

‘Take Four Girls’: *Angels* (BBC, 1975-1983) and the Cultural Configuration of NHS Nurses and Nursing on British Television

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Introduction

The BBC drama series *Angels* (1975-1983), which follows the lives and experiences of a group of ingenue student nurses at a south London teaching hospital, along with those of their instructors and colleagues, is a landmark in the history of the NHS on television. Beginning in 1975, the series was conceived, produced and broadcast at the height of second wave feminism. It thus emerged, in line with Julia Hallam’s (2000) conjunctural argument, which arises from her feminist cultural analysis of post-war images of nurses, to the effect that particular moments in the history of the NHS have differently given rise to ‘groundswell[s] of dense public activity featuring nursing and nurses across various texts in a range of media forms’ (p. 3). This includes television, which became increasingly central to such groundswells alongside the contemporaneous popularisation and normalisation of the medium, and this has remained so ever since (Hamad 2024). Such moments included the late 1940s - at which time the formation of the NHS was shaping and solidifying how nursing would operate and be understood as a profession in the UK (Iliffe 1983, pp. 48-50; Hallam 2000, p. 91), the late 1950s and early 1960s - a time that saw the massive expansion of NHS nursing following implementation of reforms and major recruitment drives both within the UK and across the world (Iliffe 1983, p. 50; Hallam 2000, p. 92), and the late 1960s through mid-1970s – contemporaneous with the rise to prominence of second wave feminism and the women’s liberation movement (Iliffe 1983, p. 168; Salvage 1985b, p. 23; Kalisch and Kalisch 1987, pp. 158-161; Hallam 2000, p. 82). Appearing as part of this 1970s groundswell *Angels*

also emerged into television culture in the aftermath of what had recently been several turbulent years for the nursing profession in the UK, during which time nurses became more politicised, more unionised and more willing to confront the government with campaigns about pay and working conditions (Iliffe 1983, pp. 94-95; Salvage 1985b, p. 103; Hallam 2000, p. 79).

Angels was the first medically oriented British television series to focus exclusively on nurses, and thereby, on the feminine and feminised side of healthcare work. Production files for the series held at the BBC Written Archives reveal some of the programme makers' thoughts about it when it was first conceived. As one unnamed member of the 'Programme Intention' section of the production notes for *Angels* wrote at the time: 'The intention of the programme is to present a drama-documentary about student nurses. About both the **private** and **professional** side of their lives' (BBC Written Archives Centre T65/241/1, August 1974). The intention to balance depictions of nurses' personal lives with depictions of their working lives is thus revealed as central to the premise of *Angels* from its point of inception, and is something that would colour drama series about nurses on television in ensuing decades, up to the present and recent past, in series like *No Angels* (Channel 4, 2004-2006), *Frankie* (BBC, 2013), *The Crimson Field* (BBC, 2014), and *Call the Midwife* (BBC, 2012-present). Combining archival research and text-based analysis, and with a particular focus on the 1975 first series, this chapter explores the relationship between text and context as it pertains to the relationship between the depiction of nurses in *Angels*, and the real-world socio-political backdrop of the 'watershed' period of NHS nursing history from which it emerged (Hallam 2000, p.79). It does so in order to demonstrate both that second wave feminism and the changing professional status of NHS nurses at that time are key contexts in relation to which the representation of nurses and nursing in the series have to be understood, and that *Angels*

would set the template for subsequent cultural configuration of nurses on British television thereafter.

Methodological note

Writing from her positionality standpoint as both (former) nurse and (current) media and culture researcher, feminist scholar Julia Hallam, at the turn of the millennium, highlights that prior research into images of nursing in media and culture had thus far tended toward content analysis as its favoured methodological approach (2000, p. 11). And had done so with a view to exploring the form and nature of positive/negative images of nurses, the function and purpose of realism and authenticity in the communication of meaning about nurses, and ways and means of promoting and negotiating normative ideals in media configurations of nursing. Regarding the latter, Hallam herself argues that the most persistently efficacious means of doing this has been via what she calls a ‘take four girls’ⁱ approach that follows the nursing careers of a group of four white women from otherwise different backgrounds (2000, pp. 128-129). She goes on to point out (2000, p. 34) that studies carried out by Philip and Beatrice Kalisch in the 1980s (1982; 1983) rise to particular prominence from this body of work, culminating in the publication of their book length historical survey of tropes that persist and those that change over time in images of nurses from the nineteenth century to the present of their time of writing (1987). The inclination to typologize mediated imagery of nurses also characterised Hallam’s own subsequent work (2000; 2005), as well, earlier, as that of nurse turned journalist and cultural critic Jane Salvage (1985a; 1985b). This work found that gendered (at best) or misogynist (at worst) ‘angel’, ‘sexpot’ and ‘battleaxe’ stereotypes emerged as the most dominant, recurring and reductive ways in which nurses had been configured in media and culture.

