

# A Black Dutchman and the Racial Discourse of the Dutch in America, 1850–1920

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Following the American Civil War, a Dutch-American immigrant soldier returned to his home in Holland, Michigan, with a freed slave whom he had adopted. The adopted child, named Siras, was then raised in a Dutch immigrant household where he learned the Dutch language and the tenets of Dutch Calvinism. Although Siras was clearly well regarded by locals, he could not escape the racial stereotypes and prejudices of the Midwest and spent his entire adult life working as a hotel porter. Siras remained the only black man among the Dutch and a challenge for what it meant to be both Dutch and American. A micro-history of Siras, rooted in primary sources, sheds light on a larger discourse of Dutch-American ethnic and national identity. Dutch American immigrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally avoided contact with blacks, expressed implicit racial superiority, and defined themselves in reference to black as an ‘other’.

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## Introduction

Sometime in the early twentieth century — the source is not clear exactly when — an old black man watched a late evening locomotive arrive at the Holland, Michigan, station. With a screech, the train came to a rest. The release of its air brakes produced a soothing hiss, followed by a short ‘all clear’ burst from the conductor’s whistle. The passenger doors jerked open and two travel-weary Dutch immigrants stepped through to the dimly lit platform below. They had arrived at a small Midwestern city, which, as one might presume from its name, consisted for the most part of immigrants from old Holland and their descendants. On that dark evening, as the train moved out of the station, and its disembarked passengers entered waiting cabs or walked towards the glow of the new arc lights in the city centre, the two newcomers scanned the emptying station for their uncle, the person they hoped would lead them to a new life

in America. But the uncle was nowhere to be found. The anxious Dutchmen paced back and forth along the wooden-plank platform, arguing with each other about having missed an earlier train, maybe the 4:15 from Detroit or the 5:30 from Kalamazoo.

Fortunately, an old baggage handler sitting quietly in the shadows had been listening to the two Dutchmen. In fluent Dutch he told them their missing uncle had been around earlier in the evening but he had left for home, and that he, the kind old porter, would take them to their uncle's home. The Dutchmen accepted the offer, and the three started off. The trio had not walked a hundred yards when they passed under a street light and the two travellers saw for the first time, with astonishment, that their guide was a black man, his skin nearly as dark as the night itself.

The story of a black Dutchman was passed down by a perceptive and witty second-generation Dutch American named Ray Nies, a man fascinated with the peculiar characters of his hometown. Born in 1877, Nies was the fifth child of eight growing up in the village of Saugatuck, a community along the Lake Michigan shore. In 1893, the family moved north to Holland, where Nies' father Jan, a veteran of Sherman's March across the Deep South, decided to relocate his hardware store. Ray Nies, a keen observer and writer, grew up in his father's store, selling hardware, fixing appliances, and watching generations of Holland citizens pass by his storefront window. As the years passed, 'Nies' Hardware' became 'Nies and Sons', and, of the five sons once employed, Ray was the only one who stayed on as his father dropped the final 's' from the store's title. In time, the father retired and passed on, Ray himself grew old, his wife died, and he retired and sold the family store. It was probably soon after that, around 1939, when Ray Nies sat down alone behind his typewriter in his rural home to recall the stories of his life. Among them was the tale of the black porter.

The more Nies thought about the story, about how it had been passed down, the more he remembered. When the two Dutchmen noticed that their guide was black, Nies recalled, they asked him how it was that a black man could speak Dutch so well. The porter was well prepared with a response. Yes, he thought, the black man's answer, the punch line. Nies typed.

'Ja, jongen', he [the negro] said in their own language, 'Yes boys, you see it's this way — America is such a wonderful country — when I first came here I was only a little boy, and I was just as white as you boys are. As I got older I began to turn first dark, and then black, and now, you see for yourselves how I am. And that's how you boys will be if you live here long enough. It's the way everyone gets who lives here a long time. The longer you stay the blacker you get. Yes, America is a wonderful country. Now, your uncle is not so black as I am, Ja, and I have learned to speak English too. Your uncle has not lived here as long as I have, but wait till you see him'.<sup>1</sup>

Shocked by the reply, the gullible immigrants entertained second thoughts about America, but the porter convinced them to go on and at least meet their uncle. Of course, when they got to their uncle's house, they found that he had not turned dark after all.

The porter's joke played on an old theme about European misunderstanding of America. Since the Enlightenment, Europeans had entertained prejudiced notions of the New World based on the idea that geography and climate were responsible for shaping the physical attributes of living beings.<sup>2</sup> By the twentieth century, these prejudices had given way to theories of social Darwinism and racial supremacy. For the black porter, this joke was a convenient way to get one leg up on the foreigners and to avoid telling his real life story, a story almost as unbelievable as the myth he propagated.

Although Nies does not give the porter a name, he does provide some clues about the man's identity. The black porter, Nies says, had begun his life in the South, but the ravages of the Civil War left him a lost, confused, and perhaps orphaned child. A Union soldier, a Dutch immigrant from West Michigan, happened upon the boy and took pity on him. When the soldier returned home to his Dutch immigrant family, he brought the young child along and then raised him as one of his own. The porter was an African American who had been raised as a Dutch immigrant. He had not arrived in the North through common channels, however, and he faced significant challenges in finding his place in society.

