

February 22, 2021

Dear Brandon Walsh and Scholars' Lab community,

When I arrived at the University of Virginia to study History, I had never heard of the digital humanities. I imagined myself as a person who is bad at technology and incapable of coding. However, my department's strong engagement with the Scholars' Lab and the digital humanities certificate program has exposed me to colleagues who convinced me that the digital humanities are leading the way in making our disciplines and research more accessible to the public. As a first-generation college student from a working-class, rural background, I know too well how inaccessible quality educational resources are for people living in disadvantaged environments. I am impressed by the Scholars' Lab's work on creating open-source software and open access content. These are the kinds of tools that can help students in both under-resourced communities and elite universities, and it would be exciting to be part of that project.

As the Scholars' Lab seeks to use its resources to respond to pedagogy challenges raised by the pandemic, this research will matter the most for the most underserved communities among us. My colleagues have spoken highly of using tools such as Omeka in the classroom, and I would be excited to learn how to use these techniques to engage different learning styles. My academic work as a historian and cultural studies scholar has focused on the music of communities in places that have been purposefully under-resourced, from the Mississippi hill country to postindustrial Detroit. I do not claim to speak for any of the communities I have lived and studied in, but I do think my experience brings to the table someone who has lived, worked, and grown-up in the places that most need the innovative tools of the digital humanities brought to bear on educational challenges and failures.

My dissertation project is about the radical Left and rock music in Detroit during the mid- to late-twentieth century. Detroit has consistently been a site of radical dissident activism since the late nineteenth century, but this narrative is obscured by the story of postindustrial urban decay. I seek to demonstrate how punks, anarchists, and other radical Leftists in the Motor City have been imagining and creating alternatives to hegemony within postindustrial Detroit, building a more liberated future in a seemingly abandoned urban space. The punk genre is often cited as having been born in Detroit in the late 1960s with bands such as the MC5, a group that was the mouthpiece of antiracist activist John Sinclair's White Panther Party. The American corollary of the antifascist movement, Anti-Racist Action, was created in the hardcore subculture in Minneapolis during the 1980s, but I argue that John Sinclair's idea to use the MC5 to build white solidarity with the Black Panthers was a clear predecessor to antifa's American birth in the hardcore punk movement. I also seek to explore through both archival research and fieldwork how punks in Detroit built their own Anti-Racist Action branch during the 1980s, and how in the early 1990s Detroit anarchists created the house and safe space the Trumbullplex, which continues to operate as a home and performance venue today. As a queer person who was drawn to punk from a young age due to its tendency to trouble the boundaries of gender and sexuality, I hope to excavate and elevate queer voices from Detroit's punk history.

This project will be greatly served by digital humanities skills. I hope to create a digital component that includes music and clips from oral interviews, using tools such as Soundcite and GarageBand. Last spring, I took a seminar on Black Atlantic Sound Studies with Dr. Njelle Hamilton as a part of the Virginia Humanities South Atlantic Studies Fellowship. This encounter with the field of Sound Studies was transformative for my approach to music writing and scholarship, and I believe digital

humanities is the best way to engage and incorporate sound into writing about music. A large part of my archival research will include punk zines and I hope to create a digital project so that these little-seen artifacts can be read online. These zines were self-made, self-published writings and art by working-class activists in the process of learning how to fight white supremacy and neoliberal capitalism. I believe making their zines more accessible to other activists can have profound consequences. We know that the erasure of the radical Left during the Cold War weakened the New Left of the 1960s, which had to essentially start from scratch. Making these zines available can help activists see the theory, praxis, mistakes, and successes of last generation's radical antiracist activists. I believe that digital tools can help bring to life the alternative worlds that the historical subjects of my dissertation imagined.

I am a historian, and am getting my degree from a disciplinary department, but my interests and background are interdisciplinary. I have spent the last year teaching for the African American and African Studies department. My first M.A. is in Southern Studies and Gender Studies. My bachelor's degree is in creative writing. I always knew that thinking within disciplinary boxes is uncomfortable for me, but until I encountered digital humanities, I did not realize that in order to be truly interdisciplinary, one must think outside the bounds of the traditional academic monograph and paper.

I find the idea of working collaboratively on a team project particularly exciting, as I think research in the humanities can often be an isolating experience. In my previous work as an editorial assistant at the *Encyclopedia of Virginia* and *Living Blues* magazine, I found working with a team to produce editorial content at a fast pace fun and intellectually engaging. I would like to learn more about how different types of humanities work can be done in a collaborative environment. I think of myself as a "scholar-activist," a framework that I believe is important to prevent from reifying a culture of individualism. My research is about antiracist activism, and antiracist activism informs my pedagogy. I think participating in a year-long collaboration will be an opportunity to create community with like-minded scholars at UVa and also give me tools to be a better community member in the future.

I am additionally interested in how digital humanities can be applied to public history work, which I believe the pandemic and our current reckoning with racial injustice have made even more pertinent. I have spent years working in both public and academic libraries, and libraries, archives, museums, and other public history careers are a path I am interested in exploring. These have been safe spaces for me, but I know that for many people, especially BIPOC, they are not. How can digital humanities be engaged to make these places and the information they hold accessible to more people?

I would like to become a Praxis Fellow because I believe learning digital humanities skills that can be applied to my research, pedagogy, and activism in concrete ways can help make my work more accessible to the communities I engage with. I can see from reading the charters that the Scholars' Lab offers a supportive environment where I could receive and practice empathy and try new things without a fear of failure. I am available for an interview on March 23 from 1-2 p.m. and March 24 from 10-11 a.m. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,
Jacqui Sahagian