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Reflective Essay

When beginning any new research endeavor, my approach is to always start with a question that I'm genuinely interested in answering, or to delve into a subject that I'm unfamiliar with. The goal of any research process should be to learn something entirely new, or to glean a new perspective, or to dive deeply into something one had previously only scratched the surface of. Research papers should not simply be a means of reaffirming an already held theory, or a rephrasing of other established ones. To approach research with an unbiased lens, and a genuine curiosity, is something that took me a while to learn. It takes time to truly understand that your education is your own, and that each project can be an opportunity for personal enlightenment, and not just a grade to finish out your credits.

So for my paper on Julia Margaret Cameron for History of Photography (ART 475), I approached the subject with only a light understanding of her, and an urge to learn more about Victorian society, and how their culture affected photographic practices, and vice versa. The goal for my first visit to the Lied Library was just to ascertain a general overview of her life and her work. *Julia Margaret Cameron: photography from the J.Paul Getty Museum* and *Julia Margaret Cameron* by Joanne Lukitsch were great entry points. The latter was an especially helpful book, providing many of her photographs alongside a survey of her life. I also picked up a book that tied her work directly to ideas surrounding "Victorian identity and empire," by Jeff Rosen. I chose the book because it was published by a noteworthy university press, and it would be a good resource to ground my research in. I was also able to find several book reviews on it

through the UNLV online database of scholarly journals. Reading book reviews are important for reminding me to continue to question what I read, and to look at texts from different angles.

Through my continued research surrounding Jeff Rosen's book, I found Cameron's album, *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men & Fair Women*. This photographic album, gathered and published by her great-niece Virginia Woolf, gave me a different perspective on her work. I became much more interested in Cameron's role as a female photographer in Victorian society, and many of her artistic, stylistic choices in staging her photographs. Thus, I took a new direction in my research. I relied heavily on the UNLV online database, since I wanted to find primary sources from Cameron herself, as well as analysis of her works by scholars in the field of art theory and criticism. Some of the keywords I used were, "cameron, victorian society, cameron's writing, photographic theory, cameron artistic style." It was difficult to find journals that weren't simply overviews of Cameron's life. However, I was able to find one scholarly journal that provided a copy of Cameron's letter, and this was a vital document to my research, since it showed, in Cameron's own words, her purposeful approach to photography.

Since I had some difficulty finding useful sources through the UNLV online database, I decided to do a basic Google search of scholars within the field of theory and criticism that have written on the subject of photography. This lead me to Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. Susan Sontag is an extremely noteworthy critic and activist, and *On Photography* was the perfect collection of essays that provided a toolbox for my research. *On Photography* gave me a vocabulary and theoretical perspective to work from, and helped focus the scope of my paper. It was also great because her essays didn't tell me how to think, or give me specific theories and ideas on viewing Cameron's work, but general perspectives within the intersection of

photography and feminism. I realized that I needed to take a much more in-depth look at the gendered aspects of photography, and Cameron's role of inhabiting the private sphere of women and the professional sphere of photographer. With *On Photography* in mind, I was able to formulate my own ideas surrounding Cameron's work. This also allowed to have a more clear search criteria for the UNLV online database moving forward.

Throughout my research, I tried to stay close to my goal of not forming an opinion too early, or letting my previous opinions dictate my research. I wanted to be open to change the direction of my research to suit the introduction of new information. All of the resources provided by the Lied Library allowed to me to find my own critical theory, and to be able to write about it confidently.