

Dominant Narratives and Historical Perspective in Time Travel Stories: A Case Study of *Doctor Who*

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ABSTRACT

Historical novels, films, and other media can disrupt or reinforce dominant narratives about the past. Educators must be careful that when they attempt to select material from a range of seemingly diverse perspectives, they do not choose content that nevertheless maintains problematic depictions of people, places, and events. Time travel stories offer a unique opportunity for students to consider, discuss, and research both “the past” and popular media’s construction of the past, as well as confront their assumptions about what they believe is “true to history” and why. This article presents a case study and content analysis of the time travel TV show *Doctor Who*, and its narrative construction of the past around race and gender in particular. Implications are discussed for how the show might teach students about historical perspective and popular media’s influence on perceptions of history in subtle and overt ways.

KEYWORDS

Dominant narratives;
history; popular media
culture; Doctor Who

Introduction

Educators can face several challenges when attempting to integrate historical novels, films, or any fictional historical media into their class routine. One is whether to have students read a novel or watch a film in its entirety, which can absorb a considerable amount of time. A second issue is appropriateness. While there are children’s books and young adult literature from which to choose, many historical films and television shows contain situations, language, and visuals that may be unsuitable for younger viewers. A third challenge is what *type* of film, novel, or media to select in terms of “acceptable” historical inaccuracies, along with the role any historical fiction should have in the classroom, what students’ learning goals should be (Demoigny & Ferraras-Stone, 2018; Hower, 2019; Metzger, 2010; Roberts, 2011; Scheiner-Fisher & Russell, 2012).

Despite these acknowledged challenges, historical novels, films, graphic novels, picture books, plays, and any dramatic form have been advocated as useful tools for teaching children and

young adults about the past (Boerman-Cornell, 2015; Hower, 2019; Park, 2016; Stoddard, 2012). Yet when educators make an effort to choose media from a variety of sources as well as seemingly diverse perspectives, they must be careful not to inadvertently select “diverse” content that nevertheless maintains the same traditional, stereotyped narratives about the past. This is especially important as many educators come from privileged racial and economic positions, and preservice teachers in particular may struggle when faced with how best to utilize historical media in their classes (Fitchett et al., 2015; Walker, 2006).

Time travel stories mix history with sci-fi and/or fantasy elements and can offer unique ways for students to think about the past, diversity of perspective, and the disruption (or maintaining) of dominant narratives in media representations. Time travel stories can also force students to confront their own assumptions about what counts as “historically accurate” and why, as well as how their own lives and worldview directly affect and connect to these assumptions. This article

presents a discussion of the pitfalls around dominant narratives and “diverse” perspectives that can accompany historical media’s implementation in the classroom, followed by a content analysis of the time travel TV show *Doctor Who*’s race and gender dynamics in its historical episodes. Activity suggestions are also provided for how to utilize *Doctor Who* episodes in a class.

Visibility and perspective in historical films and related media works

Walker (2006) found that preservice teachers generally saw historical films as a means for students to obtain factual knowledge about people, places, and events, with assessments in the form of test scores or worksheets to ensure that students had paid attention to basic information in class. However, in addition to historical films as secondary sources for names, dates, and visual representations of artifacts from another era, Walker suggested they be used as primary sources, not so much for the historical eras depicted in the films, but for the eras in which the films were made. Researchers and educators alike have echoed these sentiments (Landy, 2000; Leff, 2017; Rosenstone, 1995; Rees, 2003; Schwebel, 2011), especially as students can subconsciously transfer elements from fictional portrayals into their writings and ideas about real-life figures and events (Britt & Aglinskas, 2002; Marcus et al., 2006; VanSledright, 2002). Historical fiction allows for a study of how the past gets appropriated, recycled, challenged, reified, deconstructed, and/or regurgitated in popular culture and society broadly, and it provides an engaging stepping-stone for students to conduct their own research on where fact and fiction diverge and blur (Hower, 2019). As such, it becomes essential for educators to ruminate on the kinds of films and other representations of history brought into their classrooms.

Rich and Percy (2018) provided a critical analysis of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, a 2008 film adaption of the 2006 novel by John Boyne. The story follows Bruno, the son of a Nazi in charge of a concentration camp, who meets Shmuel, a Jewish child in the camp. The two strike up a friendship on opposite sides of the

barbed wire separating the camp from the outside world. Rich and Percy found the story flawed not because it contains any historical inaccuracies (all fictional representations of the past do). Rather, it was the very premise and unfolding of the friendship between Shmuel and Bruno given the historical realities children like them faced that was an inaccuracy so massive it could lead to a “seriously flawed understanding of the Holocaust” (Rich & Percy, 2018, p. 299). Furthermore, the audience experiences Jewish extermination through the lens of Bruno, the Nazi’s son, while Shmuel is sidelined in a story about his own people.

Historical films like *Glory* (1989), *Come See Paradise* (1990), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), *The Power of One* (1992), *Amistad* (1997), *Windtalkers* (2002), *The Last Samurai* (2003), *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), *The Help* (2011), *Free State of Jones* (2016), or *Green Book* (2018) have similar issues. All feature White protagonists for stories about events concerning Black, Japanese, or Native American characters. The White protagonists also have far more multidimensionality and interiority than the Black, Japanese, and Native American characters. Or when the Black, Japanese, and Native American characters have some dimensionality, it is expressed through their interactions with White protagonists and other White characters.

