

## Gay Doesn't Begin to Cover It:

### Non-Binary Sexuality in Modern Television

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Modern media is no stranger to the LGBT community. Shows like *Will & Grace* pioneered gay visibility on television, and in 2015 gay characters are now prominent in American television. Lesbian and gay characters now have a level of prominence never before seen in the American cultural public and queer visibility is at an all-time high. Yet some sexual minority groups still receive far less visibility than others. Recent years have seen an upsurge in transgendered characters in television programming, especially with the popularity of Ru Paul's *Drag Race* and the creation of the LOGO television network. However, characters whose sexuality lies outside of binary gender and sexuality representations are few and far between. In this paper I will examine one particular television character whose sexuality forces the modern viewer to consider non-binary sexuality, Dean Craig Pelton of NBC/Yahoo's *Community*.

Most queer characters in mainstream American television are labeled as either gay or lesbian, and in a few rare cases bisexual. Bisexual visibility in American television remains limited to a few shining examples and a handful of cliché token stereotypes. Openly bisexual characters are most often female, and reduced simply to their position as sexual trophies for male characters. Bisexuality, while least visible among sexual minorities that fit within the prescribed LGBT acronym, is most visible outside of the gay/straight dichotomy. Bisexuality becomes the most palatable non-binary sexuality due to the ability for viewers to see bisexuals as still reinforcing gender as a binary.

Bisexuality can be accepted by the casual queer-friendly viewer, because it does not challenge the larger assumption that there are only two genders. Bisexual characters can be attracted to both of these two available options, and asexual, non-binary, and gender-unrelated sexualities go unrepresented. It is important to note that I am not critiquing bisexuality itself, and more importantly I am not claiming that bisexuality is not subversive enough of the gender binary. The argument here is that representations of bisexuality on American television are vastly more common than representations of other non-binary sexualities because these characters remain more palatable to the average viewer, just as lesbian and gay characters outnumber bisexual characters for similar reasons. For the purposes of this essay I will examine one character that breaks this mold and breaks “new ground for sexual politics on television” (St. John).

The most commonly known sexuality outside the binary is pansexuality. Pansexuality has extremely limited visibility in mainstream public culture, especially in film and television. It is nearly impossible to find discussions of pansexuality outside of pansexual circles and the queer theory classroom. There is however, one television character that is openly labeled as pansexual and that is Captain Jack Harkness of *Doctor Who* and its spinoff, *Torchwood*. Initially identified as bisexual, Captain Harkness is later referred to in the canon of these two series as pansexual and later, omnisexual. The character’s sexuality can be infinitely fluid due to the nature of *Doctor Who*, a science fiction program. Harkness takes on the labels of pansexual and omnisexual due to the wide availability of non-binary gendered persons in the series. Extra-terrestrial humanoids with alternative genders and non-genders populate the series, and though he is human, Harkness’ sexuality is not limited by the genders available to his species.

It is tempting to say that Harkness and characters like him are exactly what is needed to move forward with the visibility of non-binary sexuality in television. However, one key difference separates Harkness from a character like Dean Pelton—Harkness' sexuality is labeled. Harkness is openly labeled as omnisexual while Dean Pelton, though just as openly non-heterosexual as Harkness, does not openly define his sexual preference on the show. This refusal to label Pelton as any one particular sexuality breaks open an entirely new way of portraying queer characters in television in ways that subvert and challenge audience expectations of sexuality.

To summarize briefly, Dean Craig Pelton is the dean of Greendale Community College, the fictional community college attended by *Community*'s main characters. The show revolves around several students at Greendale who form a study group and wind up spending a lot of time interacting with Dean Pelton. The dean is known for his somewhat flamboyant personality, and throughout the series his sexuality is revealed slowly, through small pieces of information that seem to hint, especially at first, that Dean Pelton is gay.

At first glance this may seem like the tired trope of refusing to define a character as gay in order to appeal to queer audiences without alienating less accepting viewers. These characters are often "coded," presenting certain stereotypical behaviors and traits so that they may be recognized as gay while never openly acknowledging their sexuality. One recent and controversial instance of this occurred in the children's television program, *Avatar: Legend of Korra*. During the series finale the main character holds hands with another female character and they walk off together. This is meant to imply that the two have become a couple, but this implication has been heavily critiqued as impossibly subtle. Most viewers did not realize that the two characters were meant to be gay until it was later confirmed via tweet. In best case scenarios

like these, the coded gay character remains completely invisible as gay, and at worst these characters perpetuate harmful and inauthentic expectations of gay characters.

