

Doctor Who: New Dawn - Essays on the Jodie Whittaker Era

Casual queerness and desire lines in *Doctor Who*

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generally ‘queer’ means to resist or reject the idea that being ‘normal’ is valuable or ideal, and to seek other ways of existing (Cáel Keegan, 2019)

DOCTOR: Why are you calling me madam?

YASMIN: Because you're a woman.

DOCTOR: Am I? Does it suit me? (‘The Woman Who Fell to Earth’ 11.1)

‘So, if Doctor Who is married to River Song and Doctor Who is now a woman, is Doctor Who gay? Or NB (non-binary)?’ (fan tweet cited in Dore 2018)

New Doctor, new season, new companions, new approach, new dynamics, new perspectives... new challenges. It shouldn't, perhaps, be too challenging. After all, science fiction is supposed to be about the new, the strange, the alien, the unfamiliar; defamiliarization or estrangement are key strategies for the genre. For various reasons of course science fiction, especially in more mainstream media, tends not to live up to its potential of creating new worlds and new ways of thinking about familiar ones. As a mainstream medium TV has often been seen as conservative but serial narrative has potential for queering. A fair number of scholars, myself included, would answer Sara Gwenllian-Jones' question 'Is fantastic genre cult television perhaps inherently queer?' (2002) in the affirmative. Discussing queer temporalities, Evangeline Aguas describes how Jose Muñoz

‘theorizes a queer futurity that is “not an end but an opening or horizon,” a vision of new worlds laden with potentiality. Within contemporary queer theory, then,’ she continues, ‘the queer experience is marked not only by a lingering in the past but also a pull towards the future’ (2019: loc1369). This suggests an affinity between queerness and science fiction, which frequently envisions ‘new worlds laden with potentiality.’ Matt Hills has observed that since its return in 2005 *Doctor Who* ‘is premised on an avoidance of normative heterosexual “social practice” such as settling down or child-rearing’ (2010: 37), aligning the series with Keegan’s definition of queer in the first epigraph to this chapter.

‘I would say that being oriented in different ways does matter,’ argues Sara Ahmed, ‘precisely because of how spaces are already oriented, which makes some bodies feel in place, or at home, and not others’ (2006: 563). The Jodie Whittaker era of *Doctor Who* is, I suggest, ‘seek[ing] other ways of existing’, moving away from centres and towards margins and validating viewers who, as the t-shirt slogan puts it, ‘can’t even think straight’. Season eleven brought not only the first female Doctor, but also three new companions, all British, two male and one female, one white, one black, and one Asian, as well as episodes featuring US civil rights campaigner and icon Rosa Parks, a pregnant man, companion Yasmin Khan discovering her grandmother's personal history during the partition of India, the Doctor wearing rainbows, and the first episode since the 1980s with both a female writer and a female director (‘The Witchfinders’ 11.8). Diversity of all kinds was highlighted in the publicity before, and during, the season's run, and featured in a BBC trailer for new drama titled ‘welcome to the revolution’. The opening episode of season eleven and, on reflection, the whole season, was stuffed full of statements of intent. Yet, as I noted in a blog for *CST* online following ‘The Woman Who Fell to Earth’ (11.1) sustaining and exploring diversity in

the complex and satisfying ways now expected by viewers of serial drama on TV is tricky, and stating intent is one thing, but fully realising it may be another (Jowett 2018).

This chapter explores how introducing, and developing, the Doctor as (nominally) female has repercussions for queering all identities in the series, and serves to unsettle dynamics established since 2005, not least the privileging of white male experience and the frequent presence of heterosexual romance (as unrequited longing) within the TARDIS. Some of this queering is less overt, such as Thasmin (Thirteenth Doctor-Yas 'shipping), while other elements (camp King James in 'The Witchfinders' 11.8 or Adam and Jake's marital problems in 'Praxeus' 12.9) announce themselves quite clearly. Applying aspects of Sara Ahmed's 'queer phenomenology' (2006) and changing understandings of queerbaiting (Brennan 2019), I attempt to unpick some aspects of this new 'era', beginning with story choices, moving on to character dynamics, and finishing with an examination of how the series' terms for its ensemble signals its new direction. Ahmed observes 'that in landscape architecture the term desire lines is used to describe unofficial paths, those marks left on the ground that show everyday comings and goings, where people deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow' (2006: 570). She links this to the ways queer desire 'helps generate a queer landscape, shaped by the paths that we follow in deviating from the straight line' (2006: 570). Ahmed's emphasis on desire lines that 'mark' deviation from norms, normative identities and relationships, and on the 'unofficial' nature of such deviations chimes with recent debates about queer representation and queer fandom, particularly in terms of the reinvention of the term 'queerbaiting', as discussed in the second section of this chapter.

