

Sugar

By: Khalil Gibran Muhammad

Excerpt #4

Directions: Read the passage and make the following annotations/steps:

- Place a ^ symbol next to each portion of the text that describes ways freedmen and freedwomen continued to face oppression similar to enslavement.
- Place a + symbol next to each portion of the text that describes ways that freedmen and freedwomen resisted white supremacy and oppression.

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 land ownership. Freedmen and 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."