

## *Ideantity: Queer Resistance and Community's Dean Craig Pelton*

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### **Introduction: *Ideantity***

“I’m not just gay. If coming out is a magic show and gayness is a rabbit out of a hat, I’m one of those never-ending handkerchiefs” (“Queer Studies and Advanced Waxing”). This statement is made by Dean Craig Pelton (Jim Rash), in a season six episode of *Community* during which he explains his sexuality to the show’s main character Jeff Winger (Joel McHale). In the five seasons prior to this episode, Craig Pelton’s sexuality is rarely addressed in such explicit terms. However, that does not mean that it is not an aspect of his character — Craig Pelton’s attraction towards men is a frequent feature throughout the show, especially in the form of his flirtations with lead Jeff Winger. Additionally, Craig Pelton frequently defies gender norms and traditional concepts of masculinity, as he often wears costumes which include dresses or other traditionally “feminine” components such as wigs and makeup. Although Craig Pelton has not explicitly “come out” for much of the show, he does not need to — Pelton is a character who can be presumed as being not heterosexual, even without stating his sexuality in any clear terms.

*Community* (2009-2015) is not the most prominent example of queer representation in the sitcom genre — unlike shows such as *Modern Family* or *Will and Grace*, *Community*’s only openly queer character is not even a member of the main cast. *Community*, which takes place at the fictional Greendale Community College, mainly focuses on a study group made up of seven unlikely friends — Jeff Winger, Britta Perry (Gillian Jacobs), Annie Edison (Alison Brie), Troy Barnes (Donald Glover), Abed Nadir (Danny Pudi), Shirley Bennett (Yvette Nicole Brown), and Pierce Hawthorne (Chevy Chase). Although he is not a member of the main cast, the group is frequently accompanied by Craig Pelton, the dean of Greendale Community College. *Community*

is not one of the most obvious or well-known examples of queer representation, however, it may be more than that — it may be an example of queer resistance. In Dean Craig Pelton, *Community* creates a character who is clearly not-straight, even when his sexuality is not an aspect of the episode's plot or the show's overall premise. This is precisely the definition of queer resistance, a subversion of heterosexuality which occurs when “the concepts of gender and sexuality are being re-articulated in ways that defy the exclusion of subjects whose identities, desires, and practices have been considered contradictory and unintelligible” (Dhaenens). Aspects of Craig Pelton's character such as his exploration of femininity and refusal to conform to heteronormative standards are precisely what Dhaenens refers to when discussing the re-articulation of concepts of gender and sexuality which make up queer resistance.

In this essay, I will explore the idea of queer resistance in NBC's *Community*, focusing specifically on the character Craig Pelton. I will begin with a brief discussion of the field of queer theory and its application to television, followed by a definition of the topic of queer resistance. I will then apply this topic to *Community*'s portrayal of Craig Pelton, by exploring the show's portrayal of his sexuality as well as his relationship with masculinity and femininity. Through my analysis of this character, I will argue that *Community*'s Dean Craig Pelton serves as an example of queer resistance.

### **Queer Theory, Queer Resistance, and Television**

In order to properly understand queer resistance, it is first necessary to gain an understanding of the field of queer theory. Queer theory is built in part on Foucault's theories regarding sexuality and sexual identity. Foucault argued that “sexuality and sexual definitions are created by society in order to repress individuals wishing to engage in behaviors that deviate from

the heterosexual model” (Avila-Saavedra). Queer theory incorporates Foucault’s theories on sexuality, as well as making observations about society at large, as the field “discusses how power operates with sexuality in contemporary society to define social and cultural norms” (Avila-Saavedra). Although it is difficult to define queer theory, the field involves examining the ways in which sexuality operates in society, as well as the resulting impact on social and cultural norms.