Story Choices

‘It’s mesmerizing,’ says one review of season eleven, ‘to see a show written, run, and mostly acted by white men for decades suddenly populated by so many people of color. And it’s just as hypnotizing to see how casually it treats queerness’ (Hogan 2018). Both are hallmarks of season eleven and what I call its statement of intent. The intent, as I see it, is to shift the series towards a more inclusive representation, achieved not only through more conscious casting and storylines but also by taking positive action to address the white, male domination of previous seasons, and indeed the TV and media industry more widely, in recruiting and appointing writers and directors who are female, black and Asian. It is perhaps unsurprising that the season attracted criticism for ‘messy’ or simply ‘bad’ writing. Admittedly, the hype around the series was bound to set trolls and traditionalists complaining. Reviews aggregators like *Rotten Tomatoes.com* provide evidence of the main positions here: a Google search for ‘Doctor Who season 11 bad writing’ brings up Rotten Tomatoes on the first page of results, with the search entry highlighting the phrases ‘trying too hard to be PC,’ ‘not good,’ and ‘bad writing’ (2020).

I have been personally engaged in several conversations about this ‘bad writing’ by (male) colleagues, some of whom seem determined to push me into admitting that I think the writing is bad. My response, personally and professionally, is that giving writers and directors who have been side-lined by the TV industry simply because of their gender or race the opportunity to work on a major flagship BBC series must be a long-term benefit. This benefit lies in modelling more inclusive industry practice (something that is surely incumbent on a major public service broadcaster like the BBC); and in providing the experience that such writers and directors have been unable to gain because of deeply-embedded inequalities in the British television landscape. Previous arguments ‘justifying’ the lack of women or people of colour behind the scenes was that the production team had to pick the ‘best person for the

job’ in order to maintain the quality of such an important series, ignoring the way industry inequalities mean that the most high-profile jobs go to those with the most experience, inevitably those with most privilege and most social capital, i.e. white men (see Jowett 2017).

Simply having these writers and directors on board has already made some difference in terms of negotiating characters and stories, providing new, or at least less common, perspectives on society and identity. Focusing episodes on Rosa Parks and on British colonisation and the Partition of India has a knock-on effect for the regular characters—the Doctor and those who travel with her—who must respond to serious oppression or inequalities encountered in these until-now unvisited parts of history. As Kelly Connolly notes, ‘From a storytelling angle, pitting the Doctor against various, often faceless systems yielded mixed results; taken as a whole, the season felt directionless’ (2018). So, in terms of a season arc, this may not be so much ‘bad writing’ as a return to episodic narrative structures that viewers accustomed to season arcs and season villains may find disappointing. Yet Connolly goes on to point out that ‘the best stories, which were almost invariably the histories, leaned into how frustrating it was, for both the audience and the Doctor, that she couldn’t save the day by defeating a single enemy’ (2018). Accepting this line of argument indicates that season eleven is continuing to present an alternative type of hero, and continuing the way science fiction as a genre of ideas encourages us, through the estrangement of aliens and other worlds, to confront our own social problems. This happens through conscious revisiting of neglected histories. ‘Rosa’, ‘Demons of the Punjab’ (11.6), ‘The Witchfinders’ and season twelve’s ‘Spyfall’ episodes (featuring Ada Lovelace, first computer programmer, and Noor Inayat Khan, WWII heroine) all showcase female and/or subaltern history. As a review of ‘The Witchfinders’ for *The Mary Sue*, notes, ‘The history episodes of classic *Who* were meant to teach basic history to the children watching the show,

but now, especially in Jodie Whittaker's era, the histories are there to provide us with a culture shock' (Leishman 2018). Connolly concludes that the Doctor's 'inability to find a quick fix for pervasive social problems is just a result of the show's increased willingness to actually engage with those problems—the same ones it once hand-waved away with a "Just walk about like you own the place" ' (2018). Here Connolly cites the Tenth Doctor's dismissive response to companion Martha Jones' expression of concern about being black in the time of Shakespeare ('The Shakespeare Code' 3.2). As several scholars have noted (see 2013's *Doctor Who and Race*, among others), Martha, the first primary companion of colour, was undermined by her storylines. Her presentation, along with that of sometime companion Mickey Smith, Rose's boyfriend (seasons one and two; last seen in the 2010 Christmas special), and Danny Pink, Clara's boyfriend (season eight), followed identifiable trends laid out for characters of colour on TV.

