“We Charge Genocide”: Revisiting black radicals’ appeals to the world community

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Abstract

In 1951, black radical William Patterson presented the United Nations with a petition, emblazoned with the title We Charge Genocide. The document charged the US government with snuffing out tens of thousands of black lives each year, through police violence and the systemic neglect of black citizens’ well-being. While historians have tended to discuss We Charge Genocide as a remarkable but brief episode, the petition built on prior attempts to invoke international law on behalf of African Americans and resonated with later generations of black activists whose political activism transcended more limited and domestic notions of civil rights. These later invocations of the genocide charge spanned the black left, including the Black Panther Party, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, James Baldwin and black feminists. This essay explores how the historical memory of racial violence, including settler colonialism and the slave trade, inspired an ideologically diverse array of organizations to each connect their experience to global histories of racial oppression. It stresses the internationalist and anticolonial perspective of the genocide charge and its proponents’ economic and transnational critique, thereby contributing to the historiographies of the long civil rights movement and black radicalism. By invoking international law, these black radicals connected the civil rights movement in the US to the struggle for human rights worldwide. Finally, the essay considers how integrating the local, national and global scales of racialized violence and its response enables historians to transnationalize the long civil rights movement paradigm.

Keywords: black internationalism; long civil rights movement; genocide; anticolonialism; violence; African Americans; transnationalism; Paul Robeson; William Patterson; We Charge Genocide
The American soil is full of the corpses of my ancestors.
-James Baldwin

Three hundred years is a long time to wait.
-William Patterson

On 17 December 1951, black radical activist William L. Patterson presented the Paris General Assembly of the United Nations, then meeting at the Palais de Chaillot, with a petition, emblazoned with the title We Charge Genocide. The powerfully written and impressively researched document – which unfolded across 250 pages of statistics and chronology – charged the United States government with committing genocide against its black citizens. Under the auspices of the Civil Rights Congress (CRC), led by Patterson and fellow Communist Paul Robeson, the CRC detailed the impact of lynchings, discrimination in the criminal justice system and the systematic neglect of the dire socioeconomic situation of black communities across the country. The CRC contended that between 1946 and 1951, 32,000 African Americans died each year because they did not receive the quality of health care, jobs, education and housing afforded to white Americans. The petition ended with a ‘Summary and Prayer’, in which its authors lamented that even such a tremendous catalogue of crimes could never capture what it was like to have black skin in America: ‘the crime [of genocide] is everywhere in American life. And yet words and statistics are but poor things to convey the long agony of the Negro people.’

The activity around the We Charge Genocide (WCG) petition was not a short burst of creative action, easily swept to the sidelines by the Second Red Scare alliance of the Truman administration and liberal civil rights groups, as some historians have suggested. It echoed prior attempts to invoke international law on behalf of the oppressed black population and it also resonated for new generations of radical black activists. As such, this essay approaches WCG as an episode within overlapping and intersecting struggles waged by African Americans on the world stage. By highlighting the continuities between interwar internationalism, postwar civil rights activism and Cold War anticolonialism, it attempts to thicken the continuities and multiplicities that Jacquelyn Dowd Hall more than a decade ago recognized as making up the long civil rights movement. In a 2005 essay, Hall critiqued the conventional periodization of civil rights, which takes Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and the Civil and Voting Rights Acts (1964 and 1965) as its bookends, for celebrating legal top-down change and a version of Martin Luther King, Jr. indifferent to economic injustice and colonial exploitation. Recuperating more far-reaching and often earlier demands for black freedom is, for Hall and others, a way of debunking co-optations of King which are used to scold contemporary anti-racist activists for betraying King’s ‘dream’, which in these conservative retellings amounted only to a post-racial America rather than a transformation of what King called ‘the whole structure of our society’.

Hall’s longer periodization is not without its detractors. Criticism has tended to coalesce around Eric Arnesen’s charge that this paradigm ‘tends to reduce very different approaches and agendas to a too simple common denominator, minimizing the importance of chronology, precise periodization and even conflicting agendas and demands.’ “‘Long movement’ scholarship,” Arnesen writes, ‘runs the risk of substituting a romantic and overly celebratory narrative for a much messier and more complicated civil rights past.’ More specifically, he suggests proponents share a misty-eyed view of the Communist Party (CP) that downplay the undemocratic nature of Stalinism and overstate the influence of a handful of Communists.

Yet, arguing for the utility of the long movement chronology does not mean the CP was the only game in town. Historians of the long civil rights movement understand that the black freedom struggle was never a monolith, a chugging locomotive: the point is not to swap Martin Luther King, Jr. as an engineer for, say, W.E.B. DuBois. Rather, the long movement way of thinking is well-equipped to narrate difference. Its characterization of a protracted struggle with deep roots in economic justice highlights continuities and complex interactions – a jumble of organizations and individuals that selected usable ideas, tactics and strategies from a variegated heritage of black politics. Rather than a flattened story, it is one in which tendencies overlap, collide and compete with one another. The trajectory of civil rights presented in this essay is indeed messy and complicated, as Arnesen understands it must be.
Another line of criticism adds credence to the concern about temporality. Scholars like Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang argue that long movement practitioners stretch chronology to the point of breaking. By speaking too capably of ‘civil rights’, these scholars produce an ‘ahistorical and placeless chronicle’ that is blind to factors of political economy and obscures more than it reveals.\textsuperscript{11} By emphasizing how internationalist critiques of colonialism, capitalist economy and violence were vital to an earlier phase of civil rights, however, historians can produce a clearly defined understanding of civil rights that also sees space and economy as vital. The different scales at which racialized violence operated – as part of global racial capitalism, under colonial and regional domination or local instances of ‘police lynching’ – connected different organizations and individuals. As recent scholarship has emphasized, demands for domestic civil rights and anticolonialism fed into each other and spilled out beyond the borders of the nation-state.\textsuperscript{12} Studying African Americans who, in different historical contexts, charged the United States with genocide is one way of globalizing this long civil rights movement literature in order to move beyond ‘nation-centred accounts of internationalist practices’ that retain the nation-state as the default analytic.\textsuperscript{13}

Stressing the international and anticolonial perspective of these actors, the economic-mindedness of their critique, as well as their transnational activities, is one way of emphasizing that the nascent civil rights struggle was broad-minded and international.\textsuperscript{14} In the early postwar period, ‘civil rights’ activists concerned themselves not just with African Americans’ status as second-class citizens, but with their exclusion from the protections of human rights. In the words of the authors of WCG, black Americans were necessarily ‘world citizens’: descendants of the Atlantic slave trade and intimately connected to other racialized peoples through related histories of oppression.\textsuperscript{15} My point is not to deny changes between the interwar and postwar years or between historical contemporaries, both of which critics suggest the long movement thesis inevitably does.\textsuperscript{16} While bearing these temptations in mind, I call for scholars to further investigate how historical memory and imagination connected such variegated struggles for black survival as a global anti-racist project. What does it mean that appeals to a world community, which by the 1950s congealed in the language of genocide, served agendas as divergent as those of the NAACP, Communists, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panthers and black feminists?

This essay therefore also revisits the theme of violence in US political history. Any study that places the non-violent methods practiced by many of the most prominent civil rights activists against a foil of organizations and activists unwilling to rule out armed resistance risks forgetting the role violence played as something other than a tactical debate. Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that the material traces of racialized violence are a haunting presence, making the afterlives of the past visible in our present.\textsuperscript{17} For Saidiya Hartman, similarly, the history of black death is ‘the history that hurts’, then as now.\textsuperscript{18} Violence (or the threat of violence) was a fact of life for black Americans, regardless of how they chose to respond. It was therefore a useful analytical lens for world-minded black activists. Thus, with Ned Blackhawk’s call to foreground quotidian violence in the story of the United States in mind, this essay aims to explore how the historical memory of racial violence inspired black activists to situate their experience within larger histories of colonization, decolonization and the advent of human rights.\textsuperscript{19} The pain racialized bodies endured was a common experience that connected the oppression of colonized and formerly enslaved peoples in vastly different environments. By invoking international law, these black radicals connected the civil rights movement in the US to the struggle for human rights worldwide.