The story of Nies's black Dutchman (whom I have identified as Siras Sill) and his environment of Holland, Michigan, allows historians to explore the participation of Dutch Americans in a national discourse on racial and ethnic identity. Americans in the late nineteenth century showed tremendous interest in issues of race and ethnicity; they categorized people into racial hierarchies and debated which groups contributed the most to the nation. Class and race often combined in a volatile mixture. The Irish and Germans, for example, transitioned from a mildly sympathetic, accommodating stance towards blacks at mid-century to an opposition to blacks as a threat to their own status as 'white workers'.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the Irish, the Dutch were seldom challenged on race or citizenship, nor did they develop much of a working-class consciousness that demanded an opposition to black: the Dutch did not view blacks as a threat to their prosperity as wage workers. Suzanne Sinke notes astutely that, for Dutch Protestant immigrants,

their background at the lower end of the economic scale in the Netherlands contributed heavily to a rapid adjustment to more fluid class relations, and a positive evaluation of the loss of *standen* [classes].<sup>4</sup>

In short, Dutch Americans had little desire to re-establish any class distinctions that mirrored what they had experienced in the Old World. However, that does not mean that the Dutch viewed African Americans as entirely equal. The Dutch American views of African Americans reflected a combination of traditional Dutch views on race with an American racial ideology that explicitly placed whites over blacks in the development of class-consciousness and political rights. As Calvinists, Dutch Americans spoke against the evils of slavery and avoided overt racism in the public sphere. Yet, by contrasting themselves with African Americans, Dutch Americans sought a stronger claim on a national American identity shaped by race.

Unlike antebellum blacks who had trickled into the Midwest as fugitives via the Underground Railroad, the child Siras Sill did not rely on aid from abolitionists or Quakers. He was different because he arrived in the North through a rare cross-racial adoption. In the immediate aftermath of slavery, freed blacks left their masters and wandered great distances across the South in search of relatives and loved ones. Black domestic migration following the Civil War was a mass, confused movement to southern cities, to plantations in Mississippi and Louisiana, and to new lands in Kansas and the West. In the midst of this movement, some blacks found their way to the North, albeit through diverse channels. For many, the Union army served as a conduit for migration. While the war raged and Union soldiers marched through the Confederacy, freed slaves and runaways attached themselves to Northern units. To avoid property rights entanglements, the military labelled these blacks ‘contraband’ and put them to work. By 1864, some 40,000 ‘contraband’ blacks were working for the Union military as cooks, labourers, and soldiers’ servants.<sup>5</sup> The congestion that blacks formed in some camps led officials to promote black resettlement schemes in the North. Some Union soldiers degraded blacks and repeatedly called them lazy and repugnant ‘niggers’ who were unprepared for freedom. Indeed, as the war progressed, blacks became scapegoats for Union soldier’s frustrations. But Yankees were also humanitarians. They sympathized with stories about the evils of slavery and were curious to learn about the lives of freedmen. In a symbiotic relationship, Southern blacks aided Union troops by providing them with food and information about the enemy. In return, soldiers taught freedmen to read and write; they welcomed black storytellers and entertainers, and were drawn to African American spirituals. Some soldiers, usually officers, picked up young blacks as personal servants, and formed student/teacher or older brother/younger brother type relationships.<sup>6</sup> ‘Dear mother and father’, the soldiers wrote, ‘what wonderful companions the Negro boys were’.<sup>7</sup> But when the war ended, so too did most of these friendships.

Prior to the mid-twentieth century, historians mostly wrote about great men, wars, and the rise and fall of states. But, during the cultural and social turn of the 1960s, historians were encouraged for the first time to investigate the stories of common men and women, to try to understand peasants, soldiers, and seamstresses instead of focusing exclusively on social and political elites. Unfortunately, substantial obstacles remained in finding adequate primary sources to narrate the lives of the non-elite. Social historians avoided personal narratives and turned their attention instead to the study of large social structures of class and race. But micro-histories like Alfred F. Young’s tale of a Boston shoemaker proved it was possible to successfully narrate the life of a single common individual.<sup>8</sup> Might it also be possible, then, to narrate the life of a nineteenth-century African American in the Midwest, the man Siras Sill, who despite living over thirty years in Holland, Michigan, left almost no trace? Over a ten-year period of working and researching in the Joint Archives of Holland, Michigan, and the archives of the nearby Holland Museum, I kept my eyes open for references to African-Americans in Holland. I managed to find just a handful of references to Siras Sill: a few hits in the census, three newspaper mentions, and one fascinating story from Ray Nies.

Even if Ray Nies's story of a black Dutchman is not an entirely accurate account of the past, it has much to teach. The text itself is a primary source into the mind and biases of its author. Nies explains in his page-and-half about the black Dutchman that a Dutch American soldier from west Michigan, probably a devout Calvinist, returned in 1865 to live in a village near Holland, Michigan, and brought a black child home from the war. At first, rumours began to circulate that the returning soldier was a sodomite and had abducted the boy for sexual purposes. Eventually, though, the soldier married a Dutch American woman and began a family. What happened to Siras in the first few decades after he arrived in west Michigan, Nies does not say, but there is much about the racial environment that we can learn from other sources. After we establish this setting, we can return to investigate the few sources in which Siras's name appears.

