



Norman B. Leventhal  
Map & Education Center  
at the Boston Public Library



## **WITH NEW EXHIBITION, *BENDING LINES*, LEVENTHAL CENTER SPOTLIGHTS THE PERSUASIVE POWER OF MAPS AND DATA, FROM COLONIAL ADVERTISEMENTS TO PRESENT-DAY POLITICS**

*A deep dive into Boston Public Library's collections showcases rare historic documents and ephemera alongside contemporary and digital artifacts.*

*Newly commissioned maps demonstrate how data can illustrate competing viewpoints.*

*Premieres online May 27 with series of live, interactive events. Physical opening later.*

**BOSTON – May 18, 2020** – The many ways that maps and visual data have been used for centuries to manipulate information and truth come under scrutiny in **BENDING LINES: Maps and Data from Distortion to Deception**, a new initiative of the Norman B. Leventhal Map and Education Center at the Boston Public Library (BPL) that features an immersive, digital-first online experience opening May 27 on the Leventhal [website](#), a series of interactive live events, extensive resources for teachers and -- eventually -- a physical exhibition.



Image highlight from an 1820 broadside that coined the term "gerrymander" – BPL collection

### **EXHIBITION OVERVIEW**

From a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Ptolemaic map that highlights the struggle to combine new discoveries and ancient geography, to an infamous 2019 "Sharpie-enhanced" weather map designed to spin the politics of disaster planning, the pieces on display and referenced in BENDING LINES come from countries around the globe and span more than half a millennium. The exhibition proves that attempts to shape public opinion aren't limited to location, or election years, or wartime propaganda. Its wide-ranging objects and topics challenge viewers to consider the social, cultural and political environments in which maps and data are created and deployed.

In addition to rare cartographic documents, BENDING LINES includes pioneering examples of data visualization and contemporary documents from the BPL's extensive map holdings, which the Leventhal Center manages. Significant documents from Massachusetts history are placed alongside national and world treasures, and in contrast to ephemeral examples of maps in advertising and media. Interactive displays show visitors the power of persuasive mapmaking and demonstrate how subjectivity is inherent even in "objective" data. BENDING LINES is curated by **Garrett Dash Nelson**, the Leventhal Center's Curator of Maps and Director of Geographic Scholarship.



Evan Vucci/AP Photo

## **DIGITAL EXHIBITION OPENING DETAILS**

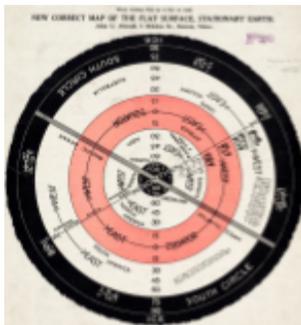
BENDING LINES' May 27 opening kicks off with a series of interactive live events, *Angles on Bending Lines: Curator Conversations*, hosted by Nelson and featuring guests who give context to the exhibition's themes and content. The first four *Angles on Bending Lines*, described below, will be streamed live on the Leventhal Center's [Facebook](#) page and [YouTube](#) channel, then archived on YouTube.

- Wed., May 27 @ 1 pm – “Same Data, Different Stories” – Garrett Dash Nelson talks with guest **Margaret Owens**, Principal Research Analyst and Planner for the City of Boston Parks and Recreation Department, and the creator of one of the “Data Stories” maps commissioned for the exhibition.
- Wed., June 3 @ 1 pm – “Twisted Data: Gerrymandering, GIS, and Visual Information” – Garrett Dash Nelson welcomes **Alasdair Rae**, Professorial Fellow in Urban Studies and Planning at The University of Sheffield (UK), who created a chart of gerrymandered congressional districts featured in the exhibition.
- June 10 @ 1 pm – “Persuasive Cartography” – Garrett Dash Nelson welcomes guest **Judith Tyner, Ph.D.**, Professor Emerita of Geography at California State University, Long Beach. Tyner coined the term that gives this segment its title; she and Nelson will discuss how maps are used to influence opinions or beliefs -- a main theme in the BENDING LINES exhibition.
- June 17 @ 1pm -- “Cartographic Curiosities: A Collector’s View” -- Garrett Dash Nelson welcomes map collector and researcher **PJ Mode**, whose love for old and unusual maps of the world led to a fascination with maps whose purpose is persuasion. Several of the maps from The PJ Mode Collection at Cornell University Library are included in BENDING LINES.

Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center President **Connie Chin** says the exhibition’s online debut advances the organization’s goal to harness its digital capabilities that enhance and deepen the experience of its collection and its physical gallery space. “The coronavirus shutdown of the Boston Public Library and our gallery has given us a unique opportunity to explore what a state-of-the-art ‘digital-first’ exhibition can look and feel like,” Chin says. “The Leventhal Center is pushing the envelope of innovation and adaptation for BENDING LINES.”

**[MEDIA NOTE: A physical opening date for BENDING LINES at the Leventhal Center will be announced later, in adherence to city/state guidance on visitor and staff safety. More details about the exhibition are below.]**

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### **MORE ABOUT BENDING LINES**

Curator Garrett Dash Nelson says BENDING LINES underscores the power of harnessing and presenting data. It asks viewers to move beyond simple concepts of *truth* and *lies*, he says, and to consider issues of communication and representation as foundational to democratic society. The act of interpreting and presenting information imbues authority: one installation juxtaposes “flat earth” maps against Earth photographs from space; others spotlights how mapmaking creates borders, boundaries and communities – concepts that are theoretical until they’re committed to paper and create powerful effects on national and group identities.

Among the object highlights in BENDING LINES:

- A 1507 map from scientist Claudius Ptolemy’s *Geographia*, showing that European mapmakers struggled to negotiate differences between then-new discoveries and the authority of ancient geography;

- A “new and accurate map of the world” from 1626 promotes a geocentric view of the solar system that portrays California as an island – it’s one of the first world maps to show European settlement in New England;
- An 1820s broadside mocking Massachusetts Governor Elbridge Gerry, whose politically motivated redrawing of his Essex County senate district in 1812 spurred political rivals to coin the enduring term “Gerry-mander”;
- World War II propaganda news maps made by the U.S. government to stir up senses of danger and patriotism;
- A groundbreaking “flow map” by the French cartographer Charles Joseph Minard;
- A selection of war-time maps including a relic from the Russo-Turkish War showing Russia as an octopus, and a map of Chinese-Japanese warfare in Shanghai;
- A pair of historic maps promoting strikingly different political views of New York City – one from a socialist perspective and the other from a right-wing, anti-communist group; and
- A rotating selection of current day maps from the media, exhibited in an interactive setting where viewers can rank their trustworthiness.



Serio-comic map graphic showing Russia's global "tentacles" -- BPL

BENDING LINES focuses on the motivations and decisions of cartographers and designers about what to show and what not to show, Nelson says. Details like scale, color, and icon choices affect users’ perceptions. And maps have myriad social purposes, he says: they aim to encourage land speculation or nationalism; they increase tourism; they sell products and ideas; they incite or wage war; and they bolster electoral or ideological campaigns. But Nelson emphasizes map-making needn’t be a discipline that comes down from high; it can be

an empowering skill that people deploy for themselves to support their own views.

“We’re showing how these types of visual rhetoric are tools for both the powerful and those who challenge them,” Nelson says. “BENDING LINES sheds light on the complicated conversation about who gets to decide what we believe, and how seeing is not always believing.”

### NEW MAPS COMMISSIONED

Developed exclusively for BENDING LINES is “Same Data, Different Stories,” a collaborative exhibition component commissioned by the Leventhal Center that brings the show’s themes into a contemporary context. Geographic datasets about Massachusetts were offered to high-profile cartographers and data designers around the country, each of whom agreed to develop two competing -- but equally persuasive -- cartographic narratives. Using design tools and Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping, the cartographers created maps and data visualizations from the datasets. The resulting work underscores how mapmakers’ perspectives influence the products they make.