The majority of commercially and critically successful Western and especially Hollywood historical films have presented the history of traumatized and oppressed people through the lens of a *sympathetic* individual from the group who nevertheless oppresses them. That films like *12 Years a Slave* (2013) or the updated *Birth of a Nation* (2016) exist with solely Black protagonists does not erase the number of films that fit into the previous, problematic category.

Django Unchained (2012), set right before the American Civil War, semi-focuses on the Black male experience (though Django partners with a White character through whose perspective the story is filtered), but it “situates enslaved womanhood on the periphery of the slave experience; women are objects of male desire and enslaved black masculinity is inherently violent” (Silva,

2018, p. 253). *Django Unchained* is an example of how the majority of slave stories are stories about Black men, with the atrocities committed against Black women treated as spectacle or a secondary plot point, even as Black women are constantly boxed into one-dimensional, sexualized roles (Guthrie, 2019; Silva, 2018). This critique also applies to the updated *Birth of a Nation* and *12 Years a Slave*.

With violence at the center of Black men's slave story, a stereotype still pushed in the media today (Guthrie, 2019), students can see these films as historically accurate because the dramas "perpetuate[s] their preconceived notions without ever problematizing the reality of slavery and racism within historical context" (Silva, 2018, p. 254). On the one hand, *Django Unchained* might be seen as a disruptor to traditional narratives about slavery in that its Black character exacts revenge against his White oppressors. However, it also maintains traditional narratives about slavery through its depiction of characters that fit into the usual stereotypes—the Uncle Tom, sympathetic White character, passive and abused Black woman slave, the angry Black man—that are familiar to audiences (Guthrie, 2019). These stereotypes flatten historical complexity by placing characters or groups into assigned roles and categories that remove much of the nuance that existed in historical reality, though to be fair, this a fault of fiction generally.

A film or novel can never capture the full range of a human life. Dramatic conventions and audience expectations shape how a story unfolds. In historical fiction, the demands of "facts" become secondary to narrative needs and the goal to create emotional resonance with the audience and tell an effective story (Polack, 2014; Slotkin, 2005). This can result in historical characters becoming "protagonists" or "antagonists," and the audience siding with one character or group over another. This is not automatically an issue when considered in purely dramatic terms, but it becomes trickier when a dramatic narrative draws upon the worst stereotypes to achieve these goals, especially as media stereotypes have real-world consequences.

In sports, media commentators use different adjectives to describe darker versus lighter-

skinned players engaged in similar acts (Foy & Ray, 2019), which leads to the perpetuation of stereotyped narratives about brains, ability, and race. When films, television shows, the news, and media broadly continue to use the same characterizations and narratives about a singular group of people, it spills over into other aspects of life. Narratives and stereotypes contribute to why Black children, for example, are not imagined as "innocent" and are instead perceived as more threatening and "dangerous" by law enforcement and various institutional forces (Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Goff et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2017). This is a self-replicating cycle. Narratives in media and history shape narratives and perceptions of people in daily life, which in turn shape how audiences interact with narratives in media and history. Existing stereotypes of Blackness contributed to why some fans of *The Hunger Games* novels were shocked at the casting of a Black child for the "innocent" character of Rue in the movie adaptation, despite that the author of the novels describes Rue with the physical characteristics of a Black child in *The Hunger Games*. These readers literally passed over explicit textual evidence that supported Rue's race because of their inability to imagine Black innocence (Toliver, 2018).

Metzger (2010) examined the film *300*, a 2006 adaptation of a graphic novel about the Battle of Thermopylae between the Ancient Spartans and the Persian army. The narrative treats the Westernized Greeks as heroic, with the Persians depicted as the villainous Other, depraved to the extreme. Films like *300* serve as a reminder of how important perspective is in a story—whose point-of-view is treated by the narrative as sympathetic, and whose point-of-view is treated as in the wrong (Metzger, 2010). Even in TV shows, films, novels, and plays that purport to have "gray" characters or anti-heroes/heroines, those characters are narratively still positioned as heroic or villainous, even if their roles are constructed with greater moral ambiguity.

Shifting away from films, the blockbuster musical *Hamilton* is an example of how visibility and invisibility of non-dominant groups can become problematic in other ways. The musical's

casting of actors of color and innovative music to depict Revolutionary America have become a phenomenon. However, albeit differently than in *The Boy in Striped Pajamas*, *Hamilton* nevertheless sidelines the experiences of those most oppressed in the historical time the play covers. Shmuel is visible in *The Boy in Striped Pajamas* in that he's physically present, yet he is rendered invisible in that he's granted no interiority or multidimensionality as a character, his plight as a Jewish child placed secondary to Bruno's experience. People of color are physically visible in the cast of *Hamilton*, but they are rendered invisible in their roles as White characters in a story "that does not acknowledge that the ancestors of these same actors were excluded from the freedoms for which the founders fought" beyond a few lines (Monteiro, 2016, p. 93). This doesn't mean that *Hamilton* isn't a powerful or effective story, but merely that every historical drama, be it a film or Broadway musical, faces choices in terms of who has *visibility* in historical stories.

Women in historical films have faced similar difficulties, with calls for educators to be mindful of whether their choices have women characters who make important contributions to the plot beyond their role as a love interest, relative, or token woman friend (Scheiner-Fisher & Russell, 2012). Like the Black, Japanese, and American Indigenous characters who are defined by their interactions with White characters, women characters have often been defined by their interactions with men. Just as textbooks have sidelined women and especially women of color's experiences in their historical narratives (Clark et al., 2004; Cruz & Groendal-Cobb, 1998, Schocker & Woyshner, 2013), historical films have done the same, too.

