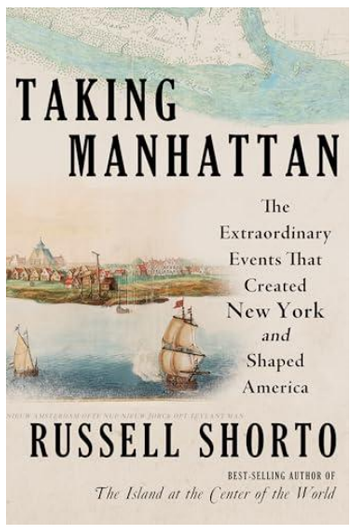

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Taking Manhattan: The Extraordinary Events That Created New York and Shaped America

van Shorto, Russell

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> A long-standing thesis in American colonial history holds that the Puritans of Boston were intellectual precursors of the American Revolution: that both the notion of America's independence from England and of religious liberty have their origins in the Massachusetts Bay Colony of the previous century. There are problems with this reasoning. The Puritans were aggressively intolerant of other faiths, and their yearning for political independence was not in the name of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" but for the sake of "godly rule," of which they were to be the arbiters.

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> It also involved a European custom: a paper, the words of which were read aloud and onto which men on both sides scratched signatures or marks. There is a widely held but mistaken view today that Native Americans prior to contact with Europeans had no notion of property rights—that to them land was as free and universal as the air. It's more accurate to say that the Lenape and other groups had a different idea of property rights. They had no sense of individual ownership of land, but they had a concept of territory over which a particular tribe or nation had authority. They fought territorial wars with one another. And a tribe could choose to grant others access to their land or to a portion of it. But such a grant wasn't exclusive: it didn't mean that they themselves wouldn't continue to use it. And it wasn't permanent. The deal could be revised later. It's also wrong to think the Native people had no way of recording such agreements. They didn't use a system of writing, but they marked important events with wampum—strings of beads—or on notched sticks. So there was some common ground between the Europeans and the Native Americans. Both had a sense of territorial rights, both were capable of fighting over territory, but both also had traditions whereby they could change who was entitled to that possession. Hence this ceremony. But of course there were vast cultural

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> I imagine their household as a New World version of a Jan Steen interior: chaotic, brimming with life, with children darting back and forth between the two houses. Similar stories played out in the streets around them—people of humble status, from a variety of backgrounds, finding a way forward. Anthony van Salee was apparently born in Spain to a Dutch pirate father and a Moorish mother. Griet Reyniers was a German or Dutch prostitute. They met and married in Amsterdam, then emigrated to Manhattan, where between the two of them they racked up fifteen court appearances in a two-year period, for drunkenness, fighting, slander, and the time a group of sailors called Griet a whore and she responded by baring her bottom and crying, “Blaes mij daer achterin!” which could loosely translate to “Kiss me back there!” But just when we might expect to see the couple fall through the cracks of the records and into oblivion, they find their footing in society. They become prominent landholders. Their children married into the elite, and their progeny stayed there, with descendants who would include Warren G. Harding and Cornelius Vanderbilt.

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> The climax of this activity came in 1602, with the founding of the Dutch East India Company. In addition to fueling the so-called Golden Age, spawning fabulous growth and wreaking untold havoc and misery in the lands it colonized, the company spurred the development of many of the basic elements of capitalism: shares of stock, a stock exchange, the very idea of a permanent company that individuals could own and sell pieces of. Under its sibling, the West India Company, New Amsterdam was launched as an outpost for the exploitation of the western hemisphere. When the West India Company gave up its trading monopoly, things on Manhattan began to get interesting, as an experiment got under way in which an overarching multinational corporation attempted to make money by permitting other, smaller companies to do business within its protective framework. The other force at play in New Amsterdam, which likewise relates back to the home country, was toleration. The idea that there ever was such a thing as a Dutch policy of toleration in the seventeenth century has been called into question in recent years. How can we call a society tolerant that was responsible for a large share of European colonialism, including mass enslavement and the enduring legacy of systemic racism? If there even was such a thing, the toleration that came into being in the Dutch Republic was surely quite narrow. These are valid points. We need to cast a cold eye on the mindset of our ancestors. At the same time, we ought to appreciate historical moments that spawned the values we hold. In an age in which Europe was awash in religious warfare—when intolerance was official policy in Spain, France, and England; when European armies were slaughtering one another over doctrinal religious disputes—the Dutch determined that they should tolerate those who believed differently. The toleration that the Dutch pioneered didn't include everyone. Limited though it was, however, it was real. It was enshrined in the Union of Utrecht of 1579, the agreement that brought the disparate provinces together into one nation. This text decreed "that each person shall remain free in his religion and that no one shall be investigated or persecuted because of his religion." This was a watershed. It was also grudging. There were whole sectors of society that thought it was a bad idea to tolerate even other forms of Christianity. Yet throughout the course of the 1600s religious toleration—pushed by a group of reformist Calvinists called the Remonstrants—became a feature of the Dutch system. By the latter decades of the century, foreign visitors to Dutch cities remarked on it. Often they did so in the negative, believing that accepting other forms of religious expression weakened a society and went against God's will.