In the 1860s, the adopted Siras was the only non-white person living among the five thousand Dutch immigrants in west Michigan. The absence of blacks or other non-white persons was not a result of Dutch intolerance, but was characteristic of the region. Fuelled by immigration from Northwest Europe, New England, and Canada, the state of Michigan had experienced tremendous growth in the two decades leading up to the Civil War. Michigan's black population had always been minor, numbering just under 2400 in 1850. It climbed to 16,000 in 1860 (comprising 2.7 per cent of the state's total population), and then dropped to half that number by war's end. During the entire nineteenth century there were never more than forty blacks in the Dutch-dominated Ottawa County at a time, and, of those, most were in the city of Grand Haven, fifteen miles away from the nearest Dutch immigrant village.<sup>9</sup>

The black child entered a Dutch immigrant community that was intent on becoming part of its new fatherland while still maintaining a pious Calvinist lifestyle. The general region of Dutch settlement, the 'kolonie', was a patchwork of cultivated fields, thick woods, and nascent villages laid out in a ten mile radius from the city of Holland. It is not clear which village the boy grew up in. Had he been in Overijssel, one of the most isolated of the Dutch villages, he probably would have joined the other children in their annual Christmas sleigh rides to the city. Had he been in Drenthe and Vriesland, he might have witnessed the 1871 arrival of an 'iron horse' on Holland's new rail line. But regardless of which village he actually lived in, some aspects of his surroundings can be taken for granted. Each village would have provided the boy with a similar upbringing full of hard work and biblical piety. Every Sunday his family attended church. In the 1870s, the Reformed Church of America (RCA) was the dominant religion in these villages. At Sunday school, the children learned the Heidelberg Catechism, they read the Bible, and they were taught the tenets of Dutch Calvinism as laid down in the Synod of Dordt. His family might have been members of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), a more conservative branch of Dutch Calvinism, which warned of the influence of American practices, stressed Dutch language services, excluded all worship songs but the Psalms, and, in refusing to send its children to public schools, built its own Christian ones. As early as 1855, just eight years after the first immigrant wave landed, the still cash-starved

Dutch gave liberally to foreign missions and laid the keel of a missionary ship. They continued to support missionaries, famine relief, and other benevolent causes. Religion was central to the lives of these Dutch immigrants, and it would certainly have played a substantial role in the relationship between the black child and his adopted family.

The Dutch Americans in these villages might have been aware that their ancestors in the Netherlands had controlled the slave trade. But even if they did have that marginal awareness, they themselves had no personal experience with black people. The Netherlands itself had never been an importer of slaves, and the country's traditional images of blacks were more based on images of North African 'moors' than sub-Saharan blacks. In addition, most of the Dutch immigrants in America had belonged to provincial farming families in the old country, and were not merchants in the ethnically diverse and religiously tolerant Amsterdam, so few had experience living alongside blacks. The immigrant Jacob Den Herder recalled Zeeland, Michigan, founder James Vande Luyster hiring a 'negro' in 1847 to instruct the pioneers how to properly fell trees. Den Herder mentions that the black man was quiet but a good teacher. Den Herder and his Dutch friends must have been nervous about his presence, however, because they were 'glad to see him move away after only a few weeks stay'.<sup>10</sup> Dutch Americans tended to view slavery as a sin on the hands of others, and the thought that blacks were therefore 'someone else's concern' persisted among Dutch Americans well into the twentieth century.

Like other European immigrant groups, the Dutch settled in the Midwest instead of the South not only for the economic benefits of open land and rich natural resources, but also because they wanted to avoid the issue of slavery. The Dutch view of the South, and subsequently Dutch diplomatic interaction with that region, was shaped by their unfavourable views of slavery, blacks, and black labour. The Dutch consular agents in the South, responsible to an ambassador in Washington DC and a department of foreign affairs in The Hague, discouraged their countrymen from emigrating to that region. The Dutch were not used to the weather, the consuls said, the soil and the crops were foreign, and competition with the black labour would prove an impediment to a successful colony. Although the South had moments of attraction for Dutch investors, the Netherlands Foreign Service was content to maintain consistently minor relations in the region, urging caution throughout.<sup>11</sup> In the 1840s, the Dutch immigrant leader Hendrik Scholte considered bringing immigrants to Texas, but turned against the idea because he wanted to avoid the 'unholy' slavery.<sup>12</sup> Writing in 1866, the Dutch consul in Galveston was more positive about his state of Texas. He was of the opinion that blacks were lazy and that white labour in Texas would be rewarded.<sup>13</sup> But, before the Civil War, all other streams of Dutch immigrants also avoided slave territory, with few exceptions. One such exception was a woman from Delft, who was apparently of some means. In 1857 she was travelling around the United States when she came upon the idea of establishing a Dutch colony in Tennessee. From the house of the Frisian Worp van Peyma family in Lancaster, New York, she wrote that the prospects were strong in convincing New York, Michigan, and Wisconsin Dutch to move to the South. The winter lasted eight months

in Lancaster, she said, and the South would welcome productive immigrant farmers. Naively, she explained that the example of free labourers would bring civilization and Christian virtue to the South, perhaps defeating slavery in the process.<sup>14</sup> Her suggestion not only demonstrates that the Dutch community's negative assessment of slavery, but also reinforces the idea that the Dutch were perfectly satisfied to stay isolated from blacks and the issues of race that were so pervasive in the South.

