

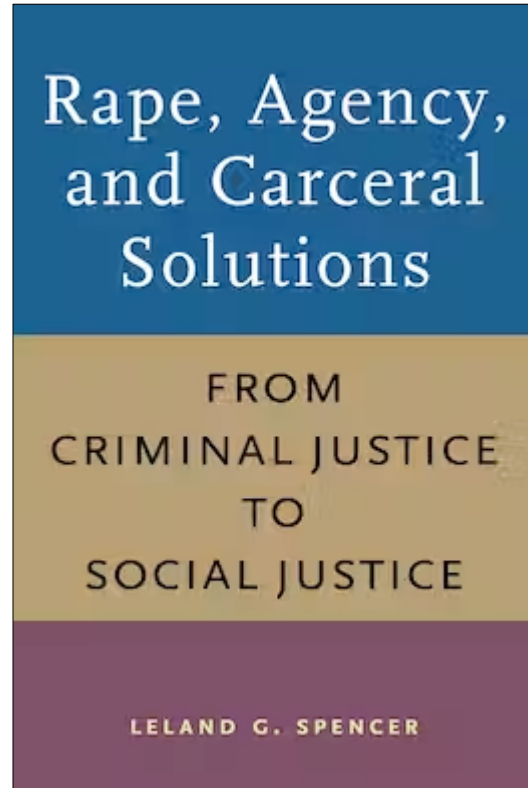
Leland G. Spencer, **Rape, Agency, and Carceral Solutions: From Criminal Justice to Social Justice**, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2023, 158 pp., \$29.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

Courtney D. Tabor

Eastern Oregon University

The normalization and excusal of sexual violence through rape culture pervades the media environment, from nonfiction to fiction forms of storytelling. In his new book, ***Rape, Agency, and Carceral Solutions: From Criminal Justice to Social Justice***, Leland G. Spencer explores this relationship, shining a light on the narratives we tell about rape and the carceral system. Drawing on abolitionist feminism and community-oriented practices of relational justice, this text argues that our stories shape cultural reality and asks how our current narratives on sexual violence contribute to rape culture. Spencer, a rhetorical scholar, is interested in unpacking media messages that prop up the paradox of neoliberal carceral feminism, wherein harm is addressed through unwavering faith in and support of state institutions of violence (e.g., prisons) rather than social justice approaches foregrounding systemic and structural redress. Through four compelling case studies of various media content, Spencer successfully argues that the stories we tell about sexual violence excuse harm through narratives of individual responsibility that place undue blame on the victim, obscure systemic and cultural normalization of violence, and call for the individual assignments of state punishment for the offender.



Spencer begins his empirical work with a content and textual analysis of news coverage (national and local, print, and televised) of the conviction of Brock Turner and the subsequent campaign to recall the judge who was criticized for his lenient sentencing. Here, Spencer highlights how journalists regularly incorporated Turner's swimming career in their coverage, with few problematizing the privileges of athletes in sexual violence cases, identified the neoliberal arguments for and against Persky's recall, wherein most arguments could be boiled down to ultimate trust in criminal justice system overall, and an insistence of Turner's case as an individual example or hook, failing to connect his case to an overall structural issue of pervasive rape culture and privilege in the carceral system. Through this case study, Spencer makes clear that Turner could have been a low-hanging exemplar for journalists to use in explaining the structural problems of rape culture and a concrete example for readers to grasp the overall issue, but he was instead treated as yet another unfortunate blip disconnected from a wider societal context.

In perhaps the most theoretically contributive chapter of the book, Spencer's next case study analyzes the play *Good Kids* (p. 38) by recounting his experience attending the play on a college campus in his role as a volunteer for the local rape crisis response organization. Spencer puts forth the concept of "performative neutrality" to explain how the play (and its corresponding "Talkback" session) relied on the repetitive use of established norms of so-called objectivity, detachment, and fairness to foreclose any possibility of critical judgment of either the play's contents or rape culture. Through the play's depiction of a fictionalized retelling of the Steubenville 2013 sexual assault case, guilt and innocence are treated as if they cannot be definitively determined, and Spencer identifies how this allows the play to buttress pervasive myths, including he said/she said and the miscommunication model of rape. Furthermore, the Talkback session, where cast and crew held a question-and-answer period with the audience, focused on the harms of digital footprints and how to avoid scandalous information being leaked by the "real" villain (i.e., those who would circulate evidence of an assault), rather than having tough conversations about the reality of sexual violence. Performative neutrality, which Spencer identifies as an "insidious erasure of culpability" (p. 60), is a particularly useful theoretical framework for readers to draw from the text, as it can be applied to numerous rhetorical examples to explain the reliance of authors on repetitive use of tropes and norms in a manner that cordons off the possibility of critical analysis or judgment of the text.

