenape believed they held land as custodians for spirit beings, and both used complex systems for transferring land rights, ritually exchanging valuable gifts to finalize deals.

Even the Dutch didn’t think that they owned the air, but later, U.S. property laws stipulated that landowners did legally own everything above their land “to an indefinite extent.” Airspace above the immediate reaches of the Earth was returned to the public domain when air travel became possible. Possession was then limited to what could be used in connection with the land, and this airspace can still be sold, rented, or traded.

So real estate, too, has a dream of vertical ascent and hovering flight—of repeating the same piece of earth over and over, above its original, in the form of tall buildings.

When the twelve-year truce with Spain expired, Holland went back to war, and back to profiting from war. Investors created a separate branch of the company, the Dutch West India Company, and voted to establish a year-round colony in “New Netherland” to be used as a base for attacking Spanish trade and storing plunder. Thirty families, employees of the company, settled at outposts on Manhattan Island and upriver at the garrison. All private trading was forbidden. Eleven African slaves owned by the company were also brought to New Amsterdam. Company slaves built fortifications, and later walls, around the settlements to keep the British and the Lenape out.

To say that New Netherland, or even New Amsterdam, was “Dutch” is a little misleading. The company was Dutch-owned, but only half of its citizen-employees were Dutch-speaking. The first thirty families were Walloon. They were joined by English, French, Irish, Swedish, Danish, German, Frisian, Italian, and Moroccan employees. Eighteen languages were spoken among a few hundred people.

Outside of the colonies the indigenous people of North America were speaking one-quarter of the entire world’s languages at that time.
The financial gain of stockholders was the sole objective of the company. The company had no religious motives and was more interested in profit than colonizing land. The company kept copious records of their internal business affairs but only occasional disinterested accounts of their Lenape trade partners.

The Dutch catered to the Lenape’s needs. When Lenapes complained that brightly colored European fabric drew attention and spoiled their hunting, the company gave them darker, more camouflaged colors.

Holland consistently increased the volume of trade by exploiting this dependence on new European products. Anything the Europeans introduced that proved useful to indigenous people could only be replaced through the fur trade. This encouraged overhunting and led to the extinction of fur-bearing animals. And, as the coastal fur trade collapsed, so did coastal indigenous political power.

In 1656 eighty thousand beaver skins were exported to Amsterdam. By that same year, the Dutch estimated that ninety percent of the Lenape had died from imported disease.

On Manhattan more than two thousand Lenape had died or left the Island, and the land upriver was described by the Dutch as being “empty” due to disease.

After fourteen epidemics the number of Lenape living in what the Dutch called New Netherland was reduced from more than twenty-four thousand to less than three thousand.

Today, sixty-three thousand Native Americans live in what was once New Netherland; ten thousand in Manhattan.

When the company lifted the ban on private fur trading among employees, many colonists abandoned agriculture. Unable to feed and shelter itself, the colony imported more and more slaves, eventually selling them to private buyers at subsidized rates.

When the number of people living in New Netherland reached one thousand five hundred, the population of neighboring New England was already above twenty thousand. The English made the same claim against New Netherland that Europeans made against Native America. They told the Dutch that it was a “sin” to let land lie uncultivated and seized so-called unused territories from the Dutch.

Long after the English had entirely displaced the Dutch, changing the name of the Land of the Lenape from New Netherland to New York, King George II placed a ban on westward European expansion in North America, forbidding colonists to settle west of the Ohio River. During the rebellion against the British, the U.S. Continental Congress promised the Lenape that in exchange for remaining neutral during the war, the Ohio River would be the permanent western boundary of the United States. But at the same time, Congress was promising colonists land in that region as payment for fighting against England.

Surviving Lenape were forcibly displaced and dislocated to destination after destination, to the places that would later be renamed Ohio, Indiana, Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma, Idaho, Montana, Wisconsin, Ontario. Each of these, in turn, was also promised to them forever.
Air, land, water, light.

Europeans finally realized the dream of vertical ascent and hovering flight when they developed the lighter-than-air balloon, which was quickly adapted to military use. After the invention of the airplane and controlled flight, the dream grew even stronger, resulting in a more precise and versatile flying machine—the helicopter.

In 1961 the U.S. Army flew thirty Shawnee helicopters into the countryside west of Saigon, Vietnam, on a mission to destroy a Viet Cong radio transmitter. This was the first time helicopters were used as assault vehicles. The helicopters had been given the name of the Shawnee people, one of the Algonkian-speaking groups that the Haudenosaunee pushed west during the fight over the beaver trade.

