



# **Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity**

*Phillip Brian Harper*

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In 1995, popular anxieties about black masculinity became evident in public reactions to the conclusion of the OJ Simpson trial and the Million Man March on Washington. The nation's divided response to the OJ verdict, together with the controversy surrounding Louis Farrakhan's call to black men to come together for a "day of atonement" brought issues of race and gender to the forefront of national debate.

In his timely and incisive book *Are We Not Men?*, Phillip Brian Harper explores issues of race and representation and shows that ideas about black masculinity have always played a troubled role both in the formation of African-American identity and in the mass media at large. What is at stake when a picture of OJ Simpson is darkened on the cover of *Time* magazine? Why is AIDS still seen as a white gay disease when a quarter of deaths from AIDS from 1981-1991 were among black males? Using examples from a variety of cultural contexts, ranging from sports and pop music to literature and television, Harper investigates these questions in an effort to show the ways in which narrow definitions of black manhood have failed to acknowledge real differences within the African-American community--to grave social and political effect. He examines recent phenomena, such as reactions to ABC anchorman Max Robinson's AIDS-related death and Magic Johnson's HIV status, as well as the homophobia and chauvinism of the Black Arts movement of the '60s and '70s, the construction of black "crossover" identity from Motown and Diana Ross to Run-DMC and MTV and the way that "street" authenticity is incorporated into Michael Jackson's choreography. He unravels the gender politics behind the "passing" novels of the Harlem Renaissance, scrutinizes black masculinity as seen through the eyes of the white protagonist of the 1961 autobiographical narrative *Black Like Me* and explores early representations of African Americans on television shows like "Julia" and "Room 222." Upholding the recent success of drag performer RuPaul, who demonstrates the limits of traditional notions of black masculinity by openly defying them, Harper suggests that popular culture is able to transcend its own representations and points to a future in which "black male" is no longer a homogenizing term.

An original, far-reaching and ultimately humane work of cultural criticism, Harper's book argues convincingly that there are no innocent texts, and forces us to reexamine the culture that surrounds us. *Are We Not Men?* will find a wide audience among those interested in American and African-American cultural studies, gender studies and gay/lesbian studies.

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