

# Friendship Across Differences: Heidegger and Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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*This paper examines the possibility of friendship across differences in Richard Wright's *Native Son* by examining the protagonist's relationship to three pivotal white characters in the text. Through the application to *Native Son* of a theory of friendship I cull from Heidegger's discussion of care in *Being and Time*, I offer a model for relationships whereby radically different individuals may approach each other across and in spite of differences. In putting Heidegger and Wright into dialogue I both shed light on the intricacies of inter-subjective relations depicted by Wright as well as give depth to an obscure passage regarding inter-subjective relations in Heidegger's *Being and Time*.*

The publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) had a profound impact on the understanding of race relations in the United States. Blacks witnessed the limit situation of anger and fear play out in Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas' murder of a white woman named Mary. Whites recoiled before the violent effects of anti-black racism and the desperation of black existence. And women of all races were left pondering the link between racism and aggression against women.<sup>1</sup> However naively, however simplistically, *Native Son*, starkly depicted and brought to the fore the gap existing between the world of whites and the world of blacks.<sup>2</sup> The Critic Irving Howe writes: "The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book needed later, it made impossible a repletion of the old lies...He told us...that Negroes... were scared by fear, that they hated every moment of their suppression even when seeming most acquiescent, and that often they hated *us*[".]"<sup>3</sup> The general problems were posed: Is it possible for blacks and whites to live and share in a common world colored by anti-black racism and the ideology of white supremacy? And what is the character and meaning of black existence in an anti-black world?

I approach these questions by analyzing Bigger's relationship to three pivotal white characters in the text through a theory of friendship I cull from Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Turning to Heidegger for a discussion on friendship might at first appear peculiar. Heidegger is among the first in the West to clearly spell out the inseparability of the world, others and the self. He uses the term *Da-sein* instead of subject to express this unity, and the phrase *being-in-the-world* to underscore how *Da-sein*, or the human being,

is always a product of its concrete lived situations. Still, it is a challenge to flesh out a theory of friendship on the little that Heidegger has to say about meaningful inter-subjective relations.<sup>4</sup> There is, however, one passage where he puts forth two different modes of care that one may express toward an other from which a theory of friendship may be gleaned. In the first mode of care, to “*leap in*” for the other, one relates not directly with the other, but to the matter at hand that is of concern to the other.<sup>5</sup> For example, if an individual is worried about writing a paper for a class, the mode of concern called leaping in would address this worry by helping the other to write the paper, or by going as far as to write the paper for oneself. In contrast to this mode there is the more authentic mode of concern where one is to “*leap ahead*” of the other.<sup>6</sup> In leaping ahead one is not concerned with the specific tasks that confront the other but with the other’s existential well-being in the rootedness of their lived situation. With respect to the above example, in leaping ahead one would not write the paper for the other, but rather help the other to formulate a topic that would excite him or her to begin the art of writing.

But my turning to Heidegger to discuss friendship is also motivated by his central insight of linking mood to all forms of understanding. Indeed, perhaps Heidegger’s most interesting contribution to Philosophy, in addition to his model of Da-sein for overcoming the subject/ object dualism, is his emphasis on mood. Through mood the world opens up to Da-sein, giving it possibilities to choose from that define its self-relation and relation to others.<sup>7</sup> Remaining faithful to Wright’s focus on his protagonist’s perspective and experiences, I analyze Bigger’s relation to the three white characters in the text who accorded him some form of recognition. The concern granted Bigger by Mary, whom he would murder, and Jan Erlone, her boyfriend, elicited in him feelings of anger and shame. I will explain Bigger’s reaction to Mary and Jan by suggesting that they ‘leapt in’ for Bigger, causing him to feel dominated because they did not understand the mood of fear that colored his world. Whereas Boris Max, the lawyer defending Bigger’s life at his murder trial and Jan’s friend, was able to leap ahead of Bigger by allowing himself to fear for Bigger, thereby helping him to arrive at a clearer understanding of the meaning of his existence. In showing how the two different modes of concern play out in concrete lived situations, I offer a constructive model for relationships whereby radically different individuals may learn to approach and reach each other across differences, indeed, in spite of differences and disconnections.

Bigger knew nothing but frustration his entire life. He was frustrated by being poor. He was frustrated by feeling inferior because he was black. He was frustrated by his thwarted desires and even more by being robbed of having any desires of his own. "They don't even let you feel what you want to feel. They after you so hot and hard you can only feel what they doing to you. They kill you before you die" (252).<sup>8</sup> Paralyzed by an environment that he perceived restricted his ability to engage in any meaningful activity, Bigger survived mostly by erecting a wall after each time he would ask himself "But what could I do?" (12). Crushed by his surroundings in the Ghettos of Chicago, Bigger saw no way out. From the perspective of his mother, also frustrated by the poverty of their existence, Bigger was "the most no countest man I ever seen in my life!" (9). Bigger's paralysis appeared to her a rejection of his ability to turn the family's situation around. "'We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you,' she said" (8).

