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Comment on Marjoleine Kars, "Poisoned Lives: Living in Slavery in Dutch Berbice"

Good afternoon, everyone.

First, I want to thank Professors Brewer, Bell, Bonner, and Lyons from the Washington Early America Seminar and Professor Quincy Mills and the organizers with the Anna Julia Cooper Workshop in Black History for ~~having me here today~~ this programme and of course Professor ~~Marjoleine~~ Marijke Kars for allowing me the privilege of offering some thoughts and comments on her vivid and fascinating chapter from what promises to be an interesting book. I will of course keep my comments brief. I hope to provide a very brief sketch of this work highlighting what I see as the truly innovative approach to Atlantic history of this period and to pose a few questions that might stir others along similar lines.

Professor Kars begins her account by providing valuable background about the eighteenth-century Dutch slave trading apparatus by noting that the or Den *Jonge Pedro,* the ship on which Accara was transferred, was a part of the de-centralized trade after the Dutch West India Company's (WIC) monopoly on the slave trade ended. This is a valuable piece of information right from the start. We are getting a picture of a differentiated trade system and one of colonial impact, with some wear on it. We are also told about the joint-stock company responsible for the settlement of Berbice and the trade requirements of the South American industry, namely the trade of 190 physical

able humans enslaved and capable of work in the region and horrific reality that far more people would need to be acquired than that 190 to account for the dangers of the middle passage and other factors.

One of the most intriguing elements of Professor Kars' writing both here and elsewhere is her focus on particulars of **experience**. Captain Jan Connel's movements from Zeeland to Guinea or Angola on Africa's west coast tells us much about the methods, routes, and industry of the eighteen-century slave trade and the business-like efficiency of the dreadful practice. Through this, too, we see a window into the intra-African wars and, as historians like John Thornton have shown us the complex relationships of slave traders with and their African collaborators. This is of course a delicate area, but does potentially, as Professor Kars later discusses, give us some insight into Accara's origin and the potential reason for his capture.

We learn, too about the nature of the shipping of human cargo, the horrors of the slave ship even before the middle passage as Connel's ship moved down the coast to the established slaving ports, the apparatus of slaving encounters including the methods of transporting slaves in canoes to meet the Dutch ships with too deep a draft to make it into the river mouths and deltas. The Middle Passage is a singularly horrific experience, as described by Stephanie Smallwood and others, but what is most important to the story of Accara is that despite these horrors, he

arrived at the settlement of Berbice in good enough health to be among those deemed 'deliverable' to the administers in the colony and ~~there for~~ therefore able to be put to work in Fort Nassau. The maths here are stark, as Professor Kars points out the *Jonge Pedro* delivered 279 enslaved people to Berbice and upon inspection only 168 were determined to be either 'deliverable' or acceptable. The remainder, some 111 –depending on deaths-- were then put up for auction and sold into even less desirable positions than those determined acceptable. These enslaved peoples then fit within the general ratio of Berbice where there were approximately 3,000 enslaved persons to about 200 Europeans; a ratio of ~~rebellion~~ rebellious potential.

As we shift to the colony, we generally shift perspective as well as we now give more room to the social and mental world of Accara. This is where Professor Kars' paper is exceptionally valuable. Though the working and accounting –the often sparce records of the enslaved we learn a lot about the hierarchies, politics, and quotidian aspects of life as an enslaved person in Berbice. In one particularly telling anecdote from these sparce records we see Accara's insistence on being called by his actual name as opposed to his provided Dutch name. This is very revealing about the strong character of Accara. Professor Kars' highlighting of this easy to overlook facet of accounting demonstrates her sensitivity to the humanity and experience of historical actors like Accara – especially when you pair this with Accara's later accuser Klass. Additionally, Kars' depiction of the various jobs

performed and the hierarchy of these jobs importantly fleshes out the peripherical experience of all involved in the colony. The only comment I would offer here would be that there are perhaps two or three instances where a more direct noting of the horrors of this existence can be explicated. For example, in the discussion of the jobs and roles of the enslaved, there is a note about "European" paternity of some of the enslaved people and the general dangers to enslaved women on this frontier. I wonder if some of these dangers should be made more explicit; calling rape, rape, I mean, and noting the relations of power inherent in these situations. I do not want to imply that you are describing a cozy situation, but by pulling this punch and a couple of others I worry that there is a little bit of a sense them all being in the colonial experience together. I assume you are seeking a nuanced picture here about the precarity of the situation for all, so I assume, too, in the larger work some context may be coming. A tough needle to thread as there is danger for all to be reckoned with.

I would also say, along these lines perhaps we need a little more about the place –which again, is likely something you are planning anyway. In your previous book, *Blood on the River* you make special note in your prologue about the effect of the place on you – your tour into the interior of Guyana, then Berbice- and a sense of the dense bush and jungle that you note frightened the Dutch settlers as well as the sense-memory tattooed on the place of the enslaved peoples there who

were, as you note, among the most oppressed in the Atlantic world. This is an unfair note, of course, because this is an isolated chapter, but I wonder if to help flesh out the place in which Accara found himself we could have more of a sense of the place in comparison to at least where he was captured from, if not where he MAY have been from –which you indicate from his linguistic traits.

I definitely share your inquisitiveness about the central event as well –the poisoned, or perhaps spoiled—bananas. I wonder how similar the flora would be between Accara's home and Berbice to give him the fluency in herbal medicines or poisons that he is accused of. This probably speaks, as you note, to the network of knowledge sharing between indigenous, creole, and recently transported enslaved peoples –and the hierarchies and communities of these peoples.

The replication of the purity : witchcraft dynamic is very intriguing and represents something densely anthropological about all peoples involved. Obeah, similar, to other transplanted and adapted religious practices such as Santeria represented something at turns both familiar and unique and dangerous. This coupled with, as you note, the wasting disease epidemic happening concurrently seems like a very interesting notion to spend some more time on in later chapters as a background to the characters.

A couple of direct questions: Does the poisoned banana incident stay with Accara for long? You mention at the very end that his power as a leader may have come from this event and is wrapped up in the danger he represents—was this something he wore later ~~one~~ on as a mark of his power? Do we know, too, what became of Klass in the long-run? Were there other poisonings that followed? –you make note that he had been known to poison people before this incident – this would be the moment in a true crime podcast where the music swells. I wonder if there are ways to trace the methods of poisonings, and the purposes for doing so to any previous practice of witchcraft or other practices?

Professor Kars' work promises to be a highly impactful and **human** history of this period that demonstrates the unique person of Accara and others within his orbit. There are still so many questions that remain and I am eager to see the full story you are able to tell as you continue this work. Thank you again for allowing me to rely my comments here.