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**ABSTRACT**

“Defining ‘Afghanness’: Performing and Claiming  
Afghan Identity within the New York Afghan Diaspora”

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This ethnographic study positions how the children of Afghan immigrants in New York perform and define ethnicized, racialized, gendered, and class identities of “Afghanness” as a lens through which to better understand the formation of the diasporic subject and the fluid boundaries of diasporic belonging. This analysis also serves as a preliminary response to scholarly and popular media representations of Afghan Americans as organically connected to Afghanistan as a homeland, living in isolated Afghan enclaves in the US, supposedly defined by a set of static social codes and conventions, detached from local spaces and realities of life in New York and throughout the US. Understanding Afghan identities as performances - conscious and subconscious strategies designed to position the individual as an easily legible member within Afghan and other communities - can problematize the notion that lives in the diaspora are defined by one idea of “Afghanness,” one that is isolated from the daily tensions of making relevant Afghan immigrant cultural productions within available forms of social capital in America. The nine life narratives explored offer the following counter-discourses of Afghan diasporic experience: There exist ideal standards for, and degrees of *being Afghan*, which change in spaces where different kinds of performances of race, ethnicity, gender, and class are valued as social capital. Others felt that claiming “Afghanness” could be legitimized through cultivating knowledge of Afghanistan’s history and cultural productions, thereby generating a *genuine Afghan self*. The subjects in this study, who grappled with claims to “Afghanness” (which also encompassed notions of *Muslimness*) in different ways in different social settings, reinvented the terms of belonging in the Afghan and larger Muslim diaspora. These terms were shaped by New York as a multi-dimensional space for identity assertion as well as contemporary American discourses on race, ethnicity, multiculturalism, and the immigrant experience.