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> The difference between this early arrival and the slave trade that Stuyvesant oversaw beginning in 1659 was in scope and intent. The first Africans to appear on Manhattan were to some extent a result of happenstance. They had had a brutal time getting to a destination that none of them had ever intended to reach. Earlier that year a flotilla of Dutch privateers on the hunt for enemy ships in the war against Spain and Portugal had captured a Portuguese vessel near Venezuela. The Portuguese were en route from São Tomé, off the coast of West Africa, and carried 225 Africans. (Portuguese middlemen more or less invented the slave trade in the fifteenth century and were far ahead of everyone else in the early seventeenth century.) The vanquished ship was in bad shape after the fight; we can imagine screams and moans of horror as the awareness spread among the chained prisoners that it was slowly sinking. The Dutch victors clambered aboard, surveyed the situation, and decided to take 22 of the Africans—the healthiest of the lot—as prizes, which was all they could carry, and leave the rest. They couldn't haul their captives all the way back to the home country: it was too far, and anyway slavery was illegal there. But word had gotten round of the recently founded colony in North America. Slavery for most of the life of New Netherland was likewise a disorganized affair. There were no West India Company shipments from Africa. There were no regulations governing the practice of slavery. Dorothea Angola's life gives us a sense of what it was like and of how unlike our mental image of American slavery it was. We

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> That many of the Angolans who wound up in Manhattan were named after Catholic saints adds to our understanding of their identities. A standard trope of the history of American slavery holds that Christian faith among enslaved Africans was a result of their captivity—that, often, owners encouraged them to adopt the faith as a way to keep them docile. But many Africans who were shipped to the Americas during the seventeenth century were already Christian thanks to the extent of Portuguese colonization on the African continent A European traveler in the Congo in the 1640s found that "there are many churches, where Portuguese papists conduct daily services and other ceremonies." The Portuguese presence in Angola was profound enough by Dorothea Angola's time that she may well have been born and baptized a Catholic and thus would have carried her faith with her to the New World. It also means that once in New Amsterdam these first enslaved Africans on Manhattan had strong natural bonds with one another. They may have come from villages that were hundreds of miles apart, but they probably shared a common language—Kimbundu, which today is spoken by more than two million people in Angola (where Portuguese is still the official language)—and customs. Many of them would go on to live through the decades of the Dutch colony's history together, becoming a tightly knit community. Together they experienced deaths, marriages, births. Probably shortly after arrival, Dorothea married Paolo Angola. And she must have been particularly close with one other early arrival, a woman named Mayken van Angola. They were likely about the same age, spoke the same language, shared customs and a region of origin. Year after year they saw one another around town, attended many of the same functions, commiserated, raised children, ultimately grew old together. Their fates were intertwined.

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> Later that same year, Paolo and Dorothea were granted their own land, a six-acre tract two miles north of the city, encompassing much of present-day MacDougal, Sullivan, and Thompson Streets—the part of Greenwich Village that three centuries later would be made famous by the likes of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Lenny Bruce. Dorothea and her husband formed a community with other freed couples who were given land nearby, which in time became known as the Land of the Blacks. For several years the couple seem

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> Johan de Witt had one of the most brilliant minds of his age. He wrote the first textbook of analytic geometry and devised the first accurate actuarial tables. He was also the Grand Pensionary of Holland, more or less equivalent to Prime Minister of the Dutch Republic. In October 1664 he was busy leading a nation that was in the midst of not only an unprecedented economic boom but a golden age in art and one of the first European experiments with a republican form of government. De Witt was not the sort of person who shied away from complexity—his mathematical work had been praised by the likes of Isaac Newton—yet even he must have struggled to manage his emotions on this autumn day. The English had been increasingly belligerent toward his country of late. Through the swashbuckling efforts of Robert Holmes, they had attacked and taken Dutch holdings on the West African coast. De Witt was well aware of English jealousy toward his nation and of the increasing yearning for war among those close to the Stuart government. He knew the English were goading him. De Witt was a careful, methodical