The commissioned cartographers and designers include: **Julia Wolfe**, Visual Journalist for ABC News’ influential website FiveThirtyEight.com in New York City; **Lauren Tierney**, a graphics reporter at *The Washington Post* in Washington, DC; **Andy Woodruff** of the U.S.- and U.K.-based Axis Maps; **Margaret Owens**, Principal Research Analyst and Planner for the City of Boston; and **Madison Draper**, a designer at the global data company Mapbox.

The Leventhal Center has also commissioned a map by Boston’s award-winning illustrator, author and artist **Raúl the Third** (nee Raúl González III). Raúl will create an original caricature map showing where Boston children live, using census tract data. The map will be part of the Leventhal Center’s education

and teacher resource toolbox, accompanied by a 2010 population map of Boston that highlights the number of children in each neighborhood, and a 1950s map that shows the locations of playgrounds and parks in Boston.

### **EDUCATION RESOURCES**

The themes of information and knowledge manipulation in maps will be integrated into the Leventhal Center's K-12 education programs. The Center's most popular program, "What is a Map?" includes visual data literacy and geographic thinking curriculum; its high school laboratory classroom project, "Empowering Maptivists," teaches data-mapping skills and how they can apply to civics and history projects. The Center will provide extensive professional development for teachers based on the exhibition's concepts, which are at the intersection of STEAM and humanities education.

### **FUNDING / SPONSOR INFO**

This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the primary source of federal support for the nation's libraries and museums -- advancing, supporting, and empowering America's museums, libraries, and related organizations through grantmaking, research, and policy development. IMLS's vision is "a nation where museums and libraries work together to transform the lives of individuals and communities."

BENDING LINES is an anchor project of a year-long programming effort planned by the Boston Public Library, under the theme "Contested Perspectives."

The Norman B. Leventhal Map and Education Center's *BENDING LINES: Maps and Data from Distortion to Deception*, will open at a future date at its free gallery in the Boston Public Library Central Branch, 700 Boylston Street. Details and related programs will be posted on [leventhalmap.org/bending-lines](http://leventhalmap.org/bending-lines).

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### **MEDIA CONTACT**

For images, interviews, previews and information about BENDING LINES, contact John Michael Kennedy ([jmk@jmkpr.com](mailto:jmk@jmkpr.com), 781-620-1761) or Jennifer Astin ([jennyastin@gmail.com](mailto:jennyastin@gmail.com), 424-333-1718).

### **THE NORMAN B. LEVENTHAL MAP & EDUCATION CENTER**

The Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center at the Boston Public Library is an independent nonprofit organization that promotes the public use of more than 200,000 maps and 5,000 atlases for the enjoyment and education of all. Uniquely positioned in a public library, the Leventhal Center offers changing exhibitions and public talks, groundbreaking educational programs that promote geographic and data literacy, and a website with 12,000 high-resolution digitized maps. The Center's education programs reach more than 4,000 school children every year, half from Boston Public Schools.

The Leventhal Center is known for the size and significance of its collection, as well as its digital engagement. With a global scope and a regional specialization in Boston and New England, the Center is a leader in exploring the study of places, societies, landscapes and history through the lens of maps and geography.

### **BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY**

The Boston Public Library (BPL) provides educational, cultural, and civic enrichment free to all through its collections, services, programs, and spaces. Established in 1848, the Boston Public Library is a pioneer of public library service in America. It was the first large free municipal library in the United States, the first public library to lend books, the first to have a branch library, and the first to have a children's room.

The Boston Public Library of today encompasses the Central Library in Copley Square, which includes the newly-renovated and vibrant Johnson Building, 25 branches, the Norman B. Leventhal Map and Education Center, the Kirstein Business and Innovation Center, and an archival center. The Library provides access to world-class special collections of rare books, manuscripts, photographs, and prints, along with rich digital content and online services. BPL hosts thousands of free educational programs and exhibitions, and provides free library services online and in-person to millions of people each year.