The Dutch immigrant view of the South was also shaped by a general condemnation of American slavery in the Dutch press. For example, the editor of the *Schager Courant* (of Schagen in North Holland) drew on historical imagery to compare Abraham Lincoln to William of Orange, whose life and martyrdom served God's will of fighting against slavery. 'Everyone feels presently that the Americans are also our brothers', he wrote in 1865.<sup>15</sup> In an earlier article, the same editor had blamed slavery not on Americans, but on their predecessors, the English, French, and Spanish, who had introduced it into the New World.<sup>16</sup> The role of the Dutch as slave traders he conveniently ignored.

Thus the black child Siras Sill entered a Dutch immigrant community whose views on race had been shaped by the growing abolitionism movement and years of war. Before the Civil War, the Dutch Reformed churches had taken no clear position on slavery, but during the war they became increasingly influenced by the anti-slavery movement. Albertus Van Raalte, founder of Holland, Michigan, and minister at Holland's First Reformed Church, used his pulpit to denounce the joint evils of slavery and secession. In a sermon in the summer of 1863, he described the difference between biblical slavery and modern slavery. He condemned the latter and prayed that none would defend it with an appeal to scripture.<sup>17</sup> Some felt Van Raalte had overstepped his bounds as a religious leader by addressing political issues. But religion, politics, and slavery had become increasingly intertwined. Since the early 1830s, abolitionists had tried and largely failed to win over Northern churches as vocal opponents of slavery. Religious institutions like the Reformed Church of America recognized that they would have to respond to the humanitarian crisis of emancipation. Although most mainstream Northern churches came to the aid of freedmen during the war, the roots of their support were often not deep enough to sustain aid throughout the year of reconstruction.<sup>18</sup>

The local Dutch American view on race was part of a national discourse about the role of government in shaping society. When the war ended, abolitionists and an assortment of philanthropists, churches, and benevolent societies came to the aid of the freedmen, but the federal government, through the Freedman's Bureau, took over the largest share of responsibility for aiding blacks. Therefore, the war did not lead to a greater role for Christian institutional humanitarianism; rather it signalled a victory for expansive federal government. Before the war, charity and aid to the unfortunate was largely in the realm of private organizations and religious groups. By 1866, when Illinois Senator Lyman Trumbull presented a Freedman Bureau bill before congress, opinions on this matter had changed. A supporter of the bill explained in a *New York Times* article that federal government aid to Negroes would

be an unprecedented use of central power. Although this 'national almshouse' would be inefficient, the writer noted, it was absolutely necessary because existing aid societies could not possibly take care of four million blacks thrown into dependency. The answer, the supporter argued, was for individual, societal, and governmental aid to address the problem jointly and in such a way that blacks did not become forever dependent on aid.<sup>19</sup>

Northerners, the Dutch included, largely agreed that part of the new deal of emancipation would be to keep blacks from migrating north. The Freedman's Bureau encouraged blacks to remain in the South. Those who came north despite this met mixed reactions, some unwelcoming, others sympathetic. Post-Civil War migration did not break down racial boundaries, in many ways it affirmed them. In the three years following the war, Wisconsin, Ohio, Minnesota, and Michigan voters all rejected Negro Suffrage referenda.<sup>20</sup> Despite African Americans' political gains in the 1870s and 1880s, Northern whites 'abandoned their commitments to civic nationalism' and returned to a society characterized by espousing racial segregation.<sup>21</sup> An emphasis on 'whiteness' marginalized blacks who could only labour in certain prescribed fields. The first black migrants to the North were servants of a kind that fed Old South nostalgia. In many cases, a Northern black was the sole representative of his or her race in a city or county. In 1870, even the black population of Chicago, roughly 3700 persons, comprised less than one per cent of the city.<sup>22</sup>

Despite entering into the national discussion about race and ethnicity, Dutch Americans consciously remained at a distance from African Americans, mirroring the position of most northern whites. During Reconstruction, Northerners and foreigners hoped to invest capital in the South and profit from a new market economy. Although wages in the South were low, there was a significant demand for skilled labour, a niche that perhaps European immigrants like the Dutch could fill. But any attempt to settle Dutch immigrants in the South had to overcome the conventional wisdom that the type of labour there was better suited to blacks than whites. John W. Lapsley, an Alabama iron company owner who tried in 1869 to convince Albertus Van Raalte to establish a colony in the South, sought to put such claims to rest. He described blacks as having a 'well-disposed' nature, content and without avarice and ambition. Lapsley also opposed the conventional wisdom that the West was more suitable for growth. The South, he said, had a healthy climate, the land was better for agriculture, and industriousness was rewarded.<sup>23</sup>

Dutch consuls were fairly positive about trade with the South during Reconstruction, but they also continued to oppose migration to areas of black settlement. When asked about the potential of Florida as a region for immigration, Consul General J. R. Planten explained that Florida was one of the last places in the Union that he would recommend for Dutch immigrants. Florida's soil was poor, he said, and the opportunities there were more conducive to black labour than white.<sup>24</sup> The consul in New Orleans, meanwhile, wrote that 'What is said of Florida applies equally to all the Gulf States'.<sup>25</sup> He urged extreme caution because speculators were quite active in promoting land booms. Immigrants should inspect the lands themselves before



purchasing. Immigration agencies in the Netherlands echoed the same warnings. Even the northern half of the southern region could be too hot for Netherlanders to work during the day, and some parts were unfit for settlement because of the ‘black problem’.<sup>26</sup>