The maneuverability of the helicopter was a major factor in the U.S. decision to go to war in Vietnam. It was argued that the helicopter would give the U.S. the advantage over the North Vietnamese that the French had lacked.

Instead, after being defeated, the U.S. used this precise maneuverability to evacuate more than seven thousand embassy and military personnel from Saigon in the last twenty-four hours of the war while the North Vietnamese took control of the city.

The fiction of history is to imagine the real. History makes reality desirable. It has the illusion of “speaking itself,” as if it simply happened.

Stories condense time the way maps miniaturize space. But somehow, condensing time seems to distance the past from us rather than to bring it closer.

What unfolds in a story—what really happens in a story—is language.

Whenever something is said there is also silence.

One of the first steps in learning a new language is to be able to hear the silence between the words.

Words are convenient and silence can be uncomfortable.

What feels familiar is actually unknown—because we think we already understand the things that are familiar to us.

In every silence there is a presence. Silence is not passive.

New Netherland was controlled by a series of Governors General appointed by the company. The third of these, Willem Kieft, tried to levee a tax on the Lenape—a fee for, quote-unquote, protecting them. When his intimidation failed, he ordered his soldiers to attack a group of Lenape living at Pavonia, now Jersey City, New Jersey. One colonist wrote that the details of the horror of this attack were unspeakable.

Six years later, a pamphlet entitled “Broad Advice” appeared in Antwerp describing the event in great detail. The pamphlet was written and published anonymously. Perhaps the writer who had earlier found the horror unspeakable rediscovered his own voice in anonymity.
The pamphlet was meant to discredit the Dutch West India Company by exposing its mismanagement of New Netherland. Intending to shock, the pamphlet gave a sensationalized secondhand account of dozens of Lenape infants, children, parents, and elders being stabbed, shot, immolated, or drowned in the raid on Pavonia. It said that the survivors did not know who had attacked them in the night and that the Dutch let them believe their indigenous rivals were responsible.

David DeVries, another dissatisfied colonist, returned home after failing to establish himself in New Netherland. He copied parts of this pamphlet, verbatim, into his own memoir, claiming the words of protest as his own.

Other colonists wrote, in their own names and in their own words, that that same night Kieft’s men attacked another gathering of Lenape at Corlear’s Hook in Manhattan, near where the Williamsburg Bridge stands today. They wrote that the heads of eighty victims were brought back to New Amsterdam and put on display.

In response, eleven Lenape groups banded together in a confederation against the company. They destroyed numerous farms, killing many colonists. Colonists abandoned their settlements in what are now Jersey City, Westchester County, and upper Manhattan.

Willem Kieft then hired John Underhill to fight the Lenape. Underhill was well known for planning the English massacre of the Pequot—lighting their homes on fire while they slept, then shooting them as they tried to escape. Using these methods, Underhill killed more than one thousand six hundred Lenape at Pound Ridge, Westchester; Hempstead, Long Island; and on Staten Island.

But colonists thought Kieft’s violent policies were bad for business, and two colonists tried to kill him. The company eventually recalled Kieft, but he died in a shipwreck in the false English Channel.

New Netherland existed for forty years. In that time more than twenty-three thousand Lenape died. To European colonists accustomed to their own radically escalating arms race in Europe, this number may have seemed relatively small. During these same years, seven and a half million Germans died in the Thirty Years War.

How do we know what we think we know? My thoughts consist of what I’ve seen, heard, read, spoken, dreamt—and what I’ve thought about what I’ve seen, heard, read, spoken, and dreamt.

Silence occludes the ordinary, the implied, the everyday, the unexceptional—everything not considered important enough to be mentioned. Yet the significance of past events appears in these ordinary moments experienced by people whose names we do not always know. That’s why the quotidian becomes a limit of understanding—and a limit for speaking about the past.

The unknown is more than an occasion for possibilities, it is a provocation that propels us on a journey, a route of unknowing in which we experience many of the ways that we do not know something.

Our bodies are frameworks with which we create abstract thought and systems of categories. In the Lenape language there is no article corresponding to
the English word “the.” Speakers of Lenape reveal the position from which they speak and express their relationship to what they speak about. Without “the,” there is no way to experience our world and not become part of it.

It’s easy to forget that it is the eye that makes the horizon.

In the dream of vertical ascent and hovering flight we glimpse the cartographer’s view: a fictional disembodied eye suspended high in the air. But as soon as we follow one line, or one river, and not another, a journey emerges, even if it is only a dream. And of course that journey unavoidably becomes a story. Spaces that have been abstracted once more become particular places.

**Seal of the City of New York.**