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Satirical Frame of Mind: Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* and the Literary Engagement with 9/11

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1. Introduction

- 1 This essay explores one important narrative strategy that emerged in the subgenre of the American 9/11 novel a few years after the attacks, namely the use of satire. It does so by way of Ken Kalfus's novel *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), in which satire is made the operating principle for examining the changes that 9/11 wrought in American civic life. Like many other fictional responses to 9/11, Kalfus opts for a "personal" or familial lens by which to depict the state of the nation, but he does so with a twist. In his novel, the unfolding of political developments is mapped onto the acrimonious divorce of the two protagonists, and this premise enables the satirical representation of the collapsing Twin Towers; increased governmental control, ethnic profiling and the encroachment of civil rights; anthrax mailings; the FBI's relentless chasing after perpetrators; the unpredictability of the stock market; the War on Terror; and the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. Kalfus's predilection for satire and political commentary, notwithstanding,ⁱ his choice to use satire when rendering these subjects, whilst the permissibility and value of satire about 9/11 are debated, is risky and therefore raises the question of how the mode is put into play in the literary treatment of 9/11.
- 2 Literary criticism attending to the role of the comic and satirical registers in 9/11 novels has been profoundly influenced by the underlying premises of criticism on the subgenre of 9/11 fiction.ⁱⁱ Over the past several years, critics have been preoccupied with the ethos and task of the novel form in relation to engagement with terrorism.

With attention paid to alterity and trauma in particular, critics have focused on the ethico-politically appropriate ways to represent the meanings of terrorism and security, the victims of terrorism, as well as the geopolitical origins and consequences of the War on Terror. They have scrutinized the ways in which novels can make legible a period in recent history, and help shed light on how the local and global impact of terrorism and its discourses have been envisioned and how the events and aftermath of 9/11 have been incorporated into collective memory.ⁱⁱⁱ While an emerging interest into the effects of comic and satirical elements in 9/11 novels is increasingly discernible, these are often regarded as literary devices used to assert the potential of the novel form to intervene in hegemonic cultural, political, and media descriptions of twenty-first century terrorism. These approaches rightly point to elements of invective political critique expressed via satire in 9/11 fiction. Because the approaches neglect the history and the characteristics of the satirical mode, however, they tend to view satire as unambiguous and to understand its affordances primarily in terms of an aim to subvert, interrogate, or disrupt.^{iv} What these approaches miss is the ambivalence that may underpin the satiric assessment of post-9/11 society and the self-consciousness that satirical renditions may display of the literary processing of 9/11.

- 3 The understanding that satire is “often ambiguous, obscure, or double-edged” is commonplace in satire theory, as is the recognition that satire is not simply the product of a writer’s style or temperament, but that it is also produced in a dialogic relation to history (Griffin 30). Since satire unapologetically engages with historical particulars and shifts in cultural attitudes, it relates in complex ways to the conditions that produce it and that serve as the subject for its criticism. Especially at times of political insecurity and cultural crisis, satirists – from Horace to 9/11 commentators – have adapted their critical edge to find acceptance among patrons and audiences and, in some cases, to avoid retaliation from a regime (Jones 38). Just as the forms of satire range from the gentle comedic and risible to the acerbic and iconoclastic, satirical intentions, too, vary, sometimes seeking to accommodate, stabilize, or mitigate, sometimes aiming to confront, deride, or transform. Not seldom, satirical motives are mixed, even self-contradictory (Griffin 35-94). This means that not only is there no single ethos or function for satire, but also that literary satire can be received in vastly different, sometimes incompatible, ways. Kalfus’s novel is a case in point, because it has been viewed as engaging both in historical revision and in scathing political criticism.^v His novel provides an occasion to consider critical debates over the task and character of literary writing in moments of intense cultural crisis. It also presents an opportunity to explore the dynamic between denunciation and comic relief in 9/11 satire.
- 4 In what follows, I show that Kalfus’s satire targets a range of issues through the follies, hypocrisies, and anxieties of his protagonists. It mocks the rise of the security state and fantasies of American tolerance and decency, and it raises questions about the role of the novel form in addressing 9/11. As I demonstrate, Kalfus’s treatment of political particulars is variously playful and hostile and this treatment suggests that satirical inquiry into the state of the nation post-9/11 is coupled, sometimes in troubling ways, with the aims to delight and to divert.

2. On satire and 9/11

- 5 The permissibility and value of satire, and of laughter more broadly, as a response to catastrophic historical events were subject to animated discussion in the US at the turn of the century. The tenor of public discussions on 9/11 has been largely shaped by the definition of the attacks as an American trauma and by the emphasis on cultural mourning and healing. As has been widely observed, in the wake of the attacks American popular media tended to avoid iconoclastic satire and irony; facing a wave of public animosity, major television, online, and print productions relying on ironic satire and ridicule were (temporarily) silenced (Jones 28-37). In the name of cultural sensitivity, appropriateness and stability, comedy in its various guises was regulated and the laughter deemed permissible, especially in September and October of 2001, focused on comic relief rather than the testing of politically sacrosanct ideas by way of mockery (Jones 28-37). The desire (often linked to political and corporate interests) to enforce a trauma decorum at this time was, of course, not limited to comedy, but also involved the unruliness of other forms of popular culture and art. For instance, immediately after the attacks, the Clear Channel radio corporation attempted to regulate popular cultural music broadcasts lest they “offend the ‘sensitivities’ of radio listeners” (Shevory 8). Attempts to regulate artistic production about 9/11 extended several years after the attacks, as exemplified by the controversies surrounding whether the poetry selection in conceptual artist Jenny Holzer’s installation in the lobby of 7 World Trade Center (2006) ought to include only “positive stuff, good stuff as opposed to the miseries of 9/11” (Collins, para. 11). Just as the question as to what was deemed permissible in post-9/11 America goes beyond satire, the question of the uses and appropriateness of laughter in the representation of historical trauma similarly extends beyond 9/11, as the debates about comedic representations of the Holocaust in the decades preceding 9/11 attest.^{vi}
- 6 The ways in which dark comedy about 9/11 and the War on Terror attempted to “cope with, confront, comment on, and even contain the potential danger represented by terrorism” have received considerable attention, particularly as regards newspaper comics, magazine articles, graphic novels, feature-length films, television mini-series, and stand-up comedy routines (Martin 233). Some recognize the reassertion of political comedy in the months following the attacks as a corollary to changes in the cultural climate, while others view it as a form of cultural resistance. William Jones, for instance, stresses that invective and unorthodox satire could slowly resurface as surveillance from government officials and economic sponsors began to decrease (Jones 34).^{vii} Defenders of the political potential of comedy have, on the other hand, emphasized how humorous, satirical, or ironic forms of expression serve as popular ways of gaining “some control over the way in which particular issues are publicly discussed” (Day 19) and that, on the whole, they make possible “a reinvigorated opposition movement to dominant media, industry, political, and economic interests” (Gournelos and Greene xi).
- 7 Kalfus’s novel can be understood to be a product of this cultural climate, in which satire is accepted as a viable – political comedy scholar Julie Webber would argue the only viable (Webber 4) – way to engage in cultural and political critique. The year 2006, in fact, saw the publication of the most acclaimed 9/11 novels satirizing American society: Jess Walter’s *The Zero*, Claire Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children*, and Kalfus’s own novel. In

