The following preface is revised from a blog post originally published at HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory, hastac.org) on August 3, 2011. This collection takes Cathy Davidson’s words as a challenge, a point of departure, an opening to new questions.

It was our HASTAC Scholars Director Fiona Barnett who, in 2011 coined our pithy HASTAC motto: “Difference is not our deficit; it’s our operating system.” Fiona has a talent for getting to the heart of the matter.

What Fiona’s defining quote states so well is that, if you begin from the conviction that everything that powers you — your operating system — is grounded in asking the question of “how are we different?” then the answers themselves won’t look ordinary. That is our starting place: “What makes this network unique?”

The same is true of any enterprise, including this volume, Disrupting the Digital Humanities. There may or may not be right answers but there certainly are limiting questions. Depending

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on what questions you ask, the answers are not just different but restrictive. They can be blinders that obscure other options and better solutions.

Questioning our questions — are they open enough? What are we missing? — is key. What about this particular way of doing things is intrinsically and determinedly different than other ways of doing things? What are we leaving out? What are the range of differences by which we are defining ourselves? What are we for — and against? What new ways of seeing the world are we espousing? What blurring do we see between the binaries that have shaped academe — thinking vs. doing, imagining vs. building, form vs. content, academic vs. non-academic, K-12 vs. higher ed, formal vs. informal learning, technology vs. humanities. Such binaries need to be blurred, if not entirely erased, across all disciplines, departments, and fields as well as across all of the identity categories you can ever imagine and in all combinations you've ever seen or heard of if we are to arrive at a DH defined by difference, not by simple automation and replication of the past.

These are deeply, profoundly epistemological questions: questions about how we know the world — and how we know it differently depending on what we bring to it. Within those epistemological questions, there are three interconnected areas of interest that also help to shape the ways that, if we are disruptive enough, we can learn better together:

1. **New Media**: How does new media afford us different ways of interacting, motivating, connecting, and networking than do previous forms of communication and publication? How can we envision and build new and different communities and connections as we design new media? How can we safeguard those communities from not just disruption but invasion, theft, insecurity, and manipulation while still promoting openness? How can we develop new tools, not for the sake of new tools, but because they offer the possibilities of retooling, of powering different, important, creative new ways of thinking and acting in the world?
2. **Critical Thinking**: How can we make sure that, in our excitement to create new tools, new communities, new interactions, we always ask ourselves the why? How? Who is included? Who is excluded? What is the cost—human and material? What is the benefit—human and material? What different contribution does this make? How is it different? Does that difference matter? How do critical thinking, creative thinking, and computational thinking all support and contest one another and help us arrive at a more equitable world?

3. **Participatory or Blended Learning**: In or out of academe, in or out of school, in the classroom and in the streets, in the classroom and globally distributed across networks, HASTAC has been dedicated to maximizing the affordances of new media to model new and different ways of learning together. When we began in 2002, we didn't know that we would be dubbed, by the National Science Foundation no less, the “world's first and oldest academic social network”—older than Facebook or Twitter, older even than MySpace, and older than the oldest academic science network nanoHUB. What we knew was that, given the affordance of openness, we wanted to support a community in which every participant felt both safe and free to participate openly. Anyone can register. Once you register, anyone can contribute, so long as it is relevant to HASTAC’s broad mission and respectful of other community members. That doesn’t sound so hard but it turns out those principles—a respectful, free, diverse, welcoming, open community that does not exploit its users’ data for any commercial purpose—is an anomaly.

Anomaly—by definition, that which deviates from the standard, normal and expected—is a good thing.

Anomaly—difference—is a value to be supported, embraced, cherished, and rewarded. It is a core value in *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*.

If all we do is produce and reproduce the same hierarchical, traditional, rote forms of learning and measuring the content of what we learn, then we have failed our principle that “differ-
ence is our operating system.” All the possibilities of interactive learning, of “collaboration by difference,” a methodology that selects difference as a key and defining principle, must be embodied by what we do. And that means in projects, not just in ideas, that are carried out in real world settings.

“Difference is not our deficit; it’s our operating system”: I am honored that the editors of this volume have asked me to return to this 2011 blog post announcing the core value of difference and have made it a kind of celebratory banner for this volume. Let’s wave that flag high! When you have difference as a mandate, you can make a difference in the world.

HASTAC has grown from a group of about twenty of us from the worlds of academe, the arts, and technology to a network over 15,500 members strong. As a technology and organization, it certainly does not run itself (any more than this volume magically put itself together). However, as a community of ideas, it exists and thrives, growing every day, precisely because it offers a platform for openness and difference and does not dictate, in advance, how individuals and groups use that platform to advance their ideas. Rather, we seek to communicate, model, and help anyone who wishes to contribute to explore what possibilities are here. Even better, we encourage the community to go for it! The administration is centralized but the content is contributed by users, day in and day out, and going strong.

I believe that the editors of this volume asked me to contribute this Preface because Disrupting the Digital Humanities begins from a parallel conviction and commitment. The volume bookmarks a similar place of difference. In the “Introduction,” the editors describe the contributors as a “motley crew”: historically, that means a diverse and even antic group made of people and things of different colors, a “we” defined not by similarity but a commitment to a community of difference.

“We” can only be as different as those of us committed to changing the rules, changing the game, changing the boundaries, changing the limits, changing the questions and therefore the answers. Differently.
Bibliography
