

**The Jesuit and the Alien Brothel; Or, The Poetics
of Problematic Historiographies in Mary Doria
Russell's *The Sparrow***

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The provocative novel, *The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell, begins in the year 2060, 40 years after humans first discovered hauntingly beautiful music being broadcasted from the Alpha Centauri system. The world voyeuristically awaits any snippets of news about Father Emilio Sandoz, a priest and the only surviving member of an exploratory mission commissioned by the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, to seek out the origin of these strange broadcasts. The novel then makes an abrupt and dizzying jump 40 years back in time to 2020 and relates the fateful events that led Jimmy Quinn, an astronomer and friend of Father Sandoz, to extract the strange alien hymn from a sequence of radio waves. Russell creates her own idiosyncratic but elegant progression as her narrative alternates between the

exuberance of first contact in 2020 and the physically and emotionally broken Father Sandoz returning to earth in 2060.

Within months of the revelation of sentient life in the Alpha Centauri system, the Jesuits quietly financed a mission to explore the alien civilization, directed by their credo, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*: for the greater glory of God. When word of the mission goes public, the United Nations then sends another mission to retrieve them. When the rescue mission arrives on the alien planet, Rakhat, three years after the Jesuit mission made first contact, they discover that the sole survivor of the party is Father Sandoz. He is then recovered by the U.N. mission and sent back to Earth in a ship set to autopilot. Preceding him are lurid reports broadcast by the U.N. crew that he had killed the child who led the U.N. crew to him and had become a prostitute in an alien brothel while stranded on Rakhat. Because of the physics of going at near light speed, the rest of the world has aged forty years while Father Sandoz has barely aged six when he finally returns to Earth more dead than alive. Among his many infirmities, the aliens of the planet Rakhat surgically removed the muscles from his palms before grafting them onto his fingers, grotesquely elongating them.

As Father Sandoz recovers under the care of his superior, the Father General of the Society of Jesus, he must decide whether he will explain himself to the Father General or remain silent. By finally deciding to justify himself by participating in a tribunal convened by the Father General, Father Sandoz not only defends himself, but the act of telling his own story allows him to reconnect with the traditional sources of his identity, such as his place within the Jesuit hierarchy, and also suture his own fragmented self. Furthermore, his testimony not only restores mental and communal integrity, but also it provides the occasion that allows the voices of his dead friends and crewmates to be rescued from silence and oblivion: they live again in the dialogic space that Father Sandoz opens up. Father Sandoz's act of recounting the tragedy on Rakhat not only allows Father Sandoz to lay the ghosts of his friends to rest, but also Father Sandoz's willingness to testify in the tribunal is the event that symbolically permits the events on Rakhat to be revealed both within the novel and at the metatextual level. The finally, Father Sandoz's testimonial performs one more function: it disrupts the seemingly insuperable forces that dominate both the novel and the

real world of the reader, namely the governing discourse of transnational capitalism.

The novel's plot has two narrative strains that switch back and forth with each other as the novel progresses. The first strain begins in 2060 with Father Sandoz returning from the Alpha Centauri planet of Rakhat. It covers his convalescence, his decision to participate in an inquiry into the expedition and his subsequent testimony before the Father General, Vincenzo Giuliani. The second strain is positioned 40 years earlier in 2020. It begins with the first discovery of the Rakhati broadcast, the events of the expeditionary mission on Rakhat and the mysterious disaster that leaves everyone but Father Sandoz dead.

