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# The Floating University

## Experience, Empire and the Politics of Knowledge

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# Introduction

## How to Know the World?

In mid-September 1926, five hundred people from across the United States boarded a ship in New York for an eight-month cruise around the world encompassing forty-seven ports of call. They met some of the major figures of the twentieth century, including Benito Mussolini, the king of Thailand, Mahatma Gandhi, and Pope Pius XI, while visiting countries in the midst of change: Japan in the process of industrialization, China on the cusp of revolution, the Philippines in agitation against US rule, and Portugal in the aftermath of a coup. In an era of internationalism and expanding American power, the leaders of the voyage believed that travel and study at sea would deliver an education in international affairs not available in the land-based classroom. It was through direct sense experience in and of the world, rather than passive, indirect engagement via textbooks and lectures, that students would learn to be “world-minded.” The trip was promoted as an “an experiment in democratic theories of education,” and New York University lent the venture its official sponsorship.<sup>1</sup> Yet the undertaking, known as the Floating University, has all but disappeared from our history books.

My initial encounter with the Floating University was an accident. While working on an entirely different research quest, I came across a yellowing pamphlet from the mid-1920s that had been slipped into the back of a book.<sup>2</sup> Printed on two sides of a single sheet, the pamphlet described an enterprise led by NYU’s professor of psychology, James E. Lough, in which students would receive university credit for travel abroad. It promised “to develop the ability to think in world terms, to interest students in foreign affairs and to strengthen international understanding and good will” through “first hand contact with places, peoples, and problems”.<sup>3</sup> I wanted to know more about this intriguing initiative and its origins. But I found that although it dominated the contemporaneous press coverage, historians of internationalism, education, and American history alike have had little to say about it.<sup>4</sup>

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1 *Binnacle* (University Travel Association) September 21, 1926, box 48, folder 4, 1DD6 Thwing Papers; Charles E. Benson et al., *Psychology for Teachers* (Boston: Ginn, 1926), 89; “Floating University Sails,” *Hartford Courant*, September 19, 1926.

2 The pamphlet was this one: *College Cruise around the World Eight Months, 1926–27*, H Subject Files/Cruises, New York University Archives.

3 *College Cruise around the World Eight Months, 1926–27*.

4 Brief mentions appear in John Eugene Harley, *International Understanding: Agencies Educating for a New World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1931); Paul Liebhardt and Judy Rogers, *Discovery: The*

What was the Floating University? What does it tell us about the history and politics of knowledge in the 1920s? And why—given the huge amount of attention it attracted at the time—does it not appear in our histories? Those are the questions this book sets out to investigate. The story it tells concerns some of the keynotes of US and global history during the twentieth century. With origins that lie in the wake of the American Civil War and the flowering of the philosophic and intellectual movements that followed, the Floating University emerged from the aftermath of World War I and the tectonic economic and geopolitical changes that the war had set in motion. Coming to fruition in the rapidly expanding urban context of New York City, it sailed along the expanding tentacles of US global power during the interwar period, riding the waves of imperialism, anticolonialism, and international jazz culture. But the creation of US newspaper syndicates, the expansion of academic expertise, and the emergence of a very different kind of international politics in the shadow of another war brought on the initiative's demise. Uncovering the history of the Floating University not only reveals much about the entangled world of internationalism, American empire, and education in the 1920s but also has implications for how historians understand the legitimization of knowledge during the twentieth century.

Universities derive much of their social standing (not to mention their income) from their claim to have authority over knowledge. They are the institutions that undertake the research, distill the learning, and provide the training that enables the specialized expertise so crucial to multifaceted economies and societies. This book troubles the naturalization of this assumption. It reveals a 1920s contest over the kind of knowledge that should underpin university education in which academically authorized expertise came into conflict with an emphasis on direct personal experience. As old authority structures were shaken after World War I, the question of how to know became an urgent priority for a variety of actors, from modernist artists and writers to quantum and atomic physicists, theologians, anticolonial and revolutionary leaders, and liberal internationalists. New, popular technologies such as photography, film, radio, inexpensive novels and newspapers, as well as cheaper transatlantic

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*Adventure of Shipboard Education* (Olympia, WA: William and Allen, 1985); Paul Liebhardt, "The History of Shipboard Education," *Steamboat Bill* 55, no. 3 (1998): 173–86; Woodrow C. Whitten, "Floating Campus," *Improving College and University Teaching* 17, no. 4 (1969): 283–86; Joan Elias Gore, "Discourse and Traditional Belief: An Analysis of American Undergraduate Study Abroad" (PhD diss., University of London, 2000), 197–99; and William Hoffa, *A History of US Study Abroad: Beginnings to 1965* (Carlisle, PA: Forum on Education Abroad, 2007), 86–96. In addition, the 1926 voyage is widely cited as part of the history of Semester at Sea. See Institute for Shipboard Education in conjunction with Colorado State University, Semester at Sea, "Semester at Sea History," 2021, archived copy, April 26, 2021, Internet Archive Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210426001218/https://www.semesteratsea.org/contact/our-history/>.

travel, jazz, and the latest improvised forms of dance, seemed to offer direct, embodied, and experiential ways of knowing that were at once deeply personal and widely accessible. Although it was academically authorized expertise that came to underpin the business model of universities during the twentieth century, at the start of the 1920s the issue of what legitimized knowledge was by no means settled.