Scheiner-Fisher and Russell (2012) promoted the usage of historical films in classrooms which pass the "Bechdel test" of having "(1) more than two females (who have names); (2) the female characters talk to each other; and (3) they talk to each other about something other than a man" (p. 222). Scheiner-Fisher and Russell further suggested films they saw as fulfilling this requirement, but—as an example—their list included *Iron Jawed Angels* (2004), which focuses on the American Women's Suffrage Movement, but only

briefly touches upon the class and race dimensions of the time.

Should *Iron Jawed Angels* be shown in a class, it would be worthwhile to highlight not only the positives of the movement or that its leaders were subjected to abuse as women, but that the movement and its most visible leaders were primarily educated, middle and upper-middle class White women. Not all of them saw gender equality as equally applicable when it came to immigrants, lower-income, and Black women, the latter of whom were unable to exercise their right to vote until decades after their White counterparts.

Much of the research on historical representation examines a particular racial/ethnic or gender perspective, as opposed to exploring race and gender together, or class and race, or gender and class. Educators have a responsibility to notice and point out both what exists in accounts of the past along with what is missing (Metzger, 2010). They need to be conscious of who has been rendered inconsequential by the narrative, and that invisibility can occur in multiple and complex ways.

The historical imaginary, counterfactuals, and time travel stories

The historical imaginary is a society's collective understanding of the past, what "everybody" knows regardless of whether it is rooted in evidence or not. It is

socially constructed...shaped by fictionalized accounts of history, what is taught in school, popular political discourse, and spaces of cultural memory...The historical imaginary is the way hegemonic forces in society have come to envision its shared history. (Guthrie, 2019, pp. 340–341)

In the United States, the historical imaginary encompasses ideas such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream," that "Lincoln Freed the Slaves," or linking the "Founding Fathers" and "Constitution" to "liberty" and "Independence Day." The historical imaginary may change over time as a society's cultural norms and values shift. However, as certain beliefs about individuals and events become so rooted in the fabric of a society's national identity and ideology, to

challenge or uphold the historical imaginary can become a battleground of political rhetoric and imagery (Guthrie, 2019). Challenges to the historical imaginary bring into question *whose* history has been highlighted as part of a national identity, and whose *narratives* (or what aspects of someone's narrative) have been given primacy over others.

Counterfactuals are what-if scenarios about how the world might have been if an event or act by someone had gone differently. Counterfactuals exist in nonfiction and fiction, but fictional works, also known as alternate history, can be a subgenre of historical fiction, sci-fi, romance, and other genres. Counterfactuals are an excellent gateway for contemplation about the historical imaginary because the genre brings to the surface what is acceptable to alter about the past, and what has become so internalized in collective consciousness that even the made-up history must still adhere to certain "facts" or representations about people, places, and events.

Authors and filmmakers can sometimes be more concerned about history as it's been represented and interpreted in prior or contemporary media works than in what actually occurred (Polack, 2014), for those representations form the basis of what the average reader/film-goer will know and expect upon encountering their works.

Roberts (2011) suggested the use of counterfactual novels and scenarios in middle and high school classrooms while admitting to the difficulty of finding novels suitable for students' reading and content knowledge levels. Historical novels can often include a wealth of details and information beyond what can be feasibly addressed in a K-12 class. Students need to be able to follow the plot and have enough background knowledge of the real-life history to engage critically with the divergent perspective the counterfactual novel—or any fictional story—takes.

Time travel stories are not counterfactual/alternate histories. The two subgenres are cousins in a sense, though characters' journey through time may result in an alternate history for portions of the narrative. However, time travel stories begin and frequently end in the real, current world, or

a future based on the real world's events and history.

It's still not history or regular historical fiction. Why care about time travel stories?

One could argue that time travel stories are more speculative fiction than history, and therefore are not related to nor should be subjected to the same criticality that regular historical fiction might be. However, I argue that time travel stories are some of the purest expressions of the historical imaginary. When a creator has the license to reimagine history through the lens of magic and science fiction, the historical content that *does* remain in many ways reveals what aspects of the past have become deeply rooted in a society at a given point in time. When the impossible is possible, what endures from reality and why?

I also argue that criticality around these types of stories is essential *because* of the fantastic elements. Speculative fiction, when mixed with history, allows for an audience to dismiss critiques of its portrayals as "fantasy" and "not real history," all while still internalizing potentially problematic content into narratives of the real-world past in spite of claims not to do so (Matthews, 2018). Time travels stories need *more* criticality, not less, as their popularity makes them a source of historical information for people who do not necessarily consume history or even regular historical fiction in a consistent manner. These stories can be and are used to challenge *or* uphold the historical imaginary depending on narrative choices.

A case study: Doctor who

Doctor Who is a British sci-fi show that aired on BBC One from 1963–1989, when it was canceled. In 2005, the show was revived, and it continues to air on BBC One today. *Doctor Who* has gained a global following. While it was conceived of as a children's show, all ages watch and are fans.

The protagonist of the show is the Doctor, a human-presenting alien from the planet Gallifrey who travels across time and space. The Doctor has a companion (or multiple companions), usually humans from Earth (the UK in particular).

