I grew up in an Iranian Shia community in Oakland, California (THE TOWN) at a well-known mosque: the Islamic Cultural Center of Northern California (ICCNC). My intent here is to write a series of short accessible papers reflecting on this Muslim community, both the positive and the negative (albeit speaking mostly about the negative—nobody needs a yes man). To be sure, the aim here is to criticize out of love (not hate) and with a clear mind and a clear heart. The sole purpose of these papers is to offer a catalyst for change.

1Please note that each of these pieces could be expanded into a 40-50 page piece, but my audience is not the scholar, but the educated layman. I am writing ultimately in a casual manner, and this is an exoteric philosophical work. Eventually, I will write more fine-tuned theoretical pieces that will be much more technical. If anyone wants to hear more about my views and would like to write a response to me, I am always open to explaining myself further. But do not take these public drafts as my final position. I revise and develop my views all the time, whether in my published or unpublished work. The only work that cannot be revised is Scripture.
in my community. One cannot change the world on a global scale, until one examines political corruption, moral failure, and spiritual shallowness at a local level. And the point about local change is the exact theme of this first piece.\(^2\)

Before proceeding, a few clarifications: I am first and foremost a rationalist philosopher. My primary philosophical influences are Maimoindes, Ibn Rushd, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. After that, I am a Sunni Muslim of the Maliki madhab (since I left Shia Islam when I was 17 or so), a child of Oakland, a person who was homeless in Oakland and Berkeley for a significant period of time during graduate school, a victim of severe abuse (amongst other traumatic experiences) that resulted in severe mental health disorders and extended visits in psychiatric wards, and finally I am (as most people know me in Oakland) an underground rapper. In virtue of all those wonderful experiences I completed my Ph.D. in philosophy, and I am now a tenure track Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina (by the grace of God and reliance, as best as I can, on the sunnah). I write with an intellectual, moral, and spiritual unity that pulls from all of those distinct perspectives, successes, failures, realities, and identities. Take that how you will. I hope the attentive and charitable reader will not take my unique vantage point as one that injects bias into my writings, but rather one that injects a fresh perspective that is valuable and worth hearing for those internal and external to the Muslim community.

My thesis is this: ICCNC (and here I do not mean the institution in particular, but the community as a whole) has failed to live up to the religious ideals of true Shia Islam and the legacy of Imam Hussein and the events of Karbala, and have contributed to the gentrification of Oakland, and more importantly, the starvation and suppression of the locals—in particular, the Black community that all true natives of The Town hold dear, as well as the abundant homeless community that surrounds the mosque.

Before getting to the central argument, I just want to rattle off a few assumptions of this paper. I take these to be empirical facts, and I am not in the business of defending them. Everyone from my community, if they look deep into their soul, knows that these are basically true (with some modulation). And I don’t want to get sidetracked with the details of descriptive claims.

\(^2\)My local level is ICCNC, first and foremost. But the arguments and points made here, I believe, can be modulated to other mosques and communities across the country. At some other point, I would like to address Zaytuna Institute and Taleef, communities which I became a part of in my late teens.
The task here is normative. In no specific order, here are my assumptions:

A1 Most if not all community members of ICCNC are Iranian, either immigrants from Iran or children of said immigrants. There are no longer, as there once were, significant non-Iranian Shia groups that are active at ICCNC.

A2 The (average) community member of ICCNC does not live in Oakland, CA.

A3 The (average) community member of ICCNC works in either Silicon Valley, or has an excellent paying job, making above or around 150,000 a year. Per household, I would imagine upwards 300,000 of income. Indeed, some members make much more than that, this is actually underestimating given the housing market in the Bay Area. I will call these sorts of community members Iranian Techies (although not all of them work in the tech industry).

A4 The ICCNC mosque, on balance, is empty for the five daily prayers.

A5 The ICCNC mosque, on balance, does not fill up its space to capacity in any of its meeting halls or the official prayer room for regular events, and arguably for their even bigger events.

A6 The average religious student or Farsi student who attended ICCNC never returns after they finish their schooling, unless it is at the behest of their parents for a special event.

Anyone even remotely familiar with the Seerah of the Prophet, or who has experienced thriving Muslim mosques throughout the United States or other corners over the world, knows that A1-A6 (and again, as assumptions, I am treating them as true), is thoroughly un-Islamic, and suggests that something has gone fundamentally wrong. That is not debatable. My aim here is to begin to scratch the surface of some important explanatory work.