Frustration, however, was not all that Bigger knew. Fear, the title Wright gives to Part One of *Native Son*, was the overwhelming force dominating Bigger's life. His fear was kept in check only by the suppression of the misery and circumstance of his situation. "[H]is courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness" (42). Above all Bigger was terrified of the place carved out for him by whites who viewed him as nothing but a lowly and dangerous creature. Newspaper accounts of his murder trial voiced freely the prevailing white supremacist views of blacks at the time. "[T]he brutish Negro," they wrote, "seemed indifferent to his fate. ..He acted like an earlier missing link in the human species. He seemed out of place in a white man's civilization"(280). In fact, there was no place that Bigger could call home. He was not only hated and feared by the dominant white community but he did not feel a part of any black community either. Segregation and poverty lead him to feel shame and self-hatred before other blacks. Racism and discrimination added to this shame by preventing him from imagining the possibility of organizing and working with other blacks on meaningful projects. Completely estranged from black folk and religious culture, Bigger lacked what Simon Weil calls "enrootedness". Crucial to defining one's sense of self, Weil believes, is belonging to a community one actively contributes to and within which one's life is preserved in "particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future."<sup>9</sup>

Without roots, without hope in the future and pride in the past Bigger, was unable to construct a unified and positive sense of self. Without being rooted in an affirming and affirmative community with positive role models, Bigger became vulnerable to the images of blacks given to him by anti-black racists. Du Bois' concept of Double Consciousness perfectly captures Bigger's experience of internalizing the other's gaze. "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."<sup>10</sup> Seeing himself as a criminal and an animal through the eyes of hating whites, Bigger felt it was only a matter of time before he would be rooted out. He was thus paralyzed by fear of self-hatred, fear of his hatred for others and above all fear of his fate, foreshadowed by his mother's prophesy : "And the gallows is at the end of the road you traveling boy" (9). Asked by Max in his jail cell: "Bigger, did you think you'd ever come to this?" Bigger responds, "Well, to tell the truth, Mr. Max, it seems sort of natural-like, me being here facing that death chair. Now I come to think of it, it seems like something like this just had to be" (358). Heidegger's discussion of mood helps to explain Bigger's fear, heightened by the uncertainty yet inevitability of when, where and how his fate was to unravel.

Heidegger breaks fear down into three intertwining parts: What we are afraid of, fearing itself, and why we are afraid. What we are afraid of is always something we encounter that has the character of being threatening. An extreme case of the threatening is when it approaches anxiety in being a fear of everything all at once. However, what separates anxiety from fear is that anxiety is not about anything in particular whereas a fear approaching anxiety is fear of everything all at once.<sup>11</sup> This is the state Bigger existed in. When Max, Bigger's lawyer asked him what he was afraid of, Bigger responded: "Everything" (354).

But what is significant about Heidegger's account of mood, in this case fear, is that the threatening is not what brings about fear. In other words, one does not first identify something as threatening and then respond to it in a fearful manner. Rather, fear itself is the mood by which the threatening is first discovered as threatening. Like all moods, fearing is inseparable from the understanding and it is the means by which a world opens up to *Da-sein*. As a mode of comportment or being-toward the world, fear allows the threatening to approach the individual in its lived situation. Fearing and what is feared are inseparable, for it is fear that brings about that which

is threatening, and not the other way around. Thus when Bigger is in the mood of fear, he is not responding to a threatening situation. Rather, all situations he comes across are threatening and this is because everything he encounters he does so from the comportment of fear toward the world. Bigger explains to Max: "I knew that some time or other they was going to get me for something. I'm black. I don't have to do nothing for 'em to get me. The first white finger they point at me, I'm a goner, see?" (351).

The third feature of fear, that about which one is afraid, is the threat to one's very existence. In fearing *Da-sein* is "left to itself" (141/132). But while fear always pertains to the fearing individual one can also have fear for another. Fearing for the other, however, does not entail that the one fearing for be afraid him or herself. One may fear for the other in fearing for that which threatens the other and not necessarily be in the mood of fear one's self. Fearing for an other is possible, however, only if one shares in the same world from which the threatening arises for the one in fear. Sharing the same world with others, or being-in-the-world with others, Heidegger calls *Mitdas-ein*. In being with an other one comports oneself to the other's world by understanding the other's mood. *Mitdas-ein* or sharing a comportment with another is the precondition for being able to leap ahead of the other in an authentic mode of care. Unlike Max, Jan and Mary, as we will see, were unable to comport themselves to Bigger's world because they did not recognize the underlying mood of fear circumscribing all of his encounters.

