A habitual challenge Dr. Susan Johnston poses students in her ENGL 349 class is an assignment like no other—to prepare a “scholarly edition” of any artifact dating from the years of Queen Victoria’s reign. When I was tasked with this assignment last winter, I was bewildered. This was unlike any paper I had ever written; in fact, it need not have anything to do with literature at all. We were to find absolutely everything we could about the artifact, enough information to create a comprehensive introduction, a “Note on the Text”, and any additional helpful contexts in as many appendices as required. Needless to say, this project was daunting enough without this bolded comment on the assignment page: “this assignment is a SERIOUS RESEARCH PROJECT requiring SERIOUS RESEARCH HOURS”. After some agonizing over the sheer breadth of possibilities, I eventually settled on my artifact, a photograph entitled “Beatrice” by Julia Margaret Cameron, a figure whom I had encountered through previous research on the Pre-Raphaelites. And now, where to begin?

Our professor had organized a series of workshops with liaison librarian Kate Cushon, who spent three classes giving us a crash course in research strategies. She referred us to the LibGuide on the Victorian period, which highlighted numerous databases and websites focusing on topics ranging from secondary sources and critical analyses to ephemera and facsimiles of rare books. I also learned about the different types of primary materials and where to find them, including the volumes of periodicals in the library’s collection and the extensive microform collection. In fact, I ventured into the micromaterials section during my research with the help of a Reference Service staff member who showed me how to navigate the shelves of records. An entire workshop was spent on optimizing our Boolean search techniques, which proved to be invaluable in my eventual quest through countless databases for even a scrap of information on Julia Margaret Cameron.

Armed with this new knowledge, I began my research, and had soon amassed dozens of pages of notes on not only the life and aesthetic sensibilities of Julia Margaret Cameron, but also on Victorian photography and the subject of the photograph. I searched through dozens of online databases using techniques from the workshop, finding some Victorian periodicals containing reviews of Cameron’s exhibitions and even some writings by Cameron herself. However, much of the information I curated came from print sources. While the Archer Library has an excellent collection, with such a highly specific area of focus, I ended up making extensive use of the Interlibrary Loan system, which provided me with access to materials from libraries across the country. Though this system was initially confusing, with the help of the library staff, I soon found it to be an extremely useful and highly efficient service. Though I once got “stuck” in my research with a document I needed but could not find, Ms. Cushon helped steer me in the right direction.

As anxiety-inducing as the project was, I realized while I was assembling my completed 39-page assignment that I had, in fact, quite enjoyed the process of research. Poring through primary and secondary sources in an effort to understand an historical moment as a rich, four-dimensional reality was a fascinating and rewarding experience, and I knew that I was now not only well-prepared for future research projects, but gladly anticipating them.