While this narrative split is at first disorienting, its broken and fractured structure is meant to mirror the recently returned Father Sandoz's precarious mental state. Discussing two authors, Bao Ninh and Erich Maria Remarque, who were both combat veterans before becoming authors, Jane Robinett writes that, "the recursive, splintered, tangled cadence of psychological trauma" can "[provide] the essential framework" for the shape of a narrative.¹ She goes on to write, "If Remarque and Bao Ninh are to successfully re/represent the experience of war and of the combat soldier in texts that bind narrative and experience into a homologous relationship capable of reconstructing and recuperating the traumatic experiences they have survived, they must find appropriate structures to embody these disruptions."²

Even though Russell, as the author, is the creator and mediator of Father Sandoz's experiences, she nevertheless remains sensitive to how Father Sandoz's trauma shapes and warps the novel's narrative landscape. Rather than Russell using a straightforward linear narrative that begins in 2020 and ends in 2060, she instead makes the death of the expeditionary mission, Father Sandoz's internment in the alien brothel, and the death of the Rakhati child the center toward which both narrative strains move. It is as though these traumas act as a black hole with Father Sandoz's psyche unable to escape their gravity. The trauma must be obsessively revisited, even if it is never to be truly transcended.

With each recursive reevaluation, the significance and meaning of the trauma changes as the victim attempts to transform the trauma from an in-

congruous and anomalous event to one that can be integrated into the victim's traditional "belief systems on which [she builds], and with which [she defends], [her] individual and collective [identity]." ³ The narrative is structured such that the traumatic events on Rakhat become the telos of both narrative strains: the second narrative strain, which begins in 2020, ends with the U.N.'s rescue of Father Sandoz from the alien brothel, and it seamlessly dissolves into the 2060 narrative strain at the point of Father Sandoz's climactic avowal of innocence before the Father General at the novel's conclusion.

When Father Sandoz testifies before the Father General, his testimonial is both a public act of defense before his superior and a very private meditation on the nature of God's engagement with Creation. What makes Father Sandoz's reflections on what led to the disaster on Rakhat so painful is not just the trauma of the events themselves, but also the ironic juxtaposition of the broken down Father Sandoz of 2060 against the Father Sandoz of 2020 who naively believes that God is calling him to the Alpha Centauri system. When Jimmy Quinn, the astronomer who first uncovers the radio broadcast from Rakhat, shares his discovery with his close friends, among them Father Sandoz, Sandoz is immediately convinced that it is more than a coincident that they are together to hear the alien music. For Father Sandoz, it is a sign from God that they are all meant to travel to the origin of the broadcast as a group. For Father Sandoz, atheism or agnosticism had never been a possibility, but until then he had only felt God's presence obliquely through his work with the poor, the oppressed and war refugees. When he hears the broadcast from Rakhat, for the first time in his life Father Sandoz believes that God is directly communicating with him.

But the reader is already aware of the dramatic irony embedded in Father Sandoz's initial exuberance and knows how his mission to Rakhat will end. Furthermore, the Father Sandoz of 2060 is also keenly aware of this irony. It is as though by allowing her readers to share the same perspective as Father Sandoz, Russell forces both to puzzle over the questions together. The novel dramatizes ancient but enduring questions of people trying to identify God's presence in the world: do our experiences point to a God actively and intimately involved in the temporal world, or do they instead give evidence of a silent and distant God? If they point to a God who per-

sonally intervenes in the world, how does one act in accordance with His will? When Father Sandoz returns from Rakhat, there is one more question that he is desperate to answer: do his traumatic experiences stand as evidence of God's mysterious and inscrutable ways, or do they instead demonstrate His intentional malevolence? Thus questions that begin as a search for God's immanence in the world end as questions of theodicy.

Russell works to make these questions relevant and relatable to a contemporary audience. One way she accomplishes this is by using technology to dramatize much older orders of religious experience. For instance, first contact with the inhabitants of Rakhat is analogized to the dynamics of divine call and response. The astronomer and computer programmer Jimmy Quinn discovers the alien music by running a collection of radio waves through an audio synthesizing program. Quinn says that most astronomers who had been searching for extraterrestrial life had expected first contact to come in the form of binary codes, not music. Quinn's decision to run the radio waves through an audio synthesizing program to yield music was pure intuition. The analogy to divine call and response is unmistakable: only through intuition can one properly interpret the "broadcasts" of God in the midst of the seemingly random events of one's life.