Similarly to queer theory, queer resistance is somewhat difficult to define. Queer resistance is defined as subversion of heterosexuality, which occurs when “the concepts of gender and sexuality are being re-articulated in ways that defy the exclusion of subjects whose identities, desires, and practices have been considered contradictory and unintelligible” (Dhaenens). In other words, queer resistance occurs when “the presumption of heterosexuality no longer holds” (Dhaenens). Perhaps some of the difficulty of defining queer resistance comes from the fact that there is no one way for an individual or piece of media to exemplify this concept. De Ridder et al. describe queer resistance as “represented by the articulation of alternatives to the ubiquitous representation of the heterosexual matrix”; however, there is not only one way to oppose the heterosexuality which is ever-present in media. Queer resistance can be found in any individual or character who subverts heterosexuality through defiance of heteronormative standards and expectations.

In media, queer resistance is more than simply representation. Queer representation in media has become much more common in recent years — according to the GLAAD media institute, 9.1% of characters scheduled to appear on “broadcast scripted primetime television” in 2020 were LGBTQ+ (Where We Are on TV Report - 2020). While this may not seem like a large percentage, it is a significant increase from just ten years ago, when only 3.9% of scripted series regulars were LGBTQ+ (Where We Are on TV Report - 2010). However, although the frequency

of representation is important, the nature of this representation is important as well. Examining media for instances of queer resistance requires looking beyond whether a queer character is present, or whether this character plays into stereotypes — it involves examining the character’s relationship with traditional ideas of gender and sexuality.

### **“Gay Doesn’t Begin to Cover it”: Craig Pelton’s Sexuality**

The first reference made to Dean Craig Pelton’s sexuality comes only five episodes into *Community*’s first season, as the Dean is adjudicating an academic dishonesty trial and accidentally mentions that he “goes both ways” (“Advanced Criminal Law”). In this instance, the statement is clearly a slip of the tongue, as Pelton immediately asks for that statement to be stricken from the record before correcting himself and stating that he is “impartial”. This one line begins a pattern of references to Craig Pelton’s sexuality, most of which are similarly ambiguous but no less clear. In the show’s third season, while attending a gay pride party, the Dean describes the party as “great, if you’re into that kind of thing” (“Advanced Gay”). He immediately follows this statement by claiming that it’s “time to mingle” and disappearing into the crowd, implying that he is, in his words, into that kind of thing.

In addition to these references to Dean Craig Pelton’s sexuality, the fact that he is not heterosexual is made clear by his demonstrated attraction to character Jeff Winger. The Dean is depicted as showing more attention towards Jeff than many of the other characters in the group, and often behaves flirtatiously towards him. In the show’s first season, when attempting to convince Jeff Winger to participate in a debate against rival City College, he offers him “a night of companionship, if you know what I mean” (“Debate 109”). He also comments frequently about Jeff’s attractiveness — for example, while watching Jeff perform in a school play, he comments

“well, that answers my question — Jeff Winger is sexy even in a coffin” (“Celebrity Pharmacology”).

Although Craig Pelton’s sexuality is frequently mentioned and implied throughout the show’s first few seasons, it does not become central to an episode’s plotline until the sixth and final season. In the episode “Queer Studies and Advanced Waxing”, the Dean is offered a position on the school board as a result of his sexuality. The board is looking for an openly gay member after facing backlash for canceling a pride parade, and asks Craig Pelton if he is openly gay, to which he responds “I’m not openly anything, and gay doesn’t begin to cover it” (“Queer Studies and Advanced Waxing”). The Dean is left to contemplate their offer, and eventually decides to accept the position, since “all [he] would have to do is [pare] down [his] sexuality to simple gayness, which is heavy in the mix” (“Queer Studies and Advanced Waxing”). However, he soon begins to feel uncomfortable with the dishonesty he showed in order to get his position. He eventually holds a press conference where he “comes out” as a politician, stating that “nothing [he] says, and very few of the things [he] thinks can be trusted” (“Queer Studies and Advanced Waxing”), which results in his dismissal from the school board. This episode is the most explicit addressal of Craig Pelton’s sexuality, as it confirms in no uncertain terms that he is not heterosexual. However, Pelton also never confirms that he is strictly homosexual. Rather than fitting into the binary of heterosexual or homosexual, Pelton exists somewhere in between. This further solidifies the character as an example of queer resistance, as Craig Pelton refuses to label his sexuality or fit into a narrow label of either heterosexual or homosexual.

