Stephen C. Finley’s *In and Out of This World* places bodies at the heart of an engaging redescription of the Nation of Islam (NOI). Finley seeks to unsettle the conventional wisdom that the NOI is best understood as a black nationalist tradition, by which he means one in pursuit of political self-determination for African Americans (p. 2). He proposes that scholars should describe it instead as a religious nationalist tradition that invests black bodies with transcendental significance through sacred and esoteric rituals, discourses, and symbols, including stories about UFOs, Yakub, Bilal, and the Mother Wheel. If scholars were to adopt this shift in perspective, he contends, then we could make better sense of how the NOI’s four most influential leaders – Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Warith Deen Mohammed, and Louis Farrakhan – have drawn upon such resources to resignify the meaning of blackness. We could also better comprehend the ways, and according to what standards, these figures have imagined and enacted their own ‘ideal black embodied economy,’ (Finley’s emphasis), which ranks some bodies above others in a new, counter-symbolic hierarchy of identity (p. 163). Emphasizing the ties between body and religion in the NOI, Finley makes a welcome contribution to the collection of scholarship that points to the role of religion in African-American racial formation and self-fashioning.

In the introduction, Finley elaborates on the book’s eponymous theory of ‘black bodies *in-* and *out-of-place*’ (p. 3). This theory expands upon
anthropologist Mary Douglas’ observations about self-regulating social systems and serves two primary purposes. First, it works as an analytical frame for making sense of how black bodies are constructed, positioned, and interpreted within broader systems of racial order. The term ‘bodies’ refers to both physical bodies that exist and act in the world, and also the ways in which bodies are described and represented in language, culture, and religion. As bodies are ‘both material and metaphor,’ Finley maintains that whether a body is construed as ‘in-place,’ ‘out-of-place,’ or somewhere in between depends upon how well it conforms to the norms and expectations of a given order (p. 6). On his account, in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century United States, most black bodies are framed ‘as being out-of-place, not belonging, and engaging in activities that [are] viewed as violating established social conventions’ (p. 4). Prevailing US racial regimes and the institutions, officials, and citizens who enforce them thus seek to put black bodies ‘in-place’ by subjecting them to terror and disciplining them into whiteness. In so doing, they not only commit horrific violence against black individuals and communities, but they also create and sustain a symbolic world – Finley calls it a ‘cosmology’ – that enshrines whiteness as its normative ideal (p. 8).

Second, Finley uses the theory to structure his redescription of the NOI and its leadership. Observing that Muhammad, Malcolm, Mohammed, and Farrakhan ‘deplored’ bodies that were in-place because they did not challenge or dislodge the racist system of classification in any meaningful way; he calls attention to their efforts to forge black bodies that would do just this work (p. 5). As he points out, these efforts have had a characteristically religious timbre. In addition to rigorous programs of moral and sexual practice, for example, they have also included the re-narration of black history and identity by way of appeal to new myths of human origins and novel forms of theodicy. In particular, they have involved stories about cosmic and extraterrestrial beings such as Yakub, the renegade ‘god-scientist’ who invented the white race roughly 6,000 years ago, through which configurations of blackness acquire what Finley calls transcendent significance (p. 10). Indeed, he argues that the ‘new religious and racial lexicon’ advanced by these men might be the NOI’s most important contribution to African-American religious history, for it has supplied a meaningful framework within which they have been able to reinvent and reclaim black embodiment (p. 15). In the explicit parlance of his theory, the new vocabulary articulated by Muhammad, Malcolm, Mohammed, and Farrakhan has afforded members of the NOI an ability to imagine and fashion their bodies ‘out-there,’ beyond the dismal horizons of slavery, white supremacy, and racial domination (p. 61).
The book’s chapters therefore detail the often conflict-laden formation of this lexicon. If the NOI’s four major leaders have shared the common aspiration to forge black bodies out-of-place, they have nevertheless not agreed upon the best way to achieve it. For instance, Finley shows that whereas Muhammad used extraterrestrial narratives to locate the true meaning of blackness outside the constraints of everyday life in the United States, Malcolm insisted that this meaning must be at least partially derived from organized struggle against such constraints. Instead of interpreting these stories to entail patiently waiting upon divine retribution, Malcolm used them to identify and criticize the this-worldly enemies of the black race (pp. 96–8). Moreover, Finley also demonstrates how the ensuing skirmish between Muhammad and Malcolm on this matter, which led to Malcolm’s expulsion from the NOI, had a concrete impact upon Mohammed’s and Farrakhan’s own competing articulations of black Muslim identity and history (p. 155). What emerges at the end of these chapters is a sophisticated and context-sensitive account of the development of the NOI’s distinctive religio-racial grammar.

Finley’s insistence that esoteric stories about otherworldly beings belong at the center of this grammar is the most compelling aspect of *In and Out of This World*. As he shows, such tales have not just been central tools for the reconstitution of black bodies, but the hermeneutical keys to the tradition itself. Narratives of Yakub, the Mother Plane, and the Mother Wheel form the central point around which everything else orbits. The ‘meaning and function of [the NOI’s] rituals, discourses, and symbols become clear when one gives theoretical attention to the religious meanings of UFOs,’ he writes (p. 159). Rather than ignore or explain away these stories as ‘mundane – or worse, “gibberish”’; Finley takes pains to show how and where they function in NOI life and thought (p. 180). The epilogue is an illuminating case in point. Here, Finley provocatively argues that Farrakhan’s reflections on the Mother Wheel – an otherworldly spaceship that carries within it the secret meanings of black life, history, and identity – establish normative configurations of twenty-first-century gender and womanhood in the tradition. While there are many good reasons to contest his claim that the meaning of women’s embodiment should be mediated through a man’s words, Finley does establish that it is difficult to think about gender and womanhood in the NOI without addressing their conceptual links to the Mother Wheel.

*In and Out of This World* aims to enact a shift in scholarly descriptions of the NOI, moving away from the language of black political nationalism and toward that of religious nationalism. This raises an important question, however: what is black religious nationalism? In many respects, Finley’s
answer to this question is undertheorized. The clearest response comes in
the conclusion, where he invokes Tracey E. Hucks’ relatively recent formu-
lation. On this account, black religious nationalism distinguishes itself from
black political nationalism in that it does not demand a separate political
space for the achievement of black self-determination. Instead, it creates
the requisite space through religious beliefs, practices, attitudes, and ori-
entations, all of which imbue black bodies with affirmative meanings not
linked to whiteness. While this gesture is thought-provoking and stimulat-
ing, it is not clear that there is a necessary opposition between political and
religious nationalism. Nor is it readily apparent that Finley’s descriptions
of political nationalism provide a comprehensive overview of nationalist
political behavior. Given its centrality to the book’s overall argument, the
category of black religious nationalism could therefore have benefited from
further development. Finley’s rich, theoretically driven redescriptions of
Muhammad, Malcolm, Mohammed, and Farrakhan provide many reasons
to believe this elaboration would be both creative and edifying, with impor-
tant consequences for the study of African-American religions.