All the same, Hallam is keen to highlight the limitations of content analysis as an approach to understanding images of nurses on grounds that ‘it often fails to reveal the implicit nature of the social relations’ on which explicit meanings that tend to be identified by content analysis are ‘fabricated’ (2000, p. 11). Further light can be shed by employing a broader range of methodologies, and by the adoption of mixed methods approaches, especially feminist ones:

Analyses of nursing’s public image can be usefully developed using the theories and methods of feminist cultural studies... Feminist nursing historians and academics can assist this... through their analyses of the public image and identity of nursing as a discourse mediated through conceptions of white middle-class femininity. (Hallam 2000, p. 11)

Using information gleaned from historical documents sourced from the BBC Written Archives Centre pertaining to the earliest episodes of *Angels*, and information from databases like the BBC Genome Project and the TV Times Project 1955-1985 [TVTiP], in combination with viewings of completed episodes which aired on BBC1 in 1975-1976, this chapter combines archival research and textual analysis to interrogate the early history of *Angels*. It does so with a view to unearthing new narratives in the history of NHS nurses on UK television using a mixed methods approach of the kind called for by Hallam, in service to an exploration of the relationship between text and context as it pertains to the relationship between feminism and television, and the representation of nurses in *Angels*.

Nurses and the NHS before *Angels*

In his Thatcher-era treatise on the NHS and the politics of health, Steve Iliffe demonstrates that the nursing profession as it stood at his time of writing had been shaped to its current iteration by the formation and operation of the NHS (1983, p. 48). Prior to this, the work of nursing had been undertaken and shaped in the contexts of, for example, the domestic sphere,

the military, and as part of the religious mission of some orders of nuns, while general hospital-based nursing was shaped by traditions of care ‘based on the administration of the [nineteenth century] Poor Law’ (Hallam 2000, pp. 19), and in the context of charitably or locally funded infirmaries. All of which took their own approaches to recruitment and practice, making for little in the way of national uniformity in nursing’s professional operation. In this way, before the NHS, the work of nursing had been organised and carried out with relatively little in the way of government involvement in or knowledge of its processes and practices. As Iliffe explains, ‘nursing was one aspect of the new health service that was unknown territory to the Ministry of Health,’ so it promptly went about attempting to address this gap in its knowledge of UK healthcare provision by asking itself ‘How many nurses were there, where were they, how much training had they had, what was the quality of their training, and how should they be deployed?’ (Iliffe 1983, p. 48). To answer these questions, a government working party was formed during the planning and preparation stages for the implementation of the health service and tasked with ascertaining the nature of the contemporary *status quo* in nursing. The findings of its investigation were published in 1947 in the form of the Wood Report (Iliffe 1983, p. 48; Hallam 2000, p. 91; Dingwall et al 2002, p. 118) which, as Hallam states, ‘set the agenda for the way the Ministry of Health was to regard the position of nurses in the new NHS’ and ‘set the stage for the way nurses were treated by the ministry until the early 1960s’ (Hallam 2000, p. 91; see also Iliffe 1983, p. 48; Dingwall et al 2002, p. 118).

NHS nurses on UK television before *Angels*

There is no question that the UK media, encompassing television drama, has played its part in shaping public perceptions of nurses and nursing, of the value of their work, and of the social role of their profession. In genre-defining early examples of medical dramas on UK television such as *Emergency - Ward 10* (ITV 1957-1967) and *Dr Finlay’s Casebook* (ITV 1962-1971),

nurses were often secondary in the depicted hierarchy of discourses of healthcare professionalism, serving more as foils to the (typically white and male) doctors, so that the programmes in which they appeared were better enabled to showcase a professional identity defined by capability and infallibility (Jacobs 2001, p. 24; Jacobs 2003, p. 5) – qualities associated with what at that time was unabashedly perceived to have been the more cerebral *profession* of medicine, especially relative to the qualities associated with what was conversely understood to have been the caring *vocation* of nursing. Indeed, the early history of nurses on UK medical television might have unfolded quite differently had *Emergency - Ward 10* continued in the nurse's-eye-view iteration that writer and creator Tessa Diamond had originally intended for it in the form of a six-part serial to be entitled *Calling Nurse Roberts* (Clark 2014 [2005]; Cooke 2015, p. 35). The titular character of the notional serial did indeed go on to feature in *Emergency – Ward 10*, a ‘flawless blonde’ (Knyaston 2013, p. 18) played by Rosemary Miller for 137 episodes across its first two years of production. Anticipating *Angels* and further indicative of the *Emergency – Ward 10*'s initial focus more on the subjectivity and viewpoint of the figure of the ingenue nurse, who Diamond had previously conceived as central to telling the stories of hospital work on television, is the one-line synopsis for the early episodes of the series. This accompanied provision of its scheduling information and credits in the *TV Times* listings magazine, and it reads, simply, ‘Pat Roberts, a young probationer nurse, is on duty.’ (TVTiP, ‘Emergency – Ward 10’ 2025).

