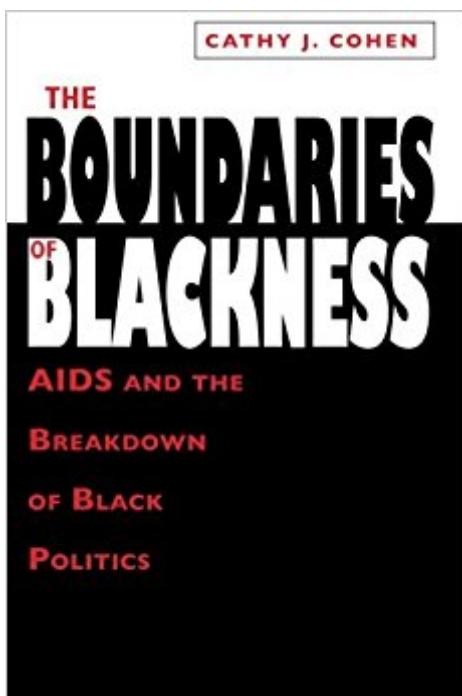


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# The Boundaries Of Blackness: AIDS And The Breakdown Of Black Politics



## Synopsis

Last year, more African Americans were reported with AIDS than any other racial or ethnic group. And while African Americans make up only 13 percent of the U.S. population, they account for more than 55 percent of all newly diagnosed HIV infections. These alarming developments have caused reactions ranging from profound grief to extreme anger in African-American communities, yet the organized political reaction has remained remarkably restrained. *The Boundaries of Blackness* is the first full-scale exploration of the social, political, and cultural impact of AIDS on the African-American community. Informed by interviews with activists, ministers, public officials, and people with AIDS, Cathy Cohen unflinchingly brings to light how the epidemic fractured, rather than united, the black community. She traces how the disease separated blacks along different fault lines and analyzes the ensuing struggles and debates. More broadly, Cohen analyzes how other cross-cutting issues—of class, gender, and sexuality—challenge accepted ideas of who belongs in the community. Such issues, she predicts, will increasingly occupy the political agendas of black organizations and institutions and can lead to either greater inclusiveness or further divisiveness. *The Boundaries of Blackness*, by examining the response of a changing community to an issue laced with stigma, has much to teach us about oppression, resistance, and marginalization. It also offers valuable insight into how the politics of the African-American community—and other marginal groups—will evolve in the twenty-first century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Yale professor Cohen combines rigorous research and fresh sociological insights to build her argument that a black political agenda based solely on race promotes exclusionary practices. Cohen tracked responses to AIDS by black civic and church leaders and media in New York City (where, since 1990, AIDS has infected more blacks than any other racial or ethnic group), finding that they have espoused an understanding of racial identity that privileges middle-class, heterosexual males, while using code words "to designate who was expendable." Starting at the beginning of the AIDS crisis, she compares coverage by network television news and the New York Times with that of black newspapers and magazines. Cohen attributes the failure of black media to focus on AIDS at the beginning of the epidemic to homophobia, classism and sexism, resulting in the extreme stigmatization of the most disempowered members of black communities. She finds that in the 1980s, the black political response to AIDS came largely from black lesbians and gays. In recent years, women and children of color have come to be most at risk, while the black media focuses on alternative treatments and new heterosexual dating patterns in response to AIDS.

Although Cohen's analysis is encumbered by academic jargon, it is astute and eye-opening.

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Cohen's intent in writing this book was, among other things, to expose the processes used to determine what issues affecting substantial numbers of African Americans can be called "black issues," deserving of attention, resources, and action on the part of other black people." She specifically looks at why AIDS has been a neglected issue in the black community and why traditional black leaders have remained silent about the disease. Cohen doesn't seek to indict, but to provoke discussion about the nature of black politics. Because blacks have been so marginalized by American culture, internal fragmentation has produced crosscutting issues that have strained the traditional political framework. Traditional civil rights groups and the black church are too centered in a middle-class ethos to take up an issue that appears to impact other marginal populations--homosexuals and drug users. Beyond the AIDS issue, Cohen looks at a new generation of leaders, more inclined or better able to incorporate the more marginalized groups within black America. Vanessa Bush

Reading it for a course in Political Theory and it is captivating. Having lived in NYC in the late eighties and early nineties, AIDS was of great concern and only the gay and lesbian communities were very active, so too the black communities, but on a smaller scale according to my black friends. It was heartwrenching to watch friends whiter away because not nearly enough was done

and organizing increased too slow. Mostly because AIDS had to do with sex and drugs, and with an underclass of gays, lesbians and minorities. As a European I was astounded that Americans can only look at an issue that is so human and affects everybody, so viscerally and not in a pragmatic problem-solving way. This book shows darkest parts of American society and that the culture of denial is devastating. America has a lot to learn and a long way to go.