To accommodate the show's longevity, the Doctor can "regenerate" into another physical form when mortally injured, which permits a new performer to assume the role. New companions are also acquired when necessary.

Thirteen incarnations of the Doctor have starred on the show as of 2020, though an extra incarnation was revealed for a guest appearance at the end of Series 7. "Series" is the equivalent of an American season in British television. While the post-2005 "NuWho" era follows the continuity of the previous *Doctor Who*, it was created as an entry point for fans who hadn't watched before. The first NuWho series in 2005 is numbered Series 1. All previous twelve incarnations of the Doctor (from both NuWho and the older show) had been a White man, with the latest and current Doctor the first White woman in the program's history. NuWho has had several "firsts." In 2007, Series 3 welcomed its first full-time Black companion in Martha Jones. Series 10 (2017) had Bill, its first companion who explicitly and openly identified as a lesbian. Series 11 (2018) debuted its first woman Doctor, along with three new companions, including Yamsin "Yaz" Khan, the first companion of Pakistani descent whose family are practicing Muslims. At present (Series 12 aired in 2020), there have been three showrunners for NuWho, each of who represent their own era. The first show runner was Russell T. Davies (RTD), who ran Series 1–4 plus an additional set of specials. Stefan Moffat (Series 5–10) succeeded Davies, and Chris Chibnall (Series 11–now) has succeeded Moffat to run the show.

Each series of NuWho *Doctor Who* typically has three to four (sometimes five if there are two-parter episodes in a series) "historical" episodes set on Earth. Since any time-period could technically be the past for the Doctor, the show treats the time-period that the current companion is from as the present (companions in NuWho have so far come from the 21st century). Some of these historical episodes include famous real-world figures like Shakespeare, Winston Churchill, Rosa Parks, Queen Victoria of Britain, Richard Nixon, Lord Byron, or Vincent van Gogh, while other episodes have completely fictionalized "everyday" people in the past. While

there is an alien aspect to these stories, the historical episodes are still constructions of the past with deliberate narrative choices.

The focus of this case study is every historical episode from NuWho (2005–2020), which I defined as when the majority or all of a storyline's action occurred in the past. Each series of NuWho *Doctor Who* has 10–13 episodes. I excluded the Christmas or New Year specials as well as the 50th anniversary episode and specials that followed Series 4 before the transition to the Moffat era with Series 5. As those specials do not necessarily follow the format of a regular series episode—plus the Doctor is sometimes without full-time companion or in-between companions—I decided to limit analysis to the historical episodes that fall within the episodes of an officially numbered series. I wanted to focus on patterns within a typical *Doctor Who* historical episode, as well as when the Doctor had full-time companions. This yielded 38 historical episodes that qualified for analysis.

Race and doctor who

When the companion or all companions are White (Series 1–2, 4, 5–9), *Doctor Who* effectively ignores race in its historical episodes. The Whiteness of the companion and the Doctor are rendered invisible in that their Whiteness is not acknowledged, let alone a cause for concern. This may be partly because until Series 11, the Doctor and companions traveled to European/Western nations where Whiteness is presented as the majority in the past, yet this choice also contributes to Whiteness being depicted as default, the norm, in that it is never *Othered* by the narrative. This doesn't change even when the Doctor has companions of color, as their *non-Whiteness* is emphasized and discussed. Rather than the narrative centering the companion's of color race as the norm, with them pointing out that other characters are White, they point out that they themselves are *not* White. Still, the introduction of Martha as the first Black companion, along with later companions of color (Bill, Ryan, and Yaz) does force the show to deal with race, yet *Doctor Who* handles the issue in an inconsistent manner, leading to characters of color being both

hyper-visible and hyper-invisible in complicated ways.

Race and the doctor's companions: Visibility, invisibility, and perspective

Specific episode examples

In the Series 3 episode “The Shakespeare Code,” Martha, in her first historical adventure with the Doctor, expresses concern at the start of the episode about walking around 16th century London as a Black person who might be “carted off as a slave.” The Doctor makes an offhand comment she should “just walk about as if you own the place, it works for me,” while also countering that he’s “not human” when Martha points out she’s not White, as well as that there are other Black people in London at this time. While the Doctor’s flippancy is in tune with the character, the narrative makes no opportunity to problematize the Doctor’s reaction to Martha’s legitimate fears, nor that that the Doctor *looks* like a White man for all of his non-human status, which offers him privileges on Earth some of his own companions won’t have. When Martha and the Doctor encounter William Shakespeare in the episode, Shakespeare comments on Martha’s color (it is implied she is the inspiration behind his famous “Dark Lady” sonnets), but her race doesn’t factor into the rest of the plot, nor is she subjected to racism by anyone, implicitly reinforcing the Doctor’s earlier views. The narrative does acknowledge Martha’s race, but it mostly sidelines it for the episode to give space to the plot around Shakespeare, alien invaders, and the “secret history” of his lost play *Love’s Labour’s Won*. This narrative pattern around race is recurrent throughout the different episodes and series of the show.

Series 3 has another two-parter historical story in “Human Nature” and “Family of Blood,” which takes place in 1913 England. The Doctor, attempting to hide from other aliens, masks himself as a human and hides with Martha at a school, where he begins a romantic relationship with a nurse while believing he’s human. The two episodes are based on the *Doctor Who* novel *Human Nature* (Cornell, 1995), which featured the Seventh Doctor from the canceled 1980s

show rather than the Tenth Doctor who would be in the television adaptation. The companion in the novel is White and able to pretend to be the Doctor’s niece. In the television show, his companion Martha is Black, so the story changes to make her a servant at the school instead of the Doctor’s niece.

