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# The Meaning of *Mother* in Louis Farrakhan's "Mother Wheel": Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Cosmology of the Nation of Islam's UFO

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This article uses a history of religions approach and an integrative psychoanalysis procedure in order to demonstrate that Nation of Islam (NOI) leader Louis Farrakhan's 1985 abduction narrative of being carried into Mother Wheel—which he claims can be apprehended as an unidentified flying object—is the most important religious event in the life of the minister. This Wheel, and its adjectival modifier "Mother," is central to understanding cosmology in Farrakhan's NOI. More than a reiteration of the teachings that his mentor and religious leader, Elijah Muhammad, bequeathed to him, the Wheel is encoded with the meaning of black bodies everywhere and with Farrakhan's body in particular. Such UFO counter-narratives—new mythologies—have to be created in order to survive in a hostile culture. They serve the purpose of creating new symbols and figures that one can then

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idealize and with whom they can merge in the formation of healthy selves with regard to black people generally or who one is, as in Farrakhan's case, individually.

## INTRODUCTION

Utilizing a history of religions method, informed by psychoanalysis, this article demonstrates that Louis Farrakhan's 1985 visionary experience of being carried onto the Mother Wheel—an unidentified flying object to the world outside the Nation of Islam (NOI)—was the most significant religious event of his life. The Wheel, and its adjectival modifier "*Mother*," is central to understanding cosmology in Farrakhan's NOI. More than a reiteration of the teachings that Farrakhan's mentor and religious leader, Elijah Muhammad, bequeathed to him, the Wheel is encoded with the meaning of *black* bodies everywhere and with Farrakhan's body in particular. While Minister Farrakhan did not invent the idea of a Mother Wheel, an interpolation of the Prophet Ezekiel's vision of a wheel in the sky (Ezk. 1.1–28), the Wheel, and its meaning for him and his religious group, is distinctive from Muhammad's conception for several reasons: (i) Farrakhan reports having been *incorporated* into the Wheel—an abduction account in which he claims to encounter Elijah Muhammad and the NOI founder, Master Fard Muhammad; (ii) His abduction gives his religious narrative and his life story coherence that would not otherwise exist; (iii) Farrakhan ascribes the meaning from the Mother Wheel to all *black* bodies, and in a powerful and eloquent way to *his* body; (iv) Farrakhan invokes physical evidence for the Wheel that comes from his multiple sightings and demonstrates an intimate relationship between the Mother Wheel and himself. Indeed, the Wheel becomes inseparable from the ways in which he understands and lives out his existence. Therefore, his intricately detailed reports of his vision and multiple encounters with the Mother Wheel illustrate that his experience was more than simply a recapitulation of the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, reflecting instead the profound transformation of consciousness that resulted from his own religious and aesthetic sensibilities through contact with the Wheel that he intimates occurred through his senses—that is, bodily (see Farrakhan 1986, 1987, 1989; Finley 2009).

At the same time, Minister Farrakhan's experience and teaching regarding the Mother Wheel does assimilate Elijah Muhammad's doctrines that he reports receiving from the NOI founder, Master Fard Muhammad (God, Allah), secret knowledge that includes the centrality

of the Mother Plane or Wheel—a UFO or “flying saucer” (Muhammad 1992: 41) that is simultaneously a vehicle of divine retribution and earthly regeneration—that was transmitted to him through the master-disciple relationship that lasted from 1930 to 1933 (Hanegraaff 1998: 400). Muhammad declares:

Allah (God) who came in the Person of Master Fard Muhammad . . . taught me that this [Mother] plane will be used to raise mountains. The mountains that He will put on this earth will not be very high. He will raise these mountains to a height of one (1) mile over the United States of America. . . . The Mother Plane is . . . capable of not only staying up for long periods of time; but it is also capable of eluding the scientists. . . . Planes come out of the Mother Plane . . . [and] that after six months to a year, the Mother Plane comes into the gravity of the earth. It takes on oxygen and hydrogen in order to permit it to stay out of the earth’s gravity until it needs refueling again. (Muhammad 1973: 236–238)

Hence, the Mother Plane is a military vehicle that has the capability of evading American war and space technology. Muhammad suggests that the Prophet Ezekiel saw this Plane or Wheel in a prophetic vision thousands of years ago: “Ezekiel saw the Mother Plane in a vision according to the Bible, he looked up and saw this Plane (Ez. 1:16) and he called it a wheel because it was made like a wheel.” (Muhammad 1973: 238; cf. Muhammad 1965: 290). Michael Lieb’s *Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race, and the Advent of the End Time* (1998) offers a sustained analysis and interpretation of race and religion in interpolations of Ezekiel’s Wheel as a UFO, in particular in the NOI. In doing so, Lieb acknowledges—tacitly, at least—the importance and centrality of the Mother Wheel in NOI thought and cosmology. He commits the second half of his book, four chapters in all, to the NOI, race, and the Mother Wheel (Leib 1998: 129–229).

The “Children of Ezekiel,” Lieb argues, are those who seek to harness that power that is necessary for and gives rise to technology. This tendency is driven by an impulse to technologize the ineffable, the inexpressible, and the unknowable in order to make it intelligible. As a result, their narratives re-invent it (Ezekiel’s Wheel) or rather technomorphosize it in the form of a machine—encoded as a UFO—so as to master it in and on their own terms (Lieb 1998: 3–5). Such is, indeed, the case with the NOI, Louis Farrakhan, and others who read the Prophet Ezekiel’s vision of a Wheel (Ezk. 1) as a form of ancient astronaut theory in that the “wheel” is said to have been a UFO that was

inhabited by intelligent life (Partridge 2003: 24, 26). Farrakhan's Mother Wheel conforms to this category. To this end, I argue that the Mother Wheel concretizes NOI cosmology and belief—stabilizing and justifying it in and through a transcendent source. As such, attempts to apprehend the meaning of NOI belief and praxis fall short without taking seriously the ways in which the Wheel functions to symbolize the cosmic and social orders. In the discussion that follows, I demonstrate how two particular visionary experiences, one in 1955 and the other in 1985, help to frame a coherent narrative that will signal at multiple points the meaning of *Mother* in Farrakhan's Mother Wheel. It is in this context, I suggest, that the meaning of *Mother* in the Mother Wheel will be most clearly gleaned.

### Farrakhan's Visionary Experiences: 1955 and 1985

Indeed, the meaning of *Mother* in Farrakhan's "Mother Wheel" is rooted in his own experience as a member and minister of the NOI. Born Louis Eugene Walcott on May 11, 1933, Farrakhan joined the NOI in 1955 (Gardell 1996: 119). Prior to this, he was a musician and nightclub singer, whose religious background was Episcopal (Gardell 1996: 120). While performing one night at a Chicago night club called the Blue Angel, a friend suggested that he attend the NOI national convention, called Saviour's Day, and witness the main address by its leader, Elijah Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah (J. Muhammad 2006: x–xi). Farrakhan did not join until later, and he expressed having some trepidation based on class indicators, especially given Muhammad's lack of diction. He explains:

I, being a student of English, and verb and subject agreement, heard him speak in a manner that a public speaker who was familiar with English wouldn't do. So in my head I said, "O this man can't even talk." When I said that he looked right at me and said, "Brother, I didn't get a chance to get that fine education that you got. When I got to school the doors were closed . . . You pay attention to what I'm saying and then you take it and put it in that fine language that you know" . . . But looking back I see that he literally gave me my assignment the first day that he laid eyes on me. (J. Muhammad 2006: 334–335)

Farrakhan intimates that he was reticent about the organization and its leader based on Muhammad's inarticulate speech that seemed to indicate a lack of formal education. As if he had read Farrakhan's mind, Muhammad responded that he should listen to *what* he was saying, not *how* he was saying it. Farrakhan was astounded, and he wondered how

