Submitted copy Tamson Pietsch, "Learning at Sea: Education Aboard the 1926-27 Floating University", in Susann Liebich and Laurence Publicover eds., *Shipboard Literary Cultures: Reading, Writing, and Performing at* Sea, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021): 239-261

Learning at Sea: education aboard the 1926-27 Floating University.

Tamson Pietsch

Associate Professor, Social & Political Sciences

University of Technology Sydney

Tamson.pietsch@uts.edu.au

Abstract:

In 1926 New York University's Professor of Psychology, James Edwin Lough, led 500 American university students on an eight-month voyage around the world. Stopping at 47 ports and visiting foreign dignitaries including the King of Siam, the Sultan of Jodhpur, Mussolini and the Pope, Lough's 'pedagogical experiment' promised a 'world education' to its students. Influenced by progressive education and new developments in educational psychology, he believed that "Floating University" students could learn from the shifting conditions around them. This chapter examines the attempt to put this educational philosophy into effect, exploring some of the reading, writing, performing and drawing that took place during the eight-month cruise around the world. Using published curricula, newspaper reports, and the letters of students and staff, it considers the relationship between experience and education in Professor Lough's 1926 floating educational experiment.

Submitted copy Tamson Pietsch, "Learning at Sea: Education Aboard the 1926-27 Floating University", in Susann Liebich and Laurence Publicover eds., *Shipboard Literary Cultures: Reading, Writing, and Performing at* Sea, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021): 239-261

After years in the planning and more than a few hurdles, the inaugural Floating University finally sailed from New Jersey's Hoboken pier at 4.25pm on the afternoon of 18 September 1926. Flags of all nations were strung from bow to stern, and on the pier waving handkerchiefs and hats stood more than one thousand friends and family.[1] Standing on the promenade deck as the ship pulled away from the shore were 50 faculty members and their families, and approximately 500 passengers. Most of these were students (of which only a few dozen were women), but there were also about 133 "older people" on board. They had signed up for the cruise when it became apparent that there weren't going to be enough students to make up the numbers.[2] All of them were white, thanks to an informal policy of racial exclusion.[3] Along with an overwhelmingly Dutch crew, they were embarking on a seven-month voyage around the world. Stopping at forty-seven ports and including visits to foreign dignitaries, the cruise promised to make students "world-minded": to foster the habit of international thinking, making "them better citizens of [the United States] through being citizens of the world".[4]

The originator of the voyage was James Edwin Lough, Professor of Experimental Psychology at New York University. Influenced by William James' new psychology and John Dewey's approach to progressive education, he believed that experiences gained during travel could be a useful educational tool.[5] Rather than relying on the abstractions of textbooks, Floating University students would learn from the shifting conditions around them. The undertaking reflected Lough's long-held belief that spatial contexts shaped student learning. "All knowledge can be traced directly to sense experience," he had written in a book published with colleagues in 1926; "[t]he study of every subject calls for laboratory methods whereby the learner establishes first-hand contact with his subjects […] To see and to handle is far better than merely to listen."[6] This was a view that directly echoed John Dewey's writings in

[1] *The Binnacle*, September 21, 1926, 2. See also Tamson Pietsch's forthcoming book on the Floating University.
[2] James S McKenzie, *A Broad Education Abroad: Readin', Writin', and Roamin'* (New York: Vantage Press, 1978), 3.
[3] University of Michigan Amherst Special Collections, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Series 1/A/Reel 22/1927, Du Bois to the Editor of the *New York Times*, June 24, 1927.
[4] *Nanaimo Daily News,* May 16, 1924, 5; *Democrat and Chronicle,* May 11, 1924, 75.
[5] William James, *Talks To Teachers On Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1899); John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1916); Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2015).
[6] Charles E Benson et al., *Psychology for Teachers* (Boston, New York: Ginn and Co., 1926), 83.

School and Society, published in 1899 and avidly read by Lough. "It is through what we do in and with the world", Dewey had written, "that we read its meaning and measure its value."[7] For Lough, taking students around the world on a ship was a way of constituting students as internationals subjects; a way of fashioning their habits by using the spatial, social and epistemic technology of the ship and the ports at which it docked.[8] As the Floating University's President, Charles Franklin Thwing, put it, the "only way seriously to study most subjects [was] at first hand" and, for the "student of the world", that meant travel.[9]

Claims about the educational benefit of travel were prominent in the promotional materials of shipping lines during the 1920s, as companies sought to take advantage of American prosperity by offering cheap "tourist" class tickets. In addition, travel agencies such as American Express and Thomas Cook as well as a host of smaller providers began to sell "summer study tours" to Europe. At their more respectable end these trips were affiliated with a university and featured course work or research and a stay of three or so months. More often than not, however, they were really just glorified package tours, perhaps led by a professor or other guide, but comprising little formal education or assessment and lasting as little as four weeks.[10] Unlike these commercial undertakings, the Floating University promised university credit for work undertaken. This meant that during the cruise, reading, writing, drawing and performing at sea took on a particular organised form that borrowed from land-based college life as much as it did from cruise and travel culture. Where in some of the other essays in this volume, cultural activities were a means of relieving the tedium of journeys undertaken for other purposes, on the Floating University they were—at least in theory—part of the reason passengers were on the ship in the first place.

