

Big Picture Paper

By Jeff Vlasek

I can remember that on one of my first trips downtown to meet with Dr. Weinbaum during the summer of 2002, we went on a tour of the various *Femspec* offices. After showing me where the files were kept, and introducing me to Monique, she handed me two copies of the academic journal *Dialogue*, and asked me to read them before the beginning of the school year. Now, I'm not one who's unfamiliar with the notion of homework in July. I attended two years of summer school when I was younger in order to get ahead and stayed in the advanced classes during the regular year. So, when I arrived back home with the new literature in tow, I tossed them on my dresser for a few days before finally picking them to leaf through the material. At the time, I felt that the articles were well written, if not a bit over my head. It is only now, after I have spent nearly a year working on *Femspec*, that I can truly begin to understand how honest and revealing the articles were, and in hindsight, I can take some comfort in knowing that many of the struggles I have experienced in working here are universal.

To start with, the articles in *Dialogue* mainly retell the history of the journal's founding, and the hardships and triumphs it has endured over the course of its existence. Although I am not entirely certain of how *Femspec* was created, apart from the fact that Dr. Weinbaum and some of her friends had the notion of giving birth to a publication that would give authors a chance to explore the area of feminism in science fiction, surrealism, magical realism, and the rest of the list that's printed on our stationery. Before I go on, I do want to comment on that fact for a moment. It makes me feel good, in a small way, to know that it is possible to dream something up, and then with the right amount of perseverance put it together and produce a finished product. It's amazing to think that by simply asking for submissions in the right circles, that they will appear. This entire situation is wildly different from the yearbooks that I have worked on, where the information published was written and produced by a staff that I had tangible contact with. I had complete control over what went into the final product, and if something needed to be tweaked, I had the power to do so. I was not use to the notion of having to go back and get permission from the author to make the appropriate changes. It's a hassle, yes, but there's nothing else one can do about it. Over time, and during the course of the year, I felt that the alterations made to the *Femspec* contracts will ultimately help in the publication process, so that there isn't as much leg work needed for a mailman, and not nearly as much nail biting on the editor's end of the line.

Getting back to the articles, however, and how they relate specifically to my time spent working on the journal, I want to start my discussion with an examination of the Devery S. Anderson

article from the summer 1999 edition of *Dialogue*, entitled, “A History of *Dialogue*, Part One: The Early Years, 1965-1971.” After going through some of the basic back-story behind the creation of the journal, he gets into the detail surrounding some of the day-to-day work involved in production. In the section named, “Labors Behind the Scenes,” I found myself identifying a great deal with much of what he wrote. For example, Anderson says, “It was no easy task, though this was totally a volunteer effort, to see this and subsequent issues through the final stages of production” (38). Speaking from the short amount of experience that I’ve had with *Femspec*, I can completely agree with his assessment, as well as the next sentence, where he quotes a former editor of *Dialogue* in saying that, “getting out this first issue has been nearly a full-time job” (38). Even though I only spend twenty hours a week on the 18th floor of Rhodes Tower (and sometimes the library, bookstore, and other parts of campus running errands) I empathize with what Anderson is saying. Oftentimes, I find that the work from the office spills over into my other tasks. I take things home with me, not because I forgot to finish them at work, but because I can’t get them off my mind. Working on the Bergon Belson spreads, for example, have become an issue for me. I’ll sit at work, enjoying the time I spend scanning in and arranging the photographs and poetry, but more often than not, I’ll find that there are other tasks that need attention more immediately. What happens next is the most difficult part of the job on *Femspec*, and perhaps on every academic journal: the balancing act.

The Bergon Belson piece needs to be finished. There's no question about that. If the Jewish issue is to come out this spring, then someone needs to put the finishing touches on the spreads and have them sent over for publication. At the same time, however, the letters to other authors and queries need to be written. They need to be sent out as soon as possible so that we can receive a response in the office and file it in our records. This helps to avoid a problem further down the line when an author contacts us and wants to know why we haven't published their particular article or story yet. (This is not to say that we're even able to find enough information to keep them happy with the result ? filing their responses to their queries takes up even more time from that which is already stretched to start with.)

