August of 2015 marked the ten-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and the ensuing levee malfunction that left many people dead, injured, and homeless. In those ten years, a variety of narratives have emerged, ranging from the political to the personal, the inspirational to the dispiriting. A narrative that is still underrepresented, however, is that of the children who experienced the storm; of the lives they lived before it, and the emotions they felt as their lives were fundamentally thrown into flux. Unlike adults, the children who survived the storm did not possess the same opportunities and expressional capabilities at the time to record and convey what they were experiencing from their own point of view. As a result, the stories of such children, if told at all, have been recorded after the fact: through documentaries, news stories, and academic studies created in the years following the storm. Our project aims to discover whether, by marrying together interview and research methods inspired by documentary theater with the development of a short narrative film, we can bring to life our subjects’ memories, presenting the lived experiences and emotions of children before and directly after Katrina in a way that is true to how they experienced it.

We plan to tackle this question by interviewing college-aged survivors of Katrina to ask for their recollections on the various ways that their families handled and made it through the disaster. We will incorporate the experiences of all these subjects, as well as what we are currently learning through the preparatory research discussed below, into the production of a 5-7 minute-long short narrative film, which we will shoot in New Orleans during Spring Break (March 19th-28th).

We have already developed a basic outline of the script that involves a girl trapped in her family’s home in the days following the storm, which allows us to begin our logistical plans. However, it is the memories we will be discussing in our interviews that will be used to set down the final structure of what the script will contain, much in the way that interviews conducted for documentary theater determine the content of a play. The specifics of how the characters interact with one another, how and what they speak to one another, the emotions they express, and the details of their life in New Orleans will all be crafted from the interviews we conduct.

The idea for our film was developed in order to highlight what we view that has been overlooked in the discussion on Katrina: the unique perspectives of children during the storm, and the stories and memories that they possess from their lives prior to that pivotal event. There is a whole generation of kids who were forced to evacuate not only their homes, but also their strong New Orleanian cultural identities after floodwaters rose. These kids were there to witness themselves becoming a part of a very sudden and traumatic diaspora that not only uprooted entire families, but also positioned them as refugees in popular media culture. Our aim is to focus our narrative on the lives of these children, not as refugees, victims of political neglect, or even as inspiring stories of perseverance, but rather as ordinary children whose memories and experiences deserve to be acknowledged.

While films about Hurricane Katrina are a dime a dozen, few have approached Katrina through the eyes of the children who lived through it. Documentaries tend to focus on the political elements of Katrina, such as in *When The Levees Broke* (2006) and *The Storm* (2005), on the physical effects of the storm, such as in *Hurricane on the Bayou* (2006), or on the ongoing process of recovery in the years following the storm, such as in *If God Is Willing and da Creek Don’t Rise* (2010) and *The Old Man and the Storm* (2009). Some of these films, such as *Trouble The Water* (2009), are able to present to their viewers the experiences of everyday people during and following the storm, filmed as it happened from their point of view. Children, however, did not have the same means of recording their experiences as did adults. Their stories are far more often documented only in their own memories.

There have been a number of efforts to bring these experiences to light. Sociologists Alice Fothergill and Lori Peek followed children for seven years following Hurricane Katrina, ultimately publishing their study, *Children Of Katrina* this past September. The result is remarkably detailed and incredibly powerful, but due to its construction as a sociological text, it’s tone is largely observational, with a focus on what occurred to and is occurring with the children. The documentary *Katrina’s Children* (2008) attempted to explore the impact of Katrina in a more internal manner, asking its child subjects to create drawings reflective of their emotions on Katrina. The film then animated these drawings, pairing them with interviews and footage gathered from children who had returned to the still recovering city.
Finally, there are the various writings, letters, and other primary source documents written and created by children during the weeks following the storm, which provide a form of immediate insight into the emotions and memories they were experiencing at the time.

Our project differs from these efforts in a variety of ways. For one, we will be attempting to portray the experiences of New Orleanian children as they were lived, rather than retrospectively. Additionally, we will be approaching our subjects ten years after the storm, at an age at which they might be better able to think critically about their memories and the emotions they experienced immediately following the storm, and to express those thoughts clearly to others. Finally, since the subjects we will be interviewing are our own age, we have the opportunity to interact with them on a more personal level that might have been unavailable to other researchers or filmmakers due to their status as older authority figures.

Because we could not find examples of existing works that have taken interviews and used it to devise a narrative script in mainstream film, we looked to theatre, specifically to documentary theatre for examples. Attilio Favorini, professor of Theater Arts at the University of Pittsburgh, states that documentary theatre is theatre that incorporates primary source materials in the form of historical documents or documented interviews, to create the historical foundation for a final script. Its purpose is to adhere to the emotional aspect of a specific situation and attempts to portray dimensioned perspectives given that they come from the mouths of real people. In his documentary anthology, *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater*, Favorini shows that documentary theatre remains relevant in societies that create and consume contemporary news and media as actively as the millennial generation does. For example, due to excessive media coverage, Katrina evacuees became more spectacle than human as the myths of the disaster grew and progressed. Anna Deveare Smith’s research and work on a multitude of her self-directed and performed plays (including *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*) inspired our research and desired approach to the creation of our film. For *Twilight*, she interviewed dozens of people who were present for the beginnings as well as the causatum of the 1992 L.A. riots. From those interviews, she was able to create and perform as hyperrealistic and compelling characters of all different socioeconomic, racial, as well as gender backgrounds.

