

# Coming Out as a Transgender Advocate: Laverne Cox, Intersectional Rhetoric, and Intersectionality

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*In this essay, the author frames the public discourse of transgender performer and advocate Laverne Cox in terms of both its use of an intersectional perspective and the use of intersectional rhetoric. This analysis bridges these two approaches to illustrate that Cox has successfully shifted public discourse in terms of trans and queer issues, but also is able to build a broader coalition while doing so. As a performer, Cox's work has complicated her advocacy work. However, Cox has built a successful approach that embraces both intersectional rhetoric and an intersectional perspective.*

**Keywords:** intersectionality, Laverne Cox, Netflix, transgender advocacy, queer of color rhetoric(s)

Given the recent media coverage of transgender issues such as the AP position on the use of names and pronouns for Chelsea Manning, instances of transgender violence such as the murder of Islan Nettles, the imprisonment of CeCe McDonald, and the very current public transition of Caitlyn Jenner; an analysis of one of the leading advocates for the trans community at this moment is timely and apt. In this essay, I demonstrate how through her embrace of an intersectional approach to discourse, transgender performer and advocate Laverne Cox has been able to shift the terrain on transgender issues and help build a coalitional approach to the movement. Through the use of public discourse and her media work, Cox has been able to shift a discourse that focuses on transition and surgery of the trans body to the violence and injustice that occurs to marginalized bodies, and she has been able to rename and reframe the discourse using a multimodal approach that provides great visibility to the movement.

This analysis of Ms. Cox speaks to two calls within the study of rhetoric. Jacqueline Jones Royster asks rhetoricians to challenge the dominant vision of a historic canon which focuses on Western, white, heterosexual, and privileged male rhetors.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Erin J. Rand suggests that queer rhetoricians have an obligation to build theory and ensure that queer work is not relegated to the margins of the discipline or ghettoized.<sup>2</sup> While Jones Royster and Rand do focus more on historical and archival approaches to the study of rhetoric, Ms. Cox does reference and engage with rhetors and scholars (e.g. bell hooks, Sojourner Truth, Patricia Hill Collins) that are important to the canon of especially African-American but also queer rhetorics. Michelle Kearl writes, "Contemporary social movements hail historically successful movement strategies when faced with rhetorically similar opposition even while the historical and material contexts of these discourses

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Jones Royster, "Disciplinary Landscaping, or Contemporary Challenges in the History of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 36, no. 2 (2003): 148-167.

<sup>2</sup> Erin J. Rand, "Queer Critical Rhetoric Bites Back," *Western Journal of Communication* 77, no. 5 (2013): 533-537.

remain.”<sup>3</sup> This essay, published in a widely accessible online journal on contemporary rhetoric, provides a space in which Rand’s goal can perhaps be realized.

Theoretically speaking, I use Cox’s rhetorical approach as a lens to bridge connections and close gaps between Enck-Wanzer’s work on intersectional rhetoric and the work of scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw on intersectionality.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, this essay troubles Cox’s ethos, particularly in regards to her media portrayals and the distribution networks in which they appear. However, her media work does seem to follow a positive trajectory that has enabled her as a Black trans woman to have great influence within both popular culture and American discourse on the struggles of the marginalized in this country.

According to her own online biography,

Laverne Cox is a critically acclaimed actress who can currently be seen in the Netflix original series “Orange is The New Black”... Laverne is the first trans woman of color to have a leading role on a mainstream scripted television show. A renowned speaker, Laverne has taken her empowering message of moving beyond gender expectations to live more authentically all over the country.<sup>5</sup>

Cox was also the first trans woman to be nominated for an Emmy award and also appeared on the cover of Time Magazine in a cover story titled “The Transgender Tipping Point.” In a 2013 “Overshare” video on the YouTube channel “Lives with Meredith Vieira,” Cox remarked, “When people ask me who I am, I say that I’m an actress. But I’m also a transgender woman of color. I was raised by a single mother. I’m from Mobile, Alabama. Although Wikipedia says that I’m an activist, I prefer the word transgender advocate.”<sup>6</sup> (As of this writing Wikipedia describes Ms. Cox as an advocate and not an activist.) Her self-description here provides an example of how Cox’s rhetoric engages with the idea of intersectionality or multiplicity of identities. Patricia Hill Collins explains that intersectionality is the way in which various identities such as gender, nation, race, and sexual orientation interact with one another and are not privileged over any other identity.<sup>7</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw’s research on intersectionality demonstrates that those with intersectional identities often get overlooked or their concerns are elided in public discourse in regards to violence.<sup>8</sup> Rhetorical scholar Darryl Enck-Wanzer, in his analysis of Latino/a social movement rhetoric, describes a radical style that embraces what he calls an intersectional rhetoric.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Kearn, “Is Gay the New Black?: An Intersectional Perspective on Social Movement Rhetoric in California’s Proposition 8 Debate,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (2015): 66.

