

## “Is This What You Mean by Color TV?”

*Race, Gender, and  
Contested Meanings in NBC's Julia*

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America in 1968: Police clash with the militant Black Panthers while one of the group's leaders, Huey Newton, is sentenced for murder; civil rights leader Martin Luther King is assassinated in Tennessee, sparking violent uprisings and riots in the nation's black ghettos; the massive Poor People's Campaign, a mobilization of indigent blacks and whites, sets up a tent city on the Mall in Washington, DC; at Cornell University, armed black students sporting bandoliers take over the administration building and demand a black studies program.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of all these events—events that many Americans saw as a revolutionary or at least an insurrectionary situation among the black population—NBC introduced the first situation comedy to feature an African-American in the starring role since *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah* went off the air in the early 1950s.<sup>2</sup> *Julia*, created by writer-producer Hal Kanter, a Hollywood liberal Democrat who campaigned actively for Eugene McCarthy, starred Diahann Carroll as a middle-class, widowed nurse trying to bring up her six-year-old-son, Corey. After the death of her husband in a helicopter crash in Vietnam, Julia and Corey move to an integrated apartment complex, and she finds work in an aerospace industry clinic.

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NBC executives did not expect the show to succeed.<sup>3</sup> They scheduled it opposite the hugely successful *Red Skelton Show* where it was expected to die a noble, dignified death, having demonstrated the network's desire to break the prime-time color bar. Unexpectedly, the show garnered high ratings and lasted a respectable three years.

Despite its success, or perhaps because of it, *Julia* was a very controversial program. Beginning in popular magazine articles written before the first episode even aired and continuing more recently in historical surveys of the portrayals of blacks on American television, critics have castigated *Julia* for being extraordinarily out of touch with and silent on the realities of African-American life in the late 1960s. While large numbers of blacks lived in exploding ghettos, *Julia* and Corey Baker lived a luxury lifestyle impossible on a nurse's salary. While hostility and racial tensions brewed, and the Kerner Commission Report on Civil Disorders described an America fast becoming two nations separate and unequal, tolerance and colorblindness prevailed on *Julia*.

The show came in for heavy criticism most recently in J. Fred MacDonald's (1983) *Blacks and White TV: Afro-Americans in Television Since 1948*. MacDonald describes *Julia* as a "comfortable image of black success . . . in stark juxtaposition to the images seen on local and national newscasts."<sup>4</sup> The show, according to MacDonald, refused to be topical; when dealing with racial issues at all, it did so only in oneliners. He also describes black and white discomfort with the show, claiming that the series was a sell-out intended to assuage white consciences and a "saccharine projection of the 'good life' to be achieved by those blacks who did not riot, who acted properly, and worked within the system."<sup>5</sup>

MacDonald's text-based criticism of *Julia* would appear to be quite justified. However, there was a whole range of politically charged meanings attributed to the program during its network run that critics like MacDonald haven't discussed. What critics of the program have ignored are the diverse and often conflicted ways in which both the producers and viewers of *Julia* struggled to make sense of the show in the context of the racial unrest and rebellions erupting throughout American society. Historically situated in a period of civil dislocations when massive numbers of black Americans were attempting, both peacefully and not so peacefully, to redefine their place within the socio-political landscape, *Julia* functioned as a symptomatic text—symptomatic of the racial tensions and reconfigurations of its time.

The extent to which *Julia* functioned as a site of social tension is particularly evident in the viewer response mail and script revisions in the files of producer Hal Kanter, and it is also apparent in critical articles written for the popular press at the time.<sup>6</sup> These documents allow us to begin to reconstruct the contentious dialogue that took place among audiences, magazine critics, and the show's producer and writers. They also provide clues to how such conflicts materialized in the program narrative itself. A key feature of this dialogue was a discursive struggle over what it meant to be black and what it meant to be white at the close of the 1960s. Black viewers, white viewers, and critics all made sense of the program in notably different ways. . . .

