METHODS AND TEXTS

USING METADATA AND MAPS TO TEACH THE HISTORY OF RELIGION

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In 2014, I taught an undergraduate course in the history department at Brandeis University titled "Mapping Boston's Religions: A Digital History Seminar." The main assignment for the course was a collaborative mapping project, in which students researched nineteenth-century sources to make a digital map of religion in Boston from 1800 to 1880. In addition to their shared map, each student created an online exhibit about some aspect of religious life in Boston, such as the history of synagogues or the history of African American churches. These exhibits each featured an interpretative essay, images and photographs, smaller maps drawing attention to the importance of space for religion, and records containing metadata (such as date of founding and the institution's denomination) about various congregations.[1] Students pored over maps and insurance atlases to find out where and when churches, synagogues, and other religious institutions had been located in the city. The aim of the project was to teach advanced undergraduate students the research skills that they would learn in a conventional history course: researching, writing, and analysis. But in this history-class-as-shop-class, the goal was also to teach new digital skills such as mapping, collaboration, and project management.[2] I introduced mapping in this course in order to engage with the recent spatial turn in history and other disciplines.

The map and the exhibits were the finished product of the students' scholarship. But the map was generated from hundreds of records of congregations and their changing locations, which are stored in the database that runs the site. The site runs on Omeka, a web-publishing platform for "scholars, museums, libraries, archives" created by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. The map the uses the Neatline family of plugins created by the Scholars' Lab at the University of Virginia. Omeka is a system for keeping track of items (or records) and their metadata.

Metadata is data about data. To use a concrete example, the books on the shelves of a library are data, and the library catalog records that keep

[1] The syllabus for the class is available at http://lincoln-mullen.com/teaching/. The students' map and exhibits are available at http://omeka.lts.brandeis.edu/neatline/show/mapping-bostons-religions.