<sup>4</sup> See Darrell Enck-Wanzer, “A Radical Democratic Style? Tradition, Hybridity, and Intersectionality,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 11, no. 3 (2006): 459-465; Darrell Enck-Wanzer, “Trashing the System: Social Movement, Intersectional Rhetoric, and Collective Agency in the Young Lords Organization’s Garbage Offensive,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 2 (2008): 174-201; Patricia Hill Collins, “It’s All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation,” *Hypatia* 13, no. 3 (1998): 62-82; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2nd ed.) (New York: Routledge, 2000); Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

<sup>5</sup> Laverne Cox, “About,” [www.lavernecox.com/bio-2](http://www.lavernecox.com/bio-2).

<sup>6</sup> Mary Colurso, “Alabama Native Laverne Cox Talks about Life as Transgender Actress, Advocate on ‘Overshare’ Series (Video),” *Al.com*, October 8, 2013, [http://www.al.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2013/10/alabama\\_native\\_laverne\\_cox\\_tal.html](http://www.al.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2013/10/alabama_native_laverne_cox_tal.html).

<sup>7</sup> Collins, “It’s All in the Family.”

<sup>8</sup> Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins.”

<sup>9</sup> Enck-Wanzer, “Trashing the System.”

## Intersectional Rhetoric

Firstly, I turn to Enck-Wanzer's concept of a "radical democratic style" to interrogate Cox as a social movement rhetor.<sup>10</sup> His approach was applied to a specific movement, though it is quite applicable here. He writes that this style and aesthetic involves the appreciation of tradition, hybridization of those traditions, and it is marked by an intersectional rhetoric. He defines intersectional rhetoric as "a rhetoric that places multiple discursive forms—speech, embodiment, and/or image—on relatively equal footing, is not leader-centered, draws from a number of diverse discursive political and rhetorical conventions, and is constitutive rather than instrumental."<sup>11</sup> However, Erin Rand criticizes Enck-Wanzer's approach here in that it "conflates the textuality of agency and the agency of texts."<sup>12</sup>

Working through Enck-Wanzer's definition, we can see how Cox's advocacy embraces an intersectional rhetoric. Cox uses multiple discursive forms; she has spoken at numerous settings including college campuses, awards ceremonies, and political events. She has also appeared in media interviews, and written several opinion pieces for publications like *HuffPost* and *The New York Times*. Cox actively posts to twitter, Instagram, and provides links to her public discourse on her personal website. Through the use of traditional oratory, media, and more specifically her use of documentary—she and Jacqueline Gares are co-producing the documentary *Free CeCe* which will include a prison interview Cox conducted with CeCe McDonald.<sup>13</sup> Cox develops a rhetorical strategy that embraces the discursive potential of intersectional rhetoric.

Cox clearly engages in what scholars have called "body rhetorics" which Charles E. Morris III and John Sloop define as "the embodied dimensions of persuasion."<sup>14</sup> Her gender and racial performance is central to her message. She is also quite self-aware of the role embodiment plays in her performance. Sarah Mirk of *Bitch* magazine wrote about a public dialogue that Cox had with bell hooks;

If I'm embracing a patriarchal gaze with this presentation (wearing blond wigs), it's the way that I've found something that feels empowering. And I think the *really* honest answer is that I've sort of constructed myself in a way so that I don't want to disappear... I've never been interested in being invisible and erased. So a lot of how I'm negotiating these systems of oppression and trying not to be erased is perhaps by buying into and playing into some of the patriarchal gaze and white supremacy.<sup>15</sup>

Cox also embraces visual ways of demonstrating the materiality of gender performance when she shared an image in which she is not wearing any makeup and provides the following caption: "Finally a few days to relax. I feel so privileged to be able to do work that I love and very privileged to be able to take time off occasionally. I take none of it lightly. Always good to have days with

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<sup>10</sup> Enck-Wanzer, "A Radical Democratic Style?"

<sup>11</sup> Enck-Wanzer, "Trashing the System," 177.