Eventually Bigger took the job of chauffeur that his mother secured for him with Mr. Dalton. His first assignment was to drive Mr. Dalton's daughter, Mary, to a school function. Mary was a radical who hated injustice, especially racial injustice. She frequently went to demonstrations and used her father's money to free other activists from prison. But the evening that was to seal Bigger's fate, Mary did not go to school. Instead she went out with her communist boyfriend Jan. They first stopped at a liquor store, before arriving to their choice destination—a black owned and populated restaurant on the black side of town that whites did not frequent. Jan and Mary had insisted that Bigger take them to one of his local hangouts and dine with them, in the hope of extending their friendship to him. They were interested in Bigger and asked him to share with them an understanding of his "people," assuring him they were on his "side" (64). Handing Bigger communist literature they tried to explain to him the material conditions

of his oppression and of the oppression of his people. Bigger did not know what they meant by his “people.” He had never felt a connection with any blacks outside of sharing in the feeling of shame over having black skin. Nor did he know what Mary and Jan meant by stating that they were on his side. He was not a part of any side. What Bigger did know, however, was that the familiarity that Jan and Mary were assuming with him made him deeply uncomfortable, almost as uncomfortable as when Mary jumped into the front seat of the car to sit next to Bigger on the way to the restaurant. These gestures of kindness, Bigger had never experienced before. But they did not inspire in him a sense of confidence. On the contrary, he felt confusion, fear, rage and above all hatred.

Did not white people despise black skin?... Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold and inarticulate hate (67).

Throughout dinner, Bigger sat humiliated across from Mary and Jan and in front of his girlfriend Bessie who was their waitress for the evening and whom Bigger pretended not to know. After dinner, Bigger drove them home. But when it was time for Mary to leave the car, she was too drunk to walk. Bigger had to carry her to her room. As he stood hovering over Mary, caressing her, he heard footsteps coming from the hallway. It was Mrs. Dalton, Mary’s blind mother. Mary then began to mumble. Bigger bent over her in fear of being detected, of being charged with sexually assaulting a white woman. He was dominated by frenzy and to prevent Mary from making a sound he covered her mouth with a pillow and then her entire face. Mrs. Dalton walked over to Mary’s bed, smelled alcohol and disappointedly walked away. Bigger had escaped detection. He then turned to see about Mary. She was dead. “He had killed a white woman.” (87). Bigger was now a Negro murderer and soon to be portrayed as a Negro rapist. In retrospect Bigger describes: “He felt strange, possessed, or as if he were acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of people” (84). Indeed, he felt he had fulfilled his destiny as a black man. Yet he did not feel bad about murdering Mary. She was white and whites had always tried to keep him

down. In fact, Bigger claims to have felt a sense of freedom and relief in finally actualizing his fate.<sup>12</sup>

Bigger is guilty of indiscriminately regarding all whites equally as oppressors and haters of blacks. Dominated by his fear, Bigger was unable to see that they were trying to extend their friendship to him because he was incapable of seeing them as anything but white. Bigger perceived himself as a victim and Jan and Mary he thought were his oppressors. All whites, he believed, stood above all blacks as Gods. It was not until after his imprisonment that Bigger finally came to regard whites as people too.

But it also seems that neither Jan nor Mary were able to see Bigger in his situation either. They presumed to relate to him on the basis of equality. That much is true. But he was not an equal. He could not choose whether or not he wanted to have dinner with them. Indeed Bigger perceived that whites robbed him of the very liberty to determine his own desires. When asked to dine with Mary and Jan, Bigger felt his chains tightening. He did not want to sit across from them at a dinner table but he could not say no. And he did not want to be engaged in a conversation with them either. But when spoken too he had to respond. He was black and he had to know his place vis a vis whites.

Heidegger's description of leaping in helps to explain the feeling of anger and rage that arose in Bigger through his encounter with Jan and Mary. In leaping in, Heidegger writes, "Concern takes over what is to be taken care of for the other. The other is thus displaced, he steps back so that afterwards, when the matter has been attended to, he can take it over as something finished and available or disburden himself of it completely. In this concern, the other can become one who is dependent and dominated even if this domination is a tacit one and remains hidden from him."<sup>13</sup>

