INTRODUCTION

Disrupting the Digital Humanities: An Introduction

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Much of this introduction was written before the world went to shit. The chapters here, no matter how recently written, can't keep at bay a world being actively undone. We find ourselves wondering why and how this work even matters. What has the digital humanities community done collectively for #BlackLivesMatter? What place is there for pedagogy in a world where education has been so systematically devalued, where students worry that even their classroom isn't safe from an ICE raid? How do we rally when so many are complicit? Scholarship can only vaguely hope to keep up. And so these are not really the questions of this volume. But they should be. As a field like digital humanities squabbles, the world around it is laid to waste. Academic turf wars have no place in a world of mass-shootings, fear-mongering, xenophobia, and white supremacy. Demanding fellow scholars do a literature review before speaking their mind has no place in a world of AR-15 assault rifles and weaponized algorithms. When something as basic as going to the bathroom lacks dignity for so many, we have no use for double-blind peer review.

All too often, defining a discipline becomes more an exercise of exclusion than inclusion.
Disrupting the Digital Humanities seeks to rethink how we map disciplinary terrain by directly confronting the gatekeeping impulse of many other so-called field-defining collections. What is most beautiful about the work of the digital humanities is exactly the fact that it can’t be tidily anthologized—that it’s messy and pushes in uncomfortable ways. The desire to neatly define the digital humanities (to filter the DH-y from the DH) is a way of excluding the radically diverse work that actually constitutes the field. Ultimately, it’s exactly the fringes, the outliers, that make the digital humanities both lovely and rigorous.

Many scholars originally were drawn to the digital humanities because we felt like outcasts, because we had been marginalized within the academic community. We gathered together because our work collectively disrupted the hegemony and insularity of the “traditional” humanities. Our work was collaborative, took risks, flattened hierarchies, shared resources, and created new and risky paradigms for humanities work. As attentions have turned increasingly toward the digital humanities, many of us have found ourselves more and more disillusioned. Much of that risk-taking, collaborative, community-supported, and open-to-all practice has been elided for a digital humanities creation-and-inclusion narrative that has made a turn towards traditional scholarship with a digital hand, government or institutionally funded database projects and tools, and a turn away from critical analysis of its own embedded practices, especially in relation to multilingualism, race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and global praxis. This is not a new critique, and we have no desire to duplicate other efforts. As Jessica Marie Johnson writes, “the humanities has a justice imperative that it has not

1 It has been most recently discussed in relation to digital humanities entanglement with the stakes of the neoliberal university. See David Allington, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia’s “Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities,” LA Review of Books, 1 May 2015. See also Jacque Wernimont’s “Whence Feminism? Assessing Feminist Interventions in Digital Literary Archives,” Digital Humanities Quarterly 7, no. 1 (2013), as well as work by Martha Nell Smith, Alex Juhasz, #tranformdh, Adeline Koh, Deb Verhoeven, #thistweetcalledmyback, and many others.
quite fulfilled as a mission (even as individuals continue to work and push that).”

Our contributors point to a myriad of places where this work has productively begun. There is nothing novel about asking these questions. There is nothing novel about being professionally marginalized for asking these questions.

This collection does not constitute yet another reservoir for the new digital humanities canon. We are not positing how the “big tent” has expanded and how that canon may or may not look. We are arguing, instead, for a digital humanities that is irrevocably destabilized from the outset. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein’s recent introduction to *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (2016) articulates a vision of the DH canon:

> We posit the book as a reflection of the current, site-specific conditions of the field. In the multivalent shape of its arguments, progressing across a range of platforms and environments, *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016* offers a vision of DH as an expanded field—a vision of new possibilities, differently structured.³

While this is important work, our aim is less about surveying, assembling, or re-assembling the field’s structures or conversations as it is about creating points of entry to dialogue. In the words of James Weldon Johnson (NAACP, 1930s), our collection is about “creative disorder,”⁴ about moving the margins to the center. Building a truly communal space for the digital humanities requires that we approach that space with a commitment to: 1) creating open and non-hierarchical dialogues; 2) championing non-traditional work that might not otherwise be recognized through conventional scholarly channels; 3) amplifying

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marginalized voices; 4) advocating for students and learners; and 5) sharing generously to support the work of our peers. *Disrupting the Digital Humanities* is more than a mere time capsule, more than just disciplinary navel-gazing. Our aim in gathering this material is to construct something that uses all of the talk about what the digital humanities is and isn’t as a jumping off point for a much deeper inquiry about education as social justice, the future of higher education, and what it is to be radically and diversely human in the digital age.