For the film, we plan to weave together the experiences of multiple subjects into the narrative of a single protagonist, that of a young girl. While doing so, we strive to constantly remain respectful of our subjects, meeting them on their own turf and being careful so that our actions not be exploitative. To help with this, we have already begun talking to psychologists and professors both in Evanston as well as in New Orleans about proper interview techniques and how best to approach our subjects. We also will be talking to and consulting with Edward Buckles, a documentary filmmaker born and raised in New Orleans who was a young teen during Hurricane Katrina. Additional preparatory research we are conducting that will help inform us and our project includes reading books and article about Katrina and its effects, most notably “Children Of Katrina”, as well as watching an assortment of other documentaries and films on the subject.

While for the larger context for our film we will be aiming to interview a diverse array of people from throughout the New Orleans area, our main focus will be on finding one person whose experiences can serve as a primary source from which we draw on, and with whom we will spend extensive time with in New Orleans. We are currently in the process of assembling our subject pool, drawing mainly on the contacts of one of our crew members, who grew up in New Orleans. Additionally, we have reached out to a number of other contacts, including college professors and other filmmakers in order to further expand our subject pool. Our first round of interviews are scheduled to begin the week of 2/22 and will be recorded over the phone. These interviews will allow us to introduce ourselves and the project, while speaking with the subjects about their lives prior to and following Katrina. This will allow us to gain specifics such as speech patterns, family dynamics, lifestyle details, and crucially, significant emotions and memories which we can then begin to incorporate into our script. At the same time, the interviews will serve as a means of narrowing down our subject pool and determining our main subject, with whom we will then conduct additional phone interviews, preparing for our meeting by building a relationship with them and getting introduced to their story.
Upon arriving in New Orleans, we aim to spend time with one main subject over the course of three days. What we end up discussing and where we travel with them will depend greatly on our subject, but we would ideally like to have them show us around both their current home and where they lived prior to the storm, further expressing the memories and emotions they recall from that time. Towards the end of this time, we would like to have our child actress meet with our subject, establishing for them the reality of the character they will be playing, and providing a point of reference for their acting.

Having already received a grant and backing from the student film organization Inspire Media, our preparation process for the film has already begun. We are in contact with a documentary filmmaker in New Orleans, Samuel Radutzky, who has volunteered to aid us with the logistics of preparing for the film from outside the city. Shooting locations and accommodations for the crew (we will be staying with friends and family local to the city) have already been secured. Additionally, we have assembled our crew who will be traveling with us to New Orleans, a total of nine Northwestern students. Casting calls have been sent out and we are beginning to audition child actors from New Orleans. Following our time interviewing our subjects in New Orleans, two days will be devoted to conducting final preparations for filming, including the pickup of rental equipment, camera tests, and the conducting of rehearsals with the child actors. Northwestern’s Spring Break coincides with that of the New Orleans Public School system, so child actors would not be required to miss school. The final two days of the trip will be devoted to the shooting of the film. Our current budget from Inspire Media limits us in regards to our ability to go beyond even the most basic production of student film. It is only with URG funding that we would be able to widen the scope of the project and travel to New Orleans, conduct in person interviews and allow for an authentic representation of the film’s premise to be achieved.

A has taken several classes that have prepared her for this project, including Documentary Film Production, Advanced Cinematography, screenwriting courses, as well numerous other film production classes. In her Interactive Storytelling Journalism class, she was required to find interview subjects, follow them around for a period of a few weeks as their story unfolded, conduct formal interviews, and then present a final write up on their story in an online creative format. Additionally, she has written and directed several short films as well as a handful of music videos, a documentary, and an animated short A has experience working with child actors and has gotten great performances out of each of them in the past. As director, A will be heading the creative elements of the project, as well as conducting the interviews with the subjects. B’s experience qualifying him for this project comes largely from his past work as a producer for previous Northwestern short films, the most recent of which being the music video “Wishes”, directed by A, whose production budget totaled $7,000. Past films which he has produced have won entry and awards at films festivals in the US and internationally. These experiences have provided him with the practical skills that he will be using as producer to ensure that the project is executed successfully, including the scheduling of the trip and interviews, as well as the logistics of the film’s production. While our project does not require IRB approval due to its status as an artistic project, the IRB training he acquired for his work with the Center for Forced Migration Studies has instilled in him an appreciation for the delicacy of dealing with human subjects, especially those who have undergone trauma. This is a concept we plan on addressing with the entirety of our crew.

As a woman of color, A is passionate about directing and designing films that promote and engage women and girls of color. Having experience working remotely with actors and crew as well as gathering information from our subjects to devise into a completed film would be an invaluable experience for her in the professional film world and would definitely help to inform her work in the future. B aspires to produce educational media for television, and this project allows him to expand his producing experience beyond that of purely narrative filmmaking. The act of producing and planning the research side of the project will provide him with a set of experiences that more closely align with his actual career goals, which include working on projects that involve more real-world interactions. We ultimately hope to distribute the film by submission to a variety of film festivals, focusing largely on those with a mission aimed at promoting social issues, women/minority filmmakers, student filmmakers, and underrepresented narratives. Given that we want as many people to view the film as possible, we plan to post the film online for free following its festival run.
Appendix

Endnotes


Bibliography

Films Referenced