However, Craig Pelton is not merely coded gay. In the early seasons of *Community* this might have been a cogent argument, as Pelton's sexuality was much more subtle at that time. What makes the dean different is the fact that while his sexuality goes unlabeled, he is still addressed outright as non-heterosexual. Over the course of the show Pelton reveals sexual interest in men and women, and makes several statements that place him somewhere outside of binary sexuality.

The first glimpse of Pelton's sexuality occurs in an early episode when he exclaims "I go both ways!" which is innocent in context, though played for laughs due to the double entendre. While this seems to paint Pelton as bisexual, and may even seem to mock him slightly, it really doesn't show the whole story of Pelton's sexuality. One of the things that makes Pelton's characterization so subversive is its development over time. It is as though we the audience are following Pelton along his own journey of understanding his sexual desires.

Later in the series the dean begins to develop an obvious crush on one of the male study group members, Jeff Winger. Pelton swoons over Jeff, unsubtly flirts with him, and in one plot line he even blackmails Jeff into going on a date with him. In one episode while investigating student-teacher relationships, Pelton asks if Jeff and his girlfriend would ever consider including a third and implies that he would be interested in joining them. Pelton makes a habit of making remarks about his sexuality that are intentionally ambiguous. In one episode, he gets excited at the prospect of hanging out with grown men in their underwear, though it is never explicit that he is interested for sexual reasons. The dean's dialogue is written as intentionally ambiguous,

intentionally confusing the audience and making the audience do the work of identifying the dean's sexuality.

This identification work is especially important to the development of the character's sexuality. The show requires the audience to do this work, never outright defining the dean's sexuality. The also make it intentionally difficult to pinpoint, with ambiguous writing.

One recurring bit throughout the series becomes particularly subversive. In an early episode of season one, Environmental Science, the dean opens a video while unaware of its contents. The video is of a muscular man painted to look like a Dalmatian and it is stylized to look like some kind of fetish video. After initial confusion, the dean's response to this video is "this better not awaken anything in me." A few episodes later, the dean receives a package on his desk and opens it to reveal that he ordered a full-body Dalmatian suit. Subtle references to Dalmatians grow as the series continues, and they often go unaddressed. A Dalmatian poster appears on the dean's office wall in one episode, and stays for the rest of the series. The camera pans and the audience sees a Dalmatian as the dean's desktop background. Two people, whose genders are never revealed, show up to a school dance in Dalmatian costumes, responding to the dean's craigslist advertisement. It becomes implied that at least part of Pelton's sexuality does not revolve around gender at all, but rather involves Dalmatians in some way.

Throughout the series there are attempts at discussing the dean's sexuality. He is called a fruit by another character, to which he responds "Hey! Unacceptable, and none of your business, and barely the whole truth!" In a third season episode the vice dean refers to Pelton as a "pansexual imp." While the dean does not appear to accept this label, he doesn't deny it either—further playing into the ambiguous sexuality that the writers (including Jim Rash, the actor who plays Pelton) have constructed for the dean.

But perhaps the epitome of Pelton's characterization as sexually non-binary comes in one of the most recent episodes, "Queer Studies and Advanced Waxing." This episode runs several plot lines at once, but the one involving the dean revolves around the labeling of his sexuality. At the beginning of the episode, two members of the school board ask Pelton if he would be interested in a promotion, putting him on the school board. The dean is thrilled until they first ask "You're gay... right? Like openly?" to which the dean responds, "I'm not openly anything and gay doesn't begin to cover it." He quickly realizes that the school board is merely looking for a token gay in order to salvage their image for recently cancelling a pride parade. It becomes clear that Pelton will be denied the promotion unless he outs himself as "a gay dean."

In this episode we really see a refusal to define the dean as either gay or straight. He explicitly states that his sexuality is non-binary, though throughout the whole episode never provides a label for his sexuality. As he deliberates with Jeff Winger over whether or not he should lie about his sexuality and take the position, they have this exchange:

Jeff: "Thirty years ago the most power the openly gay could achieve was the center square."

Pelton: "But I'm not *just* gay"

Jeff: "What does that *mean*?"