This is an example of how a plotline was reconstructed due to a companion’s race (servant from niece), but not *thoughtfully* reconstructed because it needlessly makes a Black character subjected to servitude for months. If the Doctor can hide out anywhere in time and space, why would he choose a time when his companion would have to be a servant? The narrative also gives no credit or value to this aspect of Martha’s assistance, nor does it have her character—a middle to upper-middle class modern Black woman training to be a medical doctor in her own right—question this choice.

The episodes “Human Nature” and “Family of Blood” highlight and forget Martha’s race depending on the narrative’s needs. Two White students make racist comments to Martha while she scrubs the floor. The White nurse at the school questions how she could be a medical doctor because of her “color,” along with additional dismissive remarks. Yet when Martha barges into an all-White dance to confront the other aliens, who are incognito yet have located the Doctor, not one person attempts to stop her, stares at her, or seems to care she’s there.

Such narrative choices in these episodes put race on display to make a point, while ignoring the pervasive and systemic aspects of racism by allowing the characters to act as if they exist in a colorless context when necessary for the story. Martha’s Blackness is therefore hyper-visible because her race *is* noted by the narrative, but it is hyper-invisible because it is easily tossed aside by the narrative when it suits the story, dismissing what it might actually mean to be Black in the past—or today.

This racial inconsistency happens in Series 11 episode “Rosa,” which touches upon the American Civil Rights Movement when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a White person. The Doctor and her companions must stop a racist villain from the future from

changing history in 1955 Montgomery, Alabama by ensuring that Rosa Parks will give up her seat on the bus, which the show implies is critical to the American Civil Rights Movement and the racial progress that resulted from it. For the first three-fourths of the episode, racism in Montgomery is on display, yet when the Doctor and companions need to stop the villain at the end, they suddenly run around Montgomery with minimal concern, including companion Ryan, a young Black man who earlier in the episode had been subjected to public, racist threats. “Rosa” also touches upon Yaz’s position as neither Black nor White. At one point, a White waitress in Montgomery calls Yaz a Mexican though she’s of Pakistani descent, and Yaz struggles about whether to sit in the Black or White section of the segregated bus. Despite the run-around-town at the end of the episode, “Rosa” comes the closest to depicting racial dynamics in more a realistic light as compared to the other historical episodes of NuWho, but it is noteworthy that this is the *only* historical NuWho episode where race and racism are part of the central storyline.

Contrast “Rosa” to Series 11 episode, “Witchfinder,” set in 17th century England and about witchcraft, aliens, and witch trials. Besides the character of King James I and VI of England, Ireland, and Scotland’s flirty comments that companion Ryan is his “Nubian Prince,” Ryan and Yaz’s race don’t otherwise matter to anyone in the episode, despite that the characters are in a presumably isolated Early-Modern English village. Additionally, all of Series 12’s historical episodes completely sidestep Ryan and Yaz’s race.

The Series 11 episode “Demons of Punjab” is the first historical episode of the NuWho era to focus on a non-Western/non-European setting, the 1947 partition of India into India and Pakistan. The Doctor and her companions Yaz, Ryan, and Graham encounter Yaz’s grandmother, a Muslim woman who is about to marry a Hindu man who is not Yaz’s grandfather. Yaz becomes conflicted between wanting to stop her grandmother’s wedding and wanting to save her grandmother’s fiancée when she realizes he will die, except that to stop his death would prevent Yaz’s birth as her grandmother would never meet and marry her grandfather. The partition of India

occurs at the end of British colonial rule in the country, and while the show does touch on this, it does so as background information conveyed via character dialogue, while the narrative mostly focuses on the drama of Yaz and her grandmother. The episode does pay attention to the divisions between Muslims and Hindus, making a point about religious extremism through a particular character more-so than about the effects of British colonialism on the country. Also, though the episode is primarily in India, the Doctor and Graham (the one companion who is White) are still not Othered in the narrative. This is not so much because Yaz’s grandmother and additional characters take the appearance of White and Black (Ryan) strangers in stride, but because the Doctor and Graham never question the acceptability or safety of their Whiteness as companions of color do in other episodes.

Race and non-companion characters: Colorblindness and erasure

Doctor Who does acknowledge companions of colors race (albeit inconsistently), but the show mostly ignores the race of characters of color that appear on the show when they are *not* companions, or when their race is not essential to the plot (e.g. “Rosa”). In the Series 5 episode “The Vampires of Venice,” the Doctor and his White companions encounter a 16th century boat builder in Venice whose daughter has been seemingly kidnapped by “vampires.” Though Black actors play the Venetian boat builder and his daughter, no one references their race within the episode, as if they exist in a colorblind world. This occurs with the same Doctor and the same White companions in Series 7 episode “A Town Called Mercy,” set in the 19th century Nevada in the United States; there is a preacher played by a Black actor in an otherwise White town, yet no one remarks on the race of the preacher either.