Muhammad knew exactly what he was thinking at the precise moment it was in his mind, saying, "I was a little frightened that he [Muhammad] seemed to know what I was thinking" (J. Muhammad 2006: 333). This incident also initiated the air of mystique with which Farrakhan would come to associate Muhammad. For him, Muhammad had no way of knowing who he was and what was going on in his mind, except by mysterious means.<sup>1</sup>

Farrakhan joined the NOI later in 1955 and began to attend Temple #7 in Harlem, whose minister was Malcolm X. According to Farrakhan, Malcolm began to see him less as a musician and more as a potential minister (J. Muhammad 2006: 336–337). Elijah Muhammad, who desired to control or at least to influence every aspect of the lives of Muslims, issued an edict that all NOI members who engaged in any form of professional entertainment had thirty days to leave those arenas and commit fully to Islam (J. Muhammad 2006: 336). Shortly thereafter, Farrakhan experienced the first phase of a vision that would give his life coherence. He recounts the event:

It was the last day, the 30th day or just about December 26th, or the 27th when I had this engagement in the Nevele Club. Nevele is eleven spelled backwards. It was a Jewish resort. I just said I'm going to get it all out of my system. I sang ballad. I sang some classical. I sang the blues. I played some classical violin. I played jazz violin . . . [Afterwards]<sup>2</sup> I went home to go to sleep. In the night, I saw these two doors. One had *success* written over it and a mound in the floor that came up, maybe as high as this table. It was almost like a pyramid of diamonds and gold. But the other door had *Islam* over it with a black veil over the door. I was told to choose. And I chose Islam. (J. Muhammad 2006: 336–337; see also, 111–113; Cf. Gardell 1996: 120–121)

Here, Farrakhan has an experience that will become more significant later. He frames it in the form of a vision that set up an oppositional binary: "*success*" or "*Islam*." The reference to diamonds and gold may suggest the potential for his economic "success" as a professional entertainer, but the binary indicates that something greater is to be gained through "Islam."

He extends his explanation of what appears to have been part of this same vision in 1955 by recounting the aspect that involved his

<sup>1</sup>Karl Evanzz contends that the whole episode was a sham and that Muhammad "targeted" Farrakhan not based on some secret wisdom or power that he held, but because someone had informed him of Farrakhan's presence, who he was, and where he was seated (Evanzz 2001: 168–169).

<sup>2</sup>Emphasis is mine.

membership form that he had filled out that year.<sup>3</sup> He suggests that the membership form that he completed in 1955 appeared in his vision. The form had a flip side on which something was written in *cursive*. He recalls that “two men” were discussing his form (J. Muhammad 2006: 338):

One said, “Turn it over.” There was cursive writing on my form. As I was trying to see what it was the voice on the right said to the voice on the left, “Turn it over. It’s not time for him to see this yet.” When they turned it over, like it was the front of my letter, and the back was empty. There was writing on it. Then when the man on the right said to the man on the left, to “turn it over it isn’t time for him to see it yet,” there was Arabic writing on it. (J. Muhammad 2006: 338)

On the Sunday after this vision, he reports, he attended services at NOI Temple #7 in Harlem, where Minister Malcolm X wrote two words on the board in Arabic. One word was “Allah” and the other was “Muhammad” (J. Muhammad 2006: 338). Farrakhan suggests that he immediately recognized them as the two words that were written on the form in his vision.<sup>4</sup> Farrakhan does not indicate that this was a dream. Rather, he frames it as an active, conscious event that he experienced as *real*. Needless to say, he committed to the NOI fully. That was 1955.

#### “THE ANNOUNCEMENT”: LOUIS FARRAKHAN AND HIS VISIONARY ENCOUNTER WITH THE MOTHER WHEEL

Regarding the events of 1985, Ted Koppel interviewed Louis Farrakhan on ABC’s *Nightline* on October 16, 1996, and he raised the issue of Farrakhan’s reported 1985 encounter with a UFO, calling the minister’s numerous discourses on the experience “gibberish” (Koppel 1998; Finley 2009: 350, 382, 386). Koppel’s interview of Farrakhan on the matter certainly may have contributed to public confusion on the issue rather than serious engagement, but to Minister Farrakhan, however, his words express anything but gibberish: a deeply and

<sup>3</sup>Farrakhan discusses the membership “form” as an extension of the episode with the two doors. It is not wholly clear whether or not they were separate occurrences in 1955 or if they were two parts of the same vision (J. Muhammad 2006: 337).

<sup>4</sup>Farrakhan describes what the Arabic words meant to him when he says “From this, then, I was being told that I was Muhammad,” but he does not indicate what it meant for him to be “Muhammad” (J. Muhammad 2006: 338).

profoundly religious event, without which one could scarcely make sense of his religious life and public activity (Finley, 2009: 367–368).

Brenda Denzler (2001: xiv–xv) argues that while the appearance of UFOs elicit tensions between science and the study of religion, UFO phenomena belong primarily in the field of Religious Studies because the “UFO movement was motivated at heart by essentially religious impulses” (154), and that “there are functionally religious valences to the experiences, interpretations, and beliefs of many of those who participate in the UFO community” (156–157). In short, UFOs are religious in the sense that they raise questions about the world (and the nature of the universe) and profound transformations of consciousness that have as a by-product the reconstruction of mythologies that explain the world and give meaning and coherence to an otherwise absurd existence (155–156).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, UFO narratives claim that such transformations of consciousness about human beings and the world are due to encounters with transcendence.

Theorizing specifically about African American religion, Anthony Pinn defines religion as “the recognition of and response to the elemental feeling for complex subjectivity and the accompanying transformation of consciousness that allows for the historically manifest battle against the terror of fixed identity” (Pinn 2003: 175). In this way, one could argue that both UFOs in Farrakhan’s NOI suggest a push or quest for complex subjectivity, in the manner in which UFOs offer them a sense of fullness of identity and meaning beyond racist and narrow constructions of *black* as limited and inferior, and an accompanying alteration in consciousness that moves them to push against such constrictions. Among the many ways that UFOs and extraterrestrials afforded the NOI complex subjectivity that subverted racism was with the identification of beings on planets such as Mars and Venus as “black,” therefore extending African American lineage and meaning beyond the material boundaries of America and the planet (Finley 2009: 93–94). Muhammad, for instance, maintained, “That’s the truth. You have people on Mars! Think how great you are. Ask the white man if he has any out there. We have life on other planets, but he don’t” (Muhammad 2002a: 167–168; cf. Muhammad 1993a: 8; Muhammad 2002b: 59). As a result of this complex subjectivity, members of the NOI see their significance as not strictly earthbound, and such cosmic consciousness imbues them in their quest for justice. Farrakhan and the NOI have to be interpreted in the context of such a worldview.

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<sup>5</sup>For Jeffrey Kripal (2010: 22), UFOs are religious phenomena, but also “mystical-physical.”

Modifying Michael A. Sells's work on mystical language (1994), Jeffrey J. Kripal (2010: 25) speaks of experiences such as Farrakhan's UFO encounter not only as religious, but also as *meaning events* that radically complicate traditional subject-object dualism inherent in notions of intentional structure of consciousness that posit a perceiving *subject* apprehending a definite *object*—in other words, that consciousness is always consciousness of something (Moran 2000: 16). Kripal (2010) remarks that:

We might also say that such paranormal phenomena are not dualistic or intentional experiences at all, that is, they are not about a stable "subject" experiencing a definite "object." They are about the irruption of meaning in the physical world via the radical collapse of the subject-object structure itself. They are not simply physical events. They are also *meaning events*. Jung's category of synchronicity, for example, is all about what we could easily and accurately call meaning events, that is, a moment in space and time where and when the physical world becomes a text to be read out and interpreted, where and when the event is structured not by causal networks of matter but by symbolic references producing meaning. (25–26)

What Kripal also points to is the inadequacy of science and current epistemological modalities, including those within modern trends in the academic study of religion, to account for experiences and phenomena which are neither ethereal nor physical but beyond where both the humanities and the sciences meet—they are *both* and require that theories of knowledge, religion, and reality account for consciousness *and* the material world (Kripal 2010: 22–24). This is a condition and place where, according to Kripal, "really, really weird shit happens" (26).