April of that year, Martin Amis's scatological depiction of the terrorist in his short story "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" also appeared in *The New Yorker*. While it may be a coincidence that the above-mentioned works were all published in 2006, their appearance suggests tolerance for ridicule of post-9/11 America, national posturing, and terrorism among publishers and readers of literary prose alike. The production of these works raises questions about the content, function, and efficacy of literary satire on 9/11, as distinct from the satirical mode in other genres and media.^{viii}

- 8 The present essay addresses the political particulars alluded to in Kalfus's novel and the way in which those particulars are dealt with. The discussion is informed by recent theorizations of literary satire that have opposed the critical consensus of the mid-twentieth century, which held that satire is a moral and rhetorical art with a specific purpose (to attack vice or folly), a set of tools at its disposal (wit or ridicule) and a clear aim (to persuade a readership that something or someone is reprehensible or ridiculous) (Griffin 1). Against this view of satire as straightforward, single-minded, and bound by clear boundaries with respect to moral standards or other genres (especially to pure comedy), recent satire theory has formulated an understanding of satire as a mode, an attitude, or a procedure, which invades different literary forms with a variety of aims, including to investigate, to please, to aggravate, to reaffirm, and to disown. The pre-generic, parasitical understanding of satire is described by Charles Knight in terms of the "satirical frame of mind" as "a mental position that needs to adopt a genre in order to express its ideas as representation" (4). In his view, the ironic perspective and the parodic borrowing of literary form are the main features for communicating a satirical attitude (Knight 6). Of particular interest for the present discussion is Dustin Griffin's definition of satire as an open and exploratory mode, which in various ways poses problems of interpretation. Griffin emphasizes that satire is often ambiguous as a result of its conglomeration of intents, and of the instabilities of satirical irony: sometimes spilling over into more targets than anticipated, sometimes transforming an intended attack into benign amusement, and sometimes simultaneously asserting opposite opinions (Griffin 64-70). This explication of satire offers an analytical framework for understanding how Kalfus's novel operates. The discussion begins with Kalfus's parodic and inquisitive treatment of prevailing ways of describing 9/11, and then turns to instances where the competing satirical intentions at play undercut an interpretation of the satire as straightforward polemic.

3. Satirical targets

- 9 Kalfus's novel begins with the "confusion and terror" of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers (Kalfus 3). His two protagonists, and main narrative consciousnesses in the novel, Joyce and Marshall Harriman are meant to be, respectively, on board United Flight 93 from Newark and on the 86th floor of the World Trade Center's South Tower. Fortune has it that Joyce's business trip is cancelled at the last minute and Marshall is late for work, so they both emerge relatively unscathed from the experience. Initially unaware of each other's fate, both believe that the other is killed in the attacks. It is at this point that Kalfus's story diverges from other representations of the events: the chaos of the burning and collapsing buildings and the shock of the attacks become the backdrop for the protagonists' experience of unparalleled happiness at the thought of their spouse's demise and the end of their protracted and bitter divorce (20). This

introduction to the characters and to 9/11 sets the tone for the novel, which chronicles the first two years after the attacks.