Surely Jan and Mary did not think that in inviting Bigger to dine with them that they were engaging in an act of domination. They were not racist. On the contrary, they devoted their lives to social justice. And as communists they understood what it was like to be hated and to live at the margins. Yet they were white and they belonged to a definite world and a definite community with a history and a future toward which they were striving. However, by assuming an immediate familiarity with Bigger they acted as if they did not understand the deep divisions that stood between them. They did not make an attempt to recognize or acknowledge Bigger as an individual with radically different experiences, just as Bigger failed to see Jan and Mary as anything but white. Moreover, by encountering him from the horizon of

Communism they presumed to know Bigger by treating him as a representative of a racial problem. Jan and Mary did not understand that Bigger's pain was deeper than the material conditions that they identified as the root of his problems, they did not understand the gravity of Bigger's situation and the scarring and damaging effects racism had on him—what Cornell West call the “ontological wounds” of anti-black racism.<sup>14</sup> They therefore did not acknowledge his shame or his fear. Rather they approached him as an abstraction whose problems were reducible to the material conditions of his oppression and the color of his skin. They wanted to hear about the world of blacks, as though his blackness were a thing that could be analyzed and taken care of. “This kind of concern... (Heidegger states) “pertains, for the most part, to our taking care of things at hand,” that is, to the way we relate to objects or tangible and fixed material things.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, in defining themselves as freedom fighters and not seeing Bigger as a man stripped of his abilities to act, they worked not to empower but to rob Bigger of his power by promising to secure for him a better world. In Heidegger's words, they tried to “take the other's ‘care’ away from him.” Hoping to hand him a world free of racism and oppression, they treated Bigger as an object that they could repair and not as an individual in need of care, recognition, support and understanding.<sup>16</sup> Failing to recognize the gap that existed between them and Bigger, Jan and Mary leapt in for Bigger by promising to take his troubles away. Samuel Sillen captures perfectly Jan's initial blunder of “treating Bigger as a comrade before Bigger has learned to believe in the very existence of comradeship.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, they did not recognize the privilege that came from having white skin, a privilege that inspired them to believe they could yank Bigger out of the fear-filled world he knew and into some ideal world of their creation where race differences no longer mattered. Thus they could not understand how Bigger's wounds turned into fear, coloring his entire world.

After a long escape and an attempt to frame Jan for Mary's murder, Bigger got caught, but not before killing his black girlfriend Bessie, a murder that was of little consequence in light of the Dalton one. Jan had gone to speak with him in jail, sharing his shock, anger and ultimately his understanding. Bigger, he thought, had no choice but to hate all whites. Bigger murdered, Jan believed, so that he could settle the score. But this is not why Bigger killed Mary. Fear made Bigger kill—the kind of fear that verges on Anxiety, where what is feared, the fearing and the why of fear merge into



one. It was this heightening of fear that gripped Bigger so forcefully that he was unaware he had committed a murder. Faced with what he perceived was the blind hate and fear of Mrs. Dalton, Bigger froze before the possibility of getting caught and accused of raping a white woman.

Bigger's attorney Max tried to give Bigger hope, but they both knew that Bigger was going to get the death penalty. The media coverage of the trial, the public outcry surrounding the murder, and the inquest of the angry mob sealed Bigger's fate. Perhaps it was because Bigger had nothing else to lose but he now "felt some obscure need to be at home with people." Bigger's mother, his siblings and friends came to see him in prison, but Bigger could not find a connection with any of them, only shame. Listening to his mother's promise of the life to come in the kingdom of God angered him. The only person Bigger felt he could talk with was Max, his white skinned lawyer.<sup>18</sup> In fact, it appears that only a white person could satisfy Bigger's quest for recognition, as blacks were those he felt shame before, those who shared with him "the dread of being black" (275).

At the trial, Max hoped to convey the economic, social and political circumstances that lead to Bigger's crime, hoping to dissipate his degree of responsibility. But it was not Max's defense that proved to Bigger that he was a worthy human being, but the care and attention Max gave to Bigger in their conversations in his jail cell. Max was both stunned and horrified when Bigger explained that he had not felt any remorse for killing Mary. She was white, and therefore she was his oppressor.<sup>19</sup> When Max pointed out to Bigger that Mary was not like most whites and that she did not hate blacks, Bigger did concede that she made him feel like he "was human." Still, she had tried to cross boundaries between the black and white worlds without recognizing the boundaries that had been traversed. "We live apart. And then she comes and acts like that to me," Bigger states (350).