In 1873, as Dutch Americans were struggling to find a place for themselves in the racial discourse of the Reconstruction Era, Siras Sill moved from a nearby village to within the borders of the city of Holland.<sup>27</sup> The record of his life is scant, and the few sources concerning him are complicated but tantalizing. The 1880 census, for example, lists just one African American in Holland. It is Siras Sill, thirty-five years of age, born in New Jersey, occupation: farm worker. Could this be the Dutch-speaking porter, the child who had become a man? Indeed, it appears so, and later newspaper sources confirm that this Jersey-born Siras was the name a black porter in Holland.<sup>28</sup> We often think of New Jersey as a free state, but New Jersey did not formally outlaw slavery until 1846. Those born as slaves in New Jersey before 1846 remained slaves until the 13th amendment to the Constitution was ratified. If the census is correct that Siras Sill was thirty-five years of age in 1880, placing his birth year in 1845, he would have been a teenager during the Civil War, and thus slightly too old to fit Nies’s story exactly. It appears then that the Dutch soldier had adopted a black child who was really closer to being a young black man. Yet there are also reasons to speculate that the census information is not entirely accurate, and that Siras could have been younger than what was written down. Perhaps the census taker or the head of the household had only guessed at Siras’s real age. Or, more probably, Siras himself might not have known his real age, a likely story if he were indeed an orphaned child and a former slave. Even the well-educated former slave Frederick Douglass, the famous abolitionist, was uncertain about his own true birthday. The census indicates that Siras also did not know where his parents had been born. His parents’ birthplaces are listed as ‘unknown’, which fits his orphan status. The 1880 census gave options for race, limited to the contemporary ethnic understanding: ‘Asian’, ‘Indian’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Mexican’, ‘Mulatto’, and ‘Black’. Next to Siras’s name is a thick, capital B for black.

As an adult, Siras Sill must have learned how to navigate his Dutch American town. To earn a living, he became a trusted live-in servant of Manly Howard, a Yankee entrepreneur who had come to Holland as a young married man in 1854. Although his eyesight was failing him by 1880, Howard remained an important businessman in the community. He once ran a lumber business and mill. He had helped to get funds to dig a harbour and bring a railroad to town. He was known as a lawyer, an insurance agent, and, in general, a respected and successful western Renaissance man. He was elected to the Michigan State House of Representatives in 1862 and 1864, and as a war Democrat he earned the ire of his party by voting for the abolition of slavery and supporting the 15th amendment. Representative Howard refused, however, to support a bill granting Congress the power to enforce the new anti-slavery law.<sup>29</sup> Such were the mixed emotions and political considerations of the period. At any rate, Manley Howard did not object to having a black man live on his

farm and work for him. He had had domestics in the past, and the arrangement fit into his capitalistic mindset. The Manleys must have welcomed Siras and trusted him. Siras lived with Howard, his English wife, their fifteen-year-old daughter Sattie, and a sixteen-year-old servant girl, Katie Klaus. In 1881, Howard made repairs on his house and tidied up his property. For an ageing man with poor eyesight, a servant would have been most helpful. Indeed, Siras would likely have done most, if not all of the actual physical work.<sup>30</sup>

The Manley house sat on a ridge on the north side of Black River, just as it opened up into Black Lake. The river marked the boundary, both physical and political, between Holland City to the south, and the more rural Holland Township to the north. It was a slow-moving river, and dark as befitting its name. Siras probably learned the flow of the river, and with it, the rhythm of the town. Almost every spring, when rains came and the snow melted from the rooftops and the corn fields, the river filled to its banks, and the lumber dealers, who owned sawmills upstream, found it easier to navigate their bark-laden scows down the river. But when the freshet was too severe, the current battered the River Street Bridge threatening to destroy the only link across the river. When Siras went into town to pick up some nails or a bag of flour, or just to deliver his boss's mail, he always followed the same route, always crossing the bridge.

Siras came down from the bridge and followed River Street through the industrial section of town. As he entered town, Siras could be sure that many sets of eyes were following him: grungy-looking sailors at the wharf awaiting an arrival from Chicago, an errand boy on a bicycle carrying the mail uptown, and a stock-room clerk peering out of a factory window. Siras then shuffled passed the terrible stench of the tannery, where pig-skins were dipped in tannic acid derived from hemlock bark, the familiar factory whistles signalling the hour, and a couple of horses tied up at the livery. When he reached the main street, Siras would turn left, or east towards a row of red-brick merchant buildings. If school was out, he had probably already attracted a gang of small boys who followed him as a curiosity. Although he was accepted, Siras was daily reminded that he was different.

