Alma's (Not) Normal: Normalising Working-Class Women in/on BBC TV Comedy

Abstract

This article examines the BBC sitcom Alma's Not Normal and its representation of white working-class femininities in/on British TV comedy. After The Royle Family creator Caroline Aherne's death in July 2017, the BBC created a bursary in memory of the comedy star, awarding £5,000 to the successful applicant to develop a pilot comedy script. Though open to people of all backgrounds and genders, the three winners so far have been working-class women – Sophie Willan, Amy Gledhill and Kiri Pritchard-McLean – an important shift from the recent success of female-fronted and female-authored middle-class comedies on the BBC such as Miranda and Fleabag. This article examines the award's first winner: Boltonian Sophie Willan and her series Alma's Not Normal. While Phil Wickham argues that contemporary working-class sitcoms in Britain display the 'hidden injuries of class', something that is felt but no longer acknowledged, I contend that Willan exposes class wounds by explicitly referencing and drawing attention to social issues in her TV series. More specifically, I argue that, as a working-class woman in the North West, Willan uses comedy to interrogate the intersections of class and gender. This textual analysis will then be used as a framework to conceptualise the labour of working-class women in British television comedy, mainly because class has been overlooked as a social category in contemporary scholarship on feminism and humour.

Introduction

In an article in the right-wing Daily Mail, 16 September 2021, Monica Greep describes Sophie Willan's sitcom Alma's Not Normal (BBC Two,1 2020–) as a 'new BBC comedy that normalises prostitution and drug use, and is littered with sex scenes and swearing'. However, it adds that the series 'has become a huge hit with TV fans' despite this 'extreme subject matter'. More positively, Emily Baker in The i, 13 September 2021, called it 'a delight', 'a portrait of the North we don't often see on television' and a picture of Bolton that was 'unglamorous' but also portrayed it as 'a bright, joyful and ultimately hopeful place'; Michael Hogan in the same day's Telegraph saluted it as 'brimming with passion and heart', 'an idiosyncratic gem of a comedy which is rambunctious, romantic and somehow optimistic' and 'another quietly brilliant, genre-bending, female-authored comedy'; and Rebecca Nicholson in the Guardian, 20 September 2021, welcomed the series as 'a breath of fresh air, a resolutely British, properly northern, grownup comedy that manages to turn its bleak-on-paper subject matter into a rude, witty and audacious show'.

However, although Alma's Not Normal has received acclaim from audiences and critics alike, recent moral panics surrounding white working-class women have also positioned characters of the kind played by Sophie Willan here as 'female chavs' and subjects of 'class disgust' (Tyler 2008). This demonstrates not simply how the working- class, as a whole, is marginalised, but how working-class women in comedy are all-too-frequently misrepresented and demonised on TV and in the press. At the same time, the broadcasting industries remain dominated by privately educated male comedians who have the right connections and can afford all the risks in this creative sector (Davies 2009). Willan found that her background caused her to encounter a 'glass ceiling' and that she could not enter the TV industry until she received the Caroline Aherne award in order to develop a comedy script for the BBC (Willan, quoted in Chortle 2020). Alma's Not Normal, her first series and the product of this award, offers unflinching takes on class, sexuality, mental health and substance

abuse. Because of this, the award notwithstanding, she struggled to get the series commissioned, with a male TV executive telling her that 'female heroin addicts are not funny, they're frightening' (Willan, quoted in Chortle 2021).

This article, however, seeks to explore the gendered and class- based issues prevalent in Alma's Not Normal as indeed 'funny' rather than 'frightening', arguing that the series shifts our understanding of working-class women in/on television through comedy and comedic conventions. Using textual analysis, I argue that techniques such as voiceovers and point-of-view narration humorously challenge the prevailing gaze of the (male) middle classes. Textual analysis is also used in this article to explore how the comedic representation of sex work in Alma's Not Normal provides commentary on the gendered and classed impacts of austerity in the North. By examining protagonist Alma (Sophie Willan), who is as loud and brash as her collection of hot-pink fur coats; her mother Lin (Siobhan Finneran), a childlike former drug addict with pink highlights and ill-fitting dentures; and her grandmother Joan (Lorraine Ashbourne), who is described in the shooting script for the pilot episode 2 as a 'Silk-Cut-smoking, vodka-drinking, animal-print-loving whirlwind', this article seeks to examine feminine/female perspectives in comedy television, as well as to showcase the importance of white working-class voices in an industry in which they are often overlooked, ignored or devalued. Through this analysis, I argue that 'the hidden injuries of class' that Phil Wickham (2017) contends are subtly conveyed throughout contemporary British sitcoms are instead exposed, made visible and interrogated explicitly in Alma's Not Normal.

After engaging with Alma's Not Normal as a series concerned with the intersections of gender and class, I look at the broader theoretical debates surrounding women in comedy. Here, and using Alma's Not Normal as a case study, I argue that working-class women have largely been left out of contemporary scholarship on humour – despite the growing number of TV series created by this social group (Tully 2018; Wanzo 2016; Nygaard and Lagerway 2020).

Class, comedy and contextualising Alma's Not Normal

First, I will contextualise the political intersections of class and gender in British media. This article is thus situated within a specific national framework that will inform the analysis of Alma's Not Normal as a BBC sitcom. This section then examines the lineage of white, working-class and Northern femininities in British TV comedy to trace this social group's evolution within the genre. Deeply embedded class structures within British society often intersect with gender relations. Beverley Skeggs, in her work on class, gender and culture, argues that in the popular British landscape, which is heavily weighted against the working-class, a shift has taken place from 1980s political rhetoric, which placed the single mother as a figure of contempt and as a moral/economic scapegoat, to the present, in which the 'loud, white, excessive, drunk, fat, vulgar, disgusting, hen-partying woman who exists to embody all the moral obsessions historically associated with the working class now contained in one body; a body beyond governance' (2005: 965). According to Skeggs, many young white working-class women now tend to 'disidentify' with a perception of themselves as working-class precisely because of the prevalence of such negative stereotypes (1997: 74–97). As I argue, however, Sophie Willan is a working-class writer/performer who does not 'disidentify' with her class but actively engages with class politics and its cultural constructs, despite, in the contemporary context of the Conservative government's austerity politics, representations of the poor and the working-classes continuing to be informed by their cultural demonisation as 'chavs' (Jones 2016). Imogen Tyler, for instance, has noted that in neoliberal times there has been a focused attack on working-class people, demarcating

them as ‘revolting’ subjects (2013). This ambiguous term refers to their being both socially abject and politically aware/agentic.