[2] The course design was inspired by Jeffrey W. McClurken project-based digital history courses the University of Mary Washington, website: http://mcclurken.org/.
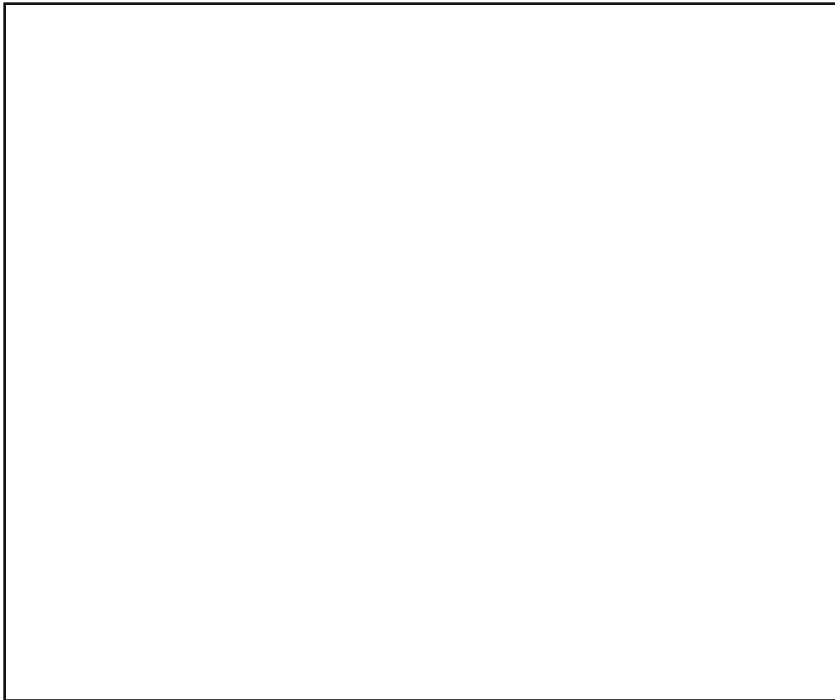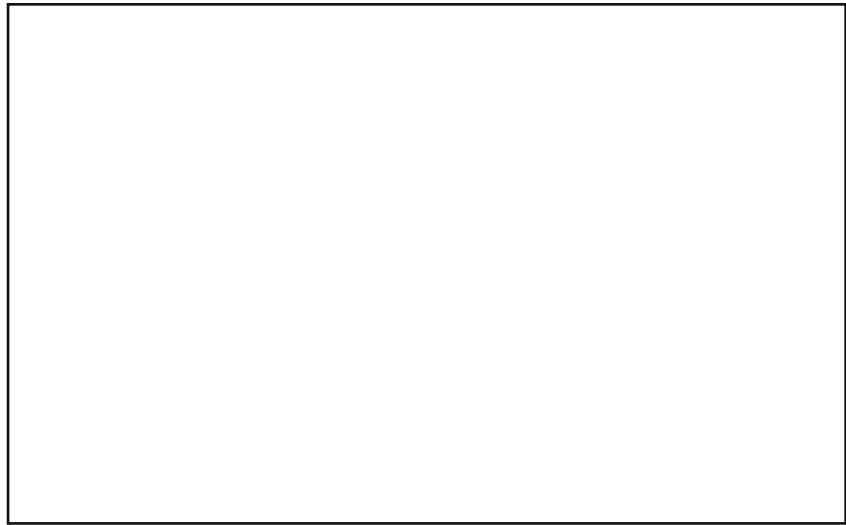
Insert Figure 1: map-no-layers
Caption: The students' map of religious institutions in progress.
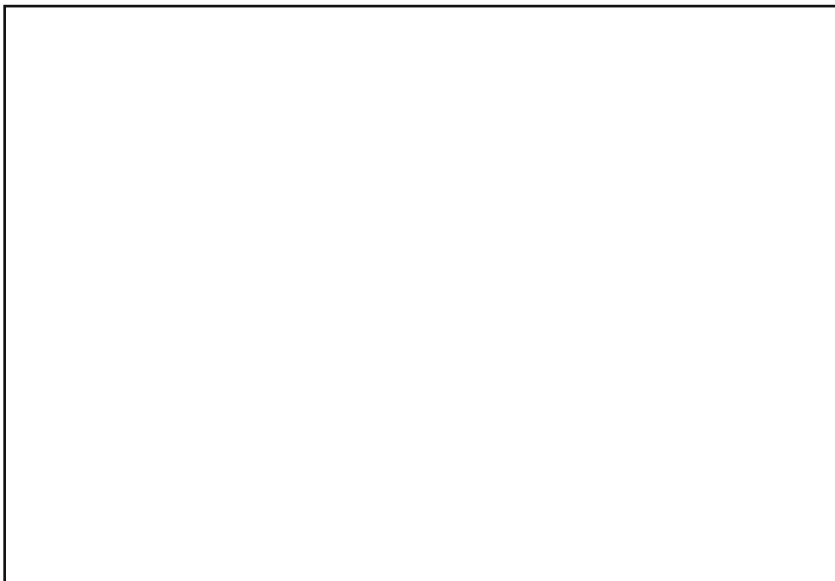
Insert Figure 2: metadata-record
**Caption: A record for church, showing the category "Congregation" and some
of the information about the church, including a nineteenth-century engraving.**

Insert Figure 3: entering-metadata
Caption: The admin page to the Omeka site showing some of the metadata categories that students created and filled.

track of information such as author, date, and call number are metadata. Metadata are usually kept according to some agreed upon convention; for example, library catalogs use various standards defined by the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) and the Library of Congress. Every item in an Omeka website can be described using the Dublin Core metadata standard, a generic set of fields that can describe many kinds of items. But Omeka also permits users to create their own metadata vocabularies: in other words, Omeka not only lets you fill in boxes about your records, Omeka lets you decide what the boxes should be.

Students looked through lists of city directories, maps from the nineteenth century, newspapers, photographic collections, and other records to find when churches or synagogues started, where they were located, what they looked like, and when the congregations split or the buildings were sold. While entering the fruits of their research into the database, students created hundreds of records, filling out boxes for each field. On its face, this approach to research and learning could not be further from the kind of humanistic learning that I believe is essential to studying history in college, these goals include: learning to make an argument, understanding change over time, and showing how the past is unfamiliar to the present.