Along these lines, September 17, 1985, was just such a mystical-physical event—a *meaning event* in which Louis Farrakhan experienced the most important religious occurrence of his life.<sup>6</sup> With some of his most trusted companions, including his wife, Mother Khadijah Farrakhan, Mother Tynnetta Muhammad, and Jabril Muhammad, Minister Farrakhan took one of the numerous religious treks to mystical sites (including places such as Sedona, Arizona) that have become ritual

<sup>6</sup>I argue elsewhere (2009: 334 cf. 367–368) that this event is the most significant occurrence in the religious life of Louis Farrakhan, and, more than this, that Farrakhan's ministry and public life cannot be correctly understood without considering the meaning of his UFO encounter: "This esoteric, mystical, and epistemological experience of the Wheel is the organizing metaphor for interpreting black bodies, and it indeed provides the necessary narrative that gives ultimate coherence and purpose to his life and ministry" (Finley 2009: 334).



pilgrimages for the NOI and for New Age adherents. On this occasion, however, he and his group traveled to Tepoltzlan, Mexico, where they ascended Tepozteco Mountain in order to visit the ruins of a temple that was dedicated to the Aztec deity, Quetzalcoatl (Farrakhan 1989: 5–6). It was here that Farrakhan reports what can be described as an abduction experience or close encounter of the fourth kind (CE4) (Kripal 2010: 155), as he reports being taken or carried into a vehicle that he calls “the Mother Wheel” (Farrakhan 1986, 1989; J. Muhammad 2006). He links this encounter in 1985 with his vision of 1955.

The most poignant version of Farrakhan’s UFO encounter and the meaning of it in his life was delivered in what the minister called “The Announcement” on October 24, 1989 (Farrakhan 1989; Finley 2009: 346–364; J. Muhammad 2006: 377–388).<sup>7</sup> Farrakhan communicates the details of his “abduction” by the Mother Wheel in a press conference format that was held at the J. W. Marriott Hotel in Washington, D.C. In this speech, Farrakhan describes in detail the events from the 1985 religious excursion to Tepozteco Mountain in Tepotzlan, Mexico:

In a tiny town in Mexico, called Tepotzlan, there is a mountain on the top of which is the ruins of a temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl—the Christ-figure of Central and South America—a mountain which I have climbed several times. However, on the night of September 17, 1985, I was carried up on that mountain, in a vision, with a few friends of mine. As we reached the top of the mountain, a Wheel, or what you call an unidentified flying object, appeared at the side of the mountain and called to me to come up into the Wheel. Three metal legs appeared from the Wheel, giving me the impression that it was going to land, but it never came over the mountain. (Farrakhan 1989: 5–6; cf. Finley 2009: 348–349)

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Farrakhan’s entry into the events of September 17, 1985, is the manner in which he invokes the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl and the topography of Tepotzlan’s Tepozteco Mountain, particularly the temple, and he interprets the symbolic aspects of the location and the geographical characteristics as he constructs this “mountain-top” experience as the pinnacle of religious happenings.

Michael Lieb (1998: 206) makes a similar observation regarding the topographical characteristics of Farrakhan’s account of his vision, which

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<sup>7</sup>See (Finley 2009: 348, 43n) The Honorable Louis Farrakhan, “International Press Conference, J. W. Marriott Hotel, October 24, 1989,” [http://www.noi.org/statements/transcript\\_891024.htm/](http://www.noi.org/statements/transcript_891024.htm/) (Accessed on September 12, 2008).

the minister, then, used to construct himself anew as a “Christ-figure,” remarking:

I emphasize the topographic and mythological dimensions of Farrakhan’s account of his vision, first, because he calls attention to them himself and, second, because he is at pains to define himself and his experiences in these terms. Although he certainly does not say so explicitly, he would have himself viewed as a Quetzalcoatl-like figure whose own pilgrimages represent a return to some inchoate world of beginnings, a world that draws him into its matrix, there to undergo a process of individuation and reclamation. . . . In such a guise, Minister Louis Farrakhan enacts his own visionary journey, one that represents in effect the receipt both of a new identity and of a renewed calling through his own version of the inaugural vision of Ezekiel.

The topography and mystical symbolism of Quetzalcoatl conspired to thrust Farrakhan into a realm in which only the spiritually adept ascend and have access. The UFO was important since it translates him from the mundane world of materiality to the sacred realm of the ethereal—collapsing them both into one another. His encounter challenges, as Kripal indicates, the current epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality—particularly apodictic binary approaches that are either/or in their presumptions about the world (Kripal 2010: 9, 23). It is tempting, moreover, to speculate on the extent to which his explanation (or experience) may have been influenced by popular science fiction and cinema. His depiction of the Wheel, for instance, shares classical characteristics with UFOs such as those described in H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*, itself a circular or disk-shaped tripod (Hughes and Geduld 1993: 84), as well as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), in which the craft landed on Devils Tower. To push this line of inquiry further, however, would question the authenticity of his report, which is not the intent of my questioning.

What Farrakhan describes next is similar to other abduction narratives that are sometimes expressed in terms of visions in which “abductees” claim to have been carried into UFOs against their will, often by beams of light, which symbolize their chosenness and enlightenment (Leib 1998: 208). At this point, he still seems uncertain about the origins of the craft, which may account, at least in part, for his fear of it:

Being somewhat afraid, I called to the members of my party to come with me, but a voice came from the Wheel saying, “Not them; just you.” I was told to relax and a beam of light came from the Wheel and I was carried up on this beam of light into the Wheel. I sat next to the

pilot, however, I could not see him. I could only feel his presence. . . . I was escorted by the pilot to a door and admitted into a room. I shall not bother you with a description of the room, but suffice it to say that at the center of the ceiling was a speaker and through this speaker I heard the voice of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad speaking to me as clearly as you are hearing my voice this morning. He spoke in short cryptic sentences and as he spoke a scroll full of cursive writing rolled down in front of my eyes, but it was a projection of what was being written in my mind. (Farrakhan 1989: 6–7)

This is a pivotal moment that is key to understanding the Mother Wheel as indispensable in an analysis and interpretation of the NOI and Farrakhan. In fact, the minute details and subtle cues signify the depth and impact of this religious experience. First, he reports that he was afraid, so that he called for his companions to join him, but a dislocated voice from *somewhere* within the vehicle admonished him to relax. He was abducted—carried into the vehicle by a beam of light, which then whisked him away to the larger or Mother Wheel. His fear would have been justified at this point because he was still unaware of the nature and identity of the vehicle and the voices. Second, he reports encountering bodies, but not having tactile contact with them. His confirmation of their presence was affective—he could feel their presence. Yet he was certain of their identities. They were pilots. So, while he did not *see* them or *touch* them, the experience of consciousness was forcefully noetic in that he experienced these bodies as concrete and was decisive about their identities.