In particular, it is argued by scholars and sympathetic journalists that the media fail to capture the rich inner lives of working-class people. David Hesmondhalgh, for instance, suggests that ‘sometimes this failure is a result of a lack of attention to working-class people, to their attitudes and values: a failure of under-representation. Sometimes it derives from other causes such as stigmatisation, sensationalism . . . a failure of misrepresentation’ (2017: 22). ‘Poverty porn’ is a genre that has come to typify the working-classes by producing abjectifying images of the poor through specific televisual techniqueswhich can be seen in series such as Can’t Pay? We’ll Take It Away (Channel 5, 2014–18), Benefits Street (Channel 4, 2014–15) and The Mega Council Estate Next Door (Channel 5, 2020). David Forrest and Beth Johnson rectify this focus on social disgust by sensitively and carefully examining the importance of working-class onscreen representation specifically in terms of Northern stardom. When analysing actor Lesley Sharp, they argue that her performances ‘allow for an undercutting of the male, monolithic North, which has hitherto overshadowed a more nuanced, careful and feminized representation’ (2016: 199). As I will argue, this ‘masculine’ space of the North, typically represented via realist, working-class narratives, is also being subtly destabilised by the growing number of working-class comedies created by women. Alma’s Not Normal demonstrates this shift par excellence. Significantly, the BBC has a history of popular and critical successes with sitcoms focusing on white working-class femininities. Carla Lane, for instance, was the first woman in British television to become a ‘name’ through her comedies for the broadcaster, which included The Liver Birds (BBC1, 1969–79) and Bread (BBC1, 1986–91). As Frances Gray argues, she was the ‘highest-paid comedy writer in the country, attracting viewing figures in the twelve million mark’. Despite Lane’s popularity, Gray laments that the media perceived her as a ‘one-off talent, the exception that provides the rule about women’s lack of comic ability’ (1994: 89). Series by Carla Lane were informed and inspired by Liverpool as a city, focusing on working-class women’s lives in the North West. The Liver Birds, for instance, follows Dawn (Pauline Collins) and Beryl (Polly James), who share a flat on Liverpool’s Huskisson Street, with the two women beginning to enjoy the new freedoms that came at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. As Vicky Ball notes, it ‘constructs and addresses aspirational templates of working-class femininity that dare to dream of identities other than those based around maternity and the realist kitchen sink’ (2017: 138). In essence, ‘The Liver Birds celebrates that which is feared in . . . the “new wave’’ films: the feminine’ (ibid.: 135).

The BBC commissioned other TV comedies created by working-class women from the 1970s onwards. Lancashire-born writer/performer Victoria Wood was discovered when she impressed the judges with her comedy song performance on New Faces (ITV, 1973–88). She subsequently created BAFTA-winning series, including Victoria Wood: As Seen on TV (BBC2, 1985–7) and An Audience with Victoria Wood (BBC1, 1988), before writing and starring in the BBC sitcom dinnerladies (BBC1, 1998–2000), which she also produced. Like The Liver Birds and Bread, dinnerladies is a ‘female ensemble text’ (Ball 2017) set in the canteen of a fictional factory in Manchester – a Northern space Wood frequently invokes in her work. The sitcom focuses on a group of primarily female and middle-aged dinner ladies. These marginalised identities are rarely seen on television, with its humour demonstrating Wood’s commitment to ‘comedy as communality, laughter as a social embrace’ (Medhurst 2007: 181). Indeed, Wood became known for creatively exploring the politics of the ordinary through her less-than- ordinary and vivid portraiture of regional, working-class femininities. From the 1990s onwards, writers such as Leeds-born playwright Kay Mellor were moving away from the sitcom format and using comedy- drama to propel the stories of white working-class subjects. Mellor has written and directed several award-winning series,

including Playing the Field (BBC1, 1998–2002), Band of Gold (ITV, 1995–7), Fat Friends (ITV, 2000–5) and Between the Sheets (ITV, 2003). According to Kristyn Gorton, Mellor's work can be 'situated within the broader context of the British social realist tradition' (2006: 73), particularly Fat Friends, which centres on the lives of a group of overweight members of a Leeds slimming club. Mellor treats this Northern space with 'unapologetic fascination' in her TV series and interviews (for example, Yorkshire Life 2012). Julia Hallam notes that she 'decided to create her own production company, Rollem Productions (Mellor spelt backwards), to retain creative control of her work and ensure her projects would actually be made in Leeds. Fat Friends . . . was her first venture as an independent producer' (2007: 28). In her oeuvre more broadly, she has ensured that working-class voices provide 'a structure of feeling that projects networks of friendships and shared responsibilities' (ibid.: 29).

The representation of white, working-class and Northern women in the British sitcom has an extensive history, with Carla Lane and Victoria Wood, as well as Mellor, ensuring that regional femininities are made visible – from Liverpool to Manchester to Leeds. The 2000s, however, saw a polarity in representations of the white working- class, with a rise in TV series demonising the figure of the 'chav', a derogatory term referring to poor, white and socially marginalised groups. According to Sharon Lockyer (2010: 125), 'chavs' became a comedy target in popular discourses, with 'comedy chavs' including female characters such as teenage single-mother Vicky Pollard in Little Britain (BBC Three and BBC One, 2003–7) and teenage schoolgirl Lauren Cooper in The Catherine Tate Show (BBC Two and BBC One, 2004–15). At the same time, comedies such as Shameless (Channel 4, 2004–13) and The Royle Family (BBC Two and BBC One, 1998–2012) were combatting these representations by reimagining, challenging and repositioning the idea of the Mancunian working-class and growing underclass as a 'social problem'. Instead, scholars have argued that Shameless celebrates the comical chaos of this community (for example, Johnson 2013). Similarly, Beverley Skeggs has outlined how The Royle Family 'presents a sustained attack on middle-class pretensions' (2005: 975).