The Floating University world cruise serves as a microcosm through which this politics of knowledge can be discerned. By focusing on the contours of this politics in the United States, this book shows that experts' claims to authority over knowledge are not neutral, natural, or timeless, for they, too, have a history. And it is a history that cannot be understood without attention to broader power relations. Despite lobbying by W. E. B. DuBois, the Floating University's student body reflected the color line of Jim Crow-era America. It sailed along routes protected by the US military, enabled by US commerce and finance, and legitimated by US networks of moral empire. What those on board ultimately experienced during their nearly eight-month voyage was not so much "the world" as the reach of their own nation's culture and power. What they learned were lessons in empire.<sup>5</sup> As well as revealing a history of knowledge and its legitimation, the story of the Floating University shows how the uneven terrain of the postwar era was already beginning to emerge in the 1920s.

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In the last two decades, international and intellectual historians have turned to questions of expertise, information, knowledge, and education. They have pointed to the rise of internationalist culture during the twentieth century and the role played by nonstate actors, civil society groups, and institutions such as universities in fashioning it.<sup>6</sup> Visions of world order advanced by specific thinkers have been a central focus for many, as have the surveys and statistical projects that sought to describe the world and the communications technologies, educational institutions, and international communities facilitating cross-border

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5 For the role of interwar collegiate culture in shaping the generation that would go on to lead the postwar world, see Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); 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.

6 Overviews of the "new international history" include Erez Manela, "International Society as a Historical Subject," *Diplomatic History* 44, no. 2 (April 2020): 184–209; David Thelan, "The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (1999): 965–75; Daniel Laqua, ed., *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements between the World Wars* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011); Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, eds., *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

interaction.<sup>7</sup> More recently, public opinion has become a key concern.<sup>8</sup> Yet for all their attention to expertise and ideas, these accounts of the history of interwar internationalism and ideas tend to take for granted the more fundamental question of knowledge itself. By what methods could the world be known? How was such knowledge verified? Questions about the production, foundation, and legitimation of knowledge claims have been central to the work of historians of science and to scholars working on gender, postcolonialism, Black history, and US empire for decades. However, they have been less prominent in the work of intellectual historians focused on visions of world order, international historians interested in knowledge exchange, and educational historians concerned with specific institutions during the interwar period.<sup>9</sup> *The Floating University* places these questions at the center of its analysis.

This emphasis in turn has significant implications for the history of higher education. For historians of American educational institutions, the parallel growth of liberal arts colleges and universities with graduate professional and research schools in the decades after the Civil War stands as a key turning point in the development of the modern university. Some scholars go so far as to argue that it was the establishment at Harvard in the 1880s and 1890s

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7 The body of work in this area is now significant. See, e.g., Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s-1930s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Daniel Gorman, *The Emergence of International Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939-1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Thomas Cayet, Paul-André Rosental, and Marie Thébaud-Sorger, "How International Organisations Compete: Occupational Safety and Health at the ILO, a Diplomacy of Expertise," *Journal of Modern European History* 7, no. 2 (September 2009): 174-96; "Technological Innovation and Transnational Networks: Europe between the Wars," special issue, *Journal of Modern European History* 6, no. 2 (2008); and Daniel Laqua, "Transnational Intellectual Cooperation, the League of Nations, and the Problem of Order," *Journal of Global History* 6, no. 2 (July 2011): 223-47.

8 Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Daniel Hucker, *Public Opinion and Twentieth-Century Diplomacy: A Global Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); Katharina Rietzler, *International Experts, International Citizens: American Philanthropy, International Relations and the Problem of the Public, 1913-1954*, (forthcoming).