- 10 The opening identifies the satirical *modus operandi* of the novel, which in key respects relies on incongruity. Joyce's, and subsequently Marshall's, reactions violate a series of expectations, including expectations about typical reactions to the presumed death of a family member and reactions to the attacks, and also about appropriate ways of writing about these topics.^{ix} The disjunctive tactic, sprung upon the readers some two-and-a-half pages into what otherwise appears to be a conventional account of 9/11, raises the question of what we can perceive about society, its self-projections and representations, if we opt for a satirical lens. The incongruity in the novel's opening serves to identify some of Kalfus's satirical targets: not only what one reviewer has called "our less noble responses to the attacks" (Miller, para. 8), but also governing modes of representing 9/11 in political and news media accounts, and ways in which those have been absorbed into literary renditions of the events.
- 11 As the incongruity of the opening scene suggests, the satirical mode of the novel is as liberating as it is inquisitive. Satire offers freedom from the restraints of expectations placed on reports of 9/11 in the news media, which, as critics have shown, focused on grief, mourning, and national memorialization (Breithaupt 73-4).^x The mode makes it possible to confront cultural attitudes that are difficult to rationalize without the justificatory framework of American victimization that formed the cornerstone of the Bush administration's and the news media's accounts. For instance, it exposes attitudes that go against the grain of the post-9/11 rhetoric of American exceptionalism, in a string of episodes that mock Joyce's increasingly outrageous – if unaware – orientalism. In them, Joyce disregards news of American raids in Afghanistan in order to "savour[] the beauty of the Afghan people who stared into the cameras: blue-eyed, dark-browed, sultry, fierce" (61); she objectifies an Ethiopian waitress at a restaurant, "a tall young woman with model-class cheekbones and a minute voice whose unpredictably stressed syllables eroticized the most commonplace English words" (118); and she appears in blackface as she applies a cleansing mask pretending she is an "Abyssinian, or at least someone with Abyssinian cheekbones. And Abyssinian legs" (120).
- 12 The opening of Kalfus's novel, further, identifies a satirical attitude toward the dominant political discourse, specifically what the Bush administration defined as the patriotic understanding of what the attacks meant for the nation and what they required of it. This definition of 9/11 relied on a logic of traumatic loss, violation, and American innocence, and insisted on a redemptive teleology, according to which the fortification of homeland security and pre-emptive military intervention would restore American society to its former state (Biesecker 147-69). The definition employed nationalist and familial framing devices, which called upon national unity, prioritized the security of American (over other) families, and justified the emerging politics of homeland security by way of a strategic use of the public's fear and a redefinition of national security (Butler 1-9, Kaplan 15-24, Altheide 15-45). Among other aspects of dominant American 9/11 rhetoric, Kalfus's satire confronts those nationalist and familial framing devices. The protagonists' reactions in the opening pages are salient, as they suggest the novel's anti-sentimental attitude toward the American family at a time when the family unit served as a particularly powerful metaphor for patriotic unity and for the promise of recuperation.^{xi} It is clear from the outset that not only is there no "closing of ranks" between the Harriman family members in the face of crisis,

but there is also no comfort and little loyalty in the family: their home “was the world of derangement and chaos” (188). Kalfus, instead, offers a parodic reversal of the family metaphor for describing the relationship between the nation and its subjects when he writes that Joyce “resented her former belief that their lives in America had been secure. Someone had lied to them as shamelessly as a spouse” (32). Evocative of anxieties about national security in the aftermath of the attacks, the reversal of the familial metaphor serves as an assault on the illusion of invulnerability provided, as Donald Pease has suggested, by the logic of American exceptionalism (Pease 7-13). It is also an acerbic dig into the discursive presentation of the family in what Caroline Levander has called “centralizing narratives of U.S. victimhood” post-9/11 (Levander 21).

- 13 The only time the Harriman family comes together is when Marshall, in a parody of a jihadist, straps a homemade bomb to his chest in an attempt to blow up the family’s Brooklyn Heights apartment and to kill himself, his wife, and his children. Since Marshall has not connected the wires properly, having not managed to decipher the online instructions in Arabic, the bomb does not go off. In a scene that is typical for how Kalfus treats the divorcing parties’ current relationship and for the parallels he establishes between domestic breakdown and international conflict, Kalfus depicts this act as the only one that could catch Joyce’s attention and make her willing to break “their ground rules” of interaction to communicate only through their lawyers (189). This is the only scene in the novel where Joyce expresses genuine interest in Marshall’s doings. That she intervenes with the intention of aiding his pursuits is characteristic of the satirical irony that marks Kalfus’s treatment of the American family: conviviality arises when the family members collaborate on a project which, should they succeed, would mean their annihilation. When Joyce and the children hurry to help him repair the bomb, Marshall resigns; watching his family work together on his suicide-murder project reminds him of a time when they were “a compact unit, loving and intimate” (191). In a further twist to the sentimentalized image of the family, Joyce’s response to Marshall’s refusal to fix the bomb is to accuse him of failing to “follow through with anything,” thus restoring the couple to their former hostilities (191). Kalfus’s tongue-in-cheek refusal to depict a familial reconsolidation after 9/11 confronts the familial rhetoric of American unity and patriotic identification. At the same time, it contradicts a performative affirmation of loyalty to the nation at a moment of crisis evident in other 9/11 novels, for instance, Julia Glass’s *The Whole World Over* (2006) and Jay McInerney’s *The Good Life* (2003).
- 14 Kalfus’s novel ends as it begins: with an unsettling – and humorous – incongruity. The final pages announce that the War on Terror was swift and efficient, and that America is the object of universal respect and gratitude for helping to establish a stable coalition government in Iraq, liberating women in Iran and Syria, capturing bin Laden, and bringing about an Israeli and PLO territorial settlement. Given the mockery of patriotic definitions of 9/11 earlier in the novel, the function of this jarring – and for some readers – unsatisfactory closing scene comes into question.^{xii} The absurdity of the ending requires a consideration of the novel’s overarching structure, which replicates the narrative logic underlying the Bush doctrine. As Frankie Bailey and Steven Chermak have noted, the Bush administration narrativized 9/11 “by way of the media into a primary, recognizable discourse, one with a distinct logic – a clear beginning (September 11, 2001), forceful middle (war), and moral end (democratic victory)” (Bailey and Chermak 5). From this perspective, the novel’s ending holds up to scrutiny

the belief, propounded by the Bush administration and the news media, that America's invincibility will be restored through a swift and victorious War on Terror, and exposes it as a fantasy.^{xiii} The parodic thrust of his counterfactual scenario is highlighted by the distance between Kalfus's account of the American government's accomplishments within two years after the attacks – the novel ends in June 2003 – and what his readership knows to be the historical actualities. The ending functions as deliberate satirical provocation, designed, to borrow Griffin's phrase, "to expose and demolish a foolish certainty" (52). The paradoxical nature of the ending – given that its historical inaccuracy follows Kalfus's satirical take on cherished American beliefs post-9/11 – can be understood in relation to a long tradition of using paradox as a satirical device for the purposes of challenging orthodoxy.^{xiv} It strikes at intellectual error and patriotic deception. Satire in the novel allows for an alternative perception of over-determined events and a distancing from ingrained descriptions of their meaning.

