

## Richard's Hungers

Have you ever experienced real hunger? The kinds of hungers that Richard experiences in *Black Boy* are not evident in the society where you and I reside. The present middle class citizens cannot really relate to true physical hunger. Hunger for most of us is when there is nothing that we desire to eat around the house and therefore skip one meal. This cannot even compare to the days that Richard endures without food. Physical hunger, however, is not the only hunger apparent in Richard's life. Richard suffers from emotional and educational hungers as well. He yearns for such things as mere association with others and simple books to read. Both of which are things that most people take for granted. This efficacious autobiography, *Black Boy*, by Richard Wright manifests what it is like to desire such simple paraphernalia.

From a very early age and for much of his life thereafter, Richard experiences chronic physical hunger. "Hunger stole upon me slowly that at first I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly" (16). Soon after the disappearance of Richard's father, he begins to notice constant starvation. This often reappears in his ensuing life. The type of hunger that Richard describes is worse than one who has not experienced chronic hunger can even imagine. "Once again I knew hunger, biting hunger, hunger that made my body aimlessly restless, hunger that kept me on edge, that made my temper flare, that made my temper flare, hunger that made hate leap out of my heart like the dart of a serpent's tongue, hunger that created in me odd cravings" (119). Because hunger has always been a part of Richard's lifestyle, he cannot even imagine eating meat every day. This simple privilege would be a miracle to him, yet to most it is nothing. These weakening and piercing hungers are frequently evident where poverty dwells in the Jim Crow South.

Furthermore, emotional hunger also represses much of Richard's life. Richard desires attention from people. However, since he does not receive much of this at home, he does not really know how to associate with others. This provokes a problem when he leaves home because he cannot understand the friendliness of people around him. "Nevertheless, I was so starved for association with people that I allowed myself to be seduced by it all, and for a few months I lived the life of an optimist" (178). Richard's home was mostly a hostile environment, therefore, in addition to craving food he also yearns for love. Another thing that contributes to Richard's emotional hunger is the subject of blacks and whites. "I wanted to understand these two sets of people who lived side by side and never touched, it seemed, except in violence" (54). He viewed this culture of justifiable torment as senseless, but dared not go against it. Richard accepted this segregation, but never let the whites go too far in the way they treated him. Richard desired to be able to speak his mind and not be tormented by the whites. It was harder for him than others to succumb to these ways, which is why he moved to the North. Oftentimes this emotional state leads to loneliness and overwhelming grief.

Although all these hungers are very significant, the hunger for education is the one that Richard has the hardest time enduring. Richard is a very bright boy, yet nobody encourages him to learn because Negro children of the Jim Crow South just did not grow up to be successful. In fact, many blacks settled for ignorance and illiteracy. However, Richard takes full advantage of the few opportunities he does encounter to learn and read. "I hungered for the sharp, frightening, breathtaking, almost painful excitement that the story had given me, and I vowed that as soon as I was old enough I would buy all the novels there were and read them to feed that thirst for violence that was in me, for

intrigue, for plotting, for secrecy, for bloody murders" (46). Richard passionately craves reading, but his grandmother views these stories as devilish and forbids him to read such things. Granny is very oppressive and the cause of much his educational hunger. Moreover, many times Richard is unable to go to school because they did not have enough money, not only for books, but also for clothing to make him look "presentable." A greater part of his education is not by way of formal schooling but learning through experience. Richard is a very curious boy and wants to learn as much as possible. Repeatedly, Richard asks too many questions of people around him, inducing them to become annoyed. He gets very excited when he learns new things. "...I had learned to count to a hundred and I was overjoyed.... I would read the newspapers with my mother guiding me and spelling out the words. I soon became a nuisance by asking far too many questions of everybody" (26). As someone stranded in a hot desert without water, Richard's thirst for learning is never fully quenched.

Whether it be physical, emotional, or educational hunger that Richard suffers through, all affect him significantly. However, this strong and determined character of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, succeeds even with these famines. Now, as an adult living in the North, he has surmounted these obstacles and consequently is stronger than most people. The main reason he does survive is due to the great endurance he possesses. Today, few people in our society would be able to survive through such hungers.

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