9 As distinct from histories of US internationalism, US empire, and US diplomacy, in which expertise, knowledge, and culture have received significant attention, although many of these also focus on the post-World War II period. See references in notes 13, 14, and 15. Other indicative works include Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Jonathan Zimmerman, *Innocents Abroad: American Teachers in the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 75-129; Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Frank A. Ninkovich, *Global Dawn: The Cultural Foundation of American Internationalism, 1865-1890* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Sam Lebovic, *A Righteous Smokescreen: Postwar America and the Politics of Cultural Globalization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

of the bachelor's degree as a prerequisite for admission to graduate school that "brought into being the system of elite education that the United States maintains today."<sup>10</sup> The dramatic increase in student enrollment during the first three decades of the twentieth century and the expansion of professional vocational degrees are usually understood as part of the story of rising social mobility, growing institutional marketization, and increasing stratification.<sup>11</sup> The Floating University's pedagogic approach could be cast as part of the reaction of liberal culture to mass education that took place during this period, but that would capture only part of its meaning.<sup>12</sup> As David Labaree notes, discussions of American higher education "tend to focus much too heavily on a few institutions at its very pinnacle."<sup>13</sup> And very rarely do they concentrate on administrative concerns, such as extramural studies departments or academic credit. The Floating University cannot be understood without attention to these dimensions of institutional life. In equating university learning with the accumulation of hourly units of study, the system of academic credit established in the first decade of the twentieth century opened the door to fundamental issues of recognition. For what sorts of activities would credit be awarded? Who counted as an educational authority? What place would extramural learning be accorded? This book suggests that attending to how these questions played out at an aspiring mid-tier institution reveals the claims to power and priority that US universities were making in the 1920s.

The production of these claims within the context of broader power relations has ramifications for historians of US foreign relations during the interwar period. Questions of

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10 Louis Menand, Paul Reitter, and Chad Wellmon, eds., *The Rise of the Research University: A Sourcebook* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 229–30; William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Roger Geiger describes two parallel revolutions, one academic and one collegiate. Roger L. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 365.

11 Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 439–44; John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 155–205; Martin Trow, "Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education," in *Martin Trow: Twentieth-Century Higher Education; Elite to Mass to Universal*, ed. Michael Burrage (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 88–143. Geiger also discusses the assimilation of proprietary professional schools and the importance of extension lectures, commerce, and business schools and evening classes to the growth of student numbers. See Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*, 443–45; Joseph K. Kett, *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties: From Self-Improvement to Adult Education in America, 1750–1990* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 269–77.

12 Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*, 447, 454.

13 David F. Labaree, *A Perfect Mess: The Unlikely Ascendancy of American Higher Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 159. On the emergence of the credit system, see Dietrich Gerhard, "The Emergence of the Credit System in American Education Considered as a Problem of Social and Intellectual History," *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors (1915–1955)* 41, no. 4 (1955): 647–68; Jessica M. Shedd, "The History of the Student Credit Hour," *New Directions for Higher Education* 2003, no. 122 (2003): 5–12.

knowledge and power have, of course, long been a focus for historians of science, medicine, and US empire. Public health, race relations, policing, and educational institutions in places like Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Panama, and the Philippines (and their influence on the national project at home) have attracted significant attention.<sup>14</sup> More recently, the established focus of US diplomatic historians on financial and commercial, cultural and religious, and official forms of foreign relations has joined with intellectual history to stimulate new discussion not only of the United States as an imperial power but also of how global and imperial connections shaped domestic life and politics.<sup>15</sup> Although there is now a significant body of scholarship that brings these literatures together and considers the relationship between higher education and power in the context of the Cold War, with some notable exceptions the period between World War I and World War II remains underexamined.<sup>16</sup> From the

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14 The literature in these fields is extensive. Good overviews include Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano, *The Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009); Adas, *Dominance by Design*; Anne L. Foster, *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919–1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

15 For general accounts and helpful overviews, see A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History*, *America in the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019); Paul Alexander Kramer, “Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World,” *American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1348–91; McCoy and Scarano, *The Colonial Crucible*. For travel, tourism, and foreign relations, see Christopher Endy, “Travel and World Power: Americans in Europe, 1890–1917,” *Diplomatic History* 22, no. 4 (1998): 565–94; Christopher Endy, *Cold War Holidays: American Tourism in France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Adria L. Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits through the U.S. Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Julia L. Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). For works on the United States as shaped by global connections, see Kristin L. Hoganson, “Cosmopolitan Domesticity: Importing the American Dream, 1865–1920,” *American Historical Review* 107, no. 1 (2002): 55–83; Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of US Imperialism, 1915–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Kristin L. Hoganson, *The Heartland: An American History* (New York: Penguin, 2020); Ian R. Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

16 See note 17 below. For higher education, international relations, and the Cold War, see Frank A. Ninkovich, *The Diplomacy of Ideas: US Foreign Policy and Cultural Relations, 1938–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Rebecca S. Lowen, *Creating the Cold War University: The Transformation of Stanford* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Jamie Nace Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Isaac A. Kamola, *Making the World Global: U.S. Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Jason M. Colby, “Conscripting Leviathan: Science, Cetaceans, and the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* 44, no. 3 (June 2020): 466–78; Lebovic, *A Righteous Smokescreen*. Work on the interwar period includes Martha Hanna, “French Women and American Men: ‘Foreign’ Students at the University of Paris, 1915–1925,” *French Historical Studies* 22, no. 1 (1999): 87–112; Paul Alexander Kramer, “Is the World Our Campus? International Students and U.S. Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century,” *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 5 (2009): 775–806; Whitney Walton, *Internationalism, National Identities, and Study Abroad: France and the United States, 1890–1970* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).