Class dynamics were under further scrutiny in the 2010s, with the modern working-class receiving renewed interest among researchers and journalists. In 2011, BBC One Controller Danny Cohen told his producers that BBC Comedy was becoming 'too middle-class' (Hilton and Ferguson 2011; Maxwell 2011), which is reflected in research from 2017 interrogating the class origins of British actors. Sam Friedman et al. found that just 16 per cent of actors came from working-class backgrounds. In comparison, 51 per cent had privileged backgrounds because of an 'unequal distribution of cultural, social and economic capital' (2017: 1006). Indeed, with this renewed interest in class politics, middle- and upper-class white women in/on BBC TV comedy have been criticised for their privileged backgrounds. For example, Phoebe Waller-Bridge's BAFTA- and Emmy-award-winning hit Fleabag (BBC Three and BBC One, 2016–19) was disparagingly referred to as being 'just for posh girls' in the Guardian, 20 April 2019, while Rosie White (2015: 119) has noted that Miranda Hart's Miranda (BBC Two and BBC One 2009–15) has come under public scrutiny for its '"middle class'' constituency' (2015: 119).

The increasing concern with televisual representations of class was noted in the BBC's Creative Diversity Report, which reveals that 'often those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are depicted negatively, fuelled by stereotypes and seen as the object of ridicule' (BBC 2020: 15). From audience research conducted at the BBC, 66 per cent agree that it is important that TV features content related to people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, 27 per cent that there is currently too little coverage of diverse socio-economic backgrounds on TV and 22 per cent that say current TV coverage is poor in respect of

diversity (ibid.: 15). The broadcaster has publicly acknowledged that there need to be changes in the company's workforce in order to reflect more accurately the society it serves. The first Mid-Term Review focusing on the BBC's governance and regulatory arrangements – launched at the halfway point of its ten-year Royal Charter – has placed further obligations on the broadcaster. 3 This includes setting a target for 25 per cent of staff to come from low socio-economic backgrounds and ensuring that 60 per cent of radio and 50 per cent of TV programme production spend is outside London by the end of 2027 (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2022). Whether these practices will be sustainable has yet to be determined. Still, the BBC Writersroom, which has been running for 20 years, has discovered, developed and championed new writing talent across the UK by running targeted Writers' Groups, creating talent initiatives via awards and bursaries and offering career/script advice to upcoming newcomers in the TV industry. While there are many issues surrounding diversity within the BBC, the BBC's Writersroom, which serves Manchester, Glasgow, Belfast, Wales and London, has undoubtedly diversified elements of its programming. For example, in 2020, Bradford-born Kat Rose-Martin won the Kay Mellor Fellowship, a collaboration between Leeds Playhouse, Kay Mellor and Rollem Productions to support a playwright in developing their writing. The same year, Rose-Martin was selected to be part of the BBC Writersroom Northern Voices, a group of writing talent who have the chance to deliver an original TV spec script with the support of an experienced script editor. As noted earlier, Sophie Willan's Alma's Not Normal was created under similar circumstances, after BBC Comedy Commissioning, in partnership with the Writersroom and BBC North, launched the Caroline Aherne bursary scheme at the Salford Sitcom Showcase in July 2017. Designed to find, develop and support outstanding new comedy talent, the bursary was named in honour of the late award-winning comedy writer and performer Caroline Aherne, who brought a rare and influential working-class voice to mainstream British television. Aherne was renowned for her BAFTA-winning series The Mrs Merton Show (BBC Two and BBC One, 1993–8) and The Royle Family – the latter arguably being her most well- known work. According to Phil Wickham, this is 'the programme that began the fundamental shift in how sitcoms looked, sounded, and felt' because Aherne decided to 'abandon the studio laugh track, high- key lighting and the traditional three-camera set-ups that helped to establish new conventions for the genre in Britain' (2017: 204). From winning the first Caroline Aherne award, Willan received £5,000 to support the development of her TV series. She received mentorship from BBC Comedy Commissioning Editor Kate Daughton to help her to develop a comedy script, following in the footsteps of Aherne by creating socially aware comedy on the BBC. Willan has publicly stated how important this award was for her career: 'It was a direct line to people who could make my ideas happen. Amid an elitist industry where working-class people are underrepresented and often misappropriated by middle-class careerists, this award was a beacon of hope for me' (quoted in Chortle 2020).

The script for Alma's Not Normal is based on Willan's award-winning 2017 Edinburgh Comedy Festival show Branded, which drew on her chaotic childhood. She was born and grew up in Bolton, spending her time in care because her mother suffered from drug addiction. She later worked as an escort, which she chronicled in her stand-up show and Alma's Not Normal. The first series unsentimentally explores various issues through its bleak yet bawdy humour, with Alma confronting the difficulties of her childhood in care, her abusive relationship with her ex-boyfriend and the impacts of the coalitions and Cameron governments' austerity policies on her mother's social care. In 2020, BBC Two commissioned the sitcom for a full series following the pilot's success, and over one million viewers watched Alma's Not Normal after it started trending on Twitter (BBC Media Centre 2020).

