Conclusion

On March 23, 1934, the head of the West Coast union William Lewis, at the request of President Roosevelt, called off a planned strike by San Francisco longshoremen. In the midst of a bitter fight with District 13 DO Sam Darcy over the role of the Party and the Communist-led MWIU in the organizing struggles on the waterfront, the reappointed head of the American Bureau-PPTUS Harrison George wrote a “Special Report” to a comrade telling him what “we” were doing in the longshoremen’s strike situation on the Pacific Coast. He declared:

This was the exact psychological moment and the most excellent opportunity in years to aim a devastating attack upon the anti-Oriental chauvinism which the American Pacific Coast proletariat has had injected into it by bourgeois and A.F. of L. bureaucrats. This chauvinism, the depth of which may be indicated by understanding that its sources go back to the massacres of Chinese immigrants by the first California white settlers in the “gold rush days of 1849,” has never received—and we can say does not yet receive—[small word covered by black spot] attention it deserves from the CPUSA. This anti-Oriental chauvinism on the Pacific Coast is as wide and as deep as that in the South against the Negroes, even though it does not assume the magnitude in political importance of the Negro question as a national revolutionary movement.

Apart from himself and a few other individuals such as Levin, Gomez, Fislerman, and Wilkerson, who devoted time and energy to the needs and concerns of left-wing and Communist Chinese and Japanese immigrant activists, George’s criticisms apply to the American Pacific Coast proletariat, the Party leadership, and the rank-and-file members at least until the mid-1930s.

By the beginning of 1933, the American Bureau stepped up its rhetoric invoking “the struggle against imperialist war” across the Pacific;
simultaneously it became more removed from the crucial local efforts to enlist Chinese and Japanese seamen because of either the Japanese government’s heightened surveillance and the Home Office’s budget reductions or the continuing divides separating the Bureau from Japanese and Chinese activists and their respective immigrant communities. At the same time, in August 1934 Party Secretary Browder advised the Japanese Buro that it must give equal attention to both “direct mass work” and work in the “Pan Pacific area.” In fact, he emphasized, “especially at this moment it is extremely urgent that we do everything in our power to assist the other parties in the Pacific, and in the first place, the Japanese Communist Party.” Meanwhile, district and national party leaders were directing Japanese members to combat “sectarian isolation from the masses” and nationalism among the Japanese masses and draw the same into the American Party and TUUL unions.

During this same period, Chinese immigrant party members were forced to wage their own struggle within the movement. Like the Japanese, Chinese members also confronted problems: isolation within the Party as well as local immigrant communities, small memberships and the repeated loss of leading members through their departure for Moscow and their homeland, a perpetual lack of funds, ongoing and bitter factional struggles within district and national party leaderships, and, perhaps most important, harassment by the KMT and immigration authorities along with the ever present threat of arrest leading to deportation. In addition, they faced the party leadership’s general lack of attention to and consequent neglect of issues of concern to their immigrant communities. Complicating matters further and contradicting their construction as natives of China, Chinese immigrant activists were expected to conform to policies that construed all members of the American Party as eligible to become naturalized “Americans.” Yet, even in the case of individual party leaders who worked closely with and demonstrated their commitment to sustaining the Chinese activists’ efforts, nonetheless the paramount interest lay in the fight to support the revolutionary forces in China and defend the Soviet Union. When developing strategies and organizing at the local level, therefore, the activists were largely on their own.

Thus, the long and deep engagements of left-wing and Communist Chinese and Japanese immigrant activists in labor, antiwar, and anti-imperial struggles, both inside the United States and overseas across the Pacific and Atlantic, remained “lost” to the memories and recorded narratives of the U.S. Left. No less striking is the absence of these histories in Asian, European, and general American historiographies.

