

Dear Professor Brian Cassidy,

I am a fifth-year doctoral candidate in U.S. History at the University of Virginia and I am excited to submit my application for your Rare Book School course “Identifying and Understanding Twentieth-Century Duplicating Technologies.” I am applying to this course because I desire to gain a more intimate and nuanced understanding of the duplication technologies used by the subjects of my dissertation, “Trashland Adventures: Building Bohemia in Detroit’s Cass Corridor, 1963-2013.” These subjects include printmakers, zinesters, and pioneers of the underground press who used duplication to create art, publish poetry, foment dissent, promote rock concerts, advocate for marijuana legalization, create underground news publications, make zines, and spark cultural and political revolution. “Twentieth-Century Duplicating Technologies” would substantially inform my entire dissertation, which tells the story of the bohemian communities that existed in the Cass Corridor until the neighborhood was significantly altered by gentrification and the building of a sports arena in the wake of Detroit’s infamous 2013 bankruptcy. This course would be especially informative to a chapter on the Detroit Artists Workshop, the Alternative Press, and the Detroit Printing Co-op, three community organizations that used duplication technology to foster bohemian community in the Corridor neighborhood during the 1960s-1970s, leaving impacts that would long outlast them. While many accounts of these artists and movements portray a late-century decline as Detroit experienced a harsher period of deindustrialization in the 1980s and 1990s, my project argues that the Corridor neighborhood remained a home to artists and activists who created a strong intergenerational community, in part through print.

My interest in underground publications came through my own artistic practices as a musician, a poet, and fiction writer, and especially my involvement in the subculture of punk rock. I come from an artistic family. My uncle is a Metro Detroit born and based cartoonist who has worked for underground and political publications and introduced me to underground comics at a young age. I performed as a member of a punk band while I pursued an undergraduate degree in creative writing at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. There, I was mentored by the poet Keith Taylor, who himself participated in the poetry printing project of the Alternative Press. Underground publications are the connective tissue of so many of the artistic movements that I have participated in and that have sustained me, but it is only through researching my dissertation that I have begun to learn about the importance of printing.

I have done extensive primary source research for my dissertation project with underground newspapers, letterpress broadsides, mimeographed manifestos, and xeroxed zines and flyers, many of which have been accessed in private collections. Due to the political and unconventional nature of these sources, much of the primary source material I am working with comes from private collections, is often undated, and stored with varying levels of organization. The ability to better understand these documents as material objects will be an indispensable skill as I continue to work with materials that have not been processed by “official” archives.

While the figures in my dissertation wrote extensively about duplication, and many felt that this was a central aspect of their artistic and political movements, I have only gained exposure to the nature of this work through reading about it. I do not have a background in visual arts and have not yet had a hands-on opportunity to learn about these technologies. This course and the Rare Book School’s resources offer an indispensable opportunity for me to gain intimacy with the historical subjects of my dissertation and greater understanding of their art-making and day-to-day work.

I am aware that some of these experiences are slightly unconventional, but they have prepared me well to engage with underground and avant-garde publications and to study “Twentieth Century Duplicating Technologies” at the Rare Book School. I believe it is crucial that I understand the artistic practice of printmakers, zinesters, xerographers, and mimeographers in order to successfully convey the lives, art, and politics of my dissertation subjects. Thank you for considering my application.

Jacqueline Sahagian