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U.S. History Paper Assignment  
Response to Question #2  
Based on Book-Black Boy  
By Richard Wright

### **Richard's Hunger**

The novel Black Boy depicts Richard Wright's life while living in the Deep South and then migrating to Chicago as a young man. While growing up he learned to believe that authority should be based on truth not control, violence and power. He often challenged authority and got misunderstood in many instances. I will describe how trepidation and especially hunger for food, life, love and opportunity propelled Wright to become a world renowned author.

Wright's autobiography depicts numerous illustrations of hunger. His family seldom could afford enough food for the family. One of the reasons Richard hated his father was because he left the family which made it very difficult to have enough food again (p.16). At one point his mom worked for a white family and would take Richard with her to work where he would smell the glorious aromas, but would only be allowed to have scraps leftover from the white family. Another situation was when he had a dog he came very close to selling because he was so hungry and needed food. The last example of hungry, but possibly the most profound was his hunger for stories and language. His love for literature and other intellects insights was nourishment for his body and soul. He read whenever he had time, and searched for the meaning to words he didn't readily understand.

Once his grandmother took ill and he was made to be quiet much of the time. He describes her as "old, white, wrinkled, grim face, framed by a halo of tumbling black

hair, lying upon a huge feather pillow, made me afraid” (p.3). Richard had many more episodes of fear in his early years from hiding from his family when he started a fire in there home; to fighting off bullies in the neighborhood and school.

At one point Richard’s mother could no longer afford where she and her sons were living and made the decision to send the boys to live in an orphanage that was always noisy with children. This setting offered no privacy or peace of mind for a sensitive boy like Richard. At one point he was so hungry and weak he could hardly do his yard work chore. This reminded me of how slaves must have felt while working the cotton fields of their masters. Hungry for food, a fair life, and opportunity, and then weakened by the long hours of exhausting field work. He describes the woman who ran the home as a “tall, gaunt, mulatto woman” (p.28) named Miss Simon and from first glance until his last day at the orphanage he was afraid of her. Because she was mulatto and an authority figure for him, I imagine he was reminded of his mulatto grandmother who consistently challenged and intimidated him. Richard said during his time at the orphanage “he was rapidly learning to distrust everything and everybody” (p.29). Imagine being left somewhere not knowing if you’d ever be reunited with what and who were familiar to you. This fear quickly turned to distrust. When Richard’s mother became ill and no longer could care for herself or her two sons, the situation once again forced them to move from there own place to live with their grandmother. He resolved to leave her house as soon as he was old enough to support himself. These pivotal points during his impoverished upbringing were certainly a catalyst for his hunger, loneliness, isolation and issues with authority throughout his life.

When Richard's Aunt Maggie came to Memphis due to her husband abandoning her; this began his real planning to go north. In 1927 Richard and Aunt Maggie made it to Chicago on the train and found no signs saying: FOR WHITE-FOR COLORED (p.261). What he did find was a strange land which made him tense and he wondered if he'd ever learn the strange laws in order to survive there.

He then found the Garveyites, and then the Black Communist Party who from first encounters in Washington Park weren't very appealing to him. They were sloppy in their appearance and wore their caps backwards with the visors turned up like Lenin, and frankly they had no ideas which could ever be understood. A day's observation of their activities was sufficient to reveal all their thought processes (p. 295). As he listened to Black Communist speakers; he wondered if the Negro could ever overcome the hundreds of years of oppression and understand himself enough to save himself? The hunger for food, life, love and an opportunity to prosper was what Richard felt every Negro was entitled to, but in order to get any of it you needed to understand the truth about the circumstances in which you lived. This is why Richard eventually became a celebrated writer.

He moved his family into an apartment that was rotting and resorted to Cook County's Bureau of Public Welfare in order for them to eat and "he knew he had come to the end of something"(p.299). As he sat waiting for food assistance he "listened to Black minds shedding many illusions. These people now knew that the past had betrayed them, had cast them out; but they did not know what the future would be like, did not know what they wanted" (p.300). Again he clearly felt the pains of hunger and thought it would be a

feeling of the past. Richard clearly knew what he wanted from life, love, and opportunity but he began to wonder if it would ever be achieved. These instances made Richard realize life wasn't very different here than from the wicked ways of the South he so desperately thought he had left behind.

Had Richard migrated from the South to the North in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century some things would have been most certainly different. For instance, he would have met a strong democratic party in Chicago and Richard quite possibly would have been a new and welcomed voice; and he may have sought out a political career. Especially since the time is ripe for more balanced Black leadership. If he wanted to pursue a formal education he would have more opportunity to do so with federal and state financial aid assistance, and with his writing ability he could pursue scholarships as well. However, the apprehension he felt when he first got off the train to Chicago may not have been much different. Chicago can be an intimidating place for someone who's never experienced a major metropolis. Another major difference between 1927 and now would be that Richard would have seen an abundance of Black people along with people of all nationalities making successful choices; unafraid and with full belly. Least of all he would have had no problem finding people of color to have an intellectual conversation.