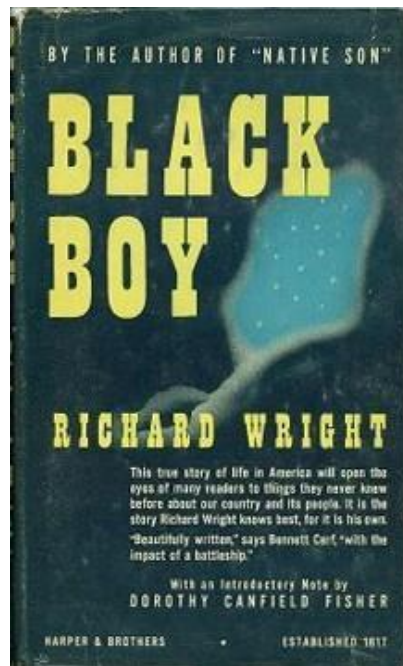


# Teaching Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

## An Online Professional Development Seminar

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### Gerald Early

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Professor of English and  
Professor of African & African-American Studies,  
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## FROM THE FORUM

- I've had a lot of luck using imagery as a means to introduce students to the book, especially doing a gallery walk-through of the covers that have graced it since its publication.
- How closely does *Black Boy* parallel Wright's own life?
- Did people challenge Wright's depiction of the Jim Crow South when the book appeared?
- How did Wright judge race relations in the non-Southern United States?



## Gerald Early

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*The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature,  
and Modern American Culture,*  
winner of the 1994 National Book Critics Circle Award for  
criticism

*One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American  
Culture* (1994)

*Daughters: On Family and Fatherhood* (1994)

*Tuxedo Junction:  
Essays on American Culture*  
(1989)

## Career

- Moved to New York in 1937, became the Harlem editor for the *Daily Worker*
- Received the *Story* magazine prize for “Fire and Cloud”
- Published collection of four short stories entitled *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938)
- Won a Guggenheim Fellowship, which allowed him to complete *Native Son* (1940)
- In January 1941 received the prestigious Spingarn Medal for noteworthy achievement
- Published semi-autobiographical *Black Boy* (1945)

# *Black Boy or American Hunger*

- *Black Boy* is a memoir of Richard Wright's childhood and young adulthood.
- The first fourteen chapters, about his Mississippi childhood were called "Part One: Southern Night", and the last six, about Chicago, were "Part Two: The Horror and the Glory".
- In January 1944, Harper and Brothers accepted all twenty chapters, and by May they were all in page proofs for a scheduled fall publication of the book.
- In June, the Book of the Month Club expressed an interest in only the Mississippi childhood section, the first fourteen chapters.
- In response, Wright agreed to eliminate the Chicago section, and in August he renamed the shortened book *Black Boy*.

## Structure of the Discussion

- Black Boy as part of the African American autobiographical tradition
- The metaphor of hunger in the text
- Wright's nonconformist attitude
- Women: depiction of female characters
- Reading: from Pulp Fiction to H.L. Mencken
- The liberal welfare state; Wright and communism
- Ralph Ellison's criticism of *Black Boy*

Hunger stole upon me so 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. The hunger I had known before this had been no grim, hostile stranger; it had been a normal hunger that had made me beg constantly for bread, and when I ate a crust or two I was satisfied. But this new hunger baffled me, scared me, made me angry and insistent. Whenever I begged for food now my mother would pour me a cup of tea which would still the clamor in my stomach for a moment or two; but a little later I would feel hunger nudging my ribs, twisting my empty guts until they ached. I would grow dizzy and my vision would dim. I became less active in my play, and for the first time in my life I had to pause and think of what was happening to me.

Chapter I

## Discussion Question

- How does Wright's description of hunger change as the autobiography progresses?

# The Isolated Life of Blacks

After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair. After I had learned other ways of life I used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passionate an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure.

Chapter II

## Discussion Question

- Were critics right to accuse Wright of misunderstanding black life in this famous passage?



# Wright's Mother

My mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. Her life set the emotional tone of my life, colored the men and women I was to meet in the future, conditioned my relation to events that had not yet happened, determined my attitude to situations and circumstances I had yet to face. A somberness of spirit that I was never to lose settled over me during the slow years of my mother's unrelieved suffering, a somberness that was to make me stand apart and look upon excessive joy with suspicion, that was to make me self-conscious, that was to make me keep forever on the move, as though to escape a nameless fate seeking to overtake me.

Chapter III

## Discussion Question

- How would you characterize Wright's relationship with his mother?