Similarly, two vague references confirm for him that this is an authentic encounter—indeed a meaning event—as he was escorted into an inner room within the craft. He observed more details than he reported, but he deems the aesthetic details of the space superfluous. He does note a speaker at the center of the ceiling, and he first hears a voice that he confirms with certainty was his mentor, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.<sup>8</sup> The second was the trope of “cursive writing” that

<sup>8</sup>I have argued elsewhere that part of the function of the reporting of this vision is to authorize *his* NOI vis-à-vis competing NOI movements and Warith Deen Mohammed, all of whom claim to be the legitimate legacy of Elijah Muhammad, who died in 1975. I claim: “It is also possible that the announcement was intended for followers of Warith Deen Mohammad and rival NOI groups such as the ones that Silis Muhammad, John Muhammad, and Royall Jenkins led—groups that were all founded after the death of Muhammad, which claimed to be legitimate and authentic successors to Muhammad’s NOI and that Farrakhan, in reality, corrupted his teachings” (Finley 2009: 355; cf. 363).

again connects, for him, 1985 to 1955. When he joined the Nation in 1955, recall that he reported, “There was cursive writing on my form” (J. Muhammad 2006: 338). Additionally, he “hears” the voice making cryptic statements, and he “sees” a scroll with his eyes, but all of this was a projection of his mind. The hearing and seeing was simply the conscious experience of what was being *written* in his mind (Kripal 2010: 165).<sup>9</sup>

Having foregrounded the dynamic religious and aesthetic details of his experience, Farrakhan then moves to what is ultimately the crux of the matter—namely, the purpose for which he had called the press conference and the substance of the knowledge that Muhammad imparted on the Mother Wheel. At this juncture, he makes his transition from the cryptic to the concrete. In so doing, he invokes the trope of cursive writing as an optical and aesthetic reference which he had attempted to read, suggesting that it disappeared, to one which then signaled an apparently direct second-person auditory engagement in which Muhammad spoke to him plainly:

As I attempted to read the cursive writing, which was in English, the scroll disappeared and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad began to speak to me. He said, “**President Reagan has met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to plan a war. I want you to hold a press conference in Washington, D.C., and announce their plan and say to the world that you got the information from me on the Wheel.**” He said to me that he would not permit me to see him at that time. However, he said that I had one more thing to do and when that one more thing was done that I could come again to the Wheel and I would be permitted to see him face to face. (Farrakhan 1989: 6, bold print appears in the original text)

Farrakhan had waited for four years from his experience of the Wheel to announce to the world what Muhammad had told him. In a fashion eerily reminiscent of an oracle, Farrakhan reports that the message that he received from Muhammad informed him of a secret war that would begin with Ronald Reagan and continue through the George H. W. Bush administration. Ostensibly, the meaning of the utterance was explicit—Reagan, Bush, with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell were planning a war, which Farrakhan interpreted

<sup>9</sup>Kripal (2010: 165) suggests that Barney Hill, who describes an abduction experience with his wife Betty on September 20, 1961, says something very similar about an experience of consciousness in which words were being imprinted in his mind, although Barney did not “hear” a voice. It may also be significant that Betty and Barney were a mixed “race” couple.

as being against Libya and Moammar Qaddafi (Farrakhan 1989: 9–10; Finley 2009: 358–362).

Why did he wait for four years, given that the fulfillment of his yearning to see the Messenger Muhammad again was contingent upon reporting what he learned from his encounter? Farrakhan reports that the delay was necessary due to the cryptic nature of the prophetic utterance. Now it all made sense. The oracle had two meanings, the first of which indeed referred to Qaddafi, who was a friend to Farrakhan and the NOI, but ultimately even this symbolized the hidden meaning of the second reference, which was devastatingly genocidal. The war that Ronald Reagan started and bequeathed to George H. W. Bush was in fact a planned systematic extermination of black people, African American youth, and the NOI under the guise of a "war on drugs" in which intentionally deceptive discourses about black youth in major American cities as "Crips and Bloods," drug dealers, and drug users would function in service and justification of public policies and practices that would lead to the deliberate destruction of black people under the guise of "extremely urgent national security" (Farrakhan 1989: 9–10). Just say no, indeed.<sup>10</sup>

Farrakhan ends by warning the United States against such covert plans and suggests that the Mother Wheel is there as a protection to black people, who are "people of God" (Farrakhan 1989: 14–15). Soon, he cautions, all of America will see the Wheel or the smaller wheels over the major cities as evidence that God is active. They will see UFOs everywhere, lest anyone mock him or fail to take him seriously (Farrakhan 1989: 16; Finley 2009: 362–363),<sup>11</sup> and that the government is fully aware of the existence of the Wheel (Farrakhan 1986, 1987; Finley 2009: 363–364). He ends his public oracle with a reminder that the troubles that America was experiencing would increase in order that they might heed the "Warning contained in this Announcement" (Farrakhan 1989: 16).

What Farrakhan employs here is a form of what Kripal calls "alien hermeneutics" in the sense that, for those who experience them, such encounters call into question the history of human belief and the origin of religion and render received reality suspect (Kripal 2010: 126, 191).

<sup>10</sup>And Powell could also be used to justify sending African American, Hispanic, Native American, and parenthetically, poor white people to foreign lands such as Panama and Columbia and then onto Cuba and Africa to fight against liberation movements there, he intimates" (Finley 2009: 361; cf. Farrakhan 1989: 13).

<sup>11</sup>"Before you can call me a nut or call me crazy, these wheels will be seen all over America. . ." (Farrakhan 1986).

In this case, however, Farrakhan intimates that not only are UFOs *real*, but the entire history of the world is in doubt. That is to say, such divine vehicles—wheels or indeed the Mother Wheel—have been around since antiquity, and thousands, perhaps millions have seen them but misrecognized them as unidentified flying objects, when they were, in fact, the vehicle of destruction and regeneration that protects Farrakhan and gives him meaning and inspiration (Finley 2009: 386–387). Regardless of whether or not one grants the literal truth of Farrakhan’s UFO claim—which may be irrelevant anyway since William James reminds us that such mystical happenings only have authority over the person claiming them and that those external to the declaration are not bound to accept its authenticity uncritically (James 2002: 460–465)—he experienced these events as *real*.

What I mean by “real” can be summarized in the following interrelated concepts of Carl Jung, Lieb, and James. Farrakhan’s “abduction” in which he was taken into the Wheel against his will to encounter the Messenger as oracle was a numinous experience that drastically changed his consciousness and hence his religious and political activity. As such, one could argue that the experience was true in terms of pragmatic realism because of the fruits that it bore as seen in the subsequent activities (James 2002: 411). On the other hand, the Mother Wheel may be apprehended *real* with respect to the middle-ground meaning of the term. This is neither to say that it was literal nor that it was pathological but that it was real, Jung would contend, because as numinous,<sup>12</sup> the psychological images act upon the experiencer as concrete (Jung 1978: 7, 16, 20–22, 37, 39, 109–111). Related to this, Lieb counts Farrakhan’s experience as real and in keeping with prior enactments of mystical traditions of transport to alternate and higher realms to convening with that which is unknowable and potentially dangerous (Lieb 1998: 200–201). He suggests that the details of his encounter with the Mother Wheel were an “actual occurrence” circumscribed by time and space as a psychological phenomenon within the unconscious of the visionary (Lieb 1998: 199).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>And I am intentionally conjuring Otto’s sense of the numinous as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* as that experience of consciousness of feeling totally overcome by and in communion with something wholly other (Otto 1923: 3–24).

<sup>13</sup>Should anyone seek to dismiss Farrakhan’s claim as merely subjective, he reports seeing the Wheel outside the window of his plane on his international excursion after his abduction and that what he saw with his eyes also showed up on radar (CE2 or close encounter of the second kind), was witnessed by Japanese pilots, and interfered with the communications of an American aircraft carrier (Farrakhan 1986). He says that the movie *Independence Day* was based on this sighting (Koppel 1998).