Seminal work; Outstanding acct of public health history affecting African Americans. Thank you!

Cohen examines AIDS as a cross-cutting issue laced with stigma and rooted in African-American communities, which provides insight into how black leaders, organizations, and community members respond to the changing political environment that confronts all marginal groups in the 21st century. (9) She highlights the development of indigenous structures, resources, leaders, and information as a response to the exclusion created by marginalization and cross-cutting issues within the African American community.(37) Cohen also examines the roles of the CDC and the national print media in defining who was at risk, what were the appropriate paths for research, reporting, and responses that others would follow.(121) She condemns the national media's portrayal of AIDS through the lenses of Magic Johnson and Arthur Ashe as one which further marginalizes AIDS for the black gay community and drug using community, which posits both of these as deviant behaviors. Cohen then tackles the role of black media in the portrayal of AIDS within the black community. She claims that historically the black press has been integral in providing information that helped shape the political agenda for black Americans. (188) Cohen then attacks the responses to the AIDS epidemic by the NAACP, Urban League and black churches. She claims that this issue should guide us in asking what role should and can such institutions play in the more cross-cutting politics of black communities in the 21st century? (258) She concludes her scathing rebuke of the African American communities' response to AIDS with an examination of the "on-again, off-again" responses of elected black officials. Cohen's condemnation of Black politics, thus, focuses on the marginalization and the cross cutting issues that surround the AIDS epidemic. Cohen's work adds to the marginalization and "cross-cutting" issues faced within Black studies through the lenses of the AIDS epidemic and its impact upon the Black community and Black politics. What I find to be relevant is the attention that Cohen plays to those groups that are marginalized specifically by AIDS: gay Blacks and IV drug users. I appreciated her analysis of the

shaping of the discourse surrounding the AIDS epidemic by the CDC, the national media and Black media outlets. By shining an academic light upon the struggles of those marginalized Cohen is able to examine the impact of AIDS upon a broader swath of the Black community. Another point I believe to be relevant is that, as Cohen points out, there is no one monolithic Black story. I also appreciated her attack on this very narrative as being defined by Magic Johnson and Arthur Ashe’s story of resistance because theirs was not one of “deviant” behavior. This brought me to a bigger question: who defines deviant or queer behavior? Or, as the case may be, who defines “respectability”? Because there is no one monolithic Black community than how do these terms respectability, deviant and queer apply to Black studies?

I was reluctant to read or buy this book because I figured that a) I didn’t want to hear a white person trash ‘the’ black community, and b) I didn’t want to read a political science book that couldn’t possibly cover any new ground on AIDS that fiction writers and progressive activists haven’t already done. Fortunately, I was surprised on both fronts. Cohen is an African-American woman (she never explains how she got the last name Cohen) and does try to be mindful of being ‘another black academic out to trash black folks’ (xi). In addition, she provides a poli. sci. framework in which to look at how African-Americans prioritized or failed to prioritize AIDS that I think could be used to analyze numerous other issues. Cohen investigates black people’s response to AIDS through medicine, the press, religious organization, and the Congress from 1981 to 1993. The book is not perfect. Chapters are completely misnamed. (One chapter about the ‘dreaded bisexual’ only discussed bisexual men for a page at most.) She at times is overly critical of black institutions. (She often states that the black press never covered HIV+ black gay men or HIV+ women activists and I can think of numerous articles in the magazines she examines which actually did what she wanted.) Nevertheless, this was an incredible book. I encourage everyone to purchase it, especially those interested in black gay issues or African-American studies.

Cohen does an excellent job of providing a dual analysis -- one of the current state in the AIDS crisis as well as an honest look at the state of affairs of Black leaders and their inability to "fight the fight" on behalf of our communities devastated by AIDS. Her scholarly work is provoking, courageous and long overdue. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in Black politics and the REAL challenges facing the most marginal of Black communities.

Rarely, if ever, does a reader encounter an analysis of black politics, of the AIDS crisis, or of government response to either that addresses such issues in a textured and multi-dimensional way. Cohen's book is an anomaly in that it acknowledges and builds upon those complexities while constructing an argument that does not end with them. *Boundaries* is a great, informative read and a must-have on the bookshelf of anyone who considers themselves a critical thinker.

The *Boundaries of Blackness* is a solid book which analyzes the response of black communities to the AIDS crisis. The complexity of black communities, which are so often described as a singular entity, emerges from Cohen's comprehensive but also nuanced and balanced study. I strongly recommend this book!

Cathy adduces an interesting and innovative argument by detailing the way in which the black political hierarchy reacted to the AIDS epidemic and comes to the conclusion that black political leadership is flawed. I don't want to give away too much of her argument, but I must say I disagree with her. That being said, it is still a must read.

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