When it came to discussing the details of the murder Bigger had difficulty understanding his own fear. On the one hand, he explained, "Mr. Max, so help me God, I couldn't do nothing when I turned around and saw that woman coming to that bed. Honest to God, I didn't know what I was doing..." (352). "It was like another man stepped inside of my skin and started acting for me..." (352). And at other times his fear is inseparable from his anger and he imagines himself murdering Mary and Bessie out of hate. "I killed 'em' cause I was scared and mad. But I been scared and mad all my life and after I killed that first woman, I wasn't scared no more for a little while" (354). His fear subsided because Bigger felt that he had finally

chosen and he had finally acted. In fact, he claims to have experienced a sense of freedom and direction after his first murder of Mary Dalton (396).<sup>20</sup> Bigger had finally fit into the world that whites had carved out for him—he was now a Negro murderer and rapist. Indeed, Bigger perceived himself to be a sacrifice, allowing his family and friends a respite from their shame. “Had he not taken upon himself the crime of being black? Had he not done the thing which they dreaded above all others? Then they ought not stand here and pity him, cry over him; but look at him and go home, contented, feeling that their shame was washed away” (296).

Bigger continued to talk and share his feelings with Max. Soon he came to view Max as someone who might actually understand him. Through the recognition accorded him by Max, Bigger began to gain “a sense of his worth” (418). “Why had Max asked him all those questions? He knew that Max was seeking facts to tell the judge; but in Max’s asking of those questions he had felt a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person that he had never encountered before. . . . For the first time in his life he had gained a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of” (360). Maybe whites, he thought, were people too, like himself. He began to feel a connection.

He stood up in the middle of the cell floor and tried to see himself in relation to other men [*sic*], a thing he had always feared to try to do, so deeply stained was his own mind with the hate of others for him. With this new sense of the value of himself gained from Max’s talk, a sense fleeting and obscure, he tried to feel that if Max had been able to see the man in him beneath those wild and cruel acts of his, acts of fear and hate and murder and flight and despair, then he *too* would hate, if *he* were *they*, just as now *he* was hating *them* and *they* were hating *him*. For the first time in his life he felt ground beneath his feet, and he wanted it to stay there (361).

But how exactly did Bigger’s conversation with Max allow Bigger to turn his life around and to feel at one with the rest of the world?

Faced with his impending death Bigger no longer felt the need to refrain from sharing his mind. However, he was not able to talk to just anyone. Bigger was prepared to die alone. His family was unable to reach him, nor was Jan. Although Jan had come closer to understanding how Bigger must have felt that fateful evening when they first met. During his last visit with Bigger Jan exclaimed: “there’s something I just got to say. . . . you needn’t talk to me unless you want to Bigger, I think I know something of

what you're feeling now. I'm not dumb, Bigger; I can understand, even if I didn't seem to understand that night...I—I know my face looks like theirs to you, even though I don't feel like they do. But I didn't know we were so far apart until that night...I didn't know my white face was making you feel guilty, condemning you..."(287). What Jan understood was that he could not assume to know the pain and suffering Bigger experienced as a black man nor could he demand from Bigger to be accepted as a friend. After listening to Jan, Bigger too came to a better understanding of Jan. Wright explains, "a particle of rock had detached itself from that looming mountain of white hate...He saw Jan as though someone had performed an operation upon his eyes, or as though someone had snatched a deforming mask from Jan's face"(289). This operation was undergone through Bigger's conversations with Max.

At this point I need to underscore how it is not *Angst* but a fear bordering on anxiety that lead to Bigger's conversion, for Heidegger designates *Angst* as the sole mood bringing about a conversion, specifically in the encounter with death. Inauthentic, everyday Da-sein flees from death, according to Heidegger, by concerning itself with the matters that are closest at hand.<sup>21</sup> Essentially, they engage with others and the world in the mode of friendship I have called leaping in. To free oneself from inauthenticity and be on the road to authenticity, one must embrace one's death, but not as the end of one's life. Literal, or factual death is not an experience that one can have while alive. In fact, to understand death as a factual event that is sure to come but at some unknown time in the hopefully distant future is to understand death inauthentically as a tangible and objective matter that can be dealt with and pushed aside. To be toward death in an authentic manner, is to accept *Angst* by refusing to interpose before this mood the business of everyday matters. "In *Angst*, Da-sein finds itself faced with the nothingness of the possible impossibility of its existence."<sup>22</sup> Faced with the nothing of *Angst*, all of one's relations to others, to things and to matters of one's concern recede into the nothing and are thus rendered meaningless. It is by way of the experience of the nothing, being-toward-death, that one presumably moves from an inauthentic to an authentic mode of existence similar to the mode of friendship I have described as leaping ahead. In this form of care one is concerned not with the everyday matters at hand, or with the what of things, but with the world as such or that which gives meaning to all one's relations.