### ***Dualidean: Craig Pelton, Costumes, and Masculinity***

One of *Community*'s most frequent running gags is Dean Craig Pelton's costumes. The joke begins in a season two episode in which he dresses in lederhosen (see fig. 1) in order to promote an event called the "Pop-and-Loctoberfest" ("Accounting for Lawyers").



*Figure 1: Dean Pelton dressed in lederhosen.*

Following this episode, the Dean is frequently seen wearing elaborate costumes in order to promote events or make announcements to the Greendale student body. These costumes often incorporate traditionally "feminine" elements such as dresses, makeup, and long wigs — for example, he dresses as a can-can dancer (see fig. 2) to tell the main characters that the biology class they enrolled in has been "can-can-canceled" ("Course Listing Unavailable").



*Figure 2: Dean Pelton dressed as can-can dancer.*

Through Craig Pelton's costumes, the character subverts traditional ideas of masculinity. Although the Dean's flair for the dramatic is not an indication of his sexuality, his refusal to commit to societal norms of masculinity combined with the fact that he has stated that he is not heterosexual further solidifies this character's position as an example of queer resistance.

### **“What's Dean Got to do With It?": Queer Resistance and Craig Pelton**

Dhaenens defines queer resistance as occurring when “the presumption of heterosexuality no longer holds”. This is exactly the case with Dean Craig Pelton — between the Dean's consistent references to his sexuality and flirtation with Jeff Winger, it would be difficult to assume that he is heterosexual. When discussing queer resistance in media, Avila-Saavedra argues that, often, “homosexual images are presented in a way acceptable for heterosexual audiences by reinforcing traditional values like family, monogamy and stability”. This is undoubtedly true for some programs — for example, *Modern Family*'s Mitchell Pritchett (Jesse Tyler Ferguson) and Cameron Tucker (Eric Stonestreet) are depicted as being in a committed relationship, and eventually married, as they raise a daughter together. However, *Community* is not one of these programs. Craig Pelton is not portrayed as being in a serious relationship — he is never depicted as having a partner, and his family is never mentioned. The Dean does not “keep [his] ‘place at the table’ by striving to be just like [his] straight, middle class counterparts” (Joyrich). Throughout the show's six seasons, he is never in a traditional, heteronormative relationship, nor does he attempt to conform to these ideals in any way.

This is not to say that there have been no criticisms of *Community*'s portrayal of Craig Pelton. In an article about the character, Stevie St. John admits that “the humor surrounding his sexual tendencies sometimes draws on stereotypes” and “on occasion, he can even come off as

predatory — a tired misconception about gay and bisexual men” (St. John). Both of these observations are true — while the Dean’s love of costumes and general flair for the dramatic enable him to subvert traditional ideas of masculinity, they also can play into stereotypes regarding gay men. Additionally, his attraction to Jeff Winger can occasionally come off as obsessive — for example, in a season two episode he tells Jeff that he was looking over his course schedule, and when asked why, responds that “maybe it was a random spot check. Maybe it was a specific spot check. Maybe [he’s] making a scrapbook!” (“Conspiracy Theories and Interior Design”). However, a character does not need to be entirely “good” to be an example of queer resistance. When examining media for representation, we often consider whether the characters are depicted in a positive light; however, when we examine a piece of media for queer resistance, this is not our primary concern. There is no moral component to queer resistance — a character must only subvert heterosexual expectations to be considered an example of queer resistance.