As the decade of the 1880s began, Siras turned thirty-five (or so the census tells us) — nearly the same age as his Dutch city. Since its founding in 1847, the hard-working Holland had served as a market town for the region, but, on a regional scale, it was admittedly a backwater. As Siras entered middle age, a series of lakeshore resort hotels opened to the west of Holland and promised to quicken the step of the city. Siras learned that the hotels would recruit black waiters, but there is no indication that he ever worked in them. Every summer from the 1880s until the late 1920s, Holland's normally quiet, cold, and barren lakeshore was transformed into a gossipy hive of sunbathers and children with dripping ice-cream cones. From on top of dunes, one's eyes could follow the Lake Michigan steamers as they slipped through the channel into Black Lake and unloaded their passengers, some on the north side where a hotel had been built at Ottawa Beach, others on the south side, at Macatawa Park. The Chicago and West Michigan Railroad, whose railroad spur fed the resorts from

the east, with daily shipments of fresh guests and fresh produce, proudly called Macatawa Park the ‘Coney Island’ of Michigan.<sup>31</sup> In 1885, the first blacks arrived at the resorts. The ‘coloured camp’ set up in a shady grove next to the gardens, skating rink, and vegetable tents. If Siras visited the camp, he might have had flashbacks to his childhood in southern black churches: a strong-voiced revivalist preacher and a full choir praised the Lord each day for two hours in the morning and again for an hour and a half in the afternoon. The travelling congregation requested ten cent donations which would be passed on to church construction projects in Allegan, Michigan. The southern revivalists were greeted as a curiosity and received large crowds.<sup>32</sup>

Contrast this image of white, middle-class Chicago and Michigan vacationers, lounging on the beach of a Dutch immigrant community, gladly pausing to watch black visitors sing gospel, with nearly any image of black/white relationships in the post-war South. Southerners in the nineteenth century had tried all sorts of schemes to rid themselves of black workers, including recruiting immigrants to till their fields and hiring native whites to serve as domestics. But immigrants struggled to adapt to the Southern environment and they demanded more compensation than did black workers. Meanwhile, white domestics were difficult to find because of a growing stigma attached to servant labour.<sup>33</sup> Northern whites, on the other hand, entertained a romanticized ideal of race relations, which often conflated hospitality and racial hierarchy. The revivalists were not the last of their race to visit the lakeshore resorts as the nineteenth century came to a close and the twentieth century began. Instead of barring blacks, resorts recruited them to serve as waiters and hosts.

Like the revivalists, the seasonal black servants at Macatawa and Ottawa Park hotel probably passed through Chicago on their way to Michigan. In fact, while Holland was in Chicago’s orbit as a resort community, the Tulip City was also influenced by the culture and changing demographics of the Windy City. As the centre of the Pullman Railroad network, Chicago had the largest black population in the Midwest. By 1890, one half of Chicago’s black men, and three-quarters of its black women worked as servants in white establishments or households. Fashionable hotels hired blacks as doormen and restaurants hired them as waiters.<sup>34</sup> Black women worked in laundries. Between 1880 and 1890, Chicago’s black population grew from 6500 to nearly 15,000. Blacks settled as families, often restricted to certain areas of the city, and, by 1900, segregation was almost universal. Blacks in Chicago lived in a parallel world. They could shop where they pleased if they could afford it. Chicago was friendlier, more tolerant than the rest of the state. A small black elite consisted of physicians, barbers, and store owners. Freedmen in Chicago, however, generally had low expectations and readily accepted jobs as servants.<sup>35</sup> But Siras was different from the new blacks in the North: he had arrived before them, he was raised in a Northern community, and knew no other home. Although he was an accepted member of society, his job opportunities were limited to those of a servant.

Like the black revivalists, Siras was a curiosity. The 1904 state census indicates that there was still just one black man living in Holland. Surely it was Siras. He lived in

the first ward, downtown, perhaps near the train station where he found employment as a porter. The resident was male, between fifty and sixty years of age. His city had grown a bit more diverse — in addition to the Americans and the Dutch, there were some Germans, a few Norwegians and Poles, and one Chinese — but Holland was still overwhelmingly white. Until his dying day, Siras remained the only permanent black resident of Holland.

In 1918, not long after Siras's death, the controversial film *The Birth of Nation* came to the Holland theatres. Subscribing to the Ku Klux Klan and a white supremacist view of history, the film fed racial prejudice across the country. In some Northern cities, African Americans had filed complaints against the overtly racist piece. But the Holland City Council rested in their leather chairs knowing that no blacks in town would file a petition against the film's showing. The reason for this was simple: there were no blacks in town. In fact, as a town of 12,000 persons, Holland stood out in all of the country for the only city of its size with not a single person of colour. The editor of the *Holland City News* (the local weekly) could recall only one permanent black resident in recent memory. He was an 'old grey-haired darkey' named Siras, and he was the 'buss driver' [*sic*] for the City Hotel. The editor noted that 'The travelling public all knew him quite well, and joked with him to their hearts' content, and the citizens all had a good word for him'.<sup>36</sup>

The image presented in this 1918 newspaper account fits Nies' story of the black orphan who grew up to be a porter. The newspaper editor called Siras a 'buss driver', which is a porter who also steered a horse and buggy, whip in hand, down the dirt road. Siras was responsible for greeting hotel guests at the station and then carrying their luggage to the six-bedroom wood-framed City Hotel. When someone broke into the hotel and stole a box of cigars, not only was Siras not a suspect, but his absence at the scene was noted as a reason why thieves were able to succeed.<sup>37</sup> Built in 1872, the hotel was one of the first structures to appear downtown after the city burned down the year before. It was located downtown on Eighth Street, a quarter mile from the train station. The hotel purchased its first 'buss' — as the editor called it — in 1882. The wooden structure caught fire once, but that was put out quickly by the firefighters stationed just a block away. It was renovated in 1880 and again in 1892. It changed owners frequently. Siras might have been the longest-serving employee, a fixture during these changing times. By 1889, when the newspaper reported that Siras celebrated his sixteenth year in the city, he was already known as 'the popular bus driver' of the City Hotel.<sup>38</sup> By 1915, he had certainly laboured long enough to be a recognizable figure not to just some, but *all* regular travellers to the city. Years later, the editor of the *Holland City News* again remembered 'a happy old coloured man named Siles [*sic*] driving that bus and his hearty laugh could be heard all along quiet main street'.<sup>39</sup>