I imagine that ICCNC and the Iranian techies would object that the context is different in the United States, and that they are doing their best to institute an Islamic “cultural” mosque in a difficult social, economic, racial, and political environment than (say) Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iraq, or Afghanistan. I do not deny that immigrants have it hard in the United States. But I believe that for a Muslim to even make that excuse would be a severe
affront to the Sunnah and life of the Prophet, in particular the struggles he faced during the Meccan years. There is absolutely no way that the context of the United States is more difficult to spread religion, peace, and harmony (and to fill up a mosque), than it was for the Prophet in the Arabian Peninsula. We must not forget that the Prophet achieved, in a short number of years and in some of the most difficult of circumstances, what very few men have ever achieved throughout history in even better circumstances. And he achieved that ultimately through his character, charisma, service, and powerful words and the way he carried himself with his family, wives, companions, community members, and the youth around him. To say that the United States is a difficult context is ultimately a cop out, especially given A3. What these really people want at bottom is not a genuine mosque where everyone is welcome and the overall community is benefited, but rather an Iranian cultural Disneyland to hang out at during the weekend, and a babysitting center to drop their kids off on Saturday’s to learn Farsi. Again, these people might insist that they do want these things and that they have made the niyyah or intention for social good, and that their failure is merely due to external circumstances. But this would require drawing out a robust distinction between desires, intentions, and the ultimate corresponding outcome in the external world. But I reject that (false) Cartesian moral narrative entirely. There is not a strict divide between the inner and the outer, and ultimately the outer is a reflection of the inner. This is a Hegelian point, derived from the Philosophy of Right (and arguably an Islamic one as well, once the relevant Islamic texts are fully unpacked).

But I do not want to get sidetracked. Recall, my thesis concerns gentrification and suppression of the people of Oakland, and the failure to be loyal to the Oakland community. That requires to bracket discussion and elaboration of some of these assumptions, and focus on A1, A2, and A3. Let me say a little bit about how I understand gentrification. ‘Gentrification’ is a thick and slippery concept used by thinkers in a variety of ways. I do not want to get caught in semantics, or engage in concept creep. I’d rather tell you exactly how I understand that concept, as it is relevant to the present task at hand. If you want to call it something else, fine. But changing the name for it doesn’t change the reality of what I am talking about.

Gentrification occurs when non-native people (whether they are White or not) move into a new neighborhood or land where there are natives with a history and heritage of their own there, and contribute to the destruction of the natives. Let me rattle off a few ways that destruction can obtain, for
there are both direct and indirect manners of destroying the native:

**G1** Making the native feel uncomfortable in the very area that they have always existed.

**G2** Degrading the native in the very area that they have always existed.

**G3** Using local resources where the gentrification has occurred to primarily benefit the gentrifiers, and not the natives.

**G4** Using racist remarks against the natives.

**G5** Not allowing natives to move freely in spaces that are supposed to be available to anyone.

G1-G5 are all true of ICCNC. Here, this will require defense. Just to clarify the scope of discussion, by ‘natives’ I primarily have in mind Black people from any socioeconomic status who live in downtown Oakland and East Oakland. Of course, there are White, Hispanic, Asian, and a multitude of other ethnicities in Oakland. But I want to talk about the most pernicious kind of gentrification and suppression, which is that done against the Black community of Oakland.

**On G1 & G4 & G5.** These all go hand-in-hand, and I will offer some general remarks that will get the point across. This is a simple defense here. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard Iranian techies within the ICCNC building, talking about the people outside as ‘siyah poost’ and wondering whether a certain person who is trying to enter into the mosque (which is generally locked even during business hours) as ‘siyah poost’. The best translation for ‘siyah poost’ is ‘Black’, but it does not have (in Farsi) the same connotation as it does in English. In English, there are contexts in which saying “x individual is Black” is thoroughly appropriate, while there are other contexts where it is problematic. I really cannot imagine any analysis of ‘siyah poost’ where things turn out to have, on balance, a pragmatic implicature of a positive valence (unless the person is a really bad speaker of both languages). In short, such speech is just Iranians getting away with saying “nigger” without having to say it in English, and facing the consequences. Indeed, I have witnessed first-hand Black Muslims walk into the mosque for prayer and engagement, and yet they are not greeted as fellow Muslims, but questioned as to why they are there and whether they need
help. This is degrading, especially to Black Muslims who have a rich history in The Town before ICCNC ever existed. Again, I am not saying that this happens every time. But even once is problematic. And the fact that I have to write a paper about it suggests that it happens more often than you might think.

But there is a deeper moral and religious point here. Islam is an African religion, as much as it is an Arab and Persian religion. The muadhin of Muhammad who said the call of prayer, Bilal, was a Black man. He was honored by God and the Prophet. And there are numerous Prophetic narrations (hadith) where Muhammad expressly claims that there is no difference in equality between an Arab person and a Black person. Black people ought to be honored as founders and pioneers of the religion of Islam. If ICCNC saw the Black people around their mosque as, first and foremost, persons and knew the Islamic history of Africans and the well-deserved normative status of Africans within Islam and Islamic culture, then they would see all the Black people of Oakland as potential allies. The reaction when a random Black person shows up to the mosque would not be social distancing and asking whether they are ‘siyah poost’, but to usher in as many Black people as possible into ICCNC. Indeed, there was a Black woman who used to clean the mosque of the Prophet. And when she died, none of his companions told him. The Prophet wept and chastised his companions, asking them why they did not come to him to tell him that she died, so that he could pray for her. For she was in khidma (service). Africans were always honored by the Prophet (and vice versa), and they should be honored by his followers, and we should do everything we possibly can to help our Black brothers and sisters out of a system of oppression that they cannot undo solely by their own.