The kinds of books the Floating University's passengers borrowed from the ship's library, the way they learned to sketch, their reading of, and submission of articles to, the student-run newspaper, and the type of plays they staged and viewed, highlight

[7] John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago, Ill., The University of Chicago press, 1915), 17.
[8] Tamson Pietsch, 'Bodies at Sea: Travelling to Australia in the Age of Sail', *Journal of Global History* 11, no. 2 (July 2016): 209–28.
[9] *The Binnacle*, September 21, 1926, 2.
[10] Tamson Pietsch, 'Commercial Travel and College Culture: The 1920s Transatlantic Student Market and the Foundations of Mass Tourism', *Diplomatic History* 43, no. 1 (2019): 83–106; Harvey Levenstein, *Seductive Journey: American Tourists in France From Jefferson to the Jazz Age* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 143.

their efforts to make meaning of the worlds they were encountering. As activities intended to bring the different elements of the passenger body together, the various modes of reading, writing and performing on board the Floating University also reveal the tensions between and within these groups, provoking questions that go to the heart of the Professor Lough's pedagogic promise. What constitutes education? Is it the content of formal courses that matters, or the context in which they are delivered? Does what a book says, depend on where it is read?

A shipboard university

Ascending the gangplank on the morning of departure, the Floating University's passengers found themselves accommodated in rooms of varying standard. They were travelling on the Holland America Line's *SS Ryndam*.[11] Built in 1901 in Belfast by Harland & Wolff, it had worked the trans-Atlantic passenger route until it was damaged in January 1916 by a German mine in the North Sea. Requisitioned by the US government during the war and converted into a troopship, it was released in 1921 and resumed the trans-Atlantic route as a refitted passenger liner. Having arrived late in New York, little more than a week before the Floating University was due to depart, it had been hurriedly configured to include a gymnasium, swimming pool, a large library and other rooms appropriate to a college party, although many of these alterations were still being undertaken as the ship departed Hoboken pier. While some passengers had been allocated commodious state rooms, many found themselves cramped three to a room in the bowels of the ship.

This room allocation reflected a class division among the passengers that would become a source of tension later in the voyage. Several weeks before departure, with the number of student enrolments still falling short, the cruise organisers had opened places up to women and older travellers seeking an educational experience. In addition to 306 young male students, when the *Ryndam* sailed its passenger list included 57 women students and 133 "older people".[12] It was these older passengers (later dubbed "tourists") as well as faculty members who mostly occupied the state rooms, and the

[11] Holland America Line Archives, 318.01: Directie/ Dossiers/Cruises/0831, Contract signed 16 March 1926; Case Western Reserve University Archives, Papers of Charles F. Thwing 1DD6/48/University at Sea, Membership Ticket.
[12] Binnacle, 1:1, 17 Sept 1926

students who were assigned shared rooms on the lower decks, which had been converted from cabin and third-class accommodation. Charles Ladd, one of the students from Kansas who wrote a travel account of the voyage, described the difficulty of trying to fit both his six-foot tall frame and that of his four-foot wide roommate into "steerage quarters five by nine by seven". Indeed, his roommate was obliged to go into the hall to get dressed. To make matters worse, they were located right next to the coal-bunkers, and the constant sound of shovels together with the coal dust were not, in Charles Ladd's words, "great aids to concentration."[13] Although the *Ryndam* was travelling at, or even under, her usual capacity, for middle-class Americans paying $2500 per berth the adapted third-class accommodation, the shortage of bathrooms (supplied with salt water pumped directly from the sea) on the lower decks, the lack of attendants, and the inadequacy of the food were far from what they had expected.[14]

The student body was drawn from all over the country. New York state had the largest group, with Missouri and Kansas following closely behind.[15] Students from the same state were accommodated together and they soon personalised their spaces, erecting street signs in the corridors that pointed the visitor to "Broadway" or to the names of Midwestern Towns.[16] Charles Ladd and his roommate decorated their quarters in "true college style", erecting a study desk with materials "borrowed" from the carpenters' supplies and tacking up a map of the ship on which they tracked the *Ryndam*'s progress. Through these and other measures, they sought to refashion the space of the ship and claim it as their own by superimposing onto it local, national and collegial geographies. Many of those on board had never left their home state before, let alone met so many of their fellow countrymen, and regional dining groups quickly formed. What the *Ryndam*'s passenger list represented, however, was not so much the whole country as the power relations that shaped it. Not only was the Floating University's student body dominated by the well-off, but it was, as already mentioned, entirely white, reflecting the racial politics of a nation at the very height of the Jim Crow era of segregation and racial violence.

---

[13] Charles Ladd, *Around the World at Seventeen* (Rahway, NJ: Quinn & Boden Co., 1928), 25–26.
[14] In early Sept 1925 the *Ryndam* sailed with 470 cabin and 150 third class passengers. *The Gazette (Montreal)*, September 5, 1925, 20.
[15] McKenzie, *A Broad Education Abroad*, 3.
[16] Ladd, *Around the World at Seventeen*, 26–27.

Days at sea were to begin with compulsory calisthenics followed by breakfast at 7.30am. Then classes ran all day, interspersed with breaks for snacks at 11am, lunch at 12 noon, and tea at 4pm. Following afternoon tea there were more compulsory exercises. Dinner was at 6pm (served in two different dining rooms) and dancing was a major activity in the evenings, although sometimes night classes were also held along with independently organised discussion groups (or seminars).[17] Only Sundays were rest days. When it came to the formal curriculum, the students could choose from 73 subjects.[18] English composition was the most popular, with Journalism, Geography, Languages, Economics and Government not far behind. The classes themselves were to be held mostly on the promenade deck, with students and teachers alike lounging in chairs. In one of the newspaper articles he wrote en route, Dewitt Reddick described the voice of the instructors mingling with the rush of the wind and churn of the water against the side of the ship.[19] The official photograph album shows students in deck chairs at work on type-writers or reading books, and crowded together perched on railings and under awnings for whole-of-ship meetings.[20] Exercise took place on the A-deck between the life boats. Canvas dividers were pulled across the thoroughfares to create some sense of separation when the group split into classes, and every bit of available space had to be utilised as classrooms, including the assembly and dining rooms and the library.[21] These conditions were not always compatible with formal education, and in the warmer climates taking class outside was as conducive to sleeping during lectures as it was to listening to them.[22]

