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Laverne Cox and the Fight for LGBT+ Rights
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Abstract

This research paper highlights Laverne Cox and her life, accomplishments, and fight for equality among women, people of color, and the LGBT+ community. It speaks of different laws and regulations that hold or have held transgender people back and explains Cox's relevance to the First Year Seminar course "Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History". It also touches on discrimination and the problems faced by transgender people in America.

Keywords: transgender, Laverne Cox, LGBT, discrimination

Laverne Cox and the Fight for LGBT+ Rights

Laverne Cox and her life were both first revealed to me when I began watching the original Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*. Cox was an intelligent, strong actress and captured my attention immediately. As a member of the LGBT+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) community, I was inspired by her commitment to activism for those with and without a voice. Over the past several years, Cox has been a large part of my life because she is a powerful, well spoken woman that I can admire. Before finding out about her and her acting, I struggled to find an LGBT+ icon to look up to or aspire to be because people in that community are not typically part of the popular media, especially television. Cox and her character “Sophia Burset” on *Orange is the New Black* opened my eyes up to a new world of role models and the growing presence of the LGBT+ community online. For me, she stood as a representation of a group I felt was never given a voice, especially in mainstream media.

In addition to finding a new role model, I was inspired to research more about transgender people and their lives. Cox has spoken endlessly on her experience as a transgender woman and has never hesitated to answer tough questions about her life, especially if the reason was to benefit others in their journeys. Her roles in various television shows were my first experience of regularly seeing LGBT people on screen. Her strength and persistence have inspired me to further embrace who I am as a woman and as a person. Seeing her struggles and difficulties in life have caused me to be more grateful for who I am and the privilege I have been given. She has constantly been a positive role model for members of the LGBT+ community and continues to speak out for LGBT+ youth and those marginalized for being who they truly are.

Born in Mobile, Alabama, Laverne Cox believes herself to always have been a performer. Her dance career began when she started dance lessons at just eight years old. Working her way up in the dance world and improving her dance abilities, Cox earned a scholarship at a boarding school, the Alabama School of Fine Arts, and spent her college years at Indiana University and Marymount Manhattan College. “It was at Marymount,” she says, “that the acting bug bit me.”

Cox’s role in acting grew larger as she transitioned from working in plays with the theatre department to eventually doing a film in her senior year. As her acting developed, so did her transition. Cox slowly transitioned her gender nonconforming image to a more feminine one, knowing she would start her medical transition soon as well. Cox performed in drag as a way to keep up with her need to perform. She eventually began working in more student and independent films but auditioned numerous times without disclosing her trans identity to agents and casting directors. This was done in hopes that her career could succeed without relying on the fact she was transgender.

Cox feared failing in the industry as a transgender actress but was influenced by another transwoman, Candis Cayne. After seeing Cayne on “Dirty Sexy Money”, she was inspired to appeal to more agents and directors, eventually booking a meeting with her current manager, Paul Hilepo.

Shortly after this meeting, Cox booked two episodes of “Law and Order”, along with an HBO show “Bored To Death”, and “I Wanna Work for Diddy”, a reality show. Her role in the latter eventually led to Cox’s own show, “TRANSform Me” in 2010. Consistent appearances in many television shows caused Laverne Cox to land the show that brought her life and identity to the entire world, “Orange is the New Black”. Throughout her career, Laverne has taken on a

stronger role in fighting for the LGBT+ community and has used her popularity and fame to her advantage in the fight for rights.

A major obstacle Laverne Cox has had to overcome is the constant changing of laws regarding transgender rights. Laws protecting transgender people have only recently begun to be put in action with the first municipality to specifically prohibit discrimination based on a transgender person's identity being Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1975 (Hunter, Joslin, & McGowan, 2004). The nation has made significant progress since then, with almost sixty counties or cities following suit by 2003. Though this is positive progress, it is still important to continue to protect transgender people, especially in the current political climate. Another question that legislation has struggled to answer is whether or not transgender people can be considered under laws that prohibit sex discrimination. Title IX prohibits sex discrimination but up until the late 1990s, "federal courts uniformly held that transsexual people are not protected under Title VII's prohibition of sex discrimination, on the ground that Congress did not intend the term sex to include transsexualism" (Hunter et al., 2003, p. 174). Though this law has been challenged since the 1990s, it shows one of the obstacles transgender people have been fighting to get over.

Queer Mobilizations: LGBT Activists Confront The Law, (Barclay, Bernstein, & Marshall, 2009) asks a question that courts have struggled with for years: "how to classify someone who does not identify with the sex assigned at birth?" Laverne Cox grew up in an environment where laws concerning transgender people were being created. She was born in 1972, placing her transition in a time where states were just beginning to move with the times. In *The Lives of Transgender People* (2011), Genny Beemyn and Susan Rankin discuss the ways a

negative environment can impact transgender youth. In places where restricting legislation is in action, a negative climate can discourage personal development and job growth. In states that prohibited same sex marriage before its legalization by the Supreme Court in 2015, if a transgender person with a mended birth certificate to match her identity married a man, her marriage could be accepted in her home state. However, if the couple was to move, there was a chance that other states would not honor her birth certificate and would consider their marriage a homosexual relationship (Barclay, 2009). These loopholes in legislation exist in many places and can prohibit transgender people from living their lives as cisgender people would. If the Supreme Court case, *Obergefell v. Hodges* had not legalized same-sex marriage, Laverne Cox and thousands of other transgender individuals would be restricted from marrying the person they love. (MAKE ANNOTATED CITATION FOR QUEER MOBILIZATIONS)

Throughout her career, Laverne Cox has worked towards a steady acting role and the need for her accomplishments to be recognized not just because she is transgender, but because she is talented and puts hard work into what she does. One of her major accomplishments was in 2014 when she earned the spot as the first transgender person to be featured on the cover of *TIME* magazine. With her role as “Sophia Burset” on *Orange is the New Black*, Cox is the “first transgender woman of color to have a leading role on a mainstream scripted television show”. Cox has also received an Emmy nomination for “Outstanding Guest Actress in a Comedy Series” and a Screen Actors Guild (SAG) Award for “Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a Comedy Series.” *Glamour* has named her one of their Women of the Year and she has also been honored by various LGBT+ publications. (Cox, 2017)

A lasting impact Cox has had on the world is her addition to the story of so many transgender lives. She has stood as a voice for those unable to speak up and has endlessly advocated for equality in the LGBT+ community and the rest of the world. She has acted as a “public educator about the plight of transgender people writ large (and TWOC (transgender women of color) specifically (Glover, 2016, p. 4)” and stands as an influential role model for transgender and cisgender youth alike. Her role as an advocate for the LGBT+ community and a fighter for equality for women of color has affected the lives of thousands who look up to and respect her.

Laverne Cox’s role in social issues and transgender activism caused me to choose her as a research topic. In class, we regularly talk about current issues and the importance of speaking out against injustice. We also find ways to consistently touch on the LGBT+ community and ways to fight for equality, especially when it feels as though we do not have a voice. The empowering atmosphere of our classroom is one that makes me excited and eager about current issues and the fight for equality across all communities and I feel that Laverne Cox perfectly embodies this. Our class is titled “Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History” and Cox is the perfect embodiment of the opposite of “well-behaved”. She has consistently challenged social norms by being her authentic, powerful self. This class has been a constant reminder of the role Cox has played in my life, a mighty woman I admire, and I aspire to have the voice and drive she so perfectly demonstrates.

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