**On G2 & G3.** There is a severe homelesseness problem in Oakland, CA and the broader San Francisco Bay Area (especially in the Tenderloin). Many of these homeless people are Black men, women, and children. If one moves into a new area, one must leave a positive footprint. I remember when low-income housing started to be built around ICCNC, and high ranking community members complained about it. Indeed, one always often hears the complaint that ICCNC is “in the ghetto.” But you people chose to buy a mosque here, and then oddly enough, all decided to live in the suburbs of Lafayette, Walnut Creek, and Danville. The reason why the ICCNC building was purchased was because it is beautiful, but more importantly, cheap at the time it was purchased in the mid 1990’s. Without doubt, Oakland, CA is in a
difficult situation. Arguably, East Oakland is an urban war zone. And there are rampant problems throughout the community. But it does not matter how those problems got there. If one sees another human being in need, one must help. Especially if one claims to be a member of a house of God (a *masjid*). Given the amount of money that these community members make, it is shameful that there is even one homeless person within a mile radius of ICCNC that is hungry, thirsty, or ever cold. These community members drive into Oakland in their classic Iranian BMW’s and Mercedes Benz’s, complain about the black people, donate to the mosque, and then bounce back to their million dollar homes in the suburbs. This is shameful for any human being, but even more shameful for anyone who has ever (allegedly) cried about Imam Hussein and Karbala. If this is not gentrification, then I’m not sure what is.

But to show how far-gone these community members are, consider my own experience as a homeless man in Oakland and Berkeley. During the academic year of 2016-2017 I was a visiting Ph.D. student at UC Berkeley from my home institution of the University of Illinois at Chicago, with the intention of completing my dissertation after a rough divorce with my ex-wife in Chicago. During that time, I started to have severe manic episodes and psychoses, and ended up homeless in Berkeley and East Oakland for about a semester, where my activities and experiences included, but were not limited to: panhandling, getting arrested and thrown in the psych ward, sleeping in homeless tent cities, street confrontations, hunger, thirst, poverty, and so forth. At another point in time, I will talk about that experience in more detail, for I have no shame about it, as it is one of the many experiences that made me into the man that I am.

The point here is this. I am fairly sure that about everyone that I grew up with at ICCNC knew what I was going through, for I was posting about it on my Instagram and Facebook constantly. I clearly was not my normal self. Nobody, except a few people, ever helped me (let alone reached out to me or tried to find me). And nobody ever really helped me (outside of the homeless community of Oakland and Berkeley that kept me safe, fed, quenched, sheltered, and ultimately focused on my dissertation and music) in a way that really mattered. I, as an Iranian Muslim, who grew up in the very halls of ICCNC, was automatically treated as a meth-head and heroin addict. My mania was attributed to drug use (which is false), not my mental health and bipolar disorder. So, if ICCNC and its members do not have enough mercy to even see their own Iranian child who is homeless as
a person who needs help (when I was am hungry and thirsty within a mile of the mosque), I cannot imagine what it’s like to be a black person near 14th and Madison. ICCNC, although it has contributed good to Oakland (primarily to other citizens of Oakland of a similar socio-economic status—e.g. via interfaith workshops), has not been a positive presence to the natives in Oakland, especially those who struggle and starve. Instead, they are (on balance) a true force of gentrification, even though they are a non-White minority. One cannot think that one has the right to move into another person’s land, and believe that they are contributing diversity and goodness to the land merely because they are diverse (which is true), but then use that as an excuse for the oppression of the original minorities who lived there.

I hope that I am wrong, and that there is a bunch of secret activity and donations that board members could reveal to prove otherwise. But if I go outside into downtown Oakland right now (and I will be back home soon), there will surely be just way too many homeless people in need of our help. I owe my life and my Ph.D. to the homeless people of Oakland, and I will do everything I can—even if death comes—to free my people, my family, and my friends. Once you sleep on concrete with someone, beg for money with them, and huddle up in a tent to stay warm even in a California winter, it’s hard to abandon them. Town Bidness, you know what it is. Tell me when to go. Gang Gang.3

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3One final note: this is not, by any means, a plea to receive money from ICCNC. I have already sincerely refused their offers in the past day, as they have become aware of my recent intellectual activities. I was offered a hundred dollars by the public relations officer of ICCNC. But my philosophical mind, my voice, and my words, are priceless. I can never be bought. The only way to stop me is to kill me. I suggest that you do that if you really don’t like me.