

Hello OFRGC community,

Below is a transcript of a conversation I had with Dr. Leland Spencer in September of 2023. I recognize that this is becoming available to read several years later. At the time I had reached out to Dr. Spencer asking to chat about demystifying areas of the field and to discuss the article “Outrage epistemology: Affective excess as a way of knowing in feminist scholarship.” We chatted about that and much more. I made the choice to edit only for reading clarity as this was a recorded conversation but aimed to retain much of the feeling/emphasis that Dr. Spencer imbued into the statements. I am grateful for the conversation we had, and I hope that you all enjoy engaging in this chat.

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Dr. Leland Spencer bio:

Leland G. Spencer (PhD, University of Georgia, 2013) is professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary and Communication Studies at Miami University and an affiliate faculty member in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program and the Department of Media, Journalism, and Film. Leland holds a graduate certificate in Women's Studies from UGA (2011), an MA in Communication from the University of Cincinnati (2009), and a BA in Communication Studies from Mount Union College (now known as University of Mount Union, 2007).

Leland's research interests are in feminist rhetoric, gender, sexuality, and gender identity, and religious communication. Leland is the author of *Rape, Agency, and Carceral Solutions* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2023), coauthor (with Theresa Kulbaga) of *Campuses of Consent* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), author of *Women Bishops and Rhetorics of Shalom* (Lexington, 2017), and coeditor (with Jamie Capuzza) of *Transgender Communication Studies* (Lexington, 2015). He has published more than forty peer-reviewed articles in journals such as the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, *Women & Language*, and others.

Leland's scholarship has received local and national recognition. Leland holds the Randy Majors Award from the Caucus on LGBTQ Concerns of the National Communication Association (NCA), the Janice Hocker Rushing Award from the Southern States Communication Association (SSCA), and the Gender Scholar of the Year Award from the Gender Studies Division of SSCA.

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Stephany:

I wanted to start off with, I emailed you and asked about demystification and troubling areas of the field. And I want to know, as both teacher, scholar, researcher, activist, how do you approach the idea of troubling areas of this field?

Dr. Spencer:

That's a good question. I think in the last few years, the conversations about disciplinary norms in communication have moved to the front of more people's awareness. And I say that very carefully because there's a misperception among some people that all of this is new, that we started talking about disciplinary norms and, and the ways that they reinforce whiteness and masculinity, in 2019 because of the various conversations that started with the controversy around the distinguished scholar process at NCA. But that is a gross misunderstanding of the history of these conversations in the field, because they've been happening for decades. People have been writing about these norms for a long time and challenging these norms for a long while. And so, I think we're in good company when we start to pose those kinds of questions.

At the same time, in many ways, some norms are helpful. I believe in peer review, I'm grateful for peer review. Peer review has made my work better. I've published 40 peer review articles, and each time the process helps it, it makes the article stronger. Now, sometimes when I'm doing that revising, I might not believe that the advice is all that helpful. I might be frustrated by it because it's forcing me to rethink or reword. But one of the things that Dr. Kulbaga has helped me to understand is that peer reviewers are really the first readers of your essay, and they've given you their honest feedback and the places where a peer reviewer gets tripped up, even if it's crystal clear to me as the writer, it's possible that other parts of the audience would be tripped up. So, I'm grateful for the process and at the same time, I know that it comes with baggage that it's not perfect. And so, for me, it's always a question of how we challenge, which parts of those processes are causing harm and at the same time retain the parts that are helping to make all of our work stronger.

Stephany:

That reminds me of a conversation I've had recently with Dr. Hanchey about the peer review process within fiction writing and the idea of workshops and how maintaining norms are useful, keeping these structures, but also recognizing where we need to improve, where we can do better next time, and where we should be doing better. And I see that kind of conversation cycle through year, almost with different journals, some journals are a little bit further behind in that conversation and others are at the forefront. So, I think it's important to kind of keep that in mind too.