The library was presided over by Miss Alida Stephens (from Williams College), and demand for books was initially very high. The most popular volumes reveal much about the kinds of reading that helped frame passengers' understanding of all they were seeing. Lord Northcliffe's *My Journey Round the World*, published in 1922, was a particular favourite.[23] As Alfred Harmsworth, Northcliffe was a hugely influential British press baron, and in 1921 he had embarked on a seven-month world

[17] McKenzie, *A Broad Education Abroad*, 2, 19.
[18] *The Binnacle,* September 17, 1926, 1.
[19] University of Texas Austin (UTA) Briscoe Center, Dewitt C. Reddick Papers 3G454/2/"College life on the bounding main"
[20] Walter Conger Harris, *Photographs of the First University World Cruise* (New York: University Travel Association, 1927).
[21] McKenzie, *A Broad Education Abroad*, 4.
[22] *The Binnacle*, October 29, 1926, 3.
[23] *The Binnacle,* November 3, 1926, 4.

cruise. Travelling west from London, Northcliffe's route was broadly similar to that followed by the *Ryndam*, and his abrupt prose and elite connections (often he stayed in Government Houses) appealed enormously to the Americans. The *Ryndam*'s copy of *Rudyard Kipling's Verse* was also in great demand. In it, the students found Kipling's 1899 poem "The White Man's Burden", which exhorted the United States to join in the project of conquest and take up the civilising mission. In India, *The Jungle Book* was a constant reference. Kipling's 1901 novel *Kim* was one of the texts recommended as preparatory reading.[24] If Northcliffe and Kipling taught the students to see through British imperial eyes, the recently published Marble's *Round the World Travel Guide* (1925) offered a more American perspective. An ordained Baptist minister, after serving congregations in New England, in 1919 Marble became the American Express agent in charge of the Far East and director of education for the company's around-the-world tours of the 1920s.[25] The popularity of these volumes can be gauged by the frequency with which Stephens was forced to post notices requesting their return.[26]

But soon Alida Stephens was facing bigger challenges than the disappearance of her books. As the *Ryndam* crossed the Pacific, her library became more than just a place to study and read. In one corner there was a grand piano which "never seem[ed] to get a rest" and in another corner there was a Victrola record player, ensuring that the students never need study in silence.[27] The Women's and Men's Glee clubs held their meetings there, and it also became the place where the ship's stationery could be purchased, along with the previous days' snapshots taken by the official photographer. By the time the ship was approaching Japan, Alida Stephens, who evidently was not used to such behaviour in a library, was threatening to close it in the evenings.[28]

Extracurricular activities on board the Floating University were seen as an essential aspect of "college life".[29] Like many of his contemporaries, President Thwing believed that the most valuable college lessons were very possibly those learned outside the classroom. Colleges were sites not just of knowledge creation but also of character

[24] Vermont Historical Society, Thomas H. Johnson papers, MSA 441/04/1, September 19, 1926.
[25] 'Obituary Record of Graduates of Yale University 1936-1937', *Bulletin of Yale University*, 1937, 195.
[26] On the disappearance of books from ships' libraries see Susann Liebich, 'A Sea of Fiction: The Libraries of Trans-Pacific Steamships at the Turn of the Twentieth Century', *The Library* 20, no. 1 (1 March 2019): 3–28.
[27] *The Binnacle,* November 2, 1926, 3.
[28] *The Binnacle,* November 4, 1926, 4.
[29] *The Binnacle,* September 17, 1926, 2.

formation. Student "democracy" in the form of communal living and student-run activities was crucial because it stimulated both individual responsibility and the bonds of collective experience. That colleges remained highly competitive, gendered and socially exclusive worlds was not seen as a contradiction to these views, but to the contrary, frequently celebrated by their advocates.[30] For Thwing, religious worship was a key aspect of this communal life and "non-sectarian" morning chapel service was held on deck every Sunday at 7.30am.[31] But for most students on the *Ryndam* extracurricular activities meant student clubs, including a Jazz Band and Glee Club, sporting activities, various discussion groups, dining societies and a dramatics group called "Planet Players". There was a student newspaper too, called the *Binnacle*, but this was run as part of the Journalism course and edited as well as written by the Journalism students, with letters contributed by the whole passenger body. Alongside the formal classes, which were conducted while the ship was at sea, these various extracurricular activities became important fora through which the *Ryndam*'s diverse passengers sought for ways to make sense of all that they were seeing. They not only functioned as a form of entertainment during the longer stretches at sea, but also enabled the recording aspects of the voyage, and of shaping the collective meaning made of it.

Art and Design

There were three courses in Art offered as part of the Floating University programme. Art Appreciation and Art History were extremely popular, with the latter alone attracting 131 enrolments in the first semester, with many of these places taken up by older passengers not formally enrolling for credit.[32] These two courses were run by Frederick Wellington Ruckstull, a founding member of the (United States') National Sculpture Society who taught at the Metropolitan Museum of Art schools in New York. Onboard the *Ryndam* he delivered authoritative lectures with titles such as "From Sanity to Insanity in Art". The third course was called the Art of Design, and it was taught by Holling C. Holling. Holling had graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago

[30] Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962) 136; Roger L. Geiger, 'The American College in the Nineteenth Century' (Nashville : Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 14–15.
[31] *The Binnacle,* September 17, 1926, 1.
[32] *The Binnacle,* October 27, 1926, 2.

in 1923 and had been writing and illustrating children's picture books and producing material for advertising agencies. His style was very different to Ruckstull's, and his class promised students a "practical" training in design and drawing. His enrolments too, were more modest: he had 30 people in his class.[33] But Holling's class provides a window onto the role of drawing at sea aboard the Floating University, in part because of the ways he integrated the space of the ship and the locations in which it stopped into his educational method, and in part because Holling left a significant archive of drawings and illustrations that record this activity.

