

AMSS 39th ANNUAL CONFERENCE

“Cosmopolitan Islam: Globalization, Transnationalism and Muslim Diasporas”

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ABSTRACT

“Pre-9/11, I felt Like an Average American ...
Now I’m a Group with Hippies and Punks”

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In the era of post-modernity, post cold war, transnationalism and, potentially, post nation-state, discourse on identity has taken on greater prominence. This prominence, however, is not without attending theoretical questions. Is one’s identity a stable state of being or a process of becoming? Is identity a solitary project of self-invention and definition, something imposed by a society/culture or a group’s elite, or is it a negotiated product? What is the relationship of *the self* to identity or identities? In a globalizing deterritorialized world, hybrid and diasporic identities - terms usually reserved for *émigré* - seem to more accurately capture the condition of today’s citizens. People everywhere are confronting questions about identity and belonging, but the debates seem to be more complex and urgent for Muslims in the East and West. The United States stands out singularly as a place where the diversity of Muslims approximates that of the global Muslim community (*ummah*) and includes a sizeable indigenous community of mostly African American Muslims. This diversity is marked by the peculiar experience of having to debate and (re) define self/community identity and Islam within a public discourse that dichotomizes *Islam and the West*, and has done this more intensely since 9/11. This paper explores theoretical issues on identity by examining the narratives of some Muslim Americans in Phoenix as they grapple with presenting a consonant image of self, community and country in the post 9/11 context. Data from this ethnographic project reveal three emerging themes: (1) A perception that the Islam practiced in America is more *authentic*, than that practiced in many Muslim-majority countries. (2) In the post September 11th environment, Muslims fear that their religious faith is under attack and their loyalty and belonging to America is under scrutiny and suspicion. (3) The meaning and content of the labels *American Muslim* and *Muslim American* are fluid and contested.