Dr. Spencer:

Yeah, I agree. One of the practices I use in my own reviewing is that I've made a commitment to sign my reviews, and that's not my original idea, you know, feminists in the field have been doing that for decades. But it does, I think, force me to slow down and consider that my name is attached to these comments. And that does not change my review. It doesn't change my recommendation for the disposition of the article. So, I still recommend rejection. Sometimes I still recommend 'revise and resubmit' sometimes, and sometimes I say, 'accept with

minor changes', that one's pretty rare, for any reviewer and certainly for any author. But it is an ethic that just invites me to think about integrating empathy and care into the process, even while it's a rigorous process and, and not creating, a dichotomy between rigor and care.

Stephany:

No, I really like that you bring up rigor, especially in the way we've, at least within the communication field, prioritize rigor in some sense, the norm of how it's always been. We need to make sure that our scholarship is meeting the standard, but the care, compassion and ethic of what I often tell my students, of flexibility with the work that work is meant to be improved upon. And when we do peer review in class with my students, it's not necessarily to break down what we're doing, but to help rebuild it in ways that are growing. We can't individually think often enough, if that makes sense. It requires a collective community to share, to produce knowledge and kind of maintain knowledge foundations. I do want to talk a little bit about outrage epistemology, because I read it. It is fabulous. Just the literature review alone, every single article, every single author, I was just noting, I need to make sure if I haven't read them, I need to get it on my reading list. I really loved the exploration of anger within the space of outrage rage, specifically as a kind of restructuring of something that has been made not an emotion for many people, something that can't be held. And I'm wondering how you and Dr. Kulbaga came to this: what was the creation journey for this idea, this article?

Spencer:

So, we recognized that we saw epistemic value in the felt sense of response to injustice. And the title of the article comes from comments that we got from a peer review on the book that we wrote together called Campuses of Consent. And we do some pretty serious critiquing of the ideas of others that we regard as dangerous. And one reviewer suggested that we tone down our outraged adjectives. And we just thought that was a great line. And we, you know, did the revisions for the book, and that was fine. We hung onto that line, and as we thought about it more, we realized that the outrage was the outrage that we felt about sexual assault on university campuses, about administrative response to sexual violence that seemed to us to be aimed more at protecting universities and reputations than to, actually helping people who had experienced violence or, trying to educate people about violence or trying to prevent violence.

This is really something that, you know, I'm not speaking about any individual particular campus, but systemic and structural problems we recognized that our outrage was not separate from our writing process. Our outrage was not separate from our coming to deeper understanding. Our outrage was not separate from our knowing. And nor could it be separate or separated from our writing. And so of course it comes out and we wanted to suggest that it should, it should come out.

We shouldn't hold back just for the sake of decorum and those norms that sometimes pop up because to do so is to impoverish what we can come to know.

Stephany:

And I really love your explanation here because as I was reading through this, and I was at the gym earlier on the treadmill, and I was thinking about the questions I would ask, the things I wanted to mention, and I'm not sure if you have seen the Barbie movie.

Spencer:

Yes, I did. Yeah.

Stephany:

Okay, something that I feel very much relates to this article and captures this feeling of holding emotion is when Lawyer Barbie says "this makes me emotional and I'm expressing it. I have no difficulty holding both logic and emotion at the same time, and it does not diminish my powers. It expands them." And I think that the really important connecting point to this article is that outrage, what inspires us, what informs us, and kind of connects to bell hooks, what pushes us to understand the world we live in is our motivation. It is our purpose. And understanding these feelings, shutting them away does us a disservice as a field. The idea of maintaining rigor, the idea of being neutral beings in a way doesn't help us as a society.

Spencer:

Yeah. I will always be happy to be cited alongside lawyer Barbie, and I think Dr. Kulbaga would agree with me.

Stephany:

What is a conversation with the field that you're currently following as it's kind of growing or as you see newer people kind of joining that conversation, what is something you have a vested interest in the growth of?