Although he was very amused to be given the title "Professor", Holling took teaching his class seriously and worked hard to integrate the *Ryndam*'s experiential philosophy into his course design.[34] After introductory sessions on the history and development of design and its use of forms and space, Holling decided to plunge his students into practical work by setting them the task of drawing ship objects, asking them to experiment with different mediums: charcoal, pencil, pen and ink, water colour, pastel and oils. He then got them to apply what they had learned to the space beyond the ship, asking them to sketch "in the field" during the *Ryndam*'s regular stops in port. In Singapore, for example, the whole class got up early and went to the city and sat down on the canal-side for a few hours, sketching the ships and sampans and junks. Then they went to the museum where they made drawings of its models of Malay houses and sea craft. These sketches provided the material that the class would later analyse. This method of teaching was, in Holling's judgement, "[n]ot hard": "I think I am learning more than my students", he wrote to his parents.[35]

Holling's own drawings, which he made continually throughout the voyage, evidence his fascination with the places and peoples he was meeting and his relentless quest to collect "original material" he could use in his own work. It was the "native" people, customs and architecture that most occupied him, and this was reflected in his course plan. The "primitive mind", he wrote, had a "love of design" and an "urge" to

[33] University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) Library Special Collections, Holling Clancy Holling papers 1012/41/8, HCH to his Mother, October 20, 1926; UCLA Library Special Collections, Holling Clancy Holling papers 1012/61/13, Student list.
[34] UCLA Library Special Collections, Holling Clancy Holling papers 1012/41/7, HCH to his sister, soon after departure.
[35] UCLA Library Special Collections, Holling Clancy Holling papers 1012/41/7, HCH to his family, December 23, 1926.

incorporate it into all aspects of life.[36] This focus on what was "native" or "original" about a place, extended to Europe. In the Netherlands he focused on women in clogs, in Scandinavia he drew Vikings, and in England he imagined Robin Hood. Holling's approach to folk and "native" customs was essentialised and often racialised. It reflected a way of seeing and representing the world he had begun to hone before he departed on the *Ryndam*. On board the ship, and in the ports along its path, it gave him a way of framing the countries and cultures he was encountering within a matrix of "authentic", local and pure versus corrupted and "deceitful". The results are clearly evident in Holling's illustrations for the *Student Magellan* — the student yearbook that was published at the end of the voyage. Thailand (Siam) was represented by a throne on top of an elephant, with the outline of temple towers in the background; Java by a stylised masked dancer; the Netherlands by a windmill on a canal. Only Germany really got to be modern. Holling called it the "new industrial republic" and produced a Bauhaus inspired design.[37] Only occasionally did Holling acknowledge that U.S. capital and culture, and the shipping routes and military force that helped extend it, played a major role in the industrial development and global entanglement he saw as a corruption. His romantic vision enabled him to superimpose his own version of internationalism onto the *Ryndam*'s route – one in which he identified "authentic" aesthetic forms that stood in for national culture. The drawings he made en route had a life off the ship as well, becoming a significant resource for him in his later career and appearing in some of his later publications.[38]

The Planet Players

Similar efforts to make sense of experience were evident in the activities of the drama group, in which Holling and his wife Lucille were both actively involved. Led by Mrs Beatrix Prior, whose main qualification in the field was that her son-in-law was the Hollywood actor Theodore von Eltz, the Planet Players attracted the involvement of many of the older women passengers, including six in the production department and

[36] UCLA Library Special Collections, Holling Clancy Holling papers 1012/61/13, course plan.
[37] *The Student Magellan, in Which You Will Find Written and Pictured Something of the Story of the Ryndam and the First Annual College Cruise around the World, 1926-17* (New York: Voelcker Bros Inc, 1927), 180–84.
[38] For example see Watty Piper, *Little Folks of Other Lands*, illustrated by Lucille W. and H.C. Holling, The Platt & Punk Company, New York, 1929.

five in the costume committee.[39] Lucille was one of them, and she worked feverishly on rehearsal and costumes and set design. The first production they staged, as the ship made its way from Panama to Los Angeles, was titled "The Very Naked Boy". It featured the student James McKenzie in the starring role, appearing suspiciously unclothed, half hidden behind a curtain with his head and bare arm and shoulder poking out. Although the plot of the play is not recorded, it is hard not to see it, at least in part, as a response both to the tropical heat the passengers were at the time enduring (they were all sleeping on deck) and a costume department comprised entirely of women. It certainly generated a degree of notoriety for James McKenzie, who recorded in his diary his embarrassment at being called "the naked boy" by shipmates who didn't know his real name.[40] As in the shipboard theatricals analysed in Mary Isbell's contribution to this volume, McKenzie's performance – at least temporarily – resulted in a blending of the identities of character and actor that impacted on his position within the social world of the ship.

The group's second performance was more ambitious and more directly reflected the progress of the voyage. It was a Minstrel Show, held in conjunction with the Glee Club the night after the ship left Honolulu. The End Men ("Buttercup", "Snowball", "Bones" and "Tambo") wore black face, in keeping with the mimicry of African Americans that characterised this staple form of U.S. cultural production. But the *Ryndam*'s version was adapted to the route the ship was taking, featuring ukulele playing as well as Hula and Hawaiian dancing.[41] Veiled comments in letters to the *Binnacle* suggest that the cross-dressing Hula dancers may have been a little too risqué for some of the cruise members, with the sexual liberality of the Hollings brushing up against the moral strictures of others.[42] However, there was little critique of the crude stereotypes on which the show relied and a refusal to acknowledge the locational work the performance was doing onboard the ship: "The American minstrel is the trick mirror through which we see ourselves at our funniest", was all the student editorial had to say.[43]

---

[39] *The Binnacle*, October 15, 1926, 3.
[40] McKenzie, *A Broad Education Abroad*, 29; Harris, *Photographs of the First University World Cruise*, No. 147, 147a, 150, 150a.
[41] *The Binnacle*, October 24, 1926, 3; October 29, 1926, 1.
[42] *The Binnacle*, October 30, 1926, 3.
[43] *The Binnacle*, October 29, 1926, 2.