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> De Witt likely detested Downing as much as everyone else did, but we can imagine him dispassionate in their discussion, determined to maintain propriety. Then, whatever the point was that De Witt was in the process of making, he was interrupted by an aide handing him a hastily scribbled note. It was from several of the directors of the West India Company. They had traveled to The Hague with alarming news. Apparently, they were at this moment standing outside the meeting room, saw who De Witt was with, and felt he had to be informed at once of developments. De Witt read the note:

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> Nicolls was also connected to the founders of the Royal Society, people who believed in the primacy of reason and in what we would call science. By the time he sailed to North America to try to take Manhattan, everything in his past had established him as a conduit for these forces. He opposed the Puritan rule in Massachusetts not only because those leaders defied the Stuart government but on principle. In the confrontation with the Dutch on Manhattan, meanwhile, he found enough common ground to hash out an agreement that would allow features of the system they had created to remain in place. He promised to merge the pragmatic tradition in English culture with the similar tradition that he found in New Netherland. Once Nicolls was in charge of New York, two questions presented themselves. Would he indeed lead the population toward that merger? And would the inhabitants of Manhattan Island do their part to make the merger work? Things didn't seem promising at first. A month after the takeover Nicolls asked the leaders of the city to gather in order to swear an oath of allegiance to the government of King Charles. Nicolls considered this the fulfillment of their side of the bargain. He had given them, in the Articles of Transfer, a guarantee of their rights. He expected loyalty to England in return. When Nicolls arrived at City Hall, he looked around in confusion. The city council and the burgemeesters were here, but where was Stuyvesant? Where was Cornelis van Ruyven? Where were the ministers of the church? One of the Dutchmen informed him that they hadn't understood that they should be present since they were not official leaders of the city. Nicolls said they certainly were expected—he wanted every person of influence to sign the oath—so someone ran off to get them. A short while later, when all were assembled, Nicolls read the oath they were to swear to. It contained the line "and I will obey all such commands as I shall receive from his majestie, his Royall Highnesse James duke of Yorck, and such governours, and Officers as from time to time are appointed over me." The assembly erupted in protest. Demanding that they swear such an oath, they informed Nicolls, was in violation of the Articles of Transfer, which gave them the right of self-government. A debate ensued. Nicolls eventually left in exasperation. That was on a Friday. The following Tuesday the two burgemeesters met with Nicolls, who was in an even worse mood. Over the weekend word had swept through the town that he intended to break the transfer agreement.

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> Stuyvesant presumably came clean to Nicolls about what he had done with the land patents and why he had done it. Nicolls seemed mollified, and he concurred. He confirmed the patents for the property of the freed Africans, including that of Dorothea Angola and her husband, giving them some hope that they would have a secure future as free New Yorkers. If that was one small, positive step for Black people in the city, the liveliness of the sale of the men and women from the Gideon also made it clear that Manhattan held great promise as a slave-trading center. Farms up the Hudson River needed workers, and the Chesapeake region to the south was becoming filled with tobacco plantations; tobacco was a demanding, labor-intensive crop, and planters were willing to pay good money for enslaved workers. Nicolls was all for turning Manhattan into a slaving hub: he showed no hesitation at mounting a trade in human beings. His problem was that the slavery business that Stuyvesant had pioneered in New Netherland had been conducted under the auspices of the West India Company, and the trade went through the Dutch-controlled island of Curaçao. Nicolls's own action in taking Manhattan had severed that connection.

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> Americans today are slowly coming to realize that New York was a major hub of the slave trade. We may still associate the institution with the southern states, but it was so much a part of the economy and way of life of New York in the city's first century and a half that by 1730 some 42 percent of families in the city owned slaves. Even as it seemingly faced the changing times and passed an act for the gradual abolition of slavery in 1799, the state of New York did so with subterfuge and with every consideration for the enslavers. The act freed no one but rather ensured that children born of enslaved mothers would be free once they reached the age of twenty-five in the case of women and twenty-eight in the case of men. Ten years after the supposed abolition, 20 percent of the population of Brooklyn consisted of enslaved Blacks.