- 15 Kalfus's satire, further, targets literary renditions of 9/11 and their gloss on what 9/11 meant and required. The incongruity of the novel's opening, which marks a shift from therapeutic and redemptive teleologies, and the ending of Kalfus's novel, with its satirical denouncement of a desire for national healing, rescue, and closure, are indicative of how Kalfus dissociates his novel from prominent features in popular novels dealing with the attacks. In her systematic analysis of American literary fiction that deals with 9/11 and its aftermath, Birgit Däwes has observed that the widespread desire for redemption evident in patriotic narratives of 9/11 translated in the years 2001-2011 into a considerable body of Christian, conspiratorial, apocalyptic, and revenge themed fiction (Däwes 137-195). As she explains, these (sometimes self-published) works have sought to

re-establish a sense of security and control by either explicitly affirming Christian beliefs (through explicit references to God, Bible quotes, or prodigal characters finding their way back to church); or by promoting the secular variants of "patriotic meaning" [...], "nation-building rhetoric" [...], fantasies of revenge, counterfactual histories or "What if? histories" [...] and conspiracy theories. (141)

- 16 Early examples of these – Däwes shows that "salvational" works were published throughout the first decade after the attacks – include William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003), Joel C. Rosenberg's *The Last Jihad* (2003), Jack Weyland's *Cheyenne in New York* (2003), John Harriman's *Delta Force: Operation Michael Sword* (2004), Bridget Marks's *September* (2004), and Nelson DeMille's *Night Fall* (2004).^{xv} What connects these novels is a belief in "stable truths" and a Manichean battle between good and evil; many of these present an earnest wish to envision the resolution of the perceived disorder instigated by the terrorist attacks by way of reinstituting American narratives of invincibility, liberalism, and justice (Däwes 137-43). Unlike such novels, Kalfus's treatment of the redemptive narrative hinges on satirical irony. The gap between what the readers know happened and what they read gives Kalfus's rendition its satirical edge: his reads as a debunked "what-if" scenario and as such subverts the underlying logic of "salvational" novels.
- 17 A corollary to this debunking of redemptive 9/11 novels is that attention is directed to the project of representing 9/11 in the novel form. Knight's view of satire as a frame of mind which adjusts or distorts the readers' perspectives from within a borrowed literary form emphasizes how satire always targets the host literary form that it uses (6). This view makes it possible to recognize that even though Kalfus does not explicitly use the subgenre as a point of reference and judgment of his parody, his chosen

opening and ending are designed to capture attention in order to call into question clichés of writing about 9/11. By upsetting a norm, Kalfus's satire raises the questions as to how 9/11 is processed in the novel form and how that processing may collude in the establishment of certain interpretations of the present: it asks who and what literary narratives of 9/11 are for.

4. Satirical unruliness

18 Up until now, while examining the operation of satire in Kalfus's novel, I have sought to identify some of the targets of Kalfus's attack and illustrate that his satire problematizes American perceptions of 9/11 across cultural, political, and literary discourses. As a complement to this presentation of Kalfus's satire as exploration and indictment, I focus below on the unruly dimensions of his satire. To examine those, I proceed from an episode that follows a suspected anthrax mailing directed at Joyce's workplace. In the episode, Joyce returns home and finds out that the anthrax mailing was a hoax. The episode illuminates the operation of Kalfus's satire, not least the complex relationship between what Griffin calls the satirical intent to provoke and the intent to arouse admiration for the performance of satirical skill.

19 It can hardly escape notice that the episode pours venom over the politics of fear and the security state. Upon watching the news report on television and catching a glimpse of the handwritten envelope in which talc had been delivered to her workplace, Joyce jumps to the startling conclusion that her husband is behind it:

Joyce was elated: now she had him. The Justice Department was investigating anthrax hoaxes as seriously as it was investigating the real anthrax mailings, promising to prosecute them as acts of terrorism. After years of careful, relentless, hard-assed maneuvering, legal and personal, Marshall had blundered catastrophically. Forget Joyce's wimpy, pearls-and-twin-set, eager-to-be-reasonable divorce lawyer: Marshall could deal with John Ashcroft now. Let them put him in jail. Let them send him to Guantánamo. She would keep the apartment. (35)

20 The episode ridicules the unhinged protagonist as she contemplates her sense of insecurity in her home and in her country, as she imagines her husband having become a "dangerous crackpot," and as she considers whether to report him to the FBI (35). The expansion of government powers in the name of security is alluded to by way of references to the former Attorney General and to the infamous Guantánamo Bay prison camp in Cuba, established, so former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld explained, to detain and interrogate people who "pose a lethal threat to the civilized world" (CNN, para. 19). The state apparatus dedicated to ensuring national security is broached when early in the episode Joyce learns that the FBI wants to interview people working in Joyce's office: "The agency was desperate in its search for clues that would lead to the source of the real anthrax" (32). Scholarship on terrorism, security, and political rhetoric post-9/11 helps discern two targets for the episode's satirical economy. One of these is homeland security, the new way of referring to American politics that emerged in the aftermath of 9/11, which attempted "to eradicate the boundaries between military and social needs and between foreign and domestic policy" and which redefined security as "entrusting the state as a guarantor of freedom" (Kaplan 15 and 19). The other target and corollary of this is the redefinition of civic duties, as a result of the "state of exception" post 9/11.