Also performed on the trip across the Pacific, was a play written by Holling with costumes designed by Lucille. Called an "Aztec Fantasy", it was explicit in its mobilisation of exoticised and racialised caricature. Holling said he had been inspired by "a vision of russet-skinned people moving stealthily" through the forest that came to him, as the *Ryndam* sailed south from Cuba to Panama, passing Honduras and the Yucatan, and he spent much of the time between Los Angeles and Hawaii writing it. The play was set in a ruined Aztec temple in the overgrown jungle where "black shapes break away from blacker shadows". It depicted a delirious American youth who, coming upon an ancient pyramid in the jungle, collapses and dreams of a scene of pageantry and human sacrifice which ends with a human heart held aloft of the altar and the youth's own death. Infused as it is with cultural clichés, it is difficult not to read Holling's depiction of the doomed prince and the staging of the Minstrel show as a thin proxy for the fears and excitement of Americans on the Pacific.[44]

The *Binnacle* used the ten-day journey from California to publish a series of articles that aimed to prepare its readers for what they would encounter in Hawaii. It began by presenting a developmental account of the islands' history that opened with "discovery" by Captain Cook in 1788 and culminated in "peaceful" annexation as a territory of the United States in 1898.[45] For Dean Heckel this development was an extension of his country's manifest destiny: "without conscious policy [t]he United States has carried her flag continually westward", he told the students in a whole-of-ship lecture, first across the continent and then over the seas.[46] American industrial development in the form of sugar plantations and processing and pineapple canning was outlined. But the indeterminant status of Hawaii as both part and not part of the United States was also highlighted in another article that focused on the islands' "race problem". Of a total Hawaiian population of 275,884 in 1921, the ship-board newspaper listed 42% as Japanese, with significant communities of Chinese (8%), Filipino, Portuguese (27%), "American" (13.5%), Asian-Hawaiian and Caucasian-Hawaiian. The "native" community was the smallest, at just under 8% of the total. With the "steady increase of the Japanese … this American territory will eventually be controlled

[44] *The Binnacle,* October 30, 1926, 1; October 31, 1926, 1; December 4, 1926, 1.
[45] *The Binnacle*, October 13, 1926, 3; October 14, 1926, 2, 4.
[46] *The Binnacle,* October 17, 1926, 8.

by an electorate of an alien race", warned the student paper.[47] Meanwhile the *Binnacle's* guide to Hawaiian customs and language invoked a population of colourful and exotic locals, and a compulsory meeting held by the Deans to discuss a subject "of interest only to the men of the Cruise" alluded to the sexual allure that attached to the islands as an American playground.[48]

These narratives framed the students' expectations of their visit. But, on arrival in Hawaii, preconceptions were complicated by what the students' saw. Upon disembarking the *Rynam*'s passengers were driven through the streets of Hilo to make a short stop at the Kapiolani school, where students from all the islands' racial groups were mingling together. In his diary Dewitt Reddick – a student from Texas for whom racial segregation was the norm – described how astonished he was to see it.[49] Meeting with the students on their second day in port, Hawaii's Governor, Wallace Farrington, robustly contested the notion that his territory had a race problem. The only difficulty, he argued, was the presence of foreign language schools, and the answer to this was American education of the kind the *Ryndam*'s passengers had seen at Kapiolani. For Albert Taylor, the Librarian of the Archives and long-standing annexationist, in Hawaii "western civilisation ha[d] come in contact with the aborigines and has … raised them to equality with the whites".[50] For settlers like Farringdon and Taylor who were pushing for statehood, culture and economic development rather than biology was the defining characteristic of national belonging. This prompted a *mea culpa* from the *Binnacle* which admitted that in the face of their "actual experience" in Hawaii (framed by the forceful and equally partial interpretations of Farringdon, Taylor and others), they had been forced to "unlearn" what "California and the guide books had taught [them] to believe".[51] If their prior reading had framed their expectations of Hawaii, the Minstrel show and Holling's Aztec Fantasy, performed onboard the *Ryndam* in the days after its departure, provided an opportunity for the ship's company to re-stage the racial categories that in many ways had been troubled during their visit.

It is telling that the performances the Planet Players staged as the ship sailed closer to Europe were quite different to those held in the Pacific. They included "The

[47] *The Binnacle*, October 15, 1926, 1; October 17, 1926, 2.
[48] *The Binnacle,* October 17, 1926, 1.
[49] UTA Briscoe Center, Dewitt C. Reddick Papers 3G454/1/October 21, 1926.
[50] *The Binnacle*, October 23, 1926, 1.
[51] *The Binnacle*, October 23, 1926, 2.

Idol's Eye", a thriller by the Anglo-Irish playwright Lord Dunsany, whose stories and plays were very popular in the USA and Britain in the period before and after the First World War; "Spring" by the young American playwright Colin Campbell Clements; "His Aunt-in-Law" by the *Ryndam*'s own Dupree Jordan; and "In the Net" by Percival Wilde.[52] As the students left East and South Asia and entered the war-scarred lands of Europe, the Planet Players were occupied less with racial and sexualised tropes and more with familial and political ones. As they encountered the port cities of the world, these plays point to the extent to which the *Ryndam*'s passengers were drawing upon familiar tropes and categories.