*Disrupting the Digital Humanities* offers a rowdy assemblage of works brought together, published open-access and in print. We have commissioned new chapters and are also republishing pieces that have stirred conversation elsewhere. However, we would not assume to anthologize the best of disrupted or disruptive DH. Rather, our goal is to bring to the surface voices that aren’t adequately heard in mainstream discussions of the digital humanities.

Our contributors are a motley crew prodding at the constraints of conventional academic prose. Contributors work within a diverse array of digital humanities subfields, including postcolonial, queer, critical race, disability, radical librarianship, feminist digital humanities, adjunct DH, public humanities, and digital pedagogy. The goal is to make more space for broader perspectives in the digital humanities, to bring otherwise marginalized voices (or bits of voices no matter how small) to the fore. The collection includes critique, manifestos, art, poetry, play, listicles, and other forms.

**dis·rup·tion**
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In feminist critical race theory, black, indigenous, and women of color (BIWOC) bodies disrupt the narratives of mainstream white feminism by having voices, by creating counternarratives, by calling out the frameworks of the hegemonic center. Thus we take for this volume the productive term “disruption” in the same vein, to decenter the digital humanities. We reimagine DH
as not the seamless products of the neoliberal academy, non-profit “philanthropists,” fascist government, and the military industrial complex, but as the work of people, labor, and voices at the margins creating friction and fantasy, mapping edges and new locations, playing slanted and in glitches with distributed resources and global communities.

In tech circles, the word “disruption” has come to mean something altogether different and more insidious. The tech industry is saturated with a rhetoric that imagines “disruptive innovation” as a system of creative disruption when in fact it is more often influenced by profit, efficiency, and the faux-revolution of technology bound up in the trappings of commerce. “Disruptive innovation” has co-opted the term “disruption” as a far more sanitizing mechanism whereby increasing the efficiency and spreadability of the capitalist status quo becomes a so-called “revolution.” And so, we here reclaim the word “disruption” in order to rehabilitate it and to return its originally intended critical heft.

Though we will not offer an exhaustive history of the use of the term “disruption,” we do wish to point to an extensive bibliography that grapples with this term and theory in critical race studies. In a 1989 article, Richard Delgado writes, “the stories


of outgroups aim to subvert that ingroup reality.”7 He continues, “stories and counterstories, to be effective, must be or must appear to be noncoercive. They invite the reader to suspend judgment, listen for their point or message, and then decide what measure of truth they contain. They are insinuative, not frontal; they offer a respite from linear, coercive discourse.”8 Delgado’s idea of counternarrative very much resonates with the purpose of our collection. As Charles R. Lawrence III explains in his 1990 discussion of civil rights protest and speech, “we are aware that the struggle for racial equality has relied heavily on the persuasion of peaceful protest protected by the first amendment, but experience also teaches us that our petitions often go unanswered until they disrupt business as usual and require the self-interested attention of those persons in power.”9 Social justice and equity are as urgent now, and much of the “business as usual” in need of disrupting is currently fortified by the tech industry.