American international alumni who hosted the Floating University's students in China, Egypt, and Japan to the University of Missouri graduates running newspapers across the globe, college ties and US expertise abroad are a central part of this story. Following historical work focused on American imperial education projects, this book reveals the entangled relationship between domestic US higher education institutions and the making, policing, and naturalizing of US power relations—not only in insular possessions but at home and across the globe.<sup>17</sup>

Key to the projection of US power abroad was the sea. Since the 1990s, the rise of global and environmental history has led to a rejuvenation of the traditional field of maritime history. From the New Thalassology to the Blue Humanities, this new maritime scholarship has sought to move beyond the sea as a space to be traversed, beyond a focus on arrivals and departures, to an approach in which journeys at sea are connected to lives on land; in which the ocean itself is a subject of study; and in which maritime infrastructures, from labor relations to coaling depots, are crucial to understanding global power relations.<sup>18</sup> Building on the “global history of science,” which has increasingly centered on the entanglement of Western science in the imperial project (and its limits), some scholars have focused on the knowledge-making voyages of figures such as Charles Darwin, the seafaring racial science of Americans in the Pacific, or the National Science Foundation's “floating laboratory,” the R/V *Alpha Helix*.<sup>19</sup> But most studies of higher education remain terrestrial. This book examines

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17 For work on education and US empire, see Liping Bu, *Making the World Like Us: Education, Cultural Expansion, and the American Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003); Zimmerman, *Innocents Abroad*; Julian Go, *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning: Elite Political Cultures in the Philippines and Puerto Rico during U.S. Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); A. J. Angulo, *Empire and Education: A History of Greed and Goodwill from the War of 1898 to the War on Terror* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Sarah Steinbock-Pratt, *Educating the Empire: American Teachers and Contested Colonization in the Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Foster, *Projections of Power*.

18 For works offering useful overviews of what a diverse field is, see David Armitage, Alison Bashford, and Sujit Sivasundaram, eds., *Oceanic Histories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Daniel Margolies, “Introduction: Oceans Forum,” *Diplomatic History* 44, no. 3 (June 2020): 409–12; Martin Dusenberre and Roland Wenzlhuemer, “Being in Transit: Ships and Global Incompatibilities,” *Journal of Global History* 11, no. 2 (July 2016): 155–62; Glen O'Hara, “‘The Sea Is Swinging into View’: Modern British Maritime History in a Globalised World,” *English Historical Review* 124, no. 510 (2009): 1109–34; John R. Gillis, “The Blue Humanities,” *Humanities* 34, no. 3 (May/June 2013), accessed June 1, 2022, <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/mayjune/feature/the-blue-humanities>; David Lambert, Luciana Martins, and Miles Ogborn, “Currents, Visions and Voyage: Historical Geographies of the Sea,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 32, no. 3 (2006): 479–93; Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun, eds., *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (London: Routledge, 2004).

19 Iain McCalman, *Darwin's Armada: How Four Voyages to Australasia Won the Battle for Evolution and Changed the World* (Camberwell, Victoria, Australia: Penguin, 2009); Warwick Anderson, “Hybridity, Race, and Science: The Voyage of the Zaca, 1934–1935,” *Isis* 103, no. 2 (June 2012): 229–53; Joanna Radin, “Latent Life: Concepts and Practices of Human Tissue Preservation in the International Biological Program,” *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 4 (August 2013): 484–508. For recent work examining meaning-making at sea, see Laurence Publicover and Susann Liebich, eds., *Shipboard Literary Cultures:*

learning aboard the Floating University and the complex relationship between the idea of an around-the-world voyage, the space of the ship, the localities that the students visited, and land-based politics and educational norms.

In drawing together these four usually disconnected fields of scholarship, *The Floating University* shows how the story of a long-dismissed educational experiment in the mid-1920s can shed light on the history of knowledge and power during the twentieth century, presenting a challenge to historians of the United States, intellectual and educational historians alike.