How could metadata achieve these humanistic goals? Using metadata offered extended opportunities to do so. In the early weeks of the semester, I asked students to look through records and maps held by the Boston Public Library to find out what kinds of information might be worth keeping track of. Their choices were difficult because for some churches we had more material than we could use and for others we could only vaguely determine

a location and date. Once the students had some familiarity with the sources, we spent a class period creating a set of metadata categories for keeping track of congregations—as spiritual/social/legal entities—and another set for keeping track of their locations in time and space, since congregations often move. Students then entered several congregations with their locations into the database and map. The following class period was messy—because they discovered that the histories and the data were complicated. Students quickly realized that we needed standards for entering the data, for example for representing dates with variable degrees of precision and uncertainty. The students also realized that the categories we had created were inadequate. What exactly did it mean to categorize a church as "African American," and did that mean that we had to categorize all other churches as "white" or "Irish"? What constituted the leadership of a congregation—the pastor or also lay leaders? What did it mean for a church to be part of a denomination or religious tradition, and how should we represent changes in affiliation or theology? In other words, students learned how people in the past had defined categories such as race and religious identity as they created related categories for the project. Furthermore, students learned how fuzzy such designations were as they worked with them. This opened the door for numerous discussions throughout the semester about how race, religion, and other categories were constructed in the nineteenth-century United States.[3]

3 For a similar classroom insight and discussion, see Kelly.

In addition to reading a textbook about of US history and a secondary history on a religious tradition of their choosing, students read from many primary sources about religious history throughout the semester. In the class reading we sought to compare the experiences of different religious groups such as Methodists, Catholics, Jews, and Transcendentalists. The students brought what they had learned about constructed categories to bear on the course project itself in unexpected ways. One assigned reading was Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Divinity School Address." The address had appalled many listeners and readers when Emerson delivered it in 1838, because he denied that churches and congregations could provide valid religious experiences, because he believed such experiences should be purely individual. In the address Emerson describes being distracted by a snowstorm during a sermon: "The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral.…The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned." Emerson admonished his audience to be "Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, —cast behind you all conformity" (136, 143). As we were discussing the text, one student observed that Emerson would not have found much use in our class project, because we were mapping congregations rather than individuals, institutions rather than prophets. Our map featured a city, when Emerson would have called us to "nature." It was a brilliant observation, because it used our reading of Emerson's text to interrogate the assumptions about religion and society that underlay our class project: assumptions that I as the instructor had required the students to go along with by assigning the map in the first place. In our discussions the class agreed that though Emerson had a point about individualism, con-
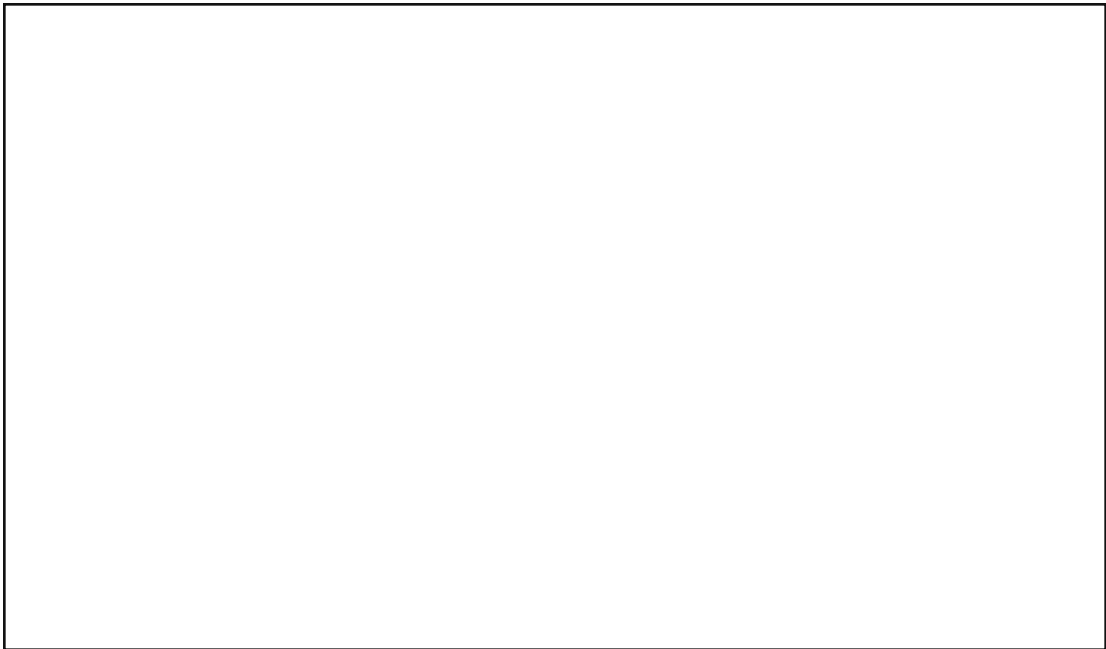
Insert Figure 4: map-historical-layer
The student's map in progress with a historical map
from 1850 layered underneath.

