In the Field
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My project seeks to uncover what field research looks like “behind the scenes.” Formal scientific papers and lectures traditionally exclude the gritty details of what it takes to conduct research (grunt work, emotional stress, etc.): this is the stuff upon which my project is based. I seek to inform the Bowdoin community and laymen about the humanity of the research process by showing undergraduate researchers as complex characters. I focused my attention on each researcher’s emotions and their individual experience spending a summer pursuing a single study question. To achieve this I extensively interviewed and shadowed the undergraduate scientific researchers. While I spent the majority of my time on Kent Island filming researchers, I also reviewed and analyzed my footage to help with the upcoming editing process.

In the early planning stages for my project, I thought about using different media to portray the experience of the researcher during the field season: I considered drawing, writing, and filming. I decided before leaving for Kent Island, however, that I wanted to wholly focus on video. Video seemed to be the most direct way to document the time and effort each researcher put into his or her project and would easily allow viewers to connect with the researcher. I worried that the subjectivity of visual art and writing would obscure this connection. The goal was to make the viewer feel like they were on Kent Island and intimately related to each character.

What I didn’t realize before I got into my project was how inherently biased documentary filmmaking is. Something will always lie outside of the frame and interview questions always carry bias. Recognizing the partiality of film helped inform the way I conducted interviews and shot scenes. I tried hard to think critically about how much of my own bias shaped the angles I shot and the interview questions I asked. Becoming cognizant of how thoroughly subjective documentary film is helped me quell my worries about being completely “true” to the researchers’ experience: my work is unavoidably a product of my own perspective. I found that one of the most effective ways to capture valuable footage was to spend a lot of time with the researchers, on and off camera. This mainly translated to my assisting with research. I became familiar with my subjects’ study species and became invested in their projects. Doing so helped me to better understand and intuit the shots that felt honest to my conception of each researcher’s experience. It also allowed me to get to know the undergrad researchers intimately, establish strong friendships, and learn a good deal about Leach’s storm-petrels, Savannah sparrows, and many inhabitants of the intertidal zone, which has made this summer satisfying and energizing. I’m looking forward to editing my footage this fall in an independent study with Professor Childress. I plan to screen the documentary on campus early winter.

Faculty Mentor: Sarah Childress, Elena Cueto-Asin

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