Of course, dressing up was not only the province of those in The Planet Players. A Christmas pageant, Halloween masquerade, Crossing the Line ceremony and a farewell masquerade ball, all gave members of the cruise an opportunity to don costumes and masks and assume identities that loosened the usual hierarchies and codes of conduct.[53] Cross-dressing was a favourite among the male students and at the Halloween party "many boys enjoyed dancing with their roommates and side-kicks who turned clinging vines and gold diggers for the evening in exotic feminine attire".[54] Black face and racial caricature were similarly a feature of the various costume competitions. Specific to shipboard environments, these events inverted the usual ordering of white, middle-class American life on land and restaged the racial and gender categories that were being destabilised en route.

Captain and Crew

They also provided opportunities for passengers to mix with some members of the crew. The official photograph album includes pictures of sailors dunking students in a Crossing the Line ceremony. It also includes group portraits of some of those staff the students regularly encountered, including the officers, the members of the ships' orchestra, the nurses and, of course, the Captain.[55] The *Ryndam*'s Captain, Jan Klaas Liewen, was an ebullient character, who had served the Holland America line for

[52] *The Binnacle,* February 3, 1927, 1; February 6, 1927, 4; April 10, 1927, 1; Harris, *Photographs of the First University World Cruise*, No. 982, 982a.
[53] McKenzie, *A Broad Education Abroad*, 221; Harris, *Photographs of the First University World Cruise*, No. 979, 149, 313-314, 350, 764.
[54] *The Binnacle*, October 31, 1926, 1.
[55] Harris, *Photographs of the First University World Cruise.*

several decades. He was happy to participate in the costume balls and other entertainments of the voyage, even being made an honorary member of the Planet Players.[56] Liewen was not overly concerned with student discipline as long as it didn't interfere with navigation, but he made clear his authority and was not afraid to use it. At one point he imposed a nightly curfew and charged his crew with surveillance of the students. According to Charles Ladd, he told one group that anyone bothering him with "fool questions about the position of the ship, of their room … or calling [him] 'steward'" would receive "a punch in the jaw".[57]

In addition to the barber, the radioman, the ship's doctor and the laundry foreman, the other staff with whom the American students had the most interaction were the 36 table stewards, 18 room stewards, 13 general service stewards, six mess room stewards, seven bathroom stewards, three deck stewards, one smoking room steward and three stewardesses, who answered to the Purser.[58] Like the sailors, all of these service staff were Dutch and only a handful spoke any English. This, together, with the unmet service expectations of wealthy Americans was a source of some tension during the voyage. Mrs Heckel, who was travelling on the *Ryndam* with her husband, the Dean of Men, recorded in her account of the voyage her suspicion that the number of crew had been reduced to cut down on costs. She was sure their bad temper came from being overworked and because they were receiving fewer tips, due to an arrangement by which the Floating University organisers had agreed to pay a lump sum for gratuities at the end of the voyage.[59] Relations with these service staff were strained at best, but at least one of the students took a different view. Charles E. Gauss, a young man from Michigan and member of the student Jazz band, became friendly with one of the table waiters, who taught him German in exchange for English lessons.[60]

There was yet another class of crew member who remained all but invisible to the students, only entering their consciousness thanks to a series of articles for the *Binnacle,* written by the Journalism students during the longer stretches at sea when copy from shore trips was less available. They described their visit to the coal bunkers as if it were

[56] *The Binnacle*, November 5, 1926, 2.
[57] Ladd, *Around the World at Seventeen,* 33–34.
[58] *The Binnacle,* January 12, 1927
[59] The State Historical Society of Missouri (SHSM), Albert Kerr Heckel papers C3481/f.6, Account of the voyage.
[60] Western Michigan University, Dwight B. Waldo Library (WMU), Charles E. Gauss Jr. Collection A3637, handwritten diary.

a trip to another world. Men with sweating and dirty bodies shovelled black coal into the red light of glowing fires, labouring in two shifts of four hours a day in a tiny room reached only by corridors and ladders. The only sign of the existence of these men to the students above decks were the ventilators, whose purpose was to carry a stream of fresh air down to the workers.[61] 58 men in all toiled unseen in the engine room, while 34 worked as sailors.[62] The lives of these men only occasionally disrupted the passengers' narratives, and even then it was only when tragedy struck. The *Binnacle* reported that in Hawaii a Dutch sailor and an American laundryman were both robbed, and several passengers recorded that in Java, having been paid part of their salary, some of the sailors had too much to drink and got into fights that left one with a broken arm and another with a broken leg, and that a fireman fell into the water and drowned.[63]

If the Journalism students made these men the object of their study, the Geology and Geography students learned more directly from the *Ryndam*'s officers. Led by Professors Woodman and Ridgely together with Fourth Officer Steinmetz, every day at noon, as the ship sailed from Hawaii towards Japan, they performed a series of experiments on the deck of the ship. These were undertaken in cooperation with the Hydrographic Office of the United States Navy Department and were designed to help it gain better knowledge of the currents in the North Pacific Ocean — a region that U.S. ships were patrolling with increasing frequency. The experiment consisted of throwing overboard numbered bottles, some intended to track the currents (loaded with sand to make them float erect in the water), and some the winds (empty so they lay flat on the water). The idea was that the finder of these bottles would record the location and send the information back to the U.S. Navy.[64] Although the feasibility of this approach was perhaps doubtful (especially given the multiple political interests active in the region), this collaboration points both to the ways the sea and those who sailed on it became a part of formal education onboard the *Ryndam*, and the extent to which the Floating University was entangled in a geo-political project that extended beyond its educational remit.

---

[61] *The Binnacle*, October 15, 1926, 4.
[62] *The Binnacle*, January 12, 1927, 2.
[63] *The Binnacle*, October 27, 1926, 4; UCLA Library Special Collections, Holling Clancy Holling papers 1012/41/8, December 21, 1926.
[64] *The Binnacle,* November 2, 1926, 3.

