I divided my year’s leave over the previous academic years, taking the first part in Spring 2012 and the second in Spring 2013. My goal was to complete a draft of a novel whose twin narrators locate readers at once in the ancient world and in contemporary (post 9-11) New York City and Europe. This I did, finishing nine chapters in 2012 and the remaining thirteen in 2013. At present, I’m revising the book (whose initial draft runs a bit less than 500 pages). I’m interested in considering the following in this fiction: How do we understand history, and to what extent can even professional historians “know” the past?

In addition to completing a draft of the novel, I finished work on “Travels with Jane Eyre,” an essay which considers what reading can and cannot do. I explored the first part of this topic more fully in “Questions of Transport” (Georgia Review Spring 2010), an essay listed as “Notable” in the Best American Essays 2011. The limitations of imagination—or, to put it a different way, the divide between art and life—is the subject of the second “half” of this exploration. I finished working on “Travels with Jane Eyre” during my Spring 2012 leave. The piece is forthcoming from the Georgia Review later this year.

During the second leave (Spring 2012), my ancillary project was to finish the reading and research for a scholarly essay on California Chicana/o literature. I now have a draft of this essay, which is due at Cambridge University Press in May as part of the forthcoming volume The Cambridge History of California Literature.