“Disruption,” as a critical term is not something that tech circles have invented, but rather have erased or coopted from the work of scholars on race. The terrain of our collection highlights

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8 Ibid, 2415.

the critical importance of subjectivity and autoethnography in the work of resisting oppressive systems:

Critical race theory writing embraces an experimentally grounded, oppositionally expressed, and transformatively aspirational concern with race and other socially constructed hierarchies. […] The narrative voice, the teller, is important to critical race theory in a way not understandable by those whose voices are tacitly deemed legitimate and authoritative. The voice exposes, tells and retells, signals resistance and caring, and reiterates the most fearsome power — the power of commitment to change.¹⁰

Counternarratives from the margins, as Garrett Albert Duncan writes, “provide potent counterpoints to challenge existing narratives.”¹¹ Counternarratives or counterstories¹² in this

volume narrate away from the center of the digital humanities which has been consistently and frequently imagined as a white, male, able-bodied, cisgendered, heternormative space.\footnote{Counterstories purposely disrupt stock stories by telling personal accounts that contradict the stock stories. […] These are stories that people of color of all economic backgrounds, and of all educational and professional attainments, tell.” See Sherry Marx, “Critical Race Theory,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, eds. Lisa M. Given, 164–68 (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2008), 166.}

This assemblage takes the critical term “disruption” and plays with these theoretical strands to produce multiple-voiced counternarratives about the hegemonic center of digital humanities. Together these different, non-straight approaches, disrupt the formation of DH and its definitions of itself by slanting the outlook, mixing and blending hierarchical frameworks, shaking up the terms and frames. One can’t substantively “include” everyone without disrupting hierarchies — without transforming the field’s critical lens and practice. Different geographies, different languages, and different modes of scholarship demand new frames. Put simply, the digital humanities must reimagine itself, and its boundaries, in order to make way for a more radically inclusive and activist community.

**An origin counternarrative**

This collection was inspired by two open conversations at the Modern Language Association’s 2015 and 2016 conferences. Many of the chapters evolved from short position papers re-


\footnote{However, we also take the criticism of counternarratives as potentially a form of “empathic fallacy” that particularly is done for “white sympathies” (see Vaught, *Racism, Public Schooling, and the Entrenchment of White Supremacy*, 19). See also Richard Delgado, *The Coming Race War?: And Other Apocalyptic Tales of America after Affirmative Action and Welfare* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) and Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*.}
leased in advance of these conversations. Selections from these chapters were published on disruptingdh.com and also spurred conversation on social media and across the open web. “Disrupting the Digital Humanities” was, according to MLA Commons, the most tweeted session at MLA 2015 in Vancouver. It was again one of the most tweeted sessions at MLA 2016.

The conversation at these sessions included panelists, voices from virtual contributors, and extensive audience interaction. At both sessions, panelists offered brief opening remarks with a facilitator “leading” discussion, but papers were published openly in advance, effectively “flipping” the conference presentation. The time spent together during the session was used mostly for dialogue and debate between panelists and between the panel and audience. At MLA 2015, Dorothy Kim absented herself from the panel to make way for the voices of #thistweetcalledmyback, a group of black, indigenous, and women of color activists working in digital spaces. We broadened this further during MLA 2016 (in light of the Presidential theme, “Literature and Its Publics: Past, Present, and Future”) by hosting a live Twitter chat (on #digped and #disruptingDH) leading up to and during the session. Our aim was to question the boundaries of the digital humanities as an academic discipline and to redirect our work outward towards an ecosystem of publics.

To launch the conversation at our first panel, Sean Michael Morris asked a series of questions, which have helped frame the work of this collection:

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14 Academia and DH particularly must ask why these public writers, citizens, activists did not opt to contribute their discussions and work to this volume. Is academic work already too attuned to the “empathic fallacy” of white academic audiences (academia’s demographics makes this particularly clear)? We are, thus, missing a vital counterstory and counternarrative to the mainstream, academic, white, hegemonic discussions of the digital humanities. It is an absence in our collection that narrates how the digital humanities, in the end, fails to allow adequate space for these voices to tell their stories. See Lauren Chief Elk et al., “This Tweet Called My Back,” Model View Culture, 13 December 2014.
• What are the best ways for us to practice radical inclusion? How do we amplify marginalized voices, and what are the complications associated with trying to do so?
• Attempts have been made ad nauseam to define the digital humanities. Can we come to some sense of DH that encapsulates the field and the work without delimiting it?
• Who is left out of the DH conversation? When and how have they been left out? Or perhaps more to the point, how has digital humanities been inscribed in such a way as to omit their work?
• Where is the conversation about digital humanities really taking place? Is it in conference rooms like this one? If so, who is guiding that conversation? And if not, where are the richest conversations happening, and who is leading them?