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## THE MEANING OF *MOTHER* IN FARRAKHAN'S "MOTHER WHEEL": FOUR PROPOSITIONS

What I have suggested thus far is that the abduction narrative of Farrakhan's *in-corporation* into the Mother Wheel is the quintessential religious experience of his life, and that without it, attempted scholarly interpretations of his religious life and related political activities lack coherence and copious meaning. Furthermore, failure to give adequate attention to theory of religion can lead to the misrecognition of the UFO encounter and its subsequent enactments as something other than *meaning events* of religious and ultimate importance to the Minister. Having stated this, I maintain that the meaning of *Mother* is encoded in this Mother Wheel, as that technology which discloses ultimate reality, and therefore a critical inquiry into its subtextual implications can reveal data that are cosmological in nature. To this end, a close scrutiny of Farrakhan's discourses on the Wheel suggests four propositions for the meaning of *Mother*, all of which could be more or less significant and tell us something about the NOI's ultimate conception of race, gender, and sexuality. All of the possibilities, I argue, can be related to the pre-oedipal primary narcissism, which is the realm of psychoanalytic object relations theory (Jonte-Pace 1987: 313–318; Greenberg and Mitchell 1983; Kohut 1978). Further still, object relations theory concerns people's relationships with others and their interactions with them (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983: 2), and more specifically, confronts the reality that people live simultaneously in internal and external worlds and "explor[es] the relationship between real, external people and internal images and residues of relations with them, and the significance of these residues for psychic functioning" (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983: 12).

Along these lines, the first proposition for the meaning of *Mother* in Farrakhan's Mother Wheel is that the category may signify abstract conceptions such as truth, freedom, and purity that are often represented in the feminine—ideas such as wisdom. Like the Statue of Liberty, otherwise known as "Lady Liberty" who ostensibly represents freedom and hope and the presumed political purity of such ideas, *Mother* may indicate puritanical abstractions. Heinz Kohut's famous essay on "Forms and Transformations of Narcissism" suggests a connection to his notion of *idealized parent imago* (Kohut 1978: 434). One could argue, then, that attempts to cast *Mother* as an abstract conception of perfection and related notions are connected to an impulse or need to re-create the perfection and character of the original primary narcissism, that is, one's mother, "but within a view of the world in which the I-you

differentiation has not yet been established” (Kohut 1978: 430; cf. 431–434). This suggests that *Mother* as Mother Wheel may be a representation of the *idealized parent imago* as a godlike, romanticized parental unit which is *perfect* and *perfection*. Furthermore, Jung reminds us, for instance, that the shape of *Mother* as a round Mother Wheel could contribute to its implication as perfection, completion, and totality—abstractions which may then indicate the divine meaning of the principles it represents (Jung 1978: 19–21).<sup>14</sup>

Notwithstanding its shape, *Mother*, more specifically, may represent atavistic conceptualizations, in a similar way that “mother land” (hooks 1992: 142–143) can function as indicative of pure ancestral and uncontaminated cosmological essence, which again bespeaks Kohut’s *idealized parent imago*. Along these lines, Daniel Madigan writes that the phrase “Mother of the Book” (*Umm al-kitāb*) appears in the Qur’ān only three times (Q 3.7; 13.39; 43.4) and that “mother” (*umm*) implies “essence” or “heavenly archetype” (Madigan 2001: 247). Connected to such a meaning, *Mother* grounds black bodies in the world as immanent-transcendence and at the same time renders the symbol *Mother* transcendental, in the sense that the signifier that gives meaning to these bodies may not be viewed as historically and existentially complex and messy but as ideal in a way that is not affected by experience in the world. Which is to say, no matter how complex identity is, it is ultimately stabilized by appeal to *Mother* as originary. Farrakhan himself says, for example, “We are a strange people in your midst. . . . You look at us, but you do not know us. . . . We are people of the Wheel. It protects us, it guides us, it stands as a constant reminder of our difference, our otherness” (Lieb 1998: 219; Finley 2009: 374). In this way, essence precedes existence, to reverse the Sartrean maxim (Sartre 1956: 25, 549; Gordon 1995: 102; Finley 2009: 48–49, 68n), for the Mother Wheel is that unchanging, transcendental technology that ultimately defines black bodies everywhere and symbolizes the abstract conceptions that escape concretization yet gives them meaning in the world in service of their liberation.

A second proposition for the meaning of *Mother* in Farrakhan’s Mother Wheel is “mother” as a reference to greatness and grandness of black intellect as well as technical superiority. That is to say, *Mother* deployed in this manner functions to indicate that the Wheel is the “mother of all wheels” (or planes), which is in fact a phrase that Elijah

<sup>14</sup>Diane Jonte-Pace (1996) suggests that *mother* in Freudian thought can also refer to the abstract concepts of mortality (death), afterlife, and immortality.



Muhammad used on occasion. Confirming my reading, Muhammad proclaims, "There is no known equal of the Mother Plane. This is the reason she is called Mother Plane. . . . She has no equal" (Muhammad 1992: 55). Likewise, Farrakhan follows Muhammad in using the same phrase, "the mother of all wheels," to refer to the Mother Wheel (Lieb 1998: 159), which, again, designates intellectual and creative pre-eminence. Since the Mother Wheel is the greatest mechanical accomplishment in the universe, the adjective *Mother* emphasizes its "superiority" and incomparability. Muhammad describes it like this: "The Wheel is the most wonderful and the most miraculous mechanical building of plane [*sic*] that has ever been imagined by man" (Muhammad 1965: 291; 1992: 28).

Farrakhan appropriates Muhammad's usage of *Mother* as a strategic redeployment that ties his vision to the apocalyptic declarations of his mentor. And the immensity of the Wheel serves as a sign of Farrakhan's own greatness, the truthfulness of his vision, and the legitimacy and authority of his leadership of and reconstitution of the NOI despite the numerous competing claims to the rights of Muhammad's legacy.<sup>15</sup> Muhammad taught that the Wheel was a human built planet that was one-half mile by one-half mile (Muhammad 1992: 28, 46), and this enormity is exactly what Farrakhan was able to confirm. He has seen the Wheel just as Muhammad described it, and it was indeed "the mother of all Wheels," the technology of all technologies. Therefore, not only does *Mother* point to the Wheel as the greatest engineering feat in history, the Mother Wheel itself points to black bodies, including Farrakhan's, as the most spiritually adept, most historic, and most intelligent in the universe, and:

These planes [the smaller UFO wheels] are flown by the Original People, a people whose wisdom is far superior to all the scientists of this world. We had a wisdom before the White man was a thought and that was superior to his wisdom. He is just a little baby and that [Mother] plane is a sign of that greater wisdom. They can't touch it. They can't knock it down. There is no rocket that they have that can reach it. (Farrakhan 1986)

Such wisdom and technology is so colossal that it could not remain unknown to the government and the powers that be. Farrakhan maintains that Presidents Reagan, Ford, Carter, and all the presidents since

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<sup>15</sup>More than a dozen such rival groups arose after Muhammad's "death" (Lieb 1998: 180; Finley 2009: 355–356).

1930 (incidentally, when Master Fard “arrived” in North America) have known that the Mother Wheel exists, but that they do not want to admit “that there is a power and technology in the world” (Farrakhan 1986) which renders Western technology inferior (Finley 2009: 372–373; cf. Koppel 1998).

So *Mother*, in this case, is a code for technological and intellectual greatness and the vastness of black creativity and black bodies. They are symbolized by the Wheel, which participated in the creation of the world, and was built by the greatest minds in the universe (Muhammad 1965: 291). Regarding Farrakhan, in particular, the Wheel also signifies his greatness and importance. That is to say, as humans attempt to develop healthy selves, Kohut argues, they often remember or seek to merge with parental units or their representations, primarily with mothers, since Kohut is theorizing the domain of the pre-oedipal. One of the ways in which this happens is through the grandiose self or *narcissistic self*. He explains that “in contrast to the idealized parent imago, which is gazed at in awe, admired, looked up to, and like which one wants to become, the narcissistic self wants to be looked at and admired” (Kohut 1978: 436). The *narcissistic self* experiences the *ego ideal* as “coming from above” (Kohut 1978: 435) as it attempts to live (“from below”) up to the perfection and godlike qualities of the *idealized parent imago*.