The importance of these social issues and the representation of white working-class women have also been more broadly discussed by the BBC's first Director of Creative Diversity, the former television presenter June Sarpong, who in October 2020 told Ofcom's Small Screen, Big Debate conference that the broadcaster had serious issues in terms of our connection with C2DE audiences and I think it's about getting the balance. As somebody who is an advocate for diversity, I'm always making sure I'm banging the drum for working class audiences because I come from a working class background, my parents were immigrants, we grew up in a white, working class community. (Quoted in the Telegraph, 5 October 2022)

Alma's Not Normal, however, invites such a connection through its use of space/place, characters and, most importantly, its comedy. As demonstrated through the work of Lane, Wood and Mellor, the comedy genre and the sitcom, more specifically, have had an enduring history in the BBC. According to Hilary P. Dannenberg:

The BBC's domination of television comedy is not only qualitative but quantitative . . . the established position of the sitcom as a cultural institution within British television consumer culture is evidenced by the plethora of websites on sitcom, by the BBC's own exhaustive online comedy guide, and the frequent articles in television magazines. The sitcom as produced by the BBC has thus played a significant role in the formation and reflection of British cultural consciousness, memory and identity. (2004: 170)

From the 1950s to the late 1980s, as Wickham argues, 'the situation comedy proved to be one of the richest sources of public discourse on class in British life. In a culture where class differences were clearly acknowledged, the absurdities, complexities and sometimes the iniquities of the class system were apparent' (2017: 201). However, while in 2004 Dannenberg outlined the dominance of BBC comedies in popular culture, for Wickham, the 'sitcom is no longer at the heart of the mass-audience schedules and has become a much more marginal genre within television' (ibid.).

Several sitcoms in the twenty-first century still investigate class. Wickham contends that they do so through unspoken signifiers and implicit references: 'Class and its effects are still there but in new, more subtle forms' (ibid.: 203). Using Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb's concept of class as a 'hidden injury' (1972), something which is felt but no longer acknowledged, Wickham points out that such 'injuries' can be seen throughout various contemporary sitcoms, specifically in working-class characters' responses to the condescending and dismissive attitudes of the middle classes; in the frustration of the educated working man, who is now often seen as xenophobic and anti- intellectual; and in the inherent sense of superiority of the middle classes, which forms a barrier to empathy for the working-class (2017: 203). In this way, the hidden injuries of class are closely connected to the tensions of class relations.

Yet, in Carl Rhodes and Robert Westwood's analysis of class structures in female-centred sitcoms – such as The Rag Trade (BBC1 and ITV, 1961–78), On the Buses (ITV, 1969–73), Absolutely Fabulous (BBC Two and BBC One, 1992–2012) and dinnerladies – they found that 'extant class structures remain unchallenged in any radical sense, and essentially the comedy supports the status quo – if only by default' (2008: 117). In essence, Rhodes and Westwood suggest that female series centred around class have never included a trenchant critique of workplace relations or capitalist exploitation. Instead, they argue that their 'analysis of a sample of British sitcoms across more than 50 years . . . reveals significant variation in gendered portrayals and a more nuanced treatment of gender politics than is typically supposed or than has been suggested' (ibid.: 116). Although class is often perceived as a contextual marker instead of a thematic one, I argue that in Alma's Not Normal, comedy acts as a vehicle for exploring intersecting axes of inequality, with the

politics of class and gender frequently overlapping. Class is not a hidden injury in Alma's Not Normal but is explicitly referred to and discussed within the text. For example, when in series 1 episode 5 Alma attends acting lessons, her coach Ian (played by fellow Boltonian comedian Dave Spikey) reviews the politics of the film/TV industry with his students, stating: 'Working-class people are in fashion now, we're like an exotic fruit, so juice that motherfucker kids. Juice it.' It is important to note how this recent acknowledgement of working- class voices has impacted Alma's Not Normal. Willan has explained that the series production team worked with Backup North West, a homeless charity that runs a paid training programme for youth from low-income and care-experienced backgrounds. The trainees worked full-time and for a living wage in specific departments across the programme, including production, art, costume, makeup, camera and location. Alongside writing her TV series and performing stand-up, Willan runs her own company, Stories of Care. In 2015 she secured funding of over £100,000 to create the multi-platform literary project, creating and curating short stories written by fellow care leavers (Film Hub North 2020). According to the Stories of Care website,4 Alma's Not Normal delivered an extensive open audition process to ensure that working-class actors from Bolton feature heavily in her series, and it stars one of the company members, Susie Hadaway, in her first television role. This speaks strongly to the importance of representation and hiring people from diverse backgrounds. It also showcases the real-life impact that open discussions of class have had on under-represented groups in society and those typically overlooked in/on television. Intra-textually and extra-textually, then, Alma's Not Normal exposes the wounds of class injuries. As I will demonstrate next, these are not hidden but on (the) show as Willan explicitly examines class via her comedic exploration of family, feminism, sex work and the North West as a space/place in her BBC sitcom.

Considering class dynamics in Alma's Not Normal

So far, this article has focused on historical representations of white working-class femininities in comedy and introduced the importance of Alma's Not Normal in continuing this lineage. The following section will examine via textual analysis how the series uses humour to engage with the contemporary politics of gender and class, thus demonstrating how it expresses the open wounds of class as opposed to keeping its injuries hidden. I will analyse three key scenes which focus on: the treatment of Alma's mother, Lin, by social workers; how Alma was taken out of numerous foster homes and taken in by her third-wave feminist grandma, Joan; and the ways in which Alma's engagement with sex work directly comments on gender and class in the North. Throughout the first series of Alma's Not Normal, numerous issues are explored concerning class: substance abuse, sex work, disability, inequality, mental health, social care, grief and homelessness. Alma is the show's protagonist and her voiceover narration is used as an authoritative restructuring and dismantling of the British government's current policies by representing the personal effects this has had on her family. According to Julia Leyda, 'a number of popular sitcoms . . . adopted attributes of nonfiction television' (2016: 166), and Alma's Not Normal is no exception, using voiceover narration, archival footage, photographs and re-enactments throughout. During a scene in series 1, episode 4 in which Alma talks to a doctor about Lin's treatment, she narrates the history of her mother's health: It all went wrong for Mum when the Government brought in the point- scoring system for disability. She was assessed on whether she was fit for work, not by a doctor, but by this bloke. After mum failed her disability assessment, she found other income streams. Then mum's nurse visits got cut, they closed the local clinics, so she had to get two buses for her anti-psychotic injection. The bus isn't fun at the best of times, never mind when you're adamantly convinced you're trapped in an

oven at the other side of the universe. So, she took her medicinal needs into her own hands again.