However, while the mood of *Angst* is a means toward the mode of concern I have designated through the term authentic friendship, Heidegger is explicit. *Angst* cannot be experienced via witnessing the death of another, nor can it be experienced in relation to an other. Unlike the mood of fear, in *Angst* one is left entirely to oneself. More precisely, in facing the nothingness of *Angst* there are no others, no things and in fact no self, as Heidegger defines the self as its activities in the world and in *Angst* all interests, things and others recede into the meaninglessness characterized by the nothing.<sup>23</sup> In the face of death, Bigger did indeed arrive at a more genuine understanding of himself and others. Thus one would presume he authentically encountered his death in a Heideggerian sense. Yet there is no account of Bigger experiencing his death alone, or arriving at any form of understanding outside of his relation to others. His fear, shame, hatred, anger, righteousness and subsequent belonging, acceptance and groundedness were always experienced in his relation to others. Thus he did not experience the *Angst* described by Heidegger in his depiction of being toward death, for he did not at any point experience himself as detached from others. In fact, it is entirely possible that Bigger may have faced his death and died filled with as much anger, rage and hatred as he had before his imprisonment had he not met Max. It is through the recognition and friendship offered to him by Max in the face of his death, that Bigger came to understand himself positively in relation to others, an understanding that questions Heidegger's claim that a turn toward authenticity happens in isolation and instead highlights his emphasis on listening and discourse.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike Jan, who initially thought he had a solid understanding of Bigger's situation and crime, Max simply listened to Bigger. Max did not have a prior conception of who Bigger was and he did not presume to understand Bigger's experiences or motives. To the contrary, when Bigger first expressed that he was not sorry for having committed two murders exclaiming "I didn't want to kill... But what I killed for, I *am*" (429),<sup>25</sup> Max was horrified: his "eyes were full of terror" (429). Yet his horror did not prevent him from openly listening to Bigger. In spite of his shock and horror over Bigger's murder, Max allowed himself to enter into Bigger's world with complete openness, free from judgment. He exercised the mode of concern that Heidegger calls leaping ahead. In this mode of concern, one "does not so much leap in for the other as *leap ahead* of him, not in order to take 'care' away from him, but first to give it back to him as such. This concern which essentially pertains to authentic care; that is, the existence of the other, and

not to a *what* which it takes care of, helps the other to become transparent to himself *in his care and free for it.*" 122/ 114-115

Of course Max literally did concern himself with the what of Bigger's life, in his attempt to save Bigger from the death penalty. Yet Max also knew that the struggle to save Bigger was futile and that Bigger was going to die. At that point, Max moved beyond the care of the what of Bigger's actual, factual life, to the care of Bigger's existence as a singular being facing his own death. Max did not concern himself with Bigger's actions, rather he tried to understand how it came about that Bigger committed the very act of murder. He didn't try to leap in for Bigger or to put himself in Bigger's shoes so to understand Bigger's crime. Bigger's murder of Mary was incomprehensible to Max, unlike with Jan, who thought he had understood that Bigger had murdered to settle the score. Rather, Max leapt ahead of Bigger opening up a safe horizon within which Bigger could genuinely voice his feelings and be heard for the first time. In fearing for Bigger, Max entered into the threatening character of Bigger's world, thereby helping Bigger to become transparent to himself. He accorded Bigger what Laurence Thomas calls Moral Deference, "the act of listening that is preliminary to bearing witness to another's moral pain, but without bearing witness to it."<sup>26</sup>

A Heideggerian theory of friendship therefore asks that one enable the other to become transparent to him or herself so that he or she can better understand their situation. In leaping ahead one directs oneself to the world of the other, therefore handing him or her back a horizon from which he or she may meet his or her concerns. This occurs in exercising non-judgmental listening, understanding and care, free of self-projection, imposition and self-interest. Blanchot hints at this form of dialogue as reserving "even in their greatest familiarity, the infinite distance, this fundamental separation starting from which that which separates becomes relation."<sup>27</sup> In the space between which two people interact, a space that belongs to neither, inter-subjective relations come to unfold. Individuals dwell and persist in the unknown while trying to negotiate tentative boundaries through inter-subjective listening and dialogue.<sup>28</sup> But the ability to exercise the form of care where one leaps ahead for the other presupposes an understanding of the other's world. Sharing a horizon of meaning and understanding rooted in a common mood is the condition for leaping ahead and giving back to the other care for his or her own existence. Max was able to leap ahead of Bigger by fearing for Bigger's life. Sharing in the same mood as Bigger, Max and Bigger realized a common understanding of the world. For however briefly, the epiphany

of being-with one another in a moment of understanding provided them with a foundation to build a friendship upon.