<sup>12</sup> Erin J. Rand, "An Inflammatory Fag and a Queer Form: Larry Kramer, Polemics, and Rhetorical Agency," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 3, (2008): 299.

<sup>13</sup> James Michael Nichols, "Laverne Cox Producing 'Free CeCe' Documentary about Transgender Woman CeCe McDonald," *Huffington Post*, January 3, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/03/laverne-cox-free-cece\\_n\\_4537625.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/03/laverne-cox-free-cece_n_4537625.html).

<sup>14</sup> Charles E. Morris, III and John M. Sloop, "'What Lips These Lips Have Kissed': Refiguring the Politics of Queer Public Kissing," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1, (2006). 18.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Mirk, "Laverne Cox and bell hooks Had a Discussion about Gender and Pop Culture," *Bitch*, October 8, 2014, [www.bitchmagazine.org](http://www.bitchmagazine.org).

no makeup to let my skin breath. #washfacenobase #TransIsBeautiful.”<sup>16</sup> Cox is acutely aware of the male gaze and that the media industry can allow her to “embody certain cisnormative beauty standards.”<sup>17</sup> This “action is radical, in part, because [Cox is] risking the introduction of a vulnerable physical body to the public discourse and [is] relinquishing the protection of physical abstraction.”<sup>18</sup>

Michelle Kearl explains that “social movement rhetoric is necessarily intersectional; that is, the tradition of protest rhetoric is citational.”<sup>19</sup> Cox’s approach also suggests a move towards a non-leader centered rhetoric. She is often speaking alongside other trans women of color. These individuals include Janet Mock and Carmen Carrera with whom she has appeared in various media settings. Cox engages citational practices when she tells audiences about other contemporary movement figures like artist, filmmaker, and scholar Kortney Ryan Ziegler and former Olympian Caitlyn Jenner.<sup>20</sup> Cox invokes historical figures such as bell hooks and Sojourner Truth through titling a college talk she gives “Ain’t I a Woman.” Cox’s discourse performs inclusive rhetoric as she gestures towards other social movements such as feminist, Black, and queer advocacy and activism.

Cox’s use of many different media and blurring of rhetorical genres uses her embodied performances to encourage the eradication of transphobia, homophobia, racism, and sexism. This lens best illustrates how a social movement rhetor can also use one’s intersectional identity for purposes of agitation. Enck-Wanzer’s intersectional rhetoric refers more to a rhetor’s complication of genre but he does also suggest that the radical democratic style engages in “antiessentialist identity politics that problematizes race, sex, and gender.”<sup>21</sup>

## Intersectionality

Patricia Hill Collins conducts an intersectional analysis by examining how the hierarchal language surrounding the term family in American political rhetoric privileges certain intersectional identities over others. She explains that intersectionality is the way in which various identities such as gender, nation, race, and sexual orientation interact with one another and are not privileged over any other identity. She also suggests that activists wishing to “challeng[e] social inequality might consider recasting intersectional understanding of family that do not reproduce inequality”<sup>22</sup> Cox demonstrates the influence of work by Collins and Crenshaw as she consciously performs her intersectional identity. This concept (also called multiplicity of identities) is used rhetorically by Cox in her advocacy work.<sup>23</sup> Crenshaw provides not only an explanation of intersectional identity

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<sup>16</sup> Soraya Nadia McDonald, “Laverne Cox on Caitlyn Jenner: ‘What I Think is Most Beautiful about Her is Her Heart,’” *Washington Post*, June 2, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/style-blog/wp/2015/06/02/laverne-cox-on-caitlyn-jenner-what-i-think-is-most-beautiful-about-her-is-her-heart/>.

<sup>17</sup> McDonald, “Laverne Cox on Caitlyn Jenner.”

<sup>18</sup> Erin J. Rand, *Reclaiming Queer: Activist and Academic Rhetorics of Resistance* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014), 113.

<sup>19</sup> Kearl, “Is Gay the New Black?” 66.

<sup>20</sup> Laverne Cox, “Black, LGBT, American: Laverne Cox; Threat or Threatened,” *The Advocate*, July 15, 2013, <http://www.advocate.com/print-issue/current-issue/2013/07/15/black-gay-american-laverne-cox>; McDonald, “Laverne Cox on Caitlyn Jenner.”

<sup>21</sup> Enck-Wanzer, “A Radical Democratic Style?” 461.

<sup>22</sup> Collins, “It’s All in the Family,” 84.