- 21 The satire aims at the Bush administration's redefinition of civic commitment and public responsibility following 9/11. In this redefinition, promoted, for example, in the proposed programme Operation TIPS (Terrorism Information and Prevention System) that the episode vaguely alludes to, American citizens were encouraged to be responsible by reporting "suspicious and potentially terrorist-related activity" and in so doing helping the authorities safeguard the nation.^{xvi} According to Barbara Biesecker, the redefinition articulated a "citizen-subject who not only cedes all authority to the remilitarized state but also is induced to function on its behalf" (Biesecker 163). The novel ridicules this call to civic responsibility and mocks its ineffectuality as a strategy, as it has Joyce report information that is not only baseless, but also immaterial to the search for bioterrorists. The playful treatment of Joyce's detective work, moreover, which yields the finding of a baby powder can to be presented to the authorities as evidence alongside her conviction that the "primitive cursive hand-lettering" adorning the envelope sent to her office (that she glimpsed for "perhaps fifteen seconds") was in her husband's handwriting (34), makes a travesty of the very idea of "responsible" citizenship. The novel does not explore the operation or deeper implications of this citizenship, although Kalfus's use of satirical irony as he depicts Joyce pondering "the ways in which Marshall's mind might have become deranged" implies an attack on the rhetoric of security and its nurturing of paranoia (36).
- 22 Kalfus's satire extends to the threat to democracy and civil rights that the Bush administration's "freedom through security" policies entailed. As Amy Kaplan has argued, these demanded that security and the consent to repression in the United States are the avenues to freedom (Kaplan 20). In the passage quoted above, "freedom through security" is ridiculed by way of Joyce's ludicrous idea: that she can gain her freedom from being tethered to Marshall by having him confined to an off-shore prison camp notorious for its violations of human rights. The satirical thrust of Joyce's solution comes from establishing an analogy between the Harriman family's affairs and the domestic and international policies of the American state.^{xvii} While the satire takes a stab at the abuses of homeland security, the analogy aims at the governmental logic of pre-emption, according to which freedom is secured through domination, as well as the expansion of government power at the cost of civil liberties.^{xviii} The analogy requires the readers to ask "whose security" it is that the government's homeland security strategies serve and suggests that interests other than safety may motivate them. Indeed, the parallels established between personal and political suggest that what is satirized is also how we imagine personal motivations to interfere with political decisions.
- 23 A salient aspect of Joyce's plan is her approval of the security strategies devised by her government. Her sanctioning here foreshadows later scenes in the novel when Joyce goes on unsuccessful dates with Nathan Robbins, the FBI agent to whom she fruitlessly reports her husband. During those dates, Robbins describes the FBI's methods of suspending the *habeas corpus* for suspected terrorists and of detaining and interrogating apparently innocent people for indeterminate amounts of time – as legitimized by the USA PATRIOT Act in October 2001, one of the Bush administration's key security strategies which, as Kaplan has argued, radically amplified state power (Kaplan 17). These scenes are characterized by Kalfus's ridicule of military masculinity, which is "missing something, something big and obvious" in the ways it manages

terrorism prevention (137). They also reveal Joyce to be too preoccupied with fantasies of heroic masculinity and the possibility of having casual sex with Robbins, what in the novel is referred to as the “terror sex” she deserved “[a]fter everything that had happened, to her city and to her marriage,” to consider the implications of homeland security practices and institutions (23).^{xix} That Joyce’s reaction to Robbins’s account of FBI practices to “take a man and break him” (198) is to worry about her chances of bedding Robbins and that the matter of civil liberties and human rights gives her no pause is indicative of the disorder that the title of Kalfus’s novel announces: the concern with the government’s encroachment on civil liberties is neutralized when the citizenry’s attention is fixed on the self and the citizenry has internalized the logic of security, pre-emption, and expanded state power. In terms of satirical provocation, then, Kalfus does not only attack the normalization of the “state of exception.” He also attacks the custodians of this social order: American citizens themselves, who are unable or unwilling to discharge their responsibilities in denouncing the government’s trespassing on civil liberties and human rights.

- 24 To say that the episode functions as acerbic and deflationary political invective, however, is to overstate the satirical edge at this stage of the novel and also to limit Kalfus’s satirical scope. For, the episode is not just an attack on the implications of homeland security; it is also a satire of folly, what one literary critic has called the protagonists’ “outrageous, if all-too-believable pettiness” (Oates 161). At this stage in the novel the parallel between public and private spheres is established and the satirical emphasis is placed on mocking the characters’ angst, lost hopes, and posturings. In the episode at hand Joyce’s hyperbolic egotism and intolerance, her obsession with revenge against “all the malicious actions” Marshall had taken against her (35), and the absurd conclusions she draws to justify her desire to secure their apartment largely serve as comic relief. Joyce’s doubts about whether Marshall really was capable of “something so wrong and so criminal” and her subsequent pronouncement that he was, can be understood in a similar vein (35). At work in this perspective is what scholarship concerned with the psychological causes of laughter and amusement calls the superiority theory of humor, which holds that enjoyment is taken at the expense of another (Morreall 7-9). Filtered through the consciousness of Joyce and the satirist’s ironic tongue, the representation of Joyce’s baseness is meant to amuse. Likewise, the episode can be understood in terms of the relief theory of humor as a release of pent-up steam (Morreall 15-23). In this view, it offers an exaggerated version of commonplace responses to pervasive fear and imminent threat, expressing people’s frustrations over life in America in the “Age of Terror” and using humor to dissipate part of their gloom.
- 25 The comic elements in the episode are a reminder that Kalfus’s satire is not straightforward, and they raise the question of satirical intent: the relationship between, on the one hand, the desire to expose to ridicule and scorn the state of the nation and, on the other, the impulse to provide a degree of mirth at a time of duress. Given that homeland security is not clearly denounced and that the question of civic duties is only implicitly raised, the anthrax episode can be read as tipping over into a mockery of Joyce’s fatuousness and thereby defusing the attack on the larger issues of amplified state power and the domestication of political dissent. In terms of its perception as a safety valve and from the perspective of criticism interested in the social power of satire and of the novel form, comic relief arguably destabilizes the political edge of Kalfus’s satire. This is especially the case if the episode is considered in

tandem with the novel's ending and the latter is read as displaying a restorative, rather than a parodic, impulse. In the end, Kalfus's novel would seem to say that the security state was a necessary evil.