This lack of racial acknowledgement is not inherently problematic. Perhaps the preacher and boat builder are known within their community, and their race is no longer an issue (whether that in itself would be historically accurate may be up for debate). The Doctor and his companions, used to diversity, would not necessarily remark

on the character's race. Beyond the context of the show's world, there's a tradition for some films and in theater especially to cast actors for parts regardless of their race. However, *Doctor Who* has already established it does see race within its world, and that its casting of companions, at any rate, is not colorblind. As such, the general lack of acknowledgement for non-companion characters' race—combined with a lack of contextualization for the characters' position in their historical world's community—again renders characters of color both hyper-visible and hyper-invisible. Due to the race of their actors, these characters stand out simply because everyone around them is White, yet they are also hyper-invisible because the existence of their race is mute in the narrative.

This treatment of non-companion characters of color continues even *with* companions of color. In the Series 10 episode “Empress of Mars,” The Doctor and his companion Bill find themselves on the planet Mars in 1881 with aliens and Victorian soldiers, all of whom are White except for one. Yet this one soldier, who is Black, never addresses his race nor has it addressed by the other soldiers or by Bill, who is biracial. Characters note Bill's gender as a woman throughout the episode, but never her race. This happens with and to Martha in the Series 3 episode “Daleks in Manhattan,” where she and the Doctor travel to 1930 Depression-era New York. One of the main characters she and the Doctor encounter is played by a Black actor, but neither Martha nor the character refer to their shared race or about race at all. This is an interesting contrast to “The Shakespeare Code” and “Human Nature/Family of Blood,” where Martha's race is noted, yet she is also the only prominent Black character in those episodes.

Class-based activity suggestions for examining race dynamics in doctor who

Before students watch an episode, ask them to write down what they believe they know about the era and location to be featured in the episode. For example, what do they already know about partitioned India in 1947, 16th century London or Venice, 1955 Alabama and the Civil Rights

Movement, or 1930s Depression-era New York? Emphasize that students shouldn't look up any information at this point, but list whatever exists in their memory, even if they aren't confident the information is “accurate.” Have students also list—to the best of their knowledge—where they believe they learned the information (school, family, museums, movies, books, etc.).

Next, show an entire historical episode in class, or have students watch the episode(s) at home and/or show clips to discuss in class. For any episode they view, students should note if there are any famous, real-world historical figures in the episode, as well as demographic info (race, gender, social status, profession, etc.) of other prominent characters in the episode.

After students have watched the episode(s), place them into groups in class and have them answer these initial, broad questions:

- What real-world evidence exists that supports or contradicts *Doctor Who's* depiction of the historical era in the episode(s)?
- For non-real-world historical characters: What evidence exists about the life of everyday people in this era/location that supports or contradicts the portrayal of characters the Doctor and companion(s) encounter?
- If the episode contains a famous, real-world figure: What evidence exists that supports or contradicts *Doctor Who's* portrayal of the figure? Did the show provide an overly positive or negative portrayal, or a more nuanced, balanced interpretation? How did the show portrayal's compare to what you've seen, read, or heard about the figure before?
- How did the episode address the race of different characters, and did you find the choices the narrative makes realistic given what you know about the time and place depicted in the episode? What and who are rendered visible and invisible by the narrative? In what ways does this occur?

When students answer these questions, they must provide examples from the episode such as explicit quotes or actions by characters, descriptions of specific scenes, and they should compare these quotes and scenes to real-world evidence

(quotes, images, written descriptions) about the historical eras and figures in primary and secondary sources. This will allow students to engage in source usage and consider the role of interpretation and perspective in historical constructions of the past. Have them sort through multiple historical sources (either pre-selected, or as part of the activity, groups can research online themselves for information, which can lead to additional work on how to judge source credibility). Students should evaluate whether these sources agree or disagree with one another, and in what ways they do. Students should also return to the information they wrote down before they watched the episode, as well as the notes they took while watching to compare if what they believed they knew *and* saw in the episode aligns with the research they've conducted with primary and secondary sources.

Question examples for individual episodes

- For “Human Nature/Family of Blood:” If the Doctor can hide out anywhere in time and space, why would he choose a time when his companion, a Black woman, would have to be a servant? How would students feel if they were Martha? Would they demand the Doctor hide on another planet or era? Students should especially reflect on how *their* race shapes their answers to these questions. Finally, they should answer: What does it mean that the narrative has a Black woman suffer indignities for a White-presenting character when neither her existence nor the Doctor’s (as later demonstrated in the episode) are in critical jeopardy? What does it mean that the narrative doesn’t seem to recognize this is troublesome? Finally, how realistic is Martha’s entrance into the all-White dance with no consequences when in the present day, Black people continue to be watched, questioned, reported on, and threatened for entering and occupying equally if not more innocuous spaces?
- For “Demons of Punjab:” Were families torn apart physically and ideologically in India as the episode depicts? What real-world evidence exists and from whose perspective does the evidence describe events? How is British imperialism/colonialism addressed (or not) by the episode? How clear is the information that explains the partition of India communicated via character dialogue to

the audience? What does the narrative gloss over in terms of the political and religious situation in the country? Based on further research, why did the partition occur in conjunction with India’s independence from British rule? How much might the fact that *Doctor Who* is a British TV show affect how it portrays (or doesn’t) British imperialism/colonialism in other countries?

Additionally, for historical episodes generally students should answer:

- Did the episode align with your prior beliefs about this era and place?
- What did you think about the episode before you did research versus after you had looked at real-world sources?
- What aspects of the events and figures from real-world history does the episode emphasize, acknowledge, and/or ignore?
- How much does the episode tell us about the historical era’s views on race versus the era in which the episode was made attitudes on race?