Pelton: "If coming out is a magic show, and being gay is pulling a rabbit out of a hat, then I'm one of those never ending handkerchiefs."

Jeff: "The sad truth Craig, anything other than straight is plenty gay for a school board."

Craig decides to take the position on Jeff's advice, because he believes the position of power and visibility will allow him to do more good, even if it means not being completely truthful about his sexuality. As he confirms that he will accept the job he states, "I could change the system from the inside out. And all I have to do is pare down my sexuality to simple gayness, which *is* heavily in the mix." And then, "Get ready America! Dean Pelton is coming out as approximately 2/7ths of what he is!"

As the episode progresses, the dean's sexuality becomes a spectacle to the media in this fictional universe. There is an announcement speech, where the dean reveals his partner, Domingo, a man hired by the school board to play the dean's monogamous boyfriend. The dean is plastered on magazine covers for academics and LGBT websites with the headline "Gay Dean!" Soon all of his actions as dean are read as gay. As part of a subplot, he allows some baby birds to live in their nest even though it is disrupting the campus wifi signal. The school board exclaims this is "too gay," to which Craig responds, "I didn't do it because I'm gay... wait I'm not gay!"

Meanwhile Craig also finds one positive outcome of his predicament. Many of the gay students on campus stop him to tell him thanks for being out, that it means a lot to them. Though his new visibility has a positive impact on these students, the dean does not feel comfortable labeling himself as gay when that is inaccurate to his actual sexuality. He calls a press conference and states that he has been lying, and gay doesn't cover what he really is. He states, "I belong to one of the most marginalized and least honest groups in America. I am..." He pauses for dramatic effect, both as the character would for his press conference but also for the show's viewer, since this would be the first time the dean's actual sexuality would be explicitly stated. However, in a twist he finishes the sentence identifying himself as "a politician." Pelton

then gives an impassioned speech explaining that he hopes the school board can accept an openly political member.

With the development of the dean's sexuality throughout the series, this show portrays sexuality in a more nuanced way than any other show on American television. First, the dean is a representation of a character with a non-binary sexuality, something which is rare in and of itself. It challenges the audience to consider the existence of sexualities that aren't merely gay, straight, or bisexual, but lie outside of those boundaries. The dean is a complicated man, with a complicated sexuality. The audience is meant to find him endearing and interesting. *Community*, as a television program, is a comedy. But it is a comedy about people, exploring their depths and their relationships with others. The dean's sexuality is often played to comedic effect, but it receives equal attention as a serious issue. In "Queer Studies and Advanced Waxing," the audience is meant to care about the dean's struggle with being completely honest with the public while still providing visibility for the queer community by holding a position of authority.

The episode also presents a kind of meta humor, where the dean's position on the school board can be considered analogous to the character's position on the show. The episode represents a commentary on calls for the show to out the dean as gay. *Community* has been criticized in the past for not having the dean come out, since most fans and critics assumed that the dean was gay. The fact that the dean's sexuality was never openly stated was criticized as another representation of a coded gay character who is never outed in order to maintain appeal to a wider audience while still bringing in gay audiences through a character they can identify with.

The episode is a metaphorical response to that criticism. While the dean coming out as gay to the school board did have a positive impact in that it increased his visibility to the public within the show, it didn't accurately represent his sexuality. Similarly, to have the dean come out



as gay on the show would provide increased visibility for gay characters, but would do the dean's character a disservice. The dean creates an opportunity to explore a much more complex sexuality, despite the fact that fans wanted to see an out character on the show. This episode solves both issues. In a way, the episode does out the dean. He states that gay is "heavily in the mix" and "approximately 2/7ths" of what he is. That in and of itself is a form of coming out, as the dean is explicitly identified as non-heterosexual. However, refusing to put a label on his sexuality, just as the character refuses to label himself to the school board, allows the character to maintain his complexity, challenge stereotypes about sexuality, and take a stand against being the token gay character. By refusing to label his sexuality, the show takes the stand that it will not use the dean as a mere edifice of the gay community to pander to particular demographics, just as the school board was attempting to turn the dean into an edifice to pander to their constituents.