According to the dynamics of call and response, God calls each person to participate in His divine plan. Each person's ability to recognize and respond to this calling is an act of grace, but it is also voluntary: one is free to either accept or decline the divine call. If one does accept, one enters into a covenant with God. This covenant is never permanent, irrevocable or definitive; rather, its continuance is based on the human party's willing performance of God's will. Furthermore, the human party's participation in the covenant is always based upon its consent and it is always free to opt out of the covenant.⁴ For the Father Sandoz of 2020, the call from God seems unmistakable, and he willingly and freely responds to it. Even after the mission to Rakhat is overtaken by tragedy, Father Sandoz testifies that he never sold his body, an act that would violate his vow of celibacy. It is as though even if Father Sandoz feels himself to be in a covenant with a malevolent God, he is still unwilling to repudiate his covenant with God, as though to spite Him. Remaining faithful to his vows seems more significant

to Father Sandoz himself as a sign of his dignity and personal integrity than his fidelity to God.

The subjective nature of divine call and response betrays its disquieting indeterminacy. Though God's will in the world will theoretically further our progress toward the "one far-off divine event, / To which the whole creation moves,"⁵ in practice knowing exactly what God is calling each of us to do is a much more dicey proposition. If God is indeed broadcasting messages to all of us here on Earth, what exactly is He asking us to do? What are the terms of the covenant? Is there even a covenant? This is to say, is God even calling us, or rather is what one believes to be a divine call simply one projecting one's own ego into the world and mistaking its echo for the voice of God? For Father Sandoz there is no doubt: because each member of his circle of friends has a specialty that would be indispensable for a mission to the Alpha Centauri system, he believes that God is obviously calling them all to the stars. Quoting Mother Theresa, Father Sandoz says to his friend and subsequent crewmate Dr. Anne Edwards: ""God does not require us to succeed. He only requires us to try,""⁶ which is to say, God requires us to respond to His call.

Another factor that Father Sandoz interprets as signaling that he is meant to travel into space is that by 2020, interstellar space travel is technologically possible, if untried. The Alpha Centauri system is the closest solar system to our own. According to Jimmy Quinn's calculations, the system itself is four light years away, but for a ship to accelerate to near light speed and then decelerate at the proper rate, the travel time would be 17 years for people living on Earth relative to an interlude of seven months for the people on board the ship.⁷ If divine call and response masquerade as radio broadcasts, radio telescopes and audio synthesizing programs, then traveling at light speed also assumes a religious significance. Speaking to Father Sandoz about the quirks of traveling near the speed of light, his friend and subsequent crewmate George Edwards says, ""Nobody understands this the first time they hear about it [...] And most people who think about it at all just accept that the math works out this way. But let's say you go to Alpha Centauri and come straight back. When you get home, the people you left would be thirty-four years older but you'd only have aged about a year, because time slows down when you're near light speed.""⁸

The first part of George's statement, "Nobody understands this the first time they hear about it . . . And most people who think about it at all just accept that the math works out this way," is a declaration of faith in an abstract system that could be Einsteinian physics just as well as religion. The second part of his statement is less reassuring: traveling at the speed of light will radically disrupt one's communal ties, a traditional foundation of identity. At this point, Russell performs a cunning sleight of hand that transforms a cultural anxiety about speed into something that has a distinctly religious resonance. The disruptive effects of traveling at the speed of light address the anxieties of speed: the discourses that speed privileges emphasize "production, consumption, acceleration, modification, termination, recuperation" as "the definitive measure of [...] value,"⁹ discourses that are inherently dehumanizing and alienating. But what could become a heavy-handed critique of our culture's obsession with speed is transformed into something else. Not speed, but responding to the divine call profoundly breaks the expeditionary crew's communal ties. This is because one "will stand out as anomalous, impossible to integrate, 'other'"¹⁰ if one obeys the prerogatives of a divine call above the priorities of the community. This elegant symbolism follows a pattern Russell uses consistently throughout the novel of imbuing technology with religious significance.

