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Geospatial Data Management Interview Series: The First Interview with Belle Lipton

Welcome to the inauguration of this geospatial data management interview series! This series aims to provide current, practical information on library projects and practices in managing, stewarding, and curating geospatial data. Any suggestions are welcome; please send them to Sarah Zhang, the IB Editor, at s_zhang@sfu.ca.

An interview with Belle Lipton, the GIS Outreach Librarian at Harvard's Map Collection

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As the first episode in the Geospatial data management interview series, I had the pleasure of interviewing Belle Lipton, the GIS Outreach Librarian at Harvard's Map Collection. The team at Harvard's Map collection has a history of licensing and providing access to geospatial data in the past. Moreover, they have informally helped researchers create geospatial data when it does not exist. This interview focuses on their first concerted effort to formally capture researcher-created geospatial data and provide pathways for contributing data and project description to accompany the data.

What prompted you to start a geospatial data curation program?

The two primary motivations grounding our data curation efforts are (1) collection development and (2) enabling research data management instruction. From a collections standpoint, Harvard students and researchers, as well as Map Collection staff regularly create geospatial data related to archival maps in our collections, and we are interested in creating formalized pathways and library services which



support contribution of those materials into our digital discovery environments.

With regards to research data management instruction, when we teach about GIS data, methods, and software to our communities at Harvard, we include support for publishing workflows which enable data transparency and reuse. We frame our consultation, workshop, and class sessions by including considerations about archiving, documenting project environments, and prioritizing open formats for GIS data.

The services we are working to formalize include guided data description workshops and consultations, as well technical infrastructure to integrate research data into formal discovery systems. These services meet both of our aims. By centering data description and open data science as a central element of our consultation services, researchers who are creating data using library collections are well-positioned to contribute that data at the end of their project. The more researchers we work with, the more teaching examples we can share. The more that contributions span many disciplines, the more likely our participants can find relevant, approachable entryways to these concepts.

Which individuals in your library have participated in this project?

I liaise with researchers to hear their needs and provide instruction geared towards facilitating data curation. Marc McGee is our Geospatial Metadata Librarian. He is the product owner of the Harvard Geospatial Library (HGL) platform, which is developed by Library Technical Services (LTS). Our main developer through LTS is named Maura Carbone. Marc regularly works with Maura and the rest of the library to keep HGL up and running, in addition to staying engaged with community best practices for spatial data repositories and geospatial metadata, both within Harvard Library and out in communities such as GeoBlacklight and IIIF. Our department is headed up by Bonnie Burns, who oversees scoping decisions about the overall data curation activities of the Map Collection. Our immediate team has also benefited from the subject expertise and general awesomeness of other members of the Harvard Library Research Data Services (RDS) community, such as Julie Goldman, a research data librarian who has been instrumental in helping figure out paths towards more coordinated services, as well as Kate Mika, another RDS data services librarian situated in Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science (IQSS). Katie is extremely knowledgeable about our research communities' data needs.

What are the challenges the library team has encountered in getting this



program off the ground?

So far, we have been using a modular suite of tools in our consultations and instruction. The OpenScienceFramework (OSF), Harvard Dataverse, Github or our university instance of it, code.harvard.edu, have all been great options for helping researchers get started setting up personal or team environments for describing, storing, versioning, and working collaboratively with their geospatial research data. We are still in the process of collecting feedback and measuring successful research outcomes with each of, or a combination of these tools. We're also working internally in the Map Collection to develop how we want research data to be accessible from our different discovery systems.

Another exciting development is the recent hire of Yuan Li as the Harvard Library Director of Open Scholarship and Research Data Services in the Fall of 2023. The question of what it means to have coordinated data services in a university setting with [as diverse data activities as Harvard](#) is necessarily going to be challenging. I am really excited to look towards Yuan's growing team and find ways for geospatial data services to plug in.

What are the next steps for the spatial data curation program? Do you have suggestions for folks who wish to experiment with such type of geospatial data curation program?

I am grateful for the flexibility to try different approaches to working with our communities, and iterating on what went well, and what we can improve. One of my personal philosophies on the topic of geospatial metadata is that for many people who have never attempted to store, organize, and make accessible hundreds or thousands of datasets — or even for those of us who have — sometimes the task of structuring metadata can feel a bit daunting. It can be something we are not sure how to get exactly right. I am passionate about breaking down these barriers, and finding ways to help researchers connect with a sense of ownership over how they want to share this dimension of their work. That's why I am so grateful to be out in the community with people, talking about their unique goals and challenges, and testing out ways to make this process as engaging and supported as possible.

Editor's note: Curious to see examples of researcher-created geospatial data with excellent descriptions? Visit the [Harvard Map Collection: Research, Teaching, and Learning GIS Collections](#) page on OpenScienceFramework(OSF). The team is also in the process of extracting records from OSF and Dataverse to ingest them to



Harvard Geospatial Library (HGL). In a future issue, we will publish a follow-up piece so you can see the results. Stay tuned!

Harvard Map Collection: Research, Teaching, and Learning GIS Collections

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What will I find here?

In this repository, you will find geospatial datasets and associated project data related to the research, teaching, and learning activities of the Harvard Map Collection.

The Harvard Map Collection partners with students, faculty, staff, and researchers on a number of activities which result in the creation or augmentation of geospatial data. These activities include:

- Part...

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Citation

Components

- Off the Beaten Path? A Spatial Analysis of Boston Tourism, 1960-2024
Lipton & Shida
GIS data and project materials from Luisa Shida's 2024 May Crane fellowship with the Harvard Map Collection.

[Harvard Map Collection: Research, Teaching, and Learning GIS Collections](#) page on OpenScienceFramework(OSF)

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