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The Floating University came to fruition as one of the many proposals to renew American higher education that emerged after the demise of the prescribed classical curriculum of the traditional nineteenth-century college and the advent of mass higher education.<sup>20</sup> Taking advantage of the exploding 1920s transatlantic travel industry, Professor James Lough's innovation—with its focus on direct personal experience in and with the world—was to recognize travel experience with university credit. This, however, put it at odds with another approach that at the same time was increasingly being advanced by US universities eager to position themselves as crucial to the nation's political and economic life. Although initially prepared to sponsor Lough's commitment to experience as the basis of learning, in early 1926 NYU withdrew its support, having concluded that only lessons learned in class from an approved university instructor should be granted credit. As far as NYU was now concerned, it was academic expertise, not direct experience, that should underpin authorized knowledge during the twentieth century.

The tensions between these two approaches were revealed when Professor Lough's Floating University set sail, claiming both the status of the university and the thrill of adventure on the high seas. As well as offering more than seventy-three subjects, a full extracurricular program, and arranged shore excursions and visits to foreign universities, the

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*Reading, Writing, and Performing at Sea* ([Cham, Switzerland]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022). For the global history of science, see Sujit Sivasundaram, "Sciences and the Global: On Methods, Questions, and Theory," *Isis* 101, no. 1 (2010): 146–58; Suman Seth, "Colonial History and Postcolonial Science Studies," *Radical History Review* 2017, no. 127 (2017): 63–85; James Poskett, *Horizons: A Global History of Science* (New York: Viking, 2021).

20 Laurence R. Veysey, "Stability and Experiment in the American Undergraduate Curriculum," in *Content and Context: Essays on College Education*, ed. Carl Kaysen (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 9–14. For other work in the progressive vein, see Patricia Albjerg Graham, *Progressive Education: From Arcady to Academe; A History of the Progressive Education Association, 1919–1955* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1967).

voyage introduced the traveling students to the hotel bars and back alleys of the world's port cities. Alcohol was a constant attraction, and the coeducational nature of the voyage provoked panics about gender and sexual promiscuity that sparked an explosion of coverage in the US domestic as well as international press. "Sea Collegians Startle Japan with Rum Orgy," read one Detroit newspaper's headline.<sup>21</sup> The voyage that had been so widely championed as an experiment in modern education was resoundingly pronounced a failure—by both US higher education institutions, which followed the lead of NYU, and the US mass media, which was convinced that student antics were incompatible with educational attainment. Lurking behind their condemnation was perhaps also a latent fear that the spectacle of ungoverned youthful bodies betrayed a lack of national readiness for the new global role the United States was rapidly assuming. By the time the Floating University returned to New York at the start of May 1927, the cruise had become an object of ridicule.<sup>22</sup>

Yet many of those who traveled on board the ship told a very different story about the nearly eight-month voyage. What was at stake for its protagonists in 1927 when the Floating University returned to New York, only to be branded a failure? And what is at stake for historians and educationalists today if they continue to take that judgment at face value? Nearly a century after the Floating University sailed, this book argues that it is time to take a different approach, one that forces historians to examine the conventions that underpin our own knowledge claims. In this, it is potentially the "failed" nature of Professor Lough's project that might be its most instructive legacy. Perhaps one of the reasons academic historians have not attended to the story of the Floating University is because they have, in many respects, inherited the rules of knowing that deemed it unsuccessful. Thinking with failure might help historians better see how legitimate knowledge was and is produced, the institutions that normalize it and profit by it, the sanctions that reinforce it, and the other ways of being it exiles.

*The Floating University* makes sense of the 1926 voyage, its delegitimation, and its historical neglect by drawing on concepts central to both the pragmatist philosophy that so influenced Professor Lough and work from the history of science and the sociology of knowledge in recent decades.<sup>23</sup> It analyzes different ways of warranting or justifying

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21 "Sea Collegians Startle Japan with Rum Orgy," *Detroit Free Press*, November 6, 1926.

22 "Occidentalism," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 6, 1926; "Paris Nights Prove More Attractive Than Battlefields to Them," *Times Herald* (Olean, NY), March 16, 1927.

23 Cheryl Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism: From Peirce and James to Ramsey and Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Morris Dickstein, *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton

knowledge claims (Lough emphasized direct experience, but universities traded on the authority of experts and “book knowledge”); the systems of social acknowledgment that conferred or withheld legitimacy (such as university endorsement and press approval); and the background assumptions that all actors took for granted (like the growing power of the United States abroad). In focusing on a single educational initiative and following a dozen or so characters who made their way around the world aboard a ship, it exemplifies global microhistory and embraces the nuance, attention to primary sources, and place-based specificity of that approach.<sup>24</sup> But as a study of an around-the-world cruise, it is also a book that spans many regions of the globe, focusing (to paraphrase Thomas Cohen) on the large things as well as the small.<sup>25</sup> Although this risks prioritizing the movement of a handful of privileged actors and riding roughshod over local context, the conjunction of these scales brings to the surface questions of whose world, whose mobility, whose knowledge, and whose forms of authorization that go to the heart of this study. While focusing on individual experience, *The Floating University* reveals the broader power structures that studies attending to the complexities of specific institutions, sites, or subjects can sometimes obscure.