Bigger too came to see Max in a different light when desperately he turned to him for answers to the meaning of his life. Wright explains: "Under the shadow of death, he wanted Max to tell him about life...knowing... that a knowledge of how to live was a knowledge of how to die" (424). But Max was unable to provide him with any answers. Bigger saw in Max's black stare his own helplessness and paralysis. Perhaps it was with the recognition that Max, a white man, did not have all the answers that Bigger is able to leap ahead of Max. Maybe all whites are not gods, as he supposed. Bigger now came to recognize the subtlety and difficulty of traversing uncharted territories and relations with people radically different from himself. He came to understand that perhaps Max was not so different from himself and that Max too might have experiences similar to his own. This newfound sense of solidarity Bigger arrives at is affirmed in the last words to Wright's novel. As Max is walking away from his jail cell, Bigger yells out: "Tell...Tell Mister...Tell Jan hello..." (430). They then wish each other a final goodbye.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this paper I focus strictly on the acts and thoughts of Bigger to the exclusion of gender issues. For an analysis of gender in Wright's *Native Son* please see Sylvia Keady, "Richard Wright's Women Characters and Inequality" in *The Critical Response to Richard Wright*, ed. Robert J. Butler (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), pp. 43-51.

<sup>2</sup> James Baldwin criticizes Richard Wright for relying on simple stereotypes to portray Bigger as a flat character, failing to recognize the richness of the fabric of black community life on black existence. In his well know "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin likened Bigger to Stowe's Uncle Tom and dismisses *Native Son* as yet another Protest Novel. See James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel" in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," in *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutabu (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co, 1982), p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed many commentators on Heidegger claim that his model of authentic Da-sein, in its emphasis on freeing itself from the everyday world of others, or what Heidegger calls the "they," leaves little room for meaningful intersubjective relations. Most notably, Michael Theunissen writes that *mitda-sein*, Heidegger concept for the ontological primacy of Da-sein's being with others, belongs "purely formally" to Da-sein in its being-in-the-world. As Da-sein is in the world, it is, as such, in the world with others. Nevertheless, Theunissen argues that authenticity, which is kicked off by Da-sein's facing death in its solitude, leads to "the dissolution of all direct connection between Others and me. Others can only be freed for themselves inasmuch as they are freed from me." Consequently, he states, "should authentically existing *Dasein* also exist formally as being-with-Others, this latter can still never work its way into its ownmost being." Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the*

*Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*, trans. Christopher Macann, (MIT Press: 1984), pp. 189-191.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 114/122. The first reference is to the English translation, the second to the original German Pagination. Hereafter abbreviated BT.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 115/122.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger places a primacy on mood, or what he calls attunement. According to Heidegger, all understanding is conditioned by mood, which is the mode by which the world opens up to individuals. Mood constitutes the directedness or comportment of *Da-sein* to itself, others and things in its being-in-the-world. "The moodedness of attunement constitutes existentially the openness to world of *Da-sein*." *Ibid.*, p. 137/129. "*Mood has always already disclosed being-in-the-world as a whole and first makes possible directing oneself toward something*" *Ibid.*, p. 137/129.

<sup>8</sup> All embedded number in the text refer to page number from Wright's *Native Son*. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Weil believes that "to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul." The complete passage reads: "A human being has roots by virtue of real, active and natural participation in the life of the community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future." Simon Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties toward Mankind*, Trans. AF Willis (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 41.

<sup>10</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet Classic, 1969) p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger makes a distinction between *Angst* and fear that points to the distinction between authentic and inauthentic *Da-sein* on the basis of how each attunement discloses the world. In the mood of fear, *Da-sein* turns away from its ownmost-potentiality-of-being toward beings in the world. Fear is always experienced in the face of this or that specific worldly being "approaching nearby from a definite region, which may remain absent" BT, p. 185/174. And it is always about the particular *Da-sein* in question BT, p. 141/132. In contrast to fear, *Angst* turns away from beings toward the nothing. In this mood of uncanniness, *Da-sein* finds itself disengaged from others and things because the world that gives to it meaning and structures its everyday associations with things has lost all significance. In *Angst* the "world has the character of complete insignificance" BT, p. 186/174. Whereas in fear, wherein *Da-sein* is open to a "definite region" belonging to the world by virtue of its being-toward a definite something (or vice versa), in turning away from things toward the nothing in *Angst* the world too is simultaneously disclosed—but not as some definite region or as characterized by significance but *as such*: "what *Angst* is about exposes nothing, that is, the world as such[.]" BT, p. 187/175. Thus what had once provided the familiar, yet unreflective context from out of which *Da-sein* encounters beings—region, significance, totality of relevance, etc, is completely lost in *Angst*.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon Lewis commends Wright for putting into words the feeling of innocence that even blacks guilty of crimes feel. "His insight that even blacks who commit crimes suffer from a gnawing feeling of innocence raises the question of black existence beyond problems of inclusion. How can one have agency in a world of meaningless guilt?" Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 20.