Following the analysis of *Good Kids*, Spencer moves to his first of two fiction television show analyses. Spencer turns attention first to the police procedural *Criminal Minds* and purposively samples eight episodes that specifically include sexual violence as central to the episode plot (p. 66). Through his analysis, Spencer identifies three ways *Criminal Minds* participates in neoliberal carceral feminism (rather than engaging in a social justice framework). First, the use of psychological profiling in *Criminal Minds* places blame on mental illnesses and trauma for sexually violent behavior, sidestepping research that indicates people with mental illnesses are more likely to be victimized than to offend and effectively making the world more hostile to people with mental illnesses, as they are pictured as monsters and criminals. Second, while the main characters of the show resist rape myths, often taking the time to educate others about their falsity and harm, the show still presents state intervention as the solution for sexual violence, effectively rebuking rape myths but not institutional rape culture. Finally, *Criminal Minds* treats the state as a benevolent actor that saves victims from violence, ignoring state violence as a perpetrator and foreclosing discussions of community violations and response.

Spencer's last case study for understanding how rape culture and carceral feminism permeate media spaces is an analysis of the book and television series *13 Reasons Why* (p. 79). He begins from the premise that popular, academic, and pedagogical approaches to the text have heretofore focused on its themes of bullying and suicidality, ignoring the possibility of the text as a critique of rape culture. After reviewing the book and four seasons of *13 Reasons Why*, Spencer puts forth four key contributions of his analysis to our understanding of mediated representations of rape culture. First, *13 Reasons Why* incorporates "perspectival truth-telling," a narrative tool that uncovers the ugliness of rape culture, as it presents different points of view that reveal different pieces of information, experiences, limitations, and perspectives of characters as they navigate the many harms of sexual violence impacting on a community-level; however, Spencer asserts that the show fails when it uses this tool to develop redemption arcs for offenders and when it obscures how violence distributes unequally across populations. Second, Spencer denounces the relegation of young adult narratives about sexual violence as merely "bullying." While bullying

may be an easier harm to stomach, *13 Reasons Why* can be a more educational text if we address it as one illustrating and criticizing rape culture specifically. Third, Spencer argues for nuanced but unambiguous villainy for rapist characters; he criticizes the use of redemption arcs in the show's third and fourth seasons as contributing to rape culture, stating that nuance in the portrayal can be effective, but rapists should not be afforded the opportunity of hero/protagonist. Finally, making a methodological contribution, Spencer extends the existing method of marathon viewing in television analyses by indicating how this method mimics viewership patterns and allows viewers to be more immersed in characters' feelings.

Rape, Agency, and Carceral Solutions is a captivating rhetorical analysis of the pervasive rape myths and buttressing of rape culture in modern media texts on sexual violence. Spencer's conclusion lays out the next steps for media producers, including numerous descriptions of how creators can use representations of sexual violence in their news or scripted stories to imagine a nonviolent and social justice-informed future. Spencer asserts that media artifacts should promote positive and consensual interactions, provide alternatives to seemingly established norms, and use the platform to develop nuanced but responsible stories. The book's key area for future exploration and explanation lies in envisioning these possibilities. Spencer often mentions "relational justice" or a "social justice approach," (p. 3) but these are often not clearly defined, with some nods made to Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color with few clear specifics. Given the breadth of literature on restorative justice and community care, there is much for Spencer to draw on to help the reader better understand potential alternatives to the case studies provided. Furthermore, to avoid falling into rape myth traps, Spencer appears to maintain a hardline when criticizing redemption arcs for rapist characters. As he aims to contribute to community-centered relational justice as an alternative to carceral solutions, it would be helpful for the reader if this criticism were further explored. Restorative justice often begins with the idea that no person is beyond redemption, and so asserting that certain characters in stories can never be redeemed is, in fact, a punitive or carceral stance.

Rhetorical scholars, and media studies scholars more broadly, will find this book useful, as it puts forth theoretical and methodological contributions that further our understanding of mediated representations of rape culture and sexual violence. Additionally, scholars teaching courses on neoliberalism, carceral feminism, and alternatives to the criminal legal system will likely find this handy for helping students connect difficult concepts around punishment to relatable media texts. Individual case studies may be worthwhile for undergraduate courses focused on media studies, representation in media, and similar topics. Finally, nonacademic activists and those with an interest in the social justice approach to crime and violence will find this an approachable text for thinking about the present role of the media in developing, maintaining, and supporting rape culture.