Another common criticism of queer characters in the sitcom genre is the use of these characters and their identities solely for comedic purposes. In her article “From Misrepresentation to Milestones: An Investigation of LGBTQ Character Development in Two Primetime Situation Comedies,” Francine Edwards discusses the use of queer characters and identities for comedic value, acknowledging that “the characterization of gays and lesbians is often viewed as less controversial in comedic roles.” This is a valid criticism of many sitcoms, and it can be applied to *Community* to an extent. Craig Pelton’s attraction to Jeff is most often revealed through one-liners which are clearly comedic in nature, and the Dean’s exploration of femininity through costumes is often played as comedic. However, *Community* is a sitcom in which serious moments are few and far between, and even the show’s more somber moments are punctuated by sharp, witty remarks. Similarly, while Dean Craig Pelton’s costumes are certainly a running joke throughout



the show, these moments are written in a way which indicates that the humor in these moments is based on the fact that the Dean puts on elaborate costumes to make simple announcements, rather than being based on the nature of the costumes themselves. His costumes feature masculine elements just as often as feminine ones, and the moments are staged with just as much humor either way. Pelton's explorations of femininity are not a punchline — rather, they are just one aspect of his complex personality. Craig Pelton is not being used for comedic purposes in an otherwise serious show — *Community* is meant to be a comedy, and regardless of identity, each of the show's characters are seen as comedic in equal measure.

Criticisms of representation in media are absolutely necessary, and it is important to view all media from a somewhat critical lens. However, when examining media for queer resistance specifically, these criticisms are essentially irrelevant. In order for a character to serve as an example of queer resistance, it is not necessary for the character to avoid stereotypes or be a morally good character. To determine whether a characterization can be considered queer resistance, we must “not settle for vaguely labeling a characterization as “stereotypical” or “negative”” (Sink et. al). Rather, we must consider whether this character subverts typical expectations for gender and sexuality, and whether the presumption of heterosexuality still holds for the character.

When considering Dean Craig Pelton from this perspective, it is clear that the character is an example of queer resistance. Pelton cannot be presumed to be heterosexual — although he never explicitly labels his sexuality, his comments regarding his sexuality and clear attraction to male characters allow him to be seen as queer without needing to. Additionally, Craig Pelton never plays into societal expectations regarding sexuality and gender. While he has some typically “masculine” attributes — for example, he is in a position of authority as the Dean of Greendale Community

College — he is unafraid to explore typically feminine areas through his costumes. While many queer characters reinforce heteronormative and societally accepted values by being portrayed as married or in stable, monogamous relationships and families, Craig Pelton is none of these things. He does not have a partner, or a family — no aspect of Pelton’s sexuality is toned down or molded to fit heteronormative expectations. *Community*’s Dean Craig Pelton is an example of queer resistance, as he re-articulates concepts of gender and sexuality in a way which clearly precludes him from being assumed as heterosexual.

The importance of queer resistance is similar to the importance of queer representation in some ways. The presence of queer characters in media has been “instrumental in propelling the changing perception of gay and lesbian identities” (De Ridder et al.), regardless of whether these characters were considered resistance or simply representation. However, in addition to providing examples of queer individuals, queer resistance provides alternatives to typical, heteronormative lifestyles. Queer resistance on television shows audiences, both heterosexual and otherwise, that there are ways to exist which do not require conforming to traditional values. For audiences who are queer, characters who exemplify queer resistance also serve as a message that these viewers can be themselves in any way they want, without conforming to heteronormative standards. For audiences who do not identify as queer, queer resistance in television normalizes the existence of queer individuals who do not conform to expectations regarding gender and sexuality. In order to fully eliminate heteronormative standards, it is necessary to normalize existing outside of these standards, and queer resistance aims to accomplish this goal. In this sense, *Community*’s Dean Craig Pelton is more than an offbeat side character — he is also an example of queer resistance, and a message that there are ways to exist outside of society’s binaries and expectations for gender and sexuality.

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