This is a rather different way of reading the new Doctor than put forward by Michael G.

McDunnah:

the show has largely addressed this change in the most empowering way: by almost completely ignoring it. Throughout Whittaker's first season, Chibnall and the other writers have treated the Doctor's being a woman as no big deal, barely even waving at the issue in their scripts. They clearly decided that the best way to make the point that a woman can be a hero was by simply letting her get on with being a hero (2019).

By season twelve, the gender swap is the subject of casual (queer) humour when time traveller Captain Jack Harkness, the most openly queer recurring character in *Doctor Who* to date¹, returns, teleports companions Graham, and eventually Ryan and Yas on board his ship to pass on an urgent message. Following some brief confusion about which of them is the new incarnation of the Doctor, Ryan clarifies: 'She, not he,' to which Jack delightedly

responds, 'Oh, this I gotta see!' (12.5). Regendering the Doctor means that the series cannot continue the way it has done, and I would certainly contest the idea that however casually it is treated within the text, and particularly by the Doctor herself, it cannot help but have wide-ranging effects.

The 'casual queerness' identified by Hogan is evident from the second episode in a brief exchange between Graham and a female pilot encountered by those from the TARDIS.

ANGSTROM: You know the Stenza too?

GRAHAM: My wife died because of them.

ANGSTROM: Mine too. I'm sorry. ('The Ghost Monument' 11.2).

Angstrom has a wife and this is unremarkable. The fifth episode returns to a familiar if not entirely frequent science fiction plot or trope: the pregnant man story.² Yoss, the male Giffan in question, tells Graham that he got pregnant 'On holiday. Got involved with someone. Didn't take precautions, like an idiot' ('The Tsuranga Conundrum' 11.5). When Yoss shows Graham, Ryan and Yas his ultrasound pictures, Ryan becomes entranced, marvelling, 'Mate, you're growing a person'. Pushing the reversal as far as possible, the episode sees Ryan and Graham called upon to calm Yoss as his time approaches and eventually, to deliver his son while Yas and the Doctor are busy elsewhere. Estranging 'normal' relationships further, the episode also features a family rift between two siblings, one of whom has a synthetic human as her 'consort'. 'The Witchfinders' (11.8) is set in 1612 during witch hunts endorsed by monarch James I. I would argue that James is another example of casual queering and deliberate inclusion. In casting Alan Cumming, the episode benefited from an experienced actor, a genuine Scottish accent and a gleefully camp performance ('Careful,' he warns Ryan as the latter picks up a witch-detecting device, 'That's my pricker'). Cumming's performance could, admittedly, be seen as a (negative) stereotype of the predatory and arch

gay man, however, Cumming's work for LGBTQ+ causes, his current marriage to a man, and his publicly acknowledged bisexuality indicates layers of authenticity, or at least self-parody, to his King James. (Similar factors apply to openly gay actor John Barrowman's camp performance of Captain Jack). Directly following this episode, comes another that, perhaps more subtly, critiques the myths of heteronormative romance, particularly the drive to define oneself by a partner, and go to any lengths to be together. Arriving in Norway, the group discover a blind teenager, Hanne, abandoned by her father Erik, who, it is revealed, is sneaking into another universe where he can be reunited with his dead wife, Trine. 'She can't leave,' Erik explains to the Doctor, 'We've tried, but she can't go through the mirror. I know I stayed away from Hanne too long, but I kept thinking, what if I go and I can't come back? I can't lose Trine again' (It Takes You Away' 11.9). 'You've got get your priorities straight, mate,' retorts Graham, 'Your daughter needs you. Come on'. Ironically, Graham himself is then drawn to stay when his dead wife Grace appears though unlike Erik, Graham eventually realises that Grace would never encourage him to stay with her and neglect his other relationships and responsibilities.