Elsewhere on UK television in the 1960s, and a noteworthy forerunner to *Angels* in terms of its attempt to balance depiction of the professional and personal/private sides of life as a nurse, *On Hand to Listen* (also known as *Something to Offer*) was a Thames Television Production *cum* government documentary film. It was sponsored by the Department for Health and Social Security and the Central Office for Information and had been made with a

television broadcast in mind. It was shown in a 30-minute slot on ITV at 3:45 pm on 20 October 1969 (McGahan, ‘*Something to Offer*’ 2014 [2005]; TVTiP, ‘*On Hand to Listen*’ 2025), with the dually purposed intention (promotional on the one hand and educational on the other) of both recruiting trainee psychiatric nurses for the NHS, and of contributing in part to the fulfilment of ITV’s relatively modest public service remit by educating viewers on a matter of national public importance: healthcare provision (BFI Player, ‘*Something to Offer*’ 2025).ⁱⁱ Moreover, while it highlights the aesthetic and stylistic contribution made to the finished film by the 16mm photography of Peter Jessop, it is noteworthy that the creative contributions of the production crew’s women, but especially director Bridget Barry and producer Anne Balfour-Fraser, go unremarked upon, especially given the centrality of women to the subject matter, the likelihood of a majority women target audience, and the relative rarity of women in above-the-line roles, resulting from extreme inequalities between men and women working in such positions that characterised the production cultures of the film and television industries in the UK (and elsewhere) at that time (ACTT 1975; Brayfield 1977, p. 110; Koerber 1977, pp. 141-142), and that have continued to do so through the decades since (Dent 2017; Cobb 2020).

Paula Milne and *Angels*

A few years later, *Angels* was developed on the back of an idea proposed by Paula Milne (Hallam 2000, p. 79). Across ensuing decades Milne would become one of UK television’s most prolific and revered screenwriters, especially of programmes with manifestly (but differently intersectional) feminist sensibilities - programmes which thematised and foregrounded women’s concerns and experiences (regarding, for example, domestic discontent, gender-based workplace inequalities, queer and inter-racial romantic relationships and racially mixed families), often featuring women protagonists, and frequently depicting them break ground as women in previously male-dominated contexts, occupations and

professions like law enforcement (*Juliet Bravo*, BBC, tx. 30 July 1980 – 21 December 1985), plumbing (*A Sudden Wrench*, BBC, tx. 23 March 1982), motor racing (*Driving Ambition*, BBC, tx. 3 March – 21 April 1984), ambulance driving (*Ladies in Charge*, ITV, tx. 6 May – 17 June 1986), private investigation/detection (*Ladies in Charge*; *Chandler & Co*, BBC, tx. 12 July 1994 – 1 September 1995), politics (*The Politician's Wife*, Channel 4, tx. 16-30 May 1995), and statecraft (*The Virgin Queen*, BBC, tx. 13-20 November 2005).

When Milne first conceived the series that would go on to become *Angels*, she was working as a script reader for the BBC (Cooke 2014 [2005]) following time spent in the early 1970s doing this work for Associated TeleVision (ATV), a British broadcaster which was then part of the commercial Independent Television (ITV) network. Having germinated the series, Milne was credited first as story editor and then script editor for all episodes across its first and second series in 1975 and 1976. She would go on to write nine episodes from 1976-1978. UK television drama historian Lez Cooke describes *Angels* as a ‘hospital soap,’ (Cooke 2014 [2005]) and in some ways it was. But in other respects, it was far from it. As Hallam notes, the show follows a ‘series (rather than serial) format’ (2000, p. 79) at odds with this characterisation, while Jason Jacobs characterises *Angels* as ‘gritty’ and the lives of the nurses depicted as ‘chaotic’ (2001, p. 25; 2003, p. 9) commensurate with what he describes as ‘the twin demands of UK television’ at that time that such shows ‘should aspire to the accuracy (and assumed political progressiveness) of social realism’ and ‘downplay sentiment and overt displays of visual style’ (2003, p. 9).