- 26 In terms of the overarching political work that the novel does, at stake is whether, to quote humor scholar Paul Lewis on the possible effects of humor, the novel may in fact suggest "that unexpected, even dangerous, events are actually neither threatening nor ultimately mysterious" (Lewis, *Comic Effects* 19). While it would be a misreading of Kalfus's satire to describe comic relief in the novel as domesticating in nature, it is not unfair to note that its diversionary effect is exacerbated by the fact that many of Kalfus's satirical targets can be deemed "safe." For instance, Kalfus mocks reductive and warmongering media reporting: "As Joyce became aware of the particularities of Afghan life through newspaper and television reports, she saw that Afghans hardly related to each other as individual men and women [...] Entire decades of Afghan history were explained by simple communitive equations like 'the friend of my friend is my friend,' 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'" (63). He also attacks the substitution of intellectual discernment for conviction: "The ether was electrified that season as men and women in television studios prosecuted matters of fact and principle [...] The strength of their contempt for the doubters – you *don't* believe Saddam has WMD? you *don't* think Saddam has links to al-Qaeda? – was a pro-war argument in itself" (201). These are safe targets in the sense that they are expressed at a time when, as Webber has observed, both news media representations of political events and the Bush doctrine were routinely debunked in various forms of political comedy (Webber 10-20). This dimension of Kalfus's work resonates with Jones's claim that writers of iconoclastic satire after 9/11 "have the relative latitude necessary to express their vitriol against events that they can no longer ignore, yet that vitriol is often mingled with caution" (Jones 47).
- 27 A study of the satire in the anthrax episode also needs to take into account the build-up of Kalfus's satirical inquiry in the novel, for that episode does not express the satirist's disgust with American society in ways that others do. Kalfus's repulsion is perhaps most notable in a scene depicting the gratuitous violence directed against a black boy, "perhaps fourteen or fifteen or two or three years younger than that" (213), who is stripped naked, hooded and jeered at, while a woman performs fellatio on him in front of a cheering and photographing crowd at a party Marshall attends in early 2003. The scene serves as a disturbing parallel to the abuses of prisoners by American soldiers in what came to be known as the Abu Ghraib prison scandal of that same year. This deeply unsettling episode serves as a mirror held up to a debased and profoundly aggressive American society. That the boy's abusers include Miss Naomi, the teacher of Marshall's two-year-old son Victor, is suggestive of the images of Pfc Lynndie England, the much-discussed female torturer at Abu Ghraib, as Thomas Bjerre proposes (249-50). It also points to a tradition of satiric disavowal of the actions and attitudes of respectable Americans in dark comedies from the mid-twentieth century onward (Cohen 3). The party episode is positioned some twenty pages before the closing scene and displays the culmination of Kalfus's aversion to the posturings of American nationalism and the triumph of civic savagery. In the anthrax episode, however, satire is muted and mitigated by way of drawing attention to follies and comic ironies. In the course of the novel, the satire becomes increasingly caustic as the Harriman family's behaviors – and by extension America's – spiral out of control. As the War on Terror intensifies, Kalfus lists international political affairs (events, debates, and rhetoric) with increasing

frequency and venom until the representation moves away from satirical wit to approximate nightmarish hyperrealism. By this point in the novel, the satirical view of the characters has morphed into a form of satire that is apparently not meant to be amusing.

- 28 To the reading of the anthrax episode as scathing political invective, diversionary comic relief, and benign social satire, at least one more reading needs to be added, namely one that considers the satirical aim of rhetorical performance. Satire, Griffin writes, is often “designed to win the admiration and applause of a reading audience not for the ardour or acuteness of its moral concern but for the brilliant wit and force of the satirist as rhetorician” (Griffin 71). Much of the effect of this episode – and Griffin might say, the pleasure taken from it – is owed to its playfulness: its fusing of seeming incongruities, its unexpected language, its play with conventions and systems of reasoning. To these, the contradictions of content and style can be counted, where the scathing denunciation of follies is expressed with comic air, as well as the virtuosity of bringing together incompatible images to deflate the protagonist’s anxieties, egotism, and self-serving “patriotism.” In just over four pages, the episode portrays the complexities of the character’s misguided self-importance and conflicting attitudes as it progresses from Joyce’s failed attempt at masturbation (“She wanted to make love to a fireman? She felt foolish now and wished she had time for another shower” (32)), through her fears about terrorism and security (“How could she have brought her kids into this world, a world even more sinister than her marriage?” (33)), to such prosaic tasks of motherhood as taking care of a knocked-over glass of milk (its contents streaking “across the dining room table toward Joyce’s pocketbook like a tsunami” (33)), and Joyce’s musings about Marshall’s role in the anthrax hoax (“How did he spend his hours in his shadowed bedroom? Was he putting more baby powder in envelopes or doing something worse? [...] She listened for stirrings in the bedroom, or for footsteps, or for the hissing release of poisonous gas” (36)).
- 29 The episode draws attention to the satirist’s skill in depicting his deformed protagonist and the world in which she finds herself. Kalfus’s language is, as is often the case with satire, largely one of the disengaged observer and his satirical attitude in these examples aims to expose the preposterousness of Joyce’s narcissism and mock her unbridled imagination. It does so in part by attacking systems of reasoning that enable the protagonist to imagine herself an innocent victim in “the divorce war” (36) and global terrorism alike, and to project a self-image as a concerned mother “put in an impossible position” (36). Those systems governed patriotic narratives of 9/11, in which American victimization and redemption were but sides of the same coin (Biesecker 152-5). Yet, they are also literary conventions. Joyce’s emotional turmoil is the stuff of melodrama, her unease gestures to the underlying menace of the gothic, while her process of unearthing the truth about the anthrax hoax and her lack of deductive powers parody the detective story. In its parodic treatment of those conventions, the episode appears to adhere to Knight’s description of satire as mocking conventions that underpin esthetic forms (Knight 203). Kalfus’s language, moreover, fuses the everyday mundane with the cataclysmic: the spilt glass of milk with a tsunami; Marshall’s moroseness with terrorism. That merging divulges part of the satire’s performance, as it serves to uphold the sustained parallel Kalfus establishes between the personal and the political. Much of the novel’s wit stems from nurturing that parallel: it lies in creating instances where the parallel is infused with new energy and given new satirical twists. In the episode at hand, readers are invited to delight in

the satirist's exaggeration of Joyce's animosity toward Marshall by way of her outlandish solution to her divorce, and at the same time admire how the insular concerns of the caricatured protagonists can be given political implications. A principal motive for the satire in the episode, in other words, is to call attention to itself as a rhetorical performance and to delight as such, rather than merely as socio-political corrective.