It is certainly refreshing that Graham (Bradley Walsh) appears to be the only (token?) white, cisgendered, heterosexual, older male in the TARDIS. Graham seemed to be immediately popular. Perhaps this is because he is played by one of the few better-known actors cast as a regular in season eleven and twelve. Graham is the most traditional companion and, as such, most often serves as 'straight guy' to the Doctor's explanations, orders or admonishments. While he inhabits privilege in ways nobody else in the TARDIS does, he is shown to be quite happy following the Doctor's lead, and orders, and is quite open to nonnormative relationships, as indicated by his acceptance of Yoss's pregnancy and his relationship advice to Jake. Graham is also largely defined by his grief for his dead wife, Grace. Admittedly, the

‘fridging’ of Grace in the debut episode of season eleven was not an encouraging sign in terms of female characterisation (see Hills 2018, Jowett 2018), but the way Graham continues to be defined by his past heteronormative relationship and his role as Ryan’s ‘grandad’ indicates another kind of gender swapping. Several season eleven episodes focus on Graham and Ryan’s challenging family relationship, culminating in the 2019 New Year special when Ryan’s absent father returned. Consequently, this character arc gave both Graham and Ryan more prominence and resulted in less focus on the Doctor or on Yas.

Opinion on Yas’s more low-key presence was mixed. Some, like Adi Tantimedh, argued that it meant ‘we didn’t get to know what made Yaz [sic] tick all season. We still don’t know what her hopes or dreams are or what her own inner life is about: she’s still a bit of a cipher’ (2019). Max Farrow tended to agree, ‘there’s too much of a gap between her first appearance and these explorations of her life. Furthermore, after these episodes establish Yaz’s [sic] family situation, they have no bearing on what follows. As such, she continues to be the least fleshed-out member of the TARDIS crew’ (2018). Others read Yas’s position rather differently: ‘Yaz [sic] stands out when compared with Graham and Ryan. She has a family and a career and a fleshed-out character, whereas Graham is defined by his past (as both a widower and cancer survivor) and Ryan has friends we’ll probably never see again’ (Fraze 2020). The final episode of season twelve seems to acknowledge this when, thinking they will all die, Graham tells Yas:

You said to the Doc that you thought she was the best person you’d ever met. But you know what. Yas? I think you are. You ain’t got a time machine or a sonic but you’re never afraid and you’re never beaten... you’re doing your family proud, Yas, you really are. In fact, you’re doing the whole human race proud. (‘The Timeless Children’ 12.10)

Thus, Yas is defined by the career and the family she leaves behind and also by embodying the best things about humanity, while Graham and Ryan are seen primarily in relation to (lost) family and (present) emotion, much as previous female companions from 2005 were.

In one of the many interviews before season eleven aired, executive producer Matt Strevens responded to a question about LGBTQ+ and other representation by saying: ‘Since the show came back in 2005, I think *Doctor Who* has been amazing at blurring the edges of sexuality and being quite gender fluid about the characters and relationships’ (in McEwan 2018). He cites gay writer Russell T. Davies’ role in bringing the series back to the BBC here but Strevens’ take is certainly not shared by the many viewers who critiqued some previous seasons for poor treatment of female characters and queerbaiting. As Emma Nordin notes, the current social media culture means that ‘critical voices [often fans] are expected to be heard and taken into consideration’ by producers of popular media (2019: loc 953). This seemed to be happening as promotion for season eleven began but, perhaps predictably, the BBC contradicted their own positive publicity about diversity before season eleven aired. During 2018 San Diego Comic Con a photo of Jodie Whittaker and Alex Kingston appeared on the official BBC America Twitter feed, captioned ‘The Doctor and her wife.’ This caption was altered later to ‘Jodie Whittaker meets the Doctor’s wife, Alex Kingston’ (see McDunnah 2019 and Duffy 2018). It is hard not to read this as a reluctance to fully embrace the queer potential of a female Doctor, at least in the USA.

Character Dynamics and Queerbaiting

The move to an ensemble cast rather than the previous dynamic of the (ostensibly male) Doctor and one (female) companion, established in the 2005 relaunch and more or less unchanged until season eleven, did manage to avoid the unrequited love trajectory of almost

every previous female companion. This has not gone unnoticed: ‘Chibnall has chosen to ditch one classic *Doctor Who* trope; the idea that the companions are just there as "eye candy" ’ (Bacon 2018). Of course, having a nominally female Doctor does not rule out romance with a companion, male or female, in the same way that having a heterosexual romance undercurrent in previous seasons did not rule out queering of the post-2005 Doctors played by men. Both Piers Britton and Catherine Johnson noted the way the series seemed to restrict male-female interaction to heteronormative romance, ruling out any other relationships (Britton 2011: 140; Johnson 2014). During the years that Steven Moffatt was head writer, the series came under fire for queerbaiting as well as for underrepresenting women.

