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Book Reviews

Lori Peek, *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011. \$ 84.50 (cloth), \$ 27.95 (paper)

In 2010, the phrase “Muslims go home” was spray-painted across the brick façade and windows of a Nashville mosque. Such acts of vandalism—and the hateful sentiments that fuel them—have been all too common in the United States for more than a decade. The experiences of the Americans who suffer from these attacks are the subject of Lori Peek’s first book, *Behind the Backlash*. The text details how Muslim Americans (and people of color that look like they could be Muslim Americans) have been on the receiving end of a tidal wave of hate speech and aggression that crested in the weeks and months following September 11, 2001.

The metaphor of a tidal wave is particularly useful when describing *Behind the Backlash* because Lori Peek specializes in the Sociology of Disaster. Peek draws on this specialty to provide the theoretical framework for her research, in-depth interviews and focus groups with 140 Muslim-American young adults during the two years following 9/11. The central scholarly contribution of the text is to explain how the social benefits of disasters—the uniting of a community or people through common grief—can also be exclusionary. In short, the uniting of some can come at the expense of others.

Chapter 1 serves as a primer, introducing readers to both the diverse population that are American Muslims and to their post-9/11 narratives. This introductory chapter also acquaints readers with the book’s author, who is neither Muslim nor a member of a racial or ethnic group that would lead her to be mistaken for a Muslim American. Her ‘outsider’ perspective may be why she is able to translate the experiences of Muslim Americans to other ‘outsiders’ so well. Peek is an effective guide for readers with limited knowledge about Islam or about the experiences of Muslim Americans over the last decade.

Chapter 2 begins with an account of the events of September 11, 2001, and the days and weeks that followed. This first narrative is a familiar one: shocking attacks, tragedy unfolding amidst a nation’s horror, and continuing trauma in the aftermath as survivors faced the enormity of the destruction. Peek also draws on disaster research to outline what can be seen as a social benefit of the tragedy, as the American populace came together in their grief. Yet, Peek also directs our attention in a new direction, towards those left out of the newly united America. Peek explains that in some ways Muslim Americans experienced 9/11 in the same way as their non-Muslim counterparts, feeling a combination of fear, anger and grief. But, Muslims also experienced something quite different from other Americans: an

exponential increase in frequency and severity of negative experiences because of their status as Muslims. Peek documents this hostility first through an impressive array of statistics on hate crimes and anti-Muslim incidents across time and space.

Over the next four chapters, Peek draws extensively from her qualitative interviews and focus groups to detail the experiences of the Muslim Americans in her study, some of which live in New York and others in her home state of Colorado. In Chapter 3, the focus is on the intolerance that many of Peek's respondents experienced before 9/11, reminding readers that anti-Muslim sentiments did not materialize out of thin air on that fateful day in September. Instead, many of Peek's interviewees talk about what it was like to grow up feeling like outsiders, struggling to fit in, and finding their places in their faith communities. Many of Peek's interviews are with women, who speak to their struggles coping with negative stereotypes about Muslim women as weak and oppressed.

Next, Peek returns to 9/11, explaining how many Muslims were made to feel even more like outsiders in their own country. She begins Chapter 4 by re-telling the events of September 11th through the eyes of Maya, a 17-year-old Muslim American who encounters an angry mob as she struggles to get to her home in New York City. Maya was not alone in her experience. In the days, weeks, and months following the attacks, Peek's respondents were verbally harassed and intimidated; stared at suspiciously and apprehensively; discriminated against at work, school, and in the housing market; and violently confronted. Others witnessed such acts perpetrated against their family members and friends.

Chapter 5 lays out the meat of Peek's argument, drawing heavily from and contributing to the *Sociology of Disaster*. She explains how Muslims were excluded from (or excluded themselves from) the collective grieving that took place across the United States after 9/11, leaving them isolated and depressed. She introduces the concept of "compounded fear" to describe the combination of fears Muslim Americans experienced, both universal (for example, fear of future attacks) and also those specific to Muslim Americans (for example, fear of hate crimes against family members). Feeling under attack, many Muslims changed their daily routines. Raids on Muslim-American homes also left Muslims feeling unsafe in their homes, the spaces that should have provided shelter from the storm. The ongoing nature of the backlash left Muslims experiencing feelings of "continuous attack" and created stress and conflict within Muslim family units.

Although the bulk of the book details the victimization of Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 era, Peek paints a different portrait of her respondents in Chapter 6. She explains how Muslims also experienced rising within-group solidarity, a strengthening of their faith, and greater closeness with family members.

Behind the Backlash does have its limits. For those already educated about anti-Muslim backlash since 9/11, the information Peek lays out is hardly surprising. For those looking to use Peek's book in the classroom, it is important to note that she makes few connections to existing literatures on race/ethnicity or religion, perhaps making the text better for undergraduate than graduate classes. Peek also admits that the bulk of her interviews are with young Muslim women, and her analysis reflects this fact. Those particularly interested in the experiences of young Muslim-American men or Muslims from older generations will not find what they are looking for in Peek's text.

Overall, however, Lori Peek has crafted an excellent book. The prose is well-written, and Peek effectively leads readers on a journey that evokes empathy for the plight of Muslim Americans. Peek places readers squarely in the shoes of her subjects. For many of us, *Behind the Backlash* serves as a reminder that even though more than a decade has passed, many Muslim Americans still suffer repercussions from 9/11. For those too young to remember, Peek offers an important introduction.

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