<sup>23</sup> For a description of several terms and metaphors related to the idea of intersectionality see, Cindy L. Griffin and Karma R. Chávez, “Standing at the Intersections of Feminisms, Intersectionality, and Communication Studies,” in

and identity politics but provides a context that deals with violence against women. Crenshaw's work explores examples like those that Cox describes in her advocacy that those with intersectional identities often get overlooked or their concerns are elided in public discourse in regards to violence.<sup>24</sup> As noted previously, Cox often references transgender violence in her oratory.

Cox often calls for her audience to fight for the rights of transgender individuals but especially poor and African-American individuals. She also frames the problems she discusses as broader social and structural issues that not only affect certain groups but those with multiple identities even more. Cox is aware of feminist and gender scholarship; her website, when I first began this research two years ago, devoted a section to these concerns.<sup>25</sup> Cox also engages many different audiences and adjusts her presentation to their needs, particularly when explaining concepts like cisgender and the problems of conflating being transgender with sexual orientation. Cox's article in the *Advocate* immediately alerts readers to her multiplicity of identities through its title, "Black, LGBT, American: Laverne Cox." In the article, Cox explains that she is "acutely aware of how sexism and transmisogyny intersect with racism to police my now black trans woman's body in public space."<sup>26</sup> Cox provides details of her personal change from male to female and how regional location (Alabama and New York) also affects this awareness. Again audiences are presented with an agitator who invokes her multiplicity of identities in order to identify with a broad audience but also explains the challenges for individuals with intersectional identities. In addition, Cox often references her Southern roots in her oratory and writings. This added identity is important in interrogating her advocacy. In his work on the oral history and narrative presentation of Black queer Southern men, E. Patrick Johnson notes that one of his informants found that a gathering for transgender individuals that she attended "failed to address issues that speak to the intersection of race and class."<sup>27</sup> Cox's advocacy also seems to follow R.M. Juang's suggestion that transgender activism should be "a robust transgender politics of recognition [that] should address the discriminations and prejudices targeted not only against gender but against racial and ethnic differences."<sup>28</sup> Cox seems to work towards this goal and one of coalition-building.<sup>29</sup>

As the LGBT community begins to shift to prioritizing more trans issues, issues that affect people of color and poor LGBTQ folks also need to be put front and center if we say we're really interested in equality and justice for all.<sup>30</sup>

I am a fan of unity across differences, because to tackle a long list of disparities – the ones that currently benefit the straight, white, cisgender, middle- and ruling-class patriarchy – requires broad coalitions to think, live, love and make policy differently.<sup>31</sup>

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*Standing in the Intersection: Feminist Voices, Feminist Practices in Communication Studies*, edited by Cindy L. Griffin and Karma R. Chávez, 97-121 (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012). For a discussion of intersecting oppressions across several different identities, see Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

<sup>24</sup> Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins."

<sup>25</sup> See Laverne Cox, "Gender Studies" 2015, <http://www.lavernecox.com/category/gender/>.

<sup>26</sup> Cox, "Black, LGBT, American."

<sup>27</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 340). This oversight is not a new phenomenon see Rand, "Queer Critical Rhetoric Bites Back" for an overview.

<sup>28</sup> Richard M. Juang, "Transgendering the Politics of Recognition," In *Transgender Rights*, edited by Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang, and Shannon Price Minter, 242-61 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 243.

<sup>29</sup> See Karma R. Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2013) for more on these processes.

<sup>30</sup> Cox, "Black, LGBT, American."

<sup>31</sup> Laverne Cox, "The Bullies Don't Draw a Distinction," *New York Times*, October 15, 2013.

This is America. Equal access and opportunity are what we're supposed to be about.<sup>32</sup>

By invoking these themes, Cox works towards a robust transgender politics and builds coalitions through her identification as a woman.