Although Siras was raised in a Dutch American immigrant community, and although he was clearly well regarded by locals, he could not escape the racial stereotypes and prejudices of the Midwest. Nies noted that Hollanders generally treated blacks well, but for some reason, he thought, blacks never seemed to come to Holland or prosper there. The hard-working and independent Hollanders, Nies suggested,

never had any need for black servants, and thus there was never the proper kind of employment for blacks in the area. Nies could not get past the stereotype that blacks were only fit for certain work, as waiters, servants, porters, and the like. Blacks were supposed to serve whites, he felt.

It is no surprise, then, that Siras was unable to break out of the role of servant. He had been a soldier's servant, a household servant, and lastly a railroad porter. According to racial hierarchies of the period, this final occupation suited him well. In fact, the largest employer of black servants in America was the Pullman Car Company, founded in 1867. Early American train cars had seats, but no place to recline. But, as long-distance train travel became more common, passengers demanded a comfortable place to sleep on the trains. Pullman gained success in operating trains with cars fitted with beds. When he began his train car business in 1867, Chicago's George Pullman hired only blacks to fill the positions of porter, the onboard 'Ambassadors of Hospitality'. Pullman recruited Southern blacks who would smile and bow; they also had to don uniforms and speak kindly. Pullman maintained this racial policy into the twentieth century. For many blacks, a position as a porter meant escape from poverty, a busy work life, and an improved social status. By 1917, Pullman employed twelve thousand black porters. Siras did not work for Pullman, but visitors to Holland could easily make the mistake of assuming such.

From an economic standpoint, Holland until the Second World War probably never needed African American labourers, or outside labour of any kind. Until the First World War, the city received a steady stream of immigrant labour from North-west Europe — by and large Dutch, with a mixture of Germans, Poles, and Scandinavians. The North in general relied on immigrant labour while blacks remained poor in southern fields. Northerners were reluctant to change their ways. During and after the Great War, over one million Southern blacks, often in family units, participated in the 'Great Migration' — a domestic flight from failing farms, boll-weevil destruction, and Jim Crow. They migrated in droves towards the promise of higher wages in wartime industries in Northern cities.<sup>40</sup> But few blacks made their way to Holland, and none stayed for the long term. During the Second World War, when Holland's factories won lucrative federal contracts and the city faced a labour shortage, business owners and the Chamber of Commerce purposely avoided recruiting African American labourers.<sup>41</sup> Siras was more or less doomed to remain the lone black Dutchman, performing his role as the humble porter.

It was limiting, but the occupation of porter fitted Siras well. It was a stereotypical occupation for a black man at the turn of the century, but it provided a steady income. More importantly, the job may have given Siras a sense of power as an insider-outsider figure. At the train station, Siras could see people come and go, and no one would suspect his unorthodox upbringing. He could gain understanding of the Dutch immigrants in town, and even get a laugh at their expense once in a while. This was the ultimate role reversal. At a time when a black man was expected to doff his cap, ignore stares and hoots, look aside, not speak to white women, and stand aside for whites on the sidewalk, here was a black man who played a power game with white visitors. Society would not accept him outside of such roles, but he could

use his own ingenuity and personality to make the best of it. What a fascinating occupation for a black man in a Dutch American city.

By 1918, Siras was no more, and there were no blacks to be found in that quintessential Dutch immigrant city. According to the city's newspaper, Siras had 'moved out to a sand farm on the lake shore and died'<sup>42</sup> — not a particularly clear or endearing ending. By 1930, the census attests, the hotel had found a fitting replacement. John Smith, an African American born in Kentucky in 1877, was found listed as a hotel porter.