Stock photos are interspersed throughout this monologue, including images of Universal Credit documents and smiling doctors, plus clips of Alma's mum (with no teeth) working as a sex worker on a street corner. The series thus establishes its larger, more social objectives by using techniques familiar from the documentary genre – in this instance, stock photos and offscreen voiceover. Alma's Not Normal is not exactly subtle in its takedown of the Conservative government's policies and politics, with an image of the former Conservative prime minister David Cameron inserted into the montage's opening. The deep and swift cuts made in social provision are at the heart of the series, and Willan notes that the 'Cameron era felt really negative for welfare recipients, mental health and social services recipients – people like my mother, people who've had difficulties' (quoted in Saner 2021). This montage reflects the material poverty of women and the social conditions of the present moment – with a frank discussion of how these have affected Alma's mother, Lin. Wickham notes that workplace sitcoms frequently display a lack of empathy with the hidden injuries of class because the middle class typically regards the working-classes with disdain. For instance, Jo Brand's Getting On (BBC Four, 2009–12) is set in a geriatric ward of an NHS hospital where nurses Kim (Jo Brand) and Den (Joanna Scanlan) are engaged in a contentious relationship with consultant Dr Pippa Moore (Vicki Pepperdine) (2017: 211). However, the doctor in Alma's Not Normal displays empathy when he reasons with Alma and her mum: 'Lin, can I level with you? Over 5,000 people are homeless in Greater Manchester. Over 80,000 are still waiting for social housing. We're living in a boom and crisis paradox.' Lin's doctor acknowledges the difficulties in navigating a broken system and the unfortunate position she is in, overtly discussing and revealing the complexities of the North West's current system of care. He does not avert Lin's gaze, nor does he ignore her, but instead regards her with empathetic concern. Here, Alma's Not Normal does not concern itself with individual differences in class. Instead, it targets institutional structures. Although this scene may not initially appear humorous, Willan's voiceover – her bold voice, matter-of-fact storytelling, and distinctly Northern accent – shifts the series' tone. She narrates her own life, demonstrating a degree of power and control not typically afforded to working-class women in the North, particularly those from a care background. Willan's voice and the rapid cutting of the images create a light-hearted, intimate and authentic tone. This is enhanced by the inter-textuality at play here. Before making Alma's Not Normal, Willan was arguably most famous for her voiceover work on Channel 4's reality TV game show The Circle (2018–21), where players compete for popularity and money through a social media platform. According to an article in the Mirror, 19 September 2018, Willan is 'The Circle's voiceover star with tragic childhood and escort past', and the reality show has 'been lit up by her northern tones, quick-wit and razor- sharp reactions'. Significantly, Caroline Aherne was also praised for her voiceover work on the reality TV series Gogglebox (Channel 4, 2013–). If, as Brett Mills argues, the comedy performer is remembered for their stress on the 'rhythms of language' (2010: 131), then both Willan and Aherne demonstrate how this has been placed firmly in the realm of the working-classes, thereby providing their vocalisations with particular power in popular British culture.

Voiceovers and fast-paced montages are also used elsewhere in the series and provide other forms of social criticism. In series 1, episode 2, Alma, like her mother, turns to sex work. Although Ruth Cain argues that 'claims of intergenerational transmission of poverty connected with female-headed families are made repeatedly in welfare reform policy discussions' despite a dearth of evidence suggesting otherwise (2016: 494–5), for Alma, there is a strong female/feminine/feminist lineage that stems from her grandmother Joan's sexually emancipated third-wave feminist outlook. For R. Claire Snyder-Hall, 'third-wave feminism respects the right of women to decide for themselves how to negotiate the often contradictory desires for both gender equality and sexual pleasure' (2010: 255), and Joan, in

particular, embodies this through her fascination with the dating app Tinder. In the first episode of the first series, we discover that after divorcing her husband and 'throwing away the iron', Joan went to university and discovered feminism before Alma left foster care and moved in with her. As Alma states in another offscreen voiceover, she sees feminism 'in a very 90s way; she said the words cock and patriarchy a lot . . . The first thing she said to me when I arrived was: "Don't waste your life ironing a man's clothes, Alma, his creases will drop out, but your wrinkles won't''. I was eight.' Alma's point-of-view helps to establish the audience's identification with her eight-year-old self, as a younger actor playing her (Maizie Wickson) stares confusedly at Joan's copy of Alex Comfort's book The Joy of Sex, a tray of pink glasses paired with a bottle of Amaretto and a table proudly displaying an erect wooden penis.

Again, Alma's humorous voiceover and the show's point-of-view shots challenge the traditional authority of the masculine gaze and voiceover in screen media, highlighting how she has been surrounded by her grandmother's ostentatious brand of third-wave feminism. This personal mode of address between the audience and Alma from different ages and stages in her life provides a level of legitimacy, subjectivity and psychological depth. The reflection on female experiences here is significant because it is also inter- generational, with Alma offering her opinion on third-wave feminist ideals. She acknowledges that Joan's activism is partly outdated since it is 'very 90s', yet her grandmother's form of sexual freedom and power has clearly influenced Alma's own outlook. Sex work has become one among many generational expressions of third-wave feminism that has extended into the twenty-first century (Baumgardner 2011). Indeed, in the series, sex work has a significant relationship with class, which can be seen in Alma's and Lin's experiences in this line of business. While it could be suggested that the gendered and generational impacts of austerity have perpetuated a culture of poverty for Alma, she does not frame her sex work in these terms.