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> As the city became both the country's largest port and its financial center, its role in the cotton trade tied its economy tightly to southern slavery, such that by the middle of the nineteenth century New York was as much a hotbed of pro-slavery sentiment as anyplace in the South. At the same time, white and Black abolitionists made the city their base, and thousands who fled enslavement in the South sought refuge in New York. The city became a battleground. "Slave catchers" prowled lower Manhattan as Black abolitionists led meetings and edited newspapers with names like Freedom's Journal and The Rights of All. As the Civil War was about to break, journalist J. D. B. De Bow asserted what everyone already knew, that New York was "almost as dependent on Southern slavery as Charleston itself." If anything, attitudes among whites in the city hardened after the war, when stereotypes of Black people as slow-witted, drunk, and lecherous became commonplace. As in other places the end of slavery in New York didn't result in equality but in new forms of racism. All of this later history traces back to Stuyvesant's "experiment with a consignment of Negroes" and Nicolls's legalization of slavery. If the idea of New York that was forged in 1664 contained within it the liberating concept of tolerance, it also contained both the seeds of intolerance and plenty of fertilizer to help them grow.

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> The so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 is oddly named, and characterizing the decisive action in it as an invitation, as English history has done, is a case of spin-doctoring on a historic scale. The idea for it came not from England but from the Continent: from Willem, his advisers, and a small band of English noblemen in exile. Willem paved the way for a Dutch takeover of England by engineering what historian Jonathan Israel has called "one of the greatest and most decisive propaganda coups of early modern times," arranging to have Dutch publishers secretly print and distribute thousands of copies of a declaration to the English people in which he decreed that James had "overturned the Religion, Laws and Liberties" of England and that he, a Dutch prince, had been asked by English officials to establish "lawful authority." In November 1688, more than four hundred ships carrying twenty-one thousand soldiers crossed to England and landed on the Devon coast. Once there Willem announced that he had come to free English Protestants from Catholic tyranny. English leaders who were opposed to James had prepared the way, and Willem's army met little resistance on its two-hundred-mile procession to London. Dutch troops took over the city, manning Whitehall Palace and other official locales, and indeed would remain stationed in England for years. James fled London and the Dutch army and spent much of his last eleven years wandering or on the run. In February 1689, Willem and his wife became William and Mary, King and Queen of England. This peaceful invasion was made possible by the same thing that made the invention of New York possible: an infusion of Dutch ideas. Over the previous decades, despite the bitter rivalry between the two nations, a parade of Dutch thinkers, painters, craftsmen, cartographers, mathematicians, and politicians had entered England and profoundly influenced English life. And the segment of English society that Richard Nicolls epitomized—pragmatic, curious, tolerant of the new and the other—had welcomed these foreigners and absorbed this flow of influences. The founders of the Royal Society were directly influenced by Dutch scientists. John Locke, the great English political philosopher, wrote his Two Treatises of Government while living in the Dutch Republic. The great "English" artists of the period who depicted and worked for the English royal family—Anthony van Dyck, Peter Lely, and Peter Paul Rubens—were actually from the Low Countries.

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> What's more, after Willem became King William, George Downing, the odious but brilliant English ambassador to The Hague, who had worked for years to transplant Dutch financial methods to England, finally succeeded in doing so. When the Bank of England was established in 1694, it capped a transformation of the English system of finance along Dutch lines. Methods the Dutch had long used to finance their government and build their empire became English. The success of the British Empire that was to come, many historians assert, rests in no small part on this Dutch base.

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> There is thus an enormous irony in James's downfall. He had wanted in the worst way to get at the Dutch, and not only took their North American colony but stamped it permanently with his name, only to have a Dutch nobleman trump him in colossal fashion, taking his crown, his country, and virtually everything that mattered to him. If New York became a merger of Dutch and English elements on American shores, the Glorious Revolution fused Dutchness and Englishness in England itself and in ways that English history has never truly come to terms with. Put another way, if the Dutch city of New Amsterdam became English in 1664, a quarter of a century later England itself became, in a sense, Dutch.

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> ideas. The first political parties in the country's history came into being in New York in the 1730s, as did the concept of freedom of the press. Kenneth Jackson and David Dunbar, the editors of Empire City, a collection of writings about New York, ask, "Is it a coincidence that the American Communist Party, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the gay rights movement all started in the city?" They might have added as well modern liberalism (Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal grew out of his time as governor of New York) and conservatism (both William F. Buckley's National Journal and the neoconservative movement were born in New York).