In a *New York Times* opinion series dealing with coalitions between LGB activists and transgender activists, she writes, “The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who are most at risk are working-class people of color. I am a fan of unity across differences, because to tackle a long list of disparities – the ones that currently benefit the straight, white, cisgender, middle- and ruling-class patriarchy – requires broad coalitions to think, live, love and make policy differently.”<sup>33</sup> She also traveled with the New York transgender freedom riders from New York City to Albany to lobby both republican and democratic lawmakers for transgender protections.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, Cox is engaging in what Sara Hayden and D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein describe as “third wave intersectionality,” an approach that has an “aim to create coalition politics based on interlocking, yet always shifting and changing, forms of oppression and axes of identity.”<sup>35</sup> Cox’s coalitional politics are demonstrated by her discussion with Janet Mock, Mark Anthony Neal, and Mychal Denzel Smith, hosted by Marc Lamont Hill. This discussion, titled “Remixing the Trans and Hip Hop Conversation,” shows the speakers attempting to create a space to discuss trans issues within the hip hop community following the resignation of DJ Mister Cee from his radio job after allegedly soliciting sex from a cross dresser.<sup>36</sup> While cross-dressing and transgender identity are two different identity constructions, discourse surrounding Mr. Cee’s resignation conflated the two. Cox and Mock in particular discuss the necessity to build a coalition within the hip hop community but also among those who love trans women. T.L. Cowan cites this Cox quote from that discussion, “How do we create a culture where we love trans women?” as an opening to a smart analysis of performance artists who are trying to do just what Cox asks.<sup>37</sup>

Her use of third wave intersectionality perspective is grounded in postmodern ideas of identity and scholarship/advocacy. Intersectional work should be grounded in doing. Cox not only has shifted the dialogue, as in her appearance with Carmen Carrera on the Katie Couric show last year. Both women cringed at Couric’s focus on the issue of transitioning and what Cox calls a focus on the genital question. Both women reframed the discourse and began to discuss the harm and abuse committed upon the bodies of transgender women like CeCe McDonald and Islan Nettles—a black transgender woman who was murdered on New York City streets after being catcalled.

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<sup>32</sup> Laverne Cox, “Beyond Second-Class Citizenship for Transgender People (Video),” *Huffpost Gay Voices*, May 10, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laverne-cox/transgender-rights\\_b\\_1506180.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laverne-cox/transgender-rights_b_1506180.html).

<sup>33</sup> Cox, “The Bullies Don’t Draw a Distinction.”

<sup>34</sup> Laverne Cox, “Transgender Freedom Riders: The Fight for Transgender Equality in New York State,” *Huffington Post*, April 24, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laverne-cox/transgender-freedom-riders-the-fight-for-transgender-equality-in-new-york-state\\_b\\_3129833.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laverne-cox/transgender-freedom-riders-the-fight-for-transgender-equality-in-new-york-state_b_3129833.html).

<sup>35</sup> Sara Hayden and D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein, “Placing Sex/Gender at the Forefront: Feminisms, Intersectionality, and Communication Studies,” In *Standing in the Intersection: Feminist Voices, Feminist Practices in Communication Studies*, edited by Cindy L. Griffin and Karma R. Chávez, 97-121 (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012): 100.

<sup>36</sup> Marc Lamont Hill, Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, Mark Anthony Neal, Mychal Denzel Smith et al. “Remixing the Trans and Hip Hop Conversation.” *Huffpost Live*, September 12, 2013, <http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/segment/what-dj-mister-cees-scandal-means-for-hip-hop/5230e99778c90a121000039d>.

<sup>37</sup> T.L. Cowan, “Transfeminist Kill/Joys: Rage, Love and Reparative Performance,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 501-516.

## Problematizing Cox's Media Work

While the rhetoric of Cox does seem historic and beneficial, it can also be seen as problematic. By using more traditional approaches and an ethos of community building, Cox seems to eschew the forms of rhetoric advocated by Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana Cloud which question the usefulness of invitational rhetoric particularly for those from marginalized positions.<sup>38</sup> Feminist scholars Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin define “invitational rhetoric [as] an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination.”<sup>39</sup>

An additional complication of Cox's performance is her media portrayals and the particular venues she has appeared. While Ms. Cox has had some control over her media portrayals her advocacy does not always match her representations. While Cox shifts the discourse away from transitioning on the Katie Couric show, audiences still see Sophia Burset transitioning in OITNB. (Laverne Cox's twin brother plays the role of Burset's pre-surgery identity.) Cael Keegan's article which analyzes depictions of the transgender body in contemporary film and television, argues that “transnormative media capitalize on the forcible pathology of ‘being trans’ by utilizing the transgender body as a consumer item that offers viewers sympathetic pathways into ideal, hegemonic citizenship.”<sup>40</sup> While Cox is able to build a coalition and shift discourses, her character of Sophia Burset demonstrates an incarcerated woman who is limited in her ability to enact change. Also important to consider are the means of distribution of Cox's representations on Netflix. As Marieke Jenner has argued, Netflix brands itself as a creator of ‘quality’ entertainment which means it targets wealthy, white, middle-class audiences with money to spend. She contends that Netflix's focus on individual preferences and audience practices connects to ideas of postmodernism that “seem to make ‘alternative’ systems to capitalism impossible.”<sup>41</sup>