**Internationalizing the African American Struggle**

This trajectory of internationalizing the black freedom struggle through appeals to international bodies began earlier than historians have generally considered. To be sure, historians discuss attempts to petition the United Nations in the years immediately prior to the completion of WCG, focusing on the NAACP’s *Appeal to the World* (1947) and a less-studied document by the National Negro Congress (1946).\textsuperscript{20} While there was some truth to William Patterson’s assertion that in the early postwar period ‘[m]ost Black leaders did not critically examine the world scene,’ the primary author of WCG doubtlessly downplayed the degree to which his petition was part of a history of black internationalist activism.\textsuperscript{21} Rather, the late 1940s and early 1950s marked a breakthrough for black internationalist politics and

“We Charge Genocide”: Revisiting black radicals’ appeals to the world community
analysis. The aftermath of World War II and the world’s ‘second chance’ at peace through the vehicle of the United Nations were essential to this. The fact is,’ Robin D.G. Kelley writes, ‘no one could afford to ignore international politics during the decade of the 1950s.’ Besides the formation of the United Nations, decolonization struggles were waged in Ghana, Kenya, Cameroon and Southeast Asia, while the Bandung conference charted a new, Non-Aligned path for the ‘Third World’.

An earlier and less-studied precedent to the black internationalist appeals after 1945 can be seen amid the years of heightened internationalism surrounding the Treaty of Versailles and Paris Peace Conference. International visions of the world found official endorsement in Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points and his promise to ‘make the world safe for democracy’. While Wilson campaigned feverishly for US entry into the newfangled League of Nations, Pan-Africanism made its own internationalist stance from well outside the spaces of official policy and rhetoric. Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association put forward their own vision of global interdependence built on racial solidarity and a diasporic African identity. According to Adam Ewing, Marcus Garvey expected little from the Peace Conference – an ‘exercise in high diplomatic theater’. Yet, the events in Paris brought together anti-lynching, anti-discrimination and anticolonial programs, represented by Garvey, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, A. Philip Randolph, Eliezer Cadet and publisher William Monroe Trotter. It was this environment, this upsurge in ‘organic mass politics’ and ‘diasporic identity building’ in the ‘age of Garvey’, that made black internationalist lobbying closer to power possible.

Within this context, William Monroe Trotter sought out the ear of Woodrow Wilson at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, hoping for the federal government to intervene to end racial segregation. A petition by the National Liberty Congress, the Washington outpost of Trotter’s National Equal Rights League, reached the US Congress in 1918, demanding federal intervention to end anti-black mob violence. With his petition at home and a trip to Paris, ‘Trotter broadened the idea of Wilsonian internationalism, reworking the concept of self-determination to include peoples beyond the frontiers of Europe’s ancient states.’ Trotter was bitterly disappointed that Wilson refused to prioritize protecting African Americans from the violence of ‘the rope and the faggot’.

Trotter was no Marxist and this can help explain why historians have not connected his cajoling in France to Communist firebrand William Patterson’s recrimination of liberal civil rights more than thirty years later. Yet, more than ideology separated the two activists. Trotter’s decision to appeal to Wilson behind the scenes rather than confront American policy publically and scathingly indicates the limits of his political capital, the lack of Great Power commitment for racial equality, the relative strength of the US’ image on the world stage compared to the early Cold War and the lack of an international legal framework for opposing violence. Despite his efforts, Trotter was unable to secure an anti-racist commitment from Wilson. That the president’s plan for a new world order languished in the US Senate in 1920 gave Trotter some sense of vindication: ‘Your League of Nations Covenant,’ he wrote to Wilson, ‘void of measures or of declarations against these undemocratic conditions… deserved its fate.’

We Charge Genocide built upon earlier civil rights petitions to the UN in the 1940s. The National Negro Congress (NNC), which had formed in the mid-1930s and declined in clout during the war, used the idea of petitioning the UN on American race relations to re-establish itself in mainstream black political activity. On 6 June 1946, president Max Yergan and other NNC representatives presented a copy of this pamphlet-length document to the secretary of the Human Rights Commission, titled, A Petition to the United Nations on Behalf of 13 Million Oppressed Negro Citizens of the United States. The petition’s demand to the UN was modest: commission studies into the economic and social inequality of blacks in America. The NNC distributed 100,000 copies of the document, which included a seven-page appendix compiled by Herbert Aptheker, a white historian and Communist. Aptheker contended that 70 percent of black Americans lived in homes without indoor plumbing or electricity and forty percent of households lived on $200 a year or less. The UN responded that their hands were tied. During the drafting of its
Charter, the US delegation had forced through a ‘domestic jurisdiction’ clause to prevent ‘intervention’ in affairs deemed (capaciously) to be internal matters. After the document failed to generate attention outside the black press, the CRC absorbed the struggling NNC the following year.36

When the NNC collapsed, the gauntlet fell to the NAACP – whose member rolls had grown nine-fold between 1940 and 1946.37 W.E.B. Du Bois hatched the idea that the organization should follow the NNC with a petition of their own of a more substantial length. The result, Appeal to the World (1947), consisted of essays by Du Bois and his contemporaries. However, the tactic of shaming US racism on the world stage – a logical strategy for the Communist and socialist internationalists in the NNC – divided the liberal NAACP’s leadership. Du Bois called upon Eleanor Roosevelt, an NAACP board member, to bring the document before the UN, but she rejected the idea as potentially embarrassing to the United States and ultimately unhelpful to the civil rights campaign. Unmoved by Roosevelt’s reticence, Du Bois presented the Appeal to two UN officials in October 1947 in New York. A ninety-four-page book version followed, copies of which the NAACP gifted to each UN ambassador.38 The mainstream US press response demonstrated a profound discomfort at the prospect of the UN intervening in what was considered a domestic affair. Indeed, this would have fulfilled the nightmare shared by opponents of the League of Nations in 1919. In his syndicated column for the Birmingham Post, John Temple Graves II, who was among the most prominent defenders of Jim Crow in the Southern press, resorted to schoolyard taunting when he attacked the NAACP’s Walter White for ‘tattling on his country to the United Nations’.39

If John Temple Graves saw Walter White as subversive and un-American, one can only imagine the insults he would have hurled at the authors of WCG. In this period of rapid transition from internationalist hopefulness to Cold War constraint, the NAACP struggled to navigate the shifting ground beneath its feet. A methodological and ideological gulf emerged within the leadership.40 Unhappy with what he saw as White’s and Truman’s parochialism, Du Bois joined Paul Robeson in supporting Progressive Party candidate George Wallace in the 1948 presidential election and soon after made a bitter exit from the NAACP altogether.41 Du Bois continued to push the UN on its home turf, but now did so from within Robeson’s orbit. In the fall of 1949, he penned a petition to the UN for the CRC and the Women’s Committee for Equal Justice on behalf of Rosa Lee Ingram, a black widow sharecropper on trial for killing a white man in self-defense.42 With Du Bois out of the picture, Walter White further embraced liberal anticommunism and doubled-down on the organization’s support for the Truman administration, seeing this as the best strategy for securing anti-lynching legislation.43

Recent scholarship has challenged the view that the NAACP carried out an internal witch hunt of leftists and retreated from the anticolonial struggle with Du Bois’ acrimonious departure. This scholarship argues that while the NAACP endorsed anticommunism, this was not a new position in the history of its national leadership, was in line with most African Americans’ politics at the time and stopped short of full-blown McCarthyism.44 Carol Anderson, whose history of African Americans and the UN helped produce this consensus view in the first place, has recently offered a major revision to what she calls a ‘forty-year orthodoxy’.45 She argues for ‘de-centering Du Bois’ in order to place liberal calls for national self-determination on par with Communism’s anticolonial credentials. The NAACP waged campaigns for self-determination from South West Africa to Indonesia and managed to survive ‘in a political environment that had toppled other anticolonial activists’.46 In Anderson’s calculus, fostering a relationship with the Truman White House was a wise maneuver, not a Faustian handshake. Furthermore, she argues, it was because the Eisenhower administration that followed Truman had little use for civil rights organizations – not the grip of the Second Red Scare – that liberal anticolonialism waned.47 While Anderson makes an important revision in drawing attention to how the NAACP sustained its anticolonialism into the 1950s, her own argument about the organization’s marginalization with the change in administration points to the liabilities of hitching black internationalism’s wagon to the fortunes of a president or political party. Appeals to the world community outlived appeals to any one administration. Furthermore, while black liberals carved out space to protest European imperial adventures and the continuation of colonialism, they were less willing or able to defy US empire, as John Munro demonstrates.48 In the end, the NAACP’s chosen path opened the door for the radical CRC to escalate the black freedom struggle on the international stage.49
Charging Genocide

The CRC began work on We Charge Genocide in the summer of 1951. That October, they published the 240-page book with the subtitle, The Historic Petition To the United Nations for Relief From a Crime of the United States Government Against the Negro People.\(^50\) Joining William Patterson to draft it were journalist Richard Boyer, political biographer Elizabeth Lawson, poet Yvonne Gregory, CP co-founder Oakley Johnson and civil rights attorney Aubrey Grossman.\(^51\) Ninety-two people – men and women, blacks and whites, spread across twenty-five states – added their names.\(^52\) This politically ecumenical group included members of the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, a black left feminist organization fighting colonialism and Jim Crow, whose National Chairman, Charlotte Bass, became the first black woman nominated for Vice President (for the Progressive Party) the following year.\(^53\) Other signatories included Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois, as well as publishers, writers, journalists, editors, lawyers, CP leaders, clergy, teachers, trade unionists, prisoners, community organizers and the bereaved family members of prominent lynching victims.\(^54\)

The opening paragraph signaled the worldview of CRC in all its complications and intersections. It took a tone that was as eschatological as it was searing:

Out of the inhuman black ghettos of American cities, out of the cotton plantations of the South, comes this record of mass slayings on the basis of race, of lives deliberately warped and distorted by the willful [sic] creation of conditions making for premature death, poverty and disease. It is a record that calls aloud for condemnation, for an end to these terrible injustices that constitute a daily and ever-increasing violation of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.\(^55\)

The crisis of black America was therefore both localized (in ‘inhuman black ghettos’) and an international concern that demanded the attention of the world’s highest intergovernmental body. WCG also situated black lived experience in a longue durée of exploitation and migration, a story in which racist violence had made itself apparent at every repulsing turn, causing ‘premature death, poverty and disease’.\(^56\) In this way, the CRC petition illustrates Leslie James’ distinction between liberal organizations such as the NAACP who emphasized the equality of all peoples and black radical internationalists who indicted ‘the high crimes of imperialism’.\(^57\)

The CRC’s conception of genocide in WCG was wider in scope than its precedents, owing to the petition’s more developed length and a concerted effort to provide the strongest possible empirical case. Patterson and his co-authors gleaned data from Truman’s 1947 federal civil rights commission, NAACP publications and the Census Bureau – hardly spurious or hyper-partisan sources.\(^58\) WCG highlighted the economic, civic, social and mental anguish caused by the daily indignities black Americans endured. Furthermore, it articulated this in terms of the cardinal sin of postwar violence – genocide. The CRC’s wider definition of state-sponsored violence distinguished them from their center-left civil rights rivals. The CRC had already taken the position that the overrepresentation of African Americans on death row constituted cases of ‘legal lynchings’. This position can be seen in a pamphlet from earlier in 1951 on the case of the Trenton Six, who had been sentenced to death by an all-white jury for the alleged murder of an elderly white shopkeeper. ‘Yes, this is a lynching,’ the CRC contended. ‘Not by men in klansmen’s robes. But a lynching northern style.’\(^59\) Against the Southern exceptionalism which assuaged liberal whites’ anxieties throughout the civil rights era, the CRC located white supremacy in the halls of state power. The anti-black violence of Klansmen was fundamentally similar to the violence committed ‘[b]y men in court robes and police uniforms’ as a ‘Jim Crow policy of government’.\(^60\) With WCG, the CRC took their critique of anti-black violence further, charging the US government with genocide.

The CRC’s legalistic approach would have been immediately apparent to the reader. WCG opened with a reading of Articles II and III of the Genocide Convention – which provided the definition of genocide – even before it listed the petitioners. The section devoted to evidence repeated Article II, before laying out a day-by-day chronology of cases of violent crimes suffered by black Americans: from rapes, beatings and shootings at the hands of police to public lynchings and attacks on union organizers. This evidence filled over 150 pages. Read from cover to cover, WCG was a disturbing and exhausting
account. Yet, the petition’s reliance on international law, rather than moral outrage alone, was a logistical weakness for two reasons. First, WCG erroneously suggested the Genocide Convention superseded US law, an assertion which was useless considering Congress had not ratified it in the first place.61 It is difficult to imagine that the CRC, who followed international and American politics closely, were unaware their claim was patently false. Yet, such a straightforward omission made them vulnerable to matter-of-fact rebuttals, thereby undoing the CRC’s attempt to put the US government on the defensive. The second weakness was that the CRC appeared unable to make up its mind as to whether WCG was an indignant polemic able to stand on its own moral animus or a focused call for legal redress through the mechanism of the United Nations. Quoting the Genocide Convention prominently suggested it was the latter, but the CRC’s choice to frame its appeal to the United Nations General Assembly ‘not as a court of law’ (which it was not) ‘but as the conscience of mankind which it should be’ pointed to the former.62

Inevitably, a third potential obstacle to the petition’s political viability was the Communism of its authors. The Communist Party (CP) and its Stalinism had alienated members and more liberal fellow travelers with the Hitler-Stalin Non-Aggression Pact in 1939.63 Once the ‘sparkplugs of insurgency’, the postwar period put Communists ‘on the defensive’.64 Communists’ belief that their struggle was for a truer American democracy and a more equitable world order was contradicted by the CP’s fidelity to the Soviet Union and its blindness to Stalin’s crimes. As Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps write, lionizing the Soviet formation foreclosed ‘more democratic concepts of socialism from gaining traction’.65 The CP’s record on race and civil rights was not without its contradictions, either, as the party opposed Randolph and his March on Washington, backed the internment of Japanese-Americans during wartime and assented to the nuclear annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the name of antifascism.66

At the same time, understanding the CRC within a transnational history of black internationalism means recontextualizing these familiar nation-bounded critiques of the CP and Stalinism. Whatever their experiences within ‘communist party paternalism’, black radicals were no Comintern dupes.67 One way of doing this has been to argue, which Robin D.G. Kelley does of the CP in Alabama, that the everyday concerns of black communists typically ‘had nothing to do with international crises’.68 More recently, others have compellingly argued the opposite – that black radicals ran afoul of Stalinist orthodoxy and pushed the limits of Comintern hegemony through internationalist campaigns often independent of – and sometimes at-odds with – national Communist parties.69 By combining Kelley’s attention to the local with a transnational approach, a clearer picture of the CRC and WCG comes into vision. Opening up the spatial field of our analysis allows us to think beyond the constraints of the CP or even the Comintern, towards a view of on-the-ground internationalist activism embedded in particular transatlantic locales rather than emanating from party structures.

The Antifascist and Anti-Imperialist Roots of We Charge Genocide

Postwar changes to the international mood legitimated the CRC’s view that lynching and inequalities in the justice system were inseparable. The Nuremberg Trials, the advent of human rights and the UN Genocide Convention together provided a foundation for the CRC to charge genocide. The 1950 UNESCO Statement on Race further signaled international support for rectifying the ‘enormous amount of human and social damage’ carried out in the name of the ‘myth of “race”’.70 In this milieu, Patterson hotly insisted on the similarity between Jim Crow and Auschwitz. ‘I could not fail to recognize,’ Patterson later recalled, ‘that just as the United States, under cover of law, carried out genocidal racist policies in police murders of Black men, framed death sentences, death that came from withholding proper medical care to Black people, just so had Hitler built and operated his mass death machine under cover of Nazi law.’71 Patterson here saw WCG as an opportunity to raise the consciousness of white Americans. He was not alone. African Americans with a variety of political stances made use of the comparison.72 After the war, harnessing the horror Americans felt towards the revelations of the Holocaust offered Patterson and the CRC a way of cutting through white America’s complacency and exposing their complicity in black deaths.

In bringing together currents of antifascism, anti-racism and anti-imperialism, Patterson built upon a decade of intellectual and political struggle to dismantle ‘the global color line’.73 Historians have too
often treated antifascism as if it had been contained within Europe.\textsuperscript{74} The history of antifascism is also a history of black diasporic politics. Historians have begun to reconstruct the world of possibilities which black internationalists inhabited between the world wars, concretized by a shared ‘opposition to the racial order of empire’.\textsuperscript{75} In fact, Fascist Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia and the republican cause in Spain stoked African Americans’ international consciousness more than perhaps any others.\textsuperscript{76} Against those who would limit the antifascist struggle to the European continent by distinguishing Jim Crow and European imperialisms from Nazi racial politics, the black diasporic left in metropoles around the world sought to build ‘an anti-imperialist cultural front’.\textsuperscript{77}

If fascisms in Europe posed no direct physical threat to black leftists, this did not stop them from connecting the racial politics of fascism to their own lived experiences of gendered and racialized violence.\textsuperscript{78} ‘These activists,’ Minkah Makalani writes,

‘were convinced that whether humanity enjoyed greater freedoms or suffered even harsher colonial regimes hinged on the struggles that peoples of African descent in the United States, Caribbean, and Africa would wage against racism, colonialism, and capitalism and on their ability to link these struggles with similar movements in Asia, Latin America, and Europe.’\textsuperscript{79}

Through ‘an array of transatlantic exchanges’, they brought ‘pamphlets and periodicals, correspondence, and debates’ to new and old shores.\textsuperscript{80} As part of the directive to build popular fronts, however, the Comintern prioritized growing antifascist alliances over cultivating anti-imperialist ones, a move which Trinidadian Marxist George Padmore insisted was self-defeating. As white communists and socialists dropped their anti-imperialist rhetoric, black internationalist intellectuals like Padmore renewed their insistence that an antifascism that was not also anti-imperialist was hardly worth fighting for.\textsuperscript{81}

This period profoundly shaped William Patterson and Paul Robeson’s political trajectories. Each was deeply immersed in what Leslie James calls the ‘anti-colonial ideological laboratory’ of the black diaspora.\textsuperscript{82} Through a series of anti-imperialist, trade union and black workers’ conferences between 1929 and 1937, Patterson came to work closely with African, Caribbean, European and North American radicals such as Padmore and fellow black Communist James Ford of Alabama – the latter a WCG signatory.\textsuperscript{83} Before they were married, William Patterson and Louise Thompson each participated in the 1937 World Congress against Racism and Anti-Semitism in Paris.\textsuperscript{84} Paul Robeson recalled that the Italian invasion of Ethiopia was a turning point for black Americans, a confirmation that their struggle for emancipation paralleled colonial peoples’ right to self-determination.\textsuperscript{85} To civil rights activists, broadly defined, ‘the fascist contagion, whether it flourished in Germany, Italy, Spain or Mississippi, represented everything they were working to abolish.’\textsuperscript{86} It was in this context that the CRC refused to disentangle world imperialism, US racism and the genocidal consequences of fascism in Europe.

The CRC aimed to do more than rankle the federal government and promote the anti-lynching cause. International solidarity was central to the worldview of the CRC. In particular, movements for peace and for decolonization clearly shaped the tone and language of WCG. By the time William Patterson began work on WCG, a strong Africanist critique of Great Power politics was several years old. At the Fifth Pan-African Conference in 1945, the assembled representatives declared:

The delegates to the Fifth Pan-African Congress believe in peace. How could it be otherwise when for centuries the African peoples have been victims of violence and slavery. Yet if the Western world is still determined to rule mankind by force, then Africans, as a last resort, may have to appeal to force in the effort to achieve Freedom, even if force destroys them and the world.\textsuperscript{87}

Two years later, W.E.B. Du Bois (a WCG signatory) made his own provocative link, this time between Nazism, racism and imperialism:

[T]here was no Nazi atrocity – concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of children – which the Christian civilization of Europe had not long been practicing against colored folks in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world.\textsuperscript{88}
Far from an historical aberration, the Holocaust was for Du Bois only intelligible when situated within the heinous stories of the subjugation of racialized peoples the world over. In this light, the responses of the United States and United Nations, sincere as they were, could only fail to impress or even pacify the African American student of history.

It was within this global context that \textit{WCG} became ‘the most damning human rights report on Jim Crow written during the Cold War’. In the months surrounding its publication as a book, the CRC forged alliances with labor unions, civil rights leaders and student organizations throughout the Western hemisphere, as well as in Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa and Burma.\textsuperscript{90} These ties sharpened Patterson’s understanding of how political moderates at home and abroad were implicated in the imperial plunder of what is now called the Global South. Patterson was not alone: black leftists saw colonial exploitation as inherent to advanced capitalism, while black liberals viewed antidiscrimination legislation as the goal.\textsuperscript{91}

In at least one speech, Patterson made this point in historical terms. Pointing to the aftermath of World War I, Patterson argued that Wilsonianism had not made the world safe for democracy, but rather had reinforced colonial strangleholds in the global south. ‘Millions of men and women in Africa and the colonial lands got new masters,’ he told an audience in 1951.\textsuperscript{92} Patterson’s knowledge of the reality of Jim Crow made incantations of human rights ring hollow in his ears: ‘golden words were often used to hide the inhuman deed,’ he recounted in his autobiography.\textsuperscript{93} ‘No government bound up with racism could want or seek world peace.’\textsuperscript{94} Patterson’s internationalist perspective altered his fundamental understanding of the federal government’s complicity in anti-black violence within the United States. In short, he came to see that ‘the lyncher and the atom bomber’ were one.\textsuperscript{95}

Paul Robeson shared Patterson’s commitment to the inseparability of domestic and international violence. Robeson’s activism was often more explicitly anticolonial than Patterson’s, in particular his work as the leader of the Council for African Affairs (CAA). As Lindsey R. Swindall notes, the concept of a Global South with a shared history of (neo)colonialism was instrumental to the CAA’s efforts, whether they were protesting apartheid in South Africa or federal hand-wringing over lynching at home.\textsuperscript{96} Furthermore, women in the CAA who later signed \textit{WCG}, including Charlotta Bass and Louise Thompson Patterson (who was also William Patterson’s wife), saw anticolonialism as a feminist issue, arguing that South African women’s freedom was ‘inextricably linked’ to their own.\textsuperscript{97} The CAA monitored the formation of the United Nations extremely closely during the war and by 1945 was calling for it to support African self-determination.\textsuperscript{98} Robeson’s work with the CAA likely contributed to \textit{WCG}’s international acclaim.

Cold War Liberalism and Civil Rights

The CRC petition was also a response to President Harry Truman’s tepid attempts to address anti-black violence. Truman had committed himself to at least a limited civil rights agenda. Civil rights became a plank of his 1948 platform and the president went so far as to desegregate the government and military via executive orders. He also commissioned a federal study on civil rights that tabled the report \textit{To Secure These Rights} (1947). Though the committee considered a broad scope of injuries and indignities, its approach might have flummoxed most African Americans. In its section dedicated to recommendations, for example, the report shifted abruptly from the topic of segregation to lynchings to a surprisingly lengthy lament that black boys were not being allowed to participate in ‘such things as Washington’s annual marble tournament’.\textsuperscript{101} Whether most African Americans considered this segregated marble tournament among the most emblematic or urgent examples of anti-blackness in the United States was not a question that the authors of \textit{To Secure These Rights} took up.
Radicals like Robeson and Patterson were unimpressed by the Democratic Party’s ‘politics of symbolic equality’. Truman desperately hoped to retain the Dixiecrat wing of the party, which came at the cost of considering the whole system of racism, which was made manifest in black poverty, sham trials and anti-black violence. As the Cold War tightened, domestic anticommunism within both major parties compelled black political organizations (such as the NAACP) to settle for narrower formulations of civil rights. Red-baiting was made a useful weapon in the arsenal of segregationists as well, who, as Carol Anderson writes, ‘twisted the definition of human rights into the hammer and sickle.’ What could have been a platform for addressing the violent oppression of African Americans was ‘roundly repudiated as subversive, communistic, and even treasonous’.

In trying to break this political deadlock, Patterson made powerful use of the language of genocide, human rights and international law. WCG strategically concluded by appealing to the precedent of the Holocaust, for which the term genocide had been established. ‘We recall the words of Mr. Justice Jackson at the Nuremberg trial,’ insisted Patterson. ‘We cannot believe that the General Assembly will not condemn the crimes complained of in this petition.’ A series of lengthy quotations from Jackson’s opening address at Nuremberg filled the back cover. Patterson had already sought to establish a relationship between the global histories of fascism, antisemitism and anti-blackness. In an earlier speech, he referred to lynchings as ‘pogroms’ and ‘the counter-part of Czarist Russia’s murder of the Jewish people’. Three months later, Patterson credited women like anti-fascist organizer Charlotte Stern with making it possible to ‘destroy fascism before the ovens and the concentration camps are built in the USA’.

The prominence of racial liberals in government, combined with the advent of human rights discourse, presented an enormous opportunity for a civil rights movement emboldened by the war. The consolidation of its interventionist foreign policy made the US sensitive to world opinion. ‘At a time when the U.S. hoped to reshape the postwar world in its own image,’ Mary L. Dudziak concludes, ‘the international attention given to racial segregation was troublesome and embarrassing.’ Official commitment to civil rights, however, remained partial, qualified and strategic. As Carol Anderson summarizes, ‘although the United States was willing to use the rhetoric of human rights to bludgeon the Soviet Union and play the politics of moral outrage that the Holocaust engendered, the federal government, even liberals, steadfastly refused to make human rights a viable force in the United States or in international practice.’ Perhaps no moment demonstrated liberal wariness towards civil rights radicalism more clearly than Eleanor Roosevelt’s refusal to take up WCG. Roosevelt publically dismissed the petition and countered that the shorter life expectancy of blacks owed to ‘sickness and disease’, which she insisted were now being sincerely addressed by the federal government.

The official response to WCG demonstrated the strict political limits of liberal support for civil rights. No sooner had Patterson put forward the petition in Paris – with the Soviet delegation’s enthusiastic support – than the US Embassy demanded the activist’s passport. Forced to flee France for New York City (via Eastern Europe), Patterson turned his journey home into an impromptu speaking tour where he further embarrassed the US and found opportunistic friends in the governments of the Soviet orbit. With Patterson’s return to the US, the American delegation successfully prevented any debate on the WCG petition. Paul Robeson, who had been monitored by the US, Britain and Canada since he visited Spain during its civil war, was similarly grounded. In fact, it was Robeson who was first tapped to deliver the Paris version of WCG, but he was barred from holding a passport. Dr. Raphael Lemkin, the Yale historian who coined the term ‘genocide’, attacked the petition in the pages of the New York Times and suggested leftists redirect their efforts to addressing the treatment of ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union. President Truman knew the black northern electorate had helped secure his victory in the 1948 election, but civil rights was like a thorn in his administration’s side that the Soviet Union continually pressed its thumb against. Soviet propagandists did not have a monopoly on such criticism, however. A State Department report on foreign coverage of US racism found ‘flagrant examples of infringements of the civil rights of any American citizens are considered news by papers of all political orientations in most
of the countries of Europe.' While Patterson prepared to table WCG, an anxious FBI agent reported back to Washington that a coalition of Latin American and European nations, joining India and Egypt, would ‘raise the Genocide Question’ at the UN General Assembly.

Members of the CRC did not need these official US responses to convince them that there were limits to having a seat at the table, the strategy taken by the NAACP. A few months before presenting WCG to the UN, Patterson told a crowd that his faith in working within legal and government arenas had been destroyed by the trial of the Italian-born anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in 1921. ‘I have learned that no rights are guaranteed except to those in power,’ Patterson warned. ‘No constitutional liberties are fully enjoyed by a people except where those from whom these liberties have been wrested no longer control the government’. In a speech to seven hundred people in May 1951, Patterson accused ‘[t]hose Negro “leaders” bedecked with Nobel prizes, United Nations Commissions and seated on federal court benches’, of being race-traitors, complicit in ‘the crimes of the government they serve against the Negro people’. Here Patterson was attacking Ralph Bunche, an African American diplomat who had won the Nobel Peace Prize, had been instrumental in drafting the United Nations Charter, was once a key member of the NNC and who gave Patterson the silent treatment in Paris.

The lengths the liberal civil rights coalition took to prevent the CRC from getting its petition heard in the UN were unsettling. The NAACP co-produced a pamphlet entitled The Negro in American Life (1952) with the United States Information Agency, the successor of Washington’s wartime propaganda wing. The State Department called on Edith Sampson, a black member of the UN delegation, to ‘declare that the horror stories about lynching and segregation were just a pack of lies’. In a lecture tour of northern Europe arranged by the State Department, Sampson told audiences that ‘the KKK has disappeared’.

Far from being stooges of the Truman administration, however, black liberals like Bunche had their own reasons to spurn Patterson and the WCG petition. Though NAACP leaders Walter White, Channing Tobias and Rayford Logan quickly and publicly rejected the genocide charge, this revealed the narrow political space available to respectable African Americans during the Second Red Scare as much as it illustrated an ideological disagreement. White had already dropped the language of human rights to maintain his access to President Truman. Tobias, meanwhile, was grilled about his prior involvement with Robeson’s CAA during his UN delegation-appointment hearings. Even more strikingly, Logan’s public acquiescence contradicted a sardonic remark he made in private that if the US intended to shield its foreign policy with the pretense of making the world safe for democracy, ‘it might not be a bad idea to have some democracy to defend.’ The anticommunism of the NAACP and liberal civil rights leaders was distinct from the white Dixiecrat Congressmen who used red-baiting to defend white supremacy. Though the NAACP understood that ‘Communists were certainly not a grave threat to American national security’, neither were they apparently ‘attractive allies’.

Indeed, black anticommunism was by no means limited to elite civil rights leaders. Seeing no advantage in supporting the CRC radicals, black liberals chose to distance themselves from WCG as fast as possible.

Furthermore, emphasizing the effectiveness of the campaign to discredit the CRC risks overestimating state control and exaggerating the marginality of dissenting voices in the civil rights conversation. In a statement to the Arkansas State Press, Patterson was resolute: ‘Neither the State Department, nor its hired apologists, Negro and white, will stop the filing of this historic petition, nor its circulation throughout the United States by the tens of thousands.’ A new historiographic consensus appears to be forming, maintaining that anticommunism’s assault has been overstated. This literature includes Carol Anderson’s reminder (discussed earlier in this essay) that the NAACP and other black liberals remained active in anticolonial activism during the early Cold War. At the other end of the political spectrum, a left-wing and vehemently internationalist anticolonialism, one never confined to the CP, as John Munro documents, survived the Second Red Scare and influenced a new generation in the 1960s.

The propagandistic response from the Truman administration and its liberal supporters indicated the seriousness with which the ideological differences between the left and center-left of the nascent civil rights movement were treated by those closest to power. The State Department, US delegation and US embassies together effectively blocked WCG from being discussed at the UN and muzzled its authors. Yet, Patterson and Robeson each had a tremendous following at mid-century and neither delivered their
message to a small group of already-converted radicals. In June 1946, Robeson organized a Madison Square Garden rally that was covered by New York City’s left-wing and mainstream press alike (including the *Times* and *Post*) and which was attended by fifteen thousand people. When, in 1949, Robeson was attacked for suggesting African Americans would refuse to fight in any war against the Soviet Union, comrades inside and outside of the CP came to his aid. In fact, the men and women who charged genocide had an afterlife: their story did not end with the revocation of William Patterson’s passport. Though Gerald Horne contends that this severed ‘the oxygen supply for his activism’, the old adage that ideas are less easily killed than their authors – the very lesson Robeson dramatized with his version of the labor song ‘Joe Hill’ – is worth bearing in mind. The ghosts of anti-black violence refused to stay quiet.

**Charging Genocide Since 1951**

Despite the fierce official response to WCG, the accusation of genocide was not suppressed for good. On 17 July 1964, Malcolm X brought a memorandum before the Organization of African Unity conference in Cairo, which, in the mold of WCG, called on African nations to stand with the millions of African Americans subjected to ‘murder’, ‘psychological humiliation and physical mutilation’ as ‘an everyday occurrence’. The history of racist violence – especially enslavement and the slave trade – underpinned Malcolm’s thinking. As the child of two Garveyites, from Grenada and Georgia, respectively, Malcolm was also the product of a transnational, diasporic black politics borne on the waves of the Atlantic. That the American landscape was ‘full of the corpses’ of black ancestors similarly drove James Baldwin to link a national history of violence to his own internalized racism. Before an almost entirely white audience in Cambridge, England, Baldwin recounted,

> It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, or 6, or 7, to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to discover that Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, when you were rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians were you.

Though neither Baldwin or Malcolm uttered the word ‘genocide’ here, the implications of their statements are clear. Like the signatories of WCG before them, each located the birth of the nation in the ghosts of genocidal white supremacy. What connected Malcolm and Baldwin to the CRC in the early fifties was a shared belief that the soil beneath their feet teemed with blood. In attributing the vulnerability of his own black body to being in a country inaugurated in settler colonialism and chattel slavery, Baldwin anticipated more recent activist and scholarly attempts to understand racialized violence against black and Indigenous people in the Americas in tandem, a topic which I take up later in this essay.

It is also important to note that Baldwin recalled this childhood experience as a moment of clarity, equivalent to what Avery Gordon calls being haunted and an ontological state that Christina Sharpe calls being ‘in the wake’. Gordon defines haunting as when ‘abusive systems of power make themselves known,’ in other words, ‘when the over-and-done-with comes alive and when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view.’ Haunting is a collapse of past and present that becomes the grounds for politics. It is at once a moment of disorientation and of newfound clarity of vision, since a ghost ‘demands its due, your attention’. Unlike trauma, which in itself cannot be operationalized, haunting represents a ‘something-to-be-done’. The child Baldwin’s realization is also an example of what Christina Sharpe calls being ‘in the wake’. The triple metaphor of the ‘wake’ brings together historical memory and personal trauma: as in the disturbance along the water of the ships which brought chattel slaves to the hemisphere, as in the rituals of mourning which seek collective meaning from the occasion of individual death, and as in a state of wakefulness (of race consciousness). Being in the wake means being haunted by ‘deathly repetition’, of ‘living blackness in the diaspora in the still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery’. The ghosts of genocide form ‘the ground we walk on’. In Baldwin’s retelling, being in the wake was, as Sharpe would put it, a position of ‘deep hurt and deep knowledge’: the terrifying but mobilizing understanding that your country is built on black and Indigenous bodies.
Where Baldwin refrained from using the term genocide, ‘Queen Mother’ Audley Moore took up the genocide charge explicitly. Over the course of her life, Moore was a Garveyite, Communist, black nationalist and founder of the sixties reparations movement. She thus embodied many of the radical threads that tied the history of African American appeals to the world together: Pan-Africanism, anticolonialism and an economically – and historically – driven critique of white supremacy. She also anticipated the work the genocide charge could do for black internationalist feminism. Moore referred to what contemporary theorists would call internalized racism and misogyny as a ‘mental genocide’, a cognitive state which necessitated decolonizing the mind. According to Erik S. McDuffie, Moore ‘viewed white supremacy, Jim Crow, political persecution, the oppression of black womanhood, colonialism, lynching and the notion of black depravity as forms of genocide.’ Like the Marxists in the CRC, Queen Mother Moore’s critique was thoroughly historical and emphasized the systemic, economic damages committed against blacks in addition to legal, political, social and psychological injuries. Unlike the male members of the CRC who played the most prominent public roles, her approach integrated patriarchy, another feature of contemporary genocide charges that this essay will revisit.

The stamp of WCG was discernible in a younger generation of activists as well. In the tumultuous sixties, activists leveled the genocide charge against the Chicago Police Department for their use of black recruits to police majority-black areas and against New York State in the aftermath of the Attica Prison uprising. Patterson maintained his ties to radicalism long enough to serve on the Board of Trustees for the Angela Davis Legal Defense Fund as an octogenarian. A 1971 full-page ad soliciting donations included Patterson’s endorsement alongside the likes of James Baldwin’s, surely a sign of his continued influence. Out of a life’s worth of radical activity, ‘Author of “We Charge Genocide”’ appeared first. For his part, Robeson also remained a vaunted figure of the internationalist left, leading C.L.R. James to call him ‘the most magnificent human being I have ever known or ever heard of’ in 1970. Patterson also forged ties with the Black Panther Party and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In 1967, SNCC approached him with the idea to reprint an updated WCG to disseminate in the decolonizing world. With racial uprisings at home and the US waging war in Vietnam, the message of WCG was as relevant as ever. ‘Unwarranted and brutal suppression of black people in the United States is a matter of international concern,’ SNCC’s Elizabeth Sutherland wrote to him. SNCC’s Stokely Carmichael even borrowed the phrase ‘we charge genocide’ to accuse the United States of shipping racism and militarism to Southeast Asia. Just as SNCC leaders looked outward, their gaze soon also turned to the history of the internal empire.

Looking across the ocean, as well as the gulf of history, the Black Panther Party (BPP) similarly situated police violence in Oakland, the Vietnam war and the combined 200,000 civilians killed at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, within a history of American white supremacy since the time of settler conquest. In fact, no organization mirrored the CRC’s rhetoric as self-assuredly as the Panthers. Its Ten Points Program (1966) compared the injuries of the black community to the Holocaust. Huey Newton’s Executive Mandate No. 1 called for black self-armament while referencing the genocide of ‘American Indians’, the internment of Japanese Americans and the war in Vietnam. In a recruitment appeal from the following year, Barbara Arthur wrote of ‘police brutality and black genocide’. The Panthers’ genocide charge was not an outcome of militant posturing or an obsession with violence. In November 1970, as the Party shifted its priorities away from armed struggle, Huey Newton addressed a Boston audience on the topic of the party’s ‘survival programs’ amid the triple threat of ‘genocide’, ‘racism’ and ‘fascism’. That same month, Newton appeared at a rally in New York City alongside the likes of Ralph Abernathy, Jesse Jackson and William Kunstler, posters for which featured the text ‘WE CHARGE GENOCIDE’ emblazoned over the UN logo.

It was more than a fondness for the CRC that motivated the BPP to take up the term genocide. The idea that black people were being systematically wiped out must have resonated with a group of activists whose lives could be snuffed out at any moment by police assassination. The idea that the BPP might invoke international law to assert their right to survival was not illogical. This possibility may have even worked against them. As a 1970 pamphlet disseminated by the Defenders of The American Constitution indicated, conservative and anti-civil rights groups helped prevent the ratification of the Genocide Convention until 1988. ‘Calling all Patriots!’ the pamphlet announced, ‘The Ratification Of...”

“We Charge Genocide”: Revisiting black radicals’ appeals to the world community 13
The Genocide Treaty Will Remove The Last Vestige Of Our Freedom.’ In calling upon true patriots to oppose ratification, the pamphlet not only practiced red-baiting (it labeled the Convention as part of a ‘One World Plot’), it also warned that ‘Black Panthers could charge the Police with Genocide’. ‘Chaos would result’, spelling nothing less than, ‘death to our American way of life’ at the hands of these insidious black rabble-rousers. The possibility of another UN genocide charge thus provoked the same blend of racism and anticommunism that the CRC, NAACP and NNC had each faced in the 1950s.162

Though this conservative criticism was misplaced, the Panthers’ genocide charge also drew important criticism from inside and outside the Party. Namely, members of the Black Panthers and SNCC’s H. Rap Brown each opposed federally-subsidized reproductive care as a government plot to lower black birthrates in urban areas. Bound up in this claim was the idea that black women’s place within the freedom struggle was as the vessels for producing the next generation of revolutionaries. At the same time, the theory seems to have begun with black civil rights liberals.163 The NAACP opposed state-funded birth control access as early as 1965, a year before the BPP was even established and two years before the Black Power Conference declared birth control ‘black genocide’.164 The National Urban League worried Planned Parenthood clinics would carry out ‘population control’ as early as 1962.165 Moreover, unlike these civil rights moderates, the Panthers put greater emphasis on capital punishment or the overrepresentation of black soldiers in Vietnam in their discussions of ‘black genocide’.166 In fact, the BPP also protested the coercive sterilization laws that reproductive justice organizations of color targeted.167 In her history of reproductive rights activism by women of color, Jennifer Nelson argues the BPP ‘contributed to the development of a new public discourse on involuntary reproductive control that foregrounded problems of sterilization abuse and population control among people of color.’168 Of course, this pivot was only possible because women within the Party pushed it to accept black women’s right to reproductive care. ‘Despite their earlier anti-fertility control rhetoric,’ Nelson argues, ‘the Black Panthers aided in the transformation of an abortion rights campaign into one of reproductive rights.’169

For these reasons, historians should approach Charles H. Martin’s claim that ‘the [CRC] Genocide Petition failed to have a substantial impact on the black community’ with considerable skepticism.170 Rather, the history of the genocide charge matches John Munro’s recuperation of the ‘anticolonial front’ within the black freedom struggle: an ‘intergenerational group of mostly Black radicals’.171 Recovering such continuities complicates the declension thesis common to the earliest studies of black internationalism. Emblematic of this tendency is Penny Von Eschen’s remarkable monograph Race Against Empire, which argued that black liberals’ acceptance of Cold War foreign policy, combined with the ‘prosecution of activists such as [Paul] Robeson […] effectively severed the black American struggle for civil rights from the issues of anticolonialism and racism abroad.’172 Yet as this essay demonstrates, the language of genocide connected several generations of black radicals. Each of these activists and intellectuals, in different historical moments, rejected a narrow focus on domestic ‘civil rights’ in favor of a historically-, economically- and globally-minded approach that maintained space in its analysis for the experiences of racialized people worldwide.

Conclusions: Violence in US history

Studying the CRC and its echoes in late twentieth-century activism connects the past to our present, as longstanding grievances against police violence continue to revive the language of genocide. The ghosts of anti-black racism continue to linger, not to mention the specters of William Patterson and Paul Robeson. The phrase ‘We Charge Genocide’ has resurfaced as the name of a world-minded group of activists protesting police violence and in outcries over the Flint, Michigan water crisis.173 Revisiting the genocide charge and other African American appeals to a world community across time also enables historians to internationalize the long civil rights movement, enriching our geographic and ideological narratives.174 The appeals launched by William Monroe Trotter, to the NAACP and CRC and to the Black Panthers, spanned a wide range of ideological commitments and were rooted in different but compatible etiologies of black death. What connected many of these and other black political formations is the recognition that racialized violence takes place at different scales, from localized Jim Crow to global patterns of colonial plunder, in ways which have entangled racialized peoples the world over.
Considering *We Charge Genocide* within a longer history of internationalist appeals and discourse about genocide also identifies the linkages African American radicals sought to forge with other racialized people. Both the Black Panthers and James Baldwin, for example, made what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call ‘the twin genocides of conquest and slavery’ the tentative rhetorical basis for cross-racial organizing in response to histories of violence.\(^\text{175}\) Twenty years ago now, Saidiya Hartman called historians’ attention to ‘the still-unfolding narrative of captivity, dispossession and domination that engenders the black subject in the Americas’.\(^\text{176}\) However, except for specialists of Native American studies, this is a story historians and activists have sometimes been slower to tell about Indigenous slavery and elimination.\(^\text{177}\) Like the black bodies forming ‘the ground we walk on’, Indigenous corpses have filled ‘the American soil’.\(^\text{178}\) James Baldwin made this connection in horror as a child, watching Gary Cooper killing ‘Indians’ and feeling in the pit of his stomach a vicarious phantom pain – what Hartman calls ‘the history that hurts’.\(^\text{179}\)

In recent iterations, the genocide charge has also been made to encompass the intersection of gendered and racialized violence. In 2016, for example, the Brooklyn-based organization Black Women’s Blueprint launched a Black Women’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).\(^\text{180}\) The name invoked similar efforts to unearth and address systemic violence and its profound legacies such as in post-apartheid South Africa and Chile following the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. The Truth and Reconciliation framework also suggests the possibility of foregrounding the history of colonialism in anti-racist appeals to human rights and an international community. Canada’s commission established that the government and participating churches carried out cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples through its residential school system. Canada’s ongoing National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls may recognize what the Black Women’s Blueprint has insisted – that sexual violence against racialized women and girls is a ‘human rights atrocity’.\(^\text{181}\)

Women of color are not new to the international fray of charging genocide. Women like Claudia Jones, who affixed her name to *WCG* and wrote ‘Lament for Emmett Till’, put colonial self-determination, human rights, international peace and women’s emancipation on the agenda and helped create a postwar black internationalism through what Kennnetta Hammond Perry calls ‘the politics of mourning’.\(^\text{182}\) Along with Eslanda Goode Robeson and Louise Thompson Patterson, she waged ‘a transnational struggle for a type of Black freedom that contested all forms of racial oppression’.\(^\text{183}\) Such activists played vital roles within the anticolonial front, which John Munro defines as ‘a tendency within the postwar Black liberation struggle’ that prioritized ‘the imperial structure of gendered racial capitalism’.\(^\text{184}\) Yet, much work remains to be done to ‘engender’ black internationalism.\(^\text{185}\)

Revisiting the discourse of those activists who refused narrower formulations of civil rights means coming to terms with a tremendous counter-factual history, the ‘archive of historical possibilities lost to the Red Scare’ and other ‘hidden archives of human struggle and political engagement’.\(^\text{186}\) It means historians must continue to consider political arenas other than the voting booth, the public march or the desegregating classroom. William Patterson himself decried that racial violence has left its mark everywhere in American history: violence took place on Southern chain gangs and ‘in the back rooms of sheriffs’ offices’, as well as in jail cells and police stations across the country.\(^\text{187}\) Yet, Patterson refused to isolate these residues of slavery within a paradigm of American or southern exceptionalism. Patterson and the CRC made explicit (if overstated) comparisons to the Holocaust, while sharpening their critique of imperialism. These radicals tugged on the thread of racialized violence, which connected, at different times, anti-black violence and ‘Northern style’ lynchings to Great Power empires, European fascist movements and settler colonialism’s logic of elimination. Theirs and others’ attempts to truly internationalize the anti-racist struggle deserve further reconsideration.

While this essay has focused on the history of African American appeals to international law and the genocide framework, further work could certainly devote itself to considering the basis of the charge itself.\(^\text{188}\) At the same time, historians may find that the usefulness of quantifying and classifying black suffering and death according to an empiricist paradigm and the strictures of international law has its limits. Shereen Ilahi argues that comparative approaches can obscure the fact that the actual experiences of violence are not understood in such a relativizing manner. For the colonial subject in Ireland or in India (or, I would add, for the black citizen in the United States), it does not matter so much that subjects of the
French or German empire had it ‘worse off’ in the eyes of historians. As Patterson himself understood, ‘words and statistics are but poor things to convey the long agony of the Negro people.’ What is beyond dispute, however, is that violence has played a constitutive role in American history and, as this essay has argued, provoked black Americans’ attempts to reckon with the past and build alternative futures.

**Declarations and conflict of interests**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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15 We Charge Genocide, 196. As Leslie James puts it, “Black people under colonialism, whether in Africa, the West Indies, or indeed Europe and the United States, were more closely connected than they imagined.” Leslie James, George Padmore and Decolonization from Below (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 47.

16 Arnesen, “Reconsidering,” 31–2; Cha-Jua and Lang, “‘Long Movement’ as Vampire,” 271.


25 A 1970 biography of Trotter is the exception. In his seminal biography of W.E.B. Du Bois, David Lewis briefly mentions Trotter’s National Equal Rights League as a competitor to the NAACP, writing that after

30 Quoted in Fox, *Guardian of Boston*, 230.
34 Quoted in Fox, *Guardian of Boston*, 234.
38 Though he does not explicitly connect it to William Monroe Trotter’s efforts, Jonathan Rosenberg argues the NAACP petition “reflected an assumption long embraced by leading reformers” about “the global nature of racial oppression” and the necessity of appealing to supra-national institutions. Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land*, 167.
40 Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 112.
41 Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 127.
43 Martin, “Internationalizing the ‘American Dilemma.’” Carol Anderson cites the liberal civil rights coalition’s decision to domesticate its approach and focus on civil rights as constitutive of the turn away from an international black politics based around human rights. Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 5.
Munro compellingly argues that “cold war conditions drew liberals away from coalition with the left and toward affiliation with US empire.” Munro, Anticolonial Front, 11.

As Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps have written, together, the NNC, NAACP, and CRC petitions “reflected a left-wing consciousness that saw campaigns against American apartheid and world colonialism as indissoluble.” Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, Radicals in America: the US Left since the Second World War (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 33.

Goodman, Paul Robeson, 179.

Patterson, Man, 179.

We Charge Genocide, frontmatter.

Others either in the Sojourners or their orbit that signed the petition were Angie Dickerson, and Dorothy Hunton, Josephine Grayson, Claudia Jones, Maude White Katz, Amy and Doris Mallard, Rosalee McGee, Louise Thompson Patterson, and Eslanda Goode Robeson, Mary Church Terrell. Erik S. McDuffie, Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism (Durham NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011, 176); We Charge Genocide, frontmatter.

Patterson, Man Who Cried Genocide, 180.

We Charge Genocide, xi.

We Charge Genocide, xi.

James, George Padmore, 5.

Anderson, Eyes Off the Prize, 177.

Committee to Free the Trenton Six, Lynching Northern Style (New York: Civil Rights Congress, 1951), 3.

Committee to Free the Trenton Six, Lynching Northern Style, 3.

We Charge Genocide, xii. Despite numerous attempts to ratify the Convention, these were not successful until 1986, under the Ronald Reagan administration.

We Charge Genocide, 57.

Brick and Phelps, Radicals in America, 25.

Brick and Phelps, Radicals in America, 64.

Brick and Phelps, Radicals in America, 20.

Brick and Phelps, Radicals in America, 29.


“We Charge Genocide” statement on Race, July 1950,” in Todd Shepard, Voices of Decolonization: A Brief History with Documents (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2015), 57.

Patterson, Man Who Cried Genocide, 170.

Jonathan Rosenberg writes, “Since it was hoped that every decent American rejected the values inherent in Nazism, it seemed reasonable to assume that by establishing a fundamental similarity between American racial practices and those in Hitler’s Germany […] average Americans might better comprehend the character of their own society.” Rosenberg, How Far the Promised Land, 113. For a treatment of more radical black activists drawing these connections across time and changing political circumstances, see Munro, Anticolonial Front.

Matera, Black London, 43. See also Kennetta Hammond Perry, London Is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship, and the Politics of Race, Transgressing Boundaries (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015); Munro, Anticolonial Front.


Matera, Black London, 43.


Makalani, *Cause of Freedom*, 17.

Makalani, *Cause of Freedom*, 17.


Makalani, *Cause of Freedom*, 16; *We Charge Genocide*, frontmatter.

Makalani, *Cause of Freedom*, 175.

Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land*, 120.


Patterson, “We Must Unite,” 6.


Patterson, *Man Who Cried Genocide*, 175.

Quoted in Horne, *Black Revolutionary*, 125.


Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize*, 3.


*We Charge Genocide*, 196.


Dudziak, “Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative,” 62.


Dudziak, “Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative,” 103.
“We Charge Genocide”: Revisiting black radicals’ appeals to the world community


117 Quoted in Horne, Black Revolutionary, 137.

118 Patterson, “We Must Unite,” 9–10.


120 Goodman, Paul Robeson, 181; Makalani, Cause of Freedom, 174.

121 Belmonte, Selling the American Way, 164.

122 Anderson, Eyes Off the Prize, 203.

123 Quoted in Anderson, Eyes Off the Prize, 203.

124 Anderson, Eyes Off the Prize, 188.

125 Quoted in Anderson, Eyes Off the Prize, 15. Logan’s involvement is discussed in Goodman, Paul Robeson, 181.


127 See Tillery, Homeland and Motherland, 75–99; Arnesen, “African American Anti-Communism.”


129 Anderson, Bourgeois Radicals.

130 Munro, Anticolonial Front.

131 As Jordan Goodman writes, “[Robeson’s] message for peace, equality and justice was understood as clearly on the streets of Manchester, Moscow, Johannesburg, and Bombay as it was in Harlem and Washington, D.C.” Goodman, Paul Robeson, xii.

132 Swindall, Greater, Freer, Truer World, 130–1.

133 “Mass support for Robeson,” Erik S. McDuffie writes, “showed that he remained beloved within black communities due in no small part to black women radicals, who collaborated and understood that defending him was critical to protecting civil liberties for all African Americans.” McDuffie, Sojourning for Freedom, 165.

134 Horne, Black Revolutionary, 125.


137 Putnam, Radical Moves, 1.

138 Baldwin and Buckley, “The American Dream and the American Negro.”

139 Avery F. Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

140 Gordon, Ghostly Matters, xvi.

141 Gordon, Ghostly Matters, xvii, 7.

142 Gordon, Ghostly Matters, xvii, 7.


144 Sharpe, In the Wake, 7. No less vividly, historian Jason Young, writing about enslaved people’s memory of the Middle Passage, describes the “specter of bodies” and the “litter of bones,” swept away and “strewn along the sea floor” and, as if the North Star’s perverse opposite, “pointing the way to the New World.” Jason R. Young, Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 131–2.

145 Sharpe, In the Wake, 27.

146 McDuffie, “Communist Philosophy.”

147 McDuffie, “Communist Philosophy,” 185.


150 “If They Can Come For Angela in the Morning, They Will Come For You in the Night” advertisement, *Cleveland Call and Post*, Sept. 11, 1971, 18A.


156 Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 72.


158 Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 96.

159 Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 354.


167 Caron, “Birth Control,” 547.


178 Sharpe, In the Wake, 7; Young, Rituals of Resistance, 131; Baldwin in McGonagle, James Baldwin Debates.

179 Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 51.


182 Carole Boyce Davies, Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 230; Perry, London is the Place, 131–2, 146–7. For more on black women internationalists see McDuffie, Sojourning.

183 Perry, London is the Place, 139.

184 Munro, Anticolonial Front, 3.


190 We Charge Genocide, 195.


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“We Charge Genocide”: Revisiting black radicals’ appeals to the world community 23
