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Reflective Essay for Lang Prize

For research, study, or leisure, Shields Library has been the bedrock of my UC Davis experience since freshman year. Stacks of its books line my shelves and crowd my living room floor. This past winter, my engagement with the library reached new proportions. At one point I had nineteen books checked out. By finals week I had spent three afternoons in the Special Collections reading room, not to mention countless hours perusing call-numbers as diverse in discipline as geology, environmental sociology, and evolutionary biology. The occasion for this effort was a research paper I was writing for UWP 102C: Writing in History. My topic, Gary Snyder's references to the Ice Age in the context of mid-twentieth-century environmentalism, was deliberately interdisciplinary, such that many of my ideas would have been impossible to substantiate, and would likely never have occurred to me, without access to the library's great variety of resources. What the facility didn't have on-site or online—a collection on Pleistocene extinctions, or chapbook of poems, for instance—I could obtain in a matter of days by Interlibrary Loan. What the library had but I couldn't check out—Snyder's personal manuscripts, or microfilm copies of nineteenth-century treatises on the Ice Age—I could view in Special Collections and in the downstairs microfilm collection.

From the class's outset, I had to think long and hard about how best to fold my UWP paper into a larger project I have been working on since the fall: my senior thesis for the University Honors Program. The paper I eventually wrote, "Gary Snyder's Pleistocene Environmentalism," is something of a preliminary run-through for the thesis, which is broader both topically and chronologically, encompassing more than the environmental movement and

more of Snyder's career than the three decades to which I limited myself in the paper. The thesis's tentative title is "Living in the Glacial Landscape." It attempts an explication of Snyder's poems and essays in light of the glaciers and climates of the Pleistocene epoch. My ultimate goal is to lay out, with Snyder as my guide, a framework for a twenty-first-century Pleistocene Environmentalism, which I believe is essential to living hopefully and reforming intentionally during the coming decades of climate change. I doubt we can learn to live in a post-glacial world largely of our own making, though never fully within our control, before we have learned to live—and learned how prehistoric men and women *did* live—in the now fast-receding glacial world of the Pleistocene. Snyder, from his meditations on glaciated alpine environments to his commentary on pre-agrarian hunter-gatherers, is the one contemporary writer whom I feel has shown us a way toward this understanding.

Not coincidentally for my research, Snyder is also a retired UC Davis professor, and consequently is well-represented in the library. I have been visiting the fourth-floor shelf of his books since the spring of 2018, and now have nearly emptied it of its contents. This winter was my first time accessing the Gary Snyder Papers in Special Collections, though every time I pass by the reading room's photo of Snyder in the first-floor hall I nod in acknowledgment. To make a historical case about Snyder's Ice Age environmental ethic, as I did in my paper, I had not only to acquaint myself with his writing, but with that of other writers from the time period under study, approximately 1947 to 1977. The best place to start, as my thesis advisor, Scott Herring of the University Writing Program, put it, was to uncover the period's "mental landscape" as recorded by Snyder himself. The daily journals in the Gary Snyder Papers presented just such an opportunity, with multiple references to books or articles Snyder was reading around the time he wrote his Ice Age-themed poems and essays. After copying over passages by hand, I would later

search the library catalogue for the authors and titles Snyder mentioned. In this manner, I was able to locate, skim, and in a few cases read in their entirety the same editions of the same books or essays Snyder read fifty to sixty years ago. Good examples are V. Gordon Childe's *The Prehistory of European Society*, Marston Bates's *The Forest and the Sea*, G.H. Dury's *The Face of the Earth*, and Paul Martin's "The Discovery of America." Only some of these sources found a place in my final paper, not because I deemed them unreliable or irrelevant, but because the sheer complexity of my subject and of Snyder's history with it go well beyond what I could do justice to in one in-class research paper. Indeed, letting go of some cherished sources or describing them only briefly, at least to meet the constraints of this iteration of my project, was one of my UWP paper's most challenging aspects. My dream is to culminate my work as a book after graduating. There, almost certainly, all sources I discovered in the journals in Special Collections will play a role.

More than just as commonplace books, however, Snyder's journals deserve further comment. They are a striking example of the depth of his thought, especially at the young age of seventeen, when the collection's holdings begin. For someone not far in age from Snyder when he wrote them, and with similar formative experiences on hikes in the Cascade and Olympic Mountains, I was immediately and emotionally drawn in when I first leafed through Snyder's 1947-1948 mountaineering recollections. In the interest of time, I could not read his accounts fully, and had to maneuver between journals from various points in his early career, which also included 1962-1963, 1966-1967, and 1973-1976. The personal insights the journals gave me, such as what Snyder thought about glaciers he encountered while hiking, were immensely valuable for writing my paper. I am greatly saddened that closure of campus for COVID-19 largely precludes future access to Special Collections, as well as to the library more generally.

By the same token, I am immensely grateful for the time I was able to spend last quarter in those spaces. Library staff were incredibly accommodating and helpful, especially those in Special Collections and research librarian Dan Goldstein, whom I met one-on-one to discuss ways to search databases for the sources I needed. I could not have asked for a more positive and productive library experience to conclude my four years as an Aggie.