Speed has other disruptive effects that the novel suggests can be salutary and potentially liberating. Russell does highlight some particularly disruptive effects of time travel. For instance, Father General Vincenzo Giuliani entered the Formation for Priesthood three years after Father Sandoz, but while Giuliani is in his late seventies in 2060, Sandoz is in his mid 40s. But for a novel that is set in the near future and that makes such rapid chronological leaps, what is perhaps even more surprising is just how predictable and recognizable are Russell's 2020 and 2060.

Though this at first seems counterintuitive, if the reader notes the lines of continuity from the real world to the fictional world of *The Sparrow*, Russell's 2020 and 2060 do not only seem plausible but downright inevitable. Among political, economic, technological and social changes, Puerto Rico has become the 51st state, the United States has lost its superpower status after being outfoxed by Japan in a trade war, Poland has become a volatile

but rapidly emerging economic power akin to the real world India or China, and the field of Artificial Intelligence has advanced to the point that not even scientists and linguists are above being replaced by computer programs.

In the fictional 2020, war and poverty are so endemic that private individuals and companies are allowed to sweep the war zones and overcrowded orphanages and “adopt” children who show promise. The children are then educated, and in return they are indentured for as much as 25 years to their patrons, a system likened to intellectual prostitution. Sophia Mendez, one of the crewmembers of the Rakhati mission, was one of these indentured servants after being culled from an Istanbul devastated during the Turkish Civil War. It is no mistake that before Sophia sold herself intellectually to her patron, Jean-Claude Jaubert, she survived by selling her body after both of her parents were killed.

By Sandoz’s return in 2060, these centrifugal forces have taken their logical course: among other developments, the United States is no longer a single nation and the Society of Jesus has seceded from the Catholic Church over the issue of birth control and the fallout from the Society’s unsanctioned mission to Rakhat. In our post-national, post-industrial and increasingly privatized world, Russell’s postulations do not seem all that far-fetched. Indeed, just as Father Sandoz is never portrayed as astonished by these developments, the reader too accepts these as well within the range of possibility. In the near future of Russell’s *The Sparrow*, wealthy private citizens and powerful corporations (like the Society of Jesus) seem unbound by the laws of traditional nation-states. For instance, the alacrity and vigor of the Jesuits in organizing the expeditionary mission to Rakhat is contrasted against the United Nations, which is impeded by years of bureaucracy and squabbling before they reach a consensus. Russell constructs a near future that is neither apocalyptic nor utopian; rather, her near future is one that conforms to her reader’s reasonable expectations concerning the rise of corporate power. In essence, she plays out the deterministic forces that are transforming her reader’s own world in less spectacular, but in no less radical ways.

The complexity of Russell’s novel is built on an intricate and dazzling interplay between contemporary real world trends, their persistence into

the landscape of her novel, and the shared circumstances of both her reader and her characters as they are both forced to adapt to and negotiate within systems that work to silence them or rob them of agency. In other words, Russell recognizes real world dynamics, that of the emergent domination of corporations and transnational capitalism at the expense of traditional nation-states, and then she projects them into her fictional world. By confirming the ascendancy of corporations in her fictional world, it seems as though Russell imbricates both her readers and her characters in the same ineluctable totality. Contemporary readers who have been laid off or have had their homes foreclosed during the recent economic crisis immediately empathize with the plight of Sophia Mendez, all victims of forces beyond their control. And the reader is taken aback when Russell discusses Father Sandoz's humanitarian work in, of all places, Sudan.

