

## Excerpt from “Sugar” by Khalil Gibran Muhammad from *The 1619 Project*

To achieve the highest efficiency, as in the round-the-clock Domino refinery today, sugar houses operated night and day. “On cane plantations in sugar time, there is no distinction as to the days of the week,” Northup wrote. Fatigue might mean losing an arm to the grinding rollers or being flayed for failing to keep up. Resistance was often met with sadistic cruelty.

A formerly enslaved black woman named Mrs. Webb described a torture chamber used by her owner, Valsin Marmillion. “One of his cruelties was to place a disobedient slave, standing in a box, in which there were nails placed in such a manner that the poor creature was unable to move,” she told a W.P.A. interviewer in 1940. “He was powerless even to chase the flies, or sometimes ants crawling on some parts of his body.”

Louisiana led the nation in destroying the lives of black people in the name of economic efficiency. The historian Michael Tadman found that Louisiana sugar parishes had a pattern of “deaths exceeding births.” Backbreaking labor and “inadequate net nutrition meant that slaves working on sugar plantations were, compared with other working-age slaves in the United States, far less able to resist the common and life-threatening diseases of dirt and poverty,” wrote Tadman in a 2000 study published in the *American Historical Review*. Life expectancy was less like that on a cotton plantation and closer to that of a Jamaican cane field, where the most overworked and abused could drop dead after seven years.....

The Whitney, which opened five years ago as the only sugar-slavery museum in the nation, rests squarely in a geography of human detritus. The museum tells of the everyday struggles and resistance of black people who didn’t lose their dignity even when they lost everything else. It sits on the west bank of the Mississippi at the northern edge of the St. John the Baptist Parish, home to dozens of once-thriving sugar plantations; Marmillion’s plantation and torture box were just a few miles down from Whitney.

### **Post Slavery: Black People and sugar**

From slavery to freedom, many black Louisianans found that the crushing work of sugar cane remained mostly the same. Even with Reconstruction delivering civil rights for the first time, white planters continued to dominate landownership. Freedmen and

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freedwomen had little choice but to live in somebody's old slave quarters. As new wage earners, they negotiated the best terms they could, signed labor contracts for up to a year and moved frequently from one plantation to another in search of a life whose daily rhythms beat differently than before. And yet, even compared with sharecropping on cotton plantations, Rogers said, "sugar plantations did a better job preserving racial hierarchy." As a rule, the historian John C. Rodrigue writes, "plantation labor overshadowed black people's lives in the sugar region until well into the 20th century."

Sometimes black cane workers resisted collectively by striking during planting and harvesting time — threatening to ruin the crop. Wages and working conditions occasionally improved. But other times workers met swift and violent reprisals. After a major labor insurgency in 1887, led by the Knights of Labor, a national union, at least 30 black people — some estimated hundreds — were killed in their homes and on the streets of Thibodaux, La. "I think this will settle the question of who is to rule, the nigger or the white man, for the next 50 years," a local white planter's widow, Mary Pugh, wrote, rejoicing, to her son.

Many African-Americans aspired to own or rent their own sugar-cane farms in the late 19th century, but faced deliberate efforts to limit black farm and land owning. The historian Rebecca Scott found that although "black farmers were occasionally able to buy plots of cane land from bankrupt estates, or otherwise establish themselves as suppliers, the trend was for planters to seek to establish relations with white tenants or sharecroppers who could provide cane for the mill."

By World War II, many black people began to move not simply from one plantation to another, but from a cane field to a car factory in the North. By then, harvesting machines had begun to take over some, but not all, of the work. With fewer and fewer black workers in the industry, and after efforts in the late 1800s to recruit Chinese, Italian, Irish and German immigrant workers had already failed, labor recruiters in Louisiana and Florida sought workers in other states.

In 1942, the Department of Justice began a major investigation into the recruiting practices of one of the largest sugar producers in the nation, the United States Sugar Corporation, a South Florida company. Black men unfamiliar with the brutal nature of the work were promised seasonal sugar jobs at high wages, only to be forced into debt peonage, immediately accruing the cost of their transportation, lodging and equipment — all for \$1.80 a day. One man testified that the conditions were so bad, "It wasn't no freedom; it was worse than the pen." Federal investigators agreed. When workers tried to escape, the F.B.I. found, they were captured on the highway or "shot at while trying to hitch rides on the sugar trains." The company was indicted by a federal grand jury in

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Tampa for “carrying out a conspiracy to commit slavery,” wrote Alec Wilkinson, in his 1989 book, “Big Sugar: Seasons in the Cane Fields of Florida.” (The indictment was ultimately quashed on procedural grounds.) A congressional investigation in the 1980s found that sugar companies had systematically tried to exploit seasonal West Indian workers to maintain absolute control over them with the constant threat of immediately sending them back to where they came from.

At the Whitney plantation, which operated continuously from 1752 to 1975, its museum staff of 12 is nearly all African-American women. A third of them have immediate relatives who either worked there or were born there in the 1960s and '70s. These black women show tourists the same slave cabins and the same cane fields their own relatives knew all too well.