Regarding the latter, much of what is stated in BBC archival sources to have been the intentions for *Angels*’ representation of nurses and nursing, especially vis-à-vis the dual focus

on both the private and professional sides of the nurses' lives, is vividly illustrated in the richly detailed depictions contained within the programme's short but punchily impactful title sequence. A twiddly and raucous electric guitar solo follows a fly-in camera effect that introduces the sequence's first visual - a stone carving of the insignia of the show's workplace and training ground: St Angela's Hospital in London, where the action will take place, and with an emblem that appears to depict a full-body likeness of the titular saint, Angela Merici, in its centre. Merici was an unconventional nun in sixteenth-century Italy who dedicated her life to the education of girls, was canonised in 1807 as the patron saint of the sick, infirm and differently abled, and whose order of sisters, in addition to their dedication to teaching, was also known for its performance of care work tending to the sick in hospitals (Sharkey and Feiertag 1960, p. 134; Cunningham 2008, p. 82; Duffin 2009, p. 39). In other words, the members of this order were not only nuns, but also nurses.

One of nursing's most famous roots is thus in 'the religious orders,' like those of St Angela, 'which provided much of the early institutionalised [health]care' (Salvage 1985b, p. 20), and throughout the nine-year broadcast run of *Angels*, it still remained the case in some UK hospitals that nurses wore caps closely resembling the white veil of a nun's habit (Salvage 1985a, p. 7). From thence came the cultural archetype associated with nurses of the 'ministering angel' or 'angel of mercy' (Salvage 1985a, p. 7),ⁱⁱⁱ which in turn provided the series title, *Angels*.^{iv} As Salvage writes (not in reference to the name of this series, but more broadly with respect to dominant tendencies in cultural configurations of nurses), in media imagery and discourse of the nursing profession 'the word ["angels"] is used synonymously with nurses. Innocent, unselfish, utterly dedicated to caring for the sick, they always put service before self' (1985b, p. 20).

The sequence goes on to offset the the staid and officious connotations of its depiction of the trappings of nurses' professional identities that come from a series of intercut close-ups of the paraphernalia of nursing (white cap, apron, watch, elasticated belt, thermometer, patients' charts) as they are borne on the body of or wielded by the hand of a depicted (white) 'every nurse', with fragmented body shots (with close-ups on the feminine contours of the woman's torso) that depict a more fun-loving and carefree life lived outside of work. This takes place via intercut shots of her dancing to the rock guitar theme music, and likewise, depiction of nurses dancing at discos and parties to offset an overly serious emphasis on professionalism can also be seen elsewhere in nurse-oriented television of this period, in informational actuality films like *On Hand to Listen*.

Key issues and themes - Representation of immigrant nurses

Some of the key issues thematised, or which otherwise stand out from the representational landscape in *Angels*' early depictions of nurses, encompass the realities of racial and ethnic diversity in the NHS nursing workforce and the experiences of immigrant nurses, perhaps surprisingly: the depiction of queer women working as nurses in the NHS and their personal lives beyond the hospital, and the fact of nursing being seen as (and being) predominantly so-called 'women's work'. For example, Hallam writes that while 'nurses are highly valued as individuals... nursing, defined as women's work, is devalued and given low status in society' (2000 p. 7). Moreover, as a majority women profession, as Salvage notes, nursing is an occupation that is inevitably 'subject to society's value-judgments about supposedly female attributes and capabilities,' specifying that in nursing 'our physical and psychological intimacy with patients and our quasi-domestic duties are closely allied to tasks traditionally regarded as women's "natural" sphere.' (1985b, pp. 4-5).^v

Since the post-war inception of the service, immigrant nurses have travelled to Britain to train and work for the NHS following major recruitment drives that have spanned the globe, tapping the labour markets of Europe, the Caribbean, the Philippines, Malaysia, Mauritius, India, various countries in Africa, and elsewhere, at different points in its history (Iliffe 1983, p. 149).^{vi} They have left their homes and loved ones, and often their children (Watson 2018, p. 221), to take up the work of this profession for the NHS and its patients. Since the beginnings of healthcare-oriented programming, UK television has striven, in different ways and to varying extents, to acknowledge and account for the racial and ethnic diversity that characterised the workforce of NHS nursing, and, therefore, to make space for the possibility of racially and ethnically mixed representation of public sector workplaces, albeit with significant limitations that have clear ideological stakes, especially for the immigrant nurses of colour whose subjectivities remained marginalised. Existing ethnographic research by Julia Hallam demonstrates that their experiences either were not accounted for in discourse or were accounted for in ways that negotiated the existing *status quo*, enabling their professional diminishment and exploitation (2000, pp. 158-169).