When the expeditionary crew travels to Rakhat, the act of traveling at the speed of light is used to symbolically reach escape velocity from these politically and economically deterministic forces. If these overweening forces dictate the arc of the linear timeline of 2020-2060, then the act of traveling at light speed is what grants the explorers the ability to defy and transcend them and write their own unique, if tragic, narrative. It introduces a different type of temporal consciousness, a religious consciousness that privileges repositories of memory and sites of experience. Charles Taylor distinguishes between different registers of time in his book, *A Secular Age*. He contrasts linear, "temporal" and "secular" time against an order of time that is pegged to some eternal order, such as Platonic Forms or Christian eschatology. This register of time is what Taylor calls "higher times":

"Secular" time is what to us is ordinary time, indeed, to us it's just time, period. One thing happens after another, and when something is past, it's past. Time placings are consistently transitive. If A is before B and B before C, then A is before C. The same goes if we quantify these relationships: if A is long before B, and B long before C, then A is very long before C.¹¹

Applying this simple, linear schema to *The Sparrow*, it is as though the reader is living in A, and the novel depicts the events of the near future in B

and C. Even though B and C may exist in a fictional world, the genealogy that Russell constructs is so insidious and seemingly inescapable because it is anchored in real world dynamics. Seemingly self-evident and inviolable divisions between the real world and Russell's fictional world become fluid, and both seem to occupy the same unsettlingly liminal space.

Taylor then goes on to describe what constitutes "higher times:"

Now higher times gather and re-order secular time. They introduce "warps" and seeming inconsistencies in profane time-ordering. Events which were far apart in profane time could nevertheless be closely linked. Benedict Anderson in a penetrating discussion of some of the same issues I am trying to describe here, quotes Auerbach on the relation prefiguring-fulfilling in which events of the old Testament were held to stand to those in the New, for instance the sacrifice of Isaac and the Crucifixion of Christ. These two events were linked through their immediate contiguous places in the divine plan. They are drawn close to identity in eternity, even though they are centuries (that is, "aeons" or "saecula") apart. In God's time there is a sort of simultaneity of sacrifice and Crucifixion.

Similarly, Good Friday 1998 is closer in a way to the original day of the Crucifixion than mid-summer's day 1997. Once events are situated in relation to more than one kind of time, the issue of time-placing becomes quite transformed.

Why are higher times higher? The answer is easy for the eternity which Europe inherits from Plato and Greek philosophy. The really real, full being is outside of time, unchanging. Time is a moving image of eternity. It is imperfect, or tends to imperfection.¹²

Taylor provides a theoretical framework through which the novel's two structures of time can be compared. Secular time corresponds to the linear timeline of 2020-2060. Of course, the narrative structure of the novel does not follow a strict linear path. This essay has already argued that the novel's narrative structure is warped in order to reflect Father Sandoz's

trauma. Another factor shaping the unique narrative structure is the distinctive qualities of “higher times,” where time is organized around events that resonate from and point towards an eternal order.

Another parallel that trauma and higher times both share is their recursive natures. Colin Burrow, discussing the “temporal uncertainty” of John Milton’s *On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity* writes, “the events of the Christian ritual year have the unique quality of being at once single historical actions (Christ was born on one day) and repeated ritual events (Christ is born on every day on which Christmas is celebrated.)”¹³ These events that are ritualistically commemorated are similar in nature to Father Sandoz’s trauma: they are both anomalous, but ultimately they must be integrated into the flow of history in order to be of communal significance. Father Sandoz’s experiences, especially his trauma, take on the characteristics of an organizing locus of “higher times.” He is at once a freak, anomalous, “other,” marked by his mysterious surgery and an object of curiosity for the voyeuristic public, but he must also ritualistically reenact and re/represent his trauma before the Father General if he is to transform his experience into something beyond the bitterness trauma.

At the climax of his testimony, Father Sandoz finally begins to reveal what led to the catastrophe on Rakhat. When the expeditionary crew reaches Rakhat, they meet two sentient species, the Runa and the Jana’ata. The Runa is the prey species and their movements and reproductive rights are controlled by the Jana’ata. When the expeditionary crew teaches the Runa how to cultivate gardens, the excess calories in their diets trigger their reproductive cycles, causing them to breed without Jana’ata consent. When the Jana’ata retaliate against this breach of protocol, the expeditionary crew is slaughtered along with the offending Runa and Father Sandoz is taken captive.