. . . The viewer mail (some 151 letters and postcards) filed in the Hal Kanter papers provides a particularly rich case study of how *Julia's* audiences attempted to make sense of the program and how they grappled with racial difference and social change through their engagement with the show. At times, the statements in the letters echo those in the popular press; more frequently, both the reading strategies and the debates are different. Many of the letters have carbon copy responses from Kanter attached, setting up a fascinating, often contentious dialogue. But what is most compelling about the letters is the way they reveal the remarkably conflicted, diverse, and contradictory responses among audience members.

These letters, the majority of which came from married women, should not be seen as representative of the larger audience's responses to the program.<sup>7</sup> Letter writers tend to be a particularly motivated group of television viewers. There is no way to determine whether the sentiments that crop up over and over again in the letters were widespread among viewers who did not write to the producers. Thus my analysis of these letters is not an attempt to quantify the *Julia* audience or to use the documents as a representative sample. While neither the letter writers nor the critics in the popular press were representative of the audience as a whole, their readings were symptomatic of struggles over racial definition. . . .

One trend that became evident almost immediately among the favorable letters written by white viewers was a marked self-consciousness about racial self-identification: "I am white, but I enjoy watching 'Julia.'"<sup>8</sup> "Our whole family from great grandmother down to my five year old, loved it. We just happen to be Caucasian." "As a 'white middle class Jewish' teacher, may I say that it is finally a pleasure to turn on the T.V. and see contemporary issues treated with honesty, humor, and sensitivity."<sup>9</sup>

One way in which to account for the self-consciousness of many letter writers identifying themselves as whites was that the novelty of a black-centered program raised questions about traditional and previously unexamined definitions of racial identity and difference. One mother of two boys in Ohio struggled with this very issue in her letter:

Being a white person I hope this program helps all of us to understand each other. Maybe if my children watch this program they will also see the good side of Negro people [rather] than all the bad side they see on the news programs such as riots, sit-ins, etc. I know this program will help my two sons so when they grow up they won't be so prejudice[sic].

While the woman made some problematic distinctions between good black people and bad black people, there was an attempt to grapple with racial difference. Definitions of what it meant to be white had suddenly become an uncertain terrain. The crisis in race relations signified by "riots, sit-ins, etc." made the black population visible, and the depiction of African-Americans had ceased to be a stable field. As representations of black people had become an arena of contested meanings, so too had self-representations of

whites become uncertain. One manifestation of that uncertainty was self-consciousness. In the aftermath of the civil rights movement and in the midst of black power sentiment, the question of what it now meant to be white in America was an issue that needed working through.

Another way to think about race was, perhaps, paradoxically, to deny difference. A letter from a rather idealistic fifteen-year-old girl in Annandale, Virginia, affirmed, "Your new series has told me that at least SOME people have an idea of a peaceful and loving existence. So what if their skin pigmentation is different and their philosophies are a bit different than ours *they are still people.*" Another woman from Manhattan Beach, California, who described her race as Caucasian and her ancestry as Mexican, wrote, "I love the show. Keep up the good work. This way the world will realize that the Negro is just like everyone else, with feelings and habits as the Whites have." A mother of twins in Highland Park, New Jersey, observed, "And it's immensely valuable to the many non-Negroes who just don't know any Negroes, or don't know that all people mostly behave like people."

Perhaps these viewers engaged in a denial of the "otherness" of black people in an attempt to reduce white anxiety about racial difference. By affirming that blacks were "just people" and just like everyone else, these viewers defined "everyone else" as white. White was the norm from which the Other deviated. In their sincere attempts to negotiate changing representations of race, these viewers denied that blacks historically had not fit the constructed norm of the white middle-class social formation. In this move, the viewers were, of course, assisted by the program itself. The show's theme music was a generic sit-com jingle lacking any nod to the rich traditions of African-American musical forms. Julia's apartment, while nicely appointed, and with a framed photo of her dead hero husband prominently displayed, was also completely generic. Unlike a comparable but more recent black family sit-com, *The Cosby Show*, with its lavish townhouse decorated with African-American artworks, Julia's home contained no culturally specific touches. Diahann Carroll's speech was also completely uninflected, on the one hand differentiating her from her prime-time predecessors such as *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah*, but on the other hand evacuating as much ethnic and cultural difference as possible. For viewers picking up on the interpretive clues provided by the show, black people were "just people" to the extent that they conformed to an unexamined white norm of representation.