Spencer:

Well, you know, it seems to me that our field goes in waves where certain topics are hot for a minute. When I first started my PhD program, everybody was talking about affect and affect was everywhere. There were graduate seminars on affect and all sorts of hot publications were about affect. And that fizzled out a little bit. Not that it's gone away, but it was like between 2009 and 2011, I think just about every conference had multiple panels on. I mean, it was just everywhere. You just couldn't throw a pebble without hitting affect. Now that one seems to be on an ebb. And so, what I'm hopeful about but maybe not optimistic about. What I'm hopeful about is the conversations that we've had, that we've started to have in the last few years in front of everyone, not just in some places about racism in the field, about citation politics. I hope that those conversations are not the hot topic

of the day. I hope that we keep having those conversations, that we keep doing that reflexive work. And I hope that we do that with nuance. I published a forum piece, in CCCS, a couple of years ago where I made this point. I think it came out sometime last year. But one of the things that troubles me is when I see engagement with race or racism as superficial. Statements like, 50% or more of my citations are to authors of color, something like that.

As a goal or an aspiration when the piece might not meaningfully engage with those ideas or take them seriously epistemologically. But you know, you got 'em in the reference list. You've padded the reference list. And, when I read the Lisa Flores essay about racial rhetorical criticism, she's asking us to do something more than count names in a list. She's asking us to think very carefully about the ways in which all rhetorical criticism is a study of race. And that's a much harder task than counting the names in the reference list. I understand, I suppose the temptation to take the easy way out and then to cast judgment on others who haven't achieved this count. I don't see that as what she's asking us to do.

I see the call in that piece and others to be an invitation to a much deeper engagement with the way that we think about race and the way that we consider how, and whether it matters in our analysis. So, I hope that these conversations, again, conversations that have been happening for decades and are now front and center for more audiences. And I'm definitely not the first or only person to make that point. I hope that those are not the conversation of the day. That this results really in a rethinking from the ground up from here on out. I'm not super optimistic about that because we already have these appropriations of the idea and, and turning them into like citation quotas, which, you know, is a misunderstanding in my view of what the challenge is.

Stephany:

The very last thing I will ask and then I will let you go, for like the readership of OFRGC, is there an article or book that you would recommend people to be picking up this fall into winter?

Spencer:

So, that's a great question. Let me just talk about two novels that I've read, of course, that I've really liked. The two novels I've really liked that I've read in the last several months. So, one is called *Demon Copperhead*, by Barbara King Solver, and it won a major award, 2023 Pulitzer for fiction. I really like that book for dealing with class and addiction and dealing with trauma in nuanced and thoughtful, really careful ways. The other book is called *Olga Dies Dreaming*. And it is a fascinating, funny, charming, and really thoughtful book. It deals with politics, it deals with gender, it deals with race, it deals with sexuality, it deals with colonialism and activism particularly in Puerto Rico and, and the relationship between, Puerto Rico and Washington DC with really fascinating characters as

sort of lens into those larger political conversations. I suspect your question was about scholarly books and articles.

Stephany:

No, it's okay. We have lives outside of our work and kind of hearing what books, like the books I read often inform my scholarship, or I get my ideas from there, and they're connected. I have *Olga Dies Dreaming* on my TBR personally, so now it's moving up the ranks on that.

Spencer:

Oh, good. Yeah. On that list. Yeah, definitely put it next in the pile. Okay, so yeah, so I really liked those two books. And I suspect all of us have a long list of things we need to read for our research. I know. So those ones are the, you know, they're good, they're a good break, but they're also intellectual, they are not sort of like fluffy fiction. And there's nothing wrong with fluffy fiction when you need it. Some, I mean, sometimes we just need like

Stephany:

A palate cleanser for our mind

Spencer:

A beach read, yeah or an airplane read or whatever you want to call it. But you know, those are two novels that I have really just loved that I've read in the last few months.

Stephany:

Thank you for sharing. Thank you so much for chatting with me.