In an effort to alleviate this balancing act, we hired student workers for the purpose of taking away some of the smaller, menial jobs, so that Jarrod and I would have more time to work on the bigger issues that needed attention. What happened, more often than not, was that I would spend more time trying to prepare tasks for the student workers to do, than I would have normally spent simply performing the duties myself. Every Monday afternoon was spent trying to get my own work done, along with the creation, collection, and laying out of the various jobs for the interns and student workers to do the next day when I was gone. It became very tedious, because many

of the tasks I wish they could have done were things far above their heads; fixing the status list would be one. The language barrier became an issue, as well, for there were instances when I would ask one of the workers to write a letter to an author, only to have it come back to my desk with such horrible grammar and structure that it was necessary for me to go over it once more and essentially write it myself.

But, I digress. Getting back to Anderson's comments, indeed, working on the academic journal was, and will continue to be, a full-time job, regardless of the fact that it is composed mainly of volunteers. I do feel guilty knowing that I am getting compensated for my time and work on the 18th floor of Rhodes Tower, whereas Dr. Weinbaum, one of the founders and editors of the publication, receives no pay for her time spent working on *Femspec*. Even my advisor for the yearbook at Miami garnered a small stipend for performing her duty as my consultant. In the time that I've spent here at Cleveland State, I've seen Dr. Weinbaum pour forth an enormous amount of effort and energy into the journal. She takes the work home with her nearly every day. When I come back in on a Monday after the weekend, I check the messages and find at least three or four from Dr. Weinbaum, most of which are dated at eleven, or even midnight on a Saturday, proving the fact that she suffers from the same syndrome that I do: the inability to let issues sit back at the office. In truth, I should make note that I have only recently contracted this disability. Dr. Weinbaum has most likely suffered from it for at least three years now.

Getting back to the article in *Dialogue*, I wanted to make mention of something else Anderson writes about that struck very close to home after working on *Femspec*. After discussing the idea of how performing the tasks for a journal is a full-time, unpaid job, he starts in about how the Mormon publication received some notoriety when it was talked about and written up in the New York Times. Unfortunately for the editors of *Dialogue*, the journal was not portrayed accurately. Anderson writes, "Although several subscriptions came through this exposure, general authorities, as well as members of the *Dialogue* staff, complained of inaccuracies in the article" (28). Often, I felt that we at *Femspec* suffered from the same problem. There was at least one occasion in this year alone where a campus newspaper (which shall remain nameless) did a poor job of covering the journal and its mission. I can even remember sitting in the room when she was taking down notes about what we did at *Femspec*, and how the office was run, and wondering just how the reporter planned to put together a decent article from the information she was collecting. The questions she asked were fairly off base, and almost totally unrelated to duty the journal performed to the academic community. Admittedly, the article was only going to be published in a student-run newspaper on campus, but the effect was still the same: misinformation spread about *Femspec* through a poorly executed piece of publicity. Much like

the case portrayed in the *Dialogue* article, we have to work twice as hard to make sure that *Femspec* is portrayed correctly in the world of academia. Misinformation could turn off potential subscribers, or even cause current subscribers to re-evaluate their commitment, and we can't afford to lose them.