Scholarly analysis of queerbaiting has developed in the years since the series has returned.

Judith Fathalla summarises:

Queerbaiting may be defined as a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility. Denial and mockery reinstate a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes (2015: 491).

In *Doctor Who*, this was most obvious with the Eleventh Doctor, particularly in the interactions between the Doctor and Craig Owens in ‘The Lodger’ and ‘Closing Time’ (5.11 and 6.12 respectively) as noted by Britton (2011). More recently, however, academics have revisited queerbaiting, with Joseph Brennan arguing that ‘conceptualisation of the active viewing process behind the term encourages reconsideration of “queerbaiting” and the more recent shift toward a “harm” view of texts that employ it’ (2018: 193). In years gone by queer relationships on TV may have been required to operate at the level of subtext for fear of

censorship or withdrawal of support from sponsors or execs, yet in the historical moment of the early twenty-first century this is no longer the case. In her article on queerbaiting in BBC's *Sherlock* (2010-)³ Fathalla states, 'While I do not wish to exonerate such writing, I wish to investigate alternative methods of reading its queer textual moments that open rather than foreclose queer possibilities. Queer moments onscreen... can be read as ruptures in the performance of heterosexual masculinity' (2015: 491). Similarly, Brennan suggests that while subtextual cues might be seen as queerbaiting since the relationship in question is neither fully realised on screen nor recognised in the narrative, the tone and accumulation of such cues means that 'producer intentionality aside, [they] invite viewers to see queerly' (2018: 193). Debates about the differences (if any) between subtext and queerbaiting have revolved around issues of intentionality and purpose (queerbaiting seeks commercial gain from attracting a queer audience with the promise of queer characters). In the introduction to the first edited collection on queerbaiting and fandom, Brennan states that queerbaiting 'is a means of holding texts and the producers of these texts to account, and it is both a concept and a condition of this historical moment' (2019: loc 98).

As Eve Ng argues, queerbaiting or queering with two female characters highlights further, intersectional, inequalities: 'queerbaiting discourses address the character of producer/viewer interactions, and for queer female narratives in particular, serve as a touchstone for greater mainstream recognition of the subordinate status of sexual minorities and women in both representational and real-life contexts' (2017: 1.4). It is not until two main female characters take up residence in the TARDIS, then, that a major lesbian 'ship is created: Thasmin (the Doctor and Yasmin). Despite an out lesbian companion appearing in season ten, and the promise of a relationship with Heather, a student attending the university where Bill works, Bill Potts never actually had any on-screen lesbian relationships since she travelled with the

Twelfth Doctor alone. This relationship could be validated when Heather appears to a dying Bill in 'The Doctor Falls' (10.12), and the two go travelling together as disembodied entities but this character arc is equally open to a much less positive interpretation. 'Predictably, yet still infuriating, she ended up right where every bad trope would suggest a proud lesbian and woman of color would: dead,' concludes one understandably frustrated viewer (Lieberman, 2017). Here Lieberman refers not only to erasure of characters of colour in the narrative of the series (what *TV Tropes* calls 'Black Dude Dies First'), but also the trope known to fans as 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome' or, more generally, 'Bury Your Gays.' This identifies a trend where if queer characters are identified as such in the text, and have queer relationships depicted on screen, this is likely to quickly result in their untimely death. This tendency has become so pervasive that it is now used as a narrative twist, or to 'heterobait', as Leyre Carcas puts it in a discussion of how series *Black Sails* showcases 'the unmaking of the similarly criticized "bury your gays" trope' (2019: loc1447). Something similar happens, albeit within a single episode story, in 'Praxeus.' Estranged couple Jake and Adam's marriage is on the rocks, and when Adam is infected with a deadly alien virus, Bury Your Gays seems the inevitable outcome. In what seems to be a highly conscious move, the episode not only sees the Doctor cure Adam's apparently fatal infection but she also rescues him from a heroic suicide mission (piloting the spacecraft spreading the antidote across the atmosphere) by materialising around him in the TARDIS so that Adam and Jake can live happily ever after.