The sources on which this book is based are hugely diverse and drawn from nearly fifty archival repositories. The view from the ship is conveyed using the personal papers, letters, diaries, and memoirs of passengers; course outlines; shipping company and organizational records; and the ship’s onboard newspaper. The view from the United States is explored through domestic news coverage, State Department records, NYU and other university archives, court and immigration records, published works, and personal correspondence. Apprehending how the ship was understood in the localities where it docked is a harder task, but local vernacular newspaper records, an oral history, diplomatic

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University Press, 1985); Harry Collins, *Changing Order: Replication and Induction in Scientific Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Stephen Hilgartner, *Science on Stage: Expert Advice as Public Drama* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

24 John-Paul A. Ghobrial, “Introduction: Seeing the World Like a Microhistorian,” *Past and Present* 242, no. S14 (November 2019): 1–22; Christian G. De Vito and Anne Gerritsen, eds., *Micro-spatial Histories of Global Labour* ([Cham, Switzerland:] Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory and Global History,” in *The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800*, ed. Jerry H. Bentley, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and Merry Wiesner-Hanks, vol. 6 of *Cambridge World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 446–73; Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (New York: Pantheon, 2007); Maxine Berg, “Sea Otters and Iron: A Global Microhistory of Value and Exchange at Nootka Sound, 1774–1792,” *Past and Present* 242, no. S14 (November 2019): 50–82.

25 Thomas V. Cohen, “The Macrohistory of Microhistory,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 47, no. 1 (January 2017): 67; Lara Putnam, “The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast,” *American Historical Review* 71, no. 2 (2016): 377; David Bell, “Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 37, no. 1 (2014): 1–24.

correspondence, and the students' own letters and reports open a window on what the Floating University meant to those who encountered it.

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The book begins by exploring the Floating University's origins in the experimental psychology of William James and the new educational thinking of John Dewey. Although later derided as little more than a "new style tourist agency," the undertaking had serious intellectual foundations.<sup>26</sup> The first chapter argues that James Lough's efforts to launch the voyage grew out of his psychology studies at Harvard and his innovations in experiential education at New York University during the period before and after World War I. It shows just how fully the university initially backed his plans. But on the eve of departure, NYU withdrew its sponsorship of the voyage. The second chapter follows the machinations that led the university to revoke its sanction, placing it within the wider context of US higher education in the 1920s and the changing business model of universities. It ends with the ultimatum NYU gave Professor Lough—he could go on the voyage, but only if he found a new job.

Yet go on the voyage Lough did. Despite NYU's withdrawal, in September 1926 his dream became a reality. Chapter 3 examines life aboard the Floating University and the attempt to implement Lough's educational philosophy in classes, shore trips, and the "extracurriculum." However, as the ship made its way around the world, divisions surfaced between and within the various groups on board that revealed tensions inherent in the project: Was there a difference between students and tourists? How much latitude should passengers be given to "experiment" onshore? What constituted an education anyway? These questions became acute when the students' behavior in port attracted the attention—and judgment—of the US and foreign press. Reports of drunkenness and romantic liaisons were seized on by American newspapers, which cited them as evidence of educational failure. With the endorsement of NYU already withdrawn, it was in their pages that the battle for the Floating University's educational legitimacy was waged. The fourth chapter traces the evaporation of the voyage's social standing as newspapers across the United States seized on events in Cuba, Japan, Rome, and Paris: in their view, students' misbehavior in the port cities of the globe did not equate with a university education.

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<sup>26</sup> Special Agent Kinsey to E. C. Bannerman, July 25, 1928, Central Decimal File 1910–29, box 317/032 University Travel Association, RG 59 (Department of State), NARA.

Meanwhile, it was becoming clear that the “world” the Floating University students were encountering was one that assumed the existence of expanding US power. Chapter 5 traces the military, commercial, and cultural geographies along which the ship sailed. Shadowed by the comforting reach of the United States’ military presence, the students’ experiences of “the world” were conditioned by the networks and informal embassies of their nation’s growing commercial and cultural reach. If Professor Lough had wanted to teach students to be “world-minded,” what they were discovering was the meaning of the United States’ place in the world. The sixth chapter explores how those aboard made sense of what they were seeing. It examines how acceptance of the United States’ emerging role as an imperial power was produced over the course of the voyage through lectures and reading materials, shipboard debates over US colonization in the Philippines, comparisons to British, Dutch, and Japanese rule, and racial constructions of global order. It then follows the students to Palestine, Paris, Abbotsford, and Stratford, where they read US history into the landscape, finding in these places abroad the cultural antecedents of their national story. But every now and then, other ways of knowing did force their way onto the ship, surfacing anxieties about American cultural limitations. Chapter 7 inverts the perspective on the Floating University to reveal some of the alternative systems of authorization to which it was recruited. It explores how the ship and its passengers were understood and employed by those belowdecks and on the docks, whose concerns were quite different from those of the Americans traveling in the staterooms and tourist cabins. Making the world their playground, the Floating University’s members only occasionally perceived that they, too, were sometimes being played.