This whole notion of misinformation about the journal also creates a secondary problem: it taints the type of submissions that we get coming in to the office. If someone reads a poorly written review of *Femspec*, or happens to see us mentioned in another journal that does not give out the proper information about what type of material we publish, then a potential contributor will get the wrong idea and proceed to send us their work without checking to see if it fits the mission of the journal. In many cases, I'm guessing that the people who send us articles and fiction that winds up rejected have either never read through a copy of *Femspec*, or more likely, never even seen a copy of the journal. They simply see our ad in *The Writer's Chronicle*, and note the fact that we're a feminist publication, and then assume that since they wrote a story that involves women in some way, that it's a shoo-in for printing. They throw together a cover sheet, mention one or two other magazines they've been published in, and fire it off to us without giving it a second thought. Unfortunately, it doesn't take us very long at the office to realize that their work doesn't even come close to being accepted. Then it's up to one of the interns to write them a letter explaining why they missed the boat, and tell them that we hope they have better luck submitting their work elsewhere. If only they had taken the time to read some of *Femspec*, or even seen a review somewhere online, they could have saved themselves, and our office, a good deal of paper. The one good thing that comes out of all this is the fact that our rejection rate continues to go up, which helps add to the overall strength of the journal in the academic community. It accurately shows our dedication to publishing only the quality works that fit our mission and stand out as fantastic works of literature, theory, and criticism. (I only wish that the status list were organized enough so that we could easily display that fact on demand.)

Continuing along in Anderson's article, the next piece that I found particularly relevant to my time at *Femspec* was the section where he wrote about the correspondence with contributing authors for *Dialogue*. Quoting a former editor of the Mormon journal, Anderson writes, "we perhaps developed too complex of an editorial process. Consequently, we offended a lot [of writers] by taking so long with the manuscripts" (pg. 40). Along with wholly agreeing with this statement from *Dialogue*, I want to elaborate on the various ways that the editorial process can end up making an author irate:

1. Now, I can speak from experience that there were, and will continue to be, instances when an author's manuscript will fall through the cracks and become lost in our drawer of files and other odds and ends. There's nothing particular that we can do to solve this problem. I saw it happen during my time at the journal, and in some cases, I was in fact the cause of such occurrences. When such a thing occurred I would first apologize to Dr. Weinbaum, and then I would go back to the author through email, or perhaps even in a letter format, and ask them for another copy. It wasn't my finest hour, no, but there's simply no other way to get another manuscript when the one we had disappeared. The office is a cluttered place, and with several interns all running through at the same time, coming in on different days and moving things, there's always the chance that I'll lose my stack of paperwork (not to mention my mind). For the most part, I think that the authors understood what sort of environment we were working in, and it wasn't a great deal of trouble for them to print us off another copy and send it our way. If they used email, then it was even easier, for they simply attached it to a note and it would arrive within the same day.

2. If the reason for delay on a decision was caused by our losing of the manuscript, the author was usually fairly supportive, and would send us another draft. If the decision was being held up because Dr. Weinbaum, an outsider reader, or I was reading the text, it was a completely different story. Authors, for whatever reason, don't like to be kept waiting told that we were processing their article. They apparently don't like the thought of their work being handled by outside readers, despite the fact that it clearly states in our guidelines that all submissions must meet the requirements and fulfill the mission of the journal to be published. There was an instance this year where an author who had submitted a manuscript in 2000 sent me an email demanding a decision on her piece. Actually, I should correct myself; she simply wrote to me, "Since I have not heard from *Femspec* in some time about my article, I assume that it has been accepted for publication. When can I expect a contract?" Now, besides the fact that she was being a bit presumptuous about the quality of her article, she was also overstepping her bounds and telling us how to do our jobs. After sending the author a short email to stall her ranting, I quickly went through and checked the files for any information we had about the piece. My search turned up the fact that we had sent the piece out to a reader for commentary, but that it was never returned (a common ailment for our journal, along with Dialogue). Dr. Weinbaum and I had a discussion about what steps to take now that things were starting to get out of hand, and the best we could come up with was to send the piece out to a special issue in the hopes that the editor would accept it and throw it in with her issue.

This would relieve the burden from both us and the author, who would finally get to see her article published in the near future. As things turned out, unfortunately, the special issue editor decided the piece wasn't a good fit for her issue, and sent it back to us. As of this moment, the author has been informed of this decision, but nothing more has been done. Only time will tell what happens next.