<sup>13</sup> BT, p. 122/114. See, Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 27-28.

<sup>15</sup> BT, p. 122/114.

<sup>16</sup> The use of Blacks by some White radicals to achieve their political goals and the devastating effects this lack of recognition has on Blacks is beautifully described by Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1980).

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Sillen, "Review of Native Son" in *The Critical Response to Richard Wright*, ed., Robert J. Butler (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1995), pg. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Sartre provides an interesting analysis of racism and power relations through his concept of "The Look." In Sartre's analysis one is either the subject or the object of the other's gaze. With respect to shame he writes: "the *recognition* of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a *given* object." Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), pp. In addition to fear, shame was the primary feeling experienced by Bigger. For a keen analysis of Sartre's thinking on racism and the gaze see, Robert Bernasconi, "Sartre's Gaze Returned: The Transformation of the Phenomenology of Racism," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 18 (1995), pp. 201-221.

<sup>19</sup> When asked by Max when he started to hate Mary, Bigger replies "I hated her as soon as she spoke to me, as soon as I saw her, I reckon I hated her before I saw her..." Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), p. 352.

<sup>20</sup> Bigger explains to Max: "What I killed for must've been good!...When a man kills, it's for something...I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kell for 'em....It's the truth, Mr. Max. I can say it now, 'cause I'm going to die. I know what I' saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I'm all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way..." Ibid, p. 429. In fact, however, Bigger did not commit his first murder of Mary Dalton intentionally. Rather, it appears that Bigger has come to accept the picture of himself as a murderer, a picture he was given by a scared and anti-black society.

<sup>21</sup> The They-self "falls prey" to the world. The fundamental characteristic of the They-self, its "essential tendency," is "call[ed] the *leveling down* of all possibilities of being" BT, p. 127/119. All possibilities are leveled down to what is objectively present, calculable and manageable, including its own being. In this leveling down of possibilities the They-self passes over the world *as such* and is taken in by the things in the world. It becomes absorbed in the world of things and understands its being-with others and its own being from the perspective of its concern with things. The leveling down of possibilities to what is tangible, calculable and manipulable is how the They "entrenches its stubborn dominance" BT, p. 128/120. What the They-self concerns itself with is what everyone else concerns itself with. Thus any self is exchangeable with another. "Everyone is the other, and no one is himself." BT, p. 128/120. These ready-made interpretations provide the They-self with a sense of security and regularity that relieves it of its responsibility (and of *Angst*).

<sup>22</sup> BT, p. 266/245.

<sup>23</sup> In the nothingness brought on by *Angst* not only do all of Da-sein's possibilities lose their significance but the world too has no meaning for Da-sein, as the world is nothing but the way it shows itself by virtue of the possibilities it grounds. All that remains is nothing. And as the world and the possibilities it gives fade into oblivion, so to then does the being of Da-sein fade into the void of the nothing. This is because the being of Da-sein lies in its existence, in its relation to possibilities. "As long as it is, Da-sein always has understood itself and will understand itself in terms of possibilities." BT,, pp. 42/40; 145/136. In *Angst* there are no possibilities and thus no relations through which Da-sein may come to an understanding of itself.



<sup>24</sup> Heidegger places a primacy on hearing as the essential mode of discourse in relation to others and even to oneself. "Listening to... is the existential being-open of Da-sein as being-with for the other. Hearing even constitutes the primacy and authentic openness of Da-sein for its ownmost possibility of being, as in hearing the voice of the friend whom every Da-sein carries with it. Da-sein hears because it understands." BT, p. 163/153. Indeed, it is this mode of discourse that occurs in relation to others and to oneself as related to others that is the primary mode that brought about Bigger's conversion, a discourse that was accompanied by a mood, as all understanding, and discourse is a mode of understanding, are accompanied by mood. "Attunement always has its understanding... Understanding is always attuned." BT, p. 142-143/134. "The moodedness of attunement constitutes existentially the openness to world of Da-sein" BT, p. 137/129. "*Mood has always already disclosed being-in-the-world as a whole and first makes possible directing oneself to something*" BT, p. 137/129.

<sup>25</sup> The sentence continues "It must have been pretty deep in me to make me kill." Ibid, p.429.

<sup>26</sup> Laurence Thomas, "Moral Deference," *The Philosophical Forum* 24:1-3 (1992-1993).

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (London/New York: Verso, 1997) Pg 294.

<sup>28</sup> Feminists have long highlighted the centrality of listening as a mode of discourse that allows for awareness and respect of the other and depth of understanding. "Unlike the eye, the ear requires closeness between subject and object. Unlike seeing, speaking and listening suggest dialogue and interaction." From *Women's Way of Knowing* quoted in Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), P. 252.