Therefore, vis-à-vis the Mother Wheel and the meaning and significance that Farrakhan draws from it, one can say that Farrakhan is “led by ideals and pushed by ambitions” (Kohut 1978: 435). Lest my interpretation be misconstrued here, let me be clear that, for Kohut, *narcissism* was not a pejorative term as it is in the popular sense of the word. He notes that “. . . narcissism, the libidinal investment of the self, is per se neither pathological nor obnoxious” (Kohut 1978: 427; cf. 429), but realistic self-esteem and self-confidence. For him, narcissism was adaptive and necessary for the development of a healthy self that was the forerunner of object love (Kohut 1978: 460). Rather, Farrakhan’s identification with the Wheel may be viewed as a healthy attempt to counter the racist American cultural narratives that have excluded some based on race, gender, and other factors. Moreover, his perception of his own greatness and the depth and importance he ascribes to black bodies can be framed in terms of an *ego ideal*, which is “the internalized image of perfection which we admire and to which we are looking up . . .” (Kohut 1978: 440). In this sense and to this end, I argue that the Wheel is this internalized image of perfection and that *Mother* signifies its greatness. *Mother* is the ideal to which Farrakhan aspires, and such fantasies “provide [adaptively] lasting support for the personality” (Kohut 1978: 440). The Mother Wheel is, indeed, the *Mother* of all technology,

the greatest feat known to humanity, which symbolizes the magnitude of the people and their God who are responsible for its existence.

The third proposition for the meaning of *Mother* in Farrakhan's Mother Wheel is that it is a feminine deflection or veil for homoerotic impulses that might conflict with the NOI's worldview and subvert their notions of masculinity. In other words, the real longing for the "Mother" Wheel is not the vehicle itself but for its male occupants, and Farrakhan expresses a deeply felt desire to "unite" with his teacher and mentor.<sup>16</sup> Jung holds erotic psychoanalytic interpretations of UFOs in tension with other psychological readings. Though he grants some validity to Freud's contention that the shape of UFOs are sexually suggestive, such as round or disk-shaped crafts like the Mother Wheel representing uteri or vaginal symbols (Finley 2007a: 323; Freud 1953: 200; 1966: 192, 358), the conflict arises for him because the pilots of such crafts are masculine (Jung 1978: 27–30). But this is exactly the case with Farrakhan and the Mother Wheel that I wish to raise.

It is entirely possible that *Mother* of Mother Wheel functions to deflect homoerotic desire, since the intense longing is for contact with the male occupants of the vehicle, in particular Elijah Muhammad (Jung 1978: 37–38, 117). Farrakhan himself expressed this in his "announcement" when he said that Muhammad told him that he had one more thing to do, then "when that one more thing was done . . . I could come again to the Wheel and I would be permitted to see him face to face" (Farrakhan 1989: 6). As a result, my claim here is not that *Mother* represents an oedipal conflict, though *Mother* may be eroticized in this instance. Conversely, pre-oedipal issues present themselves as foremost possibilities. In this sense, *Mother* may function opaquely as insulation from longing desire for intimacy with male bodies. My interpretation of Kohut supports this reading of the *Mother* as homoerotic diffusion when he claims that "The intimate relationship between idealization and narcissism is attested to by the fact that homosexual libido is always predominantly involved, even when the object is of the opposite sex" (Kohut 1978: 431). What I think he means here by "homosexual libido" is what I am framing as a homoerotic investment of psychic energy that is not explicitly sexual but is directed toward a same-sex object despite the ostensible longing for *Mother* (see Finley 2007a; Finley and Simon 2010). When one is invested in a cultural *selfobject*—Kohut's concept for figures throughout life whom we meaningfully

<sup>16</sup>In this sense and in Kohutian terms, Muhammad would be a cultural selfobject for Farrakhan, with whom he can merge and identify in his quest for self-fulfillment (Miller and Carlin 2010: 35).

substitute for parental units—who is male, it is not necessarily “homosexual” but rather aim-inhibited homoerotic or male narcissism, which is to say, “male bonding” in which homosexual energy is repressed (Freud 1961: 56–58, 70). *Mother* as Mother Wheel functions in service of this deflection and avoidance.

This is significant for a few reasons. One, many other permutations of Ezekiel’s Wheel (Ezk. 1) that are read as ancient UFOs are read as “Father” rather than mother, so it is not a given but a rendering that the Wheel should be distinguished as *Mother* (Lieb 1998: 158). For instance, Lieb argues that many similarities exist between the Mother Wheel and the “Chariot of Paternal Deitie” in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*—both of which derive their primary impetus from Ezekiel’s *visio Dei* (parenthetically, Malcolm X realized the similarities and hence was a fan of *Paradise Lost*) (Lieb 1998: 155). The point here is that what was *paternal* for Milton becomes *maternal* for Farrakhan (Lieb 1998: 156), which heightens questions about the utility of gender and parental categories and seems to point to the possibility that *Mother* performs strategically. Though Muhammad inherited this notion from Master Fard, Farrakhan makes the Mother Wheel his own in his interpretation of it and relationship to it for his life.

Two, along those same lines, we sometimes observe that in circumstances that are “homosocial,” in the way that Manning Marable describes the NOI, by which he means “it was deeply, deeply male centered” (Finley 2007b), women are often used to affirm male “normality.” Consider, for example, the American sports that are regarded as the most masculine, such as professional football and basketball, that are predicated on excessive bodily contact between men and even honorific and supererogatory physical exchanges like hugging and congratulatory butt slapping. In such arenas, cheerleaders who are sexualized (especially in their attire) are almost always present, dancing or performing in some way that emphasizes their bodies. Like *Mother* as Mother Wheel, this may be a means to deflect (what may be unconscious) homoerotic discomfort, and conversely, attractive admiring women may support, stabilize, and normalize masculinity on the field or in the arena (Kurman 1986: 58, 61; Davis 1990: 155; cf. Finley and Simon 2010: 7, 15–17, 21).<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, sexual and erotic components are essential aspects of UFO abduction narratives (Kripal 2010: 164–166), but the accounts of the

<sup>17</sup>This is a line of reasoning that I first gleaned from a February 2008 conversation with Jennifer R. Scanlon of Bowdoin College during my visit there.

abducted and the concomitant erotogenic objects are overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, heteronormative. In one sense, the homoerotic predicament makes Farrakhan's narrative unique and bears future investigation that is not possible in this limited space. Nonetheless, it is altogether feasible that *Mother*, as a feminine category, functions to divert what may otherwise pose an explicit homosocial and an implicit homoerotic quandary in the psyche of the Minister. Which is to say, *Mother* may ostensibly prevent this from becoming a conflict that is difficult for Farrakhan resolve. Consequently, *Mother* as Mother Wheel mediates the encounter, obfuscating and superficially refracting the erotic undertones evident in his longing for Muhammad and for Fard, who was also present within the Mother Wheel (Farrakhan 1986).

A fourth proposition for the meaning of *Mother* in Farrakhan's Mother Wheel is that of an analogue to motherhood and the attending notions of pregnancy and birth. Read in Freudian and Jungian terms, the inner core of the Mother Wheel could be conceived (no pun intended) as a symbolic womb or uterus (Freud 1966: 192; Finley 2007a: 322). Jung was aware of the analogy, suggesting that "There are large mother-ships from which little Ufos slip out or in which they take shelter" (Jung 1978: 11). This is consistent with the Mother Wheel, which carries within it 1500 of what Farrakhan refers to as "little wheel-like planes" (Farrakhan 1987), following Muhammad's teachings on the matter. What is more curious is that Muhammad referred to these little wheels, in fact, as "baby wheels" and in accordance with him, Farrakhan calls them "baby wheels" and "baby planes" (Gardell 1996: 213; T. Muhammad 1986: 23; Lee 1996: 121).