3. The third, and perhaps most common way for the editorial process to get tangled up and stumble, is dealing with special issue editors. On more than one occasion this year, I had the privilege of dealing with editors working on themed issues of *Femspec*. In fact, I remember that when I first arrived on staff, thinking to myself, “what the heck is a special issue?” After it was explained, I began to understand just how the already complicated editing process could become even more of a hassle for both our end of the journal, as well as the authors and contributors. To put it simply, we had several occasions this year when an editor of a special issue would send us their material, which they felt was ready to be published, only to discover that we held the ultimate say in whether or not it was truly ready to be placed into *Femspec*. We would have our Advisory Board look over the work submitted, and when they were through (which could take months, sometimes) we would send back the comments and suggested revisions to the special issue editor to pass back on to their contributors. Now, obviously for someone who has already been through the process of writing and revising with one editor, having a completely new set of editors swoop in and ask for more changes can be a little unnerving. Often times we would receive emails demanding for reasoning behind our extra edits, or for an explanation about what right we had to ask for more corrections when the issue had already been in the pipeline for two years. Unfortunately, Dr. Weinbaum and I discovered that there was truly no easy way to solve the problem. Yes, one has to admit that it is a blessing to have so many issues being worked on simultaneously, along with the fact that so many of them are well put together and well thought out. At the same time, however, there isn't a way to edit and manage an issue when one set of editors refuses to agree with the editorial board on the grounds of revisions, and just how many times it is necessary to go through and revise a piece before it can be declared “fit to be published in *Femspec*.” Hindsight being 20/20, Dr. Weinbaum and I went back and reworded the contract for special issue editors, so that in the future, they will know exactly what sort of position they are signing on for, and with that in mind, they will have no ground to stand on when we hand back their two-years-in-the-works articles and tell them that more work is needed. While this does not solve our current dilemma, it will hopefully alleviate the stress and pain from future generations of *Femspec* editors and staff. Something else that struck me particularly close

to home when reading the *Dialogue* article was the section discussing the research and revelation regarding the papyri scrolls in the late 1960's. Anderson gives a brief history behind the scrolls, explaining that they were fragments of a long-lost papyri which Mormon founder Joseph Smith claimed to be written by Abraham himself. Over time, the scrolls were assumed lost in the great fire in Chicago at the end of the 19th century, and it was only after World War II that they were found again. *Dialogue* was one of the first journals to get information about the pieces, and was eager to publish whatever it could about their importance to the Mormon community. Most importantly, the journal wanted to be one of the first to print copies of the photos taken, so that the subscribers could finally see the long-sought papyri for themselves.

After much deliberation with the Mormon community, however, it was decided that all of the journals would hold off on printing any of the photos until they received permission from the proper church authorities. With that said, *Dialogue* pulled out of the race to get the photos to the world, and waited for permission. It came as a surprise, then, when another journal published the work in the winter of 1968, leaving the staff of *Dialogue*, as Anderson puts it, “stunned, hurt and betrayed” (53).

In my time at *Femspec*, we never had something exactly like this happen to journal, but I do recall one instance where both I, Dr. Weinbaum, and a special issue editor were left with the sensation of having the rug pulled out from under us. It occurred late in the year, just before we were to go off on spring break. An author had been working with a special issue editor in getting together a critical article for an upcoming *Femspec* revolving around science fiction film. The issue had been in the works for upwards of two years, with recent advances pushing it closer and closer to the finishing line. I was, in fact, just preparing the contracts for the contributors only days before when I received an email explaining that one of the authors was withdrawing their piece. The explanation was simple, and to the point: too much time had gone by since first they had submitted the piece, and the author felt that their arguments had changed with time. In all honesty, I did emphasize with their plea: the article focused on *The Matrix*, a film released in 1999. Since its arrival in theaters and on video, fans and critics alike have been pouring over its every scene, scrutinizing every minute detail, and now, with two sequels coming out in 2003, many arguments and theories derived from the first film will become void.