Siras Sill left no titles, no deeds, no autobiography, nor writings of any kind. In fact, he was nearly lost in the historical record. The few references to Holland's black porter were written by those entrusted with the power to record the past. The census takers worked for the government, the newspapers editors served the public, and Ray Nies, a successful businessman, wrote to satisfy his own curiosity and pass on his own stories. If it were not for the humanity in Nies's narrative, the story of Siras Sill could not be known. He would be a line in the census, and an anomaly in an old newspaper clipping, but hardly a character worth remembering. But with the help of Ray Nies and an understanding of the racial consciousness of Holland, Michigan, we can see the unique role Siras played in challenging Dutch immigrants and their ideas about what it meant to belong in America.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ray Nies Manuscript, Holland Museum Archives (Holland, Michigan).
- <sup>2</sup> Philippe Roger, *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism*, trans. by Sharon Bowman (University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- <sup>3</sup> David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991).
- <sup>4</sup> Suzanne M. Sinke, 'Transnational Visions of Gender and Class in Dutch Migration', in *The Dutch-American Experience: Essays in Honor of Robert P. Swierenga*, ed. by Hans Krabbendam and Larry J. Wagenaar. (Amsterdam: VU Press 2000).
- <sup>5</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration* (Washington DC, 1918), p. 114.
- <sup>6</sup> Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolina Campaigns* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), pp. 62–63.
- <sup>7</sup> Bell Irvin Wiley, 'Billy Yank and the Black Folk', *The Journal of Negro History*, 36.1 (January 1951), 35–52.
- <sup>8</sup> Alfred F. Young, 'George Robert Twelves Hewes (1742–1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 38 (October 1981), 561–623.
- <sup>9</sup> *Negroes in Michigan During the Civil War*, published by the Michigan Civil War Centennial Observance Commission (Lansing, Michigan, 1966.) pp. 20–21; *Census Report of Michigan* (1864), pp. 606, 633; Susan E. Gray, *The Yankee West: Community Life on the Michigan Frontier* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
- <sup>10</sup> Jacob Den Herder, 'Life Sketch of Myself', <<http://www.macatawa.org/~devries/JacobDenHerder.html>>, last accessed on 20 December 2011.
- <sup>11</sup> Augustus J. Veenendaal, Jr, *Slow Train to Paradise: How Dutch Investment Helped Build American Railroads* (Stanford University Press, 1996).
- <sup>12</sup> J. A. Wormser, *Een Schat in Aarden Vaten, Vol. II: Het Leven van Hendrik Peter Scholte* (Nijverdal: E. J. Bosch, 1915), p. 192. Scholte considered Texas a strong candidate, but noted that those who found slavery unchristian would be disappointed. See 'Aanmerkingen betreffelijk Landverhuizing naar Noord-Amerika', *De Reformatie* (1847), p. 63.
- <sup>13</sup> J. Kauffmann in Galveston followed his younger brother to the US in the 1840s, settling in Charleston before moving to Texas. E. Kaufman had planned on going to California for a year in 1848, and left his brother as acting Consul. But the brother never returned; it was rumoured he had died. As of 1854, J. Kaufman, who was serving as the Consul for Bremen, Saxony, and Austria, also held the Dutch consul in his brother's stead. He wanted to be named full consul and take a leave of absence in Europe and name an acting consul in his place. Rud C. Burlage to Roest van Limburg, 18 May 1866.

- Burlage believed white immigration would do well and Texas would grow. J. Kaufmann to Rud C. Burlage, 20 April 1866.
- <sup>14</sup> Ms Storm writing 15 December 1857, republished letter in *Leenwarder Courant*, 14 October 1857.
- <sup>15</sup> *Schager Courant*, 4 May 1865. Translation of ‘Allen gevoelen thans weder dat ook de Amerikanen onze broeders zijn’.
- <sup>16</sup> *Schager Courant*, 20 April 1865.
- <sup>17</sup> *De Grondwet*, 12 August 1863.
- <sup>18</sup> John R. McGiven, *The War Against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830–1865* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).
- <sup>19</sup> *New York Times*, 11 March 1866.
- <sup>20</sup> Robert R. Dykstra and Harlan Hahn, ‘Northern Voters and Negro Suffrage: The Case of Iowa, 1868’, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 32.2 (Summer 1968), 205.
- <sup>21</sup> Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865–1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), p. 6.
- <sup>22</sup> Christopher Robert Reed, *Black Chicago’s First Century: Vol. 1, 1833–1900* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2005), p. 178.
- <sup>23</sup> Frank E. Dykema, ‘An Effort to Attract Dutch Colonists to Alabama, 1869’, *The Journal of Southern History*, 14.2 (May 1948), 247–61.
- <sup>24</sup> Buitenlandse Zaken, 2.05.13, No. 1176. Consul General J. R. Planten (New York), 15 April 1890.
- <sup>25</sup> Buitenlandse Zaken, A. Schieber, 1 January 1890.
- <sup>26</sup> ‘In de noordelijke helft van deze zone [South-East] zijn enkele zomerdagen afmattend warm en voor Nederlanders ongeschikt om in de middaguren te werken [...] Enkele deelen zijn ongeschikt voor vestiging door het negerprobleem’ (Mededeelingen van de Nederlandsche Vereeniging Landverhuizing #6: ‘Landverhuizing naar de Vereenigde Staten van Amerika’ (1915: NA Voorloper N.E.D. 1913–53, folders 13–26).
- <sup>27</sup> *Holland City News*, 8 June 1889.
- <sup>28</sup> *Holland City News*, 7 March 1918; 30 January 1936.
- <sup>29</sup> American Biographical History of Eminent and Self-Made Men with Portrait Illustrations on Steel, Volumes I–II, 1878.
- <sup>30</sup> *Holland City News*, 14 May 1881.
- <sup>31</sup> *Holland City News*, 4 July 1885.
- <sup>32</sup> *Holland City News*, 22 August 1885.
- <sup>33</sup> Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 352–53.
- <sup>34</sup> Charles Braham, ‘Black Chicago: Accommodationist Politics Before the Great Migration’, in *The Ethnic Frontier: Essays in the History of Group Survival in Chicago and the Midwest*, ed. by Melvin G. Holli and Peter d’A[lroy] Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 214.
- <sup>35</sup> Reed.
- <sup>36</sup> *Holland City News*, 7 March 1918.
- <sup>37</sup> *Holland City News*, 30 July 1887.
- <sup>38</sup> *Holland City News*, 8 June 1889.
- <sup>39</sup> *Holland City News*, 30 January 1936.
- <sup>40</sup> Carole Marks, *Farewell — We’re Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 2.
- <sup>41</sup> *Holland City News*, 29 April 1943; 13 May 1943.
- <sup>42</sup> *Holland City News*, 30 January 1936.

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