Sexuality is implicated here, as a result, and heterosexuality is normative since *Mother* is the ideal that is represented through the symbols of "motherhood." Likewise, *Mother* in this sense also means "regeneration" or (re)birth, which makes sense given that Muhammad said the Wheel would (re)create the earth after destroying evil. Lieb characterizes it this way: "Through her, the universe came into being, through her, it will be destroyed, through her it will be renewed" (Lieb 1998: 169). In addition, heterosexual processes of "mothering" can be seen in the symbolic birthing of the 1500 "babies" within her. What should we make, then, of Farrakhan's *in-corporation* into the symbolic womb of the "mother" that he expresses in his abduction narrative? One way is to view it in Freudian terms as "phantasies of being in the womb," a pre-oedipal regression to a womb-like experience or, as Heinz Kohut describes, as a primary narcissism prior to subject-object distinction (Kohut 1978: 430), in which he may feel love, union, and closeness and as a primal fantasy such as that which Freud also connects to what he

calls “Family Romances” (Freud 1962: 90 1n). As intellectual growth occurs, Freud intimates, some individuals, feeling slighted in life, fantasize about their parents—that they would somehow have been more important people and by extension that the individuals themselves would, therefore, be more significant (Freud 1959: 235–241). While Freud indicates that family romances typically fantasize about replacing both parents or simply the father, in a case such as Farrakhan’s, in which he was raised by a single mother, never getting to know his father who died a few years after his birth, it seems possible that the fiction would focus on his mother.

What this suggests, then, is that the Mother Wheel is a type of fantasized *Mother* or, as suggested earlier, an *idealized parent imago*, for Farrakhan, who, through the abduction narrative, envisions himself returning to her womb and being (re)born as someone profoundly significant. Indeed, the Mother Wheel is his *real* “mother” and indicates who he really is. He expresses it this way explicitly in relation to the Mother Wheel: “I don’t mean to boast. I am more than what you I think I am, and I am more than what I thought I was . . .” (Farrakhan 1986). In fact, Farrakhan hints at this possible reading of the Mother Wheel as analogical *Mother* in his own pre-oedipal psychoanalytic object relations theory. Thus, he indicates that the black womb is divine, and that prenatal influences affect babies as they develop throughout their lives, in particular if the mother desired or tried to have an abortion, which was the case of his own mother with himself (Gardell 1996: 335). To this end, he says of his biological mother, “She begs the pardon of God for trying to kill this which was in her womb, but she marked me with her own thinking” (Gardell 1996: 335). In his own words, his mother’s wish for an abortion wounded his subconscious mind in a way that affected him (and would affect any child) throughout his lifespan and accounts for many of his mistakes. But the Mother Wheel as *Mother* allows him renewal and new life as this mother, as Jung frames it, is a technological angel (Jung 1978: 16; Vallee 1979: 14) through whose love he is able to be benevolent toward others because of who he is.

#### RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN THE COSMOLOGY OF THE NATION OF ISLAM’S UFO: A CONCLUSION

The preceding four propositions may overlap, but taken together, they reveal something about the nature of NOI cosmology or, more generally, the NOI’s sense of order in the universe that Farrakhan and the NOI connect to their divine origins. Again, the four interpretations

were: (i) *Mother* as signifier abstract conceptions such as truth and freedom, but also of pure and undefiled cosmological essence that is transcendental and serves to identify Farrakhan and the NOI and attend their liberation; (ii) *Mother* as reference to grandness or greatness, that the Mother Wheel was the "mother of all Wheels" and therefore points to its magnitude but also to the bodies and intellect of those who are identified by/with it; (iii) *Mother* as deflection for homoerotic impulses directed toward Elijah Muhammad and male occupants of the craft; (iv) *Mother* as analogue for biological mothering and re-visioning family of origin.

My contention here is that the Mother wheel as cosmologically encoded says something significant about race, gender, sexuality, particularly in the signifier *Mother*. Furthermore, *Mother* represents cosmological realities that function as a hermeneutic that opens an aperture, allowing us to understand Farrakhan and the NOI more clearly. My suggestion is that Farrakhan is the primary purveyor of these ideas, but that they are prominent among the members of the NOI,<sup>18</sup> even though the meaning of *Mother* in the Mother Wheel circumscribes and constrains ideologies and activities of the group.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, some of what *Mother* means for Farrakhan's religious worldview has already been made explicit. Consequently, I make some brief caveats that I hope will bring them to the forefront.

Implied by *Mother* as Mother Wheel, foremost, is that race is metaphysical for Farrakhan and the NOI. In particular, black bodies are cosmic, given that they are defined by/through *Mother*, who is transcendental. I argue elsewhere that identifying black bodies with the Mother Wheel points to their interstellar and ancient existence as remnants of extraterrestrial people who are related to black bodies on planets throughout the solar system (Finley 2009: 100–202; 328–388). Muhammad declares, for instance, "Now they have also given us pictures of Mars, a planet that have [*sic*] life on it, they have been peeping in the windows of Mars that life there looks near like us. . . . They [i.e., scientists] might know a little something about us if they had

<sup>18</sup>This can be seen most clearly in the writings of the most prominent members and religious thinkers other than Farrakhan—for instance, Mother Tynnetta Muhammad and Jabril Muhammad—but in my experience "everyday" members of the NOI are able to articulate them (see, for example, T. Muhammad 1986; J. Muhammad 2006; J. Muhammad 2007).

<sup>19</sup>In the background is the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas whom I understand as positing a relationship between bodies, social systems, and cosmologies (and cognition). In this regard, I am arguing that this relationship is revealing, but it is also constraining so that the Mother Wheel and what it means in terms of NOI cosmology limits and circumscribes Farrakhan's ideological boundaries (Douglas 1978, 1986, 2002, 2003).

telescopes . . .” (Muhammad 1993b: 63). Hence, “black” is a surplus category that carries far more meaning than that of deployment and signification in the United States. Despite this cosmic connotation, *black* also has material meaning that lies outside the category, since the term refers generally to Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans, as well as those who are signified by historic reference of the term in the United States, otherwise known as “African Americans” (Muhammad 1992: 25, 27, 54).

Farrakhan follows Muhammad in this understanding of *black*, which we can see actualized in his work among the Hopi and Navaho directly after his Wheel experience, with the founding of the Latino Nation of Islam, and with his relationships with many Asian communities, including Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church (now the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification) (Finley 2009: 365–381). I would argue, however, that within what the NOI calls “the Original Family” (Farrakhan 1986) represented by the aforementioned groups, African Americans are privileged as the *black* standard which functions hegemonically in relation to other groups in the “Original Family.” But again, this racial category is primarily metaphysical rather than biological, and it is *Mother* that points to Farrakhan’s and the NOI’s ideal origins. It seems likely that his own family romance is at work here and that it merged with existing racial mythologies that existed in the NOI regarding the larger racial and cultural meaning of *black* an expansive family of people and further to include extraterrestrial life.

Similarly, *Mother* points to the racial genius of black people, not the least of which were the *black* Japanese scientists who engineered the Mother Wheel. Indeed, the Mother Wheel is the “mother” of all technologies, scientific and engineering feats, and intelligence. *Mother*, therefore, signifies all black bodies. It is a metaphor for them. It offers an ideal to which all black bodies can and should aspire. Though colonized, lynched, enslaved, and oppressed, they are heirs to the mother of all technologies and have only to live their possibilities and realize them in the material world. Subsequently, as the mother of all planes, the Wheel means that black bodies have the potential to survive death ostensibly, since Farrakhan encountered Elijah Muhammad and Master Fard Muhammad in the womb of *Mother* (Farrakhan 1986; Finley 2009: 369–371). Hence, the Wheel discloses the secret knowledge of life and death and the afterlife of which *Mother* has the power to give and to take (Jonte-Pace 1996). The metaphysical genius of the black race, then, which is unknown to the world, is its vast technological depth and the potential perseverance and endurance of its bodies that are unconcealed in/by *Mother*. But the world does not want to admit “that



there is a power and technology in the world" that renders Western science and intelligence inferior, Farrakhan argues (Farrakhan 1987; Finley 2009: 373).