All the same, Philip Donnellan's made for television documentary film *The Colony* (BBC, tx. 16 June 1964), which Sarita Malik characterises as 'a rare example of its time... accessing Black people [in Britain] directly' in ways that enabled their subjectivities to be privileged and their views to be expressed 'in a relatively unmediated way' (2002, p. 39). Profiling a range of immigrant workers from St Kitts, Jamaica and Trinidad including a railway worker, a bus conductor and a schoolteacher, the film also profiled Barbadian nurse Polly Perkins and her experience living and working in the NHS in Birmingham.

In her own interrogation of cultural imagery of NHS nurses during this period, Hallam (2000) references neither the depiction in *The Colony* nor the experiences of being a migrant NHS nurse therein related by Polly Perkins. But as part of her sustained critique of the white hegemony of the ‘take four girls’ approach to depicting the nursing profession in post-war NHS recruitment literature she writes that ‘accounts of their nursing lives told by Barbadian women reveal that the white middle-class identity of nursing that dominated’ at this time were ‘not only representative of nursing ideals and practices but also helped shape [them],’ so that ‘professional status and autonomy in nursing continued to be anchored to [the] white feminine ideal’ (p. 8) espoused by this approach.

This discursively contributed to the race-based inequalities in NHS nursing that ensued from the two-tier system of registration versus enrolment that so often worked to shepherd immigrant nurses of colour into the lower status and more poorly paid role of State Enrolled Nurse [SEN] (Iliffe 1983, pp. 148-149). This had concomitantly limited opportunities for career progression and salary growth (Salvage 1985a, p. 8), while the higher status and higher paid role of State Registered Nurse [SRN] remained, in line with the hegemony of the ‘take four girls’ approach, largely the preserve of white women. As Salvage observes in her 1980s treatises on the politics of nursing, channelling black and brown nurses onto the SEN training track was experienced as ‘a form of covert [and institutional] racism’ while any discernible NHS promotion of anti-racist policies and practices went unseen (1985a, p. 8; 1985b, p. 39).

Angels, despite its adherence to the ‘take four girls’ approach, would continue some of the ideological work done by films like *The Colony* in shining light on the experiences of

immigrant nurses of colour, albeit in negotiated and contextually specific ways that contained the possibility of too major a disruption to the hegemony of whiteness in cultural imaginings of the configuration of the ideal NHS nurse. Character profiles in the production information document ‘Walk – Don’t Run’, held in the file for *Angels* at the BBC Written Archives Centre, are revealing in this regard, especially vis-à-vis what they specify about programme makers’ intentions in configuring the identities of its black and brown nurses, who are secondary to the four principals of the ‘take four girls’ quartet – white student-nurse ingenues Maureen Morahan (Erin Geraghty), Pat Rutherford (Fiona Fullerton), Jo Longhurst (Julie Dawn Cole) and Shirley Brent (Claire Clifford).

Black and brown nurses as *secondary* characters, however, were written into the larger ensemble cast of characters from the point of inception. ‘Eva Nyeca’ is described in BBC archival sources as ‘a quiet, attractive girl from Uganda,’ in a profile that goes on to explain that ‘She and her family were one of many Asians forced into exile by Amin in late 1972 (‘Walk – Don’t Run’, BBC Written Archives Centre T65/241/1, August 1974, p.38). This referred to what at the time was the hot-button political issue, thanks to racist and xenophobic rhetoric and discourse concerning them, of the immigration to Britain of many Ugandans of South Asian ethnic origin who were expelled from their home country by its post-coup military dictator Major General Idi Amin (Sandbrook 2010, pp. 253-265) - one of many terrible legacies of British colonialism.

This character, played in the finished programme by Karan David, was renamed Sita Patel, but otherwise depicted broadly in line with this description. Relating the story of her entry

point into nursing to another student in the ninth episode ‘Model Patient’ (tx. 27 October 1975), the heretofore meek and mild-mannered Sita explains her immigrant experience thus:

When I first came from Uganda there were problems. It wasn’t very easy for us. We had so much there. Our own home. My father had a good job. And then we had nothing. Well... what we could carry in one suitcase. At the centre where we stayed, a social worker was there. She gave much time to me. It was she who encouraged me to become a nurse. Or I would have been working in a canteen.