'You see, things never really happen in a straight line with the Doc,' says Graham to an enquiry about his time with the Doctor in 'Spyfall Part 1'. As the BBC's response to the Kingston/ Whittaker ComicCon photo demonstrates, the series may not be entirely comfortable about major statements of sexual orientation in relation to the Doctor. Yet, by

neither presenting Yas in heterosexual romance relationships, nor referring to any in her past, her sexuality remains undefined,⁴ and thus fans reject the ‘straight’ line, embracing Thasmin. Tantimedh recounts, ‘LGBTQ fans coined the term after the third episode when Yaz’ [sic] mother first asked Yaz if she was dating Ryan, and after they both said no, she asked if Yaz was with The Doctor’ (2019). This exchange certainly suggests that such a relationship is possible, articulating a lesbian romance as casually as Yas’ sister Sonya asked if Ryan and Yas were seeing each other. In addition, the Doctor’s response to Najia’s question, ‘I don’t think so. Are we?’ was far from a robust denial. ‘That Jodie Whittaker played the line “Are we?” like she was perfectly willing to give it a try added fuel to the lit match of slash fiction that was about to be launched across fandom’ (Tantimedh 2019). Thasmin has since had much material to work with, albeit via subtext, context or as Brennan puts it, ‘seeing queerly’.

Eve Ng’s analysis of lesbian relationships and queer context in TV drama takes US crime drama *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010-16) as one key example. The relationship between Jane Rizzoli and Maura Isles is not enacted at a textual level yet visual and narrative cues, Ng argues, help actualise the relationship for viewers:

The contrast between the two characters’ appearance and demeanor evokes a butch/femme dynamic, especially combined with Jane’s repeatedly protecting Maura from danger. Jane, a tomboy from childhood, favors pants, T-shirt, and blazer, while Maura is typically clad in conventionally feminine fashion (2017: 5.2).

This kind of representation led to debates about ‘differences between subtext, queerbaiting, heterosexism, and poor representation’ (Nordin 2019: loc664). A not dissimilar dynamic is established in *Doctor Who*, with the Doctor continually protecting all her travelling companions from danger, though costume is less clearly gendered. Yasmin’s first appearance

sees her in police uniform, addressing the Doctor as ‘Madam’ (see the second epigraph to this chapter), though she is usually in the more casual clothes of a twenty-first century female lead: jeans, t-shirt and a leather or denim jacket. The Doctor’s signature costume tends to mix traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine signifiers. In ‘Spyfall Part 1’ the Doctor and her companions attend a themed birthday party in a James Bond-styled episode wearing tuxedos. Graham and Ryan’s costumes here are standard mens’ suits, the Doctor retains her iconic long coat and short trousers but wears a dress shirt and black bowtie, like the men, and Yas wears a sequinned tux jacket with a white blouse and a bowtie necklace (see Ray Holman in BBC 2020), effectively playing femme to the Doctor’s (at least semi-) butch. The blurriness of such distinctions returns when they leave the party in pursuit of a suspect using Harley-Davidson motorbikes. The Doctor rides alone, in front, as the hero should; Yas rides further back but is not consigned to pillion, in fact, she drives with a male passenger hanging on behind.

Thasmin, then, is a sign of the times in that it appropriates visual cues and extrapolates from short exchanges of dialogue (and looks). It is notable, for example, that as the Doctor prepares to sacrifice herself to save the world in ‘The Timeless Children’, it is Yas who protests most violently: ‘We’re not letting you go. You’re not doing this!’ The Doctor’s equally tense, ‘Get off me, Yas. Please,’ and Ryan’s sympathetic handling of Yas indicate that Yas has a particular investment in the Doctor. Holding queerbaiting to account is, as Nordin points out, ‘not just about meaning and interpretation but... just as much about representation and visibility’ (2019: loc 703). Given the BBC’s reluctance to queer the Doctor publicly at ComicCon, and its (commercial and reputational) stake in exporting the series internationally, it seems unlikely that Thasmin will ever be realised in canon text—though I would be happy to be proved wrong.

The Thirteenth Doctor and Yas may well be mapping positive queer ‘desire lines’, yet the opening episodes of season twelve introduced a more problematic character: the Doctor’s arch-nemesis, fellow Time Lord, the Master. The Master had been gender swapped in season ten, played by Michelle Gomez and calling herself Missy. This created its own ripples (see Jowett 2017). Johnson notes that making the Master female and having Missy flirt with the Twelfth Doctor not only erased ‘some of the queerness of the Doctor/Master relationship’ but ‘the implication of a sexual relationship between Capaldi and Gomez equally contributes to the series’ continuing inability to imagine male/female relationships outside of a sexual framework’ (2014). Or, as Whovian Feminism’s review of the episode/s put it: ‘it’s pretty insulting to take one of the most popular gay relationships in the fandom and make it canon as a straight relationship’ (2014). Gender swapping the Master works against the choice of many viewers to ‘see queerly’ and reintroducing the Doctor’s old foe in the two-part ‘Spyfall’ did nothing to rectify this, since Missy has regenerated and the Master is now played by Sacha Dhawan.