While this denial of difference may have been typical, it was by no means the dominant interpretive strategy employed by viewers who wrote letters. In fact, many viewers were clearly struggling with the problem of representation, both of blacks and of whites. The criticism leveled by many viewers—that the show was unrealistic and was not "telling it like it is"—reveals a struggle over how reality should be defined.

The refrain "tell it like it is" became a recurring theme in debates about *Julia*, both in the popular press and among the viewer letters. In a rather scathing review, *Time* magazine criticized the show for not portraying how black people really lived: "She [Julia] would not recognize a ghetto if she stumbled into it, and she is, in every respect save color, a figure in a white

milieu."<sup>10</sup> Robert Lewis Shayon, the TV-radio critic for *Saturday Review*, was also particularly concerned with *Julia*'s deficiencies in representing this notion of a black reality. In the first of three articles on the series, he, like the *Time* reviewer, castigated the program for turning a blind eye to the realities of black life in the ghettos. For Shayon, the reality of the black experience was what was documented in the Kerner Commission report: "Negro youth, 'hustling in the jungle' of their 'crime-ridden, violence-prone, and poverty-stricken world'—that's the real problem, according to the commission report."<sup>11</sup> The world of *Julia*, on the other hand, was a fantasy because it did not focus on the problems of black youth (which for Shayon meant young black males) and because it did not take place in a ghetto environment. The unconsciously racist notion that the black experience was essentially a ghetto experience remained unexamined in these popular press accounts. . . .

Unlike the critics, viewers generally did not want to relocate *Julia* and Corey to a ghetto. Instead, viewers who criticized the show for not "telling it like it is" were more concerned with the presentation of black characters than they were with the upscale setting. A male viewer in Chicago wrote:

On another point which bears remarks is the unwillingness to allow the program to be "black." I do not object to white people being in the cast. What I do object to is selecting the black cast from people (black people) who are so white oriented that everyone has a white mentality, that is, their expressions are all that of white people. Choose some people whose expressions and manners are unquestionably black. The baby-sitter was, for example, so white cultured that you would have thought she was caucasian except for the color of her skin.

Hal Kanter's reply to this letter indicated how contested this issue was: "We all make mistakes, don't we, Mr. Banks? Please try to forgive me for mine in the spirit of universality and brotherhood we are attempting to foster." . . .

Other viewers, also uncomfortable with the unrealistic quality of the program, pointed out more problems in the representation of blacks. A woman in Berkeley, California, observed:

Your show is in a position to dispell [sic] so many misconceptions about Black people & their relationships to whites. I am just one of many who are so very disappointed in the outcome of such a promising show.

Please, help to destroy the misconceptions—not reinforce them! Stop making Miss Carroll super-Negro and stop having blacks call themselves "colored" and make your characters less self-conscious and tell that "babysitter" to quit overacting.

This concern with representing blacks as "Super Negro" was also voiced in the popular press. In a *TV Guide* article in December 1968, Diahann Carroll was quoted as saying:

With black people right now, we are all terribly bigger than life and more wonderful than life and smarter and better—because we're still proving. . . . For a hundred years we have been prevented from seeing accurate images of ourselves and we're all overconcerned and overreacting. The needs of the white writer go to the superhuman being. At the moment, we're presenting the white Negro. And he has very little Negro-ness.<sup>12</sup> . . .

This problem of racial definition was raised by other viewers who objected to blacks being differentiated and defined at the expense of white characters. Many viewers, particularly white housewives, took exception to the juxtaposing of Julia to her white neighbor, Mrs. Waggedorn. One mother of a four-year-old in Philadelphia said she would not watch the program anymore "as I believe you are portraying [*sic*] the white mother to be some kind of stupid idiot.—The colored boy & mother are sharp as tacks which is fine but why must the other family be portrayed as being dumb, dumb, dumb." Another "white suburban mother of four" in Fort Worthington, Pennsylvania, complained that Mrs. Waggedorn was a "dumb bunny" while Julia was a "candidate for 'Mother of the Year.'" A third letter from a "quite typical New England housewife and mother of three" in Hyde Park, Massachusetts, stated:

If Diahann Carroll were to play the roll [*sic*] of the neighborly housewife, and vice verser [*sic*], the black people of this country would be screaming "Prejudice." Why must Julia be pictured so glamorously dressed, living in such a luxurious apartment, dining off of the finest china while her white neighbor is made to appear sloppy, has rollers in her hair. . . .