There was thus clear intent, via the characterisation of Sita, to engage with relevant and contemporaneous contextual realities experienced at that time by Britain’s Ugandan Asians, to pay homage to other arms of Britain’s welfare state adjacent to the NHS via a nod to the allied public service of social work, and to showcase the subjectivity of an immigrant nurse of colour, albeit one whose backstory sidesteps any need for *Angels* to directly allude to the postwar recruitment drives that took place overseas, accounting for an estimated quarter of all new nursing recruits to the NHS at that time (‘Walk, Don’t Run’, BBC Written Archives Centre T65/241/, August 1974, p. 27).

More problematically, nurse Sandra Ling (played in the series by Angela Bruce) is described as a ‘West Indian nurse from the North [of England]’ who is ‘blunt,’ ‘lazy,’ ‘brusque,’ and ‘outspoken,’ (BBC Written Archives Centre T65/241/, August 1974), while Elaine Fitzgerald (Taiwo Ajai), a 36-year-old ‘Nursing Auxiliary’ who ‘immigrated from Trinidad 17 years ago’, is described as presenting ‘a happy face’ (to take one example from the series – Elaine joyfully sings to herself while smiling broadly in the locker room), and as being ‘well-meaning if... somewhat careless’ (BBC Written Archives Centre T65/241/, August 1974). Nursing Auxiliaries – another even lower status and even more poorly paid nursing-adjacent

occupation in which black and brown women, especially those recruited from overseas, often found themselves stuck if their English or education or qualifications were deemed insufficient to merit enrolment as pupil nurses (Salvage 1985b, p. 88; Hallam 2000, p. 122) – were ancillary staff tasked with performing the most basic aspects of a nurse’s care work, listed in ‘Walk - Don’t Run’ (p. 17) as the provision of ‘bed pans, bed baths, food, etc’ (BBC Written Archives Centre T65/241/, August 1974).^{vii}

Language in these character profiles that thus present Sandra and Elaine in terms of what are offered up as deficiencies, or as defined by qualities that are incompatible with existing cultural imaginings of the ideal nurse, also discursively aligns with characteristics associated with entrenched and persistent so-called ‘angry black woman’ and ‘happy slave’ racial stereotypes, and with the ‘controlling images’ of black femininity that Patricia Hill Collins argues have shaped and negotiated racist logics informing cultural representations of black women (2009 [2000]).

In Elaine’s sole appearance, in the fourth episode ‘Staff’ (tx. 22 September 1975),^{viii} attempting to form a bond of solidarity with a black woman patient, Elaine seems initially to vent her frustration about her apparently racially motivated put-upon status as a nursing auxiliary when Staff Nurse Linda Hollis (Janina Faye) matter-of-factly asks her to do two things at once at a time when her hands are literally full: ‘Nurse Fitzgerald can finish this! Nurse Fitzgerald can finish that! They treat us auxiliaries as if we are maids! I tell you, the day of reckoning will arrive, you mark my words,’ in response to which the unconvinced patient asks, ‘What are you talking about?’ Elaine responds, ‘Our oppression sister!’ The patient replies insistently ‘I’m not oppressed.’ ‘You is,’ Elaine replies, ‘you just don’t know it

honey.’ The exchange takes place with levity, the implicit reference to race is not made explicit, and it is clear throughout that Elaine is not militant in this view. She winks, and nudges her patient on the elbow while speaking, smiling at her mischievously as she walks out of frame and away from the ward. The spectre of racist oppression and an institutionally racist professional hierarchy in NHS nursing has been invoked, only to be dismissed with this moment of comic relief.

Moreover, Elaine and Sandra’s white peers are conversely characterised in their written profiles not in terms of their racial or ethnic origins, or of their citizenship status, but rather, more familiarly, in terms, for example, of their ingenue status (thus, Maureen is a ‘wide eyed innocent’), their professional ambition (Shirley is a ‘future Matron’), their elevated level of education (Pat has ‘A Levels’) and their devotion to nursing as care work (Jo ‘gets involved’ in her patients’ problems) (‘Walk – Don’t Run’, BBC Written Archives Centre T65/241/, August 1974, pp. 57-60).

Key issues and themes - Queer representation

One thing that all of this demonstrates are some of the clear ideological limitations of the attempts made by the programme makers of *Angels* to intervene in the white hegemony of the ‘take four girls’ approach, despite the apparent good-faith efforts to represent aspects of the realities of racial and ethnic diversity in the NHS nursing workforce. Another aspect of the diversity in NHS nursing depicted in early episodes is the social reality that, as Salvage observes in the mid-1980s, ‘many nurses are lesbian’ (Salvage 1985b, p. 24). Despite this, ‘there are no images of lesbianism or same-sex relationships between nursing staff’ in the corpus of post-war texts, spanning several decades, that Hallam examines (2000), and she ‘found no documented accounts of the experiences of women who share same-sex

preferences in British nursing' (p. 137). She goes on to speculate that this was perhaps because in the nursing profession 'lesbians could pursue professional lives that bore all the hallmarks of feminine respectability without fear of discrimination as long as their private lives remained hidden' (2000, p. 137), including in discourse circulating about the nursing profession.