If students think the *Doctor Who* episode did mostly align with what they believed they knew, have them discuss the implications of this. They should consider whether *Doctor Who* upholds or disrupts dominant narratives about a particular place and time, and if those narratives align with the historical reality they reconstruct based on the evidence they researched. An additional component would be to ask students *why* they believe they answered how they did for all of these questions, and what they think that says about their own assumptions about the past and different groups of people.

Gender, “everyday” versus famous historical characters, and doctor who

Each of the three-showrunner eras has their own patterns around gender dynamics in regards to women-presenting characters in particular.

All of the women companions in the RTD era—Rose, Martha, and Donna—have moments where they bond with another “everyday” historical woman character in one of the episodes. The companions learn about some aspect of the

historical woman's life (romantic or family relationships, aspirations for the future), with a personal story or anecdote shared between the two women. These conversations occur without the Doctor present, as he's investigating somewhere else in whatever place they've arrived. In these instances, the Doctor typically has his own interaction with another character, usually a man. The exceptions to this pattern are real-life historical characters—authors Agatha Christie, Charles Dickens, and Shakespeare, as well as British monarch Queen Victoria. Real-life historical characters have multiple moments with the Doctor *and* companions, regardless of gender, in contrast to the “everyday” characters.

A shift begins in the Moffat era. For Series 5, 6, and the first half of 7, the companion Amy has *no* women bonding moments outside of the character River Song (who is Amy's daughter and the Doctor's love interest), and *one* Doctor-free interaction with another non-companion woman in the Series 5 episode “The Vampires of Venice.” Bonding moments between the companion Amy and historical characters still occur, but between Amy and men. Any significant moments with non-companion women characters now happen with the Doctor. Overall, the presence of important, non-companion women characters decreases in the Moffat era. It is only in the second half of Series 7 with the introduction of new companion Clara that important, non-companion women characters as well as non-companion women/women companion interactions reemerge, though companions Clara (Series 7.5–9) and Bill (Series 10) still have slightly more interactions with “everyday” men than they do with “everyday” women. The highest non-companion interactions in the Moffat era are between the Doctor/women characters, the Doctor/men characters, and the women companion/men characters. *Doctor Who* has not explicitly addressed non-binary characters.

In the Chibnall era, interaction dynamics become more complicated with the inclusion of three full-time companions (two men and one woman) plus a woman Doctor, as this requires more characters to share screen-time. For Series 11, frequently the new woman Doctor now pairs with the woman companion (Yaz) and other women characters in episodes (with the exception

always being when there are real-life historical characters, woman or man). The two men companions also tend to be paired together (though they are related to each other, and the development of their relationship is one of the character arcs of Series 11). For Series 12, there is more balance in women/men interactions for the Doctor, companions, and the historical characters. However, these historical episodes focus mostly on multiple, real-world historical figures (e.g. Series 12's “Nikola Tesla's Night of Terror” features Tesla, Thomas Edison, and Dorothy Skerritt, or the “The Haunting of Villa Diodati” includes authors Mary Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Polidori). These episodes provide a range of interactions opportunities for the Doctor and companions while maintaining the precedent that real-life historical characters are exempted from the otherwise more typically gendered interactions.

In the first historical episode of the Chibnall era, “Rosa,” which features real-life historical figure Rosa Parks in 1955 Alabama, two of the companions have bonding moments with the historical figure. Ryan, the first companion to have a moment with Rosa, provides a rare man companion/famous woman character interaction, but the reason the interaction occurs is because Ryan (who is Black) is able to gain entrance into Rosa's (who is also Black) home due to his race that the other characters wouldn't be granted. The other companion, Yaz, has her Rosa Parks moment *with* the Doctor, which is the first historical woman character/woman companion/woman Doctor interaction of the NuWho era. These three-way women bonding moments take place in the other two Chibnall historical episodes, “Demons of Punjab” and “Witchfinder,” just as there are now men bonding moments with companions Ryan and Graham and other men characters in the episodes.

Across the RTD, Moffat, and Chibnall eras, the real-life men historical characters get to be flirty toward the companions (e.g. Shakespeare, Vincent van Gogh, or King James). Famous women historical figures are either sad about the state of their relationships (Queen Victoria's spouse is dead, Agatha Christie's marriage has fallen apart) or they're just married (Rosa Parks).¹ Artists regardless of gender identity are

portrayed with a mix of confidence and doubt about how their work will be remembered by posterity, but they are always sympathetically shown to have hopes, fears, and dreams, able to laugh and cry. So are the royal characters. Yet non-royal and noncreative famous individuals are depicted as more one-dimensional. Former American President Richard Nixon is a caricature who sporadically appears for comedic effect and for digs about Watergate in his future, which go over his head, and being a “second-choice” president. Rosa Parks and Churchill are representative symbols of their time-periods (Civil Rights and World War II) more than they are well-rounded characters for whom the audience should care.