*Mother* as Mother Wheel also tells us something about gender and sexuality in the cosmology of NOI. We learn that women as mothers are understood as burden bearers. While the function of *Mother* is to transmit liberating abstract conceptions such as freedom and truth, she also represents pure essence that identifies black bodies, as iterated earlier in this article. She carries the symbolic weight of the black race, because she is a metaphor for them. Moreover, *Mother* as Mother Wheel protects black bodies and in particular Farrakhan's body. Consider his warning to the U.S. government after his encounter on the Wheel: "If I just get scratched accidentally by you, you will be destroyed completely" (Farrakhan 1986; Finley 2009: 373). Of course, it is the Mother Wheel that would do the destroying. I am suggesting that *Mother* as Mother Wheel is consistent with gendered relations within Farrakhan's NOI and is in fact the source of them. Again, *Mother* is the ideal which both constrains and glorifies black bodies. Take, for example, Farrakhan's lecture leading up to the Million Man March, which was an enactment of the Mother Wheel, according to Lieb (1998: 200–201). Farrakhan had this to say about woman:

Who are you? What makes you so special? Sisters you have carried us, not only in your womb, but you have carried us on your backs, for over four hundred years, and now God has come to relieve you of that burden, and make a man for you that you will be proud to honor and respect. (Farrakhan 1996: 108)

What is the reward for women being burden bearers for men and black communities both in their wombs and on their backs? "A man," Farrakhan answers. And I argue, here, that Farrakhan is constrained by a cosmology that limits not only his activities but also his view of the world, so that even while he may sincerely believe he is honoring women, he seems unconscious of his own duplicity. A man to "honor and respect" reproduces rather than disrupts a domestic system of hierarchy that privileges men, and again, makes women bear the burden for healthy children, homes, and communities—and of course, men.

To this end, Farrakhan argues that the womb (a recurring theme for him) is the sacred location that is the genesis of good or bad that happens in black communities (Farrakhan 1996: 109). Whatever the case, like *Mother* as Mother Wheel that symbolizes her, she bears the burdens and ultimately the responsibility for the successes or failures of

the Black Nation. She can give life and death. In particular, *Mother* carries and glorifies male bodies that are the real purpose for the attributes and activities of the Wheel. Like the male pilots of the Mother Wheel, men control her inner workings and processes (Finley and Simon 2010: 3–22).<sup>20</sup> Likewise, her symbolic womb was the visionary location for the profoundly religious encounter between Muhammad and Farrakhan, because *Mother*, as Mother Wheel in this case, was pure and uncontaminated. But biological women who live in the material world are not the ideal, as is *Mother*. Implied in this, notwithstanding, is that *Mother* as Mother Wheel indicates a heteronormative cosmology. Heterosexual relations are necessary for “babies,” symbolized by the 1500 “baby wheels,” and the Mother Wheel as archetype is framed in terms of the performance mothering and motherhood. As such, “homosexuality” is discouraged despite Farrakhan’s claims against being portrayed as homophobic (Finley 2009: 427).

Finally, I want to suggest that the circumstances of Farrakhan and the Mother Wheel lend themselves to both object relational and a classical psychoanalytic explanations, and that together, rather than being exclusive, they have a greater interpretive strength.<sup>21</sup> I have already described the classical Freudian reading of *Mother* as indicating Farrakhan’s *family romance*. By way of object relations theory, I wish to extend that line of reasoning here by suggesting that because mainstream cultural narratives (e.g., the “American dream”) often exclude or do not work for oppressed groups in the sense of giving their lives meaning and coherence, one alternative is to create new narratives from sources that are not under the control of dominant and oppressive systems. In the case of object relations and its province—the pre-oedipal primary narcissism—one strategy is through merger with an “alien” other (an *idealized parent imago*) who is more technologically vast, more historically ancient, more spiritually adept, and more intelligent than those in dominating power relationships with marginalized communities in a given society. Such counter-narratives—new mythologies—have to be created in order to survive in a hostile culture. These

<sup>20</sup>In this article, we argue that men in Elijah Muhammad’s NOI controlled women’s bodies through a complex arrangement of edicts and dietary codes that functioned to police traditional female domestic spaces. Furthermore, control was extended to her inner body, including not just what she ate, but her use of birth control, menstruations, etc.

<sup>21</sup>William Parsons argues that studies on psychoanalysis take three forms: classical, in which religion is seen a pathological (Freudian); adaptive, which includes forms like object relations in which religion is viewed as transitional and as a means to healthy existence; and transformative/transformation, in which it is used to uncover what some see as legitimate encounters with transcendence (Parsons 1999: 123–139; Parsons 1997: 355–361).

narratives serve the purpose of creating new symbols and figures that one can then idealize and with whom they can merge (in the Kohutian sense) in the formation of healthy selves with regard to black people generally or who one is, as in Farrakhan's case individually.

Hence, Farrakhan's and the NOI's insistence that black people are related to "aliens" or black bodies on other planets becomes coherent (Finley 2009: 100–202; 328–388). The "alien" others on distant planets, who are really extensions of African Americans who are related to them, offer means of transcendence, meaning-making symbols and mythology, and a source in which to re-envision *black* origins. The Mother Wheel brings this to fruition and realization in a powerful way for Farrakhan and the NOI. Therefore, Farrakhan can say about black bodies that "We are a strange people in your midst. . . . You look at us, but you do not know us. . . . We are people of the Wheel. It protects us, it guides us, it stands as a constant reminder of our difference, our otherness" (Lieb 1998: 219). And the adjectival category *Mother* reveals Farrakhan's and the NOI's cosmology. In fact, this may be the most creative re-envisioning of symbolism, mythology, and history that Farrakhan and the NOI offer. They take UFOs, various religious symbols found in Native American religion, Christianity, Islam, Freemasonry, and more, and fashion a religious narrative which then signifies African Americans as "alien" Others, who are utterly mystical and far more vast and ancient than the western narratives that construct "black" as inferior. In this way, Freud's notion of family romances makes complete sense.

To this end, I maintain that the Mother Wheel as a form of UFO not only offers hermeneutical possibilities,<sup>22</sup> it is a *hermeneutical necessity*. Inattention to this point in scholarly work, I contend, calls into question all supposed interpretations of his religious experience and threaten to render the Mother Wheel mundane—or worse, "gibberish." Without a doubt, Farrakhan's experience of the Mother Wheel gives coherence to his religious life, and it serves as a lens through which we can, therefore, interpret his religious and political activities and discourses and those of the NOI.

In the end, this article has attempted to make a case for a greater inclusion of the Nation of Islam in the study of African American religion, UFO religions, the emerging discipline of Western Esotericism, and more appropriate consideration in the area of Religion in America.

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<sup>22</sup>Note, that in the most recent NOI convention after the composition of this paper, they held an international UFO symposium. UFOs remain central in importance to the group. See [http://www.noi.org/sd2011/ufo\\_symposium.shtml](http://www.noi.org/sd2011/ufo_symposium.shtml) (Accessed November 12, 2011).

Most importantly, what we glean from the case of Farrakhan, the NOI, and the Mother Wheel is the importance of considering the body, consciousness, and socio-cultural constitution in theories of religion—all of which are inseparable in the present case study. Through a psychoanalytic interpretation, we are reminded that religion can be healthy and adaptive in the face of challenging circumstances.

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