

Ashbery and Me: Lang Prize Reflection Essay

In the spring of last year, I decided to join the English Department's Creative Writing Honors Program to write a creative piece for my thesis. Because of this, I wasn't able to also take part in the Critical Honors Program, which allows students to write a twenty-page thesis on a literary work. However, I soon realized that I also wanted to gain practice conducting research and critical examination of literature. For this reason, I decided to embark on an independent research project. I reached out to professors and was lucky enough to find an advisor, but without the structure of the honors program, I was overwhelmed by the task ahead of me. The library and its many resources were instrumental in the research and writing of my thesis and allowed me to gain valuable experience I would have otherwise missed out on.

My thesis is on American poetry, specifically John Ashbery's relationship with the camp aesthetic in his often overlooked project, *The Vermont Notebook*. I chose this topic because of my love of Ashbery and because I often saw him conflated with camp, a queer aesthetic, on the basis of his sexuality as a gay man more than the merit of his works. For many years, queer elements in authors' works were buried or ignored because of heteronormative assumptions. Queer readings revolutionized our understanding of many works and gave us an important lens with which to approach literature. However, some of these readings paint with a broad brush and typecast queer authors as only capable of referencing their identity. To reduce Ashbery, one of the most prolific American poets, to this seemed unproductive. I was interested in defining how Ashbery's use of camp in poetry was not just a byproduct of his sexuality, but a deliberate and nuanced choice that reflected his understanding of language.

Immediately, I ran into two problems. One: John Ashbery, the poet I wanted to explore, is famous for the difficulty critics have in pinning him down. Ashbery himself is quoted as saying,

“I often wonder if I am suffering from some mental dysfunction because of how weird and baffling my poetry seems to so many people and sometimes to me too.” Two: camp, the aesthetic I wanted to explore, is also famous for its resistance to being defined. I had a lot of work ahead of me to understand contemporary and historical criticism, so I could ultimately make a solid, creative argument that added to critical conversations. This included a wide literature review. In the English honors program, there is an entire class devoted to research methods. I got the chance to approach research more independently, due largely to the tools of the library.

When I was beginning to write, I made use of an annotated bibliography at the suggestion of my advisor. I sorted my sources by their topic to see where I had gaps. Interviews with or quotations from Ashbery himself I sorted chronologically, in order to maintain an understanding of how his ideas and poetry evolved over time. In many ways, working on this project felt like getting to know the author so I could represent him accurately to an audience. In order to do that, I needed to ensure I was aware of the complexities of his work and public life.

Understanding the library catalog’s search tool allowed me to find obscure titles with only a few keywords. One of these was *Theatricality & Absorption*, a title I found based on a few keywords a professor mentioned in their office hours. I located the book through the library’s database but found that it was unavailable at UC Davis. Through the interlibrary loan, I requested and received it at Peter J. Shields Library within a week. This book on eighteenth century art criticism would have otherwise never made it into my thesis about American poet John Ashbery, much less become an essential frame for my argument.

The advanced search tool was also essential because so many of my keywords had multiple meanings. “Camp + poetry” would bring up hundreds of articles on Nazi concentration camps and Japanese internment camps, instead of what I needed for my thesis. Similarly, when I

wanted to talk about the poem as an environment itself, “environment + poetry” gave me tons of options for poetry about nature instead. Using the “not” function to filter out unwanted searches was essential. Filtering by date helped me find contemporary research that reflected a more current understanding of, for example, queer aesthetics.

I balanced using online versus print sources based on their relevance to my topics. When sources seemed to be directly relevant to what I was exploring, I opted for a print source. This allowed me to annotate more easily on removable sticky notes or a separate piece of paper. I very quickly came to understand the call number system in order to find hard copies in Shields Library. For less relevant sources, I tried to find online versions so I could scan them quickly or use the “search text” tool to jump straight to the first mention of a keyword. I used the research guide for American Literature to locate online articles about *The Vermont Notebook*. Additionally, the guide for Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies helped me to contextualize the sociopolitical atmosphere of Ashbery's time, which included the Lavender Scare and the disqualification of gay people, including Ashbery, from military service.

When I first decided to embark on my independent thesis, I contacted students who had completed the critical honors program before in order to understand what tools they used. One student expressed their regret over not having made the most of secondary sources, inspiring me to book a research consultation and meet with a librarian for help exploring secondary texts. Through our exploration, I was able to pinpoint several key articles to provide context to my arguments (for example, by defining camp) and broaden the scope of my analysis (for example, by comparing Ashbery to his contemporaries). In my research consultation, I also learned that UC Davis students have access to subscriptions like *The New York Times*, which was a great source for credible quotes from and about John Ashbery that were harder to find in online

databases.

Before this project, I had never written a paper of this length. One of the most impactful ways that library research helped me was just by giving me examples of what a thesis could or should look like. I looked for thesis projects that dealt with similar fields in order to ensure relevance to my final project. I continued to reference these for ideas on structure and pacing as I worked through my project. These, as well as the library's citation overviews, helped me decide which citation system would be best for my project.

One of the unique features of the text my thesis explores, *The Vermont Notebook*, is its images: each page of text is accompanied by an ink illustration by Joe Brainard. Though I was able to find online copies of the book, the images were often faint or blurry online. Given the centrality of these illustrations to the text, I decided to look for a physical copy and was intrigued to discover one in the library's special collection. When I visited in person, seeing the beautifully printed drawings alongside the text allowed me to form new associations and inspire new analysis. I read through the entire first edition text and, at the very end, found the autographs of John Ashbery and Joe Brainard, which was very exciting.

Through my research, I came to the conclusion that Ashbery's poetry reflects an understanding of language as productive distortion. That is, as something that inherently twists and expands, rather than reflecting reality perfectly. I had seen this quality of language in action through my research; every new critic used their writing to imply a new perspective, slightly warping the text to better match their argument. As Ashbery reveals in *The Vermont Notebook*, the transformative property of language is not an inherently malicious one: language is abundant, misrepresentative, and wonderful. As we enjoy it, we must keep in mind the fact that writing down an experience always changes it.

Language and literacy are core interests of mine, and I plan to spend a career understanding how we learn and use language. This thesis built my research skills and allowed me to think about how language produces meaning. I am excited to continue applying these skills and expand my knowledge as I work to improve literacy in the United States. In line with these goals, I am proud to support and be supported by the library, a place that makes literacy more accessible to everyone.

No AI tools/technologies were used in the writing of this essay.