Class-based activity suggestions for examining gender dynamics in doctor who

The same initial questions from the race activity suggestions can be used here. After students have written down their initial ideas and assumptions about the era and place, when they watch the episode(s), they should additionally trace the interactions between the Doctor, companions, and other characters (who speaks to whom, what are the types of discussions characters have, what the Doctor/companion learns about a character from discussion, etc.). After students take notes on the episode, they can continue to the questions from the race activity about whether historical evidence supports the depictions of people, places, and events in the episode. Additional questions to ask students can then include:

- What historical evidence exists about the gender politics of the era depicted in the episode?
- How much do you think character interactions reflect the gender dynamics of the historical era in the episode versus the gender dynamics (or politics) of the era in which the episode was made? Are there instances when you can separate the attitudes on gender *within* the historical world of the episode versus the attitudes on gender the *narrative* promotes?
- When (or if) do race and gender intersect? When is one aspect of a person acknowledged and the other is not, and when do both tie together? Which companions have their race

highlighted and not their gender, or their gender highlighted but not their race? When is gender and/or race rendered hyper-visible and hyper-invisible by the narrative? How does the show’s treatment of gender and race mirror or disrupt the ways gender and race have been treated in historical sources and in the world today?

- How do the gender dynamics of the show change when the Doctor becomes a woman (this would require students to view at least two episodes – one with the Doctor as a man and one as a woman, and ideally maybe more episodes)?

Specific episodes that would be useful to review for gender discussions

- Series 2, “Tooth and Claw,” set in Scotland, 1879 with Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom (this episode would also make a good contrast with Series 11 episode “Demons of Punjab” and Series 10 episode “Empress of Mars” for discussions on depictions of “empire” and British rule in *Doctor Who*).
- Series 3, “Daleks in Manhattan” and “Evolution of the Daleks” in 1930 New York, which would be useful for discussions on the intersection (or not) of race, gender, and class.
- Series 4, “The Unicorn and the Wasp,” 1926 England with author Agatha Christie. This would be a good episode for examining what aspects of a real historical figure’s life are highlighted and ignored. Christie’s marriage and creative troubles are noted in the narrative, but there is no mention of her real-life racist attitudes.
- Series 5, “The Vampires of Venice,” 16th century Venice (again, race and gender analysis).
- Series 5, “Vincent and the Doctor” (1890 France with artist Vincent van Gogh) and/or “Victory of the Daleks” (WWII London with politician Winston Churchill) as examples of companion Amy’s isolation from other women characters and the interactions she has with men characters (which can be contrasted with interactions women companions have in Series 1–4). These episodes are also useful to compare how *Doctor Who* aligns (or not) with preexisting narratives about famous historical figures.
- Series 7, “Hide,” England in 1974 (the return of women companion/non-companion women interactions in the Moffat era, though it is

worthwhile to compare *what* the characters in this episode discuss versus the topics discussed by women characters and women companions in the RTD era of Series 1–4).

- Series 9, “The Girl Who Died,” Medieval Viking Village of inexact time or place (has a significant non-companion woman character who interacts with the Doctor and companion Clara; it’s also a good example for exploring stereotypes about “Viking women” and “Viking culture” the narrative has).
- Series 10, “Empress of Mars,” 1881 Mars (notable for how gender is acknowledged in the narrative, but race is completely sidestepped even with a biracial companion and another Black character in the story).
- Series 11 “Rosa,” 1955 Alabama (race and gender) and “Witchfinder,” 17th century England (the Doctor herself reflects on the change in treatment she receives as woman as opposed to when she was a man; also another example of gender acknowledged yet race is mostly sidestepped in the narrative).

Conclusion

Despite the fantasy and sci-fi aspects of the show, the historical episodes of *Doctor Who* are a representation and interpretation of the past seen by millions of people every year. Brought into a class, not only does the show address different eras that can be tied to multiple historical topics and lessons, it can be used to promote and test students’ factual knowledge, their research skills, and their understanding of the historical imaginary. Shows like *Doctor Who* can have students consider, when does popular culture seemingly challenge and subvert traditional, dominant narratives and perspectives, and when does it uphold them? When do seemingly subversive elements mask narrative choices that continue the historical imaginary as pushed by the hegemonic forces in society? When does the narrative fiddle with traditional perspectives of famous historical figures, and when does it adhere to the dominant narratives about them? How does the narrative treat characters of different races? How do choices about who and what are visible and invisible reinforce dominant narratives about groups of people?

Advocates for history education have stressed its connection to civics (Stearns, 1998). Understanding the past and the socio-political, cultural forces that have come before makes for a better-informed citizenry. Yet students and the public-at-large more readily accept narratives of the past that fit into their pre-conceived assumptions of what they believe that past was and that resonate with their personal values and concerns. Multiple sources such as the media, textbooks, classroom instruction, monuments, and family stories have shaped these pre-conceived assumptions, as have socio-cultural norms that continually value and promote certain stories and perspectives over others (Lindley, 1998; Rees, 2003; Seixas, 1994; Wineburg, 1991; Wineburg et al., 2007). These sources are all part of the socialization process into a society’s historical imaginary, which is why highlighting non-dominant and diverse narratives is critical to creating a citizenry with the ability to have empathy and perspective outside of one’s identity group.

By exploring history mixed with sci-fi and/or fantasy elements, “students of history—at all levels—can find novel insights into even the most studied moments and figures” (Hower, 2019 p. 81). Time travel stories integrate the imaginary, the historical imaginary, and historical “facts” into a single narrative. They bring to the forefront audience’s assumptions and expectations about historical figures and events, as well as allow for discussions of how media influences perceptions of history *and* our present in subtle and overt ways.

Note

1. While not included in the dataset, the one exception to this pattern for famous women historical figures occurs in the 50th anniversary special, where Queen Elizabeth I of England has a romance with the Doctor.

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