At the age of twelve I had an attitude toward life that was to endure, that was to make me seek those areas of living that would keep it alive, that was to make me skeptical of everything while seeking everything, tolerant of all and yet critical. The spirit I had caught gave me insight into the sufferings of others, made me gravitate toward those whose feelings were like my own, made me sit for hours while others told me of their lives, made me strangely tender and cruel, violent and peaceful.

Chapter III

## Discussion Question

- How was Wright able to reconcile these contradictions and be an integrated personality?

My body grew, even on mush and lard gravy, a miracle which the church certainly should have claimed credit for. I survived my twelfth year on a diet that would have stunted an average-sized dog, and my glands began to diffuse through my blood, like sap rising upward in trees in spring, those strange chemicals that made me look curiously at girls and women. The elder's wife sang in the choir and I fell in love with her as only a twelve-year-old can worship a distant and unattainable women. During the services I would stare at her, wondering what it was like to be married to her, pondering over how passionate she was. I felt no qualms about my first lust for the flesh being born on holy ground; the contrast between budding carnal desires and the aching loneliness of the hymns never evoked any sense of guilt in me.

Chapter IV

## Discussion Question

- Why should Wright choose to underscore rebellious nature of his boyish lust against the backdrop of the church?

It was no longer a question of my believing in God; it was no longer a matter of whether I would steal or lie or murder; it was a simple, urgent matter of public pride, a matter of how much I had in common with other people. If I refused, it meant that I did not love my mother, and no man in that tight little black community had ever been crazy enough to let himself be placed in such a position. My mother pulled my arm and I walked with her to the preacher and shook his hand, a gesture that made me a candidate for baptism. There were more songs and prayers; it lasted until well after midnight. I walked home limp as a rag; I had not felt anything except sullen anger and a crushing sense of shame. Yet I was somehow glad that I had got it over with; no barriers now stood between me and the community.

Chapter VI

## Discussion Question

- If Wright did love his mother, and if he did want some sort of communal life, why consider rebelling against the charade of conversion, such a small price to pay to make his mother happy?

Was I really as bad as my uncles and aunts and Granny repeatedly said? Why was it considered wrong to ask questions? Was I right when I resisted punishment? It was inconceivable to me that one should surrender to what seemed wrong, and most of the people I had met seemed wrong. Ought one to surrender to authority even if one believed that that authority was wrong? If the answer was yes, then I knew that I would always be wrong, because I could never do it. Then how could one live in the world in which one's mind and perceptions meant nothing and authority and tradition meant everything? There were no answers.

Chapter VII

## Discussion Question

- What does “surrender to authority” actually mean in Wright’s view?
- Can one surrender to authority without really surrendering? Can one surrender to authority and actually undermine authority

Later, after I had grown to understand the peasant mentality of Bess and her mother, I learned the full degree to which my life at home had cut me off, not only from white people but from Negroes as well. To Bess and her mother, money was important, but they did not strive for it too hard. They had no tensions, unappeasable longings, no desire to do something to redeem themselves. The main value in their lives was simple, clean, good living and when they thought they had found those same qualities in one of their race, they instinctively embraced him, liked him, and asked no questions. But such simple unaffected trust flabbergasted me. It was impossible.

Chapter XI

## Discussion Question

- According to Wright's political and moral values, what is the significance of Bess's lack of self-awareness?

Among the topics that southern white men did not like to discuss with Negroes were the following: American white women; the Ku Klux Klan; France, and how negro soldiers fared while there; Frenchwomen; Jack Johnson; the entire northern part of the United States; the Civil War; Abraham Lincoln; U. S. Grant; General Sherman; Catholics; the Pope; Jews; the Republican party; slavery; social equality; Communism; Socialism; the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution; or any topic calling for positive knowledge or manly self-assertion on the part of the Negro.

Chapter XII

## Discussion Question

- What exactly does this catalog of subjects represent?
- And what would you imagine black and white southerners would have to say about them if they did try to talk about these subjects?

# American Culture

As I, in memory, think back now upon those girls and their lives I feel that for white America to understand the significance of the problem of the Negro will take a bigger and tougher America than any we have yet known. I feel that America's past is too shallow, her national character too superficially optimistic, her very morality too suffused with color hate for her to accomplish so vast and complex a task.

Culturally the Negro represents a paradox: Though he is an organic part of the nation, he is excluded by the entire tide and direction of American culture.

Chapter XV

After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair. After I had learned other ways of life I used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passional an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure.

Chapter II

## Discussion Question

- How would you compare these quotations? The one on the right is from slide 14.
- Is there anything worthwhile about American culture?



# Ellison's "Richard Wright's Blues"

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.

**Final Slide**

**Thank you**