Returning to New York in May 1927, the Floating University was greeted by cheering crowds on the pier, but the fight for its legacy was only just beginning. Chapter 8 considers the various grounds on which the “educational experiment” was judged. Although supporters of the cruise advocated sober scientific principles, the press coverage ensured it was the students’ conduct that was the measure of evaluation. Although Professor Lough won a court case for unfair dismissal from NYU, his successive attempts to relaunch the Floating University attracted the suspicions of the US State Department, which even deployed a special agent to report on him. By the 1930s, it had become clear that the Floating University’s claims of the academic possibilities of situated and embodied knowledge presented just too much of a challenge to the emerging epistemic and social order. The conventions for knowing the world during the interwar period were determined by Professor Lough’s detractors.

But are their terms the criteria against which the voyage should continue to be

assessed? The final chapter attends more closely to the legacies of the voyage and the question of its failure. It considers the influence of the trip on the lives and careers of a selection of students and staff, several of whom were active in attempting to relaunch the floating university idea in the 1960s, including in the form of Semester at Sea, a program that operates to this day. With university study abroad growing exponentially during the twenty-first century, tensions between experience and expertise have reemerged, and the ways educational success or failure is framed have once again come to the fore. Thinking about failure, this chapter suggests, is important, because it draws attention to the social and political processes by which knowledge claims are supported, the forms of recognition they rely on, and the assumptions underpinning them.

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In the telling of this story, some usual suspects are absent. Elite universities and the growth of research—a feature of so many US higher education histories—play a relatively minor role. Major philanthropic institutions like the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations appear only briefly, and major figures in the nascent discipline of interwar international relations as well as the growing number of interwar think tanks, the League of Nations, and the interwar ecosystem of international conferences and organizations are rarely mentioned.<sup>27</sup> Although the State Department appears now and then, states and municipalities more generally hardly feature, although their crucial role as funders, regulators, and legislators of American secondary as well as tertiary education and the requirements they introduced for professional registration help shape the context of this story.<sup>28</sup> The political convulsions associated with labor, race, and economic relations within the United States at this time, and the contested visions of American democracy and freedom associated with them, also echo only on the sidelines of the narrative. Instead, a set of less prominent though still quite privileged actors, both individual and institutional, are at its heart. The endeavors of middle-class men and mid-tier (and often midwestern) institutions to navigate and shape the changing landscapes of their interwar world offer a fresh insight into the importance of a period in which, as historians such as Barbara Keys, Frank Costigliola, Emily Rosenberg, and Robert Dean have

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27 Recent and forthcoming works that take up this theme include Jan Stöckmann, *The Architects of Internationalism: Building a Discipline, Designing the World, 1914–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Rietzler, *International Experts, International Citizens*.

28 E.g., state licensing requirements for accountants. See Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*, 445.

variously shown, the foundations for post-1945 US foreign relations were laid.<sup>29</sup>

The account presented here is limited by available sources, space constraints, and its perspective. Coverage of the students' experience of onboard classes, for example, is conditioned by the content of their accounts; and Professor Lough, who is so central to the opening chapters, disappears from the middle ones, both because of a lack of firsthand material and because he was marginalized by his colleagues. Some locations are dealt with more fully than others, with Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Sri Lanka, and Algeria in particular receiving only cursory coverage. The view presented is a white, American-centric one. For the most part, it approaches the port cities of the world through the eyes of a handful of privileged staff and students. Not only does this sideline other ways of seeing, but worse, its invocation of the tropes of bright lights and jazz could obscure what made the decade important and particular in different contexts across the globe, detracting from such issues as franchise reform and its consequences (in the United Kingdom and Japan, among other places), the growth of print culture in the port cities of Southeast Asia, and the expansion of long-standing struggles against colonial rule.<sup>30</sup> Awareness of the limits of this shipboard perspective is important. Not only did it tend to homogenize cultures that were dynamic and diverse, but the temporary arrival of a shipload of five hundred rich Americans may or may not have presented a momentous event for those who lived and worked in the places the *Ryndam* visited. For those who did engage with the traveling students, chapter 7 only gestures toward hinterlands of possible motivation and purpose.