- 30 In other words, Kalfus's satire juggles a range of issues and intentions, the interplay of which at times seem contradictory, as is the case when comic relief is used in an episode that attacks the post-9/11 "state of exception." Recognition of this multidirectionality and ambiguity of mixed intents characterizing his satire makes it possible to discern that the novel as a whole is exploratory *and* performative, benign *and* invective, diversionary *and* intellectually probing.

5. Reading 9/11 satire

- 31 Like "all other forms of literature, satire is designed to please," Griffin writes in answer to the question of why people read, and write, satire (Griffin 161). For him, satire affords simple and complex pleasures and these are derived as much from the content of the satire as from its technical operation; enjoyment is taken, *inter alia*, from the intellectual engagement with topical issues, the stirring of emotions, the appreciation of the satirist's rhetorical skill and the esthetic dimensions of the work, and the ways in which satire embroils its readers in the social, ethical, and political issues it deals with (Griffin 161-184). I mention Griffin's discussion because it helps to highlight an important aspect of literary criticism on 9/11 satire, namely that scholarship has almost exclusively focused on satirical attack, from what appears to be an interest in its intellectual-emotional dimensions. When literary critics have examined how Kalfus's novel, Walter's *The Zero*, Messud's *The Emperor's Children*, Amis's "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" and Palahniuk's *Pygmy* anatomize idealized images of America, antiterrorism, the domestication of history, and the possibilities of empathetic and attentive global citizenship, they have done so in relation to the potential of satire to defamiliarize dominant accounts of 9/11 and to enable critical discernment regarding terrorism and its meanings.^{xx} That satirical provocation and condemnation occupies scholarly attention is unsurprising, not merely because comedy and satire today are defined as acts of political resistance,^{xxi} but also since the task of the 9/11 novelist has been described as offering intellectual clarification and a counter-weight to patriotic definitions of 9/11.^{xxii} In part, this description is a result of expectations raised by literary authors, who, in the first months after the attacks, defended the significance of the literary imagination at a time of crisis in terms of its capacity to construct what Don DeLillo, in "In the Ruins of the Future," called a "counternarrative" – to the single-minded narrative of terrorism, but also to complacent narratives of American identity (DeLillo, para. 11-13). In part, the definition is rooted in an apprehension from the perspective of literary criticism about the ways in which novelistic representations of 9/11 shape public discussions over such pressing matters as political violence, global justice, and the constituents of American nationhood and democracy.
- 32 However, because literary criticism of 9/11 prose considers satire to be a device that displays the politicized engagement with terrorism and post-9/11 America, it has offered a limited understanding of the context, function, efficacy and, indeed,

experience and pleasure of reading 9/11 satire. As I maintain above, satirical inquiry and provocation, regarding the consequences of the “state of exception,” the mirage of America’s self-projected identity, the framing devices used to define 9/11 as an event, and the difficulties of writing a novel about 9/11 in America a few years after the events, all account for parts of Kalfus’s satire. However, these explanations fail to account for its playfulness, humor, and performance of wit. Likewise, the perspective does not account for the ambiguities of the satire and its relation to the cultural conditions at the time of the novel’s publication. Griffin’s discussion of the pleasures of satire indicates that other questions may be posed in relation to satirical 9/11 literature than those of inquiry and provocation. One such question, which the present essay has pursued, regards its mixed motives, the complexity and instability of satirical twists, and the interplay of sometimes contradictory satirical impulses. Others include what writing satirical fiction about 9/11 entails and how a satire is received: where and whom it might aggravate and offend, where and how it might please. Such questions proceed from a recognition of satire as an art and open the way for a more complex understanding of the position, operation, esthetic, and social power of literary 9/11 satire.

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NOTES

- i. Kalfus's *Coup de Foudre* (2015), for instance, likewise tackles current events using dark humor, notably the charges of sexual assault brought against the former head of the IMF, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, in 2011.
- ii. While scholarship acknowledges a degree of fluidity between the comic and the satirical modes – satire theorist Charles Knight, for instance, maintains the difficulty of establishing a definitive distinction between satire and comedy (6) – a prevalent definition of each is based on a distinction of intention. In this definition, both modes expose something to laughter, but whereas comedy is ultimately forgiving and restorative, satire is condemnatory (La Farge 123-4, 135).
- iii. These concerns crystalize in Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn's *Literature after 9/11* (2008), Kristiaan Versluys's *Out of the Blue* (2009), Richard Gray's *After the Fall* (2011), Georgiana Banita's *Plotting Justice* (2012), Thomas Austenfeld, Dimitar Daphinoff and Jens Herlth's *Terrorism and Narrative Practice* (2012), Arin Keeble's *The 9/11 Novel* (2014), Paul Petrovic's *Representing 9/11* (2015), John Duvall and Robert Marzec's *Narrating 9/11* (2015), and Susana Araújo's *Transatlantic Fictions of 9/11 and the War on Terror* (2015).
- iv. For a critique of the critical practice to ascribe to the reading of literature radical and transformative potential, see Rita Felski's *The Uses of Literature* (2008).
- v. *Disorder* has been viewed as interrogating American policies of security and the "overall tendency toward the domestication of history" (Araújo, 25), as sketching the human incapacity for tolerance while anatomizing post-9/11 American society (Däwes 317), as exploring a cultural

anxiety about and nostalgia for American exceptionalism (DeRosa 103-107), as debunking the trappings of heroic masculinity post 9/11 (Bjerre 245-50), and as initiating a process of “interrupting the cultural dominant’s instrumentalized deployment of key terms in the public sphere” (Irom 520). Some critics, especially in the first couple of years after the novel’s publication, dismissed Kalfus’s novel off-hand, for its “retreat to the domestic interiors of American lives” (Morley 247). In Richard Gray’s much-cited words, Kalfus’s novel, alongside a few others, domesticated the crisis of 9/11 by measuring “cataclysmic public events [...] purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists” (Gray 30). Typical for these latter critics, and others (including Mishra and Rothberg), is that they do not engage with the novel at any length, preferring instead to discuss works that offer an international outlook on 9/11, such as Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) or Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008).