Dean Craig Pelton is doing queer theory in action. The text that is the show *Community* is engaging with the work of queer theorists like Michel Foucault and Jose Munoz. Foucault argues that the current rhetoric around human sexuality revolves around the premise that one is gay or straight, or perhaps in certain discourses bisexual. Foucault wrote that homosexuality has been represented "less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature," and "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (Foucault, 43). This describes the shift in societal perceptions of sexuality from doing individual acts, to being a kind of person. In refusing to label the dean's sexuality, not only as either gay or straight but even as anything in between or outside of the binary the show is refusing to label the dean as a particular kind of person. This is best exemplified in the way that the dean is repeatedly referred to as "gay dean" during the period of time in which he claims the gay label in order to remain on the school board.

During this time, it is as though the other characters find it impossible to separate the person from the sexuality and his every action is a gay action, including his position as dean.

As the dean is asking Jeff's advice about taking the school board position, he also asks another friend for her opinion on the subject. She tells him, "When a person becomes symbolic they gain symbolic power at the price of independent power." The show chooses to keep the dean's independent power and sacrifices the potential symbolic power that comes with labeling his sexuality and portraying him as a symbol for the gay community. The show does not label the dean as a *kind* of person, be it homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, or anything else. The dean is allowed the freedom to be a whole person, with hopes, wants, and fears that can be related to his sexuality, but do not necessarily revolve around it.

Community further engages with the work of Foucault by the representation of the dean's sexual interest in Dalmatians. This further challenges the notion that sexuality is representative of a kind of person. The dean could just as easily be labeled Dalmatian-sexual as he could bisexual or any other particular label. The dean presents an opportunity to explore sexuality outside of the discourse of being. The dean's sexual interest in Dalmatians isn't any more an indication of what kind of person he is than any of his other strong personality characteristics. The interest in Dalmatians is yet another way in which *Community* presents the dean as a sexually non-binary character. The dean's sexuality does not necessarily revolve around gender—perhaps we'll find in a later episode that it revolves entirely around Dalmatians and gender is irrelevant to the dean's sexual preferences. By choosing not to label the dean's sexuality, the possibilities remain open to sexualities that lie beyond existing conceptions of gender-related sexuality.

*Community* also practices the theories of Jose Munoz in the exposition of the dean's sexuality. Munoz writes, "Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (Munoz, 4). Authentic and positive representations of queer characters in television provide a certain visibility for the gay community that can be important in the fight against the phobic and hateful discourse of the majority.

However, these representations will always leave something to be desired. Characters like Captain Jack Harkness, for example, provide a positive representation of a pansexual character that can challenge expectations of sexual identity and stereotypes about the queer community among a broad public audience. But this character falls flat in actually representing the broadness of the kinds of people who identify as pansexual. Harkness is the edifice for a community that dean Pelton refuses to be.

No one character can ever be a completely authentic representation of a particular demographic, especially among minority subjects. This is why the refusal to label the dean's sexuality becomes so important. The dean is not a pansexual character meant to appeal to and represent a particular demographic of *Community*'s audience. He is authentic, not as a pansexual, but as a human being. The dean remains explicitly non-heterosexual, while still remaining sexually ambiguous. He is a perfect character for Munoz's disidentification, because not only is he not a representative of his sexuality—he isn't trying to be one. As Stevie St. John writes about how the dean breaks new ground for sexual politics in American television, "the humor surrounding his sexual tendencies sometimes draws on stereotypes. On occasion, he can even come off as predatory — a tired misconception about gay and bisexual men. But in an average

episode, Dean Pelton doesn't seem creepy; he comes off as friendly — though clingy — and loveable... He's eccentric — but no more so than anyone else at Greendale.” Sexually non-binary viewers may find some of themselves in the dean, good and bad, as he is flawed and human. And while the dean can't ever name all of what it means to be sexually non-binary, he does increase visibility for the sexually non-binary without being propped up as the token representative. The dean remains an ambiguous enigma, and an interesting human character.

Theorist April Callis writes, “While the sexual binary of heterosexual and homosexual is shifting and becoming less hegemonic, it is still a powerful system of sexual categorization. In light of the continued hold the sexual binary has on constructions of sexuality, non-binary identities are best understood as a sexual borderland. Rather than forming separately from the binary system, these identities have sprung up from the cracks within it, creating an in-between space that has become wider and more pronounced in recent years.” Dean Pelton is an example of a character whose identity has sprung up from the cracks. He operates in an in-between space where labels lose their meaning and importance. He is a man with a complex personality, whose sexual identity is not dependent on the definitions and labels that others prescribe, and challenges the notion of what it means to be a sexual minority character in American television.

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