And, in her position paper for our MLA 2016 panel (revised for this collection), Annemarie Perez offered one answer to this last question by describing her encounter with the digital humanities at MLA 2012: “the rooms, crowded to bursting were visibly, notably white spaces. This was a bit jarring, but what was even more so was that no one was talking about this. No one was asking where the brown people were. The absence of racialized bodies was un-noted.” She felt, as many others have (and still do), like the shapes of the rooms and who could comfortably occupy them had been determined (and delimited) in advance of her arriving.

We have no interest in duplicating the institutional structures of prestige and privilege that have already led to certain voices being left out of this conversation. We decidedly did not use a traditional CFP or peer-review process to choose panelists or chapters for the collection. Rather, we imagined this project as a grassroots effort from the start, less about championing the legitimacy of individual projects and more about questioning who decides what counts (and how). About reimagining legitimacy as less a product of gatekeeping and more a product of community building. On the other hand, this collection remains troublingly academic. And, after this process, we recognize the
charge to continue to find ways to breach the gap between scholarly networks, academic publics, and extra-academic publics. To highlight and make central the “undercommons” and “maroon spaces” that Johnson has discussed. But these are not just our gaps to breach; academia must also (and first) find ways to step aside so these publics can speak and we can listen. These publics must feel safe, compensated, credited in order for dialogue to emerge.

We have organized this book in a non-linear and overlapping set of keywords: Etymology, Play, Structure, Labor, Identity, Networks, Jeremiad. The pieces in this collection can be identified with at least one but often are identified with more than one of these keywords. In this way, the organization of this volume does not have a rigid linear structure. For example, Meg Worley’s piece “The Rhetoric of Disruption” is an example of Etymology as she digs deeply into the history of the word “disruption” itself while simultaneously also being a narrative about DH’s identity, and a subtle jeremiad about the impossibility of a homogenous DH community. She proposes, “that we camouflage ourselves with disruptive coloration. Let us play up our contrasts in order to simultaneously disguise and preserve the unity of the whole.” Likewise, the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo’s two poetic pieces show the contours of identity, jeremiads, and structures that give out a “GOLD STAR FOR FEELING ‘MOVED’ BY CLAUDIA RANKINE’S CITIZEN BUT BEING MOVED TO DO NOTHING IN AN ACTUALITY THAT MIGHT IMPACT YOU.” We are delighted to include these pieces in the collection because they point so loudly to the problems of whiteness in academic and digital spaces: “GOLD STAR FOR PROTECTING YOUR NETWORK AND REFUSING TO CALL OUT YOUR RACIST BUDS OR PUBLICLY SUPPORT THOSE WHO DO. PROPS TO WHITENESS!” Their work is also an example of a collective activist group, protesting ingeniously and playing with the limits of a digital platform to call out this whiteness.

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15 See Dinsman, “The Digital in the Humanities: An Interview with Jessica Marie Johnson.”
The volume also includes a discussion of MOOCs (a topic the digital humanities has proclaimed taboo) but through a postcolonial and global lens. As Maha Bali writes in “The ‘Unbearable’ Exclusion of the Digital”:

In spite of good intentions (and sometimes blatant pretensions of altruism and respect), platforms like the once wildly popular xMOOCs only exposed and intensified fake universality of design and practices in transnational higher education. Inclusion, we suggested, cannot be achieved by imposing or assuming local values as universal, representing others as tokens, refusing to look beyond those who are already in, denying the hegemony of power, or using stories of those who have bought in to suggest inclusion of everyone from everyone.

Their piece also traverses our keywords from structure to labor, identity, networks, and jeremiads.