A scene in series 1 episode 4 encapsulates how Alma sees sex work as a form of autonomy. Although she lives and works in Bolton (her hometown) during most of the series, her clients are predominantly from Manchester. As she walks the streets of Manchester city centre, her vibrant and colourful pink coat contrasts with the grey and drab homeless people sitting outside flashy apartments. Despite these differences, her visual excess is coded as working-class (Skeggs 2005). Alma enters one of these apartments belonging to her new client – a man looking out at the shiny high-rises and cranes that pepper Manchester's skyline. 'What do you do then?' Alma asks him with disdain. He turns around, replying: 'Property developer. I built this place and those two over there. It's going to be gorgeous when I'm done. It'll be just like London. Just need to get rid of that cluster of druggies and the homeless.' This small talk ends when Alma's client makes his sexual request, begging Alma to treat him like a 'naughty little boy' as though she is his 'mummy'. Bending over a table in his expensive flat, Alma's client waits for her to spank him. She soon adopts the role, indeed a little too well, as each slap becomes increasingly aggressive, and she shouts at him for 'building all the fancy flats for the millionaires' so there is 'no social housing for any other fucker'. He tearfully apologises as she cries, 'naughty boy; naughty, naughty boy!' The scene then quickly cuts to Alma outside the flat, where, with a triumphant grin, she gives the money she's just earned to the homeless man outside and says: 'Here you go, mate. I've just spanked an adult man for that money. Enjoy.' The swift transition from Alma spanking her client to handing over her money via a smash cut – an abrupt cut from one scene to another without a transition – is a form of visual comedy here. The intensity and volume of Alma's slap compared to the quiet click of her heels as she leaves the apartment is an aural cue that points to both the absurdity of the situation in which Alma has found herself and the return to 'normality' on the streets. However, it is the sexual act itself that functions as the primary site of comedy.

While sexual activity can serve as both a site of exploitation/victi- misation and a site of agency, here Willan uses the slippery relationship between sex and power – of kinks, fetishes and BDSM – to comment on the housing crisis in Manchester. Both are stereotypically linked to masculine control, with 'the affordable homes shortages and high numbers of people in temporary accommodation' in Manchester being linked to male property owners and male-dominated networks of power (Griffiths 2021). The increasing unaffordability of property in Manchester was chronicled in the two-part documentary series Manctopia: Billion Pound Property Boom (BBC Two, 2020) which set up a dichotomy between the working-class people of Manchester battling to preserve their communities from being displaced and property developer Tim Heatley's attempt to create upscale and glossy constructions across the city centre. This power dynamic, however, is questioned in Alma's Not Normal in two ways.

First, the series comically dramatises, thus making visible, the debate around power relations and sex stereotypes. Through the visual positioning of Alma and her client, as well as the dominance displayed in Alma's sexual activity, we see her acting out what Natalie Davis calls 'the woman on top'. As Davis argues, the female sex was perceived as disorderly in early modern Europe, but the woman on top overturned the gender hierarchy by voicing social criticism and subverting the presumed 'natural' inferiority of women through comedy and carnival (1978). This has continued into the twenty-first century, with Alma both literally and figuratively being a woman on top, displaying control over her client and disrupting patriarchal social structures through her gender and class in a comedically excessive way. According to Brett Mills, 'much comedy draws on the physical, whether it be a joke about sexual behaviour, the pain of slapstick or laughter at fat people, even if 'civilised' societies condemn such humour' (2010: 133). This sitcom draws on sex as a locus of humour via Alma's expansive bodily gestures and the labour of women's work, both in terms of Willan as a comedy performer and Alma as a sex worker.

Second, the class differences between Alma and the property developer subvert power dynamics in the series. By drawing attention to and explicitly commenting on the housing crisis in Manchester, the hidden injuries of class are no longer hidden but out in the open. Indeed, the injuries are quite literally directed at the property developer by Alma's slaps. Although the power dynamics between Alma and her client are complicated by the latter's desire to be submissive and the exchange of money, the show nevertheless highlights Alma's view that money is power. As she states in series 1 episode 3 when discussing the politics of sex work with her friend Leanne (played by comedian Jayde Adams): Why do people always psychoanalyse sex workers and question how empowered they are? Do you know we don't do it to anybody else in any other profession? You don't go into a telesales office, do you, and go, 'Oooh, Sue's on the phones. Is she empowered, or is she just loudly selling carpets 'cos she's a middle child?' I tell you what, money is empowering, Leanne. Money.

Alma is thinking practically about money and its transformative powers here, which is reflected in the feelings of other sex workers in the UK and elsewhere. Jo Weldon, for instance, recounts her experiences with researchers during her twenty years of working as an erotic dancer and wonders why no one has asked her about her financial mindset rather than pressing her for details of childhood trauma or sexual abuse. In her view, 'the reason questions about money are so rarely asked is that people continue to think only about the sex involved, and not about the labour' (2010: 148). Alma's Not Normal, however, considers Alma's labour and her experiences within the sex industry. If, as Hilary Kinnell suggests, 'understanding sex work as a form of labour helps to promote rights and protections for sex workers' in Britain (2008: xiii), then Alma brings this issue to the fore by questioning the

stigma attached to sex work, particularly in the case of women from underprivileged backgrounds.

As this analysis of Alma's Not Normal has demonstrated, working- class women are creating socially conscious comedic texts that are aesthetically, thematically and stylistically innovative in the contemporary British mediascape. By examining how Willan depicts issues around class and gender in pursuit of her social and political objectives, I have outlined how the series differs from other BBC TV comedies. Her sitcom contains frank, candid and open discussions of the effects of austerity measures in neoliberal Britain and in the North more specifically. This article has also demonstrated that it is essential to investigate how women in comedy – particularly women like Willan, who are overlooked in the genre – contribute to readings of region, identity and womanhood in much the same manner as David Forrest and Beth Johnson's analysis of Northern star Lesley Sharp (2016). And as a contribution to canon formation, this article also helps to ensure that Willan's work is preserved for posterity.