That being the case, the fifth episode, 'Off Duty' (tx. 29th September 1975), addresses this social reality in a single-episode storyline that sees first-year nurses Pat and Maureen encounter former St Angela's nurse Beryl (Jane Lowe), who works at the Russell General, another London hospital, while drinking in a pub. Beryl, somewhat the worse for drink, strikes up a conversation with the two younger women. Joining them at their table, Beryl explains that she is drinking alone having had a slight falling-out with her 'friend,' who she later names as 'Alex,' and that they usually meet there for a drink on Fridays before wending their way 'home' to the house for which they have a mortgage together.

Somewhat mournfully, Beryl explains that she and Alex have 'been together for so long now' that they 'need each other.' Maureen asks, 'Why don't you get married?', and Beryl explains patiently, 'That isn't possible dear.' When Beryl's 'friend' arrives, a reverse shot reveals the surprise that 'Alex' is in fact Sister Easby (June Watson), a senior colleague of Pat and Maureen from the wards at St Angela's. And thus, the reason why it is impossible for Beryl and Alex to be married becomes clear. Observing her friend's inebriated state, a line is drawn under their cohabitation when she calmly declares, 'Come on Beryl, we're going home.'

The scenarios depicted and described in the episode clearly lend themselves to a queer reading of these characters, and the romantic nature of the personal dynamic between Beryl and Alex is strongly implied. However, commensurate with expectation based on what was commonplace for this period of television history vis-à-vis veiled representations of closeted queer life,^{ix} and in line with contemporaneous social realities of homophobia and queerphobia, a same-sex relationship between them is neither named nor otherwise directly referred to. All the same, notwithstanding the ambiguity and opacity of the queer representation as it appears in the finished programme, Sister Easby's queerness is referenced more explicitly in her character profile in the *Angels* production notes, which describes her as 'a latent lesbian' who 'lives in a house she has mortgaged with a fellow member of the nursing profession' ('Walk – Don't Run', BBC Written Archives Centre T65/241/1, August 1974, p. 68). Retold from Beryl's viewpoint in the finished episode, Sister Easby's lesbian private life is thus acknowledged more indirectly. Moreover, with Beryl's implied alcoholism, and her sad narration of the tensions and quiet miseries that characterise their hidden and insular existence, queer life for these nurses is shown to be lonely and tragic, in line with the heteronormative storytelling logics inherent to narratives of the closet that were typical of queer representation on television at a time when such representations were themselves so few and far between. That said, coming as it did just one year after *Girl* (BBC, 1974) had courted such controversy in its representation of a same-sex relationship between two women in a military work context - one that included UK television's first known depiction of a lesbian kiss (Blyth 2014 [2005]; Buckle 2018, p. 60) – *Angels*' dramatic inclusion of such a relationship forming in the context of the similarly intense majority-women work environment of NHS nursing remains historically significant as a mid-1970s intervention into the hegemony of heteronormativity.

Conclusion

Writing at the turn of the millennium, Hallam highlights that ‘since the mid-1970s,’ at which time *Angels* was conceived, produced and first broadcast, ‘nursing commentators have become increasingly critical of images of professional identity circulating in the mass media, claiming that nursing is misrepresented and poorly understood’ by its creative practitioners (2000, p. 11). Later, writing in 2018 in the context and aftermath of the Brexit exodus of immigrant nurses from the European Union (but prior to the #ThankYouNHS phenomenon that exploded in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic two years later), Christie Watson remarked that the UK public’s perceptions of and attitudes to nurses and nursing in the twenty-first century have continued to manifest observably recidivist tendencies, while understandings of cognate healthcare professions have instead improved, progressed or complexified over time (2018, p 177). Attitudes to surgery for example “have moved on a lot more than [those] of nursing, which at times seems to be heading in the opposite direction (2018, p. 177). Highlighting what it at stake for nurses in the real world for their profession to be understood and valued, she continues to the effect that nursing is, or should be, ‘a reminder of our capacity to love one another,’ and yet, ‘it is the most undervalued of all the professions’ (2018, p. 265). It is, Watson continues, ‘hard to be kind when you are undervalued by society, by your employers and by the media’ (2018, p. 283).