gregations really did matter as groups of people and as institutions with a life of their own. There was a reason that Emerson's text was controversial and our mapping project helped us understand why. Other readings in the course by a Mormon missionary and a Jewish peddler helped us to understand how mapping religious congregations that owned buildings and thus appeared on insurance maps could blind us to the presence of other religious groups whose social networks ran through boarding houses, or whose religion did not have enough adherents for congregational life and worship (Pratt; Cohen **ADD TO WORKS CITED**). Pointing out that a category is "constructed" is standard fare for a humanities course. The difference that our mapping project made was that students learned to be suspicious of categories and then, keeping that suspicion in mind, to deploy their categories to learn new things anyway.

In this course students produced original scholarship. Through their research into primary sources viewed through the theoretical lens of space, students discovered and mapped knowledge about nineteenth-century religion that does not appear in the scholarly literature. The central question of the course used current trends in scholarship about spatial history while addressing perennial questions about how the many religious groups in the United States interacted with one another while maintaining their own identities. Students read enough of an introduction to the spatial turn in history to put their work in conversation with this scholarship

(Bodenhamer; Cresswell **ADD TO WORKS CITED**; Gregory; Knowles). The students also looked at other spatial projects, such as *Visualizing Emancipation* (Nesbit and Ayers) and Kilde's project mapping religion in Minneapolis and St. Paul. *Visualizing Emancipation*, for example, includes data about where slaves ran to or put themselves under the protection of the Union Army, thereby connecting to historiography on slaves' agency and their contributions to the fall of slavery. From these examples, students also learned the visual conventions of digital mapping and the practice of writing in the hypertext web. In writing their own exhibits, students got deeper into the scholarship on such topics as race in nineteenth-century Boston and the history of Judaism in Boston. In particular, we were concerned to understand the city as a religious ecosystem, where Protestant and Jewish groups bought and sold buildings from one another, where congregations migrated to new land reclaimed from the harbor, where different faiths met in buildings adjacent to one another, but also where a Protestant mob burned a Catholic convent to the ground.

A semester-long assignment such as this could be adapted for multiple cities, or students in a later course could build on the work of previous classes. I chose Boston for our course because Brandeis is close to the Boston Public Library's Norman B. Leventhal Map Center and some of the religious sites we were mapping. A future iteration of the course might ask students to map religion in Washington, DC, a city which was founded in 1790. While the ability to visit a location can add to a course, a course can also take advantage of how the digitization of sources collapses the constraints of space. For example, the Massachusetts State Library is digitizing all of the insurance atlases for Boston and putting them online, and the Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library has already digitized all its maps and many atlases. Many other resources, such as city directories and town planning documents, have been digitized by the HathiTrust, the Internet Archive, and Google Books. A class like this would not be possible apart from such digitization, because undergraduate students rarely travel even to nearby archives and libraries to use original materials. Whether or not a class involves mapping, any class that includes a digital project must use metadata. For example, my colleague at Brandeis Jane Kamensky offered a separate course in the history department on John Singleton Copley in which students created metadata for Copley's art and letters. Using metadata can advance our disciplinary concerns about humanistic teaching. In ways both planned and unexpected, students in my class learned how digital mapmaking can reveal new patterns in religious interactions, while clearly understood the importance of traditional historical concerns about how categories have been constructed in the past.

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