Conceptualising working-class women in British TV comedy Although I have argued that Alma's Not Normal is explicit in its class politics, working-class comedies by women remain under-theorised and under-examined in scholarly works. One issue that discourages Alma's Not Normal and other comedies by working-class women from being analysed is homogenisation. Often, and particularly in the contemporary climate, comparisons are made between shows that fall under the broad category of 'women in comedy'. For instance, in the Guardian, 7 April 2020, Lucy Mangan likened Alma's Not Normal to Daisy Haggard and Laura Solon's Back to Life (BBC Three and BBC One, 2019–) and Aisling Bea's This Way Up (Channel 4, 2019–). As she put it:

In line with the journalistic law that three of anything constitutes an official trend, I can now delightedly pronounce the birth of a new one – single-authored-by-a-female-comedian-dramas-that-capture- the-messy-imperfections-of-life-and-in-particular-the-ramifications-on-mental-health-of-previous-often-childhood-experience-and-are- brilliant-at-entwining-grief-and-laughter-and-folding-microscopic- detail-in-with-macroscopic-coverage-of-this-crazy-thing-we-call-life. Here, Mangan is comparing Alma's Not Normal with other comedies created by women because of their thematic similarities. Back to Life follows Mira Matteson (played by Haggard herself), a woman who has returned to her home in Kent after spending eighteen years in prison for a crime she did not commit in her teens. However, this is set in a sleepy Southern seaside town whose middle-class residents are central to the series, thus marking it out as very different from Alma's Not Normal, with its chaotic working-class residents of Bolton. Moreover, the 'messy-imperfections-of-life' evident in Alma's Not Normal and Back to Life are by no means exclusive to UK television comedy and have been documented by scholars examining the effects of postfeminism and middle-class precarity on women in comedy – predominantly in a US context. Meg Tully, for instance, defines 'trainwreck feminism' as the condition of women who 'adopt the trope of the trainwreck – excessive in need, sex and madness – to demonstrate the disastrous consequences of growing up in postfeminist culture' (2018: vii). She cites American comedies The Mindy Project (Fox and Hulu, 2012–17), Broad City (Comedy Central, 2014–19) and Inside Amy Schumer (Comedy Central and Paramount+, 2013–) as examples of this shift. Similarly, Rebecca Wanzo has coined the term 'precarious girl-comedies' to outline how women in sitcoms are 'experiencing a prolonged girlhood produced not only by the greater economic insecurity that middle-class women have been facing post-Great Recession but also by a variety of social factors that generate feelings of immobilization and isolation' (2016: 28–9). Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerway develop Wanzo's analysis and argue that these 'precarious-girls' typically star in 'Horrible White People' (HWP) shows which were created between 2014 and 2016 – comedies or satires that feature explicitly liberal, well-off,

young/youthful white women and the men they are related to or in relationships with. TV series that feature HWP include Fleabag, Difficult People (Hulu, 2015–17), Divorce (HBO, 2016–19), Girls (HBO, 2012–17), Lady Dynamite (Netflix, 2016–17) and Catastrophe (Channel 4, 2015–19). Most of these comedies form the emergent genre of 'prestige dramedy', a genre which offers a critical celebration of their female protagonist(s) by altering gendered and masculine ideas of 'quality' television (Havas and Sulimma 2020). This shift into a 'quality' discourse has, for Nygaard and Lagerwey, also shifted the series' characters 'firmly into the middle and upper- middle classes', which is seen as 'a departure from British sitcoms' often working-class norms and aligns the British-produced programs . . . with US sitcom's middle-class norms' (2020: 60). However, this refers only to British TV series that have been televised in North America or worldwide. Catastrophe, for instance, is inherently transatlantic, written by and starring Irish and American comedians (Sharon Horgan and Rob Delaney). Originally airing on Channel 4, the series was made available on Amazon Prime Video shortly after it was broadcast. Similarly, Fleabag aired on BBC Three on 21 July 2016, was picked up by Amazon, and premiered in the United States only two months later. It is rare for working-class comedies to be given the same streaming opportunities.

Nygaard and Lagerway rectify this concentration on HWP by including an important section on 'Diverse Quality Comedies' (DQC) in their book. For them, DQCs are 'critically acclaimed, aesthetically innovative, niche market comedies with a grim outlook on the political, social, and economic world in which their characters live . . . They are often linked with an auteur and target relatively affluent, educated, and socially liberal viewers' (ibid.: 158). These series share the same characteristics as HWP shows, but without white people and with less emphasis on central female characters, as seen in series such as Insecure (HBO, 2016–21), Chewing Gum (E4, 2015–17), Master of None (Netflix, 2015–21) and Atlanta (FX, 2016–22). Nygaard and Lagerway's focus on DQCs centres predominantly around the politics of race in that these series are 'generically and aesthetically similar to HWP shows but are created by and star men and women of color' (ibid.: 9). However, Alma's Not Normal straddles these two modes of comedy. It can be perceived as an HWP show because it features primarily white actors, with creator/writer Sophie Willan starring as her fictionalised self in a comedy that is equal parts bleak and warm. More specifically, she is a complicated female protagonist who showcases changing norms around sex, gender and relationships (ibid.: 4). However, Nygaard and Lagerway argue that HWP shows are typically obsessed with white anxiety/suffering and white precarity, thus contributing to white structural supremacy on television. By contrast, they suggest that DQCs 'confront and challenge and make visible structural White supremacy, as well as a wide range of racialized injustices' (ibid.: 156). As Alexandra Beedon and Joost de Bruin (2010: 7–8) have pointed out, this concern with race in American comedy has been evident since the 1950s. It remains evident in contemporary comedy, which they relate to the country's history of both slavery and civil rights. By contrast, 'the British class system is an integral and fundamental aspect of the country's psyche and is a theme that has been greatly explored by the sitcom' (ibid.: 7). Alma's Not Normal is not concerned with racial politics. Instead, it makes working-class politics hyper-visible in an era of unrest. The 'diversity' of Alma's Not Normal thus displaces race in favour of other concerns that have historically been evident in British TV comedy.

