APPLICATION ESSAY

During my first two years of coursework and research at Rice, I became fascinated with the ships, shipwrecks, and maritime networks of the British nineteenth century. In the spring semester of 2014, in fact, I worked with an 1864–66 Royal Navy logbook preserved in the Woodson Research Center Special Collections and Archives. Naturally, then, in the spring semester of 2015, I again turned my gaze to the sea. I was taking ENGL541, “Victorian Studies,” with my advisor, Professor Helena Michie. She had structured the course around different concepts of privacy. I was particularly intrigued when we read Charlotte Bronte’s *Villette* (1853), which features two scenes of shipwreck. Most critics, we learned, see the novel as an introspective work of psychological privacy. I however, wanted to look not inward but outward. For me, *Villette’s* two shipwreck scenes raised fundamental questions: is trauma a private or public experience? How do larger moments of historical, national, and imperial upheaval reverberate on the level of the individual? How readily do we forget a violent past, despite the traces that wash up on the textual margins?

To unpack these questions and develop my project, I began with a search of the Classic Catalog. Through a careful selection of key terms (“shipwrecks” gave me far too much and “shipwrecks [and] *Villette*” far too little), I tracked down the texts that would become foundational to my work: Heather Glen’s *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (2002), George P. Landow’s *Images of Crisis* (1982), and Cathy Caruth’s *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013). In fact, it was my journeys into the stacks that catalyzed my project. This may sound entirely old fashioned in the age of Google and Wikipedia, but I needed to see the books
themselves—more importantly, the books that surrounded these three books. By looking laterally on the shelves, I outlined three related clusters about which I needed to learn more: first, the status of scholarship on *Villette*; second, the history and iconology of shipwreck in the nineteenth century; and third, the current conversations in the field of trauma studies. Only by weaving these three critical strands together could I produce a radically new reading of such a supposedly one-dimensional novel. So I brought several stacks of books back to my carrel on the second floor and began to read. (It has been phenomenally productive for me to have a dedicated work and storage space in Fondren.)

With these books I built a glossary of key names, titles, and terms that helped me cast my research net even further. I turned to Fondren’s *One Search*, which in turn pointed me to other primary and secondary databases to which the library subscribes: *JSTOR, Project Muse, ABELL, Humanities Source, British Periodicals*, and *19th Century British Library Newspapers*. I asked the Reference librarians for further suggestions, and when we did not have a particular text on hand, I ordered it through Interlibrary Loan. From this second stage of reading I deduced several points about my three primary clusters. For the first cluster: almost every extant critical reading of *Villette* is autobiographical; scholars draw parallels between the life of Brontë and that of her protagonist, Lucy Snowe. Moreover, only a handful of critics even mention the two shipwreck scenes; when they do, they offer a psychoanalytic rather than historical reading. For the second cluster: shipwreck, it turns out, was a primary motif in abolitionist writing and painting in the nineteenth century. I needed to learn more about transatlantic slavery and visual representations of the slave trade. And for the third cluster: the private / public nature of trauma was a debate at the heart of trauma studies. I had tapped into a key debate.
From there I turned to the Research Guides on the Fondren Website. I was already familiar with the English Literature guide (as well as the “Hobby Editorial Fellows’ Guide” through my work with *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*). Yet in order to place *Villette* in a longer, wider history of the nineteenth century, I needed to consider fields outside of my normal expertise. I was delighted to find the “History of Great Britain and the British Empire” guide, and I found equally helpful the research guides for African-American Studies, American History, and Art History. The context provided by several database searches—*Global Commodities; Slavery, Abolition, and Social Justice*; and *Empire Online (1492–1962)*—helped me understand *Villette* in light of several key West Indian slave revolts (Barbados [1816], Demerara [1823], and Jamaica [1832–33]). I began to see the two shipwreck scenes as more than just instances of individual trauma (i.e., for Brontë’s protagonist); they evoked the horrible practice of jettison, wherein slaves would be thrown overboard so that the captains could claim insurance money. This discovery directed me to the *Bibliography of the History of Art* and, in turn, to the Brown Fine Arts Library. In monographs and exhibition catalogs, I learned more about the iconography of jettison and shipwreck. Specifically, I began to see an intimate connection—which, to my knowledge, no other scholar has made—between Brontë and Britain’s famous landscape and seascape painter, J. M. W. Turner. Two of his paintings, *Slave Ship* (1840) and *Disaster at Sea* (1833–35) (which I scrutinized high-quality versions of on *Artstor*), suggest the same kind of diffusion of trauma and challenge to linear, progressive history that I see in Brontë’s *Villette*.

In sum, I could not have developed this project and written my paper without Fondren’s array of resources. These include more than just books and databases: I came to know two of the circulation and access services associates, Nyssa Juneau and DaVian Smith, rather well, and they
in turn pointed me to additional resources. Moreover, I wrote sections of the paper at Fondren’s first-floor computer clusters. As I do not own a laptop, I needed a quiet, professional space with computers. More generally, though, I thoroughly enjoy that first-floor space: the open-concept, high-ceilinged area is both comfortable and conducive to thought. The same might be said of Fondren Library as a whole.