Chris Bourg’s piece on “The Library is Never Neutral” plainly explains one of the foundational slices in this collection:

A fundamental tenet that undergirds this article, and frankly undergirds much of the work I have done in and for libraries, is the simple assertion that libraries are not now nor have they ever been merely neutral repositories of information. […] [W]e live in a society that still suffers from racism, sexism, ableism, transphobia and other forms of bias and inequality; but libraries also fail to achieve any mythical state of neutrality because we contribute to bias and inequality in scholarship, and publishing, and information access.

The digital humanities is not neutral and this is not a statement of passive reflection. The digital humanities is not neutral because — in its current big-tentish, expanding-terrainish configuration — it still does not (and sometimes refuses to) consistently, rigorously, methodically, theoretically bring the perspectives of the margins in relation to race, gender, disability, sexuality, etc.
into the center of its default discourse. Our data, our algorithms, our databases, our tools, our methodologies, our objects, our networks, our writing, our funding streams, our conferences are never neutral.

**Disrupting the introduction**

We want to end by acknowledging how hard it is to write an introduction to a book that aims to push productively at the edges of a field when that field is in turmoil. Our hope is that the brand of “disruption” we’re offering here is not taken merely as critique but offers paths to formulate questions that facilitate a different path and view. We know this may not spur the collective move forward in the way we'd both hope for, but we will (and we hope the field will) stumble forward multiply nonetheless, finding increasing (not diminishing) points of entry to dialogue.

Our aim is not to agree with every word of every piece in this collection. Our aim is to push upon thinking (our own, our contributors, our readers) more than allow it to congeal into something like agreement. But all of the pieces here are motivated by a desire to make the digital humanities more open, more inclusive, more generous. There is anger among these pieces, and sadness and frustration, but also hope. Of the kind Paulo Freire advocates for, a hope that demands struggle, action, activism. This collection is about dreams and possibilities. Audre Lorde writes on the importance of poetry:

> Possibility is neither forever nor instant. It is not easy to sustain belief in its efficacy. […] [W]e must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions our dreams imply and some of our old ideas disparage. In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only our poetry to hint at possibility made real.\(^{16}\)

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Particularly in a moment of increasing fascism, deadly racism, virulent antifeminism, and violent transphobia, it is important to staunchly continue in the belief that dissent can make space for hope and community. Play, disruption, and the articulation of dreams and possibilities are not “a luxury” but an essential part of what it means to be human in a digital world. The digital humanities should never be so cloyingly academic as to turn its nose from the rigors of this kind of work — a very specific kind of rigor that might at times seem anathema to academia. A rigor that values dialogue over peer review, poetry over data, community over citation, asking honest questions over demands for evidence.

We are decidedly not defining DH. It is not for us to define. Not for any single voice or collection or discipline to define. The goal of our collection is to highlight gaps, fissures, and points of productive contact. It is not a history. It is not a representative anthology. It is not even an intervention in any direct way. It is “creative disorder” interested in letting a rhizomatic counternarrative of the digital humanities speak, breathe, play. It offers no linear reading but asks its readers to forge their own narrative from our shifting assemblage. We are publishing an assortment of outliers and pieces that productively open (rather than police) the boundaries of DH. Together, they work to short circuit the worst tendencies of the increasingly corporate university that would have us constantly in competition with each other for limited resources. Rather, the work asks us to, as Jesse has said, “make friends as an act of radical political resistance.”

Our aim is to leave no DH stone unturned and to revel in what we discover and what we can weave together from so many parts.

We end this introduction by invoking bell hooks from her book *Teaching to Transgress*: “The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to
move beyond boundaries, to transgress.”\textsuperscript{17} We end this introduction by asking our readers to transgress, to resist, to hope, to protest, to play slant, to create communities, to demand change. Together. This is what matters.

\textsuperscript{17} bell hooks, \textit{Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom} (New York: Routledge, 1994), 207.
Bibliography


“Who’s Afraid of Critical Race Theory.” In *The Derrick Bell Reader, Critical America*, edited by Richard Delgado and