vi. For a discussion of these debates and of ways in which the Holocaust can be said to have become a “structure for evoking all sorts of unrepresentable trauma” (172), including 9/11, see Andrew Gross and Susanne Rohr’s *Comedy – Avante-Garde – Scandal* (2010).

vii. In an argument which establishes an analogy between “the America before and many months after the attacks” and the Rome of Horace and Juvenal, Jones stresses that an understanding of the comic scene in America since the 9/11 attacks needs to take into account the relationship between satire and the material conditions of the specific historical moment. Whereas in September and October of 2001, in particular, the USA was characterized by increased regulation and anxiety which did not leave room for anything but “safe” Horatian laughter, the emergence of Juvenalian 9/11 satire a few years after the attacks was enabled by relative cultural stability and socio-political latitude (Jones 42-46).

viii. There are important differences between the production, distribution, and consumption, on the one hand, of the televised and digital 9/11 satires that have been explored in cultural criticism on political comedy and, on the other, of literary renditions of 9/11 in satirical mode. Differences include the characteristics of each form, and also their relative impact on individual readers and spectators as well as their relative capacity to intervene in social discourses about 9/11. For a discussion of the power of televised and digital forms of 9/11 comedy to affect political discourse in the contemporary mediascape, see Gournelos and Greene (xvii-xxxiii) and Webber (3-49).

ix. In what is known as the incongruity theory of humor, laughter is caused by a perception of something as violating our normal mental patterns and expectations (Morreall 11).

x. Early reviews of Kalfus’s novel recognize this effect of the satirical mode. Laura Miller, for instance, describes the novel as “worth celebrating for its utter lack of cant and self-regarding weepiness” (Miller, para. 8), while Sylvia Brownrigg writes that *Disorder* “challenges accepted pieties and dislodges expectations” (Brownrigg, para. 2).

xi. As Susan Faludi has argued, the imagery and rhetoric used by the Bush administration and the news media employed the bonds of family as a means of bolstering a sense of insecurity and as an appellation to a deeply rooted vision of community and loyalty to the nation (Faludi 1-7). For a discussion of the constitutive role the family has played in American nationhood and of the power and resilience of the family as a metaphor in America, see Caroline Levander’s *Cradle of Liberty* (2006) and Betty Farrell’s *Family* (1999).

xii. Among those who view the closing scene as a “miscalculation” are Brownrigg (para. 7) and Mark Lawson (para. 5).

xiii. Aaron DeRosa similarly views the ending as a renunciation, reading the closing scene as a satire of the exceptionalist narrative of “American-sponsored liberal democracy” (DeRosa 103-7).

xiv. For a discussion of paradox as a favoured rhetorical device of satirists and a definition of satire as provocation, i.e. as a “critique of false understanding,” see Griffin (52-64).

- xv. Titles published after Kalfus's own, Däwes mentions some forty works in total as examples of "salvational" approaches to 9/11, include Skip Coryell's *We Hold These Truths* (2007), Tom Lombardo's *The Christian President: What Jesus Would Have Done* (2007), Tina Louise Ristine's *The Capture of Osama Bin Laden* (2007), and H. J. Kaplan's *Paradise Denied!* (2010) (Däwes 159-95).
- xvi. Barbara Biesecker discusses Operation TIPS as one of the Department of Homeland Security's technologies of governance, maintaining that it makes "reporting something that citizens see (but about which they are incapable of making sense) into a civic responsibility" (Biesecker 162).
- xvii. For further discussions of how the novel maps the homeland onto the Harriman home, see Bjerre (245-50), Irom (522), and Däwes (315-8).
- xviii. For an analysis of this logic see Biesecker (152-65) and Kaplan (15-24).
- xix. For a discussion of gendered roles and sexuality post-9/11, see Faludi (19-195).
- xx. See, for instance, DeRosa (103-7), Austenfeld (189-99), Simpson (209-23), and Worthington (3-16). Cf. Martin Randall's discussion of Amis's short story focuses on Amisian satire and the representational problem of addressing 9/11 and its aftermath in literary form (45-62).
- xxi. Graham Matthews, for example, contends that literary satire remains "a vibrant mode of critique" in the wake of postmodernism despite the devaluation of traditional methods of critique (2).
- xxii. The view was forcefully articulated by Gray (16-19), Mishra (2), and Rothberg (151). A result of this has been that a key tenet of criticism on 9/11 novels for some time was the particular aspects of terrorism and post-9/11 society that 9/11 novels "ought" to be engaging. Critics who have sought to problematize this view include Duvall and Marzec (384), Däwes (44-56), Araújo (1-17), Keeble (11-13), and Petrovic (ix-xvii).

ABSTRACTS

Prompted by debates on the role of comedy in the USA after 9/11, the essay explores the use of satire as one important narrative strategy that emerged in the subgenre of the American 9/11 novel. Criticism of 9/11 fiction tends to regard literary satire as a device used to counter governing descriptions of twenty-first century terrorism. By way of Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), I show how literary satire on 9/11 is neither straightforward nor merely a means of political attack. Drawing on recent satire theory that views the satirical mode as unruly, various, and open-ended, I suggest that a closer look to the mixed intentions of this novel presents an opportunity to explore the dynamic between denunciation and comic relief in literary satire on 9/11 and opens the way for a more complex understanding of the operation and affordances of literary 9/11 satire.

INDEX

Keywords: Contemporary American novel, satire, terrorism, 9/11, Ken Kalfus, political comedy, American identity, critical practice