

Ben Ratskoff
Hebrew Union College-LA

**“Tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless”:
Native Son and the Jewish Bigger Thomas**

Richard Wright’s 1940 naturalist novel *Native Son*, telescopically fixated on Bigger Thomas in Chicago, seems an unlikely site for a comparative interrogation of Jewish and Black racialization and the relationship between white supremacy and Nazism. However, as if the novel’s psychic and environmental fixations of Bigger failed to account sufficiently for his characterization, Wright chased the novel’s interpretation in lectures, private correspondence, pamphlets, public responses, and, eventually, an added preface. These paratexts surprisingly curve the interpretive gaze to various international elsewheres and, in doing so, modulate the novel’s localized organization of white, Black, and Jewish characters onto an international scale. Indeed, while the novel’s acutely local focalization submerges its Jewish characters into a distancing whiteness, the internationalizing paratexts reveal decidedly Jewish figures of comparison in the Soviet Union, England, Germany, and France. This paper will focus on one such paratext: Wright’s reply to David L. Cohn’s caustic review of the novel in the *Atlantic* magazine. While Cohn had put forth a bourgeois ideal of Jewish perseverance and uplift as an exemplar against which he paternalistically condemned Bigger’s deviant violence, Wright compared Bigger to Herschel Grynszpan, the seventeen-year-old Polish Jewish refugee who had assassinated a Nazi diplomat in Paris in 1938. Wright’s identification of a stateless Jewish teenager in Europe with a violent impulse commensurable to Bigger Thomas’s in Chicago not only put pressure on Cohn’s own Jewish identification but also triangulated the contradictions of white, Black, and Jewish racialization as they traverse local, national, and international scales. In doing so, Wright exposed the simultaneity of American Jewish implication in whiteness and European Jewish subjection to Nazism, balancing multiple, internationally distant zones of synchronic racialization without bypassing the determinacy of local power, ideology, and subjectivization.