Students vs Tourists

Formal classes and extracurricular activities onboard were complemented by a programme of onshore excursions. This had been a key component of the Floating University's promise to its students. They were to "establish first-hand contact with places, peoples and problems, and […] meet the leaders of thought and action in many significant centres of culture and of social and political development".[65] In many ports, elaborate events were organised by local groups. These included official visits to universities, garden parties and lectures and receptions by town mayors. In many instances English-speaking students from the local university or YMCA were assigned to accompany the young Americans.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, not everyone on board was excited by this official programme. In Hawaii, for example, a military review had been arranged, along with University of Hawaii vs Floating University baseball, shooting and swimming competitions, and an exhibition soccer match. But only four *Ryndam* students turned up to meet the one thousand assembled local students. The swimming and rifle competitions had to be cancelled and only seven of the baseball team presented themselves.[66] Most of the Americans, it transpired, had preferred to go to the beach. Non-attendance was an issue for the Floating University leadership throughout the voyage, with student ill-discipline on shore (exacerbated by the attractions of alcohol in an era of prohibition) leading to several serious incidents. Newspapers in the United States soon got hold of these stories and they circulated rapidly around the domestic news syndicates before making their way back onto the ship, thanks to the *Ryndam*'s radio as well as letters written by worried parents.

On board the Floating University, the students' failure to attend events in Hawaii sparked a robust debate about the nature of educational experience. "You may travel around the world seeing things and learning little", remonstrated the *Binnacle'*s editorial, "or you may study civilisation through [meeting] people and come back … an intelligent citizen of the globe".[67] Which did the *Ryndam* passengers want to be: "A tourist [who] is out to see things" or "a student [who] desires to study objects and people"? The letters section soon erupted with submissions that invoked the pedagogic

[65] *The New York Times*, September 5, 1926, X8.
[66] *The Binnacle*, October 30, 1926, 5.
[67] *The Binnacle*, October 24, 1926, 2.

philosophy that had been so prominent in the promotion of the voyage. "Don't you think that actual contact with the peoples of a country will give you a better understanding of their peculiar traits, of their ideals and ambitions, than ethnological study in a museum?" asked one correspondent, who signed themselves 'One of Them'. "You say yourself, "The widest education may be obtained through intercourse with the people." Surely you don't mean the kind of intercourse you'd get from looking closely for two hours at a stuffed bird or a pickled python?"[68]

The anonymous writer had a point. The students had been promised first-hand contact and direct personal experience, not museum visits. This was a subject on which many of the letter-writers to *The Binnacle* were in fierce agreement. What they differed over was how the members of the cruise might best get "into touch with the Hawaiian students and people."[69] "With the exception of those who have "good connections" or those who went ashore with assignments, read one letter to the editor, "probably few of our students established personal contacts". The official programmes were designed to offer this opportunity, but for those like Charles Ladd who did not want to be "close herded" during shore visits, they were far too restrictive.[70]

These tensions came to a head about four months into the voyage. The "tourists", who expected to be able to take side excursions as they wished, were frustrated at the restrictions imposed by cruise management with a view to managing student behaviour. This question of shore liberties came on top of long running frustrations concerning the quality of food and accommodation on board. The younger "students" were aggrieved that the older "tourists", who mostly occupied the more spacious and comfortable staterooms and dined in the "A" dining room with the faculty, were being given better food than that on offer in the "B" dining room.

Oran Lee Raber, the *Rynam*'s Professor of Botany, was a member of the committee appointed to deal with these tensions.[71] Initially he felt that the distinction being drawn between the two groups was an erroneous one. "A student is one who

[68] *The Binnacle*, October 28, 1926, 2.
[69] *The Binnacle,* October 27, 1926, 2.
[70] Ladd, *Around the World at Seventeen*, 147.
[71] Raber was from Indiana and he had completed his undergraduate studies there in 1912. He had then gone onto graduate work at Harvard, breaking his PhD studies to serve as a Lieutenant in the US balloon service during the war. He had served as Assistant Professor of Botany at the University of Michigan and the University of Arizona. 'RABER, ORAN LEE: 1893-1940', in *Indiana Authors and Their Books 1917-1966* (Indiana University), accessed 5 May 2020, http://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/inauthors/encyclopedia/VAA5365-02.

studies", he said. "Many of the so called tourists … study more than half of the young fellows who call themselves students."[72] But the conflict over the food was such that Raber led a wholescale re-organisation of seating arrangements.[73] By the end of the voyage he was drawing a much clearer division between the two groups. One of the results of the Floating University "experiment", he wrote as the ship approached New York, was that everyone learned "there is a difference between college travel and educational travel." One group "wishes to be able to display its knowledge before Harvard professors", while the other group "will be quite content to satisfy the ladies of Hutchinson, Kansas. And they have very nice ladies there, too."[74] The problem with the *Ryndam*, Raber felt, was that it tried to reconcile these two different kinds of learners. He advocated a cruise for men only under the age of 35, and another for "older travellers".

Examination and experience

The tensions that emerged between these two groups in many ways had a spatial character. With the exception of the field trips, the Floating University's formal curriculum was conducted on board the ship. Though discipline was not always particularly strong on board, there were fewer temptations for students and Charles Ladd, among others, noted that "while on the 'bounding main' there was little else to do [but study]".[75] But if education was to be gained from experiences and encounters with foreign peoples – as the Floating University's promotional materials had also suggested – then freedom to explore on shore was essential.

Education of the first kind would usually be measured with formal assessment, and the students on the *Ryndam* sat their first semester examinations in the lead up to Christmas, as the ship sailed from Java to Ceylon. According to the *Binnacle* they passed off "with a surprisingly small number of casualties", although the paper also made clear that the conditions had not been ideal, and not everyone had been equally studious. Those who took study seriously would, the newspapers' editorial declared, "go home feeling that they [had] accomplished something under difficulties", but

[72] *The Binnacle*, January 11, 1927, 4.
[73] *The Binnacle*, January 14, 1927, 8.
[74] *The Binnacle,* April 26, 1927, 2.
[75] Ladd, *Around the World at Seventeen*, 5.