As the combination of original archival and textual analysis in this chapter has demonstrated, there is clear evidence from production documents and from the earliest completed episodes of *Angels*, that alongside striving to balance depictions of nurses’ private lives with their professional lives, the series also aimed, albeit in ideologically contained ways, to intervene in the hegemony of the ‘take four girls’ approach to depicting nurses via a disingenuous multiplicity of heteronormative white femininities. Further, that the intersectional feminism germane to *Angels*’ second wave feminist context of production manifestly informed its efforts in so doing. All the same it remains the case that its nine-year

run also did much to cement this hegemony, and to set the template for the ‘take four girls’ ensembles, and slight variations thereof, that would follow in ensuing decades. Its legacy in this regard can be seen, for example, during millennial postfeminism, in the irreverent central quartet of the aptly named *No Angels*, which did accommodate a nurse of colour, Anji Mittel (Sunetra Sarker), into its fourpiece ensemble, but in line with the demographic realities of nursing’s hierarchy that (despite ideological limitations in the execution) *Angels* had depicted from its outset in the mid-1970s, she is a healthcare assistant (as former nursing auxiliaries are now known) where her white colleagues are qualified nurses. And during fourth wave feminism, it can be seen across the first several series of nurse-oriented television’s greatest *tour de force* - *Call the Midwife*, which, notwithstanding the quiet radicalism of so many aspects of its depiction of NHS nursing, and despite the well documented realities of the extent to which the NHS was propped up by the labour of immigrant nurses from the beginning, maintained the straight white hegemony of its ‘take four girls’ ensemble until the introduction, as regular characters, of queer characters Patsy Mount (Emerald Fennell) and Delia Busby (Kate Lamb) after four years, and later black Nurse Lucille Anderson (Leonie Elliot), after six years. Given the reticence of media fictions of NHS nursing in more recent decades to break from the ‘take four girls’ mould, the path-breaking early efforts made during second wave feminism by *Angels* appear, despite their limitations, extraordinary.

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ⁱ Hallam is here referencing the title of a 1972 recruitment brochure, which itself appears to be an intertextual reference to the BBC’s then recent female ensemble comedy drama *Take Three Girls* (BBC, 1969-1971).

ⁱⁱ The curators’ written accompaniment to this television film’s entry in British Film Institute’s [BFI] online ‘NHS on Film’ archive states that the 22-minute long version held in the National Film and Television Archive under the title *Something to Offer* is an edited down version of the film, which was, ostensibly unlike *On Hand to Listen*, intended for television (BFI Player, “*Something to Offer*” 2025). The ‘NHS on Film’ archive does not indicate from where it sourced this information about the film, but data available via the TV Times Project 1955-1985 [TVTiP] (a Bournemouth University based digitisation and indexing project for the *TV Times* listings magazine, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board and carried out in collaboration with the British Universities Film and Video Council across the mid-2000s) confirms the advertised title of the programme shown in the scheduling slot given to this film to have been *On Hand to Listen*.

ⁱⁱⁱ See also Salvage (1985b, p. 20), Kalisch and Kalisch (1987, pp. 9-55), Hallam (2000, p. 10), Harmes et al (2021, p. 6)

^{iv} Archival sources reveal the original working title to have been *Walk – Don’t Run* (BBC Written Archives Centre T65/241/1, August 1974), seemingly a reference to the vocalisation of matriarchal authority that characterised the hierarchy of nursing in the NHS context in which most of it was taking place. It is not specified in archival sources available exactly what prompted the title to change to *Angels*.

^v See also, for example, Iliffe (1983, p. 147), Salvage 1985b, pp. 6-10, Kalisch and Kalisch (1987, pp. 2-3), Lawler (1991, p. 219), Hallam (2000, p. 29), Watson (2016, p. 113), Luckett (2017), Hamad (2024).

^{vi} See also Salvage (1985a, pp. 7-8; 1985b, p.24, pp. 37-38) and Watson (2018, p. 214).

^{vii} See also Iliffe (1983, p. 50), Salvage (1985b, pp. 85-88), Hallam (2000, p. 115).

^{viii} Despite the presence of a character profile for her in ‘Walk -Don’t Run’ that appears alongside those of all the other recurring members of the ensemble cast (BBC Written Archives Centre T65/241/, August 1974), the character of Elaine Fitzgerald appeared in *Angels* only once. It is not clear from archival sources consulted thus

far or from how her narrative unfolds in the episode what may have prompted programme makers to think better of making her into a regular character.

^{ix} On representation of closeted queer life in television history, see for example Doty (1993); Tropiano (2002); Becker (2006); Chambers (2009); Davis and Needham eds (2009); Buckle, (2018); Bourne (2019); McNicholas Smith (2020).