If your show is to improve the image of the negro woman, great! But—please don't accomplish this at the expense of the white housewife.

The reading strategy these viewers brought to the text was one of polarization. They saw a form of reverse discrimination. Explicit in their letters was an anxiety over the representation of race, black versus white. Implicit, however, was a nascent critique of the representation of gender. All three of these letter writers self-consciously defined themselves by occupation: white housewives and mothers. In the depiction of Mrs. Waggedorn, they saw a stereotypical representation of themselves and were quite aware that they were being demeaned as women. . . .

The viewer response letters examined so far attempted, either by denying difference or by trying to grapple with it, to engage with the program in order to think through ways in which to rework race relations. While many of the letters exhibited unexamined racist discourses, the racism seemed unintended and unconscious, a manifestation of the shifting ground. *Julia*, as a text that worked hard to evacuate politically charged representations and potentially disturbing discourses of racial oppression, would appear to

be an unlikely candidate for overtly racist attacks. However, a surprisingly large number of the letters in the Hal Kanter papers reveal an enormous amount of unmediated anxiety felt by some viewers about changes being wrought in the wake of the civil rights and black oppositional movements.

Concerns that reappeared in these letters tended to focus on a discomfort with seeing increasing numbers of African-Americans on television, fears that traditional racial hierarchies were being eradicated, and anxieties about interracial sexuality. While *Julia* never dealt with issues of miscegenation or intermarriage, many of these viewers read them into the program anyway. Some of these viewers may have done so because, unlike the black mammy figures traditionally predominant in the mass media, *Julia* conformed to white ideals of beauty. That her white male bosses were shown recognizing her sexuality may have provided the cues some viewers needed to construct scenarios such as the one provided by an anonymous viewer from Los Angeles:

What are you trying to do by making "Julia." No racial problems—she is playing opposite a white, she is suppose [sic] to live in an all white apt house. It's racial because you will have it so Nolan [Dr. Chegley, Julia's boss] will fall in love with her and have to make her over—repulsive—You had better write a part for a big black boy so he can mess with a white girl or they will get mad.

Anxiety over social change and transformations in race relations erupted here in a full-blown fear of interracial sexuality. For this viewer, integration created a moral panic whereby the sudden visibility of blacks in "white society" could only mean that "big black boys" wanted to mess with white girls.

Other viewers, less obsessed with questions of miscegenation, exhibited fears about integration by expressing anger at television as an institution. They blamed television for creating social strife and causing blacks to forget their proper place. One anonymous viewer from Houston, Texas, who signed her or his comments "the silent majority," wrote:

Living in Texas all my life I have always lived around the negroes and they used to be really fine people until the T.V. set came out & ruined the whole world! Not only have you poor white trash taken advantage of them & ruined their chances now you have ruined the college set. You are good at getting people when they are most vulnerable and changing their entire thinking!

. . . Such letters show the ideological extremes viewers could go to in their meaning-making endeavors. *Julia* as a text certainly did not encourage these interpretations. But since meanings are neither entirely determined nor controlled by the text and since viewers are active agents in the process of constructing their own meanings, we can see how disturbing the process can be. Cultural studies theorists analyzing oppositional reading strategies have

generally focused on how such viewers position themselves against dominant ideology. By implication such reading positions are often seen as positive evidence of cultural struggle against the constraining policies, perspectives, and practices of the ruling social order or "power bloc."<sup>13</sup> However, as these letters show, an oppositional reading strategy need not be a liberatory or progressive strategy.