Eventually, Father Sandoz is put into the custody of a Jana’ata merchant whom he had befriended, but when it seems that Father Sandoz is safe, the hand mutilating surgery is performed on him without the significance of the procedure ever revealed. Symbolically, it represents the cost of transcending the flow and flux of secular time, of daring, first, to enter “higher times,” and then introducing it as a disruptive force within the diachronic, linear flow of the narrative. Father Sandoz’s testimony is such a

defiant challenge to the seemingly inescapable logic of the dominant discourse because it seemingly does the impossible: it provides alternatives.

The introduction of an alternative way of valuing and accounting for human experience reveals the possibility of evading and subverting the dominant discourse. Indeed, this dominant discourse's tacit representation of itself shadows the more visible but tentative self-representation of Father Sandoz, silently fashioning the myth of its omniscience and omnipotence. This myth always threatens to co-opt the narrative structure or efface the personal stories of the characters. This is most evident in the case of Sophia Mendez, who literally becomes a commodity and a token of commercial exchange within this system. The excursion to Rakhat, far from posing a danger to Father Sandoz's life, becomes the "proof" of his existence and enables him to become the symbolic and literal incarnation of "higher times."

Eventually, Sandoz is exchanged one more time and put into the brothel of Hlavin Kitheri, an aesthete and member of the Jana'ata royalty. Sandoz's encounter with Hlavin is saturated with ironies. For instance, he learns that the songs that first brought him to Rakhat were composed by Hlavin. The subject of these songs, so beautiful that most people on Earth believed them to be liturgical music, were at best ephemera and at worst pornographic. In fact, Hlavin even composed songs extemporaneously and broadcast them as he was raping Father Sandoz. Thus if the temporal call to Rakhat (i.e. the radio broadcast) originated from a truly despicable source, Father Sandoz is tortured by the possibility that the divine call to Rakhat comes from an equally malevolent source (i.e. God). There is one other crucial tie between Hlavin and God: Sandoz identifies both of them as his rapist. To the Father General, he says, "'Can you guess what I thought just before I was used the first time?' he asked them as he began to pace. 'This is rich. This is very funny! You see, I was scarred but I didn't understand what was going on. I never imagined—who could have imagined such a thing? I am in God's hands, I thought. I love God and I trust in His love. Amusing, isn't it? I laid down all my defenses. I had nothing between me and what happened but the love of God. And I was raped. I was naked before God and I was raped.'"¹⁴

Father Sandoz's testimony of his rape is itself a kind of performance, a ritualistic identification with and reenactment of his own passion: it is at

once his justification that he had remained faithful to his holy orders (i.e. he was raped and did not sell his body) and his means of healing his own sense of personal violation and his loss of faith in a benevolent God. His reenactment in and inward interpretation of his own existential drama supplants his earlier performative response to God's call. Perhaps most significantly, it is not portrayed as his definitive reconciliation with or renunciation of God. Rather than creating a resolution, his testimony makes possible the discursive space necessary to give expression to the hostile, ambiguous and unstable feelings of betrayal which coexist with his lingering faith in an inscrutable God.

Finally, Father Sandoz's testimonial introduces "higher times" into the narrative. "Higher Times" explode the hermetically sealed and hermetically sealing political and economic forces that dominate Father Sandoz's world as well as our own. Father Sandoz is a character of possibilities: the possibility of writing our own stories despite the deterministic forces that would write them for us, and the possibility of enduring long enough to rediscover ourselves despite the entropy and inertia of an exhausted world.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Robinet, "Traumatic Experience," 296.

² Ibid., 297.

³ Ibid., 293.

⁴ Khan, "metaphorical contract," 86-87.

⁵ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 101.

⁶ Russell, *The Sparrow*, 97.

⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁹ *Ecstasy of Speed*, accessed May 13, 2009.

¹⁰ Mendelsohn, 126.

¹¹ Taylor, 55.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Burrow, "the future poet," 59.

¹⁴ Russell, *The Sparrow*, 349.