There is a danger too that in casting the fate of the Floating University as one settled by the contest between different ways of authorizing knowledge in the 1920s, this book overstates both that conflict and its resolution. Professionalized knowledge in the form of social surveys helped shape notions of self and nation, as Sarah Igo has shown, blurring the lines between experience and expertise. Moreover, many of the early twentieth-century progressive social reformers who kept company with John Dewey were chief among the new experts eager to mobilize their authorized knowledge, with repressive as well as enabling

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29 Barbara J. Keys, *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s*, Harvard Historical Studies, vol. 152 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Frank Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion: American Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations with Europe, 1919–1933* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*.

30 Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Richard Carr and Bradley W. Hart, *The Global 1920s: Politics, Economics and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2016).



effects.<sup>31</sup> Travel experience was, of course, a crucial aspect of US higher education from the colonial period onward, and as chapter 8 outlines, it continued in various ways throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.<sup>32</sup> Experiential approaches to learning also have endured beyond the 1920s, from the progressive critique of conventional schooling mounted by Dewey's followers in the 1930s and 1940s to David A. Kolb's development of the Experiential Learning Model in the 1970s and 1980s, the quite separate traditions of Montessori and Steiner schooling, and recent initiatives such as Barnard College's "Reacting to the Past."<sup>33</sup> In different ways, pedagogic innovations such as problem-based learning, work placements and design thinking, and the explosion of study abroad programs in the first two decades of the twenty-first century have all sought to embed "experience" within the university curriculum.

And then there is Constantine Raises. A member of the Floating University's cruise management team and later a travel agent, he told a story of the origins of the 1926–27 world cruise different from that presented here. His centers on a chance meeting with Professor Lough at the University of Athens in the summer of 1920 and a dinner five years later hosted by Captain Felix Riesenberg on board the New York Maritime Academy's training ship, the (SS) *Newport* (for a full version of Raises's story, see the appendix).<sup>34</sup> In presenting the account I have, which privileges the archival trail over Raises's oral testimony, I am in many respects enacting the very forms of warrant and mobilizing the same structures of recognition that I otherwise seek to historicize. Archives are themselves unreliable and problematic

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31 Igo, *The Averaged American*; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Andrew Jewett, *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

32 Hoffa, *A History of US Study Abroad*; Konrad H. Jarausch, "American Students in Germany, 1815–1914: The Structure of German and US Matriculants at Göttingen University," in *German Influence on Education in the United States to 1917*, ed. Henry Geitz, Jürgen Heideking, and Jürgen Herbst (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 195–211; Douglas Hart, "Social Class and American Travel to Europe in the Late Nineteenth Century, with Special Attention to Great Britain," *Journal of Social History* (September 2016), 313–340; Emily J. Levine, *Allies and Rivals: German-American Exchange and the Rise of the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

33 Boyd Henry Bode, *Progressive Education at the Crossroads* (New York: Newson, 1938); Caroline Pratt, *I Learn from Children: An Adventure in Progressive Education*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1948); David Allen Kolb and Ronald Eugene Fry, "Toward an Applied Theory of Experiential Learning," in *Theories of Group Process*, ed. C. Cooper (London: John Wiley, 1975), 33–57; David Allen Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984); Phyllis Povell, *Montessori Comes to America: The Leadership of Maria Montessori and Nancy McCormick Rambusch* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009); Rita Kramer, *Maria Montessori: A Biography* (New York: Diversion Books, 2017); Thomas Stehlik, *Waldorf Schools and the History of Steiner Education: An International View of 100 Years* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019); Barnard College, "Reacting to the Past," 2021, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://reacting.barnard.edu/>.

34 Liebhardt, "The History of Shipboard Education"; Biographical Note, Raises Collection.

creations that work to select, categorize, normalize, and erase.<sup>35</sup> They are not natural or neutral, and in mobilizing them I must recognize that I, too, inhabit the city of legitimate knowledge built by Lough's detractors.

Social and institutional recognition will always be central to how human communities validate the knowledge they make about the world and each other. This book shows that these forms of recognition have a history and politics that were (and are) structured by unequal relations of power. One hundred years after the Floating University set sail, and in the context of the need for rapid and transformative societal change to meet the challenges of the environmental crisis, the stakes of securing anew that social recognition could not be higher. How will it be done? Thinking about why the Floating University was deemed a failure in the 1920s highlights the failure in our own times to ground knowledge in ways recognizable to those outside the community of academically authorized experts. In seeking alternatives, perhaps Professor Lough's vision of personal and embodied experience as linked to institutional authority is a good place to begin.

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35 Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives," *Archival Science* 1, no. 2 (June 2001): 131–41; Rodney G. S. Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," *Archivaria* 61 (2006): 215–33; R. Roque and K. Wagner, eds., *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: Reading European Archives in World History* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Michelle Caswell, "Dusting for Fingerprints," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020).