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## Sugar

By: Khalil Gibran Muhammad

Excerpt #2

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

- Place a + symbol next to each portion of the text that describes the growth and expansion of slavery in America.
- Place a ^ symbol next to each portion of the text that describes violent, dangerous, and inhumane conditions that enslaved persons on sugar plantations were forced to work.
- At the bottom of the text, create a t-chart that lists who benefitted (left side) and was harmed (right side) by the cultivation of sugar in America.

The enslaved population soared, quadrupling over a 20-year period to 125,000 souls in the mid-19th century. New Orleans became the Walmart of people-selling. The number of enslaved labor crews doubled on sugar plantations. And in every sugar parish, black people outnumbered whites. These were some of the most skilled laborers, doing some of the most dangerous agricultural and industrial work in the United States.

In the mill, alongside adults, children toiled like factory workers with assembly-line precision and discipline under the constant threat of boiling hot kettles, open furnaces and grinding rollers. “All along the endless carrier are ranged slave children, whose business it is to place the cane upon it, when it is conveyed through the shed into the main building,” wrote Solomon Northup in “Twelve Years a Slave,” his 1853 memoir of being kidnapped and forced into slavery on Louisiana plantations.

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 fayed 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,”

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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.

Most of these stories of brutality, torture and premature death have never been told in classroom textbooks or historical museums. They have been refined and whitewashed in the mills and factories of Southern folklore: the romantic South, the Lost Cause, the popular “moonlight and magnolias” plantation tours so important to Louisiana’s agritourism today.