"those who came not expecting to work will of course go home feeling that they have had no difficulty in accomplishing nothing".[76] George E. Howes, the Floating University's Academic Dean, re-iterated this message the following day. Students who were "negligent in their work on board" the Rydnam were no doubt also negligent in their colleges on land.[77] The Faculty was certainly rigorous in its standards: no re-sits were permitted and make-up examinations were to be granted only at the discretion of the instructor.

Semester two examinations were supposed to be sat as the *Ryndam* made the Atlantic crossing, but it is not clear if they ever happened. *The Binnacle* makes no mention of them. Its pages suggest the students were more occupied with preparations for the farewell costume ball than they were with college work.[78] Yet Dean Howes' official "Report of Scholastic Work on the University Cruise around the World, for the year 1926-27", written soon after the *Ryndam*'s return, suggested that some form of assessment took place.[79] Twenty-nine instructors had offered a total of 138 courses, he recorded. Aggregating the results across both semesters, Howes reported that 400 college-level students had attended classes. Of these, 137 (or 35%) had either not sought credit, failed or submitted incomplete work. The aggregated marks mapped, onto a bell curve: 16% of grades were As; 38% Bs; 28% Cs; 9% Ds; 3% Incomplete and 3% fails.[80] For Howes this vindicated the Floating University's pedagogical experiment. The final sentence of his report was clear: "[t]he best and most faithful of our students have a better record, that is a higher percentage of A's and B's than is normally represented in college records".[81] Education at sea yielded better results for the best students, was his conclusion.

In presenting his academic report, Howes had also been careful to emphasise a second kind educational value that could not be so easily measured by tests. While the experiences students gained off the ship, visiting foreign places and meeting foreign peoples, might "properly be considered as an integral part of the work

[76] *The Binnacle*, December 24, 1926, 2.
[77] *The Binnacle*, December 25, 1926, 6.
[78] *The Binnacle*, April 23, 1927, 1.
[79] George Edwin Howes, 'Report of Scholastic Work on the University Cruise around the World, for the year 1926-27', loose leaf typed sheet found in 'College Cruise Around the World', University of Michigan, Buhr Remote Shelving, LB1047.U58.
[80] George Edwin Howes, 'Report of Scholastic Work'.
[81] George Edwin Howes, 'Report of Scholastic Work'.

of the courses" and roughly calculated as contributing to the grades that Howes had enumerated, he judged also that a "great deal of the rest" was "of incalculable value".[82] Their grades were only partial evidence of all the students had learned. How "the rest" should be weighed, however, Dean Howes could not say. The *Student Magellan* also contrasted what it described as the "measurable part of the work" to that which had "become a part and parcel of [the students'] own mental possession or equipment, and [could] not be evaluated". Its authors thought the results would only manifest over the course of students' lives: "in the years to come" the "broadening of [their] educational horizon" would prove to be "a most potent factor in the mutual understanding" between them and other peoples.[83] "For the first time," wrote Albert Haekel (the Dean of Men) in his own personal account of the cruise, "many of the students were enjoying the privilege of getting an education rather than merely piling up credits in the registrar's office."[84] The space of the ship was a very peculiar and particular one in which to be undertaking a year of college education, and Haekel's conclusion highlights just how difficult it was to disentangle onboard formal education from onshore experience.

Conclusion

The Floating University had been founded on Professor Lough's belief that spatial contexts shaped student learning. The moving space of the ship could be a site of international education; travel experience created material for college education. This conception of the voyage did not see the ship as cut off from the shore, but rather as moving along it; the environment of the student on the Floating University was at once dynamic in a way that his or her environment at home was not, and also static, restricted for periods of time to the space of the ship at sea. The experiences of the students onboard underlined this further. Being at sea did not wholly disconnect them from the world. The reading material they inhaled from the Library brought others' journeys, and the power relations and aspirations that underpinned them, onto the *Ryndam*'s decks. New encounters on shore, both real and imagined, were located within existing aesthetic frames. The journeys between ports were times to 'work up' material gathered

[82] George Edwin Howes, 'Report of Scholastic Work'.
[83] *The Student Magellan*, 207.
[84] SHSM, Albert Kerr Heckel papers C3481/f.6, Account of the voyage.

in the previous stop or anticipate that which would follow. Even as it sought to direct meaning and shape behaviour, *The Binnacle* too brought the shore onto the ship.

Equally, although publicity about the voyage had focused mostly on its movement through space to different locations, it is clear that the environment of the ship itself seeped into the students' learning. It influenced the objects studied in Holling's art class, and it guided what the students read and how they spent their time; it prompted fears, anxieties and excitements; it thrust together students from different parts of the country; it conditioned attention spans and, very occasionally, it offered up unexpected teachers in the form of officers and pursers.

The various ways that the *Ryndam*'s passengers sought to makes sense of their voyage through theatre, art and writing, also suggest that – despite being at sea – they were intimately connected to the social and generational distinctions that characterised the nation at home. Not only was the passenger body entirely white, but despite some enduring friendships, for the most part the divisions between college age students and older travellers were not often bridged. Although familiarity was cultivated with some of the senior crew, for the most part they lived in a separate world. If extracurricular cultural activities such as the Planet Players and *The Binnacle* provided fora in which these groups might have come together, they were ultimately unable to contain the tensions pulling different elements of the ships' company in opposite directions. More than anything, for the passengers on the Floating University, the ship helped expand the category of education itself. Formal assessment through examinations was one way to measure the pedagogic outcomes of a college year at sea, but it was unable to capture the 'education' many on board thought they had gained. There remained, in Dean Howes words, a great deal that could "not be evaluated".