Throughout the 2010s, there have been other series created, written by and starring working-class white women, including This Country (BBC Three, 2017–20), Mandy (BBC Two, 2019–), Hullraisers (Channel 4, 2022–), Raised by Wolves (Channel 4, 2013–16), Some Girls (BBC Three, 2012–14), In My Skin (BBC Three, 2018–21), Walking and Talking (Sky Atlantic, 2012) and Derry Girls (Channel 4, 2018–22). These series focus on gender, class and community, succeeding their working-class ancestors Fat Friends, dinnerladies, The Liver Birds and The Royle Family. Like Alma's Not Normal, they also have distinct

political undertones. Therefore, in considering where sitcoms such as Alma's Not Normal fit into contemporary scholarship on women in comedy, the transnational relationship between the UK and US should not be regarded as centrally significant in situating it within the British broadcasting system. We must understand how nationalised broadcasting systems have affected white working-class femininities onscreen rather than conflating American and British series, mainly because Alma's Not Normal straddles an in-between space. It can be seen as a popular and regional class-based sitcom in its similarities with comedies originating from the North (such as dinnerladies), but it can also be likened to contemporary female-authored and female-centred 'quality' series such as Fleabag. Generically, Alma's Not Normal combines working-class and middle-class tastes and values. According to Willan, both forms of comedy television have influenced her work. Her grandmother introduced her to working- class women from the North/Midlands, such as Wood and Walters, whom she describes as 'people that were coming from my kind of world, which was really great' (quoted in Saner 2021). Contemporary comedy writers have also influenced Willan: she cites Waller-Bridge's Fleabag as one of her 'favourite sitcoms of all time', although she also suggests that there needs to be variety in British programming: It's about time we saw strong, funny, dark, female-lead stories outside of London and/or the middle/upper class. I'm not saying those shows don't have a place too – they do. In fact, Fleabag is one of my favourite sitcoms of all time, but we need variety. We need to represent more people . . . the conversations around feminism feel dominated by the voices of white, middle-class women, who set the ideals for all of us based on their own experience and what's been made possible for them. I want to explore feminist issues without judgement or even final, decisive points. I want to ask questions and tell stories through people like Alma. People like me. People who don't often get asked their perspective on these issues. (Quoted in Chortle 2020)

Working-class sitcoms such as Alma's Not Normal use tropes of the genre to explore dark and/or serious topics evident in middle- class/upper-class comedies. In this manner, Willan directly comments on contemporary socio-political issues in Britain. The combination of tastes and values in her series has been given cultural credence in the British television landscape, with Willan winning the comedy writing prize at the BAFTA Craft Awards in 2021 for her pilot, beating competition from Charlie Brooker for Charlie Brooker's Antiviral Wipe (BBC Two, 2020), Daisy May and Charlie Cooper for This Country and the writing team for Ghosts (BBC One, 2019–). Although working- class comedies created by women are seldom (if ever) translated to America in the manner of their middle-class counterparts, in Britain, working-class programmes have continued to capture the imagination of comedy writers – and women comedy writers especially.

Conclusion

Like other female-created and female-fronted TV series in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Alma's Not Normal centres on imperfect women who are openly struggling with the demands of gendered neoliberalism, yet they are from a distinctly working-class background that is typically overlooked in contemporary comedy. As textual analysis of Alma's Not Normal has shown, the injuries of class are not hidden in sitcoms but central and explicit – with the series commenting on a plethora of social issues. This article has thus provided a starting point for analysing white, working-class and Northern femininities in British television comedy. Indeed, in 2021, BBC Three comedy series boasted 58 per cent female representation for long-form scripted comedy writing, the first channel in the UK to achieve this (BBC Media Centre 2021). With an increase in comedy starring, written or

created by women, further studies should engage with working-class women whose series are situated both on the BBC and in the broader televisual landscape, from Bernadette Davis's Some Girls to Kayleigh Llewellyn's In My Skin (BBC Three, 2018–).

More broadly, the lives and voices of working-class women need to be represented both onscreen and offscreen because, although BBC TV comedy has improved its female representation, the broadcaster tends still to reproduce stereotypical classed and gendered notions of humour in the twenty-first century. As Chris Arning argues, comedy on the BBC tends to be underpinned by the styles of People Just Do Nothing (BBC Three and BBC Two, 2014–18), The Young Offenders (RTÉ One, RTÉ2, BBC Three, 2018–) and The Other One (BBC One, 2017–20), series that he suggests tend to be 'predicated on a sort of working-class "chav minstrelsy'' which . . . can appear demeaning to the British White working class' (2021: 293). Alma's Not Normal showcases a shift in contemporary televisual politics by moving away from such representations, and Willan's series demonstrates the significant progress that has been made since the 1960s. Carla Lane, Kay Mellor, Caroline Aherne and Victoria Wood have all contributed to this shift, paving the way for working-class women's opportunities on TV today. Furthermore, Nygaard and Lagerway's (2020) conceptualisation of HWP in comedy has expanded essential discussions of the genre regarding gender and race, both in America and in transnational TV series such as Catastrophe and Fleabag. However, as I have argued, it is equally important to consider critically acclaimed and popular depictions of class, specifically in Britain. By contemplating the politics of class in TV series that focus on white femininities, I have suggested the necessity of understanding the relationship between identity, power and inequality in the contemporary televisual landscape, specifically through reconsidering what we consider to be working- class and middle-class tastes. Overall, for all that the Mail likes to contend that Alma's Not Normal is a 'BBC comedy that normalises prostitution and drug use', the sitcom demonstrates how, although Alma may be excessive, bold and 'not normal', it depicts the reality of many working-class women's lives across Britain, particularly in the North.

Notes

In this article, BBC2 has been used in the case of programmes broadcast up until October 1997 and BBC Two for programmes broadcast after that date. The same convention has been followed in the case of BBC One/BBC1. In the case of programme series that fall both sides of the divide I have used BBC One and BBC Two.

This can be located at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/documents/almas-not- normal-s1-ep1-pilot-script-sophie-willan.pdf>.

For more information on the Royal Charter, focusing on governance and regulatory arrangements, see <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/charter>.

This can be accessed at <https://storiesofcare.co.uk/>.

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