Queer and gay viewers’ responses to this tended to focus on the closing down of desire lines regarding the Master and the Doctor:

I’m disappointed by the new Master because I was looking forward to Michelle Gomez’s version of the Master interacting with Jodie Whittaker’s Doctor. And by interacting I mean flirting.... THIS all feels like a let down because my gay ass was looking forward to two women circling each other, throwing one-liners at each other, and getting to know each other in a way that men and women can’t. That’s why the new guy feels like a cop out by a BBC that wouldn’t ever fathom queer action like

this coming from the Doctor even though they've been a flirt for ages, across species, and genders & previous queer characters on the show. (Hale 2020)

This echoes disappointment with the recaptioning of the Kingston/ Whittaker ComicCon photograph despite little chance of Kingston returning to the series to reprise her role as River Song and queer Whittaker's Doctor. Other viewers, however, signalled some approval for the new version of the Master that indicated seeing him queerly was still possible:

Dhawan's Master is camp in a purely *Doctor Who* sense, from his fannish excitement at meeting a new Doctor to showing off tricks new and old, like his classic penchant for shrinking people (Fraze 2020).

the master is such a dramatic bitch and I love him already [#doctorwho \(@cxpxldi 2020\)](#)

Naming and name calling

While Missy once encouraged others to refer to her as a 'Time *Lady*, thank you. Some of us can afford the upgrade' ('The Witch's Familiar' 9.2), such contentious terminology has been avoided in seasons eleven and twelve. As well as awareness of context and subtext, attention is being paid to the gendered language of everyday interactions. In 'Arachnids in the UK' (11.4) this is highlighted more than once. When giant spiders invade a new hotel complex being built by American billionaire businessman Jack Robertson (in what seems to be a not-too-thinly veiled allusion to Donald Trump), the Doctor directs the action. 'Why are you asking her?' Robertson queries. 'Cos she's in charge, bro,' replies Ryan, and when Robertson challenges, 'Says who?' all three companions present a united front: 'Says us!' A little later, when Robertson complains to the Doctor, 'You are not authorized to go in here!' she replies, 'Dude, I've all the authorization I ever need,' with the aside, 'I call people "dude" now'

(11.4). As a mature, privileged white male, Robertson's idea of his own status has rarely, if ever, been questioned, and his overbearing manner—demonstrated by his treatment of several employees, including Yas' mother, Nadja—is ripe for puncturing by the Doctor and her friends. The way Ryan calls Robertson, 'bro' and the Doctor follows up with 'dude' draws attention to Robertson's blustering, old school masculinity, while designating it somewhat callow, particularly as the Doctor's grinning aside is directed at Yas and Ryan chooses 'bro' (as in 'broflake'?) rather than 'bruv'. The opposite is emphasised in 'Spyfall Part 2' when the Master, threatening a roomful of bystanders to force the Doctor's submission, orders her to kneel and say his name, taunting, 'can't hear you, love' (12.2). In an interview shortly after her debut, Whittaker spoke about how the Doctor being female would change things for the series.

The interesting thing about being a woman is — although it's irrelevant as the Doctor — it makes for interesting storytelling when it affects the time period you're in, or the moment you're in, or the interactions you have. It's not the Doctor's response, it's other people's response. And as a woman, that's often the thing: We're not surprised we can achieve things as women, it's often other people who are (in Ivie 2018).

The Doctor is basically the same, and her being female only changes how others perceive her. 'Honestly,' she says in 'The Witchfinders', 'if I was still a bloke, I could get on with the job and not have to waste time defending myself' (11.8).

I have been calling Yas, Ryan and Graham 'companions' here, adopting the traditional usage for those who travel in the TARDIS with the Doctor. In seasons eleven and twelve, however, the Doctor tends to introduce Yas, Ryan and Graham as her 'friends'. After her regeneration and meeting the three she tried out various ways to refer to them collectively. 'Right then, troops. No, not troops. Team, gang, fam?' she mumbles in 'The Woman who fell to Earth'

(11.1) or ‘Look at you. My fam. No, still doesn't quite work. Team Tardis?’ (11.4) and after notably not drowning after ducking as a witch, ‘Hi, team! Gang! Fam? No.’ (11.8). But by ‘The Battle of Ranskoor av Kolos’ (11.10), she has won Yas over.