Setting that aside, though, the fact still remained that no one had expected her to simply walk up and withdraw her work from our stack of nearly completed manuscripts. Such an act left a huge hole in the middle of the issue, with both Dr. Weinbaum and the special issue editor scrambling

to try and plug the leakage before anyone else decided to jump ship, as well. In my observation of Dr. Weinbaum during this time of crisis, I did notice that after the initial shock of the news wore off, she buckled down and immediately began to think of alternatives. I later came to realize that this sort of thing wasn't unexpected - shocks like this occur all the time in the world of running an academic journal (or any magazine for that matter). One has to be prepared for deal with such problems in the works, and anticipate what the next move will be once they happen. I admire the way that Dr. Weinbaum was able to think on her feet, as they say, and patch together a second plan to try and keep the process rolling. There was no time to sit idly by and wish that things had turned out differently. Instead, we all made our attempts to try and convince the author to keep their article in the journal, even though they seem intent on pulling it out. If that does end up being the case, then we'll have to move on to the next plan. What that is yet, I'm not entirely sure, but that's the benefit of having the ultimate editorial control: Dr. Weinbaum has the power to break down the special issue into a general issue, if necessary, and make the appropriate changes to ensure that it still comes out on time, and that people are satisfied with the product we publish.

Ultimately, that is the most important goal: we have to keep producing a journal of the highest quality possible with the submissions that we receive. That is the underlying reason for all of the other problems that we have in the office, with contributors, etc. People complain that we take too long when editing a piece that comes in, but they have to understand that we have a level of integrity that must be met. *Femspec* has set the bar very high for itself, and other publications, and we have to maintain that dignity to our subscribers, along with anyone who even happens to pick up a copy of the journal. To put it bluntly, yes, it does take a long time for certain articles to work their way through our system, and yes, we are often shocked and dismayed when an author decides to yank their piece from an upcoming issue. At the same time, though, we also know that if we want the journal to remain on a library shelf and become a useful tool for someone in the future, then we have to keep producing the highest quality publication possible. And yes, there are times when we'll lose someone's article in our shuffle about the offices; it happens at least once a semester. These things are a necessary evil, and we aren't afraid to admit to our own shortcomings. We are human, and for the most part, a committee of volunteers. Problems will arise, but we solve them.

There is a level of camaraderie between the various people in the office: Dr. Weinbaum and I work hard to keep the peace and keep things moving in the right direction. Jarrod and the other student workers all have their own individual tasks, and they perform them to the best of their ability, and due to our limiting meeting times, often without a great deal of instruction. All of our

resources pool together and form a collective whole that allows us to seemingly pull a publication out of thin air. In that sense, we are a family, albeit a strange one, with each piece doing their part to advance the good of the group. In time, when we have all gone on to different paths in the future, we'll simply be known through what we've left behind (which, in my case, is a stack of papers, and a disorganized status list).

Although I found the greatest number of connections between Anderson's Dialogue article and my time on *Femspec*, I did find one other link from a different article in the student handbook that I wanted to make mention of. It comes from the interview with bell hooks, where she is prompted with a question about the hostility of the academy towards feminist theory. She responds with, "We can't possibly talk about the future of feminist theory in relation to practice without talking about the fact that the academy as we know it remains fundamentally hostile to an intellectual process that does in fact seek to have moral and ethical implications for how people live and for their habits of being" (Signs, Summer 1996). I found this quote to be particularly intriguing, as it does effectively capture and describe my time at *Femspec*. When first coming in to the job in August, Dr. Weinbaum warned me to keep my wheelings and dealings on staff "below radar," as she called it. I understood what she meant, because I had worked in earlier situations, like my time at Miami, where I did my best to try and solve all of the problems myself, without the help of any outside source. This wasn't particularly because people wouldn't have given me aid if needed; it was more because I knew that no one would know what sort of help I needed, and it was much easier to just tackle the situation on my own.