OITNB's representations have also received criticism from some such as Anna Marie Smith, who writes that the program “promotes the narcissism of the privileged white gaze” though she notes that “we can find fugitive moments of critique.”<sup>42</sup> Cox's previous work within reality television on the cable network VH1 also can be seen as problematic as well. In her reality program “TRANSform me,” Cox and a cast of trans designers help cisgender women become more “glamorous,” stylish, and feminine. A description of an episode of the program found on VH1's website reads,

As a girl, Phaea was never fashion-conscious. Her hippie mother didn't buy her frilly dresses or teach her how to put on makeup. Now that this 28-year-old Brooklynite is engaged and entering a new phase of her life, she wants to ditch the rolled-up jeans and boxy tees and reveal the sexy sophisticated woman trapped inside. Laverne, Jamie, and Nina can certainly relate—they were never shown how to be girly-girls either! They had to learn it on their own, and now they're ready to impart that knowledge to Phaea.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Nina M. Lozano Reich and Dana L. Cloud, “The Uncivil Tongue: Invitational Rhetoric and the Problem of Inequality,” *Western Journal of Communication* 73, no. 2, (2009): 220-226.

<sup>39</sup> Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric,” *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 5.

<sup>40</sup> Cael Keegan, “Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity,” *Genders* 57, (2013): 29.

<sup>41</sup> Marieke Jenner, “Is This TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and Binge-Watching,” *New Media and Society*, 18, no. 2 (2016): 268.

<sup>42</sup> Anna Marie Smith, “Orange is the Same White,” *New Political Science* 37, no. 2, (2015): 277.

<sup>43</sup> “TRANSform Me,” *VH1*, 2016, [http://www.vh1.com/shows/transform\\_me/episode.jhtml?episodeID=166406#moreinfo](http://www.vh1.com/shows/transform_me/episode.jhtml?episodeID=166406#moreinfo).

With this description, the show reinforces the dominant hegemonic binaries of gender performance. On another reality program, *Cake Boss* Carmen Carrera was used as a blind date to ‘prank’ one of the characters on the program: after seeing the episode Carrera was dismayed. The episode was denounced by Carrera supporters and TLC pulled the episode from its rotation.<sup>44</sup> Scholars such as James Hay and Laurie Ouellette have suggested that reality programming shifts responsibility and solutions away from governmental solutions and onto the individual and self-regulation and peer-surveillance.<sup>45</sup>

While some of Cox’s media work may be counter to her advocacy narrative, she does note that the prison setting of *OITNB* has given her an easy in to discuss political subjects and controversies with reporters.<sup>46</sup> The third season of the series depicts a hate crime against Sophia in which she is attacked by inmates querying her about her genitalia. Her wig comes off in the scuffle and she gets the opportunity to tell off the warden. In somewhat of a convergence, Cox’s media portrayals and advocacy work may be coming more in sync.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I frame the advocacy work of Laverne Cox in terms of both her intersectional perspective and her use of intersectional rhetoric. This analysis bridges these two approaches to illustrate that Cox has, I think, successfully shifted public discourse in terms of trans and queer issues but also is able to build a broader coalition while doing so. As a performer, Cox’s work has complicated her advocacy work. However, her continued work on *OITNB* has demonstrated that she is now able to both advocate for CeCe McDonald through her documentary and her public discourse, but also through the responsible portrayal of transphobic violence in prison on a television program. While Cox’s media trajectory which provided her a voice (Carmen Carrera also began her fame as a reality television show personality) may be problematic in terms of the distribution methods by which she came to fame. Cox has built a successful approach that embraces both intersectional rhetoric and an intersectional perspective.

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<sup>44</sup> Kevin Burra, “Carmen Carrera Discusses ‘Cake Boss’ Controversy, RuPaul and Her Transition,” *HuffPost Gay Voices*, June 15 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/15/carmen-carrera-discusses-\\_n\\_1599651.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/15/carmen-carrera-discusses-_n_1599651.html).

<sup>45</sup> Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, “Makeover Television, Governmentality, and the Good Citizen,” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 22, no. 4 (2008): 471-484.

<sup>46</sup> Sarah Mirk, “Laverne Cox and bell hooks.”