Another issue that seemed to bother the hostile viewers was the mere presence of blacks on television. Blacks were slowly becoming more visible as supporting players in such popular programs as *I Spy*, *The Mod Squad*, *Hogan's Heroes*, and *Daktari*. Blacks were also occasionally being featured in commercial advertisements by 1967. But in the summer of 1968, the networks, at the urging of the Kerner Commission, outdid themselves offering an unprecedented number of news documentaries on the state of black America, including CBS's acclaimed *Of Black America*, a seven-part series hosted by Bill Cosby.<sup>14</sup> For some viewers this was clearly too much: "We have had so much color shoved down our throats on special programs this summer its [*sic*] enough to make a person sick," wrote one viewer from Toronto. An anonymous viewer from Eufaula, Oklahoma, wrote, "After the riots and [the] network filled 'Black American' shows all summer, white people aren't feeling to [*sic*] kindly toward colored people shows. You are ahead of the time on this one." Yet another anonymous viewer from Red Bluff, California, asserted, "I will not buy the product sponsoring this show or any show with a nigger in it. I believe I can speak for millions of real Americans [*sic*]. I will write the sponsors of these shows. I am tired of niggers in my living room." A third anonymous viewer from Bethpage, Long Island, asked, "Is this what you mean by color T. V. ugh. *Click!!*" Moreover, many of these people made no distinction between documentary representations of civil strife and the fictional world of *Julia*. Since both in some way concerned black people, *Julia* was really no different from the news specials about ghetto riots.

In the end, the reason it is useful to consider these disturbing and offensive letters is because of what they can tell us about the polysemic nature of reception. *Julia* was heavily criticized for constructing a "white Negro," for playing it safe in order not to scare off white viewers, for sugar-coating its racial messages. While all of that may be true, the show's "whiteness," middle-classness, and inoffensiveness did not defuse its threat to entrenched racist positions. This threat was also made evident by the fact that many of the hostile letters carried no return address. Unlike other viewers who wrote letters, both favorable and unfavorable, these letter writers were not interested in opening up a dialogue with the show's producers. The anonymity both shielded their besieged positions and revealed that such positions were no longer easily defensible.

While the majority of letters in the Hal Kanter papers appear to be from white viewers, there are a significant number of letters from viewers who identified themselves as black.<sup>15</sup> . . .

One crucial distinction between black and white viewers was that many of the black viewers displayed a participatory quality in their engagement

with the program. They tended to erase boundaries between themselves and the text. Many letter writers asked if they could write episodes or play parts on the show. An eleven-year-old boy from the Bronx wrote:

I am a Negro and I am almost in the same position as Corey. . . . Your show really tells how an average black or Negro person lives. I like your show so much that if you ever have a part to fill I would be glad to fill it for you.<sup>16</sup>

A teenage girl from Buffalo wanted to create a new character for the show: Julia's teenage sister. She proceeded to describe what the sister's characteristics would be and how she would like to play the part. A female teacher from Los Angeles wrote:

The thought occurred to me that *Julia* may be in need of a close friend on your television show—and/or Corey Baker may need a *good* first grade teacher (me). . . . I am not a militant but a *very proud Negro*.<sup>17</sup>

The viewers who wanted to write episodes generally made their offer at the end of the letter after having detailed what they considered wrong with the show. Other viewers wanted to get together with Kanter personally to discuss the matter. One young woman from Detroit, studying mass media at college, suggested a meeting with Kanter: "Perhaps I can give you a better idea of what the Black people really want to see and what the white person really *needs* to see."<sup>18</sup>

While white viewers offered criticisms of the program, only the black viewers took it upon themselves to offer their assistance in improving the show. Their participatory relationship to the text indicated a far more active attempt at making the show meaningful. For the black viewers the struggle over representation was between the actual program as created by the white producers and a potential, but more authentic, program to be created by the black viewers. By acting in and writing for the show, they became producers of meaning, rather than mere recipients of meaning constructed by whites. Asserting the values of their cultural codes, they attempted to bring their own knowledge to the text. The positive engagement evidenced by these viewers arose from an articulation of self-affirming representation.