With *Femspec*, however, the parameters were slightly different. It wasn't so much that people wouldn't be willing to help if something happened to arise. In fact, most of the secretaries and other staff were more than cooperative (although, I admit, most of them were female). No, getting help wasn't the problem, per se. Instead, I later came to understand that keeping things "under the radar" was meant to be a warning that others would scorn me for simply being attached to the journal in general. No, there were never any death threats, or the like, but it's still interesting to see the reactions I get from my friends and family when I explain what I do up at Cleveland State. I admit that at first, I usually joined in with their comments, saying, "Yeah, well, I do what I have to do to pay the bills." To me, working on the journal was a job, and nothing more. As time went on, however, I began to realize that I did stand out from the other graduate assistants working at Cleveland State for a variety of reasons, and that working with *Femspec* made me a unique character among the masses up in Rhodes Tower.

For starters, not being involved in the Writing Center is a trait unique in and of itself. Nearly every other graduate assistant spends part of their time down in the Main Classroom Building tutoring. Not me. Instead, I get to run around three or four different offices making copies, trying to track down lost photos, and piecing together poetry from authors who no longer remember submitting their material to us. There's a level of challenge there that makes coming in to work each day a completely different experience than the previous one. I also get to set my schedule, which is a plus, considering that the other students are in the hands of an advisor who needs them there on specific days. (I know it's a small benefit, but it's still a perk, nonetheless.)

But what's more important, and sets me aside as a unique graduate assistant from the rest of the pack, is the fact that *Femspec* is more than a simple position. I've learned a new trade, that being how to run an academic journal. Tutoring students is something that any English major can do, and will do, at some point in their lives. That doesn't make it any less difficult or less rewarding, mind you, but it does mean that you're simply polishing a skill that you've already used. Learning how a feminist journal runs would be a completely new experience to most anyone I know. One must learn how to respect the authors, while at the same time attempting to provide the highest quality publication possible for the subscribers. You have to work diligently and hard at every task at once, making sure to try and sort out the slightly more important ones from the slightly less important ones. It's a balancing act that I've never had to deal with before, even in all my years of yearbook. Back then, even though every task was important, the publisher set deadlines for certain sections, so I always had a goal that I had to reach by such and such a date. This time around, it's just one giant pool of issues that all equally need completion. It's up to me to decide what to tackle, and when. From that problem arises dialogue, and from that dialogue comes results. Meetings with Dr. Weinbaum and Jarrod produce answers, which I then go back and put into action. Things never get so far out of hand that we shout at one another. All problems can be fixed in a timely, peaceful manner, and even if the results aren't quite what we expected, we can deal with them and move on. That, right there, I believe is the key to what I have learned this year: even if the results aren't what was expected, we can use them and move forward. Ultimately, there will be a finished product, and that's the most important aspect of working on the journal.

Perhaps we scare other people in the department because they don't know how to deal with our confusing office setting, or the fact that we have the word feminist tacked on to our name. Maybe they just don't understand what it takes to run a journal that has such an odd assortment of contributors and editors. Whatever the reason may be, people should take a moment to examine their own lives with the knowledge that I have learned from working on *Femspec*, for

it's something that can be applied to their careers, and to their personal attitudes. Working on everything simultaneously to reach that finished goal isn't a new concept, for we've all heard about "slow and steady wins the race." But I think that people often simply forget it. I think back now at the massive stacks of paper that were on my desk when I arrived last fall and I remember how I felt so completely overwhelmed. Those stacks are now gone, and replaced with new stacks. When I leave, there will be the same thing waiting for the next graduate assistant when he or she arrives next fall. What advice would I give them on their first day of work? I think it would go something like this:

"Don't be afraid about the workload. Don't be concerned that you're not making any progress. Everything gets done in its due time, and when the pressure is on, everything works out in the end. You'll always have things to do, no matter how close to being finished you think you are, so don't be afraid to admit you're in over your head. There's no need to struggle and try to break the surface for air. All you need to do is teach yourself to pick and choose what needs the most attention, and then remember that everything needs the most attention. There are no right answers here, just as there will always be plenty of tasks lying on your desk every Monday morning. Learn to work through at a pace you can deal with, and all problems will be solved in their appropriate order."