DOCTOR: ...Come on, fam.

RYAN: I thought we weren't doing fam.

YASMIN: I like it.

In ‘Resolution’, the 2019 New Year special, ‘fam’ is established enough that the Doctor can remark, ‘Well done, team. Gang. Extended fam’—a small joke about the usual three being joined by Ryan’s father. Of course, there has previously been a biological family aboard, or at least adjacent to, the TARDIS. Amy Pond met the Eleventh Doctor on the eve of her wedding to Rory (‘The Eleventh Hour’ 5.1), and both spent an extended period travelling with the Doctor while also leading a ‘normal’ married life on Earth. The ‘timey-wimey’ plot twists of this ‘era’ provided them with a child, Melody Pond, kidnapped at birth and eventually revealed to be the time-travelling River Song (‘Let’s Kill Hitler’ 6.8): this elided any family life they may have had together, even after Amy and Rory discovered that River was their daughter. During Amy and Rory’s tenure as companions their relationship was played for laughs, undermined, and occasionally valorised: heteronormative romance and social practice shown to be, as per Hills quoted in the introduction, incompatible with the series’ overall trajectory.

Seasons eleven and twelve continue to avoid heteronormative social practice and seems to use ‘fam’ as the means to this end. Awaiting the late arrival of the others in ‘Spyfall Part 1’, the Doctor leaves them a phone message: ‘Just calling to say hi, fam. Where are you? We said an hour. You're late. Very late. All of you’ (12.1). The reasons for rejecting ‘troops’

‘gang’ and even ‘team’ might be obvious; ‘fam’ reorients the group from pressure to belong to deliberate choosing of a ‘fam’ beyond biological family.

This returns me to Ahmed’s queer phenomenology:

After all, it is possible to follow certain lines (such as the family line) as a disorientation device, as a way to experience the pleasures of deviation. For some, for instance, the very act of describing queer gatherings as family gatherings is to have joy in the uncanny effect of a familiar form becoming strange. The point of the following is not to pledge allegiance to the familiar but to make the “familiar” strange, or even to allow what has been overlooked, which has been treated as furniture, to dance with renewed life. Some deviations involve acts of following, but use the same “points” for different effects (2006: 569).

The Doctor’s slight awkwardness in using ‘fam’ initially, signalling her alienness, makes the familiar strange, that convention of science fiction. I am most struck, in early 2020, by a usage of ‘fam’ that hasn’t yet been adopted in *Doctor Who*: its use as singular rather than plural, a version of ‘bro’ or ‘bruv’ that is closer to ‘cuz’ (cousin) in its lack of gender specificity. As a recent social media post declared, ‘Fam is the gender-neutral bro’⁵. In the season twelve finale, a black female Doctor (notably erased from the Doctor’s memory) reenergises the thirteenth Doctor by asking, ‘Have you ever been limited by who you were before?’ The Doctor’s on-screen adventures haven’t been ‘limited’ by who *he* was before. To me, ‘fam’ signals—in a small but significant way—the changes that come, in front of and behind the cameras, when the Doctor is no longer a privileged white man.

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¹ Though by no means as queer as he was in spin-off series *Torchwood*, where he was described as pansexual, see Barron or Porter, for example.

² The most thought provoking being, perhaps, Octavia Butler's short story 'Bloodchild' (1984).

³ *Sherlock* was co-written by Steven Moffatt.

⁴ Scenes from various episodes might suggest 'a budding romance between Ryan and Yaz' (Bacon 2018) but by the end of season eleven this hasn't developed, and the season twelve two-part opener has the pair joking about whether Yas should give her sister Ryan's number. 'I'd make a great brother-in-law', Ryan jokes ('Spyfall Part 2' 12.2), seconds before asserting that he won't let anything hurt Yas. This oscillation between hints of romance and presenting the two as close friends may indicate a reluctance to close down options. This may all be a moot point if Tosin Cole leaves the series now that he has landed a role in US drama *61st Street* (Fullerton 2020).

⁵ 'news from a 15 year old boy i tutor: "there's a kid in my religion class who i have no idea if they're a boy or a girl, so when i see them i just call them "fam." [at my plaintive look of i-don't-know-if-i-heard-you-right] you know, like family". The youth have spoken and fam is the gender neutral bro' (sleepnoises retweeted by @Lizardbethart 2019).