*Ebony*, a mass-circulation magazine targeted at a primarily middle-class black readership, also tried to find racially-affirming representations in the program. Unlike other popular press accounts, *Ebony* took pains to emphasize the show's positive aspects while acknowledging its shortcomings. Pointing to *Julia's* four black scriptwriters, the article indicated that the show would provide new opportunities for African-Americans in the television industry.<sup>19</sup> *Ebony* appeared to support the program specifically because the magazine saw that blacks were assisting (even if in a limited way) in its production.

One of the main areas of concern for many black viewers was whether the representation of blacks was realistic or whether the program portrayed

a white world for white viewers. The denial of difference that numerous white viewers applauded was challenged by many, although not all, black viewers. A black woman from Los Angeles wrote:

Your show is geared to the white audience with no knowledge of the realness of normal Negro people.

Your work is good for an all white program—but something is much missing from your character—Julia is unreal.

To repeat again—Julia is no Negro woman. I know & I'm Negro with many friends in situations such as hers.

Kanter replied somewhat sarcastically: "I'm glad you think our work is 'good for an all white program.' I'll pass your praise along to our black writer and black actors."

. . . The woman with many friends in Julia's situation searched the text in vain looking for confirmation of her identity as a black woman. Unlike the black women Jacqueline Bobo studied who found positive, progressive, and affirming meanings about black womanhood in *The Color Purple*, this particular woman found nothing in *Julia*. The text did not speak to her experiences. It did not construct a reading position from which she could use her cultural codes and find useful meanings. On the contrary, her experience as a black woman, along with those of her friends, blocked any possibility of finding a place for herself within the text. The strategy of breaking down textual boundaries and inserting oneself into the program by offering to write episodes or play a role may have functioned to avert this problem. It may have given some black viewers a mechanism by which to place themselves within the program and assert their own identities as African-Americans. . . .

## NOTES

1. Cauter (1988).
2. *Amos 'n' Andy* remained in syndication until 1966. NBC attempted a short-lived variety show with Nat King Cole in 1957.
3. Brown (1971).
4. MacDonald (1983, p. 116).
5. MacDonald (1983, p. 117). *Julia* was also criticized by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1977) in its influential publication *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*.
6. The Hal Kanter papers are located at the Wisconsin Center Historical Archives, State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. The Kanter papers contain primarily final draft scripts for all the *Julia* episodes; Kanter's personal correspondence, production materials for the series, and ratings information; and a large selection of viewer letters. Most of the letters to which I will be referring later . . . are filed in folders labeled "fan letters, favorable" and "fan letters, unfavorable." Some viewer letters are also scattered among Kanter's correspondence folders.
7. Sixty-one of the letters came from married women and twenty-three from single women or those whose marital status was unidentifiable. Thirty-three letters came from men. The rest were either unidentifiable by gender or from children and young people. The preponderance of women viewers is mirrored in ratings materials located in a ratings folder in Hal Kanter papers, Box 18. A breakdown of the *Julia* audience for a two-week period ending

Sept. 28, 1969, showed that women between the ages of 18 and 49 formed the largest bulk of the audience, followed by female teens. Men between the ages of 18 and 49 formed the smallest share of the audience.

8. All of the following viewer letters, unless marked otherwise, are in the Hal Kanter papers, Box 18.

9. The writers of these letters are, respectively, a male viewer from DuBois, Pennsylvania; a female viewer from Colton, California; and a female viewer from New York City.

10. "Wonderful World of Color" (1968, p. 70).

11. Shayon (1968, p. 49).

12. Lewis (1968, p. 26).

13. See, for instance, Fiske (1987, 1989).

14. MacDonald (1983, pp. 138-139).

15. Thirteen women, one man, and three children or young people identified themselves as black. There was also a group of thirteen letters from an inner-city grade school writing class. From the tone of the letters, I suspect the class was predominantly made up of black children.

16. This letter is located in the Hal Kanter papers, Box 1, among Kanter's general correspondence. A significant number of letters from self-identifying black viewers can be found in this general correspondence rather than in the fan letter files.

17. Hal Kanter papers, Box 1.

18. Hal Kanter papers, Box 1.

19. *Ebony* (November 1968), pp. 56-58.

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