Scholars working in these fields have made significant advances in illuminating individual aspects of these histories. Scholarship concerning the U.S. Left has moved a long way from the pervasive disregard of the subject of “anti-Oriental chauvinism” of which George speaks, a prejudice evident in some memoirs of former American Communists. Indeed, Alexander Saxton’s
The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California is now widely cited, and when scholars of red unionism turn their attention to activism on the waterfront and at sea, the discussion confronts “white supremacy” and racial prejudice directed at Asian seamen in particular.5

More recently, path-breaking work in Asian American Studies has not only examined the various and changing manifestations of anti-Asian prejudice and discrimination to which Chinese and Japanese immigrants were subject in communities on and outside the West Coast,6 but it has also focused squarely on the experiences and actions of the immigrants as they used all the tools at their disposal to resist the discriminatory laws and extralegal actions that sought to prevent them from entering and sustaining lives in the United States.7 In addition, a number of Asian Americanists have begun to shed light on the links between the immigration and emigration ends of the story by adopting a transnational perspective and delving into social, political, and economic ties binding individuals, families, and communities across the vast distances.8 In this regard, most recent scholarship never loses sight of the power of the states to which the immigrants were subject.9 However, when examining Asian Americans and the Left before World War II, Him Mark Lai’s and Yuji Ichioka’s work remains exceptional; more generally, when treated, the subject is largely confined to the boundaries of a single workplace or union.10

Japanese immigrant activists, given their interest and engagement in developments overseas, necessarily contended with an expansionist state whose imperial ambitions followed them across the Pacific and sought to track their every movement, as evidenced by the many lists prepared by Japanese government agents assigned to monitor the activities of Japanese radicals living in the United States on either coast.11 The interest of the KMT in suppressing any actions seen as threatening its control over the direction of political activism in Chinese immigrant communities in the United States is likewise well documented.12

For left-wing and Communist Chinese and Japanese immigrant activists, the possibility of experiencing the repressive hand of the state was perhaps felt most immediately when they sought to cross national borders—whether the mission was to carry out an Atlantic- or Pacific-bound journey, or, if only momentarily, to board ships docked in U.S. ports. Multiple levels of security guarded the waterfronts where Japanese ships docked, and any movements in relation to and words exchanged by Japanese crews with “outsiders” were forbidden and carried severe consequences for all parties involved. The memoirs of American Communist activists who were assigned to board and scatter PPTUS leaflets in the holds of ships bound for Japan mention security conditions surrounding Japanese ships docked on both the West and East coasts.13 Yet, Japanese immigrant activists took on much of this task, and exchanges between Japanese crews and Japanese immigrant activists occasionally occurred as the latter figured out how to “pass” as nationals whose interests
necessarily converged with those of the assumed patriotic Japanese crews. The memoirs and works by recent scholars neither mention these exchanges, nor do they acknowledge the difficulties organizers working in the pan-Pacific arena had in obtaining more than passing assistance from national and district Communist party leaderships or rank-and-file non-Asian Communists in helping to sustain the overtaxed and highly vulnerable efforts of Japanese and Chinese immigrant activists. No less risky were the efforts of Asian Communist organizers to reach out to either seamen on ships and waterfronts in the Western Pacific or to labor and Communist rank-and-file activists as they traveled clandestinely inland across China and/or by sea up to Vladivostok, and from there across the Soviet Union to Moscow, then back across this expanse and down into non-Soviet territory or, alternatively, into the port of Hamburg and from there to Berlin en route to Moscow and ultimately Asia once again.

This issue raises the question of the place of these histories in Asian and European scholarship. These histories are essentially absent in European historiography, even within the descriptions of Chinese who sought to organize Chinese seamen entering the port of Hamburg and Japanese radicals who gathered in Berlin; from this base they sought not only to support revolutionary movements back home in Asia but also to join the fight against Hitler’s growing power. Although a number of European-based Chinese Communists and at least one Korean and one Indian joined these Japanese activists, their stories are not recorded.

The very existence of Chinese immigrants who joined the American as well as Chinese Communist parties and contributed to local struggles in Chinese immigrant communities in the United States has received only minimal attention. When examined, the primary focus among Asian historiography remains connections to the CCP and events in China. The sojourns of Japanese immigrant activists in the United States and Europe are viewed as mere moments in a longer trajectory whose organizing principle and ultimate purpose is return to the homeland. Most interesting in this regard is Travers Edgar Durkee’s Ph.D. dissertation on “The Communist International and Japan, 1919–1932.” The narrative is replete with references to Japanese socialists and Communists who traveled through and/or resided in not only Asia (with Shanghai as the key point of call) but also the United States and Europe. The ultimate message is clear: Asian Communism as a phenomenon belongs to the non-Western world, and the experiences of Asian activists who resided in the United States should only be “read” in the context of the homeland. As a result, the complexities of the transnational engagements of Chinese and Japanese immigrant activists, and in particular their formal and informal connections to American Communist national and district leaderships and American party institutions as well as European Communist parties have no place in Asian Communist narratives.
I discovered, however, that to illuminate the full histories of left-wing and Communist Chinese and Japanese immigrant activists I must make several key interventions. First, it was necessary simply to acknowledge the existence of left-wing and Communist Japanese and Chinese immigrant activists, their place within longstanding patterns of transnational activism and thought, and their formation of organizations inside the United States to serve the workers in the respective immigrant communities and/or grapple with overseas developments in China, Japan, and across the Western Pacific prior to World War II and the birth of the postwar Asian American movement. As elementary as such an acknowledgment might appear, it was in fact unprecedented in terms of calling attention to the linkages between the hitherto separate scholarships of Asian American Studies and the U.S. Left. It was essential to recognize that these Chinese and Japanese radicals’ experiences were integral, not simply peripheral, to the narratives of Asian American Studies and the U.S. Left.

The perspective of the other side of the Pacific required me to place these immigrant activists squarely within the historiography of Asian Studies. Thus, the two interventions entailed placing oft-perceived exiled activists in a transnational context that linked their experiences and actions in Asia and America. Rather than seeing a clear boundary between the history on one side of the Pacific and the history on the other, an early and continuing web of connections emerged.

Next, I turned to the scholarship of immigration and global labor historians such as those involved in the “Italians Everywhere” research project, who have embarked on a path-breaking effort to trace the global movements of Italian immigrant laborers; one collaboration focused on labor radicalism and migration, and the other on women workers and militancy. Among other things, these scholars have uncovered the linkages between local, national, and global histories of labor and gender. By following in these and other researchers’ footsteps, I similarly began with a willingness to cross national borders and engage a field of interest that was transnational in the broadest sense. In fact, from the beginning the sources clearly demanded crisscrossing the globe and tracking the multiple and fluid connections among the various geographical scales.

Here I drew upon the scholarship of historical geographers and labor geographers, to make sense of these very linkages, the relationship between place and space, and the ways that space and spatial divisions act upon and are also used by the activists to further their radical aims. Geographical scale can thus serve as either a tool of repression or resistance and possible liberation.

Finally, the last step was to carry out the main body of the research: an in-depth study of left-wing and Communist Chinese and Japanese immigrant activists’ experiences and activities in the United States and overseas, with attention to the similarities and differences between the two groups and any ties that developed over the course of the period under examination. In both
cases the activists formed webs of relationships that spanned the globe, both the Atlantic and Pacific dimensions, and continents and oceans. At the historiographical level, the result weaves together American, Asian, and European histories.

At this juncture I call upon other historians to internationalize their historical scholarship—despite their identification as practitioners of American, Asian, or European history—to build upon my initial research. This should not entail a neglect of the national dimension and the long and continuing power of the nation-state. In fact, I argue that, in treating national and transnational dimensions as inextricably linked levels of analysis, the researcher is forced to recognize the ongoing power of both the nation-state and the national interest. The boundaries between the various historiographies obscure more than illuminate the histories of mobile actors, such as immigrant Communists. Moreover, the left-wing and Communist Japanese and Chinese immigrant activists are not alone among immigrants and laborers in terms of their border-crossing practices, and no doubt the histories of other